"Echoes"

July slipped away in a blur of changes. Mia and RJ's... whatever it was... developed into something that defied definition - more intimate than friendship but refusing to be labeled as dating. The whole thing made my skin crawl, but at least they were both gone now - her back on tour, him in Ocean Bluff with the twins.

Life in Cork settled into new rhythms. Amber threw herself into Fashion Week preparations, her excitement about the launch barely contained. Trevor, meanwhile, focused his creative energy on the Limerick restaurant, expanding the O'Sullivan empire with his usual perfectionist flair.

Livvie kept our secret, thank the gods. Whatever project Billy had her working on remained mysterious, but I trusted his judgment. Jeremy remained blissfully unaware, still my anchor to normal life.

Hunter spent increasing time with the Celtic Rangers, his vision of reunifying the Thunder traditions slowly taking shape. Saoirse's initial reluctance seemed to be softening as they discussed rebuilding the academy, though centuries of isolation didn't fade easily.

Then Nashville called, pulling me back to set. The long days and late nights of filming should have been exhausting, but inhabiting a character again, sinking my teeth into meaty dialogue - it awakened something in me I'd almost forgotten. Even as I ached missing Hunter and the girls, especially their first day at their new Irish school, I couldn't imagine giving this up.This part of me, the actress, was just as vital as the Ranger, the mother, the wife.

August blurred past in a whirlwind of call times, press junkets, and promotional duties. My only real connection to home came through Zoom calls with the girls. Harley complained about the school uniforms but lit up describing field hockey matches. Arissa, predictably, adapted seamlessly - having Kira in the same school probably helped, though I suspected my analytical daughter would have found her footing regardless.

September brought new challenges: the Australian tour looming, but first a major press event in Nashville. When Hunter agreed to fly in for the red carpet, it felt like I could finally breathe again. The moment I spotted him in baggage claim, everything else faded away. I ran to him without caring who saw, launching myself into his arms. He caught me effortlessly, strong arms wrapping around me as my legs locked around his waist.

"I've missed you so much, baby," I whispered between kisses, breathing in his familiar scent.

"I missed you too," he murmured against my lips, holding me like he never wanted to let go.

Eventually, he set me down so we could collect his bags. My Jeep waited in the parking garage - I'd had it brought up from Texas, needing that piece of home while filming. As we loaded up and I headed toward my studio-provided apartment, the familiar comfort of having Hunter beside me again made everything feel right.

"How are the girls?" I asked, though we'd FaceTimed just yesterday.

"Good. They wanted to come, but your mom convinced them they'd have more fun staying with her and keeping their routine," Hunter said, his hand finding mine across the console. "Plus, she's spoiling them rotten."

I nodded, feeling the familiar ache. "I miss them. Being away from home is harder than I remembered."

"I know," Hunter's voice was gentle. "But I also know how much you're loving being back on a series. I can hear it in your voice every time you talk about it."

"I am," I admitted. "Playing Dixie is... freeing. She's so different from me, and getting lost in a character again, building her from the ground up - it reminds me why I fell in love with acting in the first place."

The apartment building was one of those luxury high-rises favored by the studio - all modern amenities but lacking any real personality. "Welcome to my home away from home," I said as we stepped inside.

Hunter looked around, taking in the generic décor. "It's nice."

"It's soulless," I corrected. "But it's a place to sleep." As if on cue, Thara appeared from wherever she'd been napping, making a beeline for Hunter.

"Well, hello beautiful," he scooped her up, earning an immediate purr as he scratched behind her ears.

I couldn't help but smile. "I think she missed you."

"Nah, she just lives for attention," Hunter smirked, setting her down before settling onto the sofa. I immediately curled into his side, his arm wrapping around me with familiar comfort.

"Now it feels like home," I whispered, letting my eyes close as I breathed him in. Amazing how a soulless apartment could transform just by having him in it.

"So," he pressed a kiss to my temple, "what's the schedule for tomorrow's event?"

"Car picks us up at seven," I said, not moving from my spot against him. "Which means hair and makeup will be here at four."

"Three hours for hair and makeup?"

"Have you met me?" I smiled. "Plus, this is a big press event. Lots of photos, lots of interviews about the show. The network's really pushing this series."

"You nervous?"

"No," I said honestly. "Not with you there. Though I should warn you - the press is going to be all over you. They always are when you come to these things with me."

"Because they can't believe someone as beautiful as you married a retired motocross racer?" he teased.

"Because you're hot and mysterious and refuse to give interviews," I corrected. "It's the dark and brooding thing. They're fascinated by you. Plus they're still pushing that narrative about you leaving me for Jessica Simpson."

He rolled his eyes. "That was a fifteen-minute fling like fifteen years ago."

"And you know the press will dredge up anything for a headline," I sighed, snuggling closer. "Though lately they seem more interested in whether I'm leaving you for Chris. Apparently, we have 'explosive chemistry' according to Entertainment Weekly."

"Do you?" His voice carried that slight edge it got whenever the media speculated about my love life.

"Please," I scoffed. "He's married. And not you." I tilted my head up to look at him. "You know you're it for me, right? The only one I want by my side at these things, on red carpets or fighting monsters or raising our girls."

His arms tightened around me. "I know. I just... miss you. The house feels empty without you there."

"How are the girls really doing?" I asked softly. "Harley's texts have been shorter lately."

"She's adjusting," he said carefully. "The uniform thing is hard for her, but she's making friends on the field hockey team. And Arissa... you know Arissa. She could adapt to living on Mars if she had to."

"And Tomi?"

"Asks for Mama every night," he admitted. "But she understands you're coming home soon. They all do."

I felt the familiar guilt twist in my stomach. "Sometimes I wonder if I'm being selfish, taking roles that keep me away..."

"No, you're not," Hunter said firmly. "This is your career, and you've worked damn hard to get where you are. We all understand that." His reassurance was interrupted by Thara launching herself into his lap, demanding attention. "Cat, please. I'm jet lagged as hell here."

I laughed, watching Thara headbutt his chin insistently. "She really did miss you."

"All I want right now is a shower and bed," he groaned, though his hand automatically started scratching behind Thara's ears. Even exhausted, he couldn't resist her demands for attention.

I gently lifted Thara away from him. "Come on, baby girl. Daddy needs space." I pressed a kiss to Hunter's temple. "Go shower, babe. Bed's waiting."

While he was in the bathroom, I changed into my pajamas and slipped between the sheets, listening to the familiar sound of the shower running. When he emerged wearing just his crimson pajama pants, my heart squeezed. Such a familiar sight, one I'd been missing desperately these past weeks.

I held out my arms and he immediately joined me, pulling me close against his chest. "I am really happy you're here," I whispered, breathing him in.

"I'm happy to have you back in my arms," he murmured into my hair. "Our bed feels so empty without you.""I know," I sighed, tracing patterns on his chest. "The schedule's brutal these next few months. Finish this block of filming, Australian tour, then back to Nashville..."

"At least we have Christmas," he murmured, already half asleep from the jet lag. "The girls are already planning everything they want to do when you're home."

"Even Harley?" I couldn't help asking.

"Even Harley," he smiled sleepily. "Though she's still protesting the uniform daily."

I couldn't help but laugh softly. "That sounds like our girl."

"She's adjusting," Hunter's voice was getting drowsier. "Just... takes time. Like everything else."

I settled back against his chest, listening to his heartbeat slow as he drifted off. Tomorrow would be chaos - hair, makeup, press, photos - but right now, in this moment, everything felt perfect. Even if it was temporary.

"I love you," I whispered, but he was already asleep.

Livvie
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Being back in Australia filled me with a joy I hadn't realized I'd been missing. Watching my children experience my homeland for the first time made everything feel new again. We'd only been here a few days, but already Rose had fallen in love with the beach, racing across the sand with the kind of wild abandon that only my fearless girl could manage.

J would have some work when Michelle's tour reached us - being her best friend meant certain obligations - but for now, this was pure family time. Watching Rose demolish a packet of chicken Shapes, her face lighting up at the distinctive Australian snack, made my heart swell. Even Killy, usually so particular about his food, had developed a fondness for Burger Rings. My Irish babies had a bit of Aussie in them after all.

Today was different though. Today we were heading to Morningside - the small town outside Brisbane where I'd grown up. I hadn't set foot there since I was eighteen, since the day we buried my parents and Donna. I'd never even taken J there in all our years together, the memories too raw, too painful. But something felt right about finally going back, about showing my family where I came from.
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"Are you sure you want to do this, love?" J asked softly as we got the twins ready for the drive.

I nodded, though my stomach was in knots. "I know it's going to be hard, but... I'm ready. It's time."

J's hand found mine, squeezing gently. He didn't push, didn't ask questions - just offered silent support like he always had.

"Mummy, where are we going?" Rose asked, bouncing with her usual energy as we loaded into the rental car.

"We're going to see where Mummy grew up," I explained, trying to keep my voice steady. "The house where I lived when I was little, like you."

"Was it near the beach?" Killy asked from his car seat, clutching his favorite stuffed koala.

"No, love. It was... different." How do you explain a place to your children when you've spent years trying to forget it? I caught J watching me in the rearview mirror as he drove, his eyes full of understanding.

The familiar landscape started appearing as we got closer to Morningside. So much had changed, but somehow everything looked exactly the same. Every turn brought back memories I'd buried deep inside, memories I'd never shared with anyone except J.

When we got to Morningside I directed J to the house I grew up in.

"That's it," I said quietly as we pulled up to my childhood home. "That's where Mummy lived when she was a little girl."

The house stood there like a physical manifestation of my complicated past - sweet memories of growing up with Donna tangled with the darker ones of my father's abuse. My eyes drifted to my old bedroom window, remembering sneaking Cody in, sneaking myself out. All those nights of teenage rebellion, trying desperately to take some control over my life.

The tears threatened as I stared at the house, seeing ghosts of my former selves - the lost little girl, the angry goth teenager, versions of me I'd tried so hard to forget but could never quite escape. J's hand found mine, squeezing gently, grounding me in the present.

"Are you okay, Mummy?" Killy's voice pulled me back to reality.

I forced a smile, though my voice wavered slightly. "I'm fine, love. Just remembering things from a long time ago."

"Can we go inside?" Rose asked excitedly, already trying to unbuckle her car seat.

"No, sweetheart," J answered before I could. "Someone else lives there now. We're just looking."

I was grateful for his intervention. The thought of walking through that door again, of seeing those rooms... I wasn't ready for that. Might never be ready for that.

"There's a park nearby," I said, surprising myself. "I used to play there with my sister." The words felt strange in my mouth - I so rarely mentioned Donna out loud.

"Park!" Rose cheered, while Killy studied my face with that unnervingly perceptive gaze of his.

As J drove the short distance, I found myself pointing out landmarks without meaning to. "That's where I went to school. That shop used to be a bakery where we'd get treats sometimes. That church..." I stopped abruptly, remembering the last time I'd been there - three caskets…

J's hand found mine again, saying nothing but understanding everything.

We settled onto a bench while the twins played, Rose immediately making friends with some local kids while Killy methodically explored the playground equipment.

"If this is too much, we can go," J said softly.

I shook my head. "No, I want to do this. We still need to go past my old secondary school." A laugh escaped me, remembering. "God, the trouble I got in over those uniforms - always altering them, showing up in full goth makeup."

"I bet you were hot," J grinned.

"Says the boy who wore his Catholic school uniform exactly to code," I teased. "I've seen your school pictures. That good little Church boy wouldn't have known what to do with me."

"Oy, the good Church boy was just a facade. You know what I got up to behind Mary's back," he smirked.

"Fair dinkum," I conceded. "There's a few more stops I want to make - lunch at The Fish Factory, maybe the Do-Op Shop where I bought all my clothes. And..." I took a breath. "The cemetery."

"You sure, mo chroí?" His voice carried all the concern he'd been holding back.

I nodded, watching our children play in the park where Donna and I had once been young and innocent. "I am."

The Fish Factory hadn't changed much - same weathered exterior, same salt-air smell mixing with fried fish. The twins were delighted by the hot chips, which Rose loved of course, while J tried to wrap his head around chicken salt.

"This is what Australian chips are supposed to taste like," I told him, watching his expression. "Not those fancy triple-cooked things Trevor serves."

The Do-Op Shop was different - renovated, modernized - but still had that familiar musty thrift store smell. I found myself telling J stories as we browsed, the twins fascinated by the eclectic mix of items.

"I bought my first leather jacket here," I said, running my hand along a rack of clothes. "Donna helped me hide it from Mum and Dad."

"Bloody hell... Livvie Olsen? Is that really you?" The familiar voice made me turn. Mrs. Campbell stood behind the counter, looking exactly as I remembered - though maybe with a few more grey hairs.

I smiled, surprised by how good it felt to be recognized. "Aye, it's me. Though it's Livvie O'Brien now."

"What the hell happened to your accent? You sound Irish!" she exclaimed, coming around the counter.

I laughed, the sound mixing both my past and present. "Married an Irishman and picked up his accent, I suppose. This is my husband Jeremy, and our twins, Rose and Killy."

Mrs. Campbell's eyes softened as she looked at the twins. "Your mum would have loved being a grandmother," she said quietly, then immediately looked stricken. "Oh love, I'm sorry. I shouldn't have-"

"It's okay," I managed, feeling J's steady presence behind me. "That's... that's actually why we're here. Showing the kids where I grew up. All of it."

"First time back?" she asked gently.

I nodded, watching Rose investigate a rack of sparkly dresses while Killy studied an old clock with fascination. "First time since... since the funerals."

"You were such a firecracker," she smiled, clearly trying to shift to happier memories. "You and Donna, always in here trying on clothes, planning your next rebellion."

"The leather jacket," J said, understanding dawning on his face. "The one in those old photos."

"Still have it," I admitted. "Couldn't bear to get rid of it. It was the last thing Donna helped me pick out."

"I think about Donna sometimes," Mrs. Campbell said softly. "Such a sweet girl, your sister."

I nodded, feeling the familiar ache. "I think about who she might have become... if she'd had the chance to grow up, fall in love, have children of her own. I miss her so much."

"I know you do, dear one," Mrs. Campbell's voice carried years of watching us grow up. "I'm glad you came back. It's good to see you again."

"Mummy! Look! Fairy dress!" Rose's excited voice cut through the heavy moment as she pointed to a vintage bohemian dress that looked perfectly her size.

"That's beautiful, fairy girl," I smiled, grateful for my daughter's ability to bring light to any situation. "You want it?"

"I want!" Rose nodded enthusiastically.

"What about you, Killy? See anything you fancy?"

Killy studied the racks carefully before pointing to a little jacket that could have been a miniature version of J's favorite. "Like Da."

I caught J's grin in the mirror. "Alright then, the dress and the jacket it is."

After paying - Mrs. Campbell insisting on giving us a "family discount" - we headed back to the car. The twins were excited about their treasures, but I could feel the weight of our next stop settling over me.

"Ready?" J asked softly as we buckled the kids in.

I nodded, giving him directions to the cemetery. It wasn't far - nothing in Morningside was really far from anything else - but the drive felt longer somehow. Rose chatted happily about her new "fairy dress" while Killy sat quietly, wearing his new jacket despite the warm day.

The cemetery gates looked exactly as I remembered them. The last time I'd driven through them... I pushed the memory away, focusing instead on getting the twins out of their car seats.

"Mummy?" Killy's voice was unusually hesitant. "Why are we here?"

I knelt down to his level, seeing understanding in his eyes that seemed impossible for a two-year-old. "I want to introduce you to some people who were very important to me."

"The people in the pictures in your desk?" Killy asked softly, and I felt J's hand on my shoulder, steadying me.

I hadn't realized he'd noticed those photos - the ones hidden away in my desk drawer, the ones I could never quite bring myself to display but couldn't bear to get rid of either.

"Yes, love," I managed. "My mum, my dad, and my sister Donna."

Rose, unusually quiet, slipped her little hand into mine. "Are they sleeping here?"

"Something like that," J answered for me, seeing me struggle. "This is where we come to remember them."

The path to their graves was muscle memory - three headstones, side by side. I'd picked them out myself, barely eighteen and completely alone. Until J found me.

"The flowers are fresh," I noticed, surprised.

"Mrs. Campbell," J said quietly. "She mentioned while you were helping Rose with her dress. She comes and visits them."

I stood before the three headstones, feeling the weight of twenty years of silence. "Mum, Dad... hi." My voice cracked slightly. "Been a while, though it's not like I had much reason to come home. Not that it was much of a home."

I took a steadying breath, feeling J's presence behind me. "I have a family now. A real one. This is my husband J, and our twins, Rose and Killy. Your grandkids, I suppose, though you'd never have

known them anyway." The bitterness crept into my voice. "The worst part, Dad, is that you died before I could make you understand what you did to me. Not that you would have cared. And Mum... you let him. You just let him."

I wiped away tears before turning to Donna's grave, my heart clenching. "Donna... I'm so sorry I haven't been here. But I think about you every day. God, how I wish you could have met J and the twins. You'd have loved them so much." The tears fell freely now. "I miss you. I'm so sorry I couldn't protect you... that I got to live when you didn't. It's not bloody fair."

J's arms wrapped around me from behind as the twins, sensing my distress, pressed close against my legs. For a moment we just stood there, my present family supporting me as I faced my past.

"Mummy sad?" Rose asked, her usual boundless energy subdued.

"Yes, fairy girl," I managed. "Mummy's sad because I miss my sister very much."

"Like I miss Killy when he's sleeping?" she asked, trying to understand in her two-year-old way.

A sound escaped me - somewhere between a laugh and a sob. "A bit like that, love. But Donna... Donna's not coming back."

"Why?" Killy asked softly.

I looked at J, lost for how to explain death to our babies. How to explain the accident that took my whole family in an instant, leaving me the only survivor. How to share this part of me without burdening them with its weight.

"Sometimes," J said gently, "people we love have to go away forever. But we keep them in our hearts, and we tell stories about them, and we love them always."

I squeezed his hand, grateful for his ability to find the right words when I couldn't. Looking at the three headstones, I felt something shift inside me - not healing exactly, but maybe acceptance. The guilt of being the only survivor would never completely fade, but standing here with my own family, I could finally see that I'd built something good from the wreckage of that day.

"I think," I said softly, "I'd like to tell you about your Aunt Donna. She would have loved you both so much."

"Was she pretty like you, Mummy?" Rose asked, tracing the letters on the headstone with her tiny fingers.

"She was beautiful," I smiled through tears. "And she could make anyone laugh. She used to..." I paused, memories flooding back. "She used to sing while she did the dishes, using the spoons as microphones."

"Like Da does!" Killy's eyes lit up with recognition.

"Yeah," I caught J's smile. "Just like Da does."

"Rose, you know you are named after your Aunt Donna?" I said softly, kneeling down beside her. "Your middle name, Dónailín, is Donna in Irish."

Rose's eyes widened as she processed this connection, one hand still tracing the letters on the headstone while the other clutched her new fairy dress. "Is that why Da calls me Róisín Dónailín when I'm naughty?"

Despite everything, I laughed. "Well, that's because your Da is proper Irish and loves using your full name. But yes, we gave you that name to honor my sister. To keep a part of her with us."

Killy moved closer to the headstone, studying it with that intense focus he brought to everything. "What about my name, Mummy?"

"Your name has its own special meaning, love," I said, watching him process this information about his sister's name. "But Donna would have adored you both. She would have loved being an aunt."

J knelt beside us, gathering our little family close. For a moment, we just sat there together in front of the graves, the Australian sun warm on our backs. Something about having them here, my past and present merging, made the weight I'd carried for so many years feel a little lighter.

"Can we come back?" Rose asked suddenly. "To talk to Aunt Donna?"

The simple question caught me off guard. I'd spent so many years running from this place, and here was my daughter, wanting to embrace it.

"Maybe next time we're in Australia," J suggested, watching my face carefully.

"Yeah," I surprised myself by saying. "I think... I think that would be good. And maybe I can tell you more stories about her. About when we were little."

Killy leaned against me, his small hand finding mine. "Promise?"

"Promise," I whispered, realizing I meant it.

Michelle

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The network press event was in full swing, the usual controlled chaos of photographers, reporters, and stars from every show. After the cast photoshoot, Hunter and I hit the red carpet, falling into our familiar rhythm of poses and sound bites. He looked incredible, as always, and we handled the standard questions like the veterans we were.

Until one caught us completely off guard.

"You two must be so proud to have your daughter making her music debut on Jon's new album," the reporter said brightly.

"What?" Hunter's voice carried a dangerous edge.
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"Harley's duet with Jon on his rerelease. And on a song speculated to be about Michelle. Was it a hard decision to allow Harley to do that?"

Years of media training kicked in as I forced a smile. "Hunter and I always support our girls and all of their dreams." I gripped Hunter's arm, steering us away before his expression could betray us.

"What the fuck did Jon do?" Hunter hissed once we were moving.

"I have no idea," I muttered. "But I'm going to find out." We ducked into a quiet corner where I quickly pulled up the news on my phone. There it was - somehow, Jon had recorded a duet with Harley on a song he'd written about me. "Hawaii... it had to be in Hawaii..."

"I knew he was up to something," Hunter's voice was deadly quiet. "I'm going to kill him. I'm going to enlist Trev and we're going to find a cliff..."

"Calm down," I said, though I was fighting my own rage. "We have to make it through this event. We'll worry about killing Jon later."

Hunter took a deep breath, but I could see him calculating exactly how many ways he could make Jon disappear. "He manipulated our thirteen-year-old daughter into recording a song about you. A song about your relationship."

"I know," I said through gritted teeth. "But right now, we have to go back out there and smile for the cameras. Then we can call Harley and find out exactly what happened."

"And then find a cliff," Hunter muttered.

"With Trevor's help," I agreed, straightening Hunter's tie. "But first, we have to get through the next two hours without letting anyone see how furious we are."

"Michelle! Hunter!" A network executive waved us over. "There are some people I'd like you to meet."

I plastered on my professional smile, squeezing Hunter's hand in silent communication. We'd handle this - the press, the executives, the endless questions about Harley's "debut" - and then we'd deal with Jon.

Preferably somewhere near a very tall cliff.

I navigated the meet and greets with practiced ease until I spotted Holly across the room. My manager's expression told me she'd already seen the news.

"Holly," I made my way over, phone in hand. "I don't know how this happened, but..."

She glanced at the article, looking as blindsided as I felt. "What the... okay... that's something." It was rare to see Holly at a loss for words.

"I know. Which is why I'm officially hiring you as Harley's manager too. She clearly needs one." I ran a hand through my hair, careful not to disturb the styling. "Can you get in front of this? Work some PR magic?"

Holly's professional mask slipped back into place. "I'm on it. Though it would help if I knew why Harley went behind your back with this."

"I'll figure that out and get back to you. Just... please regain control of the situation."

"Consider it done," she assured me, already pulling out her phone. If anyone could spin this, it was Holly.

I made my way back to Hunter, who was doing an admirable job of not looking like he was plotting murder. "Holly's on it," I whispered.

"Good. Because I just read the lyrics. He absolutely wrote it about you,." Hunter's jaw clenched. "And now he had our daughter sing it."

"Have you tried calling Harley?" I asked, though I already knew the answer. Our daughter could be remarkably elusive when she wanted to be.

"Straight to voicemail. She knows we know."

I checked my watch - still an hour of this event to go. An hour of smiling and pretending everything was fine while my ex-husband's manipulation of my daughter played out in the media. And somewhere in Ireland, my teenage daughter was definitely avoiding our calls.

"Should we call Jeremy?" Hunter suggested. "Have him check on her?"

"Already texted him," I said. "He'll let us know if she's okay. But dealing with why she did this... that's going to have to wait until we can talk to her ourselves. And if she won't answer our calls later we'll call my mom. Let her escape Grandma's wrath."

Hunter's smile was grim. "Your mom will definitely get her to answer."

"Nobody ignores Lea Cagle," I agreed. "Not even our stubborn teenager."

The next hour felt endless - more photos, more questions about Harley's "surprise debut," more maintaining my professional smile while internally seething. Finally, mercifully, we made it to the car.

The moment the door closed, I was dialing Harley's number. Straight to voicemail, as expected.

"Okay," I said, pulling up Mom's contact. "Time to bring in the big guns."

"Should we warn Jon?" Hunter asked, though his tone suggested he'd rather do anything but.

"Oh no," I smiled darkly. "Let him deal with my mom without warning. It's the least he deserves." I dialed Mom's number.

"Hey sweetie!" Her warm voice answered immediately.

"Mom, hi. Is Harley around?" I tried to keep my tone casual.

"Yeah, why? Did you try calling her?" Mom's voice sharpened slightly, picking up on something in my voice.

"Yes, and I think she's avoiding us..." I took a deep breath. "You're not going to believe what she did..." I explained about Jon, the song, the secret recording in Hawaii.

"He WHAT?" Mom's voice went from warm to steel in an instant. "Why can that man not stay away from my family?!"

"That's not even the worst part," I continued. "The song he had her record? He wrote it about me, about my relationship with him."

I could practically hear Mom's blood pressure rising. "Give me five minutes with your daughter. She'll answer her phone."

"Okay, but remember - we're mad at Jon, not Harley," I said quickly. "I want to support her ambition, but I need to understand why she didn't come to me. I could have helped her record properly, set her up with Holly, done this the right way."

"Oh, I know exactly who I'm mad at," Mom's voice carried that dangerous edge I recognized from my own. "That man had no right going behind your back to record with my granddaughter. Using a song about you, no less."

Hunter, hearing Mom's voice through the speaker, nodded in agreement.

"Just... talk to her first?" I asked. "Find out what Jon said to convince her. Because you know he must have said something."

"Oh, I'll find out everything," Mom assured me. "No one manipulates my grandbaby and gets away with it."

"Thanks, Mom. And maybe remind her that if she wants to pursue music, she has a whole family of professionals who can help her do it properly?"

"Including her mother, who happens to be one of the most successful artists in the industry," Mom agreed. "I'll handle this, baby. You focus on your event."

"Already done with that, thankfully. Now we just have to deal with the press fallout. I've got Holly working on it."

"Good. And Michelle?" Mom's voice carried that protective edge I knew well. "Don't let him get away with this. He had no right using your daughter like this."

"Trust me, he won't," I assured her. "I love you, Mom."

"Love you too, baby. Now let me go have a chat with my granddaughter about proper career planning and not letting manipulative men take advantage of her talent."

I hung up and looked at Hunter as our car pulled up to my apartment building. "Mom's on it. Now can we please forget about Jon for the moment? I'll handle him tomorrow. Right now, I just want to take advantage of having you here with me."

Hunter's expression softened as he helped me out of the car, his hand finding the small of my back. "You sure you don't want to plot Jon's demise a little longer?"

"Oh, I'll definitely plot his demise," I assured him as we headed up to my apartment. "But I haven't seen my husband in weeks, and right now that takes priority over murder plans."

"Even if those murder plans involve Trevor and a cliff?"

"Even then," I smiled, unlocking the door. We went inside to find Thara lounging in her favorite window spot. She barely acknowledged our entrance before going back to sleep, clearly unimpressed by our formal attire.

"I could use some help getting out of this dress."

Hunter smiled and led me to the bedroom. "Absolutely."

The moment his hands touched my back, all the tension from the evening - the press, Jon's manipulation, worry about Harley - began to melt away. This was what I'd been missing these past weeks: not just Hunter's physical presence, but the way he could ground me when everything else felt chaotic. How with just a touch, a look, he could remind me what really mattered.

Being away from him, from our girls, was always hard. But moments like this made it bearable - knowing that no matter what drama swirled around us, we had this unshakeable connection. This absolute trust and understanding that we'd built over years of facing everything together.

He undressed me with reverent care, like I was the most precious thing in his world, before pulling me into a passionate kiss. Every touch felt like coming home, reminding me of everything we'd built together. With Hunter, passion and tenderness weren't opposites but perfect complements - like thunder and lightning, powerful yet beautiful. He was everything I'd ever needed but never knew to want until I found him.

Afterwards, I lay contentedly against his chest, his fingers running gently through my hair while I traced patterns on his skin. The simple intimacy of the moment meant more than any elaborate red carpet appearance.

"I love you so much," he murmured, pressing a kiss to the top of my head.

"I love you too, Hunter," I whispered, curling closer into his embrace. In his arms, everything else - Jon's schemes, press events, being away from home - felt manageable.

We drifted off to sleep like that, wrapped in each other's arms in perfect contentment.

Livvie

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The morning after visiting Morningside, I felt different - lighter somehow. The realization had settled over me during the night: while I didn't really miss my parents, the ache of losing Donna would always be there. I hadn't fully made peace with that yet, but acknowledging the difference felt like a start.

J and I were getting the twins ready for breakfast, the morning sun already promising another warm day.

"You doing okay today, love?" he asked softly, watching me with those perceptive eyes that had first drawn me to him.

"Aye, I'm good. Really," I nodded, helping secure the twins in their car seats. And surprisingly, I meant it.

We drove to a little café near UQ that had been Abby's and my regular haunt during uni days. The place hadn't changed much - same mismatched furniture, same smell of coffee and fresh pastries. After breakfast, we headed to the university grounds.

The University of Queensland campus was just as beautiful as I remembered - the sandstone buildings, the Great Court, the jacaranda trees that would bloom purple in spring. Memories of study sessions with Abby, of late-night coffee runs and early morning lectures, flooded back as we walked the grounds.

"This is where Mummy learned to be smart?" Killy asked, taking in the grand architecture with his usual careful observation.

I couldn't help but laugh. "Something like that, love. This is where Mummy studied to be a tech fairy."

"It's big!" Rose spun in circles, trying to take in the towering buildings. "Like a castle!"

"That's what I thought too, first time I saw it," I admitted, watching her excitement. "Your Aunt Abby and I spent so many hours in these buildings, me learning about computers and coding and her learning about oceans and animal life."

J squeezed my hand as we walked past the library where I'd practically lived during finals. "You were already brilliant before uni, love. This place just gave you the credentials to prove it."

"Did you meet Da here?" Killy asked, his hand finding mine.

"No, love. I met your Da in London." I smiled at the memory. "Though sometimes I think if I hadn't studied here, learned what I did, I might never have ended up where I could meet him."

"Tell story!" Rose demanded, always eager to hear about her parents' meeting.
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"Well," I smiled, remembering that night in London, "Mummy was on holiday for her birthday, and I went to this little Irish pub. And there was this very handsome man wearing eyeliner who bought me a pint..."

"Da!" Killy interrupted excitedly.

"That's right. Your Da was so nervous when he came to talk to me," I caught J's eye, seeing him remember too. "But brave enough to come say hello anyway."

"Because you were the most beautiful girl he ever saw!" Rose quoted, having heard the story many times.

J squeezed my hand. "Still are, love."

"And then you falled in love?" Killy asked.

"We did," I nodded. "So much that when Mummy got a job in America, Da decided to move there too. Sometimes the scariest choices lead you to the best places."

"Like moving to Ireland?" Rose asked, skipping alongside us as we walked through the university grounds.

"Exactly like that, fairy girl." I watched her twirl in her new vintage dress. "Though that wasn't as scary because by then, Da and I knew we could face anything together."

We reached the science building where Abby and I had spent countless hours. "This is where your Aunt Abby learned all about the ocean and the animals that live in it."

"Is that why she knows everything about fishies?" Killy asked, his hand still firmly in mine.

"That's right, love. While Mummy was learning about computers, Aunt Abby was learning about marine biology." The memories of late-night study sessions, of Abby explaining her latest marine discoveries while I coded, felt both distant and immediate.

"Can we see where you learned computers?" Rose asked.

"The tech buildings are just over there," I pointed, then noticed J checking his phone. "Everything okay?"

"We'll deal with that later. She gets you in a few days for the tour. Right now, I want to show the twins the courtyard where Abby and I used to have lunch."

The Great Court looked exactly as I remembered - the covered walkways where we'd hide from sudden rain, the grassy areas where we'd spread out our books on sunny days. Rose immediately ran to the center, spinning with her arms out while Killy studied the intricate architecture above.

"Abby and I would sit right there," I pointed to a spot under one of the arches. "She'd be studying her marine biology texts while I worked on coding projects. Sometimes we'd quiz each other, though neither of us understood the other's subject."

"Did you eat fairy bread?" Rose asked hopefully, clearly thinking about her own favorite snack.

"Sometimes," I laughed. "Though usually just coffee and whatever we could grab between lectures. University students aren't known for proper eating habits."

"Speaking of eating," J checked his watch, "we should probably think about lunch soon. Any of your old haunts still around?"

"A few," I smiled, memories of cheap student meals flooding back. "Though maybe something a bit nicer now that we're proper adults? I know, let’s go to Queen Street Mall. They have everything.”

"Mall!" Rose's eyes lit up at the prospect.

"Is it far?" J asked, already moving to gather the twins.

"Not too bad," I said as we headed back to the car. "And the parking's better than it used to be when I was in uni. Plus, the food court's been completely redone - it's actually quite nice now."

As we drove into the city center, I pointed out landmarks to the twins. Brisbane had changed so much since my university days, but Queen Street Mall remained the heart of the city's shopping district. We found parking easily enough, and Rose's excitement was contagious as we made our way toward the entrance.

"Look Mummy!" Killy pointed to the street performers setting up for the day. "Music!"

"They've always had performers here," I told him. "When Abby and I were students, we'd sometimes spend our lunch breaks watching them instead of going to lectures."

"Were you naughty, Mummy?" Rose asked with a giggle.

"Sometimes," I admitted, catching J's amused look. "But I still learned enough to become a tech fairy, didn't I?"

The mall was bustling with its usual mix of tourists and locals. Rose was immediately drawn to the window displays, while Killy watched the performers with intense focus. It felt strange being back here as a mother, when I had so many memories of being a student rushing between classes or shopping with Abby.

"Jimmy's Thai is still here," I noted with surprise. "Abby and I used to split their pad thai when we were broke between paydays."

"Want to try it?" J asked.

"God no," I laughed. "I know much better places now. There's this amazing modern Australian place upstairs that wasn't here when I was in uni. Proper adult food."

As we made our way through the mall, I found myself pointing out more changes - stores that had come and gone, new additions, places that somehow survived the decades. It was like watching my

past and present overlap, especially with Rose skipping ahead in her vintage dress from the Do-Op Shop while Killy held tight to J's hand.

"Mummy, look!" Rose pressed her face against a shop window displaying fairy wings. "Can I?"

"Not today, fairy girl," J said gently. "But maybe we can come back before we head home."

Home. It was strange how that word had shifted meaning over the years - from Morningside to Brisbane to Austin, and now to Cork. But watching my family explore my old haunts, I realized home wasn't really about place at all. Home was wherever J and the twins were.

Michelle

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My mom's text woke me the next morning: "Talked to Harley. Jon heard her singing and asked if she wanted to be a singer like you. She said maybe, so he invited her to a recording session. She didn't think he'd actually use her vocals, which is why she kept quiet. Now she's excited about the duet, and both she and Arissa are begging to use your recording studio. I hid the keys until you decide how to handle this. Call me when you get this. Love you baby girl."

I sighed, pulling Thara into my arms from where she'd been sleeping on my pillow. "Mommy is going to kill Jon. Yes she is," I grumbled to the cat.

Hunter stirred beside me, slowly waking. "Who's killing Jon?"

I handed him my phone, waiting while his sleepy eyes focused on the message.

"Bastard!" Hunter moved to throw my phone in anger.

I quickly rescued it from his grip. "Yes, but it's not the phone's fault."

Hunter sighed heavily. "Mich, I know you think he's your friend, but I need him out of my kids' lives."

I opened my mouth to defend Jon out of habit, but stopped. He'd crossed a line this time, manipulating my thirteen-year-old daughter. "I understand."

Hunter sat up, suddenly fully awake. "You do?"

"Yes," I said quietly, still absently petting Thara. "Using a song about our relationship was bad enough, but manipulating Harley... that's different. She's thirteen. She doesn't understand the implications of what he did."

"Or why he did it," Hunter added, his voice carrying that dangerous edge.

"He wanted attention," I sighed. "And he used our daughter to get it. That's... that's not okay." I reached for my phone again. "I should call Mom back."

"What about Harley?"
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"That's trickier," I admitted. "She's excited about this, thinks it's her big break. If we come down too hard, we risk pushing her toward him. But if we don't address it..."

"She'll think this kind of manipulation is acceptable," Hunter finished.

"Exactly." I looked at the time - Mom would be up. "Let me talk to Mom first, then we can figure out how to handle this with Harley. And then..." I met Hunter's eyes. "Then I'll deal with Jon."

I dialed Mom's number, putting it on speaker so Hunter could hear too.

"Hey baby," Mom answered immediately. "I take it you got my text?"

"Yeah, thanks for handling it, Mom. How's she really doing?"

"Excited," Mom sighed. "But also nervous now that she knows you didn't know about it. She's not used to keeping things from you, Michelle. I think Jon convinced her it would be a fun surprise."

I felt Hunter tense beside me. "Of course he did," he muttered.

"Hi Hunter," Mom's voice carried understanding. "I already told Jon not to contact her again without going through you two first."

"You talked to Jon?" I asked, surprised.

"Oh yes. Called him right after I talked to Harley. Told him if he ever pulled something like this again, he'd have me to deal with. And trust me, he remembers what happened the last time I had to step in."

I couldn't help but smile slightly. Mom had always been fiercely protective, and Jon had experienced that firsthand during our divorce.

"What do you think we should do about Harley?" I asked, knowing Mom would have already thought this through.

"Well," Mom's voice took on that thoughtful tone I knew well, "she's genuinely interested in music, Michelle. That's not just Jon's manipulation - she's got real talent, and she wants to explore it."

"I know," I sighed. "I've heard her singing when she thinks no one's listening."

"So maybe," Mom continued, "this is an opportunity to turn this mess into something positive. Instead of just shutting it down, show her how to do it right. Professional contracts, proper studio time, working with Holly..."

"Guide her instead of forbidding it," Hunter said slowly, considering. "Take control of the narrative."

"Exactly," Mom agreed. "Because if you just tell her no, especially now that the song's already recorded..."

"She'll rebel," I finished, knowing my daughter all too well. "And probably run straight to Jon."

"Who would love nothing more than to play the supportive mentor," Hunter's voice carried barely controlled anger.

"So we support her interest," I said, plans already forming. "But we do it right. Properly. Professionally. And school comes first. Just like you did with me when you moved me out of LA."

"After Sunset," Mom reminded me gently.

I winced, remembering my own rebellious pre-teen years in LA - the parties, the attitude, the complete disregard for rules. Mom had finally put her foot down when I was thirteen, moving us away from the temptations of Hollywood.

"And it worked," I acknowledged. "Getting me away from that scene, focusing on school while still letting me pursue music... it probably saved my life."

"It definitely saved your career," Mom said. "By the time you went back to LA, you were ready for it. Mature enough to handle it."

"That's what I want for Harley," I said firmly. "Structure. Boundaries. Support without exploitation. And absolutely no sneaking around with Jon. Like I did."

Hunter nodded beside me. "We guide her through this the right way."

"You know," Mom said carefully, "she's a lot like you were at that age. Talented, headstrong, desperate to prove herself..."

"That's what scares me," I admitted. "I remember what I was like, the stupid risks I took, the people I trusted who didn't deserve it. At least Harley has both parents watching out for her."

"And a mother who understands the industry," Mom added. "Who knows all the pitfalls firsthand."

I caught Hunter's expression - he'd heard stories about my wild child years. "I'll call Holly first, then we'll video chat with Harley. Together," I squeezed his hand. "Show her we're supporting her dreams, just not Jon's methods."

"Want me to talk to her first?" Mom offered. "Prepare her for the conversation?"

"Please," I said gratefully. "You always knew how to handle me at my most difficult. Maybe you can help me handle mini-me."

"Okay baby. I'll text you later. I love you," Mom said.

"I love you too," I said as I hung up. I looked at Hunter, anxiety creeping in. "Maybe I need to swing through Ireland before I go to Australia so I can talk to her in person?"

Hunter shook his head. "You have enough on your plate. I can handle this. I'll head home tomorrow and deal with it. If I need you, we'll get on Zoom."

I sighed, the familiar guilt settling in my chest. "I hate that I can't be the mother I feel like I need to be because of my career."

"I know," Hunter pulled me closer. "But you also love your career. And we're in this together."

"It's not just the show anymore though," I said quietly. "It's the Australian tour, then more filming, then all the press... I feel like I'm missing everything. Their first year in Ireland, Harley's music interests, Arissa's achievements..."

"Hey," Hunter's voice was gentle but firm. "You're not missing anything. You're showing our girls that women can have careers and families. That following your dreams doesn't mean sacrificing everything else. That's the kind of mother they need."

"That's the kind of mother they need."

"I hope you're right," I said, absently scratching Thara's ears as she purred against me. "At least Harley isn't sneaking around like I used to do to Mom and Dean - meeting Jon behind their backs, lying about where I was going..."

"Your mom was there for every performance, every recording session you'd let her attend," Hunter reminded me. "She tried to guide you the right way, even when you were determined to do things your way."

"And now here I am, on the other side of it," I sighed. "Trying to guide Harley while she's probably planning ways around whatever boundaries we set. The irony isn't lost on me."

"The difference is," Hunter said, "you understand both sides of it now. You know why your mom set those boundaries, and you know exactly what Harley might be thinking. That's an advantage."

"True," I managed a small smile. "And Harley has something I didn't have at first - a father who sees her as more than just a meal ticket."

"We'll handle this together," Hunter assured me. "Just like we handle everything else."

My phone buzzed with a text from Holly: 'Call me when you can.'

"Holly's on it," I showed Hunter the message. "At least we have a good team in place this time. Not like when I was starting out and Derek was making all the decisions."

"Speaking of decisions," Hunter said carefully, "what exactly are we going to do about Jon? Because right now, I'm thinking Trevor's cliff idea has merit."

I couldn't help but smile slightly, despite my anger. "As tempting as that is, we need to handle this professionally. For Harley's sake." I started typing a response to Holly. "But after this? Jon's done. No more chances, no more 'he's changed' or 'he means well.' He used our daughter, Hunter. That's it for me."

"Finally," he muttered, then caught my expression. "Sorry, babe. I know you care about him."

"I always will," I said, hitting send on my text to Holly. "Now, how about breakfast before you have to head to the airport? We can strategize over coffee about how to handle our budding rock star."

The goodbye at the airport was hard - it always was. After one last lingering kiss, I forced myself to let Hunter go. Once he was through security, I headed back to my car and dialed Jon's number.

"Hey!" he answered cheerfully.

"Jon, we need to talk."

"About?"

"You know damn well what. Harley. Duet. Ring any bells?"

"Ohhh, you heard about that?" His voice carried that false innocence I knew too well. "Crazy how much she sounds like you."

"Listen," I kept my voice steady despite my rising anger, "I let you get away with a lot of shit. Always have. But this is too much. I refused to do another duet with you, so you thought you'd use my daughter?"

"She sounds SO much like you," he repeated, as if that justified everything.

"She is thirteen, Jon. The same age I was when we broke up. Except you're not twenty-four anymore. You're old enough to be her grandfather. Stay away from my daughter."

"Hey, you act like I did something illegal," he got defensive. "It was just a recording. I didn't do anything else to her. I wouldn't."

I sighed, pinching the bridge of my nose. "I know. I know. I wasn't accusing you of that."

"Well, that's something at least."

"Why did you do this? And don't lie because I already have a good idea of why."

"What's your theory then, Ms. Know-It-All?"

"You wanted to make a statement that you're not ever going to let me go completely. That's usually your MO."

"I don't need to make that statement," his voice dropped lower. "You already know."

The familiar manipulation in his tone made my skin crawl. After all these years, he still thought he had some kind of hold over me.

"No, Jon. What I know is that you're done. No more chances, no more benefit of the doubt. You crossed a line using my daughter."

"I thought you'd be happy," he used that wounded tone he'd always used to make me feel guilty. "Helping launch her career, just like your mom did for you."

"My mom did it the right way," I said firmly. "With contracts, proper management, protecting me - well, when I let her. What you did was sneaky and manipulative, and you know it."

"Michelle-"

"We're done, Jon. Stay away from my family. All of them. Or the next call you get will be from my lawyers."

"You know you can't ever be completely done," his voice took on that knowing tone that used to work on me. "You married Hunter, had kids... you want me away from them, fine. But you know I will always be in your life. Hunter can't come close to the mental connection we have over music, creativity, our past..."

"Hunter and I connect in every way," I cut him off firmly. "That's why I finally ended our relationship to marry him. I'm done with infidelity and with trashing my own life to be with you. You're right, maybe I will cool off and be your friend again. Maybe I always will... but anything more? Absolutely not. And you have got to stop trying to get a rise out of Hunter and you damn well better not ever use my kids to get to me again, is that clear?"

"Crystal."

"Good. Now, Holly is working damage control. You are going to do everything she tells you to do or I will sue you for using Harley's voice without parental consent," I said, my tone leaving no room for argument.

"Fine."

I ended the call, gripping the steering wheel tighter as I pulled into my apartment complex. Part of me wanted to believe he'd actually listen this time, but experience told me otherwise. At least Holly would handle the professional side of this mess.

My phone buzzed - a text from Hunter: 'Made it through security. Love you. We've got this.'

I replied, "We always do. Love you too." Then I pulled up Holly's number and called her.

"Holly Tyler," she answered in her crisp professional tone.

"Holly, it's Mich. What's our spin on the Harley situation?" I asked as I made my way up to my apartment.

"Already working on it," Holly said, and I could hear her typing. "We're going with 'talented daughter following in mother's footsteps, special one-time collaboration.' Makes it sound planned and controlled rather than Jon going behind your back."

"And Harley?"

"We position her as a gifted young artist exploring her talents, supported by her family. No mention of future projects yet - keeps our options open while we figure out how to handle this properly."

I unlocked my door, Thara immediately winding around my ankles. "And what about Jon's angle?"

"That's trickier," Holly admitted. "He's already trying to spin this as some kind of meaningful musical reunion through your daughter."

"That's going to stop. He knows you're in control of this now. He will do whatever you tell him. How are we spinning her recording with my ex-husband?" I asked, settling onto my couch with Thara curling up beside me.

"We keep it simple," Holly said, all business. "A natural collaboration between an aspiring young artist and an established musician who's known her since childhood. No mention of your past relationship, no drama. Just focus on Harley's talent and the musical aspect."

"And if anyone asks about why we didn't announce it beforehand?"

"We say it was a casual studio session that turned out so well, everyone involved felt it deserved to be shared. Makes it sound organic rather than calculated."

I nodded, though Holly couldn't see me. "What about statements? I assume we need to put something out?"

"I've drafted three options," Holly's typing resumed. "One from you and Hunter as parents supporting your daughter's artistic exploration, one from Jon about mentoring young talent, and one from the label about nurturing the next generation. All carefully worded to control the narrative."

"Perfect. Ok, Harley is interested in exploring music as a career. So is Arissa. I was considering signing them to Starlight on a development deal until they're 18," I said, already planning ahead.

"Not a bad idea. But the optics of you writing their contracts isn't great. Maybe let Mina do it?" Holly suggested.

"Great idea. Ok, talk to Mina and have her draft the deals. I'll look over it as a parent, not a record exec. And Holly? I want you to manage them."

"Are you sure? Some might say that's too close to your team."

"You're the only one I trust completely with my girls," I said firmly. "You've always had my back, looked out for my best interests. That's exactly what they need. If they want different management when they're 18, that's their choice, but for now..."

"I'd be honored," Holly said warmly. "Now, about those statements - they're in your inbox. Have Hunter review them before we release anything."

"Will do. And Holly? Thank you. For everything."

After hanging up, I pulled up my email and started reading through Holly's drafted statements. She was good - really good. The first one, from Hunter and me, struck just the right tone:

"We're incredibly proud of Harley's natural musical talent and her desire to explore creative expression through music. While this collaboration was unexpected, we support our daughter's artistic journey and look forward to guiding her as she develops her gifts."

The label statement was appropriately corporate but warm:

"We have had a long tradition of nurturing young talent, and we're excited to see the next generation of artists beginning to emerge. Harley Bradley's surprise collaboration demonstrates the kind of organic musical moments we love to support."

Jon's statement made me pause. Holly had managed to make it professional without giving him room to push his agenda:

"Working with young artists is always inspiring. Harley has inherited her mother's incredible vocal talent, and I'm grateful to have been part of her first recording experience."

Short, simple, no hint of personal connection. I started typing a text to Hunter: 'Holly's statements look good. Sending them to you now. The Jon one is particularly well controlled.'

Hunter's response came quickly: 'Just landed. Reading now. Holly really knows how to muzzle him without making it obvious.'

I smiled slightly at that. 'That's why we keep her around. How long until your connection?'

'Hour and a half. Enough time to review these properly.'

My phone buzzed with an incoming call - the network. Probably wanting to discuss how this might affect promotion for the show. I sighed, switching back to professional mode. At least the statements were handled.

'Network calling. Love you. Let me know if you want any changes to the statements before Holly releases them.'

'Love you too. And Mich? We're doing the right thing. Supporting her while protecting her.'

I took a deep breath and answered the network call. "Michelle Bradley."

"Michelle, it's Marcus," our showrunner's voice carried that careful tone executives use when approaching delicate situations. "I assume you've seen the news about your daughter's recording?"

"Just finishing up the PR strategy with my team," I said professionally. "I can assure you it won't impact any of our promotional schedules."

"Actually," Marcus paused, "we were thinking this could work in our favor. A mother-daughter story angle could really boost our demographics..."

"No," I cut him off firmly. "My daughter isn't part of the show's promotion. She's thirteen, Marcus. This isn't a marketing opportunity."

"But-"

"The focus is on Dixie and her son," I reminded him. "That's what we're promoting. My personal life, especially my children, stays separate."

There was a brief silence before Marcus sighed. "You're right, of course. Sorry, Michelle. You know how it is - always looking for angles."

"I appreciate that," I said, softening slightly. "But this one's off limits."

"Understood. Just... keep me in the loop if anything changes? The network's going to ask questions when this hits the media."

"Holly will coordinate with your PR team," I assured him. "You'll have all the approved statements before they go public."

After ending the call, I checked my messages. Hunter had sent his approval of the statements, and Holly had already started coordinating their release. My mom had texted too: 'Harley's been practicing in the music room all morning. Think she's trying to prove she's serious about this.'

I smiled despite everything. That was pure Bradley determination - when we wanted something, we went all in. I texted back: 'Tell her we'll talk about proper studio time when everything's settled.'

Thara jumped into my lap as I started reviewing my schedule, trying to figure out how to balance the Australian tour, filming, and now this situation with Harley. One thing at a time, I reminded myself. Handle the Jon mess first, then focus on helping Harley do this the right way.

My phone buzzed with a text from Holly: 'Statements ready to go. Releasing in one hour unless you need changes.'

'Go ahead,' I replied. 'The sooner we control this narrative, the better.'

Between Holly managing the PR, Hunter heading home to handle Harley, and Mom keeping things steady in Ireland, we had this covered. It wasn't ideal - I wished I could be there myself - but this was my reality. Balancing career and family, handling crises from different continents, trusting my support system to help manage it all.

I scratched Thara's ears, earning a contented purr. "At least some things are simple, right baby?"

The next few weeks would be challenging - Australian tour, filming schedule, and now this situation with Jon and Harley. But we'd handle it. We always did.

“Brisbane”

The flight from Nashville to Brisbane felt endless, made worse by multiple layovers. By the time I finally stepped off the plane, Thara's carrier weighing on my shoulder, I was already running on fumes.

The familiar sound of camera shutters hit me before I'd even cleared the gate. Somehow they'd gotten through security - probably bought tickets just to get these shots. Professional vultures, the lot of them.

Their questions blurred together, each one more ridiculous than the last: "Michelle, how does it feel to be back in Australia?" "Where's Hunter? Is he with Jessica Simpson?" "What about Jessica's new songs about him?" "Are you still seeing your hairdresser?" "Did Harley record with Jon because you're getting back together?"

I kept moving, letting the questions wash over me. After thirty-plus years in the industry, I'd learned to tune out the absurd speculation. But god, I was tired.

Then I saw Jeremy waiting at baggage claim, and everything else faded away. I practically collapsed into my best friend's arms, not caring what headlines the paps would spin from this moment. "Exhausted Michelle Morris Rekindles Affair with Hairdresser in Brisbane" - let them run with it. I needed my best friend.

"Are you okay, love?" Jeremy's voice carried concern.

"I'm exhausted," I managed, fighting back tears born of pure fatigue.

"Let's get you out of here," he said, gathering my bags efficiently. "Liv and the kids will be so happy to see you."

"Let's get you out of here," he said, gathering my bags efficiently. "Liv and the kids will be so happy to see you."

The paparazzi followed us through the terminal, their questions getting more outrageous with each step. Someone actually asked if Jessica Simpson was the reason I wasn't touring with Hunter. As if we hadn't already planned for him to handle things in Ireland while I did this leg of the tour.

Jeremy guided me through the chaos with the same calm efficiency he brought to everything. In the few years since he'd become my best friend, he'd adapted to the media circus like he'd been dealing with it his whole life.

"Car's just outside. Think you can manage one more sprint past the vultures?"

I nodded, adjusting Thara's carrier. The cat had been remarkably patient through the long flight and now this circus. "Just get me somewhere quiet before I actually give them a headline worth printing."

We made it to his rental car, Jeremy smoothly handling my luggage while blocking the photographers' view. The moment the doors closed, blessed silence descended.

"Home first, or do you need coffee?" he asked, pulling away from the curb.

"Coffee. Definitely coffee. Then you can tell me all about what's been happening with Liv and the kids in Australia."

He nodded, "You sure? You look like you could use some sleep, love."

I laughed, "I need the coffee to help me sleep. I've reached the too tired to sleep point."

"Ah, the jetlag paradox," Jeremy smiled as he navigated through Brisbane traffic. "Liv's been showing us this little café she used to go to when she was in uni here. Makes the best flat whites in Brisbane."

"Sounds perfect." I leaned back in the seat, letting the familiar Australian landscape blur past my window. "How are the twins handling being back here?"

"Rose is in love with the beach," Jeremy's voice carried that proud father tone. "And Killy... well, he's been asking a lot of questions about Liv's childhood. We took them to Morningside."

That made me sit up straighter, despite my exhaustion. "Really? How did that go?"

"Better than expected, actually. Liv seems... lighter somehow. Like facing it helped her heal a bit."

I smiled, thinking about how far my best friend's wife had come from the woman who once hated me. "Good. She deserves that peace."

After coffee, we headed to their beach house. Having neighboring properties in Brisbane had turned out to be one of my best investments.

The moment I walked through their door, Rose spotted me.

"Auntie Michelle!" she squealed, launching herself at my legs with the boundless energy only a toddler could possess.

I laughed, catching her. "Hi Fairy Girl. I've missed you too."

"Let Auntie Michelle breathe. She just had a long flight. She looks knackered," Livvie called from the living room.

"Bloody knackered, you could say," I mimicked her accent, earning an eye roll.

"Glad to see you're awake enough to have that sharp wit," Livvie said dryly.

I smirked. "Always."

We settled in the living room, Rose still clinging to me like a koala.

"Can I get you a drink?" Livvie offered.

"Nah, I got this," I lifted my coffee cup. "Though I might need something stronger later."

"Where's Killy?" I asked, noticing the quieter twin's absence.

"Reading in his room," Livvie said. "He's been obsessed with these Australian animal books we found."

"Did you bring Thara?" Rose asked hopefully, finally spotting the carrier.

"I did, but she needs some time to settle after the flight," I said, watching the cat peek out cautiously from her carrier. "Maybe you can visit her at my house later?"

"Speaking of which," Jeremy said, "do you want me to take your bags over?"

"In a bit," I stifled a yawn. "First, tell me how your family's enjoying Australia. Though I warn you, I might fall asleep mid-story."

"You should see Rose at the beach," Jeremy smiled. "She's like a little fish."

"Speaking of hair and water," I touched my travel-worn locks. "I'm going to need your professional services before the first show. This humidity is already doing things to my hair."

"Already blocked out time for you tomorrow morning, love," Jeremy assured me."Can't have Michelle Morris hitting the Australian stage with anything less than perfect hair."

"Good. I still wish you'd come to Nashville with me. The hair people they hired are fine, but not you," I said.

"You can ask a million more times. I'm not stepping foot in the States again. It's not safe," Jeremy said firmly.

I sighed. I knew he was right, but I didn't like it. "Fine, but you have to fix what the other hair people did to my hair."

"Of course... they didn't colour it or anything, did they?" he asked, professional concern creeping into his voice.

"No, style only. I told the network anything more than that would require a trip to Ireland to see you," I smiled.

"That's my girl," Jeremy said proudly.

"How bad has the press been since you got here?" I asked.

"Haven't been. Without you around I'm just another guy, not 'Michelle Morris's new man,'" Jeremy laughed.

I rolled my eyes. "Sorry about that."

"Why?" Livvie asked with a grin. "It's a bloody brilliant laugh. The tabloids think my husband's having an affair with Michelle Morris and I think it's hilarious they don't realize he’s married to someone else entirely."

“I’m glad it amuses you,” I said as Thara started pawing at the window of her backpack. She was done. She wanted out. I unzipped it and she bolted for Jeremy. The only human she loved more than me."Aww, Thara missed you. Her kitty crush," I teased.

Jeremy sighed, but petted her anyway. "Hello Vermin."

"She is not a vermin!" I cried.

"She bloody well is," Livvie said. "She has tried to kill me multiple times."

"She was just showing love," I defended weakly.

"She laid down on my face," Livvie countered.

I shrugged. "You were between her and her kitty crush."

"Aye, this bloody vermin wants to kill me and take my husband and she is a bloody CAT!"

I yawned, unable to suppress it any longer. "She knows what she wants."

"Christ, Mich... you should go get sorted in your place before you pass out on our couch," Jeremy said, still absently petting Thara.

"Yeah, probably," I finally agreed, though moving felt like an enormous effort.

I coaxed Thara back into her carrier and slung it over my shoulder, my exhaustion making even that simple movement feel heavy.

"I'm going to help Mich get settled. I'll be back, love," Jeremy said, kissing Livvie.

"Okay, sleep well, Mich," Livvie called after us.

"Auntie Michelle sing later?" Rose's hopeful voice followed us to the door.

I laughed softly. "You got it, Fairy Girl."

Jeremy grabbed my bags and walked me next door to my beach house. Once inside, I managed to get Thara's essentials set up - litter box, food, water - before changing into pajamas, moving on autopilot.

"Can you stay till I fall asleep?" I asked, already half-gone.

"Of course, love," Jeremy said as we settled onto the bed. This was the kind of friendship Hunter never questioned - the pure, platonic comfort of having my best friend hold me when I needed it. I curled up against Jeremy's shoulder while Thara claimed her usual spot on my pillow.

Safe between my best friend and my cat, jetlag finally won. I was asleep within minutes.

Livvie

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"Amadán beag!" Rose called out triumphantly before running away giggling. She'd discovered my lack of Irish language skills and had turned it into her new favorite game - saying something in Irish then darting off laughing. I could only hope J wasn't teaching her anything too cheeky.

"Rose, you're silly," I called after her, settling down with my laptop. Even with the reduced workload I'd arranged for this month in Australia, I still had clients' security systems to monitor.

Seeing Michelle again had brought back all my complicated feelings about what I'd discovered in Billy's systems. These past few weeks, with distance between us, it had been easier to push the knowledge aside. But having her here, watching her with J... god, I hated keeping secrets from my husband. But this wasn't my secret to tell.

I wished I'd never cracked that encryption. Some things, once known, couldn't be unknown - and now I had to live with that knowledge.

"Amadán beag!" Rose called again from the hallway.

"What does that even mean?" I muttered to myself, opening my secure work portal. The irony wasn't lost on me - here I was, maintaining other people's secrets while carrying one that felt too big to handle.

My phone buzzed with a text from Billy: 'Security protocols updated. Need you to test them.'

Of course he did. He'd been obsessive about security since I'd breached his systems, though I noticed he hadn't actually fired me. If anything, he'd given me more work, more access - just with very specific parameters.

"Mummy?" Killy appeared in the doorway, one of his new Australian wildlife books clutched to his chest. "Can we go see the koalas tomorrow?"

His quiet request was a welcome distraction from my thoughts about Rangers and secrets. "Of course, love. We can go to the sanctuary after Michelle's done with Da in the morning."

"Will Auntie Michelle come too?"

going to see Auntie Michelle sing?" Rose asked, running back into the room. She never could bear to miss out on any conversation.

I smiled. "Aye love, we're going to all three of Auntie Michelle's Australian shows."

"Yay!" Rose cheered, twirling in her typical fairy-like fashion.

"Even the one in Sydney?" Killy asked quietly, still clutching his book.
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"Even Sydney," I confirmed. "Da's doing her hair for all the shows, so we get to travel with her." The thought of traveling with Michelle while keeping what I knew secret made my stomach twist slightly, but the twins' excitement was infectious.

"Can I wear my fairy dress?" Rose asked, already planning her outfits.

"For at least one show," I agreed. "Though you might want something cooler for Brisbane. It gets quite hot in the arena."

My phone buzzed again - another text from Billy. He was certainly being persistent today. Part of me wondered if he was checking up on me, making sure I was keeping their secret. As if I had any choice in the matter now.

I texted back, "Billy, relax. I'm on it. And do I need to remind you I don't actually work FOR you? You contracted me. I work for myself."

His response came quickly: 'Just being thorough. Recent events have highlighted the importance of proper security protocols.'

I rolled my eyes. Recent events meaning me breaking through his supposedly unbreakable system. Though to be fair, without Killy's pattern recognition, I might never have managed it. That thought still unsettled me - what my two-year-old son could see that others couldn't.

"Mummy?" Rose interrupted my thoughts. "Can we have fish and chips for dinner?"

"Again?" I laughed. "You've had fish and chips three times this week."

"But it's better here," she insisted.

She wasn't wrong. Australian fish and chips were different from what we got in Cork. Better, though I'd never admit that to Trevor.

I sighed, feeling a familiar ache in my chest. Being back in Australia with my family was exactly what I needed, but I found myself missing everyone back in Ireland - Amber, Trevor, Niamh, all of them. Somewhere along the way, without even realizing it, I'd found a real home, a real family. People I actually missed when I was away.

I'd never had that before. Never had anyone to miss except Donna. This was all new territory - scary territory. I truly loved my family... all of them... even Michelle, despite our rocky start. The thought of losing any of them made my chest tight. I couldn't lose another family. Not after Donna, Mum, Dad...

The weight of Billy's secret pressed against my conscience again. These people I loved were trusting me with something huge, something that could put them all in danger. The responsibility of that knowledge felt overwhelming sometimes.

"Mummy?" Killy's voice pulled me back to the present. "You look sad."

I forced a smile and picked up my son. "How can I be sad when I have my baby boy right here?" I gave him a little tickle.

He giggled and grabbed my hand to stop the tickling.

"I love you so much, my sweet boy," I said, holding him close.

"I love you too, Mummy," Killy wrapped his little arms around my neck.

"I love you too, Mummy!" Rose called out, launching herself at my legs and wrapping herself around them like a koala.

I laughed, "I love you both so much, my babies."

The door closed, and J walked in.

"What's this? Am I missing out on hugs?" he smiled.

"Da!" Rose immediately abandoned me for her favorite person in the world.

J caught her with practiced ease. "Oh, hello Róisín. Mo stór."

"Is breá liom tú, Da!" Rose hugged him tight, and I found myself wishing again that I understood more Irish. Though watching them together, some things didn't need translation.

"Michelle settled?" I asked, still holding Killy who seemed content to stay in my arms.

"Out cold," J nodded. "Thara's standing guard, of course. That cat treats her like she's made of glass when she's exhausted like this."

"When she's not trying to murder me," I muttered.

J laughed. "She just knows you're her competition for my affections, love."

"I'm being terrorized by a cat with a crush. Brilliant." I shook my head. "Did Michelle seem okay? Besides the exhaustion, I mean."

"Worried about Harley," J said, shifting Rose to his hip. "Though she's trying not to show it. You know Michelle - always trying to handle everything herself."

I felt that familiar twist of guilt, knowing what I knew about her other life. About all the things she really did handle on her own.

"Da," Rose interrupted my thoughts. "Can we have fish and chips?"

"Again? Fish and chips kick now then is it? You can, I think I'm going to opt for something a bit different," J laughed.

"How about burritos? I know this amazing place. It was my go-to for years," I suggested.

"I remember the place," J smiled, his eyes twinkling with memory. "I believe we got take away there when I visited you back when we were dating."

"If I recall, almost everything was take away on that trip. We rarely left my flat," I smiled, kissing his cheek, remembering those early days when we couldn't get enough of each other.

J's smile widened. "Yes, burritos it is."

"YAY! Burritos!" Rose cheered, completely forgetting her fish and chips campaign.

"Do they have plain ones?" Killy asked cautiously. My careful eater, always worried about new foods.

"They make them however you want, love," J assured him. "Just beans and rice if that's what you'd like."

I set Killy down and grabbed my purse. The familiar route to the burrito place brought back more memories - late night study sessions with Abby, celebrating after acing a particularly difficult coding exam, that first visit from J when everything in my life changed.

"You're doing it again," J said softly as we walked to the car.

"Doing what?"

"Getting lost in memories," he squeezed my hand. "Good ones or bad ones?"

"Good ones," I assured him, watching Rose skip ahead while Killy held tight to J's other hand. "Really good ones. Though it's strange being back here with you and the twins. Like my past and present colliding."

"But in a good way?" he asked, that gentle concern in his voice that still made my heart flutter after all these years.

"In the best way," I said, meaning it. Even with all the complicated emotions, even with Michelle's secret weighing on me, having my family here made everything feel right.

Watching my children experience Australia filled my heart in ways I hadn't expected. Born in Austin, being raised in Cork, and now exploring Brisbane - my little tri-citizens. I loved that they were getting to know this part of their heritage, their Australian roots. That they'd grow up understanding all the pieces that made them who they were, not just the Irish culture they were surrounded by at home.

"Look Mummy!" Rose pointed excitedly as we walked. "A lorikeet!"

The bright flash of color in a nearby tree brought back memories of feeding the rainbow lorikeets with Donna in our backyard. The birds had always been her favorite.

"Can we feed them?" Killy asked, his usual caution forgotten in the face of potential wildlife encounters.

"Not here in the city, love," J answered. "But maybe we can take you to a sanctuary where you can."

"After the koalas?" Rose asked hopefully.

"After the koalas," I confirmed, grateful that my children would have happy memories of Australia, not just the complicated ones I carried. "Though food first. I don't know about you lot, but I'm starving. And we certainly need to eat and get home before the drop bears come out." I smirked.

J smiled and rolled his eyes, no doubt remembering when I'd first 'warned' him about Australia's most dangerous predator. He'd actually believed me for a good ten minutes before catching on.

Was it probably wrong for parents to terrify their children with stories of carnivorous koalas dropping from trees to attack unsuspecting tourists? Probably. But it was an Australian rite of passage. After years of being on the receiving end of drop bear warnings, it was finally my turn to carry on the tradition.

"What's a drop bear?" Killy asked, his eyes widening with that mixture of fear and fascination only children can manage.

"Well," I started, adopting my most serious tone, "they look just like regular koalas, but-"

"Love," J interrupted, trying to hide his grin. "Maybe save the drop bear stories until after dinner? When we're safely inside?"

Rose clutched J's hand tighter. "Are they scary, Da?"

"You have nothing to be scared of, love. I will always protect you," J said, scooping Rose up into his arms.

I sighed in mock disappointment. "Fine, I'll tell you all about the drop bears later."

The burrito place was exactly where I remembered, though the surrounding shops had changed. The familiar smell of Mexican spices mixed with the evening air brought back a flood of memories - late night study breaks, celebrations after successful hacks (the legal ones, of course), post-exam comfort food.

"Still looks the same," I said as we walked in. "Even that wobbly table in the corner is still here."

"Mummy, what's good here?" Killy asked, studying the menu with his usual careful consideration.

"Everything," I smiled, remembering countless meals shared here over the years.

We ordered and found a table, falling into our usual family rhythm - Rose chattering about everything she wanted to do in Australia, Killy carefully organizing his food just so, J making sure everyone had what they needed. It felt so normal, so right.

Then I heard a voice I hadn't heard in over a decade. "Livvie Olsen?"

I turned around and found myself face to face with Richie - my university boyfriend, looking barely changed from our days together. "Bloody hell... Richie..."

I felt J tense slightly beside me. In all our years together, he'd never actually encountered any of my exes.

"Wow, Liv, you look well... I wondered what happened to you," Richie said, his familiar smile bringing back a flood of memories.

"I am good... you... you look well too." I managed, my heart fluttering slightly. Two decades had passed, but he still had that same warm smile that had once caught my attention at that footy match. He'd aged well - very well.

The memory of our last conversation - me high and angry, him worried and walking away - flashed through my mind. He'd tried to save me from myself back then, but I hadn't been ready to be saved.

"Hard to believe it's been twenty years," Richie said, glancing at my family. "You look... happy."

"I am," I said softly, suddenly very aware that I was just staring at my ex like an idiot while my husband stood right there.

"Jeremy O'Brien," J stepped forward, his Irish accent notably stronger. "Livvie's husband." His hand clasped Richie's perhaps a bit firmer than necessary. "And these are our twins, Rose and Killy."

I felt my cheeks flush, embarrassed that I'd forgotten basic introductions.

"You still in Brisbane?" I asked, trying to ignore the warmth in my face. Bloody hell, I was married with kids - I shouldn't be blushing like a uni student.

"Yeah, teaching at St. Joseph's now. Coaching the footy team too."

"Fitting," I smiled, remembering his passion for the sport. "You were always good at mentoring the younger players."

Something passed between us - an acknowledgment of that long-ago confrontation, of the different paths we'd taken. I felt J's hand settle on my lower back, a subtle but clear gesture of possession.

"Did you ever get married?" I asked, trying to keep the conversation moving normally.

Richie nodded. "Aye, you'd never believe it, her name is actually Olivia. She's from Singapore. We have 2 kids of our own."

I couldn't help but laugh at that. "Another Olivia? That's... that's actually hilarious."

"Isn't it?" Richie grinned. "My mum thought it was hilarious when I brought her home. Said I clearly had a type."

I felt J's hand press slightly firmer against my back, and I leaned into him instinctively. "How old are your kids?"

"Ten and eight. Boy and girl. They're both mad about footy, thank god. Though their mum keeps trying to get them into cricket."

Rose, who had been unusually quiet during this exchange, suddenly piped up. "Da, what's footy?"

"The sport that Mummy watches on the telly," J told her.

"With the red shirt that has the lion?" Rose asked excitedly.

"Oh bloody hell Livvie, you're corrupting your poor children by making them Lions fans?" Richie teased.

I laughed, feeling more at ease. "Oi! You have lived in Brissie long enough! You should be a Lions fan by now too."

"I would never abandon my Crows," Richie said firmly, that familiar stubborn loyalty I remembered so well.

"Some things never change," I shook my head. "Still supporting a losing team after all these years."

"Says the Lions fan," he shot back, then checked his watch. "I should probably get going. The wife's waiting on takeaway."

"It was... nice seeing you," I said, meaning it despite the awkwardness. "Glad things worked out for you."

"You too, Liv," he smiled, that familiar warmth in his expression bringing back a flood of memories. "You deserved to find your happiness."

Without thinking, I stood and hugged him - a gesture that surprised even me. "We're here for a month... maybe we could catch up properly?"

"Aye, I'd love that," Richie nodded, and I found myself holding out my phone.

"Put your number in. I'll text you when we're back in Brissie."

"Back?" he asked, typing in his details.

"We're following Michelle Morris's tour - Sydney, Mellie, then back here," I explained. "J's her hairdresser."

"Wait - you're the one from the tabloids?" Richie's eyes widened with recognition as he looked at J. "The supposed affair with Michelle Morris?"

I laughed, though I felt J tense beside me. "That's him. Though it's all rubbish - they're just best friends. Actually... I could probably get you tickets for tomorrow's show here in Brisbane?"

"Really?" His face lit up. "Olivia's a huge fan. Would be a brilliant surprise."

"I'll sort it with Michelle in the morning and text you the details."

After he left, J's voice carried a carefully neutral tone that I knew too well. "You never let anyone put their number directly in your phone. Security risk, you always say."

I froze, realizing he was right. In all my years of tech security work, I'd never broken that rule. Until now. "I... it was just easier..."

J's expression said everything his silence didn't.

"Da," Rose tugged at his sleeve, oblivious to the tension. "Can we get ice cream?"

"Not tonight, love," J said, his accent still notably thick. "It's getting late."

I busied myself gathering our rubbish, avoiding J's eyes. What was wrong with me? I was acting like some lovesick teenager instead of a grown woman with a family. And over what? A chance encounter with an ex from two decades ago?

"Ready to head home?" J asked, his voice still carrying that careful neutrality that was somehow worse than anger.

"Yeah," I nodded, watching him lift a sleepy Killy. "The twins need sleep."

The walk home was quiet - uncomfortably so. Even Rose seemed to sense something was off, staying close to J instead of skipping ahead like usual.

Once we got the twins settled in bed, I knew we needed to talk about what had just happened. But as I turned to J, he spoke first.

"I need to review Michelle's schedule for tomorrow. Get everything sorted for the show."

"J..."

"We'll talk later, love," he said, but the 'love' lacked its usual warmth.

"We'll talk later, love," he said, but the 'love' lacked its usual warmth.

I watched him head to his makeshift workspace in the beach house's spare room, then did what I did best when emotions got complicated - I retreated. Went through the motions of getting ready for bed, checking my work emails, anything to avoid the conversation I knew we needed to have.

But J wasn't like me. He didn't let things fester, didn't do silent treatment. After about fifteen minutes, he appeared in our bedroom doorway.

"Are we going to talk about what happened back there?" he asked quietly.

I focused intently on my laptop screen. "Nothing happened."

"Liv." Just my name, but the way he said it...

"I'm sorry," I said looking up at him. "I got... flustered. It was unexpected, seeing him after so long."

"Flustered enough to forget to introduce your husband?" His voice was quiet but held an edge I rarely heard. "Flustered enough to break your own security protocols?"

"J..."

"Do you know what it felt like?" He looked at me. "Watching my wife look at another man like that? Having to introduce myself because you were too caught up in him to remember I was standing right there?"

The hurt in his voice made my chest ache. "I don't... it wasn't... bloody hell." I sighed. "You're right. I handled that badly. Really badly."

"And now you want to get him tickets to Michelle's show?" J ran a hand through his hair in frustration. "Set up a catch-up while we're here?"

"I wasn't thinking," I admitted. "It just came out. I can text him and say I couldn't get tickets."

"That's not the point, Liv." He sat on the edge of the bed, looking more vulnerable than I was used to seeing him. "The point is that you looked at him the way you used to look at me. Back in London, when we first met."

That hit hard. Because he wasn't wrong - I had felt that flutter, that spark of attraction. But it wasn't the same. "J, what I felt for Richie back then... it wasn't even close to what I feel for you. He was my almost-love. You're my everything."

"Am I?" His voice was soft, uncertain. "Because tonight, for a few minutes there, it didn't feel like it."

"J..." I closed my laptop and moved closer to him. "You're the only man I've ever truly loved. Richie... he was there during a complicated time in my life. He tried to save me from myself, and when he couldn't, he walked away. You..." I took his hand. "You loved me exactly as I was, helped me become who I wanted to be. You gave me our beautiful children, a real family. Something I never thought I'd have again after..."

I trailed off, memories of losing my first family threatening to surface.

"I know," J squeezed my hand. "I just... I've never seen you look at anyone else like that. It scared me."

"It was just shock," I said, though we both knew it wasn't entirely true. "Seeing him brought back a lot of memories. But memories are all they are. You're my present, my future."

"Promise?"

"Promise." I leaned against him. "Though I should probably cancel those tickets."

J sighed. "No, it's fine. See if Mich can get him tickets."

"Are you sure?" I asked, studying his face.

"Aye, but seats, not tickets for our box," J said firmly.

I nodded. "Fair dinkum."

The fact that he was willing to compromise, even after how badly I'd handled things, reminded me again why I loved him so much. J had always been the more emotionally mature one in our relationship.

"I really am sorry," I said softly. "About how I acted. About making you feel..." I trailed off, not even wanting to say it.

"I know," he pulled me closer. "Just... no more putting numbers in your phone. Security risk and all that."

I could hear the attempt at lightening the mood in his voice, but also the lingering hurt. "Never again. Though you have to admit, it's a bit funny that he married another Olivia."

"Hilarious," J said dryly, but I felt him relax slightly. "You realize Michelle is going to have a field day with this."

"Oh bloody fucking hell!" I groaned, realization hitting me. "She's going to try to get me and Richie back together to fulfill her fantasy of getting you and Trev back together."

"Aye, probably," Jeremy nodded, and I could see him fighting a smile now.

"Maybe we just don't tell her?" I suggested hopefully. "Just say they're friends or something?"

"Love, this is Michelle we're talking about. She'll find out somehow. She always does."

I buried my face in his shoulder. "She's going to be impossible. You know that thing she does where she pretends to be subtle but is actually about as subtle as a brick through a window? Like all those times she tried to convince you that Trev was your true love?"

"And that you were just keeping me from my destiny?" J added, his tone making it clear how ridiculous he found the whole thing.

"Exactly. Only now she'll think she has actual history to work with on my side too." I looked up at him. "You know I don't want that, right? Any of it?"

"I know," J pressed a kiss to my temple. "But Michelle's still going to have a field day with this."

"She'll probably try to convince me Richie's my Trevor or something equally ridiculous," I sighed. "As if I'd want anyone but you."

"Still need to tell her about the tickets though," J said, reaching for his phone.

"Let me," I said quickly, not wanting him to have to deal with this after I'd already mucked things up so badly tonight. "I'll text her in the morning before your hair appointment. That way I can explain about Richie and his wife before she gets any ideas."

"His wife named Olivia," J said, and I could hear him trying not to smile.

"Don't you start," I warned, but I was smiling too. The tension from earlier was finally starting to ease.

Michelle

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I woke up feeling like an actual human being for the first time since landing in Australia. Amazing what proper sleep could do. Thara stretched dramatically before abandoning her spot on my pillow to use her litter box, her usual morning routine restored despite the time zone change.
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Checking my phone, I saw a missed text from Hunter. My heart squeezed - middle of the night in Cork, which meant I'd missed him being awake again. God, I hated this time difference.

There was also a text from Livvie asking about tickets for friends - four of them, including kids. I forwarded the request to Holly to handle the box office hold, then confirmed with Livvie it was handled.

Time for a quick shower before coffee. Today was packed: sound check, radio interview, TV interview, meet and greet, then the actual show. Back to the usual chaos, but at least I felt rested enough to handle it.

Once I was dressed, I texted Jeremy: 'Need hair done before interviews, then touch-up before meet and greet. When can you come over?'

His response was immediate: 'Give me 20. Need to get the twins settled with breakfast first.'

I smiled, remembering why I loved having Jeremy as my hairdresser. He understood the chaos of juggling family and career better than any stylist in LA or Nashville ever had. Plus, he actually knew how to handle my hair properly.

While I waited, I started my morning routine - checking social media responses to the Harley situation (carefully controlled thanks to Holly), reviewing talking points for the interviews (no personal questions, focus on the show and tour), and trying to calculate what time it would be in Cork when I finished tonight's show. Maybe I could catch Hunter while he was awake.

I was halfway through my breakfast when Jeremy arrived, his familiar presence immediately making the beach house feel more like home.

"How's the jet lag?" he asked, starting to work on my hair.

"Better after actually sleeping," I settled into the routine we'd perfected over years. "Though I keep calculating Cork time in my head. Missed Hunter's call last night."

"He'll understand," Jeremy said softly, knowing exactly how much I struggled with the distance. "Though I have to admit, it's nice having you here for a bit."

"I've missed you too," I smiled at him in the mirror. "Nashville's great, but the hair people there..."

"Are butchers," he finished with mock horror, making me laugh. "I've seen what they did to your ends."

We fell into our usual comfortable chat while he worked - about the twins, about Cork, about everything except what was really weighing on my mind. Being away from Hunter and the girls was getting harder, not easier.

Once my hair was perfect (because Jeremy wouldn't settle for less), it was time to head to the arena. Soundcheck first, then off to the radio station for my first interview of the day.

The radio station was one I'd been to dozens of times over the years - same bright walls, same overly enthusiastic morning show hosts, same carefully crafted questions that were supposed to sound spontaneous.

"And we're here with Michelle Morris!" Dave, the host, launched into his usual patter. "Welcome back to Brisbane!"

"Thanks for having me," I smiled, falling into interview mode. "Always love coming back to Australia."

"Now, we've got to talk about this surprise collaboration that dropped recently," Sarah, his co-host, leaned forward. "Your daughter Harley's debut..."

I kept my expression pleasant, delivering Holly's carefully prepared statement. "We're incredibly proud of Harley's natural musical talent and her desire to explore creative expression through music. While this collaboration was unexpected, we support her artistic journey and look forward to guiding her as she develops her gifts."

"But working with Jon..." Dave pressed. "That must have been..."

"The focus is on Harley's talent," I cut in smoothly, my tone making it clear that line of questioning wasn't open for discussion. "Speaking of talent, I'm really excited about tonight's show. We've got some surprises planned for the Australian audiences…"

"Speaking of tonight's show," Sarah picked up on my redirect, "you've got quite a production planned. Three major cities..."

"Brisbane, Sydney, and Melbourne," I nodded, grateful for the safer topic. "Each show is going to be a bit different. We've incorporated some local elements, some special guests..."

"Any hints about who might join you on stage?" Dave asked.

"Now that would spoil the surprise," I laughed. "But I will say that Australian audiences are in for something special. This tour... it's about connection. About bringing people together through music."

"Speaking of connections," Sarah tried again, "your husband Hunter..."

"Is an amazing father and incredibly supportive of my career," I cut in, keeping my smile fixed. "Just like I support him."

I could see Holly through the studio window, giving me an approving nod. We'd prepared for this - everyone would try to dig into the personal stuff, especially after the Harley news broke. The key was to acknowledge just enough to seem open while steering the conversation back to the tour.

"Is it true Hunter isn't with you in Nashville because of the Jessica Simpson situation?" Dave asked, clearly hoping for drama. "Those two songs on her new EP..."

"After those lyrics, I wouldn't blame you for being worried," Sarah added.

I laughed, keeping it light but firm. "You've got to stop believing those tabloid stories. Hunter isn't in Nashville because our daughters need routine and stability at home in Ireland. Simple as that."

"Speaking of your daughters," Dave shifted tactics, "Harley seems to be following in your footsteps with this new song."

"What footsteps?" I smiled. "It's one song. If music is something she wants to pursue later, we'll support her. But right now, she's thirteen..."

"You had a number one album at thirteen," Sarah pointed out.

"Harley is not me," I said firmly. "She's had a normal childhood, she's a kid, and we want her to stay that way. Her future career choices are her decision when she's older."

"Tell us about this new show you're filming," Dave took the hint.

"I play Dixie, mother of one of the firefighters," I felt myself relax into safer territory. "She's a bit of a hellraiser... some might call her the villain, but I absolutely adore playing her. She's deliciously complex."

The TV interview that followed was more of the same questions, just with cameras catching every micro-expression. Years of experience helped me maintain the right balance of friendly and professional, even when they tried to dig into the Harley situation again. Still, by the time it was over, my media smile felt permanently fixed to my face.

Holly managed to find me thirty blessed minutes to actually eat something and decompress before the pre-show chaos began. The quiet of my dressing room at the arena felt like a sanctuary after the morning's press gauntlet.

When Jeremy arrived with his supplies, he took one look at my face and knew. "How was your day, love?"

"Vultures, all of them," I sighed, attempting his accent. "What is it you would say? The lot of them? Yeah, that."

"Oh love, I'm sorry," he said sympathetically, starting to work his magic on my show hair. His familiar presence was exactly what I needed after a morning of deflecting personal questions.

"Everyone wants to talk about Harley and Jon," I said, watching him work in the mirror. "Or Hunter and Jessica Simpson. As if that's even a thing."

"Did anyone actually ask about the show? Or the tour?" Jeremy's hands moved expertly through my hair.

"Eventually. After trying to create drama about my marriage, my daughter, and my ex." I closed my eyes for a moment. "I miss when interviews were about the music."

"At least the show tonight will be," Jeremy said, concentrating on a particular section of my hair. "Though speaking of those tickets Liv asked for this morning..."

Something in his voice made me look more closely at his reflection. "J... why do I feel like there's a story there?"

"Because there might be," he said, and I could see him choosing his words carefully. "The tickets are for her ex. From uni."

I spun around in my chair, excitement building. "Ex?"

"Oi, turn back around so I can work," Jeremy's tone carried a warning. "And don't get any bright ideas."

"Me?" I tried for innocence, but we both knew better.

"Aye, you." His voice turned serious. "Remember what I said would happen if you meddled in my marriage again?"

I opened my mouth to argue, but stopped myself. The memory of that conversation after Paris was still too clear - the hurt in his eyes, the anger in his voice, the very real threat that he'd end our friendship if I ever tried to interfere with his marriage to Livvie again. Even I knew when I'd pushed too far.

"Understood," I said quietly, for once not pushing my luck.

"Good."

We fell into silence while he worked, but my mind was racing. Even if I couldn't meddle, I was dying to know more. After a few minutes of impressive self-restraint, I couldn't help myself.

"Can I at least ask about him? Just out of curiosity?"

Jeremy sighed, but I could see his slight smile in the mirror. "His name's Richie. Played footy for UQ. Now he's a teacher and coach. Married with kids."

"Married?" Well, that definitely killed any scheming possibilities. "With his own Livvie, actually," Jeremy added.

"What?"

"His wife's name is Olivia. From Singapore."

I had to laugh at that. "Okay, that's actually hilarious. Does Livvie know about this other Olivia?"

"Aye, found out last night when we ran into him at dinner." Jeremy's hands stilled for a moment. "It was... interesting."

Something in his tone made me look up at his reflection. "J? Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," he said, but his accent was thicker than usual - always a tell.

"Clearly," I said dryly. "That's why you sound like you just stepped off the boat from Cork."

He met my eyes in the mirror. "You know how sometimes... when you see Hunter with Jessica, even though you know there's nothing there..."

"It still stings a bit," I finished softly, understanding. "Liv didn't handle seeing her ex well?"

"She..." he focused intently on my hair. "She forgot to introduce me. Had to do it myself."

"Oh, J." My heart hurt for him. I started to turn around again but he gently moved my head back.

"We talked it through," he said quickly. "It's fine. Just... seeing her look at someone else like that..."

"Like what?"

"Like she used to look at me. When we first met."

"Are you insane? She still looks at you like that. That woman is obsessed with you," I said firmly. After all the years of watching them together, I'd never seen anyone more in love than Livvie was with J.

"Aye, well, she looked at him like that too," J said quietly, still focusing too intently on my hair.

"Doubtful," I scoffed. "J, that woman changed her entire life to be with you. Moved continents. Trust me, no ex from uni comes close to what you two have."

I could see him trying not to smile. "Since when are you on Livvie's side?"

"I'm on your side, you idiot. And your side happens to be with Livvie." I caught his eye in the mirror. "Though if you tell her I said that, I'll deny it completely."

"Your secret's safe with me," J's smile was more genuine now. "Though I still don't understand how you went from trying to break us up to defending our marriage."

"People change," I shrugged. "Besides, after everything that happened in Paris..." I trailed off, remembering how close I'd come to losing my best friend. "I learned my lesson. Even if sometimes I still think Trevor-"

"Michelle." Just my name, but his tone carried years of this particular argument.

"Sorry, sorry," I held up my hands in surrender. "Old habits. But seriously, J, you don't need to worry about any ex. That woman adores you."

"I know," he said softly. "Just had a moment of... I don't know. Seeing her that flustered over someone else..."

"Brought up old insecurities?" I suggested gently.

"Aye... I barely survived losing Trev... I don't think I could survive losing Livvie," he said quietly.

"You're not going to lose her... but I do understand. Jessica is a hot mess, hideous train wreck that Hunter wouldn't look twice at ever again, but I still get insecure about the rumors sometimes," I admitted.

The fact that I was admitting this to anyone - even J - showed how much our friendship had evolved. There was a time when I wouldn't have acknowledged any insecurity, especially about Hunter.

"The difference is," J said, putting the finishing touches on my hair, "Hunter never looks at Jessica the way Liv looked at Richie last night."

"No," I agreed, "but that doesn't stop the tabloids from trying to create drama. Just like Liv being surprised to see an ex doesn't mean anything more than that - surprise." I studied his reflection. "You two okay?"

"We talked it through. She's mortified about forgetting to introduce me."

"Because if she hurts you, best friend's wife or not, I will end her."

"And there's the Michelle Morris I know and love," J laughed, finally sounding more like himself. "Though maybe focus on your show tonight instead of plotting Livvie's demise?"

"Speaking of which," I glanced at the time, "how much longer? Meet and greet starts in thirty."

"Almost done. Just need to set this last bit." He worked in silence for a moment. "You know what the worst part was?"

"Hmm?"

"She broke her own security protocols. Let him put his number in her phone directly."

I turned to face him, hair be damned. "She what? Livvie 'I won't even let my husband touch my work devices, O'Brien?"

"Exactly."

"Okay, maybe I need to have a word with her after all..."

"Michelle."

"Not about Trevor!" I protested. "About her being an idiot. Nobody breaks Livvie's security rules. Not even Livvie."

"Turn back around," J sighed, gently repositioning my head. "And leave it. Please. We sorted it."

"But-"

"Mich." The way he said my name made me stop. "I know you care. I know you want to help. But sometimes helping means staying out of it."

"Fine," I conceded. "But I reserve the right to give her my disappointed look when I see her tonight."

"As long as that's all you give her," J finished with my hair. "There. Show ready."

A knock at the door interrupted whatever I was about to say. Holly poked her head in. "Meet and greet in ten. You ready?"

"Just need to change," I stood up, checking J's work in the mirror. Perfect, as always. "Thanks, J. For everything."

"Always, love. Now go be a star while I find my wife and make sure she's not giving her number to any other exes."

"J!"

"Kidding," he smiled. "Mostly."

I hugged him before heading to change. The outfit Lydia had designed for tonight's show was perfect - a flowing jumper with a dramatic skirt that would catch the stage lights beautifully.

The meet and greet was the usual blur of excited faces, camera flashes, and earnest declarations of fandom. I'd been doing this long enough to have the routine down - the right smile, the genuine-sounding thanks, the practiced poses. Don't get me wrong, I loved meeting fans, loved hearing how my music had touched their lives, but there was always something slightly hollow about these carefully orchestrated moments.

Thirty years of fame had taught me that these controlled interactions, while meaningful to the fans, could never capture the magic of real connection. But it was part of who I was, who I'd always been, so I kept smiling, kept posing, kept making each fan feel special during their moment with Michelle Morris.

Some fans asked about Hunter - the crossover between our fan bases still surprised me sometimes. Others wanted to know about the girls. I'd perfected the art of being warm while saying nothing: sharing just enough to make them feel connected without revealing anything that wasn't already public knowledge about my family.

But after the meet and greet... that's when everything shifted. Showtime. This was what I lived for, what I'd always lived for. The moment I stepped onto that stage, everything else fell away - the drama with Jon, the worry about Harley, the constant juggling of career and family. Up here, it was just me and the music, the way it had always been.

The roar of the crowd hit me as I walked out - Australian audiences always brought such incredible energy. This wasn't some carefully scripted TV interview or controlled meet and greet. This was real.

"Brisbane!" I called out, earning another wave of cheers. The response was immediate, electric, feeding into my own excitement.

The band kicked in with the opening notes of the first song and everything else disappeared. This was where I belonged, where I made sense. The lights, the music, the connection with thousands of people all sharing this moment - this was pure magic.

I knew somewhere up in the private box, J and Livvie were watching with the twins, safely removed from the crowd's attention. Down here on stage, I could lose myself in the performance, letting the music take over. Each song flowed into the next, the set list I'd practiced a thousand times becoming something alive and electric in front of this crowd.

Two hours of performance flew by, and after the encore, I finally made my way back to my dressing room. Despite being drenched in sweat, I felt that familiar post-show high - nothing could touch this feeling.

I'd barely had time to grab water and catch my breath when the door burst open and Rose came flying in. "Auntie Michelle!"

I caught her, pulling her into my lap despite being sweaty. "Hey Fairy Girl! Did you enjoy the show?"

Rose nodded enthusiastically. "I dance the whole show!"

I kissed her head as J and Livvie came in with Killy. "I'm glad you had fun. What about your parents?"

"Brilliant as always, love. You never disappoint," J smiled.

"Aye, it was a great show," Livvie added. "And really special to see you play in my home city. Thanks for letting us be part of it."

I nodded. "Of course. The more the merrier, right? That's why I gave you those four extra tickets, no questions asked." I couldn't help adding, "Though maybe I should have asked questions."

"Mich..." J's warning tone was clear.

I rolled my eyes. "Fine. But you know what you did, Liv. You know."

Livvie had the grace to look slightly embarrassed, but before she could respond, Killy spoke up from his spot next to J. "You sang pretty, Auntie Michelle."

"Thank you, love," I smiled at him, grateful as always for how he could diffuse tension without even trying. "Did you like the quiet songs or the fun ones better?"

"The quiet ones," he said decisively. "Rose liked the dancing ones."

"I did!" Rose bounced in my lap. "I dance just like you!"

"She really did," J smiled. "Couldn't keep still the whole show."

"Speaking of keeping still," Livvie said, clearly trying to change the subject, "we should probably get these two home to bed."

"Running away from this conversation, are we?" I couldn't help teasing.

"Michelle," J's voice carried that note of warning again.

"I didn't do anything," Livvie shot back, her accent getting stronger with irritation.

"Fawning over an ex in front of your husband is nothing?" The words came out before I could stop them.

"At least I didn't take my ex to Hawaii with my husband and kids on a family vacation," Livvie countered, her eyes flashing.

I glared at her. "You want to go there? He was with his family too. Nothing happened."

"No, you just let him take advantage of your daughter and record her without your permission. That's way better than just exchanging phone numbers with an ex," Livvie said sharply.

"How dare you bring Harley into this," I started, feeling my temper rise.

"Okay then," J stepped between us, pulling Livvie back. "We really should get going. See you tomorrow, love."

I kept glaring at Livvie but softened when I looked at J. "See you tomorrow."

I kept glaring at Livvie but softened when I looked at J. "See you tomorrow."

After they left, I slumped back in my chair, the post-show high completely gone. Trust Livvie to know exactly where to hit to hurt the most. The Harley situation was still too raw, too fresh. And she knew it.

My phone buzzed - a text from Hunter: 'Just watched some fan videos from the show. You were amazing, baby. The girls are going to love watching it in the morning.'

Despite everything, I smiled. Trust Hunter to know exactly when I needed to hear from him. I started to type back, then hesitated. Should I tell him about the argument with Livvie? About her ex showing up?

No, I decided. He had enough to deal with, handling things with Harley. Besides, J would sort Livvie out. He always did.

Holly knocked on my door. "Ready to head out? Car's waiting."

"Yeah," I stood up, gathering my things. "Though fair warning - tomorrow's hair appointment might be a bit tense."

Holly gave me that look she'd perfected over years of handling my drama. "What did you do?"

"Nothing!" I protested with mock innocence. "Livvie was being a bitch."

Holly sighed and shook her head. "Come on, let's get you home. I know you want a shower, and I'm sure Thara misses you."

"Of course she does. Let's go." I grabbed my bag and followed Holly out to the waiting car.

The drive back to the beach house was quiet - I was still running on performance adrenaline but could feel exhaustion creeping in around the edges. By the time we pulled up, all I wanted was a hot shower and my bed.

Thara was waiting at the door when I walked in, giving me that look that managed to convey both 'how dare you leave me' and 'thank god you're back' at the same time.

"I know, I know," I scooped her up. "Mommy abandoned you for hours. How will you ever forgive me?"

She headbutted my hand, demanding attention. After a shower and quick bowl of cereal, I curled up in bed with Thara and called Hunter.

"Hey babe," his voice immediately made me feel better.

"Hey, how are things?"

"Good, about to get the girls from school," he said.

I sighed. "Right. Time difference. Yesterday afternoon there."

"I've got time. Tomi's at the park with your mom. What's wrong?"

"Show was amazing, but... I think I messed up with J."

"What did you do?" The resignation in his voice made me laugh.

"Why do you assume it's me?"

"Because I know my wife."

After I explained about Livvie's ex and the argument, Hunter sighed. "She shouldn't have brought up Harley, but J did ask you to stay out of it."

"And I did!"

"Snide comments is not staying out of it, Mich. You have got to learn to keep your mouth shut. And temper your looks. Sometimes your looks are louder than your words."

"I... just... she... UGH!"

"Just apologize tomorrow. It'll be fine." He paused. "The girls are doing really well. Arissa's making friends on her new basketball team, and Harley's actually warming up to field hockey. She misses the ice, but she's adjusting. The uniform complaints are getting less frequent. I think they're both really settling in."

My throat tightened. "I miss you all so much." The exhaustion was making everything feel more intense.

"Call me in the morning."

"You'll be sleeping."

"Don't care. Wake me up. You need rest right now, baby."

"Love you. Give the girls my love. And Mom."

"Love you too, gorgeous. Sleep well."

I pulled Thara closer after hanging up. "At least I have you. Tours are lonelier than I remembered."

I put Thara on my pillow and turned off the light. I was asleep in no time.

Livvie

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After getting the twins settled in bed, I headed to our room to get ready for sleep. J followed me in, closing the door quietly behind him.

"What the fuck was that?" His voice was low but intense.

"What?" I tried for innocent, but we both knew better.

"Using the Harley situation against Michelle. That was a low blow, Liv." The disappointment in his voice was worse than anger would have been.

"She started it!" I sounded childish even to myself.

"She was trying to defend me. To be a good friend," he said quietly.

"She needs to stay out of our marriage," I snapped, the earlier frustration rising again.

"You're just salty because you know you fucked up," he said, just as my phone chimed with a text.

"Better check that. Could be your boyfriend." The bitterness in his voice made me freeze.

I glared at him. "Seriously?"

"You tell me, Liv. You're the one who couldn't wait to give him your number. Security protocols be damned."

The hurt in his voice made my anger fade. "J..."

"No, you know what? I get it. Seeing an ex unexpectedly, getting flustered. But what I don't get is you using Michelle's daughter to deflect from your own behavior. That's not you, Liv. That's not who we are."

He was right. I'd gone for the jugular because I was embarrassed about my own actions. "I shouldn't have brought up Harley."

"No, you shouldn't have." He sat on the edge of the bed. "And you shouldn't have let him put his number in your phone either."
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"I know." I moved to stand in front of him. "I got caught up in the moment and acted like an idiot. But J, you have to know - there's nothing there. He's just... a memory. You're my everything."

"A memory you couldn't wait to exchange numbers with."

The bitterness in his voice made my chest ache. "I'll delete it. Right now." I reached for my phone.

"That's not the point, Liv." J ran a hand through his hair in frustration. "The point is that you wanted to keep in touch with him in the first place. The point is that you looked at him like..."

"Like what?"

"Like you used to look at me. Back in London, when we first met."

"J..." I moved closer, needing him to understand. "What I felt for Richie back then wasn't even close to what I feel for you. He was there during a hard time in my life, tried to help me when I was spiraling, but... he walked away. You?" I took his hands in mine. "You loved me through everything. Gave me a real family. A home."

"Then why did you need his number?"

"I don't," I said firmly. "But, why is it any different for me to befriend Richie than it is for you to befriend Trev? He's your ex..."

J opened his mouth to speak, but stopped. He knew I had a point. "Because, it is."

"Yeah, I suppose it is. Trev was your first love. Richie was not my any love. You were my first and only love."

The truth of those words seemed to hit him. His expression softened slightly. "Liv..."

"I mean it," I moved to stand between his knees, running my fingers through his hair. "What I had with Richie... it wasn't love. It might have become something eventually, but then I lost my family and everything fell apart. You... you're the one who helped me put myself back together. Who gave me a new family to love."

"A family you moved continents for," he managed a small smile.

"Exactly. So maybe we can both agree I handled seeing Richie badly, but it doesn't mean anything more than that?"

He wrapped his arms around my waist, pulling me closer. "I just... I love you so bloody much, Livvie. If I lost you..."

I tilted his chin up, making him look at me. "You won't. You're stuck with me. And as far as how I look at you... do you not see the love in my eyes every time I look at you? How endearing I find your clumsiness? How even when you succumb to your foot in mouth syndrome I forgive you almost immediately?" I smiled softly. "Jeremy Callaghan O'Brien, I am bloody fucking madly in love with you."

He pulled me down into a kiss and I fell on top of him, both of us laughing as we landed on the bed. In that moment, I knew the fight was over. Richie or no Richie, we would be fine.

“Sydney”

Whoever suggested scheduling two-day breaks between Australian tour dates deserved a raise. We were heading to Sydney today, but then I'd have a full day to recover (minus a couple of interviews) before the show. After last night's performance and drama, I needed it.

I checked the time - just enough to eat and get ready before heading to the airport. The private plane for these inner-country flights had been worth every penny, especially since J and his family would be joining me. I figured he'd slept off his annoyance by now. Besides, I hadn't actually interfered in his marriage this time. He was my best friend; he knew exactly who I was and loved me anyway - snide remarks and all. Maybe even because of them.

I knew it was the middle of the night in Cork, but Hunter had insisted I call, so I did.

"Hello?" His voice was thick with sleep.

"Hey babe... sorry, I know I woke you," I said softly.

"Baby? No, no, it's fine. Are you feeling better after getting some rest?" Even half-asleep, he was checking on me.

"I am. Looking forward to having today off. It's a travel day, but on a private plane so it should be pretty chill."

"Good. You need the rest," Hunter said, sounding more awake now. "Did you sort things out with J?"

"Not yet. Seeing him on the way to the airport." I started packing up my toiletries while balancing the phone. "Though knowing J, he's probably more upset about what Livvie said about Harley than anything I did."

"Just... try to be gentle with them both today. Not everyone handles jealousy as well as we do."

I had to laugh at that. "You mean not everyone has had as much practice? Between Jessica's songs and Jon's... everything..."

"Speaking of Jon," Hunter's voice took on that edge it always did with him, "Holly sent me the press coverage from last night. No mentions of Harley, thank god."

"She's good at her job," I said, watching Thara investigate her carrier with suspicion. "Though I'm sure the questions will start up again in Sydney."

"Just stick to the statement. And Mich? Try not to kill Livvie on the flight."

"I would never..." I feigned offense. "I'll call you when I make it to Sydney."

"You better. I love you."

"I love you too, bye babe."

"Bye."

After hanging up, I finished packing. I loved having my own beach house here in Brisbane - it made tours feel a bit more like home. But now it was back to hotel rooms in Sydney and Melbourne. The glamorous life of a singer on tour.

Once everything was ready, I coaxed Thara into her carrier and headed down to the waiting car. We stopped next door to collect the O'Briens - Rose already wearing her fairy wings despite the early hour, Killy clutching one of his books, and J and Livvie looking as exhausted as I felt.

"Good morning Auntie Michelle!" Rose's energy seemed immune to the early hour.

"Good morning Rose," I smiled at her enthusiasm. "How are you all today?"

"Good," J said simply.

Livvie shifted uncomfortably. "I'm sorry about last night. I shouldn't have brought up the Harley situation."

I nodded, accepting the olive branch. "I accept your apology."

"Good, now we can move on," J said with finality.

"Good, now we can move on," J said with finality.

The drive to the airport was quiet, except for Rose occasionally pointing out things she saw through the window. I caught J watching me in that way he had - like he was trying to decide if I was really going to let things go or if I was plotting something.

"Stop looking at me like that," I said quietly while Livvie was distracted helping Killy with his book. "I promised, didn't I? No meddling."

"Aye, you did," he smiled slightly. "Though your track record with promises about staying out of my marriage..."

"That was different. I thought Trevor was your soulmate back then."

"And now?"

I glanced at Livvie, who was completely absorbed in whatever Killy was showing her in his book. "Now I know better. Even if she did break her own security protocols for some football player."

"Michelle..." But I could hear the amusement in his warning tone.

The private terminal was mercifully empty when we arrived. No press, no fans - just our small group and the flight crew. Holly was already there, tablet in hand.

"Schedule update," she said as we approached. "Sydney media wants to add another interview tomorrow."

"No," J answered before I could. "She needs the rest day."

Holly nodded, already typing. "That's what I told them. Also, the venue called - they want to move the sound check earlier."

"That we can do," I said, watching Rose twirl in her fairy wings while we waited for our bags to be loaded. "As long as it doesn't interfere with hair time."

"When does anything ever interfere with hair time?" Livvie muttered, but without the edge from last night.

"Never," J and I said in unison, sharing a smile.

"Auntie Michelle," Killy appeared at my side, book in hand. "Will you read to me on the plane?"

"Of course, kiddo." I looked at the book he was holding - another one about Australian wildlife. "Though I might need help with some of these animal names. Your mom would know them better than me."

Thara was already settled in her backpack, used to our constant travels. Unlike most cats, she actually seemed to enjoy the adventure of it all. Just another way she was perfect for my lifestyle.

"Like owner, like cat," J smiled, noticing how relaxed Thara was. "Both born for the road."

"We do make it look good," I agreed, adjusting the backpack's strap. "Though I think Thara handles the travel better than I do sometimes."

"Mummy," Rose tugged at Livvie's sleeve. "Can I sit by Auntie Michelle too? For the story?"

I caught the flash of something in Livvie's eyes - worry? jealousy? - before she smiled at her daughter. "If Auntie Michelle doesn't mind."

"Of course not, but the plane has a bedroom. Are you sure you wouldn't rather go lay in bed and watch Bluey?" I suggested, knowing the Australian cartoon was Rose's current obsession.

"Bluey!" Rose cheered, her fairy wings bouncing with excitement.

"Crisis averted," J whispered as we boarded. "Though I'm surprised you're giving up story time."

"Please," I smiled. "I know better than to compete with Bluey. Besides," I nodded toward Killy, who was still clutching his book, "I think someone else would prefer a quieter reading session."

Killy smiled shyly, confirming my thought. While Rose was all energy and excitement like her father, Killy had inherited Livvie's quieter nature. Sometimes I wondered if he noticed more than any of us realized.

"Alright everyone," Holly called from behind us. "Time to get settled for takeoff."

The plane was spacious enough that we could spread out comfortably. Livvie took Rose to the bedroom area to set up Bluey, while J helped Killy get settled with his book. I released Thara from her carrier, and she immediately claimed her favorite spot by the window.

"Your cat has expensive taste in travel," Holly noted, settling into her usual spot with her laptop.

"She deserves it," I said, watching Thara make herself comfortable. "Besides, private flights mean no one questions having her out of her carrier."

Once we were in the air, Killy made his way over to me with his book. "Ready?"

"Come on," I patted the seat next to me. "Show me these Australian animals you're so fascinated with."

J caught my eye from across the aisle where he was working on something in his phone - probably reviewing the schedule for Sydney. The slight smile he gave me said everything was okay between us again. Sometimes I forgot how lucky I was to have a best friend who understood me this well.

I read with Killy until his eyes started getting heavy. He made his way to Livvie, climbing into her lap with a sleepy "Mummy."

Livvie smiled as she cradled him, that soft expression she got only with her children making me miss my own even more.

Jeremy moved to sit beside me. "So, which cliffs are we throwing Jon off of?"

I laughed, grateful for his ability to lighten even the heaviest moments. "I'll let you pick."

"So many options," he smiled, then his expression turned serious. "But really, what was he bloody thinking?"

"He wasn't. Jon will do anything if it means getting to me. He doesn't always think it through."

"Or he thinks it through too well," J said quietly. "Using Harley was calculated, Mich. He knew exactly what he was doing."

I sighed, slumping back in my seat. "I know. That's what scares me. He's always known exactly how to get to me, but using my daughter..."

"At least Hunter's handling it well."

"He is. Though I can tell he wants to do more than just throw Jon off a cliff." I twisted my wedding ring absently. "You should have heard him when I told him everything Jon said to Harley - all that stuff about how she sounds just like me at that age, about helping launch her career like he helped launch mine..."

"He's trying to recreate history," J's voice carried a dangerous edge. "Using your daughter to do it."

"Over my dead body," I said firmly. "I won't let him manipulate Harley. She deserves better than that."

"We won't let him," J squeezed my hand. "None of us will."

I sighed, needing him to understand. "I know I was too young when I got involved with Jon. But J... I wasn't a normal kid. I was thrown into this adult world. I wouldn't change it - I love my life and my career, and yes, I was truly in love with Jon despite the age gap. But I know now it wasn't normal."

I glanced toward the bedroom where Rose was still watching TV. "I've tried so hard to give Harley a normal childhood. And she is a pretty typical thirteen-year-old. I know Jon isn't interested in her the way he was in me, but... I worry he wants history to repeat itself. I honestly worry about him pushing Jake to show interest in Harley."

"Jake isn't his father," J said firmly. "You don't think he would, do you?"

"No, probably not... but with Jon, anything is possible."

"Has Jake noticed Harley's crush on him?" J asked carefully.

I groaned. "Thank god, no. He still sees her as a little kid - which she is. He's married with a baby of his own now. But that age gap..." I twisted my ring nervously. "It's about the same as what was between me and Jon when I was thirteen."

"The difference is Jake's not his father. He sees Harley like a little sister."

"I know. And I trust Jake. But I don't trust Jon not to try to manipulate the situation somehow. He knows about Harley's crush - she's not exactly subtle about it. And knowing Jon, he'd think it was some kind of poetic justice."

"Have you talked to Jake's mum about any of this?"

"Dot? No. She has enough to deal with when it comes to Jon. Besides..." I lowered my voice further, "she still blames me for a lot of what happened back then. Can't really fault her for that."

"At least Jake turned out nothing like his father," J said.

"Thank god for that. Though I still wish Harley would develop a crush on someone her own age."

"She hasn't noticed Kora has a crush on her? She is bloody blind?" Jeremy asked incredulously.

I sighed. "She thinks she's in love with Jake. She's blind to anyone else, even her best friend's obvious crush on her." I shook my head. "I wish she liked Kora back. They would be a cute couple, and Kora is actually her age."

"Has Harley mentioned if she likes girls at all?"

"No. Jake is the first crush she's ever had. I'm not sure she's even considered her sexuality beyond that," I said quietly, thinking about my daughter's single-minded focus on Jake.

"She's young yet," J said gently. "Plenty of time to figure all that out."

"I know. I just..." I glanced to make sure Livvie was still occupied with Killy. "I worry about her getting hurt. Kora's such a good friend to her, and this crush on Jake... it can only end in heartbreak."

"Like mother, like daughter?" J suggested carefully.

"God, I hope not. At least Jake has the sense to keep his distance. And Hunter's keeping an eye on the situation."

"Speaking of Hunter," J nodded toward my phone, which was lighting up with a text. "Checking to make sure you survived the flight with my wife?"

I checked the message and laughed. "Actually, yes. That's exactly what he's doing."

'Everyone still alive?' Hunter had texted. 'No cat fights at 30,000 feet?'

'All good,' I typed back. 'Though your timing is interesting. We were just talking about Harley and Jake.'

His response was immediate: 'Any change there?'

'No. Still crushing hard. Still oblivious to Kora.'

"Tell him I said hello," J said, reading over my shoulder. "And that I'm keeping you in line."

I elbowed him playfully. "I do not need keeping in line."

"The last twenty-four hours suggest otherwise," he teased, but there was no heat in it. We were good again, back to our normal rhythm.

I rolled my eyes. "I'm good, Holly. How's the media looking today?"

Holly sighed. "Well, if you believe the Daily Mail, Jessica and Hunter are having a secret affair via Zoom. Oh, and you and your castmate Hunter are having an affair."

"What? That Hunter plays my son on the show!" I cried, incredulous at the absurdity.

"Yeah... but here's a new one..." Holly's hesitation made my stomach drop. "They're saying Harley and Jake are having an affair just like you and Jon did, and that's why she did the duet... the media went there..."

"FUCK!" The word exploded out of me. "Okay, this is bad. They can make up whatever shit they want about Hunter and me, but to drag Harley into it..." My hands were shaking. "Fix it, Holly. Fix it."

"Fix it? How? It's out there."

"I don't care. Fix it."

J's hand found my shoulder, steadying me. "Deep breaths, love. We'll handle this."

"Jake needs to make a statement," Holly was already typing. "Something about how inappropriate these rumors are, given that Harley is a child."

"Get Millie involved too," I said, my mind racing. “She is a new mom and has her own career. She’ll want to protect herself and Jake from a rumor that her husband is cheating with a child. They just adopted a baby.”

"What about Hunter?" J asked quietly.

"He's going to lose it," I admitted, pulling out my phone. "But he needs to know before he sees it online. Holly, give me ten minutes to call him before you start damage control."

"Should I wake Livvie?" J nodded toward where she was still holding a sleeping Killy. "She might have some ideas about controlling the online spread."

"No," I said firmly. "Let her sleep." I moved toward the back of the plane for privacy before calling Hunter. He answered on the first ring.

"Hey baby, everything okay? You just texted a few minutes ago."

"No," my voice cracked slightly. "The media... they're running stories about Harley and Jake. Saying..." I had to take a breath. "Saying they're having an affair like Jon and I did. That's why she recorded with him."

The silence on the other end was deafening. When Hunter finally spoke, his voice was deadly calm. "They're saying what about our thirteen-year-old daughter?"

"Holly's already working on it. Jake and Millie will make statements, shut it down immediately. But Hunter... Harley's probably already seen it. You know how she is with social media, and with her crush on Jake..."

"She's been glued to her phone all morning," Hunter confirmed grimly. "And she's been... different. Excited about something. Damn it."

"She'll take this as encouragement," I ran a hand through my hair. "She'll think if the media's talking about it..."

"Like mother, like daughter?" Hunter's voice carried a mix of worry and resignation. "I'll talk to her. Try to help her understand why these rumors are inappropriate and harmful."

I sighed heavily. "I'm so sorry. I feel like I set this all in motion."

"No baby, you didn't. Jon did. And we are going to put a stop to it," Hunter said firmly.

"Okay. I love you," I said softly.

"I love you too. It will be okay. I promise," Hunter assured me before we hung up.

I made my way back to my seat, feeling drained.

"Don't stress. I'm on it," Holly said as she disappeared to the back of the plane to work her PR magic.

I leaned against J's shoulder, grateful when he wrapped his arm around me. The familiar comfort of my best friend was exactly what I needed.

"Love, it will work out. It always does," he said quietly.

"This is exactly what I didn't want for my girls," I murmured.

"You know how the news cycle is. It will pass before you know it."

The steady rhythm of the plane and J's presence eventually lulled me to sleep. I didn't wake until we were landing in Sydney.

Livvie

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Growing up in Australia, I'd been to Sydney a few times, but Brisbane isn't exactly around the corner. The city had always held this mixture of magic and intimidation for me as a kid, and if I'm honest, it still did.

The car was waiting when we landed, efficiently loading our luggage before taking us to the hotel. Michelle had arranged connecting suites for us - more like small apartments than hotel rooms really. Once we were settled, I watched the twins playing while J flipped through channels on the telly, but my mind was elsewhere.

Looking at my perfect little family, the weight of Michelle's secret felt heavier than ever. How could I keep something this huge from J? Especially if it turned out to involve our son? In that moment, I knew - I had to tell him. Michelle would be furious, but I couldn't bring myself to care what she thought.

What worried me more was how to convince J I was telling the truth. The whole thing sounded mad - Rangers, alien technology, our son somehow able to decode it all. But I had to try.

I needed time to figure out how to tell him. Just a couple more days. I'd do it in Melbourne. That would give me time to work out how to convince him this was real and that I hadn't finally lost the plot.

"Mummy, can we go beach?" Rose's question pulled me from my thoughts.

I looked at J. "What do you think, love?"

J nodded. "Aye, should we see if Auntie Michelle wants to come?"

"YES!" Rose bounced with excitement.

"I'll text her if you want to get the twins in their togs," J offered.

I took the twins to their room, helping Rose into her sparkly green toddler bikini and Killy into his red swim shorts. When I came out, J had already changed into his swim shorts and confirmed Michelle was joining us. He watched the twins while I changed into my olive green bikini.
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Australian beaches. Nothing else quite like them. This was what I loved most about home. Well, I suppose it wasn't really 'home' anymore... but it would always be part of me.Once an Aussie, always an Aussie.

We met Michelle in the hallway, Thara predictably staying behind in the suite - one thing she wouldn't tolerate was sand in her fur. The beach behind the hotel was pristine, exactly what you'd expect from Sydney's coastline. As we walked, I found myself watching Michelle, wondering if I should warn her about my decision to tell J. But no - she'd only try to talk me out of it, or worse, find some way to stop me. She could deal with the fallout after J knew the truth.

The moment we hit the sand, both twins made a break for the water - even Killy, usually so cautious, couldn't resist the call of the waves. I chased after them, my maternal instincts warring with my own excitement to be back in Australian waters. While J and Michelle set up our spot with blankets and umbrellas, I helped the twins navigate the surf.

Michelle eventually stretched out to soak up the sun (always the California girl, that one), and J joined us in the water. Watching him play with our children in the waves, hearing their laughter mix with the sound of the surf, feeling the familiar Australian sun on my skin - it was the perfect afternoon. Almost perfect enough to make me forget about the weight of secrets I was carrying.

"Mummy!" Rose called out. "Look what Da found!"

J was holding up a sand dollar, perfectly intact. Killy immediately wanted to examine it, his natural curiosity taking over.

"Can we keep it?" he asked quietly.

"Of course, love. We'll find a safe place for it in your room." I watched him cradle it carefully, already knowing he'd probably add it to his growing collection of treasures from this trip.

"Hey guys," Michelle called from her spot on the beach. "Getting hungry over here. Should we think about dinner?"

"Can we eat here?" Rose asked hopefully, pointing to one of the beachfront stands.

"Fish and chips sounds perfect," J agreed, already gathering our things. The familiar smell of salt and vinegar was drifting over from the nearby shop, making my stomach growl.

"As long as they have chicken salt," Michelle added, having developed quite the taste for it.

"Oi, of course they have chicken salt," I said as I watched the twins race ahead toward the stand, J kept pace with them, and I felt that familiar ache of knowing I was keeping something from him. But for now, I pushed it aside. We had a perfect afternoon to finish first.

The sun was starting to set over the water, painting the sky in shades of pink and orange that you only get in Australia. We found a spot at one of the picnic tables, the twins still damp from the ocean, sand clinging to their legs despite J's best efforts to brush it off.

"Da, open please," Rose held up her hot chips and a packet of chicken salt, and I watched J carefully add exactly the right amount - he'd gotten quite good at judging our daughter's preferences.

Killy was still examining his sand dollar between bites, probably planning exactly where he'd display it in his room. My careful, methodical boy. Just like his father in so many ways, but with that ability to see patterns that neither J nor I could explain...

"Earth to Liv," Michelle's voice pulled me from my thoughts. "You okay there?"

"Yeah," I managed a smile. "Just... taking it all in."

The faint clicking of cameras broke the moment - the paparazzi had found Michelle.

Michelle sighed, clearly hearing it too. "Can't go a day. Except in Ireland."

"Aye, cause the Irish don't give a shite if you're famous. We'll just ignore you if you seem to have notions," J nodded.

"Which explains how you acted when we first met," Michelle laughed.

"Aye, you come into my salon throwing around 'do you know who I am' and you're gonna bloody wait. I wasn't going to push a regular out for some random lass, no matter who she is," J grinned, remembering their first meeting in Austin.

"I guess it worked out. I got a best friend out of the deal," Michelle smiled.

"And now we're stuck with you," I teased.

"You know you love me," Michelle batted her eyes innocently.

I rolled my eyes. "I wouldn't go that far."

"So, suppose they're going to go mad that we're on the beach together even though my wife and kids are right here?" J asked.

Michelle nodded. "Probably. Our torrid affair continues."

"Let's give them something to photograph then," J smiled, putting his arm around Michelle as she leaned into him.

I couldn't help but laugh. "You two are terrible. And I love it."

"Da! Mummy! Look!" Rose called out, pointing at the sky where the sunset had turned spectacular, all pink and gold reflecting off the water. Even the paparazzi seemed to pause their clicking to admire it.

"Nothing quite like a Sydney sunset," I said softly, watching my daughter's face light up with wonder.

"Should probably head back soon," Michelle said reluctantly. "I've got early interviews tomorrow."

"And these two need baths," I looked at my sandy, salty children. "The hotel's probably wondering what happened to their pristine sheets by now."

J gathered our things while I helped the twins collect their treasures - Killy's sand dollar, Rose's collection of shells, the memories of a perfect afternoon. Even with the paparazzi intrusion, even with the weight of secrets... this had been exactly what we all needed.

Back in my suite, Thara abandoned her window perch to greet me, demanding immediate attention.

"Hey baby girl," I scooped her up, letting her headbutt my chin affectionately while I stroked her fur.

"Mommy needs a shower, then we'll watch TV together," I set her down reluctantly.

The hot shower felt amazing, and for a few blessed minutes, I could just... be. No cameras, no press, no drama. Sometimes being alone was exactly what I needed.

After changing into sweats and a tank top, I curled up on the sofa with Thara. An Australian entertainment show caught my attention when my face appeared on screen:

"Michelle Morris continues her Australian tour, arriving in Sydney today. Sources claim her marriage to Hunter Bradley is struggling amid rumors of his reconnection with Jessica Simpson, while Michelle herself maintains a close relationship with her hairdresser. In related news, singer Mia Black has been spotted with Michelle's ex-husband RJ James, declining to comment on their relationship status. Adding to the family drama, Michelle's daughter Harley Bradley debuts next month with a duet featuring another of Michelle's ex-husbands. Reports suggest young Harley may be following in her mother's footsteps in more ways than one, as rumors circulate about her connection with Jon's married son, Jake. The Morris-Bradley family saga continues to captivate audiences worldwide."

"Unbelievable," I muttered, turning off the TV. "They're really going there with Harley and Jake." I looked at Thara. "Though Mia and RJ... that part's actually true. What is she thinking?"

My phone buzzed - a text from Holly with screenshots of more articles. Each one seemed worse than the last. The Harley situation was spinning out of control, and now they were dragging Mia into it too. Even the most ridiculous rumors about me and J felt tame in comparison.

I was about to call Hunter when another text came through - from Mia herself: 'Just saw the news. You okay?'

'Shouldn't I be asking you that?' I typed back. 'You're the one dating my ex.'

'Not dating. Just... figuring things out. But seriously, how's Harley handling all this?'

I sighed. 'Probably loving it, which makes it worse. You know how she feels about Jake.'

'Want me to talk to her? I remember being young and thinking I was in love with someone way too old for me.'

The offer surprised me. Mia and I had come a long way from trying to kill each other. 'Maybe. Let me talk to Hunter first.'

'Of course. And Mich? Try not to worry too much about me and RJ. Some things just... happen. And, that song you wrote about RJ's... size? That is a bold face lie.'

I nearly choked on my water. 'TMI Mia! I do not want to know about what you do with RJ!'

'HAHAHAHA!'

'Bitch.'

'Ho. With love. 😘'

'😘'

I set my phone down, shaking my head but smiling despite everything. Trust Mia to make me laugh even in the middle of all this drama. Hard to believe there was a time when we actually tried to destroy each other. Now she was defending my ex-husband's... honor.

Thara stretched across my lap, demanding attention. "Mia is something else," I told her, scratching behind her ears. "Though I suppose she's right. Some things do just happen."

My phone buzzed again - Hunter this time. Time to deal with reality.

My phone buzzed again - Hunter this time. Time to deal with reality.

"Hey babe," I answered.

"You see the latest?" His voice was tight with controlled anger.

"Just watched an entire entertainment segment about our supposedly dramatic lives. How's Harley?"

"Thrilled," he sighed. "She thinks the rumors mean Jake might notice her. I tried explaining why this isn't a good thing, but..."

"But she's thirteen and thinks she's in love," I finished. "God, I hate that I know exactly how she feels."

"At least Jake's nothing like his father. He called - he's mortified about the whole thing. Millie's already put out a statement."

I shifted, letting Thara readjust in my lap. "Holly sent me the statement. It's good. Clear but not cruel. Makes it obvious how inappropriate these rumors are without making Harley feel stupid about her crush."

"Speaking of inappropriate," Hunter's tone changed slightly. "Mia and RJ?"

"Speaking of inappropriate," Hunter's tone changed slightly. "Mia and RJ?"

"Just talked to her actually. She says they're not dating, just... figuring things out." I paused. "And she told me that song I wrote about him was inaccurate."

Hunter groaned. "Disgusting. And irrelevant. That ass deserved it."

I laughed, remembering another media scandal. "Like you deserved when I said something similar about you on TRL?"

"No! I did not deserve that."

"Which is why I retracted it later. You know I was under Mesogog's influence when I gave that interview."

"And we should never speak of it again."

"It's on YouTube..."

"And. We. Should. Never. Speak. Of. It. Again." Each word carried playful warning.

I laughed, but then sobered. "But seriously, RJ and Mia... it's..."

"Disturbing? Gross? Insane? Yes, all of that," Hunter finished.

"I know you hate RJ, but..."

"But nothing," his voice hardened. "That fake zen master thing he does is offensive to those of us that are actual Buddhists. Guys like him are a dime a dozen. Look at any mainstream yoga studio. Not to mention the shit he put you through."

"Oh believe me, I haven't forgotten."

"I know, baby... I just..." He sighed heavily. "If RJ and Mia are together, that puts RJ back in our orbit, and I do not want that. Not after everything."

"I know, but what can we do? Other than hope Mia comes to her senses?"

"You're Michelle Morris. The queen meddler. You'll figure something out."

I couldn't help but laugh. "You always tell me not to meddle."

"It's for a good cause this time."

"Hunter Bradley, are you actually encouraging me to meddle?" I teased. "Should I be worried? Are you possessed?"

"Just... be subtle about it?"

"When am I not subtle?"

His laugh carried through the phone. "Baby, you're about as subtle as a brick through a window. But maybe that's what we need right now. Between Harley and Jake, and now Mia and RJ..."

"Speaking of Harley," I shifted, disturbing Thara who gave me an annoyed look, "what exactly did Jake say when he called?"

"He's worried about her. Says she's been commenting on all his social media posts, sending him messages. He's trying to be nice about it, but..."

"But he's a married man and she's thirteen," I finished. "God, this is such a mess. Maybe we should take away her phone?"

"Already did. Your mom confiscated it after that entertainment show aired. Harley's furious, of course."

"Let her be furious. Better that than having her social media activity fuel more rumors. I know Jake sees her as a kid sister and wants to be nice, but... maybe he needs to just lay it out flat for her. Snap her out of this fantasy."

"Oof... that sounds harsh," Hunter said softly.

"Maybe she needs harsh. If a reality check leads to her first heartbreak, maybe it's worth it." Even saying it made my chest ache.

"Let's see if nice works first," he suggested.

"Fine, but if it doesn't, we need to do something drastic." I paused. "Is Harley around?"

"She's in the recording studio with Arissa. They figured out how to work the soundboard with some tutorials from Billy."

"Of course they did," I couldn't help but smile. "Tell them to send me the tracks they record."

"I will. I need to go change Tomi, but I love you. Go have fun with your hairdresser boyfriend," he teased.

"Oh yes, J is so hawt," I laughed. "Give everyone my love. I love you."

"Love you too, baby. Bye."

After hanging up, I looked at Thara, who was watching me with those knowing eyes. "What do you think?"

She just stared at me, somehow managing to look both judgmental and sympathetic.

"Yeah, me too," I nodded.

I scooped up Thara and headed to bed. For once, I didn't have to set an alarm - tomorrow was my beautiful day off (mostly), and I could sleep until I naturally woke up. Or until Thara decided it was breakfast time.

I snuggled under the blankets, enjoying the feeling of luxury hotel sheets, while Thara claimed her usual spot on my pillow. Between the sun and surf from today, and the emotional drain of everything else, I was asleep almost instantly.

The next morning, a knock at my door interrupted my morning coffee. "It's open!"

Jeremy walked in, already dressed for the day but clearly relaxed. "Livvie took the twins to some wildlife park. Thought I'd come hang out with my favorite diva."

"Lucky me," I smiled, patting the sofa beside me. "The girls sent some tracks they recorded last night. Want to hear?"

"Of course." He settled onto the sofa, and I immediately stretched out, putting my head in his lap like I'd done countless times before. Thara, who'd been ignoring me, suddenly perked up at the sight of J.

"Oh, hello then. I don't want your tail in my face," he pretended to be annoyed as she jumped up and demanded his attention. "Bloody cat."

"She loves her kitty crush," I teased, pulling up the audio files on my phone. "Okay, listen to this. They wrote it themselves."

As the music started playing, I watched J's face. In the few years since he'd come into our lives, he'd become such an important part of our family. My best friend, the girls' beloved uncle, even Thara's favorite human.

"These are really good. They sound like you," he said softly. "Both of them."

"And Harley's got my attitude," I sighed. "Speaking of which..."

"How bad was it when you talked to Hunter last night?" J asked, still absently petting Thara despite his protests about her attention.

"She's thrilled about the rumors. Of course she is." I shifted slightly to look up at him. "Jake called Hunter - apparently she's been all over his social media. Mom had to take her phone away."

"Probably for the best. Though knowing Harley..."

"She'll find another way to contact him? Yeah." I closed my eyes. "I hate this, J. I hate that she's going through her first crush so publicly. I hate that the media's turning it into some scandalous thing. I hate that Jon's probably loving every minute of it."

"At least Jake's nothing like his father, bloody wanker," J's voice carried that edge it always did when Jon came up.

I sighed, "I know... I know."

"Hey," J nudged me gently. "At least your daughter has better taste than you did. Jake's a good kid."

"Thanks for that," I swatted at him playfully. "Though you're right. Jake's handling this whole thing really well. Better than I would've at his age."

"Better than most would." He shifted slightly, careful not to disturb Thara who had made herself comfortable. "You know what's really mental though? You and I are actually the stable relationship in all this drama for once."

I couldn't help but laugh. "God, you're right. The tabloids think we're having some torrid affair, but we're actually the boring ones. When did that happen?"

"Probably around the time you stopped trying to break up my marriage and I stopped enabling your chaos."

"I do not create chaos!"

J just looked at me.

"What?"

"Michelle, you thrive on chaos. As much as your bloody cat," he glanced at Thara, who was now sprawled across his legs. "And that hasn't changed, you just know better than to fuck with Livvie now."

"You made it pretty clear Livvie was off limits. I got the message," I said quietly, remembering how close I'd come to losing him.

"Finally. So you've given up on trying to rekindle my relationship with Trev?"

I shrugged, unable to help myself. "Yeah. I guess. You two are pretty good as brothers. Might I add you have me to thank for that."

"Oh no. No, no. You do not get to do that," Jeremy's voice rose slightly.

"What? If I hadn't brought Trev back into your life then you two never would have reconnected at all," I reasoned.

"You mean if you hadn't meddled and sprung my ex on me without warning..."

"It all turned out well," I defended. "You and Trev are brothers now. All's well that ends well."

He shook his head. "No, you got lucky. You need to just not meddle."

"Even Hunter thinks I should meddle with the Mia situation," I argued.

"Your husband encouraging your worst habits doesn't make it right," J said dryly. "Besides, you're too close to it."

"What do you mean?"

"RJ's still a sore spot," he said gently. "And now he's potentially going to be in our lives because of Mia. I get why you want to interfere, but..."

"But I might make it worse," I finished. "Like I usually do."

"Like you sometimes do," he corrected. "Though I have to admit, watching Mia deal with RJ's zen master routine might be entertaining."

"God, that fake Buddha thing he does," I groaned. "How does she not see through that?"

"How do you know it's fake?" J asked.

"Trust me. It is. I know you only met RJ that one time, but trust me," I said firmly.

"Seemed like a nice enough bloke to me," J said.

"Like I said, you met him once," I shifted to look up at him. "You didn't see how he was after... after Aubrey. All that zen master wisdom disappeared pretty quickly when things got hard. He just... left. I was alone in the hospital right after losing my baby."

J's hand found mine, squeezing gently. He knew how rarely I talked about this. "I'm sorry, love. I didn't mean to bring up bad memories."

"No, it's okay. I just... I don't want Mia to go through what I did. She acts tough, but losing Diamond nearly destroyed her. If RJ runs again..."

"Maybe he's changed," J suggested gently. "It's been years."

“This is the same man that asked for an annulment after we lost our daughter, he will run when things get hard,” I said.

"And you think things with Mia will get hard?"

"Things with Mia are always hard," I managed a small laugh. "It's kind of her brand.”

“You and Hunter changed. You’ve told me the two of you used to have epic screaming matches. You both have matured past that,” Jeremy said.

“Yes…we have…but…this is RJ.” I insisted.

"And Mia isn't you," J pointed out, still absently petting Thara. "She might handle him differently."

"Or she might kill him," I mused. "Actually, that might solve everything."

"There's the Michelle I know and love," J laughed. "Though maybe we should avoid murder as a solution. The press is having enough of a field day as it is."

"Speaking of press," I sat up slightly. "Thank you for yesterday. Playing along with the photos and everything."

"Always happy to fuel rumors about our torrid affair," he grinned. "Though Livvie's right - we are terrible."

"The worst," I agreed, settling back down. "But at least we're terrible together."

"Speaking of terrible," J shifted slightly, "those songs…Harley’s. Not that they are terrible, they are actually really bloody good…but... I think they might be about Jake."

"She's thirteen and writing love songs about a married man," I sighed. "Even if that married man is barely more than a kid himself."

"Like mother, like daughter?"

"Don't," I warned. "Just... don't. I can't think about that right now." He was right though. At 13 I had so many songs about Jon on my first album.

J's hand found mine again. "You know we've got your back, right? All of us. Whatever happens with Harley, with the press, with any of it."

"I know," I squeezed his hand. "Sometimes I wonder what I did to deserve friends like you and Livvie. Especially after how I treated her at first."

"You grew up," J said simply. "We all did. Well, except maybe Thara. She's still as demanding as ever."

As if on cue, Thara headbutted his chin, making me laugh. "She just knows what she wants. Like her mom."

"Speaking of knowing what you want," J's voice turned serious again. "What are you going to do about these songs? They're good, Mich. Really good."

"I know. But I can't... we can't..." I sat up, running a hand through my hair. "If we release them now, with all these rumors about Jake..."

"Arissa's songs seem to be about someone too. Any idea who?" J asked.

"No! I didn't even know Arissa had a crush. She's more private than Harley though." I paused, an idea forming. "How much do you think Hunter will kill me if I ask him if the girls can open for me on the Christmas tour?"

"Depends," J said carefully. "Are you asking because they're genuinely ready, or because you want to keep an eye on Harley?"

"Both?" I admitted. "The songs are good, J. Really good. And maybe if Harley has a proper creative outlet..."

"She'll stop fixating on Jake?" He raised an eyebrow. "You really think that'll work?"

"It's worth a try. Besides, the Christmas tour is mostly small venues, family shows. It could be good for them to start there."

"I don't think Hunter will like it very much," J admitted.

"Probably not... but I think I can convince him," I said, already planning my approach.

"The other question, given the current state of affairs in the States, you want to take them back there?" Jeremy asked, voicing a concern I'd been trying to ignore.

"Not really, but we're all Americans so... it should be fine. I think," I said, though I wasn't entirely convinced myself.

"I guess it doesn't hurt to ask," J shrugged, but I could tell he was worried too.

"I miss when things were simpler," I sighed, settling back down with my head in his lap. "When Harley was little and her biggest drama was which stuffed animal got to sleep in her bed. Though

watching her and Arissa in the studio together now... it's amazing how close they've gotten in just a year."

"They're both talented," J said softly. "Though hopefully with better taste than their mum."

"J!"

"What? Someone had to say it."

"At least Hunter turned out to be worth all the drama," I said. "Though I could have done without the Jessica Simpson songs."

"Speaking of songs," J shifted slightly, careful not to disturb Thara. "That one of Arissa's... the love song. Any ideas who it might be about?"

"None," I admitted. "And that worries me. Harley tells me everything - sometimes more than I want to know. But Arissa... she keeps things closer to the chest."

"Like her mum does," J pointed out. "When she wants to."

"I'm an open book!"

J just looked at me.

"Fine. Sometimes I keep things to myself. But this is different. She's writing about someone, J. Someone who clearly matters to her, and I have no idea who it could be."

"Maybe that's why she hasn't said anything. She's still figuring it out herself."

"I'll figure it out," I said determinedly.

"Michelle..." J's warning tone was back. "What did we just spend an hour talking about?"

"Not meddling, I know. But this is different. This is my daughter."

"Who deserves privacy to figure things out on her own," he said gently. "Just like you did. Just like Harley clearly isn't doing."

"Low blow," I muttered, but he had a point. "Fine. I'll try to let her come to me when she's ready. Try being the operative word."

"That's all I ask," J smiled. "Now, speaking of things we shouldn't meddle in... have you heard from Mia today?"

"Don't start. I'm being good about that too."

"For now."

We spent the next couple of hours just talking - about everything and nothing, the way best friends do. J told me about the twins' latest adventures, I shared stories from filming in Nashville. It was the kind of easy conversation we rarely got time for anymore.

When Livvie returned with the twins, their excitement about the wildlife park filled the room. Rose couldn't stop talking about the koalas, while Killy had apparently made detailed mental notes about every animal they'd seen.

After J helped Livvie get the twins settled for their nap, he came back to discuss the hair plans for Sydney and Melbourne. We had to consider the humidity, the lighting, the costume changes - all the little details that made shows work.

The afternoon interviews were predictable - more questions about Hunter and Jessica, about J and me, about Harley and Jake. I stayed on message, kept my media smile in place, gave them nothing new to work with. Holly would be proud.

Dinner with J and Livvie at a quiet restaurant near the hotel was the perfect way to end what had been, despite everything, a pretty good day off. Well, mostly off.

The next morning came too early, my alarm reminding me that show days started with sound check, whether I was ready or not.

J worked his magic on my hair while I downed my second coffee, both of us watching the Sydney sunrise through the hotel windows. Sound check was the usual controlled chaos - testing levels, running through key changes, making sure the band and I were perfectly in sync.

The day blurred into a familiar rhythm: interviews where I carefully dodged personal questions, Holly keeping me on schedule, more touch-ups from J between appearances. By the time the meet and greet started, I was running on pure adrenaline, but seeing the fans' excitement always gave me a second wind.

Then finally, finally, it was showtime.

The roar of the Sydney crowd hit me the moment I stepped on stage - a wall of sound and energy that still gave me chills, even after all these years. There's nothing quite like performing live, nothing that compares to the feeling of thousands of voices singing words that came from your heart. When they sang along to songs I'd written in my darkest moments, or my highest highs... that connection was intoxicating. Pure magic.

Pure magic.

The post-show high carried me through meeting some fans backstage, through changing out of my stage clothes, through the drive back to the hotel. J and Livvie were waiting in my suite with takeaway.

"Brilliant show, love," J said as I collapsed onto the sofa. "Though that key change in the second set..."

"I know, I know," I grabbed a container of noodles. "But did you hear how the crowd reacted?"

"Because they love you, not because it was technically perfect," he teased.

"The new arrangement of 'Moonlight' was gorgeous though," Livvie added, surprising me a little. She didn't usually comment on the musical aspects.

"Thanks," I smiled, watching Thara investigate our food choices. "I wasn't sure about stripping it down like that, but..."

"But sometimes less is more," J finished. "Even if you are a diva."

"Speaking of divas," I nodded toward Thara, who was now demanding prawns from J's container. "Your girlfriend wants attention."

"She's not my girlfriend," J protested, even as he picked out a prawn for Thara. "She's just using me for food."

"Like all the best girlfriends do," Livvie deadpanned, making me laugh.

My phone buzzed - Hunter FaceTiming. I propped it up so we could all see.

"Hey baby," his face filled the screen. "How was the show?"

"Amazing. Sydney crowds are always incredible." I shifted so he could see J and Livvie too. "Though your wife's hairdresser might have helped."

"I'm sure he did," Hunter smiled. "The girls will want to hear all about it in the morning. They're finally asleep - took forever to get Harley to stop playing those new songs and go to bed."

"She still working on that one we heard?" J asked carefully.

"Yeah," Hunter's expression turned serious. "We'll talk about that later though. You look exhausted, Mich."

"I am, but I need to talk to you about something." I stood up, heading to the bedroom for privacy. "One sec."

Once alone, I took a deep breath. "Okay... how would you feel if... I know you won't like this, but..."

"Out with it..."

"What if the girls split an opening slot on the Christmas tour? Three songs each." I said quickly. "They'd only have to miss a month of school."

"Oh, is that all? A month?" His voice dripped sarcasm. "Why do we even bother trying to give them normal lives?"

"Hunter, please," I sat on the bed. "They're really good, and this could be a safe way to handle their performance bug without them starting actual careers before they're eighteen."

"I don't like it," he said flatly.

"I know, but will you think about it?"

"I mean," he sighed, "I know you're probably right... I'd be there too, of course. With Tomi."

"Obviously."

"But the US..."

"I know, and if things look too sketchy when the time comes, we call it off," I promised.

"As soon as you mention it to them, they'll want to do it."

"Which is why I wouldn't bring it up without you being on board."

"I appreciate that," he sighed heavily. "Okay, fine."

"Okay, fine."

"Really?" I hadn't expected him to agree so quickly.

"Really. But we set strict boundaries. School work gets done, no social media performances until then, and if either of them breaks any rules between now and then, the deal's off."

"Agreed." I smiled, even though I knew he couldn't see it. "And Hunter? Thank you. I know this isn't easy for you."

"Nothing about raising teenagers is easy," he said. "Especially not our teenagers. Speaking of which, Holly sent me some more articles about Harley and Jake."

"I don't want to know."

"No, you don't. But we're handling it. Jake's been great about the whole thing actually."

"Unlike his father would have been," I muttered.

"Exactly. Now get some slee."

"I love you."

"Love you too. Even when you come up with crazy ideas about our daughters touring."

After we hung up, I rejoined J and Livvie in the other room, where Thara had apparently convinced J to share even more of his prawns.

"Everything okay?" J asked, though his knowing look suggested he'd guessed what I'd been discussing with Hunter.

"Everything's perfect," I smiled, reclaiming my container of noodles. "Though we should probably all get some sleep soon. Travel day tomorrow."

Once they'd left, I crawled into bed, Thara claiming her usual spot on my pillow. One more show in Australia - Melbourne was always special, and I had a feeling this time would be no different. Despite everything - the drama with Harley, the press chaos, the constant juggling of career and family - I was exactly where I needed to be.

“Melbourne”

We'd been in Melbourne a day - one more stop on Michelle's Australian tour. Tomorrow was the show, but today was supposedly a day off. I knew I had to tell J what I'd discovered in Billy's systems while we still had a chance to confront Michelle about it.

After getting the twins settled for their naps, we moved to the balcony. The Melbourne skyline stretched out before us, but I could hardly focus on the view.

"Liv, what's going on?" J's voice was gentle. "You've seemed distant for days. Are you still upset about the Richie situation?"

"What? No, of course not. That was my mistake, anyway. But..." I took a steadying breath. "There is something we need to talk about."

"What is it, mo chroí?"

"Okay," I twisted my hands together. "You're not going to believe me. You might even think I've lost the plot, but... when I was working in Billy's systems, I found something. An encryption I'd never seen before. I had to crack it - you know how I get. But now I wish I hadn't."

"I warned you that hacking everything would eventually get you into trouble," he said softly. "What did you find?"

"Michelle... and Hunter... and several of their friends..." I forced myself to meet his eyes. "They're Power Rangers."

J laughed, but it sounded uncertain. "Power Rangers? That's a Japanese TV show. Power Rangers aren't bloody real."

"They are, love. They really are. And that's not all. Michelle... she isn't from Earth. Or I guess she is, but... I don't understand all the technical aspects, but... she's the Queen of Saturn."

"You're right, Liv. You have gone mad," J shook his head. "The only thing Michelle is queen of is country music."

"I know how it sounds," I said, running a hand through my hair in frustration. "But J, think about it. How many times has Michelle disappeared during emergencies? All those unexplained incidents in Cork? The way Billy's security was unlike anything I've ever seen before?"

"Liv..."

"And Killy..." I leaned forward, lowering my voice even though we were alone. "He could see patterns in that encryption. Billy's been monitoring him ever since."

"Billy's been what?" J's voice took on that protective edge I rarely heard.

"Not... monitoring exactly. But he's interested in Killy's ability to see these patterns. Patterns that shouldn't be visible to anyone, let alone a two-year-old. Patterns in alien technology, J."

"Alien..." He shook his head. "Listen to yourself, love. This is mental."

"I know how it sounds," I said desperately. "Why do you think I've been keeping it to myself? But J... I know what I saw in those systems. The files about all of them - Michelle, Hunter, Billy himself. Details about their powers, their battles, their..." I stopped myself. "I wouldn't make this up. You know me. You know how I think, how I work. This is real."

"Even if..." J ran a hand through his hair, a gesture I recognized as him trying to process something overwhelming. "Even if what you're saying is true, why tell me now?"

"Because I can't keep carrying this alone. Because our son might be involved somehow. Because..." I met his eyes. "Because you're my husband, and I hate keeping secrets from you. Even ones that aren't mine to tell."

"Does Michelle know you know?"

"Yes. Billy and Michelle know. They made me promise not to tell anyone... especially you."

"Especially me?" His voice sharpened. "Why especially me?"

"Because you're her best friend," I said carefully. "Because she didn't want you involved in this part of her life. She thinks she's protecting you."

"Protecting me?" J stood up, starting to pace the balcony. "My best friend's been lying to me for years, and she thinks that's protection?"

"J..."

"No, Liv. If what you're saying is true - and that's a bloody big if - then she's been lying to me since the day we met. All those times she disappeared..."

"She had her reasons-"

"And Killy?" He turned back to me. "What exactly did Billy say about our son?"

I took a deep breath. "Just that his ability to see these patterns... it's not normal. Somehow he was able to see alien patterns in their technology and Billy is curious how."

"Their technology," J repeated flatly. "Alien technology. Power Rangers. Saturn queens. Christ, Liv...""I know it sounds mad," I stood up, moving toward him. "But J, I wouldn't make this up. And I wouldn't tell you if I wasn't absolutely certain."

"And what exactly am I supposed to do with this information?" He ran both hands through his hair now - a sure sign he was truly upset. "Just go do Michelle's hair tomorrow morning like nothing's changed? Like I don't know she's been lying to me for years?"

"She's still the same person," I said softly. "Still your best friend. She just has... another life we didn't know about."

"A life that might involve our son somehow."

"Yes."

"Does she know you're telling me?"

"No," I admitted. "But I couldn't keep it from you anymore. Not with Killy involved."

The sliding door opened behind us - Rose appearing in her fairy wings. "Da! I'm awake!"

J's expression shifted instantly, the mask of normalcy sliding back into place. But the look he gave me said clearly: this conversation wasn't over.

J picked up our daughter, “Why are you awake? It’s been a half hour. It’s still nap time.”

"Not sleepy," Rose declared, wrapping her arms around his neck. "Want to see koalas again."

"No koalas today, love," J said gently. "But if you take a proper nap, maybe we can go to the park later."

I watched them, my heart aching. This was why I'd kept the secret so long - this normal life we'd built, these precious moments with our children. But keeping J in the dark about something that could affect Killy... I couldn't do it anymore.

"Park!" Rose bounced in J's arms. "Can we take Auntie Michelle?"

J's eyes met mine over Rose's head, and I saw the conflict there. Everything had changed in the last few minutes, but we couldn't let our daughter see that.

"Let's get you back to bed first, fairy girl," J said. "Then we'll sort out the rest."

I moved to the living room while J handled Rose, my stomach in knots. When he returned, he sat beside me, his expression unreadable.

"So, you're serious? This is real?" His voice was quiet, controlled.

I nodded slowly. "I know it sounds mad... but I promise, it's all true. I wish I didn't know, but I do, and I couldn't keep it from you anymore."

J ran a hand through his hair. "I need to go talk to Michelle."

"Are you mad at me, love?" I caught his hand before he could stand.

He sighed, shaking his head. "No, I'm not. Not at you anyway. I just need to process this, and I need to talk to Michelle."

"Okay."

He leaned down to kiss me, gentle despite everything. "I'll be back."

After he left, I felt the weight I'd been carrying lift. Whatever happened next, at least I wasn't carrying this secret alone anymore.

I was sprawled on the sofa, half-listening to music while playing games on my phone, when someone knocked. Sliding a protesting Thara off my stomach, I padded to the door.

J stood there, his expression unlike anything I'd seen in our years of friendship. "We need to talk." He pushed past me into the room.

I closed the door slowly, my stomach already knotting. "Sure, come in. J, what's going on?"

When he turned to face me, I couldn't read his expression - some devastating mixture of hurt, anger, and something else. Fear maybe? "Livvie told me. Everything."

The world tilted slightly. Blood rushed in my ears as anxiety clawed at my chest. Everything? Had she really... after promising... after all our discussions about protecting J from this part of my life... "What everything?" I managed, trying to keep my voice steady.

"Rangers, Saturn, everything." His voice was tight. "Is it true?"

I froze. I could lie - call Livvie unstable, deny everything. But she had proof, and if I tried to discredit her she could out me to the world...

"Is it true!" The pain in his voice made me flinch.

I couldn't meet his eyes as I nodded. "It's true."

"All of it?" His voice cracked slightly. "The Rangers, the... the alien stuff, all of it?"

I nodded again, still unable to look at him. Thara had disappeared - smart cat knew when to make herself scarce.

"How long?" When I didn't answer immediately, his voice rose. "How long, Michelle?"

"Since I was thirteen," I whispered. "The Ranger part, at least. The Saturn stuff... that came later."

"Thirteen?" He ran both hands through his hair. "So every emergency, every time you ran off suddenly, every unexplained incident in Cork..."

"J..."

"And my son?" That brought my head up sharply. "What exactly does Killy have to do with all this?"

"Nothing," I said quickly. "He just... he can see patterns in our technology that he shouldn't be able to see. But J, I swear, we're just monitoring-"

"Monitoring? You're monitoring my child?"

"Sort of. I told Billy to back off. I don't want Killy involved. Billy promised he'd leave Killy alone."

"Why the hell should I believe anything you say?" The bitterness in his voice made me flinch.

"Because all I ever wanted was to protect you and your family."

"I don't even know how I can believe this..." He took a shaky breath. "Show me."

"Jeremy..."

"Show me. I need to see it with my own eyes that this is real," his voice left no room for argument.

I sighed, considering my options. A Ranger morph? A Sailor transformation? Finally, I summoned my Master Morpher, deciding to start at the beginning - my first power. "It's Morphin' Time! Brontosaurus!"

Purple light enveloped me, and suddenly I stood before my best friend in my original Ranger form. I removed my helmet, meeting his eyes. "Is this what you wanted to see?"

"Bloody fucking hell..." He stumbled back slightly. "It is true."

"Yeah, but I'm still me."

"I don't know who the hell you are," his voice carried fear, breaking my heart.

"Power down," I said quickly, the suit dissolving. "Yes you do. I'm still the same Michelle. You just know more about me now."

"You're a bloody alien," he said, like he was trying to make sense of it.

"Eh, sort of? It's more complex than that. I'm human. Just... not an Earth human. Please, let me explain. I promise, I'll tell you everything. No more secrets."

J dropped onto the sofa like his legs couldn't hold him anymore. "Everything. Start at the beginning."

I sat in the chair across from him, giving him space. "The very beginning? Okay..." I took a deep breath. "When I was thirteen, I was chosen by Zordon - he was this ancient, interdimensional being of pure good. He chose warriors to protect Earth, gave us our powers. I became the Purple Ranger, part of a team. The Saturn stuff... that came later. Turns out I'm the reincarnation of Saturn's princess. It's... complicated."

"Complicated," he repeated flatly. "My best friend was chosen by some ancient being to be a Power Ranger and is also an alien princess, and all you can say is it's complicated?"

"I know this is a lot to take in."

"Does anyone else know? Besides Livvie?"

"The other Rangers - Hunter's one too, actually. So is Billy. There are... a lot of us. But J..." I leaned forward. "I never wanted to lie to you. I just wanted to keep you safe. Keep you and your family away from all this."

"By monitoring my son?"

"That's... that's not exactly what's happening," I said carefully. "When Livvie broke through Billy's security systems, Killy saw something in the code. Something that should have been impossible for anyone to see, let alone a two-year-old. Billy just wants to understand why."

"And you didn't think maybe his parents should be involved in that decision?"

The hurt in his voice made me wince. "You're right. We should have told you. But J, you have to understand - this life, this world... it's dangerous. The more people who know about it..."

"The more people who could get hurt?" His laugh was bitter. "Bit late for that, isn't it? My son's already involved, whether we like it or not."

"I won't let anything happen to him," I said firmly. "None of us will. That's why we've been so careful."

"Like you were careful with Harley?" The moment he said it, I could see he regretted it.

I sighed. "You're right. Some things are out of my control. But I promise you, I've done everything to protect you and your family."

"You said the Saturn thing came later and that it's complicated? Tell me."

"Oh... okay." I shifted in my chair, trying to figure out where to start. "When I was fifteen, I found out I was Sailor Saturn - the reincarnated Princess of Saturn. For years, I thought I was one of two Sailor Saturns, meant to be Sailor Moon's counterpart. But those were false memories, planted to protect who we thought was the other Saturn. Turns out she's actually Sailor Titan, and I'm the only true Sailor Saturn."

I paused, watching his face. "The Purple Ranger powers were originally bloodlocked to me because of an entity trapped in my Amethyst - that's what holds my life force. I freed that entity recently, so the purple power isn't bound to my bloodline anymore. But I am still Saturn's Queen."

"And Hunter?" J's voice was quiet.

"We found out recently that he has a Saturn starseed too. He's originally from Saturn, like me. We were destined to find each other again in this life." I met J's eyes. "I'm still uncovering memories of my past life, but I promise you - I am human. Just... not originally an Earth human."

J was quiet for a long moment, processing. Thara chose that moment to reappear, jumping into his lap like nothing had changed. Like I hadn't just turned his whole world upside down.

"The cat," he said suddenly. "Is she...?"

"Just a cat," I assured him. "Though she's probably more aware than most cats. Being around all this energy..."

"And the twins? Are they in danger just being around you?"

The question hurt, but I understood it. "No. We're very careful about protecting civilians. Especially children."

"Except Killy can see things in your alien technology that he shouldn't be able to," his voice hardened again. "What does that mean for him?"

"Honestly? We don't know. It might mean nothing. It might mean..." I hesitated.

"Mean what?"

"It might mean he has some kind of connection to the Morphing Grid - that's where our powers come from. But J, if he does, we'll help you protect him. Guide him. Whatever you want."

“I don’t want him to have anything to do with it,” he said firmly.

I nodded, “Then he won’t. I already told Billy to back off.”

"Just like that?"

"Just like that." I met his eyes. "J, you're my best friend. Your family means everything to me. If you say Killy stays out of it, he stays out of it. No monitoring, no tests, nothing."

He absently stroked Thara's fur, thinking. "And you never told me because..."

"Because the more people who know, the more targets there are. Because I wanted you to have a normal life. Because..." I swallowed hard. "Because I was afraid you'd look at me exactly the way you're looking at me now."

I ran a hand through my hair, everything I'd been holding back suddenly pouring out. "Jeremy, you don't know what it's like. I've been famous since I was eight - normal was never in the cards for me. My mom tried, moving us to Angel Grove, but then Zordon chose me and that was it. Normal disappeared completely."

"I've tried to retire so many times. In '97, after graduation, I thought I was done. But then the Sailor Soldiers needed me, not to mention the one-off battles other Ranger teams called me in for. By 2002, I was training new Rangers - that's actually how I met Hunter. He was on the second team I trained."

My voice grew quieter. "I tried again in '09, but the Sailor Soldiers needed me again. That's how it always goes. I try to retire, to have some kind of normal life, and something always pulls me back in. I thought breaking the blood lock on the Purple powers would free me, but..." I shook my head. "I'll never be free. Being a Ranger isn't glorious, J. It's a curse. It's cost me everything - Hunter more than once, my freedom, one of my brothers. Now it's a legacy my children can't escape."

I met his eyes. "Meeting you in Austin... it was the first time in so long I had friends who weren't Rangers. The closest thing to normal I'd had in years. I wanted that so desperately."

J was quiet for a long moment, still absently petting Thara. "All those attacks in Cork recently... that was part of this?"

"Yeah. A threat we had to handle. That's why we couldn't tell you. The less you knew..."

"The safer we were," he finished. "But Liv found out anyway."

"Because she's brilliant. And stubborn. And apparently raised a son who can see things in alien technology that he shouldn't be able to see." I leaned forward. "J, I swear, if I thought for one second Killy was in danger..."

"You'd what?" His voice wasn't angry anymore, just tired. "You can't even protect your own daughters from this life. How could you protect mine?"

The truth of that hit hard. "You're right. I can't promise anything. Except that I'll always try. You and your family... you're not just some civilians to protect. You're my family too. That's why when Hunter was acting weird at dinner a few months ago I got him out of there. That wasn't really Hunter. I mean, it was, but he was possessed by the Death Ranger... an evil version of him from a parallel universe."

J stared at me, Thara momentarily forgotten in his lap. "That dinner when Hunter was... when you rushed him out... that wasn't just him being jet lagged?"

"No. I figured out during dinner it wasn't my Hunter. The way he was acting…the way he called me 'My Michelle' when my Hunter knows how triggering that phrase is for me..." I shuddered at the memory. "I had to get him away from everyone."

"Christ," J whispered. "I thought he was abusing you. I was so worried about you. And you pushed me away."

"Because I was protecting you. Keeping everyone safe." I watched his face. "Now you understand why I didn't want you to know? Why I tried so hard to keep you away from all this?"

"I understand why you thought you had to," J said carefully. "But Mich... all those times I thought you were in trouble, or hurting, or needed help... and you just pushed me away..."

"I know." The guilt was heavy in my chest. "You're the best friend I've ever had, J. Watching you worry about me, not being able to tell you the truth... it killed me. But I thought I was protecting you."

"And now?"

"Now?" I managed a weak smile. "Now you know everything. And I'm terrified you're going to walk out that door and never look at me the same way again."

"I won't lie," he shifted, causing Thara to readjust in protest. "This is... a lot. Rangers, Saturn, parallel universes... it's mental. But you're still my best friend. Even if you are apparently an alien princess."

"Queen, actually," I corrected automatically, then winced. "Sorry. Not helping, am I?"

For the first time since he'd walked in, J's lips twitched in something close to a smile. "You really haven't changed, have you? Still a bloody diva."

"Always." I felt some of the tension ease. "Though now you know why I'm so high maintenance about my hair before shows. All that morphing..."

"Don't," he held up a hand. "I'm not ready to joke about it yet. I just... I need time to process all this. And I need to know that from now on, you'll be honest with me. Especially about anything involving my children."

"I promise." I met his eyes. "No more secrets. Though... what are you going to tell the twins?"

"Nothing, for now. They're too young. Maybe not ever."

I nodded slowly. "Whatever you want to do. Can I trust you to keep my secret with you and Livvie? Please, you can't tell Trev or any of the others."

"Of course not. I promise. Livvie and I won't tell anyone else."

"Livvie already told you when she promised not to," I couldn't keep the bitterness from my voice.

"You never should have asked her to keep that from me," Jeremy's voice was firm but gentle.

I sighed. "You're right. Okay, fine... thank you for keeping my secret. So... are we okay?"

Jeremy sighed, then pulled me into a one-armed hug. "We will be. I love you. But I do need time to process this."

I leaned into his embrace, the familiar comfort of my best friend almost making me cry. "I love you too. I can't lose you."

"You won't."

We sat like that for a moment, Thara eventually deciding she needed to be part of the moment and climbing across both our laps.

"So," J said finally. "Tomorrow's show..."

"Will go on as normal," I assured him. "Nothing changes there."

"Except now I know why you sometimes have to disappear suddenly."

"Yeah." I hesitated. "Speaking of that... what exactly did Livvie tell you about the current... issues we're dealing with?"

"Just that there had been some threats in Cork. Nothing specific." He studied my face. "Should I be worried?"

"No, no need. Like I said, the Death Ranger was a threat, but we neutralized him. There's no current threats."

"And if there were?"

"Then I'd handle it. Like I always do." I met his eyes. "But J, I promise - if anything ever comes up that could affect you or your family, you'll know about it now. No more keeping you in the dark."

"Even if you think you're protecting me?"

"Even then. Though..." I managed a small smile, "you might regret wanting to know everything. This life can get pretty crazy."

"I already do. And so does Livvie. She said she wishes she could unknow."

"She shouldn't have hacked Billy's systems."

"I told her she would eventually uncover something she would regret. She finally has. And now we know so, here we are then."

I nodded slowly. "Here we are. Though... I have to admit, it's kind of a relief. Having you both know. Not having to make up excuses or lie to my best friend anymore."

"I need to go. I have processing to do and I need to talk to Livvie," he said, standing.

I stood too, accepting his hug before he left. Once the door closed, I collapsed back onto the sofa. Thara immediately jumped down from her perch to settle in my lap.

"Well, that could have gone worse."

Livvie

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Relief flooded through me when J returned, looking considerably calmer than when he'd left.

"How did it go then?" I asked carefully.

He sat beside me. "She changed in front of me. Into the Purple Ranger. I saw it with my own eyes."

"You did? Bloody hell... I haven't... what was it like?"

"Bloody bizarre."

"But you believe it now?" I asked, watching his face carefully. "All of it?"

"Hard not to when your best friend transforms into a Power Ranger right in front of you." He ran a hand through his hair. "She told me about the Saturn stuff too. And about Killy."

"Are you angry with me?" I had to ask. "For telling you when I promised not to?"

"No," he pulled me closer. "You were right to tell me. They never should have asked you to keep that from me. Especially not with Killy involved."

"What are we going to do about that? About Killy?"

"Nothing," J said firmly. "Michelle's already told Billy to back off, and we're going to keep Killy as far from all this as possible."
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"But if he can see things in their technology..."

"Then we'll deal with it if we have to. But for now, he's just our son. Our perfectly normal two-year-old who happens to be brilliant like his mum."

I nodded, leaning into him as he pulled me closer. "You were right. I shouldn't hack every puzzle I find."

"I'm right?" His voice carried exaggerated shock. "You've never said that before."

"I know, but-"

"No. Shhh, shhh." He pressed a finger to my lips. "Let me savor it. I'm right."

I rolled my eyes but let him have his moment of triumph.

"You were saying?" he prompted finally.

"I am so obsessed with being the best hacker in the world... the idea that there was a system I couldn't get past... I let it get to me. I'm sorry."

"Liv, you are the best," he said softly. "But some things are locked down because it's something we don't need or even want to know."

"I get that now."

"This whole thing is mental. Absolutely mental." He shook his head. "My best friend is a bloody Power Ranger. And an alien queen."

"Still processing that part?"

"All of it. Though..." he paused. "It explains a lot, doesn't it? All those emergencies, the weird incidents in Cork, the way she sometimes just disappears..."

"The way Billy's security was unlike anything I'd ever seen," I added. "Though I wish I hadn't been clever enough to crack it."

"No you don't," J smiled slightly. "You love that you managed it. You just wish you hadn't found out what was behind it."

I started to protest but then sighed. "You're right. I truly am the best in the world."

"Clearly. Too good maybe."

"Nah, just too nosy."

"Can't argue that," J said, just as Rose burst out of her room like a tiny cyclone in fairy wings, Killy following at his usual measured pace.

"Snack time!" Rose announced. My daughter existed in two states: unconscious or full throttle fairy energy. There was no in between.

"Veg please, Mummy," Killy requested, ever my careful, thoughtful boy.

"No, Shapes!" Rose countered immediately. She never met a processed snack she didn't love.

I shook my head at their typical contrast. "Oi. How about a bit of each?"

"No veg. Ick." Rose's whole face crinkled in theatrical disgust.

"Then no Shapes," I said, using my best mum voice.

Rose immediately turned to J, deploying her best puppy dog eyes. "Da..."

"Don't. You heard your Mummy," he said, though I could see him fighting a smile.

Rose crossed her arms, her bottom lip jutting out in a pout that usually worked on her father.

"Do you want veg and Shapes or no snack?" I asked, knowing the answer.

"Veg and Shapes," she mumbled, admitting defeat.

"Brilliant then, let's get you two sorted," J said, shepherding them toward the kitchen, giving me a look that said we'd continue our earlier conversation later.

"J, I'm going to step out for a bit. I'll be back," I said, already heading for the door before he could question me.

I went next door to Michelle's suite and knocked. She opened the door with Thara in her arms, her expression hardening when she saw me.

"You..." The single word carried years of our complicated history.

"Mich, listen."

"You listen. I trusted you. You betrayed me."

"Can I come in?"

She moved aside wordlessly, closing the door behind me.

"I know you're upset, and I am actually sorry I betrayed you," I said carefully. "But I had to tell J."

"You could have at least warned me."

"And give you a chance to stop me? No. I had to tell him, Mich. Especially with what Billy said about our son. But I swear, there is no one else I would tell."

"Why should I believe a word you say?" Her voice was ice.

"Because I haven't told anyone else. I told J - my husband, Killy's da. If I wanted the world to know, I would have told them by now."

She studied me for a long moment. "I suppose you're right. I hate you for betraying me though."

"Fine. Hate me all you want. But I'm still J's wife, so we're stuck with each other."

"Fine."

"Truce?"

Michelle sighed heavily. "Fine. Truce."

Thara glared at me from Michelle's arms - the feeling was mutual, vermin cat.

"Even after everything, she still hates you," Michelle noted, almost smiling.

"Well, I still think she's vermin, so we're even." I hesitated. "How bad was it? With J?"

"He saw me morph."

"He told me. Said it was 'bloody bizarre.'"

"That's one way to put it." Michelle sat on the sofa, looking more vulnerable than I was used to seeing her. "He's never going to look at me the same way again, is he?"

"He will," I said, surprising myself by wanting to comfort her. "He just needs time to process. Trust me, I've been there."

"At least you found out by choice. By being too clever for your own good." She managed a weak smile. "J had it thrown at him."

"Because I threw it at him," I admitted. "But Mich... he needed to know. About Killy, about all of it."

"I know," she sighed, absently scratching Thara's ears. "You're right. I hate that you're right, but you are. We should have told him as soon as we realized about Killy."

"So what happens now?"

"Now?" She looked at me. "Now we keep your son safe. Billy backs off completely - no monitoring, no tests, nothing. And if Killy does run into anything odd we deal with it then. As a family."

"As a family?" I couldn't help but raise an eyebrow. "That's oddly mature of you."

"Well, don't get used to it. I still think you're insufferable most of the time."

"Likewise." But there was less heat in it than usual. "I should get back. J's dealing with snack time drama."

"Rose refusing her veg again?"

"Aye. Always."

"At least she's predictable. See you at dinner?"

"Aye. See you at dinner," I said, heading back to our suite.

When I returned, J was in the midst of a familiar battle - trying to convince Rose to let him clean the Shapes dust off her face. Our daughter could make eating a snack look like warfare had broken out.

"But Da, I'm not done!" Rose protested, despite having finished her snack several minutes ago, judging by the empty bowl.

Killy, naturally, had managed to eat his carrots and Shapes without getting a crumb on himself. Sometimes I wondered if our twins could possibly be more different.

"Mummy!" Rose used my arrival as an escape opportunity, ducking under J's arm with the washcloth. "Save me!"

"Rose Dónailín O'Brien," I said firmly. "Let your Da clean your face."

She froze at the use of her full name, then trudged back to J with dramatic resignation. "Fine."

"Everything sorted?" J asked quietly as he finally managed to clean our daughter's face.

"As sorted as it can be," I replied. "Though I think we still have some things to discuss later."

"After these two are in bed," he agreed.

I watched as Rose tried to convince Killy to play fairy princesses with her, while he seemed more interested in organizing his snack leftovers. Just our normal, everyday chaos - and that's exactly how we wanted to keep it.

Michelle

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After Livvie left, I curled up on the sofa with Thara and called Hunter, needing to hear his voice.

"Hey babe," he answered on the first ring.

"Hey... can you talk?" My voice sounded tired, even to myself.

"Yeah. What's up?"

"Livvie told Jeremy everything. About us." The words felt heavy.

"Oh god." He paused. "I was afraid of that. Are you okay, baby?"

"I am now," I assured him. "It was a rough conversation, but I think we're okay. He... he took it better than I expected."

"And do we trust they can keep it from everyone else?"

"I do." I was surprised by how certain I felt. "Livvie told Jeremy, but I don't think she'll tell anyone else. And Jeremy... he'd never betray that trust."

"Okay. As long as you're okay."

"I am. Really."

"Well, you caught us at a good time. The girls are awake if you want to talk to them."
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"Yes! Of course I do." Any chance to hear my daughters' voices.

"Good, because your daughter is being impossible."

"Judging by how you said that, I'm guessing Harley?"

"Oh yeah."

"Let me talk to her."

"Hang on."

A few moments later, Harley's voice filled the line - that perfect blend of teenage attitude and underlying vulnerability that broke my heart. "Hey Mom!"

"Hey baby girl. I miss you." God, I missed her. Even her attitude.

"I miss you too." Then, immediately: "Dad took my phone." The accusation was clear.

"I know. We both decided on that."

"What? Mom! Why?!" The betrayal in her voice made my chest ache.

"Because baby, this thing with Jake is getting out of hand." I tried to find that balance between understanding mother and firm parent.

"But I-"

"Love him?" My voice softened. "Yeah? Baby, he's married and twenty-two. You're thirteen."

"You mean the same age you and Jon were when you were dating?" The sharpness in her tone reminded me so much of myself at that age.

"You're right," I admitted, remembering my own teenage defiance. "But that doesn't make it right. I was living a very different life than you are. I was already paying bills, handling adult responsibilities. That doesn't make it right, but it was different. I wanted better for you. I want you to be thirteen, to enjoy being a teenager. Jake is happily married with a baby. And these rumors... what the media is saying... it's lies, it's gross, and it's wrong."

"You always told Grandma love didn't have an age limit when you were with Jon." She threw my own words back at me, just like I used to do to my mother.

"You always told Grandma love didn't have an age limit when you were with Jon."

I closed my eyes, fighting back memories. "And I was wrong, Harley. So wrong. I know you don't want to hear this, but I was a child. Jon... he took advantage of that, even if I couldn't see it then."

"Jake wouldn't-"

"No, he wouldn't," I agreed quickly. "Jake's nothing like his father. Which is exactly why he's so uncomfortable with these rumors. With your messages. Baby, you're making him feel terrible."

Silence on the other end.

"Harley?"

"I just..." her voice got smaller. "I just wanted him to notice me."

"Oh, baby." My heart broke a little. "I know. First crushes are so hard. But Jake sees you as a kid sister, and that's a good thing. That's how he should see you."

"It's not fair."

"I know it doesn't feel fair right now. But one day you'll understand why we're being so protective about this." I paused. "But, I did listen to your songs. They are really good. Really, really good."

"They are about Jake." Her voice was small again.

"I know, and that's okay. That's a healthy way to handle your feelings, but you need to understand that Jake doesn't feel the same." I hesitated, remembering something. "Actually... I wanted to talk to you about the songs. How would you feel about opening for me on the Christmas tour?"

The sudden intake of breath told me I'd successfully diverted her attention. "Really? Like, really really?"

"Really really. You and Arissa both. Three songs each."

"Does Dad know?"

"He does. We talked about it."

"And he said yes?" The excitement in her voice made me smile.

"He did. But there are conditions," I said firmly. "School work gets done, no social media performances until then, and if either of you breaks any rules between now and then, the deal's off."

"Even the Jake stuff?"

"Especially the Jake stuff. No more messages, no more comments on his posts. He needs space, Harley."

She was quiet for a moment. "If I'm really good... can I have my phone back?"

"That's up to your dad. But proving you can respect boundaries would be a good start."

"Okay." Another pause. "Mom?"

"Yeah, baby?"

"The songs... they're really good?"

"They're amazing."

"Thanks, Mom." I could hear her smile.

"Hey, is your sister around? I need to talk to her too."

"Yeah, hang on." I heard Harley call out, "Arissa! Mom wants to talk to you!"

A moment later, Arissa's voice came through. "Hi Mom."

"Hey baby. So... I was listening to those tracks you and Harley recorded..."

"Yeah?" There was something tentative in her voice.

"How would you feel about performing some of them? Maybe... on the Christmas tour?"

"What?" The excitement in her voice made me smile. "Like, opening for you?"

"Exactly like that. Three songs each. If you want to."

"Of course I want to!" Then, more cautiously: "Dad's okay with this?"

"He is. Though there are conditions - keeping up with school work, following rules, that kind of thing."

"I always follow rules," she said, making me laugh. My practical daughter.

"I know you do, baby. And those songs..." I hesitated. "...it sounds like they're about someone specific. Want to tell me what inspired it?"

"Not really," she said quietly. "Not yet."

"Okay." I knew better than to push. Arissa would talk when she was ready. "Well, whenever you want to talk about it, I'm here."

"I know, Mom." A pause. "Are we... are we really good enough to open for you?"

"You're more than good enough. Both of you."

After talking with the girls, Hunter asked me to sing Tomi to sleep. He put me on speakerphone, and I sang her favorite lullaby, my heart both full and aching at the sound of her happy babbles. Being away from them never got easier.

The next day fell into the familiar rhythm of a show day - sound check, interviews, preparation, meet and greets. Even with Jeremy knowing my secret now, our routine stayed the same. If anything, it felt more natural without having a huge secret between us.

Then came showtime. My final Australian show. Melbourne's energy was electric from the moment I stepped on stage. The crowd, the music, the connection - everything aligned perfectly. I couldn't have asked for a better way to wrap the Australian tour.

Back in my suite, sharing post-show takeaway with J, Livvie, and the twins, I made a decision.

"I'm heading back to Ireland tomorrow, I think."

"You are?" J looked up, surprised.

"Yeah. Hunter was going to pick up Thara in Nashville, but..." I watched my cat curled up with her favorite human despite herself. "I miss my kids. I need a couple days with them before going back to filming."

Livvie nodded. "Makes sense. I'm sure Amber will be thrilled to see you."

"Right?" I smirked. "I can't wait for Thara to make her red carpet debut at Fashion Week. Shame I can't be there to see it."

Livvie just shook her head, but there was almost fondness in her exasperation.

After they left, I curled up in bed with Thara, feeling content. The tour had been a success, J knew my secret and was still my best friend, and tomorrow I'd be with my family. For now, that was enough.

“London”

I rifled through my suitcase for the third time. Was I taking enough tops? Did I have the right shoes? Would cat hair show on everything? Mental note: buy lint roller.

Tomorrow I'd be leaving for London, and the stress was getting to me. Everything had to be perfect. After a year of work, Amber Nichole Cosmetics was finally launching. My dream was about to become reality - if I could just get through the next few days.

"Love, breathe," Trev's voice came from the doorway, Rachel balanced on his hip.

"Everything has to be perfect," I said, not looking up from my packing. "This needs to go well."

"And it will. Stop stressing." He handed me our daughter.

"What do you think?" I asked Rachel, grateful she could finally sit up on her own, almost ready to crawl.

She responded with happy babbles.

I smiled. "Exactly what I was thinking."

"I wish I could go with you," Trev said softly.

"You could... your mam could watch Rachel. She'd probably love that."

"I have so much to do for Limerick..." he hesitated. "Though if I can work from Cork, I suppose I could work from London."

"I'll be busy most of the time anyway - you'd have plenty of time to work. But you'd be with me for the red carpets," I added hopefully.

"Let me talk to Mam. Will you be okay with her for a few minutes?"

I nodded, more confident with Rachel these days, even if I still hadn't attempted diaper duty.

Once Trev left, I sat on the bed with our daughter. "I know I probably shouldn't take your da from you too, but it's just for a few days and this is a really big deal. I do want him by my side."

Rachel smiled up at me, babbling her baby wisdom.

"You know what else, mija?" I confided in her. "Lydia's making me take Diabla with me. As if launching my brand isn't stressful enough, now I have to babysit Michelle's cat? She'll probably destroy everything just to spite me."

Rachel reached for my hair - her favorite thing to grab lately.

"Careful with Mummy's hair, mija," I gently redirected her hands. "Though I suppose I should practice having it pulled, considering what that demon cat might do to it."

The sound of the front door opening caught my attention. "Da's back already?" But then I heard a familiar voice call out.

"Anybody home? I come bearing gifts and a cat carrier!"

"We're upstairs!" I called back. "Though Diabla can stay downstairs!"

"Be nice!" Michelle's voice got closer. "Or she might decide your launch collection needs redecorating."

"Don't you dare!" I stood up, holding Rachel protectively. "That demon cat is not going anywhere near my makeup. I still can't believe Lydia's making me take her."

Michelle walked in, Thara secured in her travel backpack, Tomi on her hip, and Arissa following close behind.

"Aunt Amber, are you so excited? I wish I could go!" Arissa hugged me and kissed Rachel's head.

I smiled genuinely - I adored this kid. "I know, mija, but you have school. Besides, you were my number one tester. I wouldn't even have a line without you. You've already played such a huge role in the launch."

"It's going to be amazing. The buzz online is already fire," Arissa beamed.

"And with Thara as your star model, how could anything go wrong?" Michelle's innocent tone didn't fool me.

I glared at her. "I cannot believe you did this."

"Actually, Lydia did."

"With your pushing. You're the reason we have a Thara palette and why this diabla gata is my launch model."

"It's not my fault my cat is beautiful, photogenic, and has a perfect autumn coat color," Michelle said sweetly.

"Right..."

"Now," Michelle handed me a Coach duffle bag. "Here's her food, bottled water, treats, her amber and diamond collar with matching hat for the red carpet, and her favorite bed. I doubt she'll sleep with you and your mutt."

"Ellie is not a mutt... wait. Diabla has her own Coach bag?"

"Obviously."

"And an amber and diamond collar with matching hat?"

"For the red carpet. She has to wear her autumn best." Michelle carefully transferred the backpack to me. "She's a great traveler as long as you keep her in her backpack."

I watched as Tomi and Rachel babbled at each other happily. At least our daughters had better sense than we did.

"So how long are you in Cork?" I asked, carefully setting Thara's backpack down. The demon cat glared at me through the window.

"Just tonight. Heading to Nashville tomorrow." Michelle shifted Tomi to her other hip. "I wish I could come see the launch in person, but filming schedule's too tight."

"I know," I sighed. "Though who's going to control Diabla on the red carpet?"

"She'll behave," Michelle said confidently. "Won't you, baby?"

Thara's only response was to continue glaring at me through her carrier.

"Speaking of behavior," Arissa piped up, "did you see the latest photos from the shoot? Thara actually worked with the photographer this time."

"Only because Michelle wasn't there to encourage her chaos," I muttered. "Though I have to admit, the shots are incredible. Even if having a cat as my launch model is completely insane."

"Innovative," Michelle corrected. "The internet's already buzzing about it."

"Are you satisfied with your revenge?" I asked.

Michelle pretended to consider. "As long as you don't retaliate again? Yeah, we're good."

I hadn't decided if I was going to retaliate, but for now, I'd let her think she'd won. "Good. Then this is over."

"Good." She turned to the carrier. "Now Thara, you be good for Aunt Amber. And pose pretty. Mommy will be watching all the videos online." Then to me, with steel in her voice: "Amber, if anything happens to my baby girl, I will end you."

"Nothing is going to happen to Diabla. She's too evil."

"Well, I need to get home. I only have one day with my family and I don't want to waste it with you," Michelle said, but her smile took the sting out.

"Love you too."

"Bye Aunt Amber! Good luck!" Arissa hugged me again.

"Thank you, mija."

As they headed out, Trev appeared in the doorway. Michelle paused to hug him.

"Hey Trev! Good to see you."

"You as well. Glad you got to come home for a bit."

"Me too. Gotta run, but I'll text you," she called over her shoulder.

Trev walked in and took Rachel. "Mam said she'd be happy to watch Ráichéal. Of course."

I smiled, feeling everything falling into place. "Great! I'm so happy! You better pack!"

"Already started," he smiled, bouncing Rachel. "Though I have some concerns about sharing a hotel room with Diabla."

"Don't we all," I muttered, eyeing the carrier where Michelle's demon cat continued to glare at me. "At least Ellie will be there to keep her in line."

"Speaking of which," Trev shifted Rachel to his other arm, "have you seen the schedule Lydia sent through? The press schedule is intense."

"I know. But this launch has to be perfect." I started going through my mental checklist again. "The collection's ready, the marketing's in place, Diabla somehow managed to be photogenic..."

"Love, it's going to be brilliant. You've worked so hard for this."

"I just..." I sat on the edge of the bed. "What if it's not enough? What if no one shows up? What if Thara decides to destroy everything and Ellie can't stop her?"

"First," he sat beside me, "everyone who's anyone in beauty and fashion will be there. Second, your products are incredible. And third..." he glanced at the carrier, "even Diabla knows better than to cross Lydia."

Despite my anxiety, I actually managed to sleep that night - though I kept waiting for Thara to attempt murder in my sleep. She didn't, which probably meant she was plotting something bigger.

The next morning was a whirlwind of goodbyes - holding Rachel a little longer than necessary, promising Niamh we'd FaceTime every day. Then we were off to collect Shay, who looked about as thrilled as an alligator in a dentist office.

"Darling, the education you will get at Fashion Week is far more important," Lydia had insisted when Shay protested. I wasn't sure Shay agreed, but nobody said no to Lydia.

The drive to the airport was a careful balance of keeping Ellie calm and Thara contained - though surprisingly, they both seemed resigned to their fate as travel companions. By some miracle, we made our flight on time.

The hotel Lydia had arranged was exactly what you'd expect - pure luxury. We barely had time to drop our bags before having to prepare for the first event. Thank god for Trev handling Thara while I got ready.

When I emerged from the bathroom, I had to pause at the sight of my husband. The suit fit him perfectly. He looked like he belonged on a runway, not in a kitchen.

A sharp knock interrupted my appreciation. Trev opened the door, only to have Lydia sweep past him in a cloud of designer perfume and perfectly styled elegance.

"Amber, darling, you look wonderful." She air-kissed my cheeks. "Everything ready for tomorrow?"

I nodded, trying to project confidence. "Everything's set."

Then Lydia turned to Trev and actually purred. "Oh, my..." She circled him like a fashion-obsessed shark. "You look fabulous. The way those pants hug your hips, how that jacket wraps around those broad shoulders..." She reached out to feel the fabric - and possibly my husband. "I might consider designing menswear if you were my model."

"Hey!" Trev jumped back as Lydia tried to lift his shirt, his accent stronger with surprise. "Watch it there!"

"Lydia!" I stepped between them. "Stop molesting my husband."

"Darling, I'm simply appreciating fine art," she waved her hand dismissively. "Now, where is our star?"

On cue, Thara emerged from the bedroom, wearing her amber and diamond collar. Even I had to admit she looked stunning - not that I'd ever say that out loud.

"Oh, perfection!" Lydia clapped her hands. "The autumn collection's muse in all her glory. Though..." she studied Thara critically, "we might need to adjust the hat slightly for tomorrow's event."

"The bloody cat has enough accessories," Trev muttered, still keeping his distance from Lydia.

"Nonsense. One can never have too many accessories." Lydia checked her watch. "Now, we have exactly forty-seven minutes to get to the opening reception. Shay, darling!"

She swept to the door, calling into the hallway. A moment later, Shay appeared from her room next door, looking equal parts defiant and uncomfortable in an oversized designer suit. It was fashionable for her age, but definitely not what Lydia would have approved.

"Unfortunately, I'm ready," Shay muttered.

Lydia's eyes narrowed at the outfit. "Oh dear. If we weren't in such a rush, I'd have you change. No matter, I'll send over some proper dresses for the rest of the week."

"Bloody hell, Auntie Lydie..." Shay's Yorkshire accent flared with frustration. "You already forced me to be here. Can't I at least pick my own clothes?"

"Clearly not," Lydia said as we headed toward the elevator.

"Are you bloody serious?" Shay grumbled, tugging at her sleeves.

"Darling, if you're going to be in the business, you have to look the part." Lydia ushered us into the waiting car. "Now smile. Your misery is making that drab outfit look even worse."

Shay slumped further into her seat, muttering something that sounded suspiciously like Yorkshire-flavored cursing. Trev caught my eye, both of us fighting smiles. We'd been on the receiving end of Lydia's fashion dictates often enough to sympathize.

"Now," Lydia pulled out her phone, completely ignoring Shay's sulking. "The reception tonight is just a warm-up. Tomorrow is when everything really begins. Amber, darling, are you ready for the press conference?"

"As ready as I'll ever be," I said, checking that Thara's carrier was secure. The last thing I needed was Michelle's demon cat escaping in London.

"And Thara's outfits are all prepared?"

"Outfits. Plural." Trev shook his head. "The cat has a better wardrobe than I do."

"Of course she does," Lydia said as if this was perfectly normal. "She's our star."

"It will be fabulous, darling." Lydia waved her hand dismissively. "Tomorrow is your big launch. This is everything you've been working for."

"Yeah, and I have to share the spotlight with a fucking diabla gata," I grumbled in Spanish, glaring at Thara's carrier.

"Oh, nonsense. Consider her an accessory." Lydia's eyes sparkled with that look that usually meant trouble. "She'll only enhance your moment. And darling, your launch is the most anticipated event of the week. It's going to be sensational."

"As long as Diabla behaves," I said, watching the cat's green eyes glowing at me through the carrier window. Something about that look made me nervous.

The opening party red carpet was surreal. I'd walked plenty of them before, but always as a model or brand ambassador. Never as the head of my own line. With Diabla in her amber and diamond collar perched in my arms, and Trev beside me, I suddenly realized something - we were a power couple. The way the press clamored for us, how they hung on our every word... it hit me all at once.

"Amber, what are your expectations for the launch?"

"I just want to get my products into the hands of people who will love using them as much as I do. There's buzz, yes, but honestly? The products will speak for themselves."

"Trevor, there's talk of your second restaurant being a Michelin Star contender this year. Thoughts?"

"I can't focus on that," Trev said smoothly. "My goal is ensuring both restaurants put out the best food possible every night. Anything beyond that is a bonus."

"Amber, your sister Brianne Dalton, CMO of Doll 10, has been critical of your line. She and Dr. Dalton have criticized you for bringing more color to the luxury space. Comments?"

I shifted Thara slightly, keeping my smile in place. "I could say a lot about Doll 10, but I won't. The makeup speaks for itself. I think my sister will be shocked at how luxury customers enjoy fun makeup as much as drugstore customers do."

"What's your view on dupes? Your line will almost certainly be copied within weeks."

"I'm 100% certain there will be dupes," I smirked. "And I'm 100% not threatened by it."

"Trev, rumors of a feud with Gordon Ramsay?"

I felt Trev's grip tighten on my waist. "Chef Ramsay has his place. We're very different chefs."

"How do you balance two demanding careers?"

I smiled, genuine this time. "Together."

"We're a team. Always," Trev added. "She's my best friend. I support her and she supports me."

"Is that Michelle Morris's cat? Your autumn line spokesmodel?"

I managed not to roll my eyes as Diabla posed perfectly for the cameras. "Yes, this is Thara. Her coat is a perfect mix of autumn shades. Michelle was kind enough to let her join us this week. One of our seasonal palettes is inspired by her coat - the Thara palette. It's beautiful."

As if on cue, Diabla tilted her head at the perfect angle for the photographers. The flash of cameras intensified - this demon cat knew exactly what she was doing.

"Amber! Over here!" "Trevor, this way!" "Can we get a shot of just Thara?"

I forced myself to keep smiling as the cat in my arms soaked up the attention. Michelle was never going to let me live this down - her cat stealing the show at my launch.

"Darlings!" Lydia appeared beside us, Shay trailing behind her looking slightly less miserable. "We simply must get inside. The party's waiting."

As we made our way in, I heard one photographer say to another, "That cat's more photogenic than half the models here."

"Don't you dare repeat that to Michelle," I muttered to Trev.

"Wouldn't dream of it, love," he squeezed my hand. "Though you have to admit..."

"I don't have to admit anything about Diabla."

I practically thrust the cat at Shay. "Cat-sitting duty. Have fun." Her protests fell on deaf ears - being my assistant sometimes meant dealing with demon cats.

The party was a who's who of fashion and beauty - editors, influencers, celebrities, and industry titans all mingling in their designer best. Trev and I worked the room like we were born to it, though we both knew we'd rather be home with Rachel.

I was deep in conversation with Charlotte Tilbury - basically the cosmetics version of Lydia - when I heard that familiar, grating voice.

"Charlotte! Darling!" Brianne swooped in, literally pushing me aside to air-kiss Charlotte's cheeks. Brody hovering behind her like an overpriced shadow.

"Brianne, darling, always lovely." Charlotte's smile never wavered. "And Brody, I was so pleased to see you back at Dalton Industries."

"Yes, quite remarkable," Trev's voice dripped with sarcasm. "Not everyone could bounce back from such a public humiliation."

"Oh, Charlotte, are my sister and her... chef... bothering you?" Brianne's concern was as fake as her lashes. "Amber never did learn proper manners."

"On the contrary," Charlotte's eyes sparkled. "Amber is absolutely delightful. Her instincts for cosmetics are extraordinary. I'm quite excited about tomorrow's launch."

I smiled sweetly at my sister. "Like Charlotte, I built my line from scratch. Some of us weren't handed mommy-in-law's company on a silver platter."

Brianne's perfectly lined lips tightened. "At least I didn't need a cat gimmick to get attention."

"No, you just needed your mother-in-law's name and connections," I shot back. "How is Dr. Dalton? Still running discouraging the use of sunscreen?"

"Ladies," Charlotte intervened smoothly, though she seemed to be enjoying the show. "Surely there's room in luxury beauty for both of you?"

"Of course," Brianne's smile was razor-sharp. "Though some of us actually understand luxury."

"And some of us understand innovation," I countered. "But don't worry, Bre. I'm sure Doll 10 will catch up eventually. Maybe in another decade or two?"

Trev's hand found my waist, a subtle reminder to keep it professional. But I could feel him fighting a smile.

"At least our products are backed by a real doctor," Brody finally spoke up, puffing out his chest.

"A chiropractor who thinks sunscreen causes cancer," I rolled my eyes. "Very credible. Tell me, does she adjust your spine before or after giving skincare advice?"

"Mother's research is groundbreaking," Brody started, but Charlotte cut him off.

"Darling, speaking of research," she turned to me, effectively dismissing my sister and her husband, "I simply must know more about your color stories. That autumn palette is extraordinary."

"Oh yes," Brianne's voice dripped acid. "Do tell us about the cat makeup."

"I'd love to," I smiled sweetly. "But shouldn't you be checking on your mother-in-law? I heard she's giving another lecture about how moisturizer is toxic."

I caught Shay's eye across the room and waved her over. She approached reluctantly, Thara looking regal in her arms.

"Speaking of my autumn collection," I said as Diabla posed perfectly, her amber collar catching the light, "our star model seems to be quite popular tonight. The press can't get enough of her."

Charlotte reached out to stroke Thara's muted calico fur. "The coloring really is extraordinary. Those soft cream tones blending into the warm ginger and those deeper auburn patches... perfect inspiration for an autumn palette."

"A cat. As a spokesmodel." Brianne's voice was flat. "How... innovative."

"Michelle Morris's cat, actually," I couldn't resist adding. "Her coloring captured exactly what I wanted for the collection."

"Sometimes the best inspiration comes from unexpected places," Charlotte said diplomatically. "Though I must say, she's remarkably well-behaved for a cat at an event like this."

I bit back a comment about Diabla saving her chaos for tomorrow. "She's a natural in front of the cameras."

"Unlike some people," Trev muttered, just loud enough for Brody to hear.

"Michelle Morris?" Brianne latched onto that detail, ignoring Trev's jab. "I suppose that explains the gimmick. Always riding someone else's coattails, aren't you, big sister?"

Before I could respond, Thara let out a perfectly timed sneeze directly onto Brianne's designer dress. The look of horror on my sister's face was almost worth having to deal with Diabla all week.

"Oh dear," Charlotte barely concealed her amusement. "That Valentino, isn't it?"

"I should get her some water," Shay said quickly, whisking Thara away before my sister could recover from her shock.

"You did that on purpose," Brianne hissed at me.

"Please," I smiled. "If I had that kind of control over Michelle Morris's cat, do you think I'd be letting her steal my spotlight?"

"Speaking of spotlight," Lydia materialized beside us. "Amber, darling, the Times wants a quick word. Charlotte, you simply must come too."

"Running away as usual, big sister?" Brianne called after me. "Just like you ran from the family business?"

I turned back, keeping my voice sweet but firm. "No, baby sister. I didn't run - I built something of my own. But I understand why that concept might be difficult for you to grasp."

"Ladies," Charlotte intervened again, though she was clearly enjoying the drama. "Shall we focus on tomorrow's excitement?"

"Yes, let's," Lydia linked her arm through mine. "Though Brianne, darling, you might want to have that dress cleaned. Cat hair can be so... persistent."

As we walked away, I heard Brody trying to comfort my sister about her ruined Valentino. I made a mental note to give Diabla an extra treat later - though I'd never admit that to Michelle.

"Well," Charlotte said once we were out of earshot. "Family dynamics in the beauty industry are always so... entertaining."

"Especially when one sister actually earned her place," Lydia added pointedly. "Now, about that Times interview..."

The rest of the evening passed in a blur of interviews, air kisses, and carefully navigating industry politics. Every time I caught sight of Brianne, she was either glaring at me or frantically trying to clean her dress.

When we finally made it back to the hotel, Shay tried to hand Diabla back to me.

"Oh no," I shook my head. "She's staying with you tonight. That's what assistants are for."

"But-"

“Here’s her bed,” I handed off the designer pet bed.

“Amber…”

"Good night, Shay!" I called over my shoulder, hearing her grumbling as she carried Thara into her room.

"Well," Trev said as we got ready for bed, "that was quite the opening night."

"Just wait until tomorrow," I sighed. "The actual launch will be..."

"Perfect," he finished firmly. "Your products are incredible, the press loves you, and even Diabla seems to be behaving."

"Don't jinx it," I warned. "We still have the main event tomorrow. And knowing that demon cat, she's just waiting for the perfect moment to cause chaos."

Morning came too early, but I was already running on adrenaline. Today was it - everything I'd worked for, dreamed of, built from scratch. While Trev FaceTimed with his mam to check on Rachel (who was apparently being thoroughly spoiled in true Irish grandmother fashion), I started my preparation ritual.

The burnt orange dress had been custom made for this moment - the color perfectly matched one of the shades in my signature palette. I let the hair stylist work her magic, but my makeup... that had to be me. Every product, every brush stroke, every blend had to be perfect. This wasn't just another beauty launch - this was my name, my vision.

When I finally emerged from the bathroom, the reflection in the mirror stopped me. The dress, the hair, the makeup... I looked like the model I used to be, but different. Stronger. This wasn't about wearing someone else's designs or selling someone else's products. This was mine. All mine.

"You look amazing, mo grá." Trev's smile was soft as he looked me over.

I returned his appreciative gaze, taking in how the tailored designer suit made him look like he belonged on a runway instead of in a kitchen. "So do you."

"Ready?" He held out his hand.

"As ready as I can be." I took it, squeezing slightly. "Though honestly? I'm nervous as hell."

He pulled me close, careful not to wrinkle either of our outfits. "That's normal, but you'll be fabulous as always."

"As long as I have you by my side, I'll be okay."

"You'll always have me at your side."

I gave him an air kiss, protecting my perfectly applied lipstick. "Okay, time to collect Shay and Diabla."

When Shay opened her door, she looked like the personification of teenage misery in what was clearly a Lydia-selected dress. Thara, meanwhile, looked absolutely regal in her amber collar and matching hat.

"You look miserable," I noted.

"This dress is too bloody tight," Shay muttered, adjusting the fabric.

"You look great. But if you show up with that expression, your aunt will have a fit."

She managed a forced smile. "Fine. Let's just go."

The limo ride to the venue was quiet, tension building with every mile. When we arrived, the press was already swarming the red carpet, the air electric with anticipation.

"Ready?" Trev squeezed my hand.

I nodded. "Hand me Diabla. Let's do this."

"Gladly," Shay practically thrust the cat at me.

Trev exited first, helping me emerge gracefully with Thara in my arms. Standing there, facing the wall of cameras and reporters, it hit me - this was really happening. My dream, becoming reality in real time. Everything was moving so fast, yet I wanted to freeze this moment, to remember every detail.

The red carpet stretched before us, and we began our walk, stopping for photos and fielding questions. Thara, naturally, posed like she'd been doing this her whole life.

The energy was intoxicating - every photographer, every reporter clamoring for our attention. Trevor and I had somehow become fashion's new power couple without even trying.

"Amber, Trevor! Can we get a shot with Brianne and Brody?"

I turned to see my sister and her husband doing their best attempt at a glamorous entrance. Brianne's smile was sharp as glass.

"Oh, hello Bre. How lovely that you could be here to witness my crowning moment," I said sweetly.

"Oh no, dear sister," she matched my tone. "I'm here to watch this little venture of yours crash and burn."

"Always wrong, aren't you? But then, that's rather your brand." I kept my camera-ready smile as we posed together.

"A cook on the red carpet," Brody sneered at Trevor. "Standards really have slipped."

"Michelin-starred chef," Trev corrected smoothly. "Though I suppose they have lowered the bar, letting in disgraced executives. Tell me, how did you explain away trying to hook up with your wife’s sister?"

We walked away before they could respond, leaving them to stew in the reminder of Brody's very public downfall.

"That was deliciously cruel," I murmured to Trev as we continued down the carpet.

"He deserved it," Trev's hand stayed protectively at my waist. "Some things shouldn't be forgotten."

Thara chose that moment to strike her most regal pose yet, drawing another wave of camera flashes. Even I had to admit - Diabla knew how to work a crowd.

"Ms. O'Sullivan! Can you tell us about the inspiration behind the Thara palette?"

I turned toward the reporter, making sure Thara was angled perfectly for the cameras. "The inspiration was actually quite organic. When I saw how Thara's coat captured every perfect autumn shade - those warm gingers blending into deeper auburns, the soft cream highlights - I knew I had to recreate those colors. Each shade in the palette is inspired by her natural coloring."

Thara, as if understanding she was the topic of discussion, tilted her head regally.

"And how did Michelle Morris feel about her cat becoming a beauty icon?"

I managed not to roll my eyes. "Michelle has been incredibly supportive. Though I think Thara's natural modeling ability surprised us all."

"Even if she is a diabla gata," I added under my breath, earning a subtle squeeze from Trev.

"Mr. O'Sullivan! How does it feel supporting your wife's venture while managing two restaurants?"

Trevor smiled, his media training showing. "It's three restaurants actually. And she always supports me, so I'm happy to do the same for her. She's being incredibly supportive as we prepare to open our fourth restaurant in Limerick."

The reporters latched onto this new information immediately.

"A fourth O'Sullivan restaurant?" "When is the Limerick opening?" "Will it have the same concept as the Cantina?"

I watched proudly as Trev handled the questions with his usual charm, carefully revealing just enough about the Limerick plans to create buzz without giving away too much. This was why we worked - we understood each other's worlds, supported each other's dreams.

A flash of movement caught my eye - Lydia was signaling that it was time to head inside. The actual launch was about to begin.

"If you'll excuse us," I smiled at the press. "We have a cosmetics line to launch."

The buzz inside the venue was electric. Lydia swept over immediately, looking impossibly polished as always.

"Darling, you look divine." She air-kissed my cheeks before turning to Shay. "And you, my dear niece - I see my glam team managed a miracle. You look almost presentable."

"Thank you, Auntie Lydia," Shay managed through her practiced smile.

"Here," I transferred Thara back to her. "Take Diabla until after my speech."

Shay accepted the cat with poorly concealed resignation.

"Now," Lydia's eyes sparkled with that look that meant everything was going according to her master plan. "The buzz is perfect. We'll begin the show in twenty minutes, followed by your launch speech. The models are all in hair and makeup - your products look stunning on them, darling. And the combination of my fall pieces with the spring preview..." She practically purred with satisfaction.

It was a brilliant strategy, really - launching my makeup line alongside Lydia's fashion show. Her models would showcase my products while wearing both her current collection and teasing her upcoming spring line. The fashion press would be covering the clothes, the beauty press would be covering my launch, and both would be talking about the collaboration.

"Perfect," I smiled, though my stomach was doing flips.

"Now," Lydia's tone left no room for argument, "you and Trevor will be front row, of course. Fifteen minutes before the finale, slip backstage for touch-ups. And darling? You need to hold Thara during the show. The press will eat up shots of you two watching together."

I sighed, already imagining what chaos Diabla might cause. "Fine."

"Perfect!" Lydia swept away to terrorize someone else.

Trev and I worked the room, navigating the mix of beauty executives, fashion editors, and celebrities. The energy was incredible - everyone who was anyone in both industries had turned out for this. When the lights flickered their warning, I reluctantly collected Thara from Shay and let Trev guide me to our prime front-row seats.

Of course, Brianne and Brody were seated across the runway from us. I could feel my sister's glare even in the dimming lights. Thara, as if sensing the tension, chose that moment to stretch dramatically in my lap, showing off her perfect autumn coat colors to anyone watching.

"Diabla knows exactly what she's doing," I muttered to Trev.

"Like owner, like cat," he whispered back, making me smile despite my nerves.

The music started, and the first model appeared on the runway. My breath caught - seeing my makeup on these models, paired with Lydia's designs... it was better than I'd imagined. Every shade, every finish, every detail was exactly as I'd envisioned.

I caught glimpses of the press photographing not just the runway, but the reactions of those in the front row. Including, no doubt, countless shots of me and my demon spokesmodel watching the show together.

The show flew by in a blur of perfect makeup and stunning fashion. When it was time, I handed Diabla to Trev and slipped backstage for final touch-ups. Watching the last few looks from behind the scenes, I couldn't help but feel a surge of satisfaction. All those casting directors who'd told me I was too short for runway... well, tonight this was my runway.

On cue, I walked out, every step perfect from years of training. Stopping at the end of the catwalk, I took the microphone, my heart pounding but my voice steady:

"Thank you all for being here tonight. I'm Amber Nichole O'Sullivan, and I am proud to officially launch Amber Nichole Cosmetics. This is the culmination of a lifelong dream - bringing a new dimension to luxury cosmetics. No longer will you have to choose between superior formulas and bold color stories. Amber Nichole brings you the most pigmented, vibrant colors with formulas that can only be achieved in the luxury space.

"Makeup has been my creative outlet, my form of self-expression, since childhood. Every formula in this collection is a labor of love, tested personally until each one achieved exactly what I envisioned. These aren't just products - they're dreams made real.

"I have so many people to thank. First, my incredible business partner, Lydia James. She could have simply put her name on these products, like so many fashion designers before her. Instead, she trusted me to launch under my own name as part of Lydia James Fashion. Her faith in my vision means everything.

"To my husband, best friend, and partner in all things - Trevor O'Sullivan. Mi corazón, none of this would be possible without you. And to our beautiful daughter Rachel, our unexpected blessing during this crazy journey.

"Special thanks to Michelle Morris for letting her gorgeous cat Thara become our beauty icon - her perfect autumn coat colors inspired our signature palette. To my brilliant assistant Shay James - mark my words, we'll all be here for the launch of Shay James Fragrances someday.

"And to my incredible support system - my mother-in-law Niamh, and those friends who are truly family: Livvie, Jeremy, Pete, Gina, Fionn, Decklan, Aine, James, Hunter, Susan, Abby, and of course my loyal Ellie.

"Most importantly, thank you all for being here, for giving Amber Nichole a chance. I hope you love these products as much as I do. And with that - Amber Nichole Cosmetics is officially on sale now!"

The energy shifted immediately from fashion show to launch party, the main hall already packed with people lining up at our product booths.

Backstage, Lydia caught me in a rare moment of genuine warmth. "Darling, that was perfect. Now go enjoy your triumph."

"Thank you, Lydia. For everything." I meant it more than she'd ever know.

Trev was waiting for me, Thara still regally perched in his arms. Together, we entered the main hall where the lines for product seemed endless. My heart swelled - until I spotted Brianne working the crowd, clutching an armful of Doll 10 products.

I moved closer, catching her desperate pitch: "Don't waste your money. Here, try this Doll 10 foundation - once you do, you won't even think about Amber Nichole."

I couldn't help but laugh. "Oh, baby sister. Has Doll 10 really fallen so far that you're reduced to giving away free full-size products?" The desperation was almost sad. Almost.

"I'm letting people experience a superior product," she snapped.

"Then why are you carrying Doll 10?" I smiled sweetly. "Seriously, Bre, this is pathetic. Stop trying to sabotage my launch, or I'll have security escort you out."

Her glare could have frozen hell, but she walked away. Even she knew when she'd been beaten.

After passing Thara back to Shay, Trev and I started making our rounds.

"Amber, darling, over here!" Lydia's voice cut through the crowd. She was standing with Andy Bell - yes, that Andy Bell. The same one my husband had cried in front of three times at the concert this summer.

"Oh, bloody hell, it's Andy Bell. I can't. I cannot." Trev froze beside me.

"Pull yourself together," I laughed, guiding him forward. "Hey! I'm so glad you could make it!"

Andy's smile was warm. "Of course. Those samples you sent were incredible. You have a real gift for formulation."

"Doesn't she?" Lydia beamed. "And speaking of gifts, you may finally get your wish about my men's line."

"Finally? After all my begging?" Andy's eyes lit up. "What changed your mind?"

Lydia gestured at my husband. "Look at him. Like a Greek god in that suit."

Trev's eyes widened as Lydia lifted his jacket. "Look how these pants hug his thighs. Gorgeous specimen."

My poor husband turned scarlet as his idol nodded in agreement. "Oh, absolutely gorgeous. You should have seen him backstage at the concert, covered in glitter. Spectacular."

Watching Trevor turn the same shade as my autumn palette, I decided to rescue him. "I hope you can stay awhile?"

"Of course! How is that precious daughter of yours?" Andy asked.

"She's absolutely amazing," I smiled.

"Getting bigger every day," Trevor added, his face lighting up like it always did when talking about Rachel.

"You must send me new photos," Andy insisted. "And speaking of photos - that cat of yours is causing quite a stir. The autumn palette inspired by her coloring is brilliant marketing."

"The cat belongs to Michelle Morris," I clarified quickly. "But yes, Diabla has been... surprisingly cooperative."

As if summoned by her name, I heard a commotion from across the room. Turning, I saw Shay trying to maintain her grip on Thara, who appeared to have spotted something interesting near the product displays.

"Oh no," I muttered. "Trev-"

But before I could finish, Thara had somehow escaped Shay's hold and was making her way toward... of course. My sister. Who was still clutching her Doll 10 products.

"This should be interesting," Lydia said with entirely too much enthusiasm.

We watched as Thara approached Brianne with what I can only describe as demonic intent. My sister, still trying to push her products on people in line, didn't notice the cat stalking toward her until it was too late.

With one perfectly timed leap, Diabla knocked the Doll 10 products out of Bre's hands, sending foundations and powders scattering across the floor. Then, as if to add insult to injury, she proceeded to walk across the spilled makeup, leaving tiny paw prints in the powder before sauntering back to Shay like nothing had happened.

The entire room went silent for a moment before breaking into poorly concealed laughter.

"That bloody cat," Trev whispered, but I could hear him fighting a smile.

"I should probably do something about this," I said, not moving.

"Probably," Lydia agreed, looking delighted. "Though I must say, Thara has impeccable timing."

"Michelle is never going to let me live this down," I muttered, watching my sister's face turn an interesting shade of purple.

Playing the gracious sister, I approached Bre. "Oh, I'm so sorry. Let me get someone to clean this up."

"You trained that cat for this," she accused as Brody rushed to help her. "Somehow, you planned this."

I couldn't help but laugh. "Trust me, no one can train that diabla."

Walking away, I found Shay practically doubled over with laughter. "Try to keep a better hold on her next time."

"I think I just started liking this cat," she managed between giggles.

As the cleaning crew tackled Brianne's scattered products, Trev appeared with a sleek-looking executive type.

"Love, this is Rachel Smith from E! Network. She has a pitch for us."

I immediately tensed. "We've discussed reality TV before..."

"I know, but she asked us to hear her out," Trev said diplomatically.

"Ms. Smith," I smiled politely, "I appreciate your interest, but-"

"Please," she jumped in. "Your dynamic is incredible - the way you support each other's careers, this feud with your sister, Trevor's new restaurant... it's compelling television."

"Our private lives aren't for sale," I said firmly. "Our marriage, our daughter, our home - all off limits."

"What if we focused purely on your professional lives?" She countered. "No personal footage, no home scenes."

"Our daughter would never be on camera," I insisted.

Rachel nodded eagerly. "Of course. But think about the possibilities - Trevor could be bigger than Gordon Ramsay. Brand deals, product lines..."

I saw Trev's expression shift slightly. "Bigger than Ramsay? Trevor O'Sullivan ready meals..."

"Well," I conceded, catching his interest, "it would be satisfying to show the world who my sister really is. We'll think about it."

Rachel handed over her card, clearly sensing a potential victory. "That's all I ask."

"We'll be in touch." Though whether to accept or decline, I wasn't yet sure.

Once Rachel was out of earshot, I turned to Trev. "Your ego is so fragile. All someone has to do is mention Ramsay and you're like a moth to a flame."

"I just want the chance to prove I'm a better chef than that sharpay," he muttered, his accent thickening with irritation.

"We'll need to talk to our lawyer," I laughed. "And maybe see if Michelle will let us borrow Holly. God knows we'd need her level of PR management."

Trev nodded, and we spent the rest of the evening working the room. The mix of beauty industry executives and celebrities all wanted to talk about the products, the formulas, the color stories. By the time the event wound down, we'd sold out of several products and were running low on almost everything else.

Standing there, watching the last guests leave with their Amber Nichole shopping bags, it hit me - the launch had exceeded even my wildest dreams.

Back at the hotel, exhaustion mixed with triumph led to our first truly intimate night since Rachel's birth. Months of pent-up tension and launch-day adrenaline made everything feel more intense.

The next morning, we slept later than usual, finally discussing future plans over breakfast.

"Will you be doing all the Fashion Weeks?" Trev asked between bites.

"I should... but I hate being away for a month." I paused, considering. "What if we brought your mam and Rachel? Niamh's barely left Ireland except for Tomi's birthday in Paris. You could skip New York, but do Milan and Paris together."

"Love, I still need to check on Shamrock in Austin," he reminded me. "I thought I'd go to New York with you, spend a few days in Texas, then go to Milan."

I sighed. The idea of any of them in the States right now made my stomach turn - it didn't feel safe for non-citizens. But he was right about Shamrock needing attention. "Fine... but Rachel stays here."

"Bloody hell, of course she does. I don't even want to go myself." He pushed his food around. "I'm actually considering selling Shamrock, just to be done with business in the States."

"But it was your first restaurant," I said softly. "You love that place."

"Yeah, but..." he shrugged. "The States isn't exactly somewhere I want to do business anymore. Just thinking about it."

A knock at the door interrupted our discussion. Shay entered, looking slightly frazzled, with Thara regally perched in her arms.

"Your demon cat kept me up half the night," she announced. "Also, Auntie Lydia wants to know if you've seen the numbers yet."

"Numbers?" I reached for my phone, which I'd deliberately ignored since waking up.

"Oh my god," I breathed, scrolling through the reports. "We sold out completely online. The waitlist for restocks is..." I showed Trev the screen.

"Bloody hell," he whispered. "That's..."

"I know." My hands were shaking slightly. "And the press coverage..."

"Every major beauty site is raving about the formulas," Shay added. "And the fashion blogs can't stop talking about how the cat stole the show. Though they're calling it 'Thara's elegant dismissal of inferior products.'"

I couldn't help but laugh. "Of course they are. Michelle is going to be insufferable about this."

"Michelle is going to be insufferable about this."

"Speaking of Michelle," Shay held up her phone, "she's been texting me all morning asking for videos of Thara's 'star moment.' Apparently the internet is going crazy over the Doll 10 incident."

"Send her the security footage," I said. "She deserves to see her diabla's finest performance."

"Already trending," Shay confirmed. "Hashtag TharaTakesLondon."

"Brilliant," Trev grinned. "Though I notice Brianne hasn't posted anything since last night."

"Give her time," I smirked. "She's probably still trying to get the paw prints out of her foundation samples."

My phone buzzed - Lydia. "Darling, we simply must discuss Milan. After last night's triumph, every fashion house will want Thara at their show."

I looked at the demon cat, who was now grooming herself as if she hadn't just launched a successful attack on my sister's products. "No. Lydia, you said it was just for the launch. Michelle needs her back in Nashville." I watched Thara pause in her grooming to give me a superior look. "And honestly, I don't want to spend another minute than necessary with this diabla."

"But darling-"

"No, Lydia." Even she knew when I wouldn't budge.

She sighed dramatically. "Fine. Though I must point out - I knew she would be a smashing success."

"You did," I conceded. "Though I doubt even you predicted she'd destroy my sister's products in front of the entire beauty industry."

"No, that was purely a bonus. I knew I liked that cat. On top of being beautiful, she has flair."

"Don't encourage her," I muttered, watching Thara preen at the praise. "The last thing that cat needs is more ego."

"Speaking of ego," Lydia continued, "what are your thoughts about the reality show pitch? Rachel Smith has already called me three times this morning."

I glanced at Trev, who was pretending not to listen while feeding Thara bits of his breakfast. "We're... considering it. Though keeping Rachel completely out of it is non-negotiable."

"Of course, darling. Though perhaps we should discuss this in person. Breakfast? The Dorchester in an hour?"

I looked at my still-untouched breakfast and sighed. "The Dorchester it is."

After hanging up, I filled Trev in on Lydia's summons.

"And why exactly does Lydia get a say in this?" His accent thickened with annoyance. "She's your business partner, not your boss."

"I know, but..." I gestured helplessly. "She's Lydia. Of course she wants a say. And honestly, it'll be less painful if we just hear her out."

Trev sighed, running a hand through his hair. "Fine."

"Besides," I added, watching him sneak another piece of bacon to Thara, "you're the one who's already dreaming up your TV empire to rival Ramsay."

"That's different," he protested. "That would be about cooking, not our personal lives."

"Right. Because Kitchen Nightmares never shows Gordon's dramatic side."

We got dressed and headed to the Dorchester, where Lydia was already holding court at her usual table. She'd brought Shay too, which meant this wasn't just a casual breakfast meeting.

"Darlings!" She waved us over. "I've taken the liberty of ordering for everyone. And don't worry - I made sure they have Trevor's preferred tea."

"Of course you did," I muttered, sliding into my seat. "So, let's hear it. What's your take on this reality show situation?"

"Well," Lydia's eyes sparkled dangerously, "I've already spoken with Rachel Smith this morning. And I have some thoughts about how we could make this work while protecting your privacy..."

"Of course you do," Trev said under his breath, but Lydia ignored him.

"Think about it - Trevor opening his new restaurant in Limerick, you launching in different markets, the fashion weeks..." She paused as our breakfast arrived. "We focus entirely on the business side. No home footage, no personal drama - unless you want it shown."

"And Rachel?" I asked firmly.

"Completely off limits. Not even mentioned." Lydia waved her hand. "The show would be about two successful people building their empires. Your relationship would be background color at most."

"And what's in it for you?" Trev asked directly.

"Darling," Lydia smiled like a shark. "Think of the exposure for both brands. Amber Nichole Cosmetics and the O'Sullivan restaurant empire, growing together. Plus..." She looked at Trev. "Rachel Smith wasn't wrong about the Gordon Ramsay comparison. You're much more photogenic, and your accent is far more appealing."

I watched my husband try not to look interested. "And what about Brianne? Because you know she'll try to get involved."

"Oh darling," Lydia's smile turned predatory. "That's part of the appeal. After last night's little... incident, the beauty industry is already choosing sides. Why not let the cameras capture the real story? Show everyone exactly how your sister operates."

"By giving away full-size products to try to steal my customers?" I couldn't help but laugh. "That was pretty desperate."

"Precisely. And with your success..." Lydia glanced at her phone. "Which, by the way, the numbers from this morning are extraordinary. Pre-orders for the restock are already overwhelming."

"But a reality show..." Trev still looked uncertain. "The pressure of cameras everywhere..."

"Not everywhere," Lydia corrected. "Only at approved locations. Your restaurants, beauty events, fashion weeks. We control the narrative completely."

"And what happens when they want more drama than we're willing to give them?" I asked, knowing how these shows worked.

"That's why we need Holly," Lydia said simply. "Michelle's PR woman knows how to handle these situations. And speaking of Michelle..."

"Michelle can't be involved," I cut her off firmly. "I won't work with her. And besides, she hates reality TV. She's made that very clear."

"I wasn't suggesting she appear," Lydia said smoothly. "Just that we might benefit from Holly's expertise in managing these situations. After all, she's kept Michelle's private life mostly private despite her level of fame."

Trev shifted beside me. "And what about Shamrock? The Austin restaurant?"

"That could be an interesting storyline," Lydia mused. "The decision whether to keep or sell your first restaurant in the current climate..."

"No," I said firmly. "We're not turning that into entertainment. Some things need to stay private."

"Of course, darling. You set the boundaries." Lydia took a delicate sip of her tea. "We just need to make sure those boundaries make good television."

I could tell the idea of being more famous than Ramsay appealed to Trev. He wanted to do it. "Love, thoughts?"

I studied my husband's face - he was trying to look neutral, but I knew that look. The same competitive fire that made him an incredible chef was burning at the idea of showing up Gordon Ramsay.

"If we do this," I said carefully, "we need ironclad contracts. Nothing filmed in our home, nothing about Rachel, complete control over what airs. And we'd need our own legal team, not just the network's."

"And Holly," Lydia added.

"And Holly," I agreed.

"If the lawyers can work out a contract to our liking, then yes," I nodded.

Lydia practically clapped with delight. "Excellent! I'll have Rachel Smith meet with our legal team this afternoon."

"Our legal team?" I raised an eyebrow.

"Darling, did you think I'd let you sign anything without my lawyers reviewing it first? This needs to protect both our brands."

"Speaking of brands," Trev interjected, clearly trying to change the subject before I could argue about Lydia's involvement, "what's the timeline looking like for the product restock?"

"Two weeks," I said. "Though at this rate, we might need to increase production. The waitlist is insane."

"See?" Lydia smiled. "Perfect timing for filming to start. We capture the aftermath of a successful launch, leading into Milan Fashion Week..."

"One thing at a time," I warned. "Let's see the contracts first. And Trev and I have our own lawyer. Yours can be involved, but this is O'Sullivan Inc. on the line far more than Lydia James Fashions."

Lydia's smile didn't waver, but something shifted in her eyes. "Of course, darling. This is your show - literally. I'm merely here to... advise."

"And protect your investment," I added pointedly. "But this needs to be done our way."

"Agreed," Trev said firmly, his hand finding mine under the table. "Our restaurants, Amber's brand - we need to maintain control."

"Speaking of control," Shay spoke up for the first time, "what exactly would my role be in all this?"

"That depends," I turned to her. "How do you feel about being on camera?"

"Absolutely not," she said immediately, making Trev laugh.

"Then you'll be safely behind the scenes," I assured her. "Though you might need to wrangle some producers."

"Better than wrangling that demon cat," she muttered.

The rest of London Fashion Week passed in a blur of events, interviews, and unprecedented success. Everywhere I went, people were talking about Amber Nichole Cosmetics - though admittedly, they were also talking about our feline spokesmodel's dramatic takedown of Doll 10.

By the closing party, I was beyond ready to head home. The thought of handing Diabla over to Hunter to return to Michelle filled me with relief - though I had to admit, despite the chaos she'd caused at various events, I'd escaped relatively unscathed. Just a few cat scratches. Poor Shay, on the other hand, looked like she'd been in a fight with a tiny demon. Which, essentially, she had.

A few precious days at home with Rachel and Trev awaited before the New York shows began. But standing here, watching the beauty industry's elite clamoring for my products, I knew this was just the beginning. Amber Nichole Cosmetics wasn't just a success - it was a phenomenon.

And to think, I had a demon cat to thank for part of it. Though I'd never admit that to Michelle.

"Growing Pains"

We had been back in Ireland for two days and I was already deep in code, working on enhanced security protocols for a corporate client. They'd nearly been hit by ransomware - nearly being the operative word, thanks to me. But "nearly" wasn't good enough. I had a reputation as the best, and I intended to keep it that way.

Just as I was inputting the final line of code, chaos erupted upstairs:

"Ro Ro, no! That's Mummy's!"

"Ki Ki, shut up!"

THUD

A scream followed - not the usual toddler dramatics, but something that made my blood run cold.

"Ki Ki not ok!"

I bolted for the stairs, meeting J there. Rose stood at the top, her face a mask of horror. At the bottom lay Killy, crying in a way I'd never heard from my usually stoic son.

"Killy, baby..." I dropped to my knees beside him.

"Arm," he managed between screams. The fact that he was crying at all, let alone screaming, sent panic through my chest. My quiet, careful boy never made this much noise.

"Roisín, what happened?" J asked, scooping up Rose to bring her downstairs.

"Ki Ki said no and I pushed him and he fell on accident," Rose said, her bottom lip trembling.

"You pushed your brother down the stairs?" The words felt frozen in my throat.

"On accident," Rose nodded, tears starting.

J passed Rose to me and carefully lifted Killy. "We need to get him to hospital. Come on, lad, it'll be ok."

The drive to A&E was tense - Killy trying to be brave but crying softly, Rose alternating between "sorry" and "accident" from her car seat. J drove while I sat in the back between the twins, trying to keep them both calm while fighting my own panic.

Cork University Hospital's A&E was mercifully quiet when we arrived. The staff knew us - between Jeremy's accidents and the twins' various mishaps, we were practically regulars.

"What happened then?" The nurse asked as she gently examined Killy's arm.

"Fell down stairs," Killy managed, his voice small.

"No, I pushed down stairs," Rose corrected helpfully from J's lap. "But on accident!"

The nurse caught my eye, and I explained the situation. She nodded, pressing gently along Killy's arm until he cried out.

"Right then, we'll need some X-rays. And maybe a chat about stair safety, yeah?" She smiled at Rose, who buried her face in J's chest.

The X-rays confirmed what we'd feared - a clean break in his left arm. At least it was a simple fracture, the doctor assured us, showing us the images. They'd need to set it and cast it, but it should heal well.

"What color cast would you like, love?" the nurse asked Killy, who was being impossibly brave about the whole thing.

"Red," he said quietly. "Like Da's jacket."

"I want pink!" Rose announced from her spot on J's lap.

"You don't get a cast, Rose," J explained patiently. "You're not hurt."

"Because I pushed Ki Ki," she said, her bottom lip trembling again. "I'm bad."

"Not bad," Killy said immediately, surprising us all. "Accident."

I caught J's eye over their heads, seeing my own mix of emotions reflected there - pride in Killy's forgiveness, worry about Rose's impulsiveness, and exhaustion from the whole ordeal.

"No, not bad," J said carefully, "but there needs to be a consequence, which we will discuss when we get home."

I nodded in agreement. Our little fairy princess was about to learn what being grounded meant. No amount of "accident" claims could erase the fact that she'd pushed her brother down the stairs - something we'd warned her about countless times.

While the doctor worked on Killy's cast, Rose grew increasingly quiet, clearly sensing the seriousness of what she'd done. Even her usual endless energy seemed subdued. The reality that her actions had actually hurt her brother was finally sinking in.

"All done," the doctor announced, Killy's arm now encased in bright red plaster. "Though I suspect this young man might need some ice cream for being so brave."

"Ice cream?" Rose perked up hopefully.

"Not for you, fairy girl," J said firmly. "Some actions have consequences."

The look on our daughter's face suggested this might be the most effective punishment we'd ever given her.

After getting Killy his well-earned ice cream and settling him into bed, we sent Rose to her room. The silence from her usually noisy space was deafening.

"She's two," J said once we were alone in our bedroom. "She doesn't understand what being grounded means."

"No, but she needs to learn sometime." I ran a hand through my hair. "J, she pushed her brother down the stairs. She broke his arm."

"First of many with Rose as his sister," he said with a hint of a smile.

I shot him a look. "Not helpful."

"Fine." He sobered. "How long are we grounding her for?"

"Two days. Any longer and she won't understand why." I watched his face carefully. "But you have to stick to it. If you cave to those big eyes of hers, it won't mean anything."

J sighed, and I could see him already struggling with the idea of refusing our daughter anything. "Fine. I'll be strong. Two days."

"Good. Roisín, come here!" I called.

The patter of tiny feet preceded our daughter's appearance. "Yes Mummy?"

"Have a seat," I gestured to the bed, watching as she climbed up, her fairy wings slightly crooked.

"You know pushing Killy was naughty," I said gently but firmly.

"You really hurt your brother," J added.

Rose's bottom lip trembled. "It was a accident. I sorry."

"Sometimes sorry isn't enough," I explained. "When we do naughty things, there has to be a consequence. Do you know what that means?"

She shook her head, hair bouncing.

"Like when someone steals, they go to jail," J offered.

"Jail?!" Rose's eyes filled with tears. "Don't send me to jail!"

I shot J an exasperated look. "No, love, not jail. But you are going to be grounded. That means for two days, no telly and no playing with friends. You can color or read books."

Rose's face crumpled. "But... but... Chip Agus Prata?"

"No Chip Agus Prata," J said firmly, though I could see it paining him. "No Bluey either."

"No Bluey?!" Now the tears really started. "But Mummy..."

"No, Roisín." I kept my voice steady. "When we hurt people, there are consequences. You hurt Killy very badly."

"Ki Ki got ice cream," she pouted.

"Because Killy has a broken arm," J explained. "Which hurts very much."

"I hurt too!" she tried. "In my heart because I'm sorry!"

I had to bite back a smile at her dramatics. "Being sorry is good, but it doesn't fix Killy's arm. Two days, no telly, no friends. Do you understand?"

She nodded miserably, her fairy wings drooping. "Can... can I still give Ki Ki hugs?"

"Of course you can," I softened slightly. "As long as you're very gentle with his arm."

"And tomorrow," J added, "you can help sign his cast. But only if you're good tonight."

Rose nodded solemnly, which for her meant about thirty seconds of seriousness before she started fidgeting with her wings.

"Right then," I stood up. "Back to your room. You can color until dinner."

"Can I color for Ki Ki?" she asked hopefully.

"Yes, love. That would be nice." J managed to keep his voice firm despite her obvious attempt to melt his heart.

After Rose trudged back to her room - making sure we could hear every dramatic footstep - J turned to me.

"Two days is going to feel like forever."

"For her or for you?" I asked, knowing exactly how much this punishment would torture my husband.

He looked at me, “Yes.”

Hunter

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I was sprawled on the sofa, Tomi settled in my lap, trying to beat Jeremy at our ongoing "Breath of the Wild" shrine competition. Last I checked, he was just ahead of me. Arissa and Kira were at Kira's house, while Kora and Harley were upstairs.

I was just about to enter a new shrine when shouting erupted from above:

"Jake is an adult! He doesn't love you, he never will, and I'm so tired of hearing about him!" Kora's voice cracked with emotion before her door slammed. Footsteps thundered down the stairs, accompanied by sobs.

Great. Our tomboys were hitting peak teenage drama. I hated this part.

Pausing the game, I watched Kora reach the bottom of the stairs, her face streaked with tears. "Kora, you okay, sweetie?"
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She launched herself into my arms, careful of Tomi, and broke down completely. After all the time she spent here, she was practically another daughter.

"I wanna go home," she managed between sobs.

"Okay," I said softly. "We can call your dad. But what happened?"

"I just..." she hiccupped, trying to catch her breath. "I can't listen to her talk about Jake anymore. It's all she talks about, and I..." Fresh tears started.

Oh. This wasn't just about Harley's crush on Jake. There was something else here.

"And you what?" I asked gently, shifting Tomi to my other knee so Kora could sit beside me.

"I just want my best friend back," she whispered. "Everything's different now. She only wants to talk about Jake, or write songs about Jake, or look at Jake's social media..."

Footsteps on the stairs made us both look up. Harley stood there, her face a mix of anger and hurt.

"Well maybe if you weren't so jealous-"

"Harley," I warned. "That's enough."

I watched Kora shrink further into herself, and my heart ached for her. We adults had all seen it - the way she looked at Harley, how her face lit up when Harley walked into a room, how she deflated every time Jake's name came up. Hal and I had figured it out months ago, though Kora thought she was hiding it well. Harley hadn't picked up on it at all.

It was bad enough watching your best friend obsess over someone else. But watching your crush pine after someone while having to hear about it constantly? That was a special kind of teenage hell.

"I'm calling Dad," Kora said quietly, pulling out her phone.

"Okay," I said softly. "You can stay here until he can pick you up." I knew Hal was probably mid-flight somewhere over Europe.

"But why is she being like this?" Harley demanded. "She's supposed to be my best friend! She's supposed to support me!"

"Harley Bradley," I said firmly, "go to your room. We'll talk about this later."

"But Dad-"

"Now."

As Harley stomped back upstairs, I turned to Kora. "Want to help me put Tomi down for her nap while we wait to hear from your dad?"

She nodded, grateful for the distraction. Kora had always been good with Tomi, another thing that made her practically family.

"He's married," she said suddenly as we headed toward the nursery. "Jake's married with a baby. Why can't she see that?"

The question wasn't really about Jake, but I answered it anyway. "Sometimes when people want something badly enough, they don't want to see the reality."

Kora's phone buzzed - a text from Hal saying his flight was over Germany and asking if she needed someone to pick her up.

"My mom can get me," she said quietly, typing back.

I nodded. "You know you can always talk to us, right? About anything."

She looked up at me, and for a moment I thought she might actually open up about her feelings for Harley. But then Tomi made a grab for her hair, breaking the moment.

"Thanks, Uncle Hunter." She managed a small smile. "I just... I miss how things used to be. Before Jake, before all this drama."

"I know, sweetie." And I did. I remembered being a teenager, watching everything change and not being able to stop it. "But sometimes things have to change before they can get better."

"Even if it hurts?"

"Especially then."

Kara

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"The president needs to release the files. His base isn't going to forget about it, no matter how many distractions he tries to create," I said firmly to the camera. Another segment on Grayson's show - not my favorite part of the job, but necessary.

"The president just returned from the UK where there were significant protests. It seems he's not immune even in foreign countries," Grayson noted.

"No, he's not. But remember, some of the royals involved in this scandal have been shunned from public life, while the President hasn't faced similar consequences. There's strong anti-US government sentiment in Europe right now, especially in the UK."

"Not that we need foreign countries to approve of our government," Grayson added pointedly.

"Perhaps not, but they are our allies," I countered, which led to another heated debate about foreign relations. By the end, my blood was boiling.

After logging off, I checked my phone - a text from Hal. Kora was upset and needed picking up. Perfect timing - I needed an escape after that segment.
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I turned off my home studio lights and headed to Kira's room, where she and Arissa were hanging out.

"Hey, can you girls watch Tiffy for a bit? I need to pick up Kora."

"Do I have to?" Kira groaned, while Arissa immediately said, "Of course!"

"Thanks, Arissa," I smiled. "Won't be long."

Grabbing my purse, I headed out, grateful for the excuse to clear my head after dealing with Grayson.

The drive to Hunter's gave me time to process Hal's text. Something about Harley and Jake - which meant teenage drama. I'd noticed Kora's crush on Harley months ago, though I hadn't mentioned it to her. Some things you had to figure out on your own.

When I pulled up, Kora was sitting on the front steps with Hunter and Tomi. Her eyes were red from crying, but she was managing a smile as Tomi tried to share her snack with her.

"Hey sweetie," I called softly.

"Hi Mom." She stood up, clearly trying to act like everything was fine. "Thanks for coming."

"Thanks for watching her," I told Hunter. "And for..." I gestured vaguely, knowing he'd understand I meant taking care of her emotional breakdown too.

"Anytime," he said. "She's family."

As Kora slid into the passenger seat, I sighed, glancing at her profile. Her crush on Harley was obvious, and while I was still working through my feelings about it, I was trying. First Alexis, then Kenzie, now my daughter - the Baptist teachings I'd grown up with warred with my love for my family. Though considering my own past - the affair with Hal while I was married to Grayson - I was hardly in a position to judge anyone's choices.

Hal's patient guidance and our switch to the Episcopal church had opened my eyes to different biblical interpretations, showing me there wasn't just one way to view faith and love. It wasn't always easy, shifting beliefs I'd held my whole life, but watching Kora struggle now made me grateful for that growth.

"Mom," Kora's voice pulled me from my thoughts as I started driving. "I don't know if I can be Harley's friend anymore."

"Because of Jake?" I asked carefully.

"She's different now. All she does is talk about him. It's gross." The pain in her voice was clear, even as she tried to hide it.

I nodded, not pushing. She wasn't ready to talk about the real reason, and honestly, neither was I.

"When will Dad be home?" Kora asked.

"Few hours. He texted when he got back in the air - just dropped his client in Germany and heading straight back. No other flights today." Hal usually avoided weekend flights, but this was one of his biggest clients outside of Michelle.

Back home, Kora disappeared to her room while I settled in the living room. Streaky, my orange tabby, immediately claimed my lap.

"Any advice on handling this one, Streaks?" I murmured, scratching her ears.

"Mommy, can I have a snack?" Tiffy appeared, clutching her favorite koala plushie.

"Of course, sweetie. What would you like?"

"Berries."

I led her to the kitchen, getting her snack ready. "Mommy, is Kora okay?"

"Yeah, just had an argument with Harley," I said, lifting her into her booster seat.

"About what?"

"I'm not sure, sweetie."

My phone chimed - a text from Livvie: "Hey, Killy broke his arm. He's ok. We're home now, also Rose is grounded so no playing with Tiffy for a couple days."

I read it twice before calling her. "Um, what happened? Killy broke his arm? Rose is grounded? Did she...?"

"She pushed him down the stairs," Livvie explained. "Didn't mean to, but..."

"Is Killy alright?"

"Yeah, clean break. They reset it and put a cast on. He's sleeping now."

"I'm so sorry... need anything? I can bring dinner over."

"Actually, that would help. We're juggling tending to Killy and teaching Rose about being grounded. And honestly, J could probably use a friend when Hal gets home."

"Say no more. We'll come over once Hal's back."

After hanging up, I started preparing a casserole. Nothing made me feel better than taking care of people - especially on days like this.

Livvie

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"Mummy, I'm bored," Rose's voice whined from my office doorway.

"Yeah? Good. You're grounded," I said without looking up from my computer.
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"But I want Bluey," she pressed, fairy wings drooping dramatically.

"No. You're grounded. You can read or color. That's it."

"I don't wanna!" Her voice rose to a scream.

"What's going on in here, Roisín?" J appeared behind her.

"I'm bored!" Rose wailed, turning her big eyes on her father.

"I know, love, but..." J caught my warning look and straightened his spine. "...but that's part of being grounded."

Rose threw herself on the floor in full dramatic meltdown mode. "Not fair!"

"What's not fair is pushing your brother down the stairs," I said firmly. "How's Killy doing?"

"Sleeping," J reported. "Actually took his pain medicine without a fuss."

"Unlike some people," I muttered, watching Rose's theatrics escalate.

A small thump from upstairs made us both freeze. "I'll check on him," J said quickly.

"And I'll deal with our drama queen." I stood up from my desk. "Roisín, enough. Up."

"No!" she wailed, but I noticed she was watching to see if her performance was having any effect.

"Right then. If you're going to act like a baby, you can have a nap like one."

That got her attention. "I'm not a baby!"

"Then stop acting like one," I said calmly. "Up. Now."

Rose slowly picked herself up off the floor, her fairy wings completely askew. "Can I at least color in Ki Ki's room?"

"No. Your brother needs rest." Though I had to admit, it was sweet she wanted to be near him. "You can color in your room or the living room."

"Living room," she decided, probably hoping to at least have an audience for her suffering.

"Fine. But one more tantrum and it's straight to your room. Understand?"

She nodded miserably, trudging toward her coloring supplies.

J came back downstairs. "He's still sleeping. Asked for water but went right back out."

"Good. He needs it." I watched Rose dramatically selecting crayons. "Think she's learned anything yet?"

"Other than how to perfect her dying swan routine?"

"J..."

"Sorry, love. But you have to admit, she's got a future in theatre."

I rolled my eyes. "Only if you continue to pander to her."

"I do not pander... usually... much..."

"You are a sucker for her big blue eyes."

"Only because they look like yours," he pulled me closer. "I'm a sucker for you too, mo chroí."

"Nice try," I smiled as he wrapped his arms around me, his lips finding my neck. "Okay, fine. You win. I guess I'm a sucker for you too."

J smiled against my skin. "I know."

A loud sigh from the living room reminded us we weren't alone. Rose had positioned herself where we could clearly see her suffering, carefully selecting the saddest colors from her crayon box.

"She gets the dramatics from you," I whispered to J.

"Me? I seem to remember someone throwing their laptop when the code wouldn't compile..."

"That was one time-"

"Mummy?" Killy's voice called from upstairs, saving me from having to defend my coding frustrations.

"Coming, love!" I extracted myself from J's arms. "Keep an eye on our actress. Don't let her convince you she's dying of boredom."

"I'm dying!" Rose announced right on cue.

"See?" I gave J a pointed look before heading upstairs to check on Killy.

I hurried up to my baby boy's room. If J was a sucker for Rose, I was equally weak when it came to Killy - though my quiet son rarely took advantage like his chaos-loving sister.

"Yes, little love?"

"Mummy, cuddles?" he asked softly, his red cast looking too big for his small arm.

I slipped into bed beside him, carefully gathering him into my arms. As I stroked his hair, he settled against me, the pain medicine making him extra snuggly. Killy had always been my cuddler, especially when he wasn't feeling well, and right now there was nowhere else I needed to be.

"Mummy?" his voice was already getting drowsy again.

"Yes, love?"

"Is Ro Ro in trouble?"

"Yes, but she still loves you. She just made a very bad choice."

He was quiet for a moment. "Can she sign my cast when she's not grounded?"

My heart squeezed. Even after being pushed down the stairs, he was worried about including his sister. "Of course she can. But right now you need to rest."

"Kay." He snuggled closer. "Love you, Mummy."

"Love you too, my sweet boy."

From downstairs, I could hear Rose starting another dramatic monologue about the unfairness of being grounded. J's patient responses were getting increasingly strained.

"But Da, what if I promise to never ever push Ki Ki again?"

"That's good, but you're still grounded."

"But what if-"

"Roisín..."

"BUT DA!"

I smiled against Killy's hair as he dozed off. J was trying so hard to stay firm, but I could hear him weakening. Maybe I should go rescue him - but Killy's warm weight against me made it hard to move.

My phone buzzed softly. A text from Kara: 'Hal just landed. Making tuna noodle casserole. Be there in about an hour.'

Thank god. We could all use a proper meal, and honestly, J could probably use his best friend right now. Being the disciplinarian wasn't exactly his strong suit.

"BUT WHAT IF I CLEAN MY ROOM?"

"Roisín Dónailín O'Brien, what did Mummy say about shouting?"

A blessed moment of silence followed, broken only by Killy's soft breathing against my chest. Then, in a dramatically whispered voice:

"But Da, what if I promise to be good forever and ever?"

I could practically hear J's resolve cracking. Time to intervene. Carefully, I extracted myself from Killy's grip, making sure he was settled comfortably before heading downstairs.

The scene in the living room was exactly what I'd expected - Rose had positioned herself directly in J's line of sight, her fairy wings deliberately drooping, while she colored the saddest picture she could manage.

"Roisín," I said firmly. "If you can't color quietly, you can go to your room."

"But Mummy-"

"No buts. Hal and Kara are coming over soon. If you want to be allowed to say hello to them, you need to show us you can behave."

That got her attention. She loved her Uncle Hal's flying stories.

"Uncle Hal's coming?" Her eyes lit up before she remembered she was supposed to be miserable. "But... but I'm grounded."

"Yes, you are. But if you can behave until they arrive, you can say hello before going to your room."

She considered this carefully, her little face scrunched in thought. "Can I show him my new fairy wings?"

"If you can color quietly for the next hour without any more drama," J said, finally finding his stern voice again.

Rose nodded solemnly, turning back to her coloring with exaggerated care. The silence probably wouldn't last long, but at least we had a moment's peace.

"How's Killy?" J asked quietly.

"Finally properly asleep. The pain medicine's knocked him out." I sank onto the sofa beside him. "This is going to be a long two days, isn't it?"

"At least we have reinforcements coming," he smiled, pulling me close.

Hunter

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After Kora left, I carried Tomi inside, my mind still on the teenage drama unfolding in our house.

"Harley! Come down here!"

She appeared at the top of the stairs, stomping down each step deliberately. "Yes?"

"Sit." I pointed to the sofa, settling Tomi in her playpen before joining Harley. "You were really awful to Kora. She's your best friend."

"I was not! She freaked out for no reason!"

I sighed. "No reason? Harley, we discussed this Jake situation. I thought you understood it was inappropriate."

Harley rolled her eyes. "You and Mom decided that for me."

"Harlyn Nicole Bradley," my voice hardened. "I don't like this attitude that's been developing since Hawaii. You may not like it, but you're still a kid, and-"

"I'm thirteen."

"Exactly. As I was saying, you're still a kid and I will not tolerate this disrespect. Jake is a great guy, but he's a married adult with a baby. You can think he's attractive, you can be his friend, but that's
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where it ends. The media was wrong to spread those rumors, and you need to check this attitude or you won't like the consequences."

I meant it too. Sensei Omino never would have tolerated this behavior from Blake or me. Maybe it was time to introduce some ninja discipline to my daughter.

"You can't tell me how to feel," Harley muttered.

"No, but I can tell you how to behave. And right now, you're hurting people who care about you."

"Kora's the one who-"

"Who what?" I challenged. "Who got tired of hearing about your crush on a married man? Who's trying to be your friend while you push her away?"

That hit something. Harley's defiant expression wavered slightly.

"Look," I softened my tone. "I know first crushes are hard. But taking it out on Kora isn't fair. And this attitude? It stops now."

"Or what?"

"Or you can forget about opening for your mom on the Christmas tour."

That got her attention. Her eyes widened, the teenage attitude dropping for a moment. "You wouldn't."

"Try me." I held her gaze. "Your mom and I agreed - any rule breaking, any attitude, and the deal's off. That includes how you treat your friends."

Harley slumped back against the sofa. "But... the songs..."

"Are good. Really good. But talent isn't everything, Harley. How you treat people matters more."

"I didn't mean to hurt Kora," she said quietly, finally sounding like my daughter again instead of this angry teenager she'd been lately. "I just... I thought she'd understand."

"Understand what? That you're obsessing over someone who's married? That you're pushing away everyone who cares about you?"

Tomi chose that moment to babble "Harwey" from her playpen, making both of us smile despite the tension.

I turned back to Harley. "Think about Tomi for a minute. If she was thirteen and trying to get involved with a twenty-two-year-old, how would you feel? Be honest with yourself."

Harley sighed. "I wouldn't like it. I would try to stop her." Then defensively: "But she isn't me."

"You sound like your mother." I watched her face carefully. "Remember how you felt when Mom told you the truth about her and Jon? When you first learned they got together?"

"Yeah," she said softly. "I thought it was gross. He was a grown man and she was a teenager."

"And how does your mom justify it?"

"She says she was different than other thirteen-year-olds," Harley admitted reluctantly.

"Harley, I love you so much, but I don't like who you're becoming lately. I think you need to cut off contact with Jake for a while, get back to being you." I paused. "Starting with an extra hour of training after school."

"An hour?"

"Yes. And no social media. Period."

"But Dad-"

"This isn't a negotiation. You need to focus on yourself, not on Jake's Instagram posts or what the media is saying."

She slumped further into the sofa. "For how long?"

"Until I see the Harley I know come back. The one who cares about her friends, who works hard at training, who writes songs about more than just crushes."

"Mom writes love songs all the time," she muttered.

"About her husband. Not about married men." I softened my tone. "Look, you're talented. Really talented. But right now you're letting this crush consume you, and it's hurting people. Including yourself."

Tomi babbled again from her playpen, reaching toward her sister. Without thinking, Harley went to pick her up, and I watched as some of the teenage attitude melted away while she held her baby sister.

"Fine," she said finally. "But can I at least tell Jake why I'm not going to be responding anymore?"

"No. Honestly? He probably won't notice. He's a new dad. He's busy."

"You know Mom wrote love songs about Jon at my age," Harley tried one last time.

"Yeah, and two things about that - one, it was gross then, and two, he was her boyfriend... which was still gross."

Harley sighed in defeat. "Fine."

I watched her bouncing Tomi gently, seeing glimpses of my daughter underneath all the teenage drama. Maybe this enforced break from social media would help her find herself again.

"Training starts tomorrow," I said. "And I want you to call Kora and apologize."

"Now?"

"Yes, now. A real apology, Harley. Not just 'sorry you got upset.'"

She nodded, shifting Tomi to her hip. "Can I at least keep the songs I wrote?"

"Of course you can. They're your songs, Harley. Your mom and I would never tell you what to write or what to perform." I softened my tone. "Just... think about why you wrote them, okay?"

"Because I love-"

"Because you're hurting," I corrected gently. "And you're taking that hurt out on people who care about you."

Tomi reached up to pat Harley's face, babbling "Sing!" - one of her favorite words lately.

"Dad?" Harley's voice was quieter now. "Are you really disappointed in me?"

The vulnerability in her voice hit me hard. Sometimes I forgot how young thirteen really was - especially with everything she'd inherited from her mother's side.

"No, baby. I'm not disappointed in you." I pulled her and Tomi both closer. "I'm worried about you. There's a difference."

"Because of Jake?"

"Because you're letting this crush change who you are. The Harley I know wouldn't hurt her best friend. She wouldn't push away people who care about her."

"I just..." she buried her face against my shoulder, careful not to squish Tomi between us. "Everyone treats me like a kid."

"Because you are one. And that's okay. You don't need to grow up so fast."

"Mom did."

"Your mom didn't have a choice. You do."

"Because she was famous?" Harley asked.

"Yeah, but also..." I chose my words carefully. "Grandma and Dean relied on her and your Uncle Zack to pay the bills. They had the careers. Grandma gave up her career to help your mom and Uncle Zack reach their dreams. The cost was they became the breadwinners of the family."

"Mom told me she doesn't want me to pay bills until I'm a grown up," Harley said softly.

"I know. We agree on that. You and your sisters just need to be kids." I watched her process this. "That's why this thing with Jake worries us so much. You're trying to grow up too fast, just like your mom had to. But you don't have to."

Tomi chose that moment to grab Harley's hair, making her laugh despite everything. It was good to hear that sound again - my daughter's real laugh, not the forced one she'd been using lately.

"I should probably call Kora," Harley said, gently untangling Tomi's fingers from her hair.

"Probably. But maybe wait a bit. Give her some space to process too."

"Is she really mad at me?"

"She's hurt," I said honestly. "There's a difference."

"Like you being worried instead of disappointed?"

"Exactly." I smiled at her understanding. "Sometimes when we care about people, watching them hurt themselves is worse than being mad at them."

"Dad?" She shifted Tomi to her other hip. "Will you help me with the extra training? Like, really help me, not just make me do drills?"

"Thunder style?" I asked, knowing what she was asking for.

"Yeah. I think... I think I need the focus."

I studied my daughter carefully. This was the first time she'd asked for intensive Thunder training since before Hawaii. She'd been maintaining her basic Ranger training, but this felt different - more like when she first accepted her Thunder powers.

"You sure? An extra hour of advanced Thunder techniques isn't easy, even for a Ranger."

She nodded. "I'm sure. Maybe... maybe getting back to serious training will help me be more like me again? The me before all this Jake stuff."

"Okay." I smiled. "But we're talking real intensive training. Like Sensei Omino used to put me and your Uncle Blake through."

"Can I still handle the Christmas tour if we're training that hard?"

"Of course. Your mom would kill me if I interfered with that." I took Tomi, who was starting to fuss. "But no more pushing people away, okay? Especially not Kora."

Something flickered across her face at the mention of Kora's name, but she nodded. "Okay. I promise."

Harley gave me a quick hug before heading upstairs. I watched her go, then looked down at Tomi in my arms.

"You can't grow up," I told her seriously. "I can't handle a third teenage girl."

Tomi beamed up at me, babbling "Dada!"

I pressed a kiss to her head. "Exactly. Ugh, why did Harley have to be so much like your mother?"

Not that I should have been surprised. Between Michelle's dramatic flair and my Thunder ninja stubbornness, Harley never stood a chance at being low-maintenance. At least Arissa seemed to have a calmer demeanor. Though watching her lately, I had a feeling she was dealing with her own teenage drama - she was just better at hiding it.

My phone buzzed - a text from Michelle asking how things were going with Harley.

'Had a talk. Think we made progress. She's asking for extra Thunder training.'

Michelle's response was immediate: 'Extra training? That's... different. Good different?'

'Think so. Better than obsessing over Jake's social media.'

'True. Though if she's anything like me, she'll find ways around the social media ban.'

I couldn't help but smile. 'Already thought of that. Ninja monitoring.'

'Poor kid doesn't stand a chance. How's Kora?'

'Gone home. That's next on the list - making sure they actually talk it out.'

'Good luck with that. Teenage girls are fun, aren't they? 😅'

'Just wait till Tomi hits that age.'

'Don't. I can't even think about that yet.'

Kara

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When Hal got home, I packed up the tuna noodle casserole and we headed next door to the O'Briens with Tiffy and Kora. Kira and Arissa had begged to stay home to film for their beauty channel - apparently their latest makeup tutorial couldn't wait.

Livvie opened the door looking exhausted but managed a smile. "Come on in. Good to see you."

"It's so quiet," I noted. "Usually Rose is racing to the door by now."

"She's in the living room. She gets to say hello, then it's straight to her room until dinner," Livvie explained.

"Oof, really sticking to the grounding thing?" Hal asked.

"Yeah, we have to." Livvie glanced toward the living room. "Though I'm having an easier time with it than J is."

We found J in the living room, looking like he was trying very hard not to cave to Rose's perfectly practiced sad face. Her fairy wings were drooping dramatically as she colored what appeared to be the most tragic picture a two-year-old could manage.

"Uncle Hal!" She started to bounce up but caught Livvie's warning look. "I mean... hi."

"Hi there, fairy girl," Hal said carefully, clearly trying to follow Livvie and J's lead on the punishment.

"How's Killy?" I asked, setting the casserole down.

"Sleeping," J reported. "The pain medicine keeps knocking him out."

"Rose pushed him," Tiffy announced helpfully.
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"On accident!" Rose protested, her bottom lip trembling.

"Rose," Livvie's voice carried a warning. "You said hello, but now you need to go to your room until dinner."

"But Tiffy play!" Rose begged, her fairy wings drooping even further.

"No ma'am. You're grounded," Livvie said firmly.

Rose turned to Jeremy with her big blue eyes. "Da?"

I watched J physically steel himself against his daughter's pleading look. Livvie had mentioned earlier that keeping him firm on the punishment was proving... challenging.

"Listen to your mummy, Roisín," he managed, though it clearly pained him.

The look Rose gave him suggested he had just committed the ultimate betrayal. With all the drama a two-year-old could muster, she trudged toward the stairs, making sure we could hear every miserable footstep.

"That was actually impressive," Hal said once Rose was out of earshot. "Both the dramatics and you two sticking to your guns."

"It's killing me," J admitted, collapsing onto the sofa.

"You're doing the right thing," I assured him, heading to the kitchen to heat up the casserole. "Though I have to admit, the fairy wings were a nice touch."

"She's been practicing that droopy wing thing all day," Livvie followed me. "I swear she gets more theatrical by the hour."

"How's Killy really doing?" I asked, lowering my voice.

"Better than his sister's taking the punishment. Clean break, thank god. But..." Livvie glanced toward the stairs. "I keep thinking about what could have happened."

I nodded. "I get it, but he's okay... that's what matters."

"Kara, I've never been so scared in my life." Livvie's voice shook slightly. "Not even when I found out Mary was trying to kill me. This was terrifying."

"It's always terrifying when it's your baby," I said softly, sliding the casserole into the oven. "I remember Kira's first broken arm - she was four, just learning jumps at the ice rink. Her ankle gave out and she hit the ice hard. I was scared out of my mind." I pulled Livvie into a hug. "It's completely normal."

When we returned to the living room, Hal and Jeremy were deep in conversation about parenting struggles.

"She knows exactly what buttons to push," Jeremy sighed.

"Of course she does. She's a little girl," Hal nodded. "Kora does the same thing to me."

"Yes, but Kira can't get away with it anymore," I laughed.

"No, I'm immune to Kira these days," Hal smiled. "Kora and Tiffy, though? Still breaks my heart every time."

"Speaking of Kora," Jeremy looked at her where she sat quietly in the corner. "You okay, love?"

Kora shrugged, not looking up from her phone. The drama with Harley was clearly still weighing on her.

"Has she talked to you about what happened?" Livvie asked quietly.

"Not really," I admitted. "But I heard enough from Hunter to get the picture."

"Harley's crush on Jake?" Jeremy asked. When we all looked at him surprised, he shrugged. "I do pay attention sometimes."

"It's more complicated than that," Hal said carefully, watching Kora. We all knew what he meant, even if Kora thought she was hiding it well.

A thump from upstairs followed by Rose's dramatic "I'm DYING of boredom!" interrupted the conversation.

"Well then you won't have to worry about being bored much longer," Livvie called back dryly.

"Not falling for it?" I smiled.

"Bloody hell, not a chance." Livvie shot J a look. "She gets this from him, you know. Bloody dramatic bloke acts like he's dying from a cat scratch."

"Hey!" Jeremy protested. "Thara's claws are sharp and it was on my foot. It could have gotten infected and fallen off. I bloody well could have died."

Hal raised an eyebrow. "You're so brave."

"That's right, mate," Jeremy nodded solemnly, though his eyes sparkled with humor.

Another theatrical sigh drifted down from upstairs, followed by Rose singing what sounded like the saddest version of "Let It Go" ever attempted by a two-year-old.

"She's good," Hal noted, fighting a smile. "The vocal control on those dramatic pauses..."

"Don't encourage her," Livvie warned. "Though I have to admit, the song choice is inspired."

"Should I check the casserole?" I offered, trying to change the subject before J's resolve weakened further. The look on his face suggested Rose's sad singing was getting to him.

"I'll help," Livvie said quickly, probably thinking the same thing. "J, why don't you go check on Killy?"

"And maybe remind Rose that grounded means quiet?" I added.

The sad singing increased in volume.

"You know what? I'll check on Killy and Rose. J, you help Kara," Livvie said decisively, marching upstairs. From her tone, Rose's performance wasn't doing her any favors.

I headed to the kitchen with J trailing behind, looking torn between amusement and worry.

"She's really not making this easy, is she?" I started pulling plates down from the cabinet - I knew their kitchen as well as my own by now.

"Not even a little," J sighed, grabbing silverware. "Though I have to admit, the singing is a new touch."

"She's creative, I'll give her that." I checked the casserole. "How are you really holding up with all this?"

"Honestly? I hate it. But Liv's right - we have to follow through." He leaned against the counter. "I just keep thinking about Killy at the bottom of those stairs..."

Rose's singing abruptly cut off upstairs, followed by Livvie's firm voice, though we couldn't make out the words.

"At least you know Liv won't cave," I said, pulling the casserole from the oven. "Though I have to admit, Rose's performance skills are impressive for a two-year-old."

"She gets that from me," J managed a small smile. "Though Liv would say that's not necessarily a good thing."

Hal appeared in the doorway. "The singing stopped. Should we be worried?"

"Nah, that means Liv's gotten through to her." J started setting the table. "For now, at least."

"Until she tries a new strategy," I added, remembering Kira at that age. "Though the singing was definitely more creative than Kira's tantrums."

"Don't give her ideas," J groaned. "She's got enough dramatic inspiration as it is."

Footsteps on the stairs made us all look up. Livvie appeared with a much more subdued Rose.

"Someone has something to say," Livvie prompted.

"I sorry for being loud," Rose mumbled, her fairy wings completely deflated now.

"Thank you for apologizing," Livvie said. "You can join us for dinner, but then it's straight back to your room. No playing or watching TV after. Understand?"

Rose nodded miserably.

"How's Killy?" J asked, probably trying to distract Rose from her punishment.

"Still sleeping," Livvie reported. "Which is probably best, considering his sister's musical tribute to boredom."

"Should we wake him for dinner?" J asked, helping me set out the casserole.

"Let him sleep," Livvie decided. "He can eat when the pain medicine wears off."

Rose climbed into her booster seat, making sure we could all see how sad she was. Tiffy, bless her heart, tried to sit next to her friend but Livvie redirected her to another spot - no socializing during punishment.

"Kora?" I called softly. "Dinner's ready."

My middle daughter finally looked up from her phone, and I caught the remnants of tears she was trying to hide. Whatever was on that screen - probably Harley-related - had upset her.

Hal noticed too. "Everything okay, sweetheart?"

"Fine," she said quickly. Too quickly.

We all pretended not to notice as she slipped her phone into her pocket and joined us at the table. The tension between wanting to help her and knowing she needed space to process was familiar to any parent of a teenager.

"This smells amazing, Kara," Livvie said, clearly trying to shift the focus.

"Just a simple casserole," I smiled. "Sometimes comfort food is exactly what's needed."

J served Rose a small portion, and despite her commitment to looking miserable, I noticed she perked up slightly when she actually tasted it.

"When will Ki Ki wake up?" she asked quietly.

"When he's ready," Livvie answered. "The medicine helps his arm not hurt so much."

"Because I pushed him," Rose's bottom lip trembled again.

"Why did you push him, Rose?" Tiffy asked innocently, genuinely curious.

"Because he told me no," Rose admitted quietly.

"And why was he telling you no?" Livvie pressed gently.

Rose studied her plate intently. "I wanted Mummy's make up."

"And are you supposed to be in Mummy's make up?"

Rose shook her head, her fairy wings drooping even further.

"So Killy was trying to be a good brother," Livvie continued softly, "and you pushed him for it?"

"Not meant to push hard," Rose mumbled.

"But you did," J said firmly. "And now your brother has a broken arm."

I watched Rose process this - maybe for the first time really understanding the consequences of her actions. Her eyes filled with tears, but these weren't her usual dramatic ones.

"Ki Ki hate me now?"

"No, love," Livvie's voice softened. "Killy doesn't hate you. He even wants you to sign his cast when you're not grounded anymore."

"Really?" Hope crept into her voice.

"Really. But that's why being grounded is important. You need to learn that pushing people isn't okay, even when you're angry."

"Killy is your twin, he will always love you. But you need to be more careful, mo stór. You need to stop doing things you know you aren't supposed to do," Jeremy said gently.

Rose's eyes filled with tears. "Da still love me?"

"Of course! We all still love you," Jeremy assured her immediately.

"Of course we do," Livvie added firmly. "Mummy and Da will always love you, but you're still grounded."

Rose looked down at her plate and nodded, subdued for perhaps the first time all day.

"I still love you too, Rose," Tiffy offered softly, her heart as big as always.

"Still friends?" Rose asked hopefully.

"Still friends. But you can't push me," Tiffy said with all the seriousness a seven-year-old could muster.

Rose nodded earnestly. "I no push."

"Still friends," Tiffy confirmed with a smile.

I watched my youngest with pride - she'd always had such a gentle soul, even with friends who sometimes tested her patience.

"And you can play together again when Rose isn't grounded," Livvie reminded them.

"You can even come to our house," Hal added. "Give Killy some quiet time to rest."

After dinner, Rose trudged back upstairs - still dramatic but with less flair than before. We stayed for a while longer, the easy conversation with Livvie and Jeremy reminding me how lucky we were to have them next door.

Finally, it was time to head home. Tiffy needed her bath, and I could see Kora was ready for some space to process her own emotions.

Later, tucking Tiffy into bed, I couldn't help but smile at her sleepy "I love you, Mommy." My life wasn't perfect - dealing with Grayson during our segments was still a necessary evil - but he couldn't

touch this. This peace, this joy, this family we'd built. While J handled Rose's bedtime routine - a task requiring extra patience tonight - I focused on Killy. He'd woken hungry, so I took him downstairs for some dinner and another dose of pain medicine. Bathing with the cast would be its own challenge; that could wait until tomorrow.

After he ate, I carried him back to bed.

"Mummy read?" he asked softly.

I nodded, settling in with his favorite books. By the end of the second story, he was asleep again. I kissed his head before heading to change into my pajamas.

With J still working his bedtime magic on Rose, I retreated to my office. Opening my email, I found a new message from Richie. We'd been corresponding since Australia, where I'd seen him twice more - both times with J present, even meeting Richie's wife Olivia. What J didn't know was how often we'd been writing. I wasn't hiding it, exactly... I just didn't want him getting jealous when there was nothing to be jealous of.

I clicked open the email:

To: LivviePOBrien@gmail.com

From: RC3401@email.com

Subject: Re: Home safe

Livvie, I'm glad you're home safe. It's still weird for me to think of Ireland as your 'home'. You'll always be that fierce little Aussie girl to me, the one who could explain both coding algorithms and football strategies with that fire in her eyes.

The team's doing well this season - wish you could've seen our match yesterday. You always did understand the game better than most of my players. Miss having you in the stands, calling out plays before I could make them. Some things never change, eh? Still haven't found another girl who knows the game like you do.

Olivia says hi. She really enjoyed meeting you and J. She keeps talking about visiting Ireland someday. Maybe we could make that happen? Though I suppose that depends on whether you've told J about our emails. I get why you haven't - given our history, it might seem odd to him. But you should. He's a good bloke, even if he can't appreciate a proper game of football like we do 😉

How are the twins? Olivia keeps asking to see more pictures. Rose reminds me of you. She has your fire. You still have that same sparkle in your eyes though, the one that always got me into trouble.

Miss you, Richie

To: RC3401@email.com

From: LivviePOBrien@gmail.com

Subject: Re: Home safe

Richie, I miss you too. Seeing you again brought back so many memories.

The twins are okay, more or less. Rose pushed Killy down the stairs today and he broke his arm. He'll be fine, but the terror of what could have happened... I don't think I've ever been so scared.

J is an amazing bloke. I love him with all my heart, but he would get jealous. It's a bit hypocritical considering his ex is like a brother to him now and I'm best friends with his wife. Still, it's not worth the fight. But if you and Olivia want to visit Ireland, you're always welcome. I can handle J.

Getting to know the man you've become has been... interesting. Twenty years feels like a lifetime ago, yet sometimes it feels like yesterday. I've always regretted how things ended between us. What we had was special, and I destroyed it. After losing my family, I was such a mess. That self-destructive spiral cost me you... and almost cost me my life. Abs is the only reason I'm still here, if I'm honest. It doesn't excuse what I did, trying to drag you down with me. You were right to walk away. But sometimes I can't help wondering what might have been if things had been different. If I'd let you save me when you tried.

Maybe in another timeline. Though I suppose there's no point looking back. We're both happy now, with beautiful families. Things happened as they should.

Send me more match photos. Know that part of me will always be cheering from your sidelines, even if I can't be there anymore.

-Livvie

I hit send just as I heard J's voice.

"Livvie, you coming to bed?" he called down.

I quickly locked my computer. "Coming, love!"

Racing upstairs, I tried to quiet the guilt churning in my stomach. I should tell him about the emails. Hiding them was wrong, but his double standard frustrated me. Trevor was practically his brother now, but I couldn't have a friendship with my ex? It seemed ridiculous.

I slid into bed, letting J pull me into his arms. The irony wasn't lost on me - I couldn’t keep Michelle's secret, but here I was keeping my own from him. What the hell was wrong with me?

As I drifted off to sleep, I convinced myself it wasn't a big deal. After all, they were just emails. Nothing more.

But if that was true, why did I feel the need to hide them?

"The Weight of Maybe"

Richie pulled me into his arms, and suddenly I was drowning in memories - not just the physical ones, but everything. The way he'd held me after I lost my family, how he'd tried to save me before I pushed him away. The taste of his kisses mixed with rain after footy practice, the sound of his laugh in Queen Street Mall, the way he'd whispered "I adore you" over sauce-covered pies.

We stood in my bedroom - my married bedroom - with J's clothes still draped over the chair and the twins' artwork plastered across the walls. Evidence of my perfect life surrounding us as I prepared to shatter it.

"God, Liv," his Aussie accent was thick with need. "You're even more beautiful now. Been dreaming about this since I saw you again. The way you smile, how your eyes still light up when you laugh..."

"We can't," I whispered, even as my body betrayed me, pressing against his. "I have a family, a life..."

"But it could have been our life," his hands found my skin, remembering every spot that made me shiver. "If I'd been stronger, stayed with you through the darkness... this could have been us."

Our clothes hit the floor and suddenly he was inside me, filling me in a way that felt like finding a missing piece of myself. Like finally coming home after twenty years of wandering. "Richie," I moaned his name like a prayer. "Oh god, I've missed you so much."

"Should have been us," he groaned against my neck. "All these years, Liv. Could have helped you heal, could have built something beautiful..."

"I love you," the words spilled out, heavy with two decades of what-ifs. "I think part of me always has, even when I thought I'd forgotten."

"Livvie?"

J's voice shattered everything. The devastation in his eyes physically hurt - this wasn't just catching us in bed. This was betrayal in our marriage bed, surrounded by family photos and children's drawings and all the precious pieces of the life we'd built together.

"J..." I tried to cover myself, to explain, but what could I possibly say? How do you explain destroying someone's whole world? "I'm so sorry..."

"You were my everything," his Irish accent was thick with pain, tears in his eyes. "Our family, our life... was any of it real? Or was I just keeping your bed warm until he came back?"

"She was never really yours, mate," Richie's arm tightened possessively around me. "You had to know that. You're a good bloke, but you could never truly understand her. Not like I do. We're the same, Liv and me. Australia's in our blood, in our souls."

"Please," J's voice cracked. "Livvie, look at me. Really look. Everything we built, everything we are... please don't throw it away. I love you. The twins love you. We're real."

I couldn't breathe. Couldn't think. The pain in J's eyes was killing me, but Richie's arms felt like home, and I was drowning in twenty years of might-have-beens...

I jerked awake with a gasp, my heart threatening to pound out of my chest. J slept peacefully beside me, completely unaware of my unconscious betrayal. The clock read 5:55 AM. No chance of sleep now, not with the ghost of two different loves warring in my heart.

I carefully slipped out of bed and headed downstairs, desperate for a cuppa before retreating to my office to check email.

I settled at my desk with my coffee, hoping work emails might distract me from the dream. Instead, I found a message from Richie that made my stomach twist:

To: LivviePOBrien@gmail.com

From: RFoster@email.com

Subject: Re: Home safe

Liv,

Hearing about Killy shook me proper. That kind of terror as a parent... but he's tough like his mum. Always were a fighter, weren't you?

Been thinking about us lately. Twenty years feels like another lifetime, but I can still see you so clearly in those stadium stands, that first UQ match. God, we were so young, so carefree back then. Those days at the mall, taking the piss about my sauce-covered pies...

Then the accident changed everything. I was there in hospital, so grateful you'd survived, but watching you slip away all the same. Maybe if I'd been stronger, like Abs was... She stayed, fought for you, pulled you back from the edge. But I walked away when you needed someone most. Chose footy over watching you destroy yourself. Too young and stupid to realize I could've supported you without following you down that path of parties and substances. Could've found another way to help you through the pain.

When my teammate told me about your OD, Christ... I've never felt such guilt. Wanted to reach out after, but what right did I have? I was the one who walked away when you begged me to stay, to join you in escaping the pain. If I'd just been braver, found a way to help you through it... who knows? I was falling in love with you back then, Liv. Breaking it off nearly killed me. Spent years wondering if you were the one that got away. Wasn't until Olivia that I thought maybe I'd found another shot at that kind of happiness.

Seeing you with J though... that's what you deserved all along. Someone who loves you unconditionally, stands beside you no matter what. Everything I couldn't be back then.

Should stop. Few too many at the pub tonight. Being far too honest. But having you back in my life, even just as friends... you've grown into an amazing woman, Liv. Strong, successful, whole. J's a lucky man.

-Richie

My coffee grew cold as I read it again and again, memories flooding back - that first footy match, the pie shop confession, the hospital room after the accident, that final fight in my dorm. What the hell was I supposed to do with this? Especially after that dream…

To: RFoster@email.com

From: LivviePOBrien@gmail.com

Subject: Re: Home safe

Richie,

Your email... bloody hell. Guess we're both being too honest tonight. Can't sleep after Killy's accident, sitting here with memories I thought I'd buried years ago.

You didn't abandon me. I pushed you away - hard. Was so lost in my own pain after losing my family that I couldn't see straight. Couldn't see that you were trying to save me, not control me. Too caught up in finding ways not to feel anything at all.

You made the right choice picking your career over watching me self-destruct. I wouldn't have stopped - not then. Wasn't ready to face any of it. Took hitting rock bottom and Abs literally saving my life before I could start putting myself back together.

Maybe you're right - maybe if things had been different, if the accident hadn't happened... but it did. And everything after... god, I was such a mess. Sometimes I wonder if I pushed you away because I knew you'd try to save me, and I wasn't ready to be saved.

Strange to think about all the what-ifs, isn't it? The paths not taken, the things we could have been. Probably shouldn't admit this, but I've thought about it too, over the years.

You've grown into an amazing man yourself, Richie. Olivia's the lucky one there.

Take some panadol before bed. Pub nights aren't as forgiving at our age.

-Liv

I hit send before I could overthink it, then immediately regretted being quite so honest. What was it about 6 AM and old memories that made the truth slip out so easily?

Forcing myself to focus on work emails, I tried to ignore the knot in my stomach. Two hours of pretending to be productive later, a familiar voice broke through my spiral of regret.

"I'M FREE!"

I couldn't help but laugh - Rose had obviously remembered her grounding was over. The thunder of tiny feet on stairs was followed by an enthusiastic chorus of "I'm free! I'm free! BLUEY! Da! BLUEY!"

"Hey fairy love," I caught her at the bottom of the stairs. "Maybe tone it down a bit?"

"Mummy!" She launched herself into my arms. "I'm free! Bluey?"

"Can we maybe have brekkie first?" J's sleep-rough voice carried down the stairs as he appeared, looking adorably rumpled.

Rose immediately wiggled free and ran to him. "Da! I'm FREE!"

J chuckled despite himself as he scooped her up. "Aye, you are. But food before Bluey, yeah?"

"Pancakes?" Rose's eyes lit up hopefully.

"Burritos?" J countered.

Rose considered this carefully before nodding. "Ok!"

"I'll help," I offered, needing the distraction. Plus, J's breakfast burritos were legendary - even if they weren't quite authentic by Trevor's standards.

"Mummy, can I have juice?" Rose asked as J settled her at the table.

"Apple or orange?" I headed for the fridge, grateful for the mundane normalcy of morning routine.

"Apple!"

"Where's your brother?" J asked, already pulling out ingredients.

As if summoned, Killy appeared in the doorway, his red cast a stark reminder of why I'd been awake since that dream. "Hungry."

"Burritos okay, love?" I asked, helping him into his seat.

"With beans?" His careful consideration of breakfast options was so different from his sister's immediate enthusiasm.

"Course," J smiled. "Though maybe we keep them on the inside of the burrito this time, yeah?"

I watched my family's morning routine unfold - J cooking while entertaining the twins with silly voices, Rose chattering about all the Bluey episodes she'd missed, Killy methodically organizing his plate before eating. This was my life. My real life. Not what-ifs and might-have-beens with Richie.

My phone buzzed in my pocket. I ignored it.

It buzzed again a few minutes later. And again. The third time, J noticed.

"Someone's popular this morning," he said casually, sliding a perfectly wrapped burrito onto Killy's plate.

"Probably work," I lied, hating how easily the words came. "I'll check it after brekkie."

"No beans fall out," Killy instructed his burrito seriously, making J laugh.

"Ki Ki free too?" Rose asked around a mouthful.

"Love, Ki Ki's got to wear his cast a while longer," I explained gently. "But if he's feeling up to it, he can watch Bluey with you."

I forced myself to focus on my family, on this moment, trying to ignore the weight of my phone in my pocket. Whatever Richie had replied, it could wait.

After breakfast, J took Rose upstairs to get cleaned up and dressed. I told him I needed to check something for work before helping Killy - another lie that came too easily. Back in my office, I found Richie's reply waiting. The content made my breath catch - this wasn't just reminiscing anymore. This was definitely crossing a line.

And what scared me most wasn't the inappropriate nature of his message - it was how little that fact bothered me.

To: LivviePOBrien@gmail.com

From: RFoster@email.com

Subject: Re: Home safe

Liv,

Wasn't expecting you to be awake. Though maybe I was hoping you would be. Been thinking about you since your email. Since seeing you again, if I'm honest.

You didn't push me away - I walked. Should have found another way. That last day in your dorm... Christ, even angry and hurting you were gorgeous. Wanted to kiss you instead of fighting. Should have pulled you close, taken you to bed one last time. Maybe things would have been different.

Remember that night after practice? When you were waiting by the field and it started raining? You just laughed and pulled me into that dance in the mud. Your shirt clinging to you, the way you felt in my arms... I still dream about it sometimes. Shouldn't admit that, but few too many drinks still in my system.

I know we both have lives now. Good ones. But seeing you again, Liv... you're even more beautiful than I remembered. When you smiled at me in that café, all I could think about was how your lips used to taste, how you felt underneath me.

Probably shouldn't be typing this. Definitely shouldn't send it. But I can't stop thinking about what might have been. What could still be.

-R

I stared at the screen, my heart pounding. This was beyond dangerous territory. I could hear J and Rose upstairs, Killy in the kitchen finishing his breakfast. My real life - my good life.

And yet my fingers were already moving toward the reply button.

"Mummy!" Killy's voice made me jump guiltily. "Help, please?"

I quickly closed the email, my hands shaking slightly. "Coming, love!"

In the kitchen, Killy was struggling with his cup one-handed. The sight of his cast snapped something in me - what the hell was I doing? My son had just broken his arm, my daughter was finally ungrounded, my husband was upstairs being his wonderful self, and here I was... what? Entertaining inappropriate emails from my ex?

"There you go," I helped Killy with his drink. "Ready to get dressed?"

"Bluey after?" he asked hopefully.

"Course, love." I scooped him up carefully, mindful of his cast. "Though maybe we should ice that arm first?"

As I helped Killy upstairs, I could hear Rose chattering away to J about which Bluey episode she wanted to watch first. The normality of it all made my chest ache.

My phone buzzed again in my pocket. I ignored it, but the weight of it felt like guilt.

Once Killy was dressed and settled with his sister watching Bluey, I retreated to my office again. Three more messages from Richie waited:

"Liv, I'm sorry. That was completely inappropriate."

"Please don't hate me. Blame it on the pub?"

"Actually, no. Not blaming the alcohol. I meant what I said. All of it."

I stared at the messages, my cursor hovering over the reply box. What could I even say? 'Thanks for the inappropriate memories while my husband's upstairs'? 'Sorry, busy having a perfect life you're threatening to complicate'?

"Love?" J's voice from the doorway made me quickly minimize my email. "Everything alright? You've been a bit... off this morning."

"Fine," I said too quickly. "Just work stuff."

He studied me for a moment, and I felt the lie sitting heavy between us. J knew me better than anyone - of course he could tell something was wrong.

"Right then," he said finally. "The twins want to go to the park later, if Killy's up for it. Thought maybe we could pack a picnic?"

The genuine care in his voice made me feel sick with guilt. What was I doing?

I waited until J went back to check on the twins, then opened a new email:

To: RFoster@email.com

From: LivviePOBrien@gmail.com

Subject: This needs to stop

Richie,

I remember that night in the rain. Remember a lot of things I probably shouldn't. And maybe that's the problem.

What we had... what we could have had... it's dangerous territory. Especially now. I've got a life here - a good one. A husband who loves me, beautiful children, everything I never thought I'd have after losing my family.

And you've got Olivia. A woman who actually deserves you, who you built a life with. We can't... I can't...

Maybe seeing each other wasn't such a good idea. Those memories are better left in the past where they belong.

-Liv

I hit send, then immediately started typing again:

To: RFoster@email.com

From: LivviePOBrien@gmail.com

Subject: Re: This needs to stop

But god, I remember how you tasted too. I still dream about feeling you inside me.

I stared at the second email, my finger hovering over the send button. Delete it? Send it? What the hell was wrong with me?

I hit send before I could overthink it and minutes later he had replied.

To: LivviePOBrien@gmail.com

From: RFoster@email.com

Subject: Re: Re: This needs to stop

Christ, Liv.

You're right - we should stop. This isn't fair to J or Olivia. They deserve better.

But I can't stop thinking about you. About us. About how it felt when you'd wrap your legs around me, the sounds you'd make when I...

No. You're right. We need to stop. Delete these emails. Forget they happened.

But Liv? If you ever changed your mind...

-R

I sat there, staring at his words, my heart racing. The sounds of Bluey drifted from the living room, J's laugh mixing with the twins' giggles. My real life - my perfect life - playing out just meters away while I sat here entertaining... what exactly?

My phone buzzed again. Another email.

To: LivviePOBrien@gmail.com

From: RFoster@email.com

Subject: One more thing

Liv,

I know I just said we should stop. And we should.

But I've got meetings in Cork next week. AFL's looking to partner with some GAA clubs - similar enough sports, right? I'll be at the Imperial Hotel for a few days.

Thought maybe we could get a coffee. Just to talk. About stopping.

-R

My hands were shaking as I read his message. Cork City was only twenty minutes away - an easy drive I made whenever we needed anything beyond what Ballincollig offered. He had to know that.

"Love?" J called from downstairs. "Kids are ready for the park if you are!"

"Coming!" I called back, my voice surprisingly steady considering how unsteady I felt.

I closed my laptop without responding, but the weight of Richie's invitation followed me downstairs. Just coffee. That's all he was suggesting, but we both knew better. The implications were clear - he wanted to pick up where we left off twenty years ago. Wanted more than just memories. Wanted an affair.

"J," I said, hating how easily the lie formed, "I've got to stay here. Belarusian hacker trying to get ransomware into one of my client's systems. Need to monitor the counter-protocols I'm running."

"Course, love." J kissed me without hesitation, complete trust in his eyes. "Go save the world. I've got this."

I watched him leave with the twins, the guilt settling heavy in my chest. I needed to think. Really think about what I was doing - what I was even considering.

I went back to my office, but instead of checking emails, I found myself staring at the photos on my desk. The twins with our dogs.. J and me in London. Our wedding photo - J looking at me like I was his whole world while I laughed at something he'd whispered.

Twenty years ago, I'd been a broken girl trying to escape her pain through any means possible. Now I was successful, stable - a wife, a mother, respected in my field. I had everything I'd never thought possible after losing my family.

And yet...

I opened my email again, re-reading Richie's messages. The memories he'd stirred up weren't just about the physical attraction - though that was definitely there. It was about who I'd been before the accident. Before the drugs, before the spiral. When I was just a uni student falling for a footy player who made me laugh.

But I wasn't that girl anymore. And Richie wasn't that boy.

My phone buzzed - a photo from J of the twins at the park, Rose going down the slide while Killy watched carefully from a bench. 'Missing you,' the caption read.

The knot in my stomach tightened. The irony hit me hard - I'd told Michelle's secret because I couldn't bear keeping anything from J, and here I was hiding something that could destroy everything we had. Michelle would find out too - she always did, somehow. And she'd use it as proof that J belonged with Trevor instead of me.

J and Trevor. The thought made me physically ill. What the hell was I doing? Considering putting J in exactly the situation I'd always feared? Making my worst nightmare a reality with my own hands?

I pressed my palms against my eyes, forcing myself to be honest. This wasn't about Richie - not really. This was about me. Plain Livvie who'd never understood why someone like J would choose her, let alone stay. I'd built another family, something I never thought I'd have after losing my first one. And now, what? I was going to deliberately wreck it before it could be taken from me?

The realization hit like a punch to the gut. My fear of not being enough, of losing another family - it was pushing me toward the very thing that would make those fears come true.

I needed to stop this before I destroyed everything I loved. I opened my email and typed another reply:

To: RFoster@email.com

From: LivviePOBrien@gmail.com

Subject: One more thing

Richie,

You should definitely try my brother-in-law Trevor's restaurant while you're in Cork - best food in the city. J and I would love to take you to dinner there. Let me know when you're in town and we'll sort it.

-Liv

My hands were steady as I hit send. No more dangerous flirting, no more what-ifs. Just two old friends having dinner with my husband there. The way it should be.

When J got home, we put the twins down for their nap and headed downstairs.

"Did you out-hack the hacker?" he asked as we settled on the sofa.

"What?" For a moment I'd forgotten my lie. "Oh, yeah. Always do."

I laid my head in his lap while we pulled up KallMeKris, our favorite YouTuber. She was reading Reddit stories - one about a man discovering his wife's affair. With each update, each description of his devastation, the knot in my stomach grew tighter. I couldn't keep these emails secret.

"Oh, J?" I tried to keep my voice casual. "Heard from Richie. He's going to be in Cork for business. Thought we might take him to the Cantina."

"You've been emailing him?" The slight tension in his voice made my chest ache.

"Aye... we're friends. Like you and Trev. Nothing more. I promise." And I meant it. Those earlier emails were just drunk messages he hadn't meant to send. We were friends, and that's all we'd ever be.

J's hand stilled in my hair. "Like Trev and me?"

The comparison suddenly felt hollow - J and Trevor's friendship was built on years of mutual respect and genuine care, not charged emails and buried memories.

"No," I admitted quietly. "That wasn't fair to say. You and Trev... that's different. Real. Richie and I are just... reconnecting as friends. Nothing inappropriate." The lie tasted bitter, but it wasn't a lie anymore - not going forward.

"You sure that's all it is?" J's voice was carefully neutral, but I could feel the tension in him.

I sat up to face him. "Yes. And that's all it will ever be. I love you, J. You and the twins... you're my whole world."

He studied my face for a long moment. "You'd tell me if there was something to worry about?"

The guilt nearly choked me. "Actually... Richie got a bit flirty in his emails. But I shut it down."

"Flirty?" J's voice tightened. "He wants you, and you want me to have dinner with him?"

"I shut him down," I said firmly. "He's just a friend now and he knows that. Besides, it's not like I grinded on him in a Paris club or kissed him at Sosaidh's wedding like you did with Trev."

"Oi! You were right there both times and-" he started defensively.

"And I accepted your explanation," I cut in. "But how would you have felt if you'd been standing there watching me do those things with Richie?"

He opened his mouth, then closed it again. "Oh. Right. I get it. I'm sorry, love." He sighed. "Aye, we'll have dinner with Richie... but I'd prefer if you weren't alone with him."

"I promise," I said softly. "I will never be alone with him."

"And I'll show you the emails," I offered, the words coming out before I could stop them. "All of them. Even the ones from this morning."

J shook his head. "No. I trust you. If you say you handled it, you handled it."

His complete faith in me made the guilt worse. I should tell him everything - the dream, the suggestive emails, how close I'd come to agreeing to meet Richie alone. But wouldn't that just hurt him needlessly? I'd made my choice. I'd stopped it before anything really happened.

"Though," J added with a slight smile, "maybe we should invite Trevor and Amber to dinner too. Make it properly awkward for everyone."

I couldn't help but laugh. "God, can you imagine? Richie trying to impress Trevor with his culinary opinions while Amber judges everyone's fashion choices?"

"And Michelle would somehow find out and invite herself along just to stir up drama," J added, pulling me close again.

"She always does," I settled back against him, feeling the tension start to ease. This was where I belonged. This was real.

My phone buzzed - another email from Richie. J felt me tense.

"You can check it," he said quietly. "I meant what I said - I trust you."

I pulled out my phone, making sure J could see the screen if he wanted to:

To: LivviePOBrien@gmail.com

From: RFoster@email.com

Subject: Re: Re: One more thing

Liv,

Message received, loud and clear. You're right - dinner with our spouses is a much better idea. I'll invite Olivia to come with me. I was out of line earlier. Way out of line. The pub, nostalgia, seeing you again... not great excuses, but there they are.

You've built a beautiful life, Liv. I've got a good one too. Let's not complicate either of them.

Dinner sounds great. Olivia's actually quite excited to meet everyone. Tuesday work?

-Richie

"See?" I showed J the screen. "All sorted."

"Good," he kissed my temple, and I felt the last of the tension drain from his shoulders.

"Oh god," I laughed, suddenly struck by the absurdity of it all. "My ex, your ex, their wives, and us all having dinner together. It's like that first episode of 'Coupling' all over again."

J considered this for a moment before laughing. "Oi, it is... though hopefully with less nudity in the restaurant."

"Well, if anyone's going to flash the room, it'd probably be me," I teased, referencing the infamous scene.

"Somehow that checks," he smirked, pulling me closer.

I kissed him softly, feeling overwhelmingly grateful for this man who could make me laugh even after our serious conversation. "I love you so much."

"I love you too, my Livvie."

The twins' voices drifted down from upstairs - naptime apparently over.

"Mummy! Da! Ki Ki won't share his koala!" Rose's indignant cry carried through the house.

"I'm reading!" Killy protested.

"Back to reality," J smiled, starting to get up.

I caught his hand. "J? Thank you. For trusting me. For being you."

Something in my voice made him pause. He studied my face for a moment, then leaned down to kiss me properly. "Always, mo chroí. Though maybe we should rescue the koala before World War Three breaks out upstairs."

"MUMMY! He says I can't even LOOK at it!"

"It's MY koala!"

I laughed, the last of my guilt finally easing. This was my life - squabbling twins, a husband who trusted me even when I barely trusted myself, and a home filled with more love than I'd ever thought possible after losing my first family.

No what-ifs were worth risking that.

We headed upstairs to find Rose attempting to wrestle Tidhg the Koala from Killy's good arm, his cast making the whole situation more precarious.

"Róisín Dónailín O'Brien," J's voice carried that perfect mix of firmness and patience. "That's Killy's bear. Where's your Eevee?"

Rose immediately released Tidhg, studying the carpet with sudden interest. "My room."

"Go get your Eevee," J said gently. "Your brother's not feeling well, love. He doesn't have to share Tidhg right now."

"Aye, Da," Rose mumbled, disappearing into her room with uncharacteristic quietness.

I sat next to Killy on his bed while J went to check on Rose. "You okay, love?"

He nodded, hugging Tidhg closer with his good arm. "Arm hurts."

"Time for medicine and ice?" I suggested, brushing his hair back from his forehead. He nodded again.

From Rose's room, I could hear J switch to Irish. Though I couldn't understand the words, his gentle tone was clear: "Anois, a stór, cad é atá ag cur isteach ort i ndáiríre? Ní raibh suim agat i Tidhg riamh roimhe seo."

"Roinneann Ki Ki i gcónaí," Rose's small voice wavered. "Ach anois ní roinnfidh sé."

"Mar go bhfuil a lámh tinn," J explained patiently. "An cuimhin leat nuair a bhí ionfhabhtú cluaise ort agus nár theastaigh uait Eevee a roinnt? Uaireanta nuair nach mbraitheann muid go maith, teastaíonn ár rudaí speisialta uainn dúinn féin."

I smiled, listening to their private exchange. Even without understanding the words, I could hear the love in J's voice, the way he always knew exactly how to help the twins understand each other. Looking at Killy clutching his koala, then across at Rose in J's lap with her Eevee, I felt that certainty again. This was everything. "This was real."

I gathered Killy carefully in my arms, mindful of his cast. "Come on, my baby boy. Let's get you a snack and some medicine."

"Snack?!" Rose's head popped around her doorframe, previous drama instantly forgotten at the mention of food.

"An bhfuil ocras ort, mo stór?" J asked her with a knowing smile.

"Tá!" Rose bounced out of her room, Eevee clutched tight. "Snack time!"

"Inside voice, fairy girl," I reminded her as we headed downstairs, Killy still quiet in my arms.

The simple domesticity of it all - getting snacks for the twins, J switching effortlessly between English and Irish, the way Rose's moods could flip like a switch while Killy remained our steady soul - it grounded me.

"Jammies?" Rose asked hopefully, bouncing down the stairs like gravity was optional.

"No, veg," Killy countered quietly from my arms.

I laughed at their typical contrast. "How about fruit? Berries?"

"Aye," they agreed in unison - one of those rare moments when our opposites-in-everything twins actually wanted the same thing.

In the kitchen, Rose scrambled into her chair while I carefully settled Killy in his. J got their berries ready while I measured out Killy's pain medicine.

"Thank you," Killy said with his usual careful politeness, waiting for his spoon.

Rose, naturally, was already face-first in her bowl, any trace of her earlier tears gone.

J and I settled at the table with them, his hand finding mine under the table - a habit we'd never broken.

"So, love," I squeezed his hand, "when are you planning to transform me into Princess Daisy?" I'd decided I made a perfect Princess Daisy, and convincing J to be Luigi hadn't been hard. The twins as Toad and Toadette just made perfect sense - our little mushroom children.

"Could do it today, if our fairy girl can contain her enthusiasm," J smiled.

"I can help Da!" Rose's head shot up, berry juice on her chin.

"Ah... how about you help by watching Bluey in the salon while I color Mummy's hair?" J suggested diplomatically.

"Bluey!" Rose nodded enthusiastically, clearly considering this an acceptable compromise.

"Can I watch too?" Killy asked quietly, still working on his berries one at a time.

"Course, love," I smiled. "Though maybe we should ice that arm first?"

He nodded, already looking sleepy from the pain medicine. The timing might work out perfectly - he usually napped after his meds anyway.

"Right then," J started clearing the bowls. "Let me get everything set up in the salon. Rose, mo stór, think you can help get your shows ready?"

"Aye Da!" She bounced out of her chair. "Come on Ki Ki!"

"Careful with his arm," I called after them, but Rose was already being surprisingly gentle with her brother, helping him down from his chair.

"She's getting better with him," J noted softly. "Maybe the accident scared her more than we realized."

I watched our twins head for the salon - Rose chattering away while Killy nodded seriously. "Nothing like almost losing something to make you appreciate it more."

The words came out before I could stop them, and I felt J's eyes on me.

"You okay, love?" he asked quietly. "You've seemed... off today. And don't tell me it's about work, because we both know that hacker story was bollocks."

I turned to face him, the guilt rising again. "J..."

"Is this about Richie?" His voice was gentle, but I could hear the uncertainty underneath. "Because if you're having second thoughts about dinner..."

"No," I said firmly, meaning it. "No second thoughts. I just..." I took a deep breath. "Had a dream this morning. About choices and paths not taken. Made me realize how lucky I am to be on this one. With you. With our family."

He studied my face for a moment, then pulled me close. "You're not the only one who sometimes dreams about other paths, mo chroí. The difference is choosing this one. Every day."

"DA! BLUEY!" Rose's voice carried from the salon.

"Every chaotic minute of it," I laughed against his chest.

The twins settled on their beanbags in the salon, Bluey already playing, while I took my familiar spot in J's chair. His hands moved through my hair with practiced ease - we'd done this dance countless times over the years, though it had been a while since I'd gone for such a dramatic change.

"You're sure about this red?" he asked, mixing the color. "No going back to blonde easily."

"Course I am. It's hair. And we'll get my blonde again. It'll be fine."

He caught my eye in the mirror, one eyebrow raised.

"Don't look at me like that," I laughed.

"Right then, let's do this," he said, starting to apply the color with the same precision he brought to everything.

I watched him work in the mirror, the familiar rhythm of it soothing. The twins were absorbed in Bluey, Killy already looking drowsy from his medicine. This was us - just another day in our little family bubble. No complications, no what-ifs, no ghosts from the past trying to stir up trouble.

Just my husband doing my hair while our children watched cartoons. Simple. Perfect.

Killy had dozed off, his koala tucked carefully against his good side, while Rose remained bizarrely focused on the show - a rare moment of stillness from our fairy girl.

"Remember the first time you did my hair?" I asked, watching J work in the mirror.

"At the salon in Austin," he smiled. "You wanted that mad green streak. Scared the hell out of me - first time doing anything that wild on a client."

"Turned out perfect though."

"Always does," his fingers brushed my neck as he worked, sending a familiar shiver down my spine. "Though I still say that pink phase was your best."

"Smooth talker," I teased, but caught his eye in the mirror. Even after all these years, moments like this still made my heart skip.

"Da!" Rose's voice broke the moment. "Can we watch Chip Agus Prata next?"

"Aye mo stór, just let me finish with Mummy's hair," J said, working the last section of color through.

Several hours later, after processing, washing, and styling, I stared at my reflection. The red was striking - definitely a dramatic change from my usual blonde, but perfect for Princess Daisy.

"Don't like it," Rose announced, her bottom lip already trembling.

"What? Why not?" I turned to her, surprised.

Her little face crumpled. "I don't look like you anymore."

"Oh, fairy love," I scooped her into my arms, my heart melting. "It's just for Halloween. After that, I'll go back to blonde, I promise."

"Really promise?"

"Really really promise," I hugged her close. "Can't have my mini-me looking different from me for too long, can I?"

"Ki Ki still looks like Da," Rose mumbled against my shoulder.

"That's because Ki Ki and Da always match," I smiled, looking at their identical styles - even down to the black nail polish. Though the red streak they usually shared was growing out, part of their own Halloween preparations. "My handsome boys."

"Speaking of matching," J started cleaning up his station, "Ki Ki, time to touch up your nails? They're getting a bit chipped."

Killy nodded sleepily from his beanbag. His eyes widened slightly when he finally noticed my hair. "Red."

"Like Princess Daisy," I reminded him. "For Halloween. Just like you and Da are letting your red streaks grow out for Luigi and Toad."

He considered this seriously, then nodded. "Okay."

"See Rose?" J smiled. "Even Killy's changing his hair for Halloween. It's just temporary."

"But Ki Ki and Da will match again after?" Rose asked, still in my arms.

"Course we will," J assured her, already getting out his nail polish for Killy. "Red streaks and all."

I set Rose down as J settled on the floor next to Killy's beanbag. Watching them - J carefully painting Killy's tiny nails while our son held perfectly still - made my heart swell. These were the moments that mattered. These small, perfect pieces of our life together.

"Mummy?" Rose tugged at my hand. "Can I have sparkly nails?"

"Ask Da nicely," I smiled, "He's the artist in this family."

"Da?" Rose bounced over to them. "After Ki Ki, can I have sparkly please?"

"An féidir leat é a rá i nGaeilge?" J asked, not looking up from Killy's nails.

Rose thought for a moment. "Le do thoil, Da?"

"Much better, mo stór. And yes, you can have sparkly ones after I finish with your brother."

I settled back in the styling chair, watching my family. Rose hovering impatiently while trying (and mostly failing) to be still, Killy maintaining perfect concentration as J worked on his nails, the familiar smell of the salon mixing with the sound of Bluey still playing in the background.

"Da?" Rose bounced over to them. "After Ki Ki, can I have sparkly please?"

"An féidir leat é a rá i nGaeilge?" J asked, carefully working on the nails he could reach around Killy's cast - just his right hand and a couple visible fingers on his left.

Rose thought for a moment. "Le do thoil, Da?"

"Much better, mo stór. And yes, you can have sparkly ones after."

"Will have to wait on the rest of yours until that cast comes off, mate," J told Killy, who nodded seriously. Even with limited access, they maintained their matching ritual as best they could.

I watched from the styling chair as Rose practically vibrated with anticipation, while Killy held his accessible fingers perfectly still for J. Such a simple moment - just a father doing his children's nails on a Saturday afternoon - but it was everything.

"Can they be pink AND sparkly?" Rose asked hopefully.

"Course they can, fairy girl," J smiled, finishing up Killy's last accessible nail. "Though you'll have to sit very still like your brother."

"I can!" Rose declared, though she was literally bouncing as she said it.

"Aye?" J raised an eyebrow. "Show me then."

Rose immediately planted herself on the floor, assuming what she clearly thought was her most serious expression. The effect was somewhat ruined by her fairy wings being slightly askew.

"Very still," Killy advised his sister solemnly, carefully protecting his freshly painted nails.

I bit back a laugh, watching Rose try to contain her natural energy. She made it about thirty seconds before asking, "Is it my turn yet?"

"Almost, mo stór," J said, putting the finishing touches on Killy's nails. "Just let these dry properly first."

Once both twins were satisfied with their nails and everything had dried, we decided to head to the Cantina for dinner. As luck would have it, Trevor and Amber were there having dinner with Niamh and Rachel in the VIP room.

"Hey ya mate!" J called as we joined them.

"Glad to see you lot!" Trevor pulled J into a hug. "I'll have the kitchen start the usual."

I watched them together, marveling at how their relationship had evolved. The love between them was deep and real, but completely different now - they weren't ex-lovers anymore, just brothers. It seemed impossible to imagine them any other way.

I settled next to Amber while Rose made a beeline for the baby. "Baby Ray," she cooed, touching Rachel's face with surprising gentleness.

"Oh, love, how's the arm?" Niamh asked Killy, who had carefully positioned himself to protect his cast.

"Mamo, arm still hurt," Killy said quietly, using his special name for his grandmother.

Niamh passed Rachel back to Amber before gathering Killy gently into her lap, careful of his cast. Her natural grandmother's instinct to comfort taking over immediately.

"Your hair!" Amber finally noticed my transformation. "Going for the whole Mario family costume thing?"

"Princess Daisy," I confirmed. "Though Rose isn't thrilled with the change."

"Don't like it," Rose announced, though she was clearly distracted by making faces at Rachel. "Mummy supposed to be blonde like me."

"Well, I like it," Amber smirked, flipping her chestnut hair. "Was getting tired of being the only non-blonde in our little group."

"It's temporary," I assured them. "Already promised Rose I'm going back after Halloween. Can't have my mini-me looking different from me for too long."

"Speaking of Halloween," Trevor called from where he and J were still catching up, "we need ideas for Ráichéal's first Halloween costume."

"You should do a family costume like us," I suggested. "Something themed."

"Not so much into video games, Love," Trevor smiled. "Though watching you lot play Mario Kart is entertaining enough."

"Could do something food-themed," I suggested, thinking of Trevor's chef background. "Since the Cantina's such a big part of your lives."

"No," Niamh cut in firmly, still cuddling Killy. "My granddaughter's first Halloween needs to be proper Irish. None of that American nonsense."

"Mamo," Rose looked up from making faces at Rachel. "What's proper Irish Halloween?"

"Ah, mo stór," Niamh's eyes lit up. "Samhain is very special. Not like the American Halloween with all its plastic decorations."

"Though we do that too now," J added quickly, seeing Rose's concern about her beloved trick-or-treating traditions.

"But the old ways are important," Niamh continued. "The bonfires, the stories..."

"No scary stories," Amber cut in protectively, pulling Rachel closer. "She's too little."

"She means the fairy stories," Trevor explained, clearly used to mediating between his wife and mother. "Right, Mam?"

"Course," Niamh smiled. "Though perhaps Ráichéal could be a fairy princess? That would blend both traditions nicely."

"Like me!" Rose bounced excitedly, her wings fluttering. "Baby Ray can have wings too!"

"Actually," Amber smiled, "that's not a bad idea. I could design her a little dress..."

"With sparkles!" Rose added enthusiastically.

"Definitely with sparkles," Amber agreed. "Maybe in emerald green?"

"For Ireland," Niamh nodded approvingly. "Now that's proper."

I watched Rose demonstrating her best fairy twirl for Rachel, who was watching with wide-eyed fascination. Killy remained content in Niamh's lap, though I noticed him starting to droop slightly.

"Time for more medicine, love?" I asked, catching J's eye. He was already reaching for Killy's pain meds in his pocket - we'd gotten good at reading our quiet son's subtle signs of discomfort.

"Food's coming," Trevor announced, heading toward the kitchen. "Including something special for our brave boy with the cast."

"Ice cream?" Killy perked up slightly.

"Better," Trevor winked. "Made it just for you."

"Speaking of special things," Amber shifted Rachel to one arm while reaching for her phone. "Wait until you see what that demon cat did at Fashion Week. Even I have to admit, Thara taking down Brianne's makeup display was worth having to babysit her."

"Your cat did what?" J asked, returning with Killy's medicine.

"Oh god, you haven't seen?" Amber's eyes lit up. "Here, watch this. Michelle's going to be impossible about it, but..." She pulled up the video on her phone.

I settled back, watching my family - chosen and blood - share stories and laughter. This was what I'd been so afraid of losing, what I'd nearly risked with those emails. This warmth, this belonging, this love.

"Here's something special," Trevor emerged from the kitchen with a plate. He'd created a simple but perfect chocolate dessert that looked like building blocks - easy for Killy to manage one-handed.

"For me?" Killy asked quietly.

"Course, mate. Thought you might need something to cheer you up with that cast."

"Can I have some too?" Rose asked hopefully.

"Róisín," J started, but Trevor was already setting down a second plate with a similar dessert, though he'd added pink sprinkles to hers.

"Proper dinner first," Niamh reminded them, still holding Killy carefully.

"Pretty!" Rose approved of her sprinkles, temporarily distracted from her campaign against my new hair color.

The kitchen staff brought out our usual orders - they knew us well enough by now that we rarely needed to actually request anything. Killy stayed in Niamh's lap while she helped him manage his food one-handed, and Rose somehow managed to eat while continuing to entertain Rachel with faces.

"So, the reality show rumors are true then?" J asked.

"Aye, Lydia convinced me," Trevor admitted.

"More like played him perfectly," Amber smirked. "All she had to do was mention how he's better looking than Ramsay and how much more famous he could be."

"It worked, didn't it?" Trevor defended. "But don't worry - it's strictly about our careers. Our personal lives, including you lot, are completely off limits. We made sure that was in the contract."

Fionn appeared from the kitchen, and I brightened at the sight of our friend. "Oi! Fionn! How ya going, mate?"

His smile was immediate. "Doing well."

"How's Declan?" I asked, noticing the extra glow about him.

Fionn's cheeks flushed slightly. "He asked me to move in with him."

"That's wonderful!" I beamed at him. "About time, yeah?"

"It's pretty great," Fionn admitted, his happiness obvious.

"Aye, and he's been brilliant running things here while I'm caught up with the Limerick restaurant and all this TV nonsense," Trevor added proudly.

"Uncle Fionn!" Rose finally noticed him. "Look at my sparkly nails!"

"Very pretty, princess," Fionn smiled, then noticed Killy starting to droop in Niamh's lap. "And how's our brave knight doing?"

"Tired," Killy mumbled.

"Think it's time to head home," J said, catching my eye. The pain medicine always made Killy sleepy, and Rose was showing signs of being overtired too, even if she'd never admit it.

"But dessert!" Rose protested.

"We'll pack it up for you," Fionn offered. "Special containers for special desserts, yeah?"

"Speaking of special," Trevor stood. "Let me sort you lot some dinner to take home for tomorrow. Save you cooking while dealing with that cast."

"You don't have to-" I started.

"Course I do. It's what family's for."

"I want to see Patrick before we go," Rose announced.

J laughed. "Course you do. Let's go see Patrick."

"Mamo, I want to see Patrick too," Killy said quietly.

J and Niamh took the twins to visit the restaurant's beloved lobster while Trevor and Fionn disappeared into the kitchen, leaving me alone with Amber, who was cradling a sleeping Rachel.

"You've been off all night," Amber said quietly. "What's going on?"

I sighed, the weight of the day's events suddenly heavy. "I almost did something unforgivable."

"Oh?"

"My ex... he suggested meeting up. Just us. I actually considered it for a moment." I shook my head. "Must have been temporarily insane to even think about risking all of this."

Amber studied me carefully. "But you didn't."

"No. Invited him and his wife to dinner with J and me instead." I watched Rachel sleeping peacefully in her arms. "Had this dream this morning... about choices and consequences. Woke up feeling like I'd actually betrayed J."

"Dreams have a way of showing us what we're afraid of," Amber said softly. "Or what we're grateful for."

"Both, maybe." I could hear Rose's excited voice from the lobster tank, explaining to Patrick why her nails were extra sparkly today. "I've got everything I never thought I'd have again after losing my family. The idea that I even considered..."

"But you didn't," Amber repeated firmly. "That's what matters. Though if you tell Michelle about any of this, she'll probably try to use it as proof that J belongs with Trevor."

"God, don't even joke about that."

"Don't worry, Trev isn't interested. Although if he were..." Amber's smirk was pure mischief.

I rolled my eyes. "Not all of us are as willing to share as you are."

"Come on, you have to admit Mary's face when Trev kissed Jeremy at the wedding was absolutely priceless," Amber grinned at the memory.

"Aye, it was," I chuckled. "Which is the only reason I didn't push Trevor off that boat right then and there."

"It was kind of hot though," Amber said with that characteristic directness of hers.

I rolled my eyes. "Bloody hell, Amber. Only you would think your husband kissing his ex-boyfriend was hot."

"Well, it was," she shrugged, completely unapologetic. "Though not as hot as what happened after, when Trevor-"

"No!" I cut her off quickly. "Do not finish that sentence. I do not need to know what happened after."

"Your loss," she teased, but was interrupted by Rose's return.

"Patrick says hi!" Rose announced, bouncing back to our table.

I smiled as J scooped her up. "Right then, time to head home."

"Here you go," Trevor emerged from the kitchen with an enormous bag of food. "Should sort you for a few days."

J somehow managed to balance both Rose and the takeaway bag while I gathered a very drowsy Killy from Niamh. Our son immediately nestled against my shoulder, his cast carefully positioned between us.

"Thanks for this," I nodded toward the bag. "Though you didn't have to-"

"Family," Trevor cut me off with a smile. "Besides, can't have my favorite taste-testers going hungry while dealing with that cast."

"Give us a ring if you need anything," Niamh said, pressing a kiss to Killy's head before doing the same to Rose. "Mamo's always here."

"Thanks Mamo!" Rose called, already half-asleep against J's shoulder despite her earlier protests about leaving.

"Let us know how the show goes," I told Amber. "Though try to keep Michelle from inviting herself to film cameos."

"No promises there," she laughed. "You know how she is."

The drive home was quiet, both twins properly exhausted now. Looking at J behind the wheel, our sleeping children in the back, I felt that certainty again. No email, no dream, no what-if was worth risking this.

Once the twins were in bed, I headed down to my office to check my systems. As expected, the Russian hacker had tried and failed to breach my client's security. I added a few quick additional protocols - I could strengthen them properly tomorrow. Just as I was shutting down for the night, my phone rang. Richie.

I sighed before answering. "Hi."

"Livvie," his voice was hesitant. "Glad I caught you. I wanted to apologize for those emails. I never should have sent them. Got caught up in memories and... overstepped."

"Aye, you bloody well did. Though I got caught up too, and I was stone cold sober, so I can hardly judge."

"Please don't tell Olivia or J," he asked quietly.

"Already told J everything. Couldn't keep it from him. But Olivia won't hear it from me."

"Bloody hell, Liv... I suppose J hates me now?"

"He's not best pleased, but I don't think he hates you."

"He'd have the right. I'm so sorry."

"Are you though?" I found myself asking. "Are you really sorry? Because you invited me to your hotel, Richie. Your intent was clear. If I'd said yes... would you have actually cheated on Olivia with me?"

The silence stretched so long I thought we'd lost connection. "Hello?"

"I'm here," he said finally. "And god help me, but yes. I would have. Still would, if I'm being honest. I respect your marriage, respect you, but if you were willing... aye, I'd do it."

"Wasn't expecting that level of honesty," I managed.

"It's the truth. Seeing you again... it did something to me. Remembered what we had, what a fool I was. But if you're happy, I'll leave well enough alone. Never want to complicate your life."

"Bit late for that," I said quietly. "But I am happy. I love J. He's my first and only real love, Richie. What we had... I never loved you. Maybe I could have, if things had been different, if we'd had time before I lost my family... but things as they are? I didn't know what love was until J. He and the twins are my world. So no, the answer will always be no."

There was another long pause. "Right then. I suppose that's that."

"I suppose it is." I rubbed my temples, feeling exhausted. "The dinner invitation still stands though. You and Olivia, me and J. As friends."

"You sure?"

"Yes. Because nothing happened, Richie. We both got caught up in memories for a moment, but that's all. And I'd like us to be friends - real friends, not whatever this was."

"Yeah, alright." He sounded resigned but relieved. "Friends then. And Liv? Thank you. For being honest."

"Always am these days. Learned that lesson the hard way."

After hanging up, I sat in my office for a moment, letting the conversation settle. Then I heard J's footsteps on the stairs.

"Love? You coming up?"

"Yeah," I called back. "Just finishing up."

Upstairs, I was in the middle of changing when J's arms slipped around my waist from behind, his touch familiar and electric all at once.

"Don't think you'll be needing that just yet," he murmured, turning me to face him.

"Suppose not," I smiled, meeting his kiss as we fell back onto our bed. The intensity between us had never faded - if anything, it had deepened over the years, built on trust and understanding and real love. And that night it was even more intense, our desire overtaking us.

Later, curled in his arms, my heart still racing, I closed my eyes and let the contentment wash over me. This was what love really meant - not remembered attraction or might-have-beens, but this bone-deep certainty. This belonging. This life we'd built together. This was everything I'd ever wanted, everything I'd ever need.

"Boundaries"

I collapsed onto the sofa in my Nashville apartment, every muscle aching from a brutal day of filming. Thara immediately claimed her spot on my stomach, her familiar weight both comforting and a reminder of home.

"Hi baby girl," I scratched behind her ears, earning a content purr. She settled against me, apparently forgiving me for today's long absence. The emptiness of the apartment pressed in - no Hunter's quiet presence, no Tomi's cheerful babbling, no teenage drama from the girls. Even my weekend had been consumed by royal duties on Saturn and TK-91. Just one more week until my anniversary with Hunter, when I could finally take some real time off at home.

But this week was going to be chaos with the series premiere. Between filming, interviews, and promotional appearances, I barely had time to breathe, let alone deal with everything else weighing on me.

I rolled onto my stomach, earning an indignant meow as Thara was displaced. She promptly jumped back up, settling on my back with an air of royal displeasure.

"Sorry baby," I apologized, reaching for my phone and pulling up Jeremy's contact. God, I missed my best friend. The time difference between Nashville and Cork was killing me - 3 AM there now. I could stay up another five hours until Rose's inevitable early morning wake-up call to her father, but even I knew that wasn't realistic.

Instead, I typed out a message: "Jeremy, missing you like crazy. Call me when you're up. Don't worry about waking me up, for real. Just call me. I wanna talk. Love you."

I dragged myself up, ignoring Thara's disapproving stare, and headed for a shower. Sleep wouldn't come easily, but at least I could look forward to hearing my best friend's voice soon.

Sure enough, around 2 AM, my phone buzzed on the nightstand. Jeremy's face lit up my screen, and I fumbled to answer, still half-tangled in sheets.

"Hello?" My voice was thick with sleep.

"You told me to wake you..." Jeremy's familiar accent was somehow both apologetic and amused.

"Yeah, I did. It's fine. I miss you," I managed, trying to shake off the fog of interrupted sleep. Thara immediately relocated from her pillow to curl against my side, apparently forgiving me for the disturbance.

"I miss you too, Love," his voice carried that particular warmth he reserved for family. "Though you sound knackered. Sure you don't want to call later?"

"No," I said firmly, sitting up and properly waking myself. "I need my best friend time. How are the twins? How's Liv? How's everyone? I feel so out of touch."

"The usual chaos," Jeremy chuckled. "Rose tried to reorganize Trevor's entire spice rack yesterday. Nearly gave him a heart attack."

"Of course she did," I smiled, settling back against my pillows. "And Killy probably tried to create a proper organizational system to fix it?"

"Oh, we haven't talked in a bit. Killy broke his arm," Jeremy's voice carried that particular strain parents get when discussing their children's injuries.

"He what? Oh my god, what happened?" I sat up straighter, suddenly wide awake. Thara shifted irritably at my movement.

"The day after we got home from Australia, he and Rose were arguing and Rose accidentally pushed him down the stairs," Jeremy sighed. "He's ok, but clean break in his left arm."

"Oh my god, J! I'm so sorry!" My heart ached at missing such a significant event in my best friend's family. "How's he handling it? And Rose - she must be devastated. And Liv?"

"He's being our Killy - so quiet and careful, even with the cast. Rose was pretty upset at first, but now she's decided she has to kiss his cast better about fifty times a day," Jeremy's voice carried that mix of exasperation and fondness unique to parenting toddlers.

"Let me guess - she's being a bit too enthusiastic about her nursing duties?" I couldn't help but smile, picturing Rose's particular brand of two-year-old care.

"Aye, we've had to stop her from climbing on him to 'make it better' and explain that his cast doesn't need her ‘fairy dust’ in it. Though Trevor's been great - made him special treats, keeps finding ways to distract them both."

"Of course he did," I said softly, hearing the gratitude in Jeremy's voice. "And how are you and Liv managing?"

"It's been... interesting. Trying to keep Rose from accidentally hurting him again while making sure she knows we still love her. You know how she gets - all energy and no awareness of consequences."

"That sounds like Rose," I nodded, though something in Jeremy's tone caught my attention. There was something... off. "J? Is everything okay? You sound... I don't know, different."

"Everything's fine," Jeremy said, but his tone suggested otherwise. I'd known him too long not to catch those subtle shifts in his accent.

"J..." I pressed gently. "Come on. Talk to me."

He sighed, and I could picture him running a hand through his hair - his tell when something was bothering him. "It's nothing, really. Just... Liv's been a bit off since Australia. Distracted, maybe?"

My internal radar pinged. After years of friendship, I knew when something was wrong. "Off how?"

"I don't know, exactly. She's just... different. Since we ran into..." he paused. "Never mind. It's nothing."

"Since you ran into who?" I sat up straighter, fully awake now. Thara made a disgruntled noise at being disturbed again.

"It's not important," Jeremy said quickly - too quickly. "How's filming going?"

"Oh no, don't you dare change the subject," I said firmly. "Who did you run into in Australia?"

There was a long pause, then Jeremy sighed. "Richie. Her ex from uni. We ran into him at this burrito place she used to go to."

"Richie?" My interest peaked immediately. Liv rarely talked about her past relationships. "And she's been off since seeing him?"

"Michelle..." Jeremy's warning tone was clear.

"What? I'm just being supportive," I said innocently, though we both knew better. "So what happened when you ran into him?"

"Mich, no. I know that tone. You are not meddling in this."

"I'm not meddling! I'm just asking about my best friend's life," I protested, though my mind was already working overtime. "But seriously, if Liv's been weird since seeing him..."

"Michelle Pauline," Jeremy's accent got thicker - never a good sign. "Remember what happened last time you meddled in my marriage? At Disney?"

"That was different," I defended weakly.

"No, it wasn't. And if you even think about-"

"J, I promise I won't meddle," I said, trying to sound sincere. "But you can't just drop that your wife's been weird since running into her ex and expect me not to be concerned."

"She's not..." Jeremy sighed heavily. "Look, it was just unexpected. For both of us. And now they're having dinner with us next week - him and his wife Olivia."

"I'm sorry, what?" I sat up so fast Thara actually hissed at me. "They're having dinner? And his wife's name is Olivia? Like, seriously?"

"Michelle..."

"No, no, I'm just... processing," I assured him, though my mind was racing. "So your wife, who's been 'off' since seeing her ex, is now having dinner with said ex and his wife who happens to share her name? And you're okay with this?"

"Of course I'm okay with it," Jeremy said, but there was something in his voice. "Why wouldn't I be?"

"J..." I said softly, knowing my best friend too well. "You don't sound okay with it."

Jeremy sighed, his voice heavy. "He wants her back. He propositioned her to start an affair. She turned him down."

"He WHAT?" I practically shouted, causing Thara to leap off the bed in protest. "That bastard did what? And you're still letting them come to dinner? J, what the actual fuck?"

"Liv turned him down immediately," Jeremy said quietly. "She told me everything right away. She's been completely honest about it all."

"But she still wants to have dinner with them?" I couldn't keep the disbelief from my voice. "After he tried to- J, are you sure about this?"

"I trust my wife, Michelle."

"It's not Liv I don't trust," I said firmly. "It's this Richie person who thinks he can just-"

"Michelle," Jeremy's tone carried a warning. "Don't."

"Don't what? Care about my best friend?" I protested. "J, this man literally tried to break up your marriage and now you're having him over for dinner?"

"Liv wants to clear the air," Jeremy's voice was quiet. "She wants to show him - show everyone - that what we have is real. That she's happy."

"By having dinner with someone who wants to destroy that happiness?" I couldn't help the edge in my voice. "J, you know I love you, but this is insane. What's next - inviting Trevor and Amber to make it a real awkward party?"

"Actually... yes... they will be there. It's the night before they leave for Paris Fashion Week," Jeremy replied.

"You know, if you had gotten back together with Trev..."

"Mich, don't," he warned, his accent getting thicker. "We've talked about this. Trevor and I are brothers now. We're exactly where we're meant to be - him with Amber, me with Liv."

"But-"

"No buts. I mean it, Michelle. Stay out of this. No meddling, no stirring things up, no trying to create drama. Liv and I are handling this our way."

"Fine," I conceded, though my mind was already working. "But J... you'd tell me if you weren't okay, right? If you needed me?"

"Of course I would," Jeremy's voice softened. "You're my best friend. But I'm fine. Really. Liv and I are solid."

"You better be," I muttered. "Because if this Richie person tries anything..."

"Michelle..."

"What? I'm just saying, if he steps out of line, I know people. Important people. With spaceships."

Jeremy actually laughed at that. "Love, you are not sending the Saturn military after my wife's ex."

"I could though," I said, only half joking. "Or you know, Thara could accidentally destroy his favorite suit..."

"Speaking of your demon cat, how is she handling Nashville?"

"Don't change the subject," I protested, though I absently scratched Thara's ears as she reclaimed her spot next to me. "But she's fine. Misses you though. Keeps giving me dirty looks for taking her away from her favorite human."

"She does not miss me," Jeremy laughed, but I could hear the fondness in his voice. "She just misses having someone to terrorize besides you."

"Please, you're her favorite and you know it," I smiled, watching Thara settle more comfortably against me. "Though she's been surprisingly well-behaved on set. The crew loves her."

"Of course they do. She's got everyone wrapped around her paw, just like her mother."

"Hey!" I protested, though he wasn't entirely wrong. "I'm just naturally charming."

"You're naturally something," Jeremy teased. "Look, Love, I need to start getting ready. Rose will be up soon and I've got early clients."

"Yeah, okay," I sighed, not wanting to end our call but knowing he had to go. "But J? Just... be careful with this dinner thing, okay?"

"Michelle..."

"I know, I know. No meddling. I promise. Just... I love you. Call me later?"

"Love you too," Jeremy said softly. "Try to get some more sleep, yeah?"

After we hung up, I lay there staring at the ceiling, Thara purring against my side. Sleep wasn't coming back anytime soon - not with my mind racing about this Richie situation. Jeremy might trust Liv, but something felt off. And this dinner... with Trevor and Amber there...

I reached for my phone again, pulling up Hunter's contact. It would be early morning in Cork - he'd be up with Tomi.

My finger hovered over the call button before I forced myself to put the phone down. I'd promised Jeremy no meddling. Even if every instinct I had was screaming that this dinner was a terrible idea.

"What do you think, baby girl?" I asked Thara. "Think I can actually stay out of this one?"

Thara's unimpressed stare said it all.

Amber

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I stood in my closet, surrounded by designer pieces as I tried to decide what to pack for Paris Fashion Week. The pressure of representing both my cosmetics line and Lydia's fashion house was weighing on me.

"Love, you will look great in anything," Trevor called from our bedroom, where he was cradling Rachel. The sound of their quiet contentment made me smile despite my wardrobe crisis.

"Easy for you to say! Any suit you put on looks amazing," I replied, fingering the silk of a Lydia James original.

"And any dress you pick will look amazing," he countered, his voice carrying that particular warmth reserved for me.

I paused, pulling out another option. "What about tonight? What does one wear to meet her sister-in-law's ex-boyfriend?"

Trevor laughed, the sound rich and genuine. "Whatever you want, Love. You'll be the prettiest woman in the Cantina as always."

"You're biased," I smiled, finally settling on a deep burgundy wrap dress. "Though I have to admit, this dinner should be... interesting."

"Aye," Trevor's tone shifted slightly. "Jeremy told me about this Richie person propositioning Liv."

I turned to face him, watching him gently rock Rachel. "And you're okay having him in your restaurant?"

"Not really," Trevor admitted. "But I trust Jeremy and Liv. If they want to handle it this way..."

"Still," I pulled out a pair of heels to match the dress, "having dinner with someone who tried to break up their marriage? Seems a bit..."

"Mental?" Trevor suggested, his accent getting stronger. "Aye, but it's their choice. Though if he tries anything tonight..."

"No cliffs," I said firmly, recognizing that particular tone in my husband's voice.

"Oh come on Love, it's efficient and they are so plentiful," Trevor argued, bouncing Rachel gently as she started to fuss.

I rolled my eyes, "No cliffs."

"Fine," he said, pressing a kiss to Rachel's head. "But if he disrespects Liv or Jeremy in my restaurant..."

"Then we handle it like adults," I said, though I couldn't help smiling at his protectiveness. "Besides, his wife will be there. What's he going to do?"
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"You didn't see the way he looked at Liv in Australia," Trevor's voice went serious. "I've seen that look before. In Paris, when..."

I raised an eyebrow, "...when you were grinding with Jeremy on the dance floor? Yeah, I know you wanted him and if Livvie hadn't been standing right there you would have propositioned him."

"That was different. That night was closure," Trevor defended, adjusting Rachel as she snuggled against his chest.

"Mi corazón, you don't have to convince me. I was the one that gave you permission to do him one more time if you needed to. Maybe Livvie needs that?" I suggested thoughtfully.

"You know Livvie and Jeremy's marriage isn't like that," Trevor said firmly. "What we had... it was complicated. Years of history and unresolved feelings. But Jeremy and Liv? That's pure. Simple. Real."

"Sure, but maybe she needs closure with Richie. Maybe everything would calm down if you and Jeremy hooked up one more time and Livvie and Richie did... everyone gets it out of their system and we move on," I said, pulling out another dress to pack.

"Amber!" Trevor's scandalized tone made Rachel stir.

"What? I'm just saying - you and Jeremy got your closure in Paris. Maybe that's what Livvie needs with Richie."

"Have you been talking to Michelle?" Trevor asked suspiciously. "Because that sounds like something she would say."

"And that is grounds for divorce," I said flatly. "I am nothing like Michelle. I don't create drama - I just believe in being honest about what people might need."

"Love," Trevor shifted Rachel gently, "you know Jeremy and Liv aren't like us. They don't handle things the way we do."

"True," I conceded, returning to my packing. "Though it would probably be less awkward than this dinner is going to be."

"At least it's at the Cantina," Trevor said, settling into the glider with Rachel. "If things get too awkward, I can always escape to the kitchen."

"No you can't," I turned to face him. "You're sitting through this dinner like the rest of us. Besides, I need you there to keep me from committing murder if this Richie person tries anything."

"I thought you were the one telling me no cliffs," Trevor's eyes sparkled with amusement.

"That's different. I was being the voice of reason then. Now I'm being a protective sister." I pulled out another dress for Paris. "You didn't see Liv's face the other night, mi corazón. When he..." I trailed off, remembering how shaken Liv had looked.

"When he what?" Trevor's voice went serious, his hold on Rachel tightening slightly.

I sighed, turning to face him. "Livvie told me she asked if he was serious. If he would have gone through with it if she were willing. He said yes and basically that it was an open invitation if she ever changes her mind."

"He what?" Trevor's accent got thicker - never a good sign. "And they're still having him over for dinner? In my restaurant?"

"Liv wants to prove something," I said quietly. "To him, to herself, maybe to J... I don't know. But mi corazón, if he tries anything tonight..."

"I'll handle it," Trevor's voice was deadly calm. "No cliffs needed."

"Good. Now, I need to finish packing," I said as I vanished back into my closet.

I ran my fingers over the designer pieces, mind drifting to the whirlwind of the past month. The Amber Nichole launch had exceeded even my wildest expectations, and then we'd shocked everyone with the Rachel Amber ghost launch two weeks later. My gamble of a luxury brand duping itself before anyone else could had paid off spectacularly - both lines were selling out faster than we could restock.

The beauty world was still buzzing about it. A high-end brand creating its own "dupe" line, complete with nearly identical formulas but different packaging and price points? It was revolutionary. And having Thara as the face of the autumn collection... well, Michelle would never let me live down how well that had worked out.

The Paris shows would be my fourth major appearance since the launches. Milan and New York had been incredible successes - the beauty world was still buzzing about how we'd dominated Fashion Week in both cities. Lydia was already planning my wardrobe for Paris - a perfect blend of pieces that would showcase both her fashion house and my cosmetics.

"Love?" Trevor's voice carried from the bedroom. "I think Rachel's ready for her nap."

"Coming," I called back, grabbing the burgundy dress for tonight. At least I had that decision made.

As I watched Trevor settle Rachel in her crib, I couldn't help but smile at how different my life was now from my magazine modeling days. Who would have thought I, of all people, would end up here, building a beauty empire while balancing family life?

"What's that smile about?" Trevor asked, gently tucking Rachel in.

"Just thinking about how much has changed," I said softly. "A year ago I was just starting to develop the formulas for Amber Nichole. Now we have two successful brands, Rachel, this amazing life..."

"Aye, and look how far you've come. You managed to create two amazing lines. Amber Nichole's formulas are amazing and you somehow managed to come up with similar enough formulas with

different ingredients to dupe your own high end line. It's nothing short of amazing. You're amazing," Trevor said as he pulled me into his arms.

"Even if I let Michelle's demon cat be the face of the autumn collection?" I couldn't help teasing.

"Well, that worked out better than anyone expected," Trevor laughed softly, careful not to wake Rachel. "Though don't tell Michelle I said that. Her ego's big enough already."

"Speaking of Michelle," I pulled back slightly to look at him, "how long do you think before she finds out about this Richie situation?"

"This is Michelle we're talking about, Love. I suspect she already knows and it's just a matter of time before she tries to convince Jeremy he should try to get me back and let Richie have Livvie," Trevor sighed.

"She promised she wouldn't med... what am I saying? Of course she is going to meddle. Will she ever get over this weird romanticizing she does about you and Jeremy as a couple?"

"Probably not," Trevor shook his head. "She's got this... fantasy version in her head. Completely ignores that Jeremy and I are happier as brothers than we ever were as lovers. That what we have with you and Liv is real."

"At least she's in Nashville right now," I said. "Though knowing Michelle, distance won't stop her from trying to orchestrate something."

"God, remember what she tried to pull at Disney?" Trevor groaned.

"Si, and Livvie was a mess. It was hard for her to see you and Jeremy connect at the club that way but for Michelle to taunt her with it," I sighed, remembering how hurt Liv had been.

"She tried it with you too," Trevor reminded me.

I chuckled, "Yeah, but when she tried to stir me up I just told her it was hot watching you grind on Jeremy and you went to bed with me that night."

"I love how confident you are. Nothing ruffles you," Trevor smiled as we headed downstairs.

I shrugged, "I love you more than anything, but if you need something to get closure or fulfill you or whatever I'm not going to stop you. And if you ever decide not to choose me anymore then we shouldn't be together."

At the bottom of the stairs he pulled me into his arms again, "Mo grá, I will always choose you. And you are all I need to be fulfilled," he said as he kissed me.

"I know," I smiled against his lips. "Just like I'll always choose you. Which is exactly what Liv and Jeremy have too, if Michelle would just let them be."

"Speaking of letting them be," Trevor pulled back slightly, his accent getting thicker, "what exactly did Richie say to Liv? The full version you're not telling me."

I hesitated. "Mi corazón..."

"Amber."

"Fine," I sighed. "But remember you promised no cliffs." I studied his face carefully. "And no 'accidentally' burning his food tonight either."

"I would never," Trevor protested, though his eyes said otherwise.

"Treabhair Ó Súilleabháin, I mean it. I know that look. You're already planning something in that kitchen of yours."

"I'm a professional chef, Love. I don't mess with food," he said, but there was something in his tone. "Though if his meal happens to be extra spicy..."

"No," I said firmly. "You are not sabotaging his food. Even if he deserves it. I will not have the Michelin reviewers hearing that the great Trevor O'Sullivan tampered with a customer's meal because of personal drama."

"He's not just a customer," Trevor muttered. "He's a gobshite who-"

"Who Liv turned down," I cut him off. "She chose Jeremy, just like you chose me. And tonight we're going to have a nice, normal dinner where nobody gets poisoned or pushed off cliffs."

"Fine," Trevor conceded, though I could tell he was still plotting something. "But if he so much as looks at Liv wrong..."

“Everything is going to be fine,” I promised, hoping I was right.

Livvie

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Rose was playing that game where she ran up to me, said something in Irish, and ran away giggling because she knew I didn't understand. Her fairy wings bounced with each dramatic escape.

"J! Your daughter is doing it again!" I called up the stairs.

"Roisín, what did you say to Mummy?!" J called back.

"Nothing!" Rose laughed, darting past me again with another string of Irish words.

I caught the flash of mischief in her eyes - she was definitely Jeremy's daughter in these moments, that same playful spark he got when he was up to something. Though at least she wasn't climbing on Killy while he was still in his cast.

"Amadán beag!" Rose called out again, her giggles echoing through the house.
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I sighed, watching her fairy wings disappear around the corner. Ever since J had started teaching her Irish, she'd turned it into her favorite game - tormenting me with words I couldn't understand, always careful to do it when he wasn't around to translate.

"J! Your daughter is saying things in Irish again!" I called up the stairs.

"What's she saying?" he called back.

"I don't know, that's the problem!" I replied, watching Killy carefully color at the coffee table, his cast propped up exactly as the doctor had shown him. At least one of our twins was being cooperative.

"Roisín!" J's voice carried down. "Are you tormenting your mummy?"

"No!" Rose's innocent voice called back, right before she darted past me with another string of Irish words, dissolving into giggles.

I caught a glimpse of her impish grin as she disappeared again - definitely her father's daughter in these moments. Though I had a feeling whatever she was saying wasn't as innocent as she was pretending.

"Killy," I tried a different approach, "what's your sister saying?"

He looked up from his careful coloring, his good arm still working meticulously on his picture. "She's calling you a silly head, Mummy," he said quietly, always honest with me. "But I told her it's not nice."

Of course my careful boy would tell me the truth. He never could bear keeping things from me, even when Rose tried to swear him to secrecy.

"NO KI KI!" Rose's voice carried from somewhere in the house, followed by more Irish words.

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. Getting a two-year-old ready for a sleepover at Mamo's was challenging enough without adding in my own anxiety about tonight's gathering.

"Rose, we need to get you ready to go to Mamo's," I said.

"MAMO!!!!" Rose screamed, suddenly appearing from wherever she'd been hiding, fairy wings askew with excitement. The prospect of seeing Niamh had apparently overridden her previous resistance.

"Inside voice, fairy girl," I reminded her, though I couldn't help smiling at her enthusiasm. At least Niamh could handle Rose's endless energy. And having the twins at Mamo's meant one less thing to worry about during this dinner.

"Mummy?" Killy's voice was soft. "Will Mamo be careful with my arm?"

"Of course she will, love," I assured him, kneeling beside his chair. "Mamo knows exactly how to take care of your cast. And Rose knows she has to be extra gentle with you, right Rose?"

"I gentle!" Rose declared, twirling past us. "Ki Ki arm owie!"

"That's right," I said, watching her spin. "Now, shall we get your overnight bags ready?"

"I packed mine," Killy said proudly, pointing to his perfectly organized backpack by the stairs. Of course he had - my methodical boy was always prepared.

"Rose?" I called out. "Do you have your things ready?"

"NO PACK!" came the reply, followed by more Irish words.

I sighed, looking at the clock. We needed to leave for Niamh's soon, and I still had to get myself ready for dinner. The thought of seeing Richie again made my stomach twist, even though I knew I was doing the right thing by facing this head-on.

"J!" I called up the stairs. "A little help with your daughter?"

"What's she done now?" Jeremy's voice carried down, followed by his footsteps.

"Speaking Irish and refusing to pack," I said, gathering Killy's medications for Niamh.

"Ah," Jeremy appeared, immediately spotting Rose trying to hide behind the curtains - her fairy wings giving her away completely. "Roisín Dónailín, are you giving your mummy trouble?"

"No Da!" she giggled, the curtains moving with her dramatic denial.

"Then why isn't your bag packed for Mamo's?" he asked, moving toward her hiding spot.

"Because..." Rose peeked out, then immediately ducked back behind the curtain when she saw her father's raised eyebrow.

I watched them, grateful as always for how easily Jeremy could handle Rose's chaos. Though I couldn't help but notice the slight tension in his shoulders - he was as anxious about tonight as I was, even if he was trying to hide it.

"Róisín, téigh suas staighre agus pacála do mhála anois," he said firmly.

"Da..." Rose's voice carried that particular whine she used when trying to get her way.

"Róisín Dónailín..." Jeremy's warning tone was clear.

"Fine, Da help?" Rose emerged fully from behind the curtain, fairy wings drooping hopefully.

J nodded, "I'll help."

As they headed upstairs, I turned back to Killy, who was carefully trying to pack his crayons with one arm. "Need help, love?"

"Yes please Mummy," he said softly.

I smiled and helped him clean up, then headed upstairs to get dressed. I stood in front of my closet, anxiety making even this simple decision feel overwhelming. I finally settled on some black wide-legged pants with a green bohemian shirt and heels. Casual, but not too casual. I applied a small amount of makeup and put my hair up, trying not to overthink every choice.

When I went downstairs, J had the twins ready to go. He was wearing black jeans and a black henley shirt that fit him perfectly. Bloody hell, my husband was gorgeous. Even after all these years, the sight of him could still make my breath catch.

"Mummy pretty!" Rose declared from her spot by the door, fairy wings somehow still perfectly in place despite what I'm sure had been a struggle to get her ready.

"Da pretty too!" she added with a giggle.

"Aye, Mummy is very pretty," J smiled, his eyes meeting mine in that way that still made my heart flutter.

"Are we ready then?" I asked, doing one final check of Killy's medication bag. "Did you pack Rose's spare fairy wings?"

"Of course," J nodded. "And Killy's special pillow for his arm."

I took a deep breath, trying to push away thoughts of the dinner ahead. Right now I just needed to focus on getting the twins to Niamh's. Everything else - Richie, his wife Olivia, Trevor and Amber - that could wait.

"Mamo time!" Rose announced, already trying to open the door.

"Hold on, fairy girl," J caught her before she could escape. "Let's make sure we have everything first."

We loaded up the twins and headed to Niamh’s cottage. It was going to be an interesting night.

Michelle

"Run that one more time. Chris, step to the left. Michelle, step forward. Yes, there we go," the director said as we ran through the scene again. It was a short filming day because we all had interviews and promotional events to attend.

We got the scene done and I headed to my dressing room where Thara was lounging on the sofa waiting for me.

"Hi baby girl. Let me change and we'll head to the radio interview," I said as I got out of my character's clothes and put my own on. My mind kept drifting to Cork, to Jeremy and this dinner situation. If something happened with Livvie and her ex... no, I promised J I wouldn't meddle. But still, it could finally make Jeremy see that Trevor was who he belonged with.

I caught my reflection in the mirror and shook my head. I'd promised Jeremy no meddling. Besides, Livvie would never actually cheat on him. She loved him too much, even if she wasn't his soulmate like Trevor was...

"Stop it," I told my reflection firmly. "You promised."

Thara gave me that knowing look she got whenever I was plotting something. Sometimes I swore that cat could read my mind.

"Don't look at me like that," I told her, gathering my things for the interview. "I'm not going to do anything. Even if it would make everyone happier in the long run..."

My phone buzzed - a text from Holly reminding me about the radio interview schedule. Right. Focus on work. Not on how perfect Jeremy and Trevor would be together if Livvie would just...

"I said stop it," I muttered to myself, grabbing Thara's backpack. "No meddling. You promised."

I headed outside to the waiting car, settling in as Thara made herself comfortable beside me. As we drove toward the radio station, I found myself scrolling through my phone, trying to distract myself. But my mind kept circling back to the possibilities...

This was the perfect chance for Jeremy to see he belonged with Trevor. Trevor had been his first love, his soulmate. They just needed to find their way back to each other. They could raise the twins and Rachel as siblings. It would be perfect.

But how...?

"No," I said firmly, earning a judgmental look from Thara. "No meddling. No plotting. You promised J."

Though technically, if something happened naturally, without my interference...

"Stop it, Michelle," I muttered, forcing myself to focus on my interview prep notes instead of matchmaking schemes.

I looked at my phone again. A new headline popped up: "Mia Black confirms romance with Michelle Morris's ex-husband."

I made a gagging sound and looked at Thara, "Look at this. Mia and RJ are media official. What the hell is she thinking?"

Thara gave me her typical unimpressed stare as I clicked the article. There they were - photos of Mia and RJ looking cozy at some restaurant. Great. Just what I needed - more media drama to handle during interviews.

"I mean, of all people, she picks RJ?" I scrolled through the photos. "Mr. 'I'm so zen' fake Buddha himself? And she actually confirmed it to the press?"

I started typing a text to Mia, then stopped myself. No, I needed to stay focused on work. I did not need to get involved in yet another relationship situation. Even if Mia was clearly making a huge mistake...

Seeing RJ again after so many years had made me realize how much anger I actually still had towards him for what he did to me. I had bottled it up, told myself I was over it and that I understood. But the moment I saw him again I realized I didn't understand. Not at all. And I wasn't over it. I was still fucking pissed. And now he was with Mia, of all people. It made me want to scream.

I finally arrived at the radio station. Thara hung out in her backpack in the green room while I went into the studio. I answered questions about the show and my character, but of course it came back to my personal life.

"Michelle, the rumor mill has been on fire about your daughter and Jon's son..."

"I'm going to stop you right there," I cut in firmly. "She is 13. He is 22 and married. I know what I did, but Harley isn't me and this is a different time. Nothing is happening with them. That rumor is disgusting and needs to die." My tone left no room for follow-up.

"And Mia Black has been seen with your ex RJ James. What are your thoughts?"

I sighed, keeping my media smile in place despite my churning emotions. "Mia is a grown up. She can be with whomever she wants. I'm not exactly on great terms with RJ and I have my thoughts about him, but she can do what she wants. It's not my business."

"Speaking of exes, any truth to the rumors about Hunter and Jessica Simpson?"

"No," I said flatly. "Hunter's in Ireland with our daughters while I film. Any other questions about my actual work?"

The host took the hint and switched back to questions about the show, but my mind kept drifting. Between RJ and Mia going public, the Harley situation, and now this dinner in Cork... it felt like everyone's relationships were in chaos. Except Hunter and me - we were solid. Which was exactly why Jeremy and Trevor should be together too. They could have what Hunter and I had...

"No," I muttered under my breath during a commercial break. "Stop plotting."

"Everything okay?" the host asked.

"Just thinking about my next scene," I lied smoothly. Though really, I was thinking about how easy it would be to just make one phone call, plant one little seed of doubt...

"And we're back in three, two..."

After the interview, I collected Thara from the green room and headed back to my car. Holly was already texting me talking points for my next appearance - apparently Entertainment Tonight wanted to discuss the Harley situation again.

"You'd think they'd find something else to talk about," I told Thara as she settled into her backpack. "Like the actual show I'm promoting."

My phone buzzed with a text from Hunter: 'Just saw the Mia/RJ article. You okay?'

'Fine,' I typed back. 'Just tired of the media drama.'

'Love you,' his response was immediate, making me smile despite everything.

'Love you too. Miss you.'

I stared at my phone, debating whether to tell Hunter about the dinner situation in Cork. He could be my eyes and ears. 'Hey, check on Jeremy for me later.'

'What's up with Jeremy?'

'Livvie's ex is in town and he wants to hook up. Somehow this translated to Livvie and Jeremy having dinner with the ex and his wife. And Trevor and Amber,' I replied.

'Mich, I know what you're thinking. And don't.' he replied.

'I'm not thinking anything!' I protested, though Thara's judgmental stare suggested otherwise. 'I'm just worried about my best friend.'

'Michelle Pauline...'

'Fine. But you have to admit, this dinner sounds like a disaster waiting to happen.'

'A disaster YOU are not going to meddle in,' Hunter's reply was immediate. 'Let them handle it.'

'But-'

'No buts. Remember what happened last time you tried to "help" with Jeremy's relationship?'

I sighed, remembering the fallout from that particular incident. 'That was different.'

'It really wasn't. Promise me you'll stay out of it.'

I looked at Thara, who was still giving me that knowing stare. "What do you think, baby girl? Should I promise?"

My phone buzzed again: 'Michelle?'

'Fine, I promise,' I typed back, though my mind was already working. Technically, if I just called Trevor to check on the dinner plans, that wouldn't be meddling. Just being a concerned friend...

'I mean it,' Hunter texted, like he could read my thoughts. 'NO meddling.'

I tossed my phone into my bag with another sigh. "Your daddy knows me too well," I told Thara.

The car pulled up to the studio for my Entertainment Tonight interview. As I gathered my things, my mind kept circling back to Cork. Jeremy and Trevor had been so perfect together before Mary ruined everything. And now, with this Richie situation...

No. I'd promised. Multiple times. To multiple people.

But maybe...

"Ms. Morris?" the PA appeared at my car door. "They're ready for you."

"Coming," I said, giving Thara one last scratch behind the ears. "Be good, baby girl. No plotting while I'm gone."

Though as I followed the PA inside, I couldn't help but think that one small phone call to Trevor wouldn't really count as meddling. Just to check on him. See how he was handling having Jeremy and his ex in the same room...

No, he would tell Jeremy and Jeremy would be pissed. I had to let this go. Somehow.

Amber
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Trevor and I arrived at the Cantina before anyone else. I went to ensure the "VIP Room" was set nicely while Trev went into the kitchen to check on Fionn and see if he needed anything.

The staff had set the table perfectly - elegant but not overly formal. It was going to be an uncomfortable dinner, but I had already decided we would just confront it head on. Somehow I doubted Livvie had mentioned to Richie that Trevor was Jeremy's ex... we needed all the complications out in the open and then we could move forward and have a somewhat nice meal.

I adjusted a wine glass slightly, wondering how this night would unfold. Between Richie's proposition to Liv and the complex history at this table, it had all the makings of a disaster. Or as Michelle would say, quality entertainment.

I heard Trevor's voice from the kitchen - his accent was getting thicker, which usually meant he was either stressed or angry. Probably both, given the situation.

"Everything okay, mi corazón?" I called out.

"Aye," he appeared in the doorway. "Just making sure Fionn knows to keep an eye on certain meals."

I raised an eyebrow. "Trevor..."

"What? I'm not going to do anything," he protested, though his expression suggested otherwise. "Just making sure the food is... properly prepared."

"We talked about this," I reminded him. "No tampering with anyone's dinner."

"It's not tampering if-"

The sound of the front door opening cut him off. Voices carried from the main dining room - Jeremy and Livvie had arrived.

"Behave," I warned Trevor before heading out to greet them.
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Livvie looked stunning but nervous in her green top, while Jeremy... well, that henley was doing him favors. Not that I'd mention that to Trevor - he was already on edge enough.

"You look beautiful," I hugged Livvie, feeling her tension. "Both of you clean up nice."

"Thanks," Livvie managed a smile. "The twins are settled at Niamh's."

"Rachel too," I nodded. "Though I think Niamh's more excited about having all three of them than they are about being there."

Trevor emerged from the kitchen, and I caught the slight shift in his posture when he saw Jeremy. Even after all these years, even with how happy we all were now, there was still that moment of... something... when they first saw each other.

"Richie and Olivia should be here soon," Livvie said, her voice carrying that forced casualness that suggested she was trying very hard to seem calm.

"Well then," I smiled, channeling my inner hostess, "shall we have some wine while we wait?"

"Wine would be brilliant," Livvie said quickly, earning a concerned look from Jeremy.

Trevor disappeared back into the kitchen, returning with an expensive bottle of red. As he poured, I noticed his hands were steady despite the tension I could feel radiating from him. Years of chef's training showing through.

"So," I decided to tackle this head-on, "just to be clear - does Richie know about..." I gestured between Trevor and Jeremy.

"No," Livvie admitted, taking a large sip of her wine. "I haven't exactly had a chance to explain that part."

"Brilliant," Trevor muttered, his accent thickening again. "This should be interesting then."

Jeremy's hand found Livvie's, squeezing gently. The gesture was automatic, protective.

The sound of the front door opening made us all freeze.

"Show time," I murmured, straightening my dress.

The hostess showed our guests back to our room.

"Richie, Olivia, hi," Livvie said, and I could hear the slight tremor in her voice.

"Hi Livvie. J, good to see you again," Richie said, his Australian accent thick.

"Glad you could make it," Livvie managed. "These are our friends, Amber and Trevor O'Sullivan. This is actually Trevor's restaurant."

I watched Richie carefully as he took in Trevor - tall, fit, obviously attractive in his perfectly tailored suit. The slight widening of his eyes suggested he hadn't expected the owner to be joining us. Though that was nothing compared to the reaction he'd have when he learned the full story.

"Pleasure," Trevor said smoothly, though I caught that dangerous edge in his voice - the one he usually reserved for dealing with food critics or Mary.

"Your restaurant is beautiful," Olivia spoke up, her Singaporean accent mixing pleasantly with her Australian one. "We've heard wonderful things."

"Thank you," Trevor nodded, pulling out my chair before taking his own seat. I noticed Jeremy doing the same for Livvie, and caught the flash in Richie's eyes as he watched the gesture.

"Wine?" I offered, trying to break the tension. "We have an excellent Bordeaux breathing."

"That would be lovely," Olivia smiled, though her eyes kept darting between all of us, clearly sensing the undercurrent of tension.

As Trevor poured, I couldn't help but notice how Richie's gaze kept returning to Livvie, despite his wife sitting right there. This was going to be an interesting night indeed.

I chuckled, deciding to get everything out in the open. "Well this is quite a gathering. Livvie and Jeremy, their exes, and their exes' spouses."

"You are Jeremy's ex?" Richie asked me, looking confused.

"Me? Oh no, no. Trevor is his ex."

Richie looked between them, "Oh, right. Livvie mentioned something about that."

From his tone and expression, it was clear if Livvie had mentioned it, he had forgotten. The look of surprise on both his and Olivia's faces would have been amusing if the tension in the room hadn't just ratcheted up several notches.

"So," Olivia broke the awkward silence, "how long have you owned restaurants, Trevor?"

"About five years now," Trevor replied smoothly, though I could feel him tensing beside me. "Started with Shamrock in Austin. We're in the early stages of planning our fourth location in Limerick."

"Three successful restaurants with a fourth in development?" Richie asked. "That's impressive."

"He's incredibly talented," I said proudly. "The reviews have been extraordinary. Last year he earned his first Michelin Star."

I noticed Richie's eyes kept darting between Trevor and Jeremy, clearly trying to piece together their history. The tension at the table was palpable.

"There's quite a lot to take in," I couldn't help saying, earning a sharp look from Livvie.

The waiter appeared then - perfect timing - to take our orders. Though I noticed Richie seemed more interested in studying the dynamics at our table than the menu.

"The chef's tasting menu is excellent," Trevor suggested, his accent getting thicker. "Though some dishes might be a bit... spicy."

I kicked him under the table. We'd discussed this - no tampering with anyone's food, no matter how tempting.

Jeremy

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I watched Trevor's expression as he mentioned the spice levels, recognizing that particular glint in his eye. Bloody hell, he better not be planning anything with the food. The last thing we needed was this dinner turning into even more of a disaster.

Livvie's hand found mine under the table, and I squeezed it gently. She was trying so hard to appear calm, but I could feel her tension. Across the table, Richie's eyes tracked the movement, his expression darkening slightly.

"The carnitas are particularly good," I suggested, hoping to move things along. Though honestly, food was the last thing on my mind. What I wouldn't give for Michelle's chaos right now - at least that would break this bloody awful tension.

"J's quite familiar with the menu," Trevor said, his voice carrying that edge that usually meant trouble. "Being family and all."

"So, you two dated but now you're best friends?" Richie asked, "I guess it never connected when Liv mentioned it... I guess you're bi?"

The bluntness of his question made me tense. I felt Livvie's hand tighten in mine, heard Trevor's sharp intake of breath. This was exactly the kind of conversation I'd hoped to avoid.

"My sexuality isn't really dinner conversation," I said carefully, keeping my voice steady despite my rising irritation. "But yes, Trevor and I have known each other a long time. We're family now."

"Family," Richie repeated, his tone suggesting he didn't quite believe it. "Right."

Amber cleared her throat. "The wine's lovely, isn't it, Olivia?"

Poor Olivia looked like she wanted to disappear into her chair. Can't say I blamed her - this dinner was becoming exactly the disaster I'd feared it would be.

"You know, if you're that interested in our sexuality, yes. Jeremy is bi, just like Livvie there. As for me? I thought I was gay until I fell in love with Amber. She's the only girl I've ever been with. Sexuality being a spectrum and all. But now that we got that sorted, what will you have for dinner?" Trevor asked with an evil gleam in his eye.

Bloody hell. Thank you Trevor. "I know what Livvie will have. She loves your Irish Stew Burritos," I said, trying to steer us back to safer territory.

Livvie nodded, squeezing my hand. "Aye. My favorite food."

The way she emphasized the word 'favorite' wasn't lost on me - or Richie, judging by his expression. My wife might be anxious about this dinner, but she wasn't subtle about making her choices clear.
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"So, Richie, you're from Australia. What brings you to Ireland?" Amber asked, smoothly changing the subject.

"I'm an Australian Rules Football coach at the secondary level and one of my counterparts in the youth GAA wanted to work on a collaboration," he explained.

"How lovely," Trevor said, though his tone suggested he found it anything but.

"Amber, you look familiar," Olivia finally spoke up, seeming grateful for a new topic.

Amber smiled, "I'm the CEO and founder of Amber Nichole Cosmetics."

"Yes! I just purchased your Everyday Basics palette and your foundation. It's the nicest makeup I've ever worn. It's so weightless, but it lasts. I'm wearing it now actually," Olivia said enthusiastically.

Amber was beaming, "I'm so glad you love it as much as I do."

The genuine interaction between the two women eased some of the tension in the room, though I noticed Richie's attention hadn't shifted from Livvie.

"Amber has always loved makeup," Liv chimed in, clearly trying to keep the conversation flowing.

"It's so weird to hear you talk now, Liv. You don't sound Aussie at all. You sound so Irish," Richie said, his eyes still fixed on my wife.

Liv shrugged, her hand still firmly in mine. "Almost 15 years with J... my Aussie comes out on some words, but yeah, my accent morphed after we moved in together."

The way Richie's expression tightened at the mention of our years together didn't escape my notice. Though watching him stare at my wife like she was still his to claim was starting to test my patience.

"Trevor, why don't you show the girls your pet lobster? Patrick is Cork's most famous lobster," I suggested, needing a moment alone with Richie.

"Oh yes, I even designed some merch. Olivia, you have got to see the t-shirt. It has a picture of Patrick in a chef's hat," Amber said enthusiastically as she and Trevor led Liv and Olivia away.

As soon as they were out of earshot, I turned to face Richie. The tension that had been simmering all evening was about to come to a head, and honestly, I welcomed it. Better to have this out now than let it fester through the whole meal.

"Right then," I said quietly, my accent getting thicker with anger. "Let's sort this. You need to stop looking at my wife like that."

"Like what?" Richie challenged, though we both knew exactly what I meant.

"Like she's still yours to want. Like you didn't try to convince her to have an affair with you despite your own wife sitting right there."

His eyes narrowed. "You know about that?"

"Of course I bloody know. Liv tells me everything." I leaned forward slightly. "So let me be very clear - she chose me. She'll always choose me. And if you try anything tonight..."

"You'll what?" Richie's Australian accent got stronger. "Throw me out of your ex-boyfriend's restaurant?"

"Actually," I smiled, but there was no warmth in it, "I was thinking we could have a chat about what exactly you said to my wife. In detail. With your wife present."

The color drained from Richie's face. "You wouldn't."

"Try me," I said calmly. "Because right now, I'm trying very hard to be civil. To respect Liv's wish to handle this her way. But if you keep looking at her like that, if you say one more thing to make her uncomfortable..."

"She came to me," Richie said defensively. "She wanted to talk."

"Aye, to clear the air. To show you she's happy. That what we have is real." I kept my voice steady despite my rising anger. "Not to have you proposition her."

"I just thought-"

"You thought wrong," I cut him off. "And now you're going to spend the rest of this dinner being perfectly pleasant. You're going to stop staring at my wife. You're going to treat your own wife with respect. Or I will make sure Olivia knows exactly what kind of man she married."

“Il have never cheated on Olivia. I love her. Seeing Livvie again, just…”

"You realized you still love her. I get it - Liv is extraordinary. She's beautiful, brilliant, and seeing her again after all these years... I understand why those feelings came rushing back. But mate, she's my wife. She chose me, she built a life with me, and we have our babies together. Those feelings you're dealing with? They're yours to handle. But if you ever try to act on them again, if you make her uncomfortable one more time, I promise you'll regret it."

Richie's jaw tightened. "Are you threatening me?"

"No, I'm being very clear about boundaries," I kept my voice low and steady. "You have a wife who clearly adores you. Focus on that. Because if you keep pushing this with Liv..."

"You'll what?" he challenged, though I could see uncertainty in his eyes.

"Let's just say I've learned a few things from my best friend about making life difficult for people who threaten my family's happiness."

"If you're threatened by me that tells me there is a reason. Maybe you realize Livvie would be happier with me. Happier in her home country with someone that doesn't make her change her accent," Richie said.

I rolled my eyes, "I didn't make her change a bloody thing about her. It happened organically."

"Did it? Because the Liv I knew would never have left Australia permanently. Would never have given up her identity like that."

"The Liv you knew was running from her past," I said quietly, my anger cooling into something more dangerous. "She wasn't happy then, mate. She was surviving. What we built together - that's where she found herself. Found peace."

"And you think you're the reason for that?"

"No, she did that herself. I just loved her through it. Something you never got the chance to do because you weren't what she needed."

Something flickered in Richie's eyes - hurt, maybe, or recognition. "You don't know what we had."

"Actually, I do. Liv's told me everything. About uni, about your relationship, about how you tried to 'save' her when she was spiraling." I leaned forward slightly. "But you didn't understand what she really needed. You wanted to fix her, make her better. I just wanted to love her exactly as she was."

"And now?" Richie challenged. "Now that she's successful, stable... now you think you deserve her?"

"Deserve her?" I couldn't help but laugh. "Mate, you still don't get it. This isn't about deserving. It's about choosing. Every day, we choose each other. Through everything - the twins, our careers, all of it. She's not with me because I deserve her. She's with me because we built this life together."

The sound of approaching footsteps told me our time was running out. "So one last time - back off. Focus on your wife. And let Liv be happy."

Before Richie could respond, the others returned, Olivia excitedly showing off her new Patrick the Lobster t-shirt.

"Look what Amber gave me!" she beamed, completely unaware of the tension between her husband and me.

"It's adorable," Liv said, settling back into her seat beside me. Her hand found mine immediately, and I felt some of my anger dissipate at her touch.

"The lobster really is quite famous," Trevor added, though his eyes narrowed as he looked between Richie and me. He'd always been good at reading a room.

"Everything okay here?" Amber asked carefully, and I caught the warning look she gave Trevor.

"Perfect," I said, squeezing Liv's hand. "Just getting to know each other better."

The waiter appeared with our food, and I noticed Richie's attention had finally shifted to his own wife. Good. Maybe he'd actually listened.

Livvie

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Something had shifted while we were looking at Patrick. The tension between J and Richie felt different now - more defined somehow. J's hand was steady in mine, but I could feel the remnants of anger in his touch.

I watched Richie actually look at Olivia for what felt like the first time all evening, guilt flickering across his face as she showed him her new t-shirt. Whatever J had said to him seemed to have made an impact.

"The food looks amazing," I said, trying to keep things moving smoothly. Though I couldn't help but notice Trevor watching the plate placed in front of Richie with particular interest.

"Trevor," I caught his eye, raising an eyebrow. "You promised."

"What?" he asked innocently, though the gleam in his eye suggested otherwise. "Just making sure everything is prepared to our usual standards. So, Richie, have you been to the Cliffs of Moher?"

Amber kicked him under the table - not exactly subtly.

I shot Trevor a warning look. Between his not-so-subtle cliff references and whatever conversation had happened between J and Richie, this dinner was walking a dangerous line.

"We haven't had the chance yet," Olivia answered, seemingly oblivious to the underlying tension. "Though I'd love to see them. The photos look stunning."

"They are," J said, his thumb absently stroking my hand under the table. "Quite a drop though."

I squeezed his hand in warning. "The Giant's Causeway is lovely too," I said quickly, trying to steer us away from cliff discussions. "Much safer."

"Speaking of safety," Amber cut in smoothly, "how are the twins doing? Is Killy's arm healing well?"

"Oh, Richie told me about him breaking his arm. Poor little love. How is he?" Olivia asked.

"He's hanging in. Quite a trooper my boy. It's going to be a long few weeks protecting him from his twin, but we're managing," I said, unable to keep the pride from my voice when talking about my children.

I caught the flash of something in Richie's eyes at my mention of 'my boy' - pain maybe, or regret. But for the first time tonight, he didn't stare at me. Instead, he looked at Olivia, really looked at her, as she asked about the twins.

"Rose is trying very hard to be gentle," J added, his accent softening the way it always did when he talked about our children. "Though her version of gentle still needs some work."

"They're with Niamh tonight?" Amber asked, though she knew perfectly well where they were.

"Aye, having a sleepover with their Mamo," I smiled, remembering how excited Rose had been. "Along with Rachel."

Amber smiled, "I'm sure Niamh is in heaven having all her grandkids with her."

"Wait, who is Niamh?" Richie asked.

"My mam," Trevor explained.

"So how is she related to your kids, Livvie?"

"Oh, she took J in as another son. She treats the twins the same as Rachel," I said, watching Richie try to process this.

"Wait, so the mum of your ex-boyfriend is like a grandmum to your kids?" Richie asked J.

"Not like. She is. She's my mam now. My birth mam was shite. Niamh is my mam in every way that matters. Trev and I are brothers," J explained.

"And exes..." Richie said, his tone suggesting he couldn't quite wrap his head around it.

I felt J tense beside me, saw Trevor's expression darken slightly. Our carefully constructed family dynamic probably seemed strange to outsiders, but it worked for us. It was real.

"Yes, exes," Amber said firmly. "And now brothers. Family. It's really not that complicated."

"Just... unusual," Richie said, and something in his tone made me bristle.

"What's unusual about it?" I found myself saying. "That they managed to build something beautiful from their past? That we all chose to be family?"

J's hand tightened on mine, a silent show of support.

"I just meant..." Richie started, but Olivia cut him off.

"I think it's lovely," she said sincerely. "That you've all created this extended family. That the twins have so many people who love them."

"They do," I agreed, grateful for her understanding. "Between their Mamo, their aunts and uncles, their cousins... they're surrounded by love."

"Even if some of that family started in unexpected ways," Trevor added, his earlier antagonism softening as he looked at J.

"Like Michelle," Amber added with a slight smile. "Talk about unexpected family."

"Michelle?" Olivia asked.

"J's best friend," I explained, though that barely scratched the surface of Michelle's role in our lives. "She's like the chaotic sister none of us asked for but somehow can't live without."

"Though sometimes we'd like to try," Trevor muttered, making J laugh.

"She means well," J defended, though I could hear the amusement in his voice. "Most of the time."

"When she's not trying to create drama," Amber added.

"Or meddle in everyone's relationships," Trevor said pointedly.

I caught the confused look on Richie's face as he tried to follow our easy banter, the way we could joke about even the complicated parts of our family dynamic. It struck me then - he really didn't understand what we had. What we'd built.

"Michelle Morris. Well Michelle Bradley to us," I clarified.

"Oh right, her tour is why you were in Australia," Richie said.

I nodded, "Yeah... she's not just J's client. She's his best friend."

"The Michelle Morris is your best friend?" Richie asked J, clearly surprised.

"Aye," J said simply. "Has been for years now."

I watched Richie try to process this new information - another piece of our life he couldn't quite grasp. The way his eyes kept darting between all of us suggested he was finally starting to understand just how much he didn't understand about our world.

"That must be interesting," Olivia said genuinely. "I love her music. Though the media seems quite focused on her personal life lately."

"The media's always focused on her personal life," Amber rolled her eyes. "Especially when they can create drama about Hunter."

"Or about J," I added, remembering the latest round of affair rumors. "They love implying there's something going on between them."

"Which is ridiculous," Trevor said. "Anyone who's spent five minutes with them knows they're just family."

"Though Michelle does love to stir things up," Amber smiled. "Remember what she tried to pull at Disney?"

"We don't talk about Disney," J and Trevor said in unison, making me laugh despite everything.

The easy way they played off each other - even about uncomfortable memories - seemed to further confuse Richie. His expression suggested he was trying to reconcile the J he'd met in Australia with this J, who had this whole rich life filled with complicated but genuine relationships.

"So, Olivia," I decided to shift the focus, "Richie mentioned you're from Singapore originally?"

"Yes," she smiled, seeming grateful for the attention. "Though I've been in Australia since university. That's where Richie and I met - he was coaching at my brother's school."

I felt J relax slightly beside me as the conversation moved to safer territory. Though I noticed Richie's expression change when Olivia mentioned how they met - like he was just now really seeing his wife.

"Singapore's beautiful," Amber added. "I did some modeling there years ago. The food is incredible."

"Oh god yes," Olivia's face lit up. "Though I miss it sometimes. Australia has decent Asian food but..."

"It's not the same," I finished, understanding completely. "Like how the Irish food is amazing but sometimes I just want a proper meat pie from home."

"Or a chicken parma," Richie added quietly, the first normal contribution he'd made all evening.

"God yes, a proper chicken parma," I agreed before I could stop myself. "Though Trevor's come close with his version."

"Still not quite right though," Trevor admitted. "Some things you just can't replicate perfectly."

"Like how Michelle complains about the Guinness in Nashville," Amber added.

"That's because American Guinness is shite," J and Trevor said simultaneously, then looked at each other and laughed.

The moment of genuine amusement between them seemed to finally break through something in Richie. He looked at Olivia again, really looked at her, as she chatted with Amber about Singapore street food.

"The laksa here isn't bad," Trevor offered. "Not Singapore standard, but I've been working on the recipe."

"Really?" Olivia perked up even more. "I'd love to try it sometime."

I caught the slight flinch from Richie at the idea of future meals together, though he covered it quickly.

"I've been experimenting with different spice blends," Trevor continued, his chef's passion taking over. "Though getting the authentic ingredients can be challenging in Cork."

"My brother sends me spices sometimes," Olivia offered. "I could share some..."

"That would be brilliant," Trevor smiled genuinely, and I could see Amber watching him with pride. He truly loved sharing food with people, creating connections through cuisine.

The conversation drifted into a discussion about Asian markets in Ireland versus Australia, and I felt myself relaxing slightly. This was better - normal conversation, no underlying tension. Even Richie seemed less focused on me, actually engaging when Olivia mentioned a particular spice shop in Brisbane.

J's thumb stroked my hand under the table, and I leaned into him slightly. Maybe we could salvage this dinner after all.

Amber
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As dinner came to a close we said our goodbyes to Richie and Olivia. Once they left, Trevor looked at Jeremy.

"What a bloody wanker," Trevor said, his accent thick with irritation.

I laughed, "Trev..."

"What? He was," Trevor defended, and I could tell he'd been holding that in all night.

"I'm not gonna disagree," Jeremy said, pulling Liv closer.

"What did you say to him when we left the table?" I asked, curious about the shift in dynamics we'd noticed upon returning.

"Just made sure he understood some boundaries," Jeremy said carefully, though his accent had gotten thicker again.

"Boundaries?" Liv asked, looking between them. "What exactly happened while we were with Patrick?"

"Nothing major," Jeremy assured her, but Trevor snorted.

"Right, which is why you looked ready to throw him off the nearest cliff," Trevor said. "But seriously, mate, what did you say to him?"

Jeremy sighed, his arm still protectively around Liv. "Just made it clear that his feelings for Liv were his problem to deal with, not hers. And that if he ever tried anything like that again..."

"You threatened him?" Liv asked, though she didn't sound upset.

"Not exactly," Jeremy said. "Just helped him understand some things about our family. About what we have."

"And about what would happen if he tried to mess with that," Trevor added knowingly.

"I think he got the message," Jeremy said.

"Hey, at least he wasn't as bad as Brody," I said, trying to lighten the mood.

"Not sure anyone could be," Livvie said. "No, I do believe Richie is a good bloke. He just got caught up in his feelings."

"Aye, with another man's wife," Trevor said, his accent thick with disapproval.

"At least he seemed to finally notice his own wife by the end," I pointed out. "Olivia seems lovely."

"She does," Livvie agreed. "And she clearly adores him. Hopefully tonight helped him remember that."

"If not, there's always the cliffs," Trevor muttered, earning an elbow in the ribs from me.

"So, you leave for Paris in the morning?" Livvie asked, clearly ready to move past the evening's drama.

I nodded, "Yeah. I feel like I've only had a day or two home in the last month. But after Paris I'm done with fashion weeks until Spring."

"Taking the wee one and Niamh?" Jeremy asked.

I nodded, already looking forward to having them with me. Though guilt crept in as Liv smiled.

"Yeah, you've got to stop taking Niamh. The twins need their Mamo," she teased.

"So does Rachel," I replied softly.

"We should get going, if you need us though..." Trevor started, the protective brother showing through.

Jeremy nodded, understanding everything Trevor wasn't saying. "I know. Thank you."

We exchanged hugs - our little chosen family, stronger than any drama life could throw at us. As we headed to our respective cars, I couldn't help but think how lucky we all were to have found each other, complicated histories and all.

I settled into the passenger seat as Trevor started the car, watching Jeremy and Liv head toward their own vehicle.

"They'll be okay," Trevor said quietly, reading my thoughts as usual.

"I know," I smiled, reaching for his hand. "They're solid. Though I have to admit, watching you and Jeremy handle this together... that was something."

"Aye," he squeezed my hand. "Though I still say we should have let Michelle handle it. She'd have made his life properly difficult."

I laughed, "Mi corazón, the last thing this situation needed was Michelle's particular brand of chaos."

"Speaking of chaos," Trevor grinned as he pulled out onto the road, "want to bet how long before she finds out about tonight?"

"Oh god," I groaned. "She probably already knows. She has some sort of drama radar."

"At least she's in Nashville," Trevor said. "Too far away to meddle properly."

"You clearly don't know Michelle very well," I smiled, already imagining the calls we'd be getting once she heard about this dinner.

"True," Trevor laughed. "Though I'd pay good money to see her reaction when she hears about Richie propositioning Liv."

"No you wouldn't," I shook my head. "Because the moment she finds out, she'll somehow twist this into proof that you and Jeremy should be together."

"Bloody hell, you're right," Trevor groaned. "She'll probably try to convince everyone that Richie and Liv belong together so Jeremy and I can reunite."

"While completely ignoring that we exist," I added dryly.

"Or that Jeremy and I are happier as brothers than we ever were as lovers," Trevor said, then smiled at me. "Besides, I quite like where I ended up."

"Good answer," I leaned over to kiss his cheek. "Now let's go home and finish packing for Paris. And maybe figure out how to keep Michelle from finding out about tonight's dinner until we're safely out of the country."

"Too late for that," Trevor nodded toward my phone, which was lighting up with a text. "Ten euros says that's her now."

"Glitter & Glamour"

The flash of cameras was nothing new - I'd walked enough red carpets to be immune. But having reality TV cameras following our every move? That was different.

Trevor and I made our way down the Paris red carpet, his hand steady at the small of my back. It was only our second day here, but already the French press was buzzing about the "Irish celebrity chef and his beauty mogul wife." Our growing status as a power couple still felt surreal sometimes.

"Over here!" a photographer called. "Mr. and Mrs. O'Sullivan!"

We turned, practiced smiles in place. The reality show cameras caught every moment as we fielded questions about Amber Nichole, Trevor's upcoming Limerick restaurant, our "enviable marriage." It was strange having our lives documented like this, but Holly had assured us the exposure would be good for both our brands.

I caught Trevor's eye between photos, saw the slight amusement there. Who would have thought a con-artist from San Diego and the chef from Kilmaley would become this?

"Mi corazón," I murmured as we moved down the carpet, "you're going to have to stop looking at me like that or these photos will be very different from what Holly wants."

"Can't help it," he whispered back, his accent thickening slightly. "You in that dress..."

"Save it for after the cameras," I smiled, though I couldn't help leaning into him slightly as another flash went off.

"Amber! Can you tell us about the Rachel Amber ghost launch?" a reporter called out.

I shifted into professional mode, ready to discuss business. Though part of me was still processing how far we'd come - from my days of running cons to becoming a legitimate CEO, from Trevor's small kitchen in Kilmaley to his Michelin star. Sometimes it felt like a dream.

"The ghost launch exceeded our expectations," I said smoothly, falling into my CEO persona. "Creating our own dupe line before competitors could was a risk, but our customers appreciated the transparency."

"And the innovation," Trevor added proudly. The way he championed my success still made my heart flutter, even after all this time.

"Trevor! Any truth to the rumors about Gordon Ramsay visiting the Cantina again?"

I felt Trevor tense slightly beside me - Ramsay was still a sore spot, especially after his last "surprise" visit. "No comment on that," he managed diplomatically, though his accent got thicker.

The reality show producer signaled for us to wrap up the carpet walk. As we headed inside, I couldn't help but think about how different this was from my old life.

"You okay?" Trevor asked quietly as we made our way to our seats.

"Yeah, just thinking about my old life," I smiled, but then I saw Bre and Brody. "Speaking of my old life."

Trev turned, "Oy. Is she here to hock her third rate foundation again?"

"Probably. Bre never misses a chance to be the center of attention," I said, watching my sister work the room. Even from here, I could tell she was wearing Doll 10's latest foundation - the coverage was patchy at best.

The reality show cameras were still rolling, which meant I needed to maintain my professional composure. Though honestly, after Bre's behavior at my launch, I was tempted to let them capture exactly what I thought about my sister's attempts to undermine me.

"Don't," Trevor murmured, reading my expression. "She's not worth giving the cameras that kind of drama."

"Says the man who let Thara destroy her products," I whispered back, making him grin.

"That was different. That was Michelle's demon cat acting independently," he defended, though his eyes sparkled with mischief.

I watched Bre spot us, saw her expression tighten before she plastered on that fake smile she'd perfected. "Here we go," I muttered.

"Amber! Trevor!" Bre's voice carried across the room with practiced enthusiasm. "What a surprise seeing you here."

"Is it?" I asked smoothly. "Given that I've been at every fashion week this season?"

Brody hovered behind her like an expensive shadow, looking as uncomfortable as ever since the Fashion Week incident.

"Well, you never know with your... busy schedule," Bre's smile didn't reach her eyes. "How is the mass market line doing?"

"Rachel Amber? Breaking sales records," I said, enjoying the way her smile faltered. "Turns out customers appreciate honesty about dupes. Speaking of which, how's that new foundation formula working out?"

Trevor's hand found the small of my back - support and warning all at once. The reality show cameras were eating this up, but I needed to maintain that professional edge.

"Our formulas are doctor-approved," Bre said stiffly.

"By a chiropractor," I couldn't help adding. "But hey, at least the coverage is... consistent."

"At least our products have medical backing," Brody spoke up, apparently forgetting how well that had worked out last time.

"Right," Trevor's accent got thicker. "Because your mother's opinions on sunscreen being toxic are so scientific."

I felt rather than saw the reality show producer getting excited about this exchange. Drama with my sister would make for perfect TV, but I needed to handle this carefully. My brands' reputations were too important to risk.

"You know what?" I smiled sweetly. "We should focus on the positive. Like how Amber Nichole and Rachel Amber are both outperforming expectations. Or how Doll 10 is... still in business."

Bre's perfectly lined lips tightened. "We'll see you at the shows, big sister. Though you might want to check your seating assignments."

"Already did," I replied smoothly. "Front row, as usual. Lydia makes sure of that."

The mention of Lydia made Bre's eye twitch slightly - she'd never gotten over being snubbed by the fashion icon.

"How is Lydia?" Brody asked, trying to sound casual. "I heard she's finally considering a men's line."

"Aye," Trevor smirked. "Though I doubt you're what she has in mind for modeling it."

"Lydia was actually inspired to do a men's line by Trevor. She said he has a perfect male form," I smiled, enjoying how both Bre and Brody's expressions soured at that information.

"Though she needs to stop trying to measure my inseam herself," Trevor muttered, making me laugh.

"Oh, that's right," I continued innocently. "She did mention wanting you as her primary model. Something about how suits hang perfectly on your shoulders..."

Bre's carefully applied makeup couldn't quite hide her rising color, while Brody looked like he'd swallowed something unpleasant. The reality show producer was practically vibrating with excitement at this exchange.

"Speaking of Lydia," Trevor said, glancing at his watch, "we should head to our seats. She'll kill us if we're late to her show."

"Of course," I smiled at my sister. "Always lovely catching up, Bre. Good luck with... whatever it is you're doing here."

Trev and I found our seats, which happened to be next to Nicole Kidman and her daughter. I knew Livvie was a huge fan of her, and Michelle counted her as a friend. I also knew Nicole had just filed for divorce from her husband (and she had the break-up bangs to match), so between the press swarming her and the attention Trev and I were generating, this was going to be intense.

"Hi," I smiled as I sat.

"Hi... Amber, you're Michelle Morris's friend, right?" Nicole asked me.

"Well, she's more of my husband's friend, but, sure... let's call her my friend," I said, making her laugh.

"I thought I recognized you. You were at Tomi's party at Disney," she said.

I nodded, "We were. This is my husband, Trevor."

"Nice to see you again Nicole," he said politely.

"I have used some of your new makeup. It's phenomenal," she said.

I smiled, genuinely pleased. "Thank you. I'm so glad you like it. It was a true labor of love."

"I think that shows in the formulas."

We chatted until the show was about to start, the reality show cameras capturing every moment of this casual interaction with Hollywood royalty.

The lights dimmed as Lydia's show began. I could feel the reality show cameras still rolling behind us, probably thrilled to capture me sitting front row with Nicole Kidman at Paris Fashion Week. The producer was probably already planning how to edit this to maximize drama - especially after that encounter with Bre.

Speaking of my sister, I could see her a few rows back, trying not to look bothered by her seating assignment. The fact that she was wearing one of last season's designers probably didn't help her mood.

"Your sister seems... intense," Nicole murmured as the first model appeared.

"That's one word for it," I whispered back, watching the stunning pieces Lydia had created. Several of the models were wearing Amber Nichole makeup - the colors perfectly complementing the collection.

Trevor's hand found mine as we watched, and I couldn't help but smile. Everything we'd built together - his restaurants, my cosmetics lines, our beautiful family - it still felt surreal sometimes. In the best possible way.

Michelle

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I stood in my Nashville apartment, staring at the designer gown laid out on my bed. Tonight was different from other premieres - this wasn't just another project, this was my show. My character. My comeback to series television.
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"Mommy hasn't been this excited about a red carpet in years," I told Thara, who was sprawled across my dresser with her usual royal indifference. "Yeah, I know, you're not impressed. And this is one red carpet you can't steal the spotlight at."

The thought of walking it alone made my chest ache. Having my family safe in Ireland was worth it, but moments like this... the empty apartment felt heavier than usual.

A knock at my door startled me. I wasn't expecting anyone - Holly wasn't due for hours. When I opened it, my heart actually stopped. Hunter stood there, somehow looking devastatingly handsome despite obvious jet lag.

"Oh my god, Hunter? What are you doing here? Are you here? Am I dreaming?" The words tumbled out.

"No baby, I'm here, in the flesh," he smiled, opening his arms.

I launched myself at him, and he caught me easily, lifting me up as I peppered his face with kisses. "Oh my god, baby, I'm so happy to see you."

Hunter chuckled against my lips, "Holly helped me plan this and keep it a secret. It's a big night for you. Couldn't have you walking the red carpet without me."

I kissed him again, my heart so full it hurt. Hunter hated red carpets, avoided them whenever possible. The fact that he'd not only flown here but made it a surprise... god, I loved this man more than ever.

"The girls?" I asked between kisses, though I hated to pause even for questions.

"With your mom. Tomi's been practicing saying 'surprise' all week - I'm shocked she didn't give it away during our calls."

I finally pulled back enough to really look at him. Even exhausted from the flight, he was the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen. "I can't believe you're here."

"Believe it," he smiled, his hands settling on my waist. "Though we should probably start getting ready. Unless you want to give the press something really interesting to talk about."

"Don't tempt me," I murmured, but I knew he was right. "How long do I get to keep you?"

"Three days. Then I need to get back to the girls." His thumb stroked my hip. "But tonight is about you. About your show."

Thara finally decided to acknowledge Hunter's presence, jumping down to wind around his legs in greeting.

"Of course now you decide to be social," I told Thara, though I couldn't stop smiling. "You've been ignoring me all day, but Hunter shows up and suddenly you're all attention."

"She misses me," Hunter grinned, bending to scratch behind her ears. "Don't you, beautiful?"

"Both of my girls are traitors," I said, but the happiness in my voice betrayed me. "Though speaking of beautiful... please tell me you remembered your suit."

"When have I ever forgotten?" he smiled, that confident smile that still made my heart skip. "Though no tie."

"Never a tie," I agreed, already picturing how he'd look. The press would go crazy - they always did when Hunter made rare appearances with me, especially since he somehow managed to look runway-ready in just a perfectly fitted suit and open collar. "Though right now, you need a shower and I need to start my makeup."

"Or..." Hunter's hands found my waist again, pulling me closer.

"Don't you dare distract me," I warned, though I was already melting into his touch. "We have a schedule."

"Since when do you care about schedules?" Hunter murmured against my neck.

"Since Holly will literally murder us both if we're late to my own premiere," I managed, though my resolve was weakening. "And the press is already watching for any sign of trouble between us after those Jessica Simpson rumors..."

"Fine," Hunter sighed, pressing one last kiss to my temple. "But after the premiere..."

"All yours," I promised. "Now go shower while I try to make myself camera-ready."

I watched him head toward the bathroom, still hardly believing he was here. Thara jumped back onto the dresser, giving me her usual judgmental stare as I started my makeup routine.

"Don't look at me like that," I told her. "You're just as happy to see him as I am."

I put on my makeup and finished fixing my hair, then slipped into my denim gown. Yes, denim. I'd told Lydia I needed something for the premiere, and she'd taken "Nashville" and "country" and created... this. It was her usual impeccable cut and style, but made entirely of denim. Leave it to Lydia to hear "Nashville" and immediately think 'denim ball gown.' It was beautiful though, if completely unexpected.

Hunter came out of the bathroom wearing his signature black Gucci suit with a crimson shirt. He looked spectacular, as always. The man could make anything look good, but there was something about the way his suits fit...

"Oh wow, Mich, that dress. It's..."

"Something. I know." I laughed.

"But you make it work. You look amazing baby," he said, his eyes taking me in with that look that still made me feel like the most beautiful woman in the world.

I smiled and reached for my clutch - a vintage piece that had seen me through countless red carpets. "Be good, Thara," I called to my cat, who had claimed her usual spot on the window ledge. She flicked her tail in response, clearly unimpressed by our glamour.

Hunter's arm felt solid under my hand as we headed out. Even after all these years, having him beside me at these events felt special - probably because he hated the spotlight so much but would brave it for me.

The elevator ride down was filled with that familiar pre-event energy, though having Hunter beside me made it different. Better. Usually these premieres meant facing the press gauntlet alone, fielding endless questions about my personal life. But tonight...

"Ready?" Hunter asked as we reached the lobby.

"With you here? Always," I smiled, squeezing his arm. The photographers outside were already going crazy, their flashes visible through the glass doors. Having Hunter make a rare red carpet appearance was going to send the entertainment media into overdrive.

The limo ride was quiet, peaceful - our own private bubble before the chaos. When we arrived, Hunter stepped out first, ever graceful despite his distaste for these events, then offered his hand to help me navigate the denim gown's exit from the car.

The press reaction was immediate and intense. Cameras flashed from every angle, questions overlapping each other in an eager jumble. Hunter's hand stayed steady at the small of my back as we made our way down the carpet, his public smile perfectly masking how much he hated this kind of attention.

We moved through the familiar dance - poses together, then solo shots, then photos with my cast. Through it all, the questions kept coming, growing more insistent with each flash. Hunter handled it all with his usual quiet dignity, though I could feel the tension in his touch.

"Michelle! Hunter! Over here!"

"How do you respond to Jessica Simpson's new songs?"

"Michelle, can you comment on the Harley situation?"

"Hunter, why aren't you in Nashville full time?"

The questions came rapid-fire, each one more invasive than the last. Hunter's hand stayed firm against my back as we maintained our media smiles.

"Michelle! Is it true you're leaving the show after one season?"

"Hunter, are the rumors about you and Jessica..."

"We're just here to celebrate the premiere," Hunter cut in smoothly, his voice carrying that quiet authority that somehow commanded more attention than shouting ever could.

"Michelle, your dress is stunning! Who designed it?"

Finally, a question I could actually answer. "Lydia James. She heard 'Nashville premiere' and created this incredible denim piece."

"Hunter, how do you feel about Michelle's return to series television?"

"Incredibly proud," he said simply, and I could hear the genuine emotion beneath his practiced response.

"We all are," a familiar voice called out. I turned to see my brother Zachary and his wife Kelly.

"Oh my god!" I forgot about the cameras for a moment, launching myself at my big brother. "I wasn't expecting you here!"

"You didn't think I would miss my little sister's premiere, did you? I'm so proud of you, Mich," Zachary said as he hugged me back.

"Congratulations," Kelly echoed, pulling me into a hug next.

I squeezed her tight before remembering where we were. The photographers went crazy as I posed with Zack, then Hunter and Kelly joined us for family shots. The four of us had perfected this routine over the years - the Morris-Bradley family's public face.

"Zack, is it weird seeing your sister on TV without you?" someone called out.

Zachary laughed, his media training as smooth as ever. "I mean, a bit. All of her scripted TV work has been with me, but she is certainly talented enough to do it without me on screen. I'm super proud of her."

"Were you scared to do a series without Zack?"

I nodded, keeping it honest. "Honestly, I was at first. It was a new challenge to not have our brother/sister dynamic to lean into, but it was also a lot of fun to do something on my own." I felt Hunter's hand at my back again. "Now, we really have to get inside, but thank you all for being here."

As we made our way inside, I held onto both Hunter and Zack, still processing this surprise. "Did everyone know about this except me?"

"Pretty much," Zack grinned. "Mom's been dying to tell you all week."

"The girls too," Hunter added. "Harley almost slipped up twice during our video calls."

"Speaking of the girls," Kelly said as we found our seats, "how are they handling the Irish school system?"

"Better than expected," Hunter smiled. "Though Harley's still protesting the uniforms."

"Of course she is," Zack laughed. "She's definitely got that Morris stubborn streak."

I was about to respond when Holly appeared, tablet in hand. "Two minutes until showtime. Michelle, you're needed for the introduction."

I squeezed Hunter's hand before standing. "Be right back."

"Break a leg, baby," he smiled, and for a moment, it was just us - no cameras, no press, no pressure. Just my husband looking at me like I was everything.

I made my way to the stage, my denim gown catching the lights in ways Lydia had probably calculated precisely. The network executives were beaming - having Hunter, Zachary, and Kelly here had created exactly the kind of buzz they wanted for the premiere.

"Ladies and gentlemen," the network president began his introduction. "Tonight we're proud to present our new series..."

I let his words wash over me, my eyes finding Hunter in the audience. He gave me that small, private smile - the one reserved just for me. Zack caught my eye too, giving me a subtle thumbs up like he used to do before our childhood performances.

When it was my turn to speak, I stepped up to the microphone. All those years of public appearances made this feel natural, though having my family here made it different. Special.

"Thank you all for being here tonight," I began, my voice steady and sure. "This show has been such an adventure from day one, and I could not be more excited to finally bring Dixie to life for you all tonight. I want to thank everyone involved, and it's a huge, wonderful team. Thank you for letting me play in Dixie's world and for giving me a chance to revisit acting. It's been a minute, and it's been nice to be on set again. I hope you all love watching the show as much as I have loved filming it so far."

The words came from my heart - this role really had rekindled something in me. As I made my way back to my seat between Hunter and Zachary after all the speeches were done, I felt that familiar pre-show flutter of excitement. But this time, I got to experience it with my family beside me.

Hunter's hand found mine as the lights dimmed, while Zachary gave my shoulder a quick squeeze - our old signal from childhood performances that meant 'you've got this.' As the opening credits began to roll, I couldn't help but smile. This was exactly how this moment should be.

Livvie

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"Mummy!" Killy's distressed voice made me bolt up from my desk and race to the living room.

"What is it?" I asked, then stopped short at the scene before me.
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Rose stood next to her brother, holding an empty bottle of body glitter, looking entirely too pleased with herself. She had somehow managed to dump the entire contents over Killy's cast, and from his uncomfortable squirming, I could tell plenty had gotten inside.

"Fairy Dust fix," Rose announced proudly, her own fairy wings sparkling with evidence of her "helping."

"What's going on?" J's voice carried from his salon before he appeared in the doorway. "Oh Róisín..."

"What? I help," Rose insisted, still clutching the empty bottle like a trophy.

"Itchy," Killy whimpered, trying unsuccessfully to adjust his cast in a way that might dislodge the glitter. His careful, methodical nature was clearly distressed by this unwanted decoration.

"Da, get it out," Killy pleaded, his good hand trying to reach under the cast.

"Don't scratch, love," J moved quickly to stop him. "You'll hurt yourself."

I knelt beside Killy, trying to assess the damage. The cast sparkled like a disco ball, but it was the glitter inside that worried me. "Rose, why did you put glitter on your brother's cast?"

"Make pretty," Rose explained, as if this should have been obvious. "Ki Ki sad about cast. Fairy dust make happy."

"Oh bloody hell," J muttered, examining the cast. "We might need to take him back to hospital."

"No hospital," Killy's eyes went wide.

"Mummy fix?" Rose asked, finally seeming to realize her 'help' might not have been helpful.

"I don't know, fairy girl," I sighed. "This is quite a lot of glitter."

"Maybe we should call Trevor," J suggested. "He's dealt with enough glitter incidents in his drag days."

I nodded, already reaching for my phone. Though explaining to Trevor that his goddaughter had turned his godson's cast into a glitter bomb would be interesting.

"I sorry Ki Ki," Rose said softly, her fairy wings drooping. "Just want help."

"I know, love," J picked her up. "But we need to ask before we decorate people, yeah?"

"Even with fairy dust?"

"Especially with fairy dust," J confirmed, though I could see him fighting a smile.

Killy was still trying not to scratch, his usual patience wearing thin. "Mummy, it's everywhere," he said miserably.

I dialed Trevor's number, praying he'd pick up. Between his restaurant empire and Paris Fashion Week preparations, getting hold of him wasn't always easy.

Trevor answered amid what sounded like a fashion show afterparty. "Hello?"

"Trev, hey, sorry to bother you. Rose dumped glitter on Killy's cast and it's everywhere, even inside. Any ideas or should we head to hospital?" I asked, watching Killy try not to squirm.

"Hold on," Trevor said, and I could hear him moving somewhere quieter. "Right then. What kind of glitter are we dealing with?"

"Rose?" I looked at my daughter. "What fairy dust did you use?"

"The sparkly kind," she said helpfully.

"It's that body glitter from your club days," J clarified, examining the empty bottle.

"Bloody hell," Trevor muttered. "That's fine stuff, it'll get everywhere. Okay, listen carefully - you need baby powder. Lots of it. And those long cotton swabs if you have them."

"Baby powder?" I repeated, making J raise his eyebrows.

"Trust me. Used to use it all the time to get glitter off after shows. Pour it around the edges of the cast, it'll help absorb the glitter and make it easier to get out. Just don't let it clump."

"Da," Killy's voice was getting more distressed. "It's moving when I breathe."

"Hang on, love," I told Killy before turning back to the phone. "Did you get all that Trev?"

"Aye. And Amber says try olive oil if the powder doesn't work. Though that's messier." There was a pause. "Also she's dying laughing about this. Says to send pictures."

"Not helping," I muttered, though I could hear Amber's distinctive laugh in the background.

"Tell Rose good job on the fairy aesthetic though," Trevor added, clearly amused now that it wasn't his problem.

"You're all horrible people," I said, but couldn't help smiling. "Thanks Trev."

J was already heading to the bathroom for baby powder while Rose watched anxiously, her fairy wings drooping further.

"Ki Ki still love me?" she asked in a small voice.

"Of course I do," Killy said immediately, despite his discomfort. "Just no more fairy dust, okay?"

The baby powder helped, but not enough. Glitter still sparkled mockingly from inside the cast, and Killy's increasing discomfort was clear on his face. Finally, I had to admit defeat.

"I'm so sorry, love. I think we need to get you to hospital and have a doctor help," I said, hating to see his face fall at the word 'hospital.'

"I'll stay here with Rose," Jeremy said, lifting our guilty fairy princess into his arms. "You go."

I nodded and went to get my shoes while Killy sat miserably on the couch. He wasn't happy about another hospital visit, but at this point, he just wanted the glitter out. The way he was trying so hard to be brave about it made my heart ache.

"Rose," he called to his sister before we left. "Next time just draw me a picture?"

The drive to A&E was quiet, Killy trying his best not to move his increasingly itchy arm. The staff knew us by now - between Jeremy's accidents and the twins' various mishaps, we were practically regulars.

"Back so soon?" the nurse at reception smiled kindly at Killy. "What happened this time, love?"

"My sister tried to help," Killy explained solemnly. "With fairy dust."

The nurse's professional composure cracked slightly. "Fairy dust?"

"Body glitter," I clarified. "Lots of it. Inside the cast."

"Oh dear," she tried to hide her amusement as she typed into her computer. "Dr. O'Malley'son tonight. He'll know what to do."

As we waited, Killy leaned against me. "Mummy? Do you think Rose will try to fix this too?"

"No, love. Da's keeping her fairy dust far away from you now."

"Good," he nodded seriously.

"Well now, what's this I hear about fairy magic gone wrong?" Dr. O'Malley'sfamiliar voice carried his usual warmth as he entered the exam room.

"Rose wanted to help," Killy explained, holding out his sparkly cast.

"Ah, sisters," the doctor nodded sagely while examining the cast. "I have three myself. Though they preferred markers to glitter." He gently turned Killy's arm, assessing the situation. "Right then, looks like we'll need to remove this cast and fit you with a new one."

"Will it hurt?" Killy asked quietly, his good hand finding mine.

"Not at all," Dr. O'Malley assured him. "Though I must say, this is the most festive cast I've seen all week. Your sister has quite the artistic vision."

"Ro Ro is a fairy," Killy said matter-of-factly.

"Aye, just like your mummy then. And you, dear lad, seem to have a penchant for ending up in A&E like your da," he said.

I sighed, "That is what I'm afraid of."

"Though your da still holds the record for most creative injuries," Dr. O'Malley chuckled as he started working on removing the cast. "I remember when he was in here after falling off a perfectly stable sidewalk. And who could forget the trolleyt incident?"

"Da hurt his foot," Killy nodded seriously. "On the trolley."

"The man can trip over air," I said fondly. "At least you come by your A&E visits honestly, love."

"There we go," Dr. O'Malley said as he carefully removed the glitter-covered cast. "Now, let's check how the break is healing before we put on a new one."

Killy watched intently as the doctor examined his arm, his natural curiosity temporarily overriding his dislike of medical procedures.

"Healing nicely," Dr. O'Malley nodded. "Though let's try to keep this cast fairy dust free, yeah? What color would you like this time?"

"Red," Killy said immediately. "Like before."

"Good choice. Though maybe we should make it glitter-resistant," the doctor winked as he started preparing the new cast materials.

I watched my careful boy stay perfectly still during the process, so different from his sister's constant motion. Though knowing Rose, she was probably already planning new ways to 'help' decorate this cast too.

"Should I text your da?" I asked Killy. "Let him know we'll be home soon?"

"Yes please," Killy nodded, watching Dr. O'Malley work. "Tell Da no more fairy dust."

I pulled out my phone to text J: 'Getting new cast. All good. Please hide ALL of Rose's glitter before we get home.'

J's response was immediate: 'Already done. Rose is very sorry. She's drawn Killy about 47 pictures to make up for it.'

"Your sister's been busy," I told Killy, showing him the text.

"She always is," he said with that particular mix of exasperation and love that only siblings can manage. "But pictures are better than fairy dust."

"Almost done here," Dr. O'Malley announced. "And this time we've made sure there are no gaps for any magical enhancement."

My phone buzzed again - a text from Trevor: 'How's our glitter boy? Amber wants pictures of the sparkly cast before it comes off.'

Amber

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The Lydia James show was, as always, spectacular. She'd masterfully integrated Amber Nichole Cosmetics into every aspect, proving why she was a legend in the industry. The after-party was pure Lydia - extravagant, exclusive, and absolutely perfect.
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During the festivities, Trevor got a call from Liv about Rose's latest adventure in helping - dumping glitter inside Killy's cast. I couldn't help but laugh. It was such a Rose thing to do, her heart pure but her methods... chaotic. In her sweet two-year-old mind, she was fixing things. Rose was a force of nature, just like her madre, always meaning well with often mixed results.

When Liv sent pictures of the "improved" cast, I nearly choked on my champagne. Knowing they'd already cleaned off a significant amount, and seeing how much glitter still remained? Poor Killy. Mi hijo had to be absolutely miserable with all that sparkle inside his cast.

The party flowed around us as we mingled - catching up with Nicole, chatting with various industry players. Some faces I knew through Michelle, others from my modeling days or my current role as CEO. Through it all, I watched Bre and Brody making their desperate rounds. My sister kept throwing me side-eye glances, so obviously hoping to see me fail that she was making herself look ridiculous.

And the best part? The reality show cameras were capturing every moment of her increasingly transparent jealousy.

"Your sister seems... intense tonight," Nicole observed quietly, following my gaze.

"She's not handling our success well," I replied, watching Bre try to corner a Vogue editor who was clearly trying to escape. "Especially since the ghost launch."

Trevor's hand found the small of my back as he returned from getting us fresh drinks. "Amber just revolutionized how luxury brands handle dupes, and Doll 10 is still pushing the same tired formulas."

"With 'medical backing'," I added, making air quotes. The cameras caught the gesture, and I could practically see the producer's excitement at the potential drama.

"Though speaking of formulas," Nicole turned to me, "that foundation you sent over? Amazing. My makeup artist is obsessed."

"Wait until you try the new primer we're launching next month," I smiled, perfectly aware that Bre was now within earshot. "We've developed something completely unique."

The way my sister's shoulders tensed told me she'd heard every word.

"Unique how?" Nicole asked, genuinely interested.

Before I could answer, Trevor's phone buzzed again. He checked it and started laughing. "Look at this," he showed me his screen. "Liv sent an update. They're getting a new cast and Rose has apparently drawn approximately forty-seven apology pictures."

"That sounds about right," I smiled, remembering how Rose approached everything with maximum enthusiasm. "Though maybe we should send them some glitter-proof sealant, just in case."

"Don't encourage her," Trevor warned, though his eyes sparkled with amusement.

I noticed Bre had moved closer, probably hoping to overhear something about the new primer. The reality show cameras followed her not-so-subtle movement, and I had to admire their ability to capture her desperation without being obvious about it.

"So, Nicole," I said, keeping my voice carrying-distance perfect, "about that primer..."

"It's a completely new approach to skin preparation," I explained, knowing Bre was hanging on every word. "We've developed a formula that actually adapts to your skin's needs throughout the day."

"Like your foundation does," Nicole nodded appreciatively.

"Exactly. But we've taken it further. The primer actually helps repair your skin while you wear it." I caught Bre's slight flinch out of the corner of my eye. "No questionable ingredients, just pure science."

Trevor's phone buzzed again. "New cast is red," he reported. "And apparently 'glitter-resistant' according to the doctor."

"We'll see how long that lasts," I smiled. "Rose is nothing if not determined."

"Like her mother," Trevor said fondly, then tensed slightly. I followed his gaze to see Brody approaching, clearly on a mission from my sister.

"Here we go," I murmured, taking a sip of champagne. The cameras shifted subtly to capture whatever drama was about to unfold.

"Amber," Brody's attempt at a casual greeting failed miserably. "I couldn't help but overhear about your new primer."

"I'm sure you couldn't," I replied smoothly. "Though I doubt Dr. Dalton would approve of our science-based approach."

Nicole raised an eyebrow at the exchange, while Trevor's hand tightened slightly on my waist.

"Mother has some concerns about your claims," Brody pressed on. "Especially since none of your products have medical backing."

"No, they just have actual scientific research and proven results," I smiled sweetly. "But hey, how's that sunscreen-causes-cancer campaign working out?"

Trevor tried to hide his smirk in his champagne glass while the reality show cameras practically vibrated with excitement. This was exactly the kind of drama they'd been hoping to capture.

"You know," Nicole cut in smoothly, "I've always wondered about the connection between chiropractic care and skincare..."

"Me too, actually," I said, keeping my tone professionally curious. "All of Doll 10's products are advertised as 'Doctor Developed,' which I guess is technically true, but I don't see many veterinarians developing human products, so what exactly does a chiropractor know about

dermatology or cosmetic chemistry? Because while we don't have 'medical' doctors, we do have cosmetic chemists who are doctors in their actual field."

Brody's face reddened slightly. "Mother's research is extensive-"

"In spinal adjustment, certainly," I nodded. "But skin chemistry? That's why Amber Nichole works with actual cosmetic scientists. People who've dedicated their careers to understanding how ingredients interact with skin."

Trevor's subtle squeeze of my waist told me I was walking the perfect line between professional shade and outright confrontation. The reality show cameras were eating it up.

"Our products are proven-" Brody started, but Nicole cut him off.

"By whom?" she asked with genuine curiosity. "I mean, I've used both lines, and there's really no comparison in terms of quality. Amber Nichole's foundation literally disappeared into my skin while providing perfect coverage."

I could see Bre approaching now, clearly realizing Brody was out of his depth. The reality show producer was practically dancing with joy.

"The difference is in the science," I explained, as if I were giving a master class rather than throwing shade. "When you understand the molecular structure of ingredients, how they interact with different skin types, how to create stable formulations that actually do what they claim... well, that's why we're expanding into international markets while others are still trying to convince people that sunscreen is dangerous."

"That study was-" Brody tried again.

"Completely discredited," Trevor finished smoothly. "By actual dermatologists."

"Our balm foundation went viral on TikTok," Bre announced, materializing beside Brody like she'd been summoned by the criticism.

I took a careful sip of champagne. "Yes, dear sister, lots of things go viral on TikTok - some great, some disastrous. But you're a CMO, you understand buzz doesn't guarantee quality or customer loyalty." I tilted my head slightly. "Though speaking of your role... why are you becoming the face of Doll 10 when Dr. Dalton is CEO and founder?"

"As Brody's wife, Doll 10 will be mine someday when Dr. Dalton retires," Bre said with practiced certainty.

"Ah, now we're getting somewhere. That's your real issue with me, isn't it? You conned your way into inheriting a company while I built mine from scratch."

"With Lydia James's backing," Bre countered quickly.

"Yes, with a legitimate business partner who owns 50% of Amber Nichole and 25% of Rachel Amber. The rest is mine and Trevor's - built on actual passion and hard work." I met her eyes steadily. "But you grew up with me. You know cosmetics has been my love since childhood. You just can't stand seeing me succeed after I escaped Dad's control. You got pushed into conning Brody after I walked away, and now you're trying to punish me for building something real. I'm sorry you didn't have the strength to stand up to Dad, but that's not my fault."

"Strength?" Bre's carefully maintained composure cracked slightly. "You ran away in the night."

"I did. And I never looked back. I worked my way up from struggling model to CEO of two successful brands. You've never had to earn anything. Daddy orchestrated your relationship with Brody, and the Daltons have handed you everything since."

"I love Brody," Bre insisted, though uncertainty flickered in her eyes.

"Maybe now. But we both know it started as a con - picking up exactly where I left off."

The reality show cameras were practically vibrating with excitement - this was exactly the kind of family drama they lived for. Nicole had stepped back slightly, though she was clearly fascinated by the unfolding scene.

"You don't know anything about my marriage," Bre's voice shook slightly.

"I know Dad pushed you into it the moment I refused to play his game," I said quietly. "I know he saw another chance when Brody showed interest in you. Just like he tried with me."

Trevor's hand was steady at my back, grounding me. This wasn't how I'd planned to spend the Paris after-party, but maybe it was time for some truths to come out.

"At least I didn't abandon my family," Bre shot back.

"No, you just helped Dad destroy other families with his cons. Tell me, how many lives did you help ruin before landing Brody? Or did you stop counting after a while?"

Brody's head snapped up. "What is she talking about, Bre?"

I set my champagne down, feeling Trevor's silent support beside me. "Let's be honest for once. You weren't Dad's first mark, Brody. Just his most profitable. When I refused to play my part in his games, he needed a backup plan."

The reality show cameras caught every nuance as I continued, "Dad always sent me after the important marks because Bre... well, she could barely manage the small cons. When I walked away, he was desperate. He saw your grief over losing me as an opportunity, and Bre was his last resort. Even a second-rate con can succeed when the mark is vulnerable enough."

"Are you seriously trying to insult me by saying I'm a lesser con artist than you? Like that's something to be proud of?" Bre's voice cracked slightly.

"In our world, it was. But this isn't about cons specifically - it's about you always being second-rate compared to me in everything. Cons, cosmetics - you've always desperately tried to outdo me and never could. And now you can't stand seeing me succeed with something legitimate."

I turned to Brody, whose complexion had gone ashen. "You knew she targeted you when you were grieving. Deep down, you've always known. And yes, maybe she loves you now, in whatever way she's capable of love. But it started as a con, just like everything else in our family. Own it. Stop pretending it's something it's not."

"At least I didn't abandon everyone," Bre whispered.

"No, you just helped destroy other families until you landed Brody. The difference between us, Bre? I own my past. I'm not proud of it, but I acknowledge what we were raised to be. You're still running from it, still pretending. You can never build anything real until you face the truth about who we were and choose to be something different."

The silence that followed was deafening. Nicole had retreated to a safe distance, though she was clearly still watching. The reality show producer looked like Christmas had come early.

"You have no right," Bre finally managed, but her voice trembled. "You left me there. With him."

"You're right," I said softly. "I did. Because I had to save myself first. I couldn't breathe in that life anymore, couldn't keep destroying people for Dad's profit. But you weren't a child, Bre. You could have left too."

"And struggled like you did?" she demanded. "Living in sketchy hotels, taking dangerous modeling jobs that barely paid rent?"

"Yes," I met her eyes steadily. "That's exactly what you could have done. I was lucky enough to meet Trevor, to find a real friend to struggle with. But at least I was free."

Brody, who'd learned months ago about both sisters' roles in his con, finally spoke. "You're still trying to pretend it wasn't all calculated, Bre? Even now?"

"She's right about one thing," Bre shot back. "I do love you now."

"But you didn't then," he said quietly. "You just saw an opportunity."

"Oh, let's not play wounded spouse, Brody," I cut in, my voice sharp but controlled. "You're the same man who tried to convince me to leave Trevor right after Rachel was born. Suggested I raise my daughter with you instead, knowing full well I never loved you. You only stayed with Bre because I turned you down, and she only stayed because you're her path to controlling Doll 10."

I looked between them, aware of the growing audience. "Whatever approximation of marriage you two have, it's exactly what you both signed up for. Neither of you gets to play victim here."

"At least my husband isn't gay," Bre said loudly, clearly hoping to create a scene.

I glanced around the fashion week party, unable to help my laugh. "Did you really just try to use that as an insult here? Dios mío, hermanita. And Trevor isn't gay - he's bi, predominantly attracted to men but capable of falling in love regardless of gender. It's called a spectrum, something you'd understand if you weren't so desperate to find fault with my marriage to cover up the holes in yours."

"Your marriage is perfectly fine," Bre insisted, though her voice had lost some of its certainty.

"Your marriage is exactly what it's always been - a business arrangement with benefits," I said calmly. "Which would be fine if you'd both just admit it. The problem isn't that you married for advantage, it's that you're still pretending it was some great love story."

Trevor's hand at my back reminded me we were still at Lydia's party. The reality show cameras were drinking in every moment, but I needed to rein this in before it overshadowed the fashion week coverage.

"You know what?" I picked up my champagne again. "None of this matters. You two can keep playing whatever roles you want. I'm going to go celebrate my successful cosmetics lines and my very real marriage with my husband who, regardless of his sexuality, chose me. Not because of what I could give him, but because of who I am."

"Mo grá," Trevor murmured, pride evident in his voice.

Nicole, who'd been watching this entire exchange with fascination, stepped forward. "I believe we were discussing that new primer formula?"

Michelle

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The premiere was incredible. I only had one scene, but it clearly established my character as a major player in the series. And that scene? Definitely a show-stealer.

The after-party had that perfect relaxed vibe - formal enough to feel special, casual enough to actually enjoy. I found a quiet table for four where Hunter, Zachary, and Kelly could join me.

"You were amazing, Mich," Zachary said, pride evident in his voice. "God, I'm proud of you. You truly don't need your big brother anymore."

I smiled, feeling that familiar warmth whenever Zachary praised me. "I always need you, Zachary. Maybe not on screen anymore, but I will always need my big brother. We're the only ones left. David and Tommy are both gone. It's just us now, just like when we started out."

Zachary nodded solemnly. "Just us. But you know Tommy would be proud of you too."

I sighed, the familiar ache whenever we talked about Tommy surfacing. To be honest, I had never really known David, so while I missed him, it wasn't the same raw pain as losing Tommy. "I miss him so much. I will never not be sorry for how things ended."
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"I know, Mich, but Tommy knew you loved him. And he loved you. You both just let your egos get in the way. And that was on both of you, not just you," Zachary said softly.

The silence that followed felt heavy until Hunter, usually content to let moments breathe, decided to lighten the mood. "Did Mich tell you the girls are opening on her Christmas tour?"

"No way. Seriously? You're letting them get into the industry?" Zachary asked, surprised.

"Hell no. But Jon already opened that door for Harley, so now we figured if we lean into it and keep it contained till they're 18, that's better than them seeking their own opportunities," I explained.

"I saw what Jon pulled. Mom is furious," Zachary said.

"I don't blame her. I would be too," Kelly added.

"Mom is always pissed at Jon. But yes, Hunter and I were pretty pissed too," I agreed.

"That's putting it mildly. I still think we should have gone with Trevor's cliff idea," Hunter said.

I laughed and shook my head. "Harley and Arissa are talented. Very much so. They've been writing and demoing their own songs and they're really good. I figure if they open for me, it lets us control it and keeps them out of the industry at large till they're 18."

"Not a bad idea. Do you have any dates near Cali? I'd love to come see them," Zachary asked.

"No Cali dates, but we will be in Nevada," I said.

"That's not too far. We can drive out for the show!" Kelly said enthusiastically.

"Yes! Please come," I said, genuinely excited at the thought of having more family there. "The girls would love to have their uncle there."

"And their aunt," Kelly added warmly. I loved how naturally she'd become part of our family, how perfect she was for Zachary.

" Zachary smiled. "I think Mom’s still plotting Jon's demise after that stunt he pulled."

"She's not the only one," Hunter muttered.

"At least we have Holly managing everything now," I said. "No more surprise recordings or unauthorized releases."

"The girls are really talented though," Kelly added. "I've seen some of their demos on FaceTime with Mom."

"They are," I couldn't help the pride in my voice. "And this way we can control how they enter the industry, keep them protected until they're old enough to handle it themselves."

"Plus they'll have proper contracts, proper management," Hunter added. "Not whatever Jon tried to pull."

"Not to mention actual parental supervision," I said. "Though I have to admit, watching the girls in the studio together... they're really something special."

"Mom sent me videos of them practicing," Zachary grinned. "Those harmonies? Definitely got the Morris gene."

"They did," I couldn't help the pride in my voice. "Even Tomi's starting to join in, though mostly she just dances while they sing."

"That kid has more energy than you did at that age, Mich. And that's saying something," Kelly laughed.

"She really does," Hunter smiled. "Though right now she's mostly focused on learning to keep secrets. She almost gave away my surprise visit about twelve times."

The conversation flowed naturally between family topics, show business, and memories. Having Zachary here, having Hunter surprise me... it made what could have been just another premiere feel like something special.

After the party, Zachary and Kelly headed back to their hotel while Hunter and I returned to my apartment. Thara was waiting, clearly unimpressed that her dinner had been delayed by something as trivial as my premiere.

"Sorry baby girl. Hunter, can you feed her while I go change out of this dress?" I asked.

"Of course babe. You go get comfortable," he said, draping his jacket over a dining room chair before picking up Thara's bowl. Even such a simple domestic moment felt precious after being apart so long.

In my bathroom, I carefully removed the trappings of Michelle Morris - the designer dress, the jewelry, the carefully applied makeup. I pulled my hair into a ponytail and slipped into purple pajama shorts and a tank top, taking a deep breath. Being glamorous was part of the job, but this... this felt like me.

When I returned to the living room, Hunter was already on the sofa, shirtless in his crimson and black plaid pajama pants. He looked up at me with that look that still made my heart skip. "You look beautiful."

I chuckled, settling beside him. "I just washed my face and put PJs on. Michelle Morris has left the building."

"Yes, and this is Michelle Bradley. My wife. The Mich only I get to see. And she is the most beautiful woman I have ever seen."

Only Hunter could make me feel more gorgeous bare-faced in pajamas than in full glam. I curled into his arms, feeling truly at home for the first time since coming to Nashville.

"You were amazing tonight. I'm so proud of you baby," he murmured, pressing a kiss to my head.

"Mmm, and I'm sure the headlines are already pouring out," I said, reaching for my phone to Google my name. Sure enough:

"Michelle Morris Stuns in Denim Gown with Unexpected Cutouts for Rare Appearance with Husband Hunter Bradley"

"Hunter and Hunter: McVey Debuts as Michelle Morris's Hot TV Son While Husband Hunter Bradley Makes Rare Red Carpet Appearance"

"Michelle Morris is our Forever Crush in Plunging Denim Gown"

"Michelle Morris and Hunter Bradley Dazzle at Series Premiere"

"Hunter Bradley Supports Wife at Nashville Premiere; Jessica Simpson Notably Absent"

"Hunter and Michelle or Hunter and Jessica? Which Blonde Has His Heart?"

"Michelle Morris and Hunter Bradley: PR Stunt or Stronger Than Ever?"

I laughed, showing him the screen. "Yep... already started."

Hunter shook his head, his arms tightening around me. "We really aren't that interesting."

"To them we are. And you know, your affair with Jess is quite the headline grabber," I chuckled.

"Yeah, my non-existent affair with a woman I broke up with 15 years ago?"

"The one and only," I scrolled through more headlines. "Though I have to admit, Lydia's denim dress is getting a lot of attention."

"It should. Only you could pull off a denim ball gown," Hunter smiled against my hair. "Though I still can't believe she heard 'Nashville premiere' and immediately thought 'denim.'"

"That's Lydia for you," I settled more comfortably against him. "At least she didn't try to add cowboy boots."

"Don't give her ideas for next time."

"Speaking of next time," I turned slightly to look at him. "Thank you for coming. I know how much you hate these things."

"I don't hate being with you," Hunter said simply. "And this was important. Though I did notice the press trying to bait me about Jessica..."

"They always do," I sighed. "At least they've moved on from asking about Jon."

"Only for now. And I've come to accept the press is part of our lives. I hate when they try to intrude into our private lives, but between your career in entertainment and mine in motocross... we'll always be tabloid fodder, no matter how annoying it is," he sighed.

"You're the one that had to retire a record-breaking motocross champion and then turn around and marry me of all people," I teased.

He pulled me on top of him so he could look into my eyes, his expression turning serious. "Worth every second." His kiss was passionate, full of everything we'd been missing these past weeks apart.

"Mmm, okay..." I ran my hands over his chest, feeling his heart race under my touch. "I think we need to properly celebrate my premiere."

He smiled that smile that still made my stomach flip, even after all these years. "I like the way you think." In one smooth motion, he stood, taking me with him.

I laughed, wrapping my arms around his neck. "Hunter!"

"Hey, you said you wanted to celebrate," he grinned, carrying me toward the bedroom. "We're going to celebrate."

"Wait," I reached back over his shoulder. "My phone-"

"Will still be there in the morning," Hunter said, his lips finding my neck.

"But Holly might-"

"Can wait," he insisted, though we both knew if Holly really needed me, she'd find a way. "Right now, you're just Michelle. My love."

I melted into him at those words, at the way he could make the whole world fade away. The press, the show, the constant juggling of careers and family - none of it mattered in moments like this.

Thara made a disgruntled noise as Hunter kicked the bedroom door closed behind us, clearly unimpressed with being excluded. But for once, I didn't feel guilty about ignoring her protests.

"I've missed you so much," I whispered against his lips.

"Show me how much," he smiled, laying me on the bed.

"Gladly," I smiled, pulling him down to me. After weeks apart, every touch felt electric, heightened.

His hands traced familiar paths along my skin as my fingers tangled in his hair. This was what I'd been missing - not just the physical connection, but this intimacy that we'd built over years of trust and love.

"You're thinking too much," Hunter murmured against my collarbone.

"Just about how much I love you," I breathed, arching into his touch.

"My beautiful girl," he smiled against my skin. The way he could make me feel simultaneously safe and on fire still amazed me.

Thara's indignant meow from the other side of the door made us both laugh.

"Your cat is not happy about being excluded," Hunter said between kisses.

"She'll survive," I pulled him closer. "I need you more right now."

His hands slid under my tank top, leaving trails of fire across my skin. After so many years together, he knew exactly how to touch me, where to kiss me, how to make me forget everything but him.

"Hunter," I gasped as his lips found that sensitive spot below my ear.

"I've got you, baby," he murmured, and I could feel his smile against my neck.

The sound of my phone buzzing in the other room barely registered - Holly, the press, the whole world could wait. Right now, there was only this, only us.

My fingers traced the familiar planes of his chest, remembering every scar, every mark. His body was a map I knew by heart, just as he knew mine.

"God, I've missed you," he breathed against my lips.

"Show me," I challenged, pulling him closer.

His hands moved to the hem of my tank top, sliding it up slowly. "You're so beautiful," he murmured, his eyes dark with desire.

I sat up slightly to help him remove the garment, then pulled him back down to me. The feel of skin against skin after weeks apart was intoxicating. His lips traced a path down my neck to my collarbone as my hands explored the muscles of his back.

"Baby," I gasped as his touch grew more insistent.

"Tell me what you need," he whispered, his voice rough with want.

"You," I breathed. "Just you."

His answering kiss was deep, passionate, full of promise. Outside, the Nashville nightlife continued, but in here, in this moment, nothing existed beyond us.

Livvie

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I carried an exhausted Killy into the house, finding J and James in the living room watching Rose play.

"Hey Love, we're home. Hey James," I said.

"Oh good. How's my boy then?" J reached for Killy.

Killy hesitated, clearly not wanting to leave my arms, but finally let his father take him - only to immediately climb back into my lap once I sat down.

"Ki Ki better?" Rose bounded over to her twin.

"I tired. Ro Ro, shhh," Killy mumbled against my shoulder.

"But Ki Ki better?" Rose stage-whispered, bouncing on her toes.

"Ro Ro, stop," Killy said firmly.
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"It's okay Rose. Killy is fine, but he's sleepy. He needs rest," I explained gently.

"But, Ki Ki play with me?" she persisted.

"No!" Killy's uncharacteristically sharp tone showed just how exhausted and frustrated he was after his second hospital visit.

"Okay then, I'm going to get our boy up to bed. Rose, stay with Da and Uncle James. I'll be back," I said, carrying Killy upstairs.

He fell asleep almost instantly, and I headed back down to join J.

"So, James, how's Aine?" I asked.

"Good," he said vaguely.

"James is having another moment of crisis," J explained.

I rolled my eyes. "Oh Christ man, what now?"

"He wants Aine to move to his flat, then he doesn't. He wants to buy a house with Aine, then he doesn't. Same shite," J said.

I blinked at him. "James, you have got to grow the fuck up. Aine is your girlfriend. She is having your baby in like 2 months. You need to get it together and decide what you want."

"It's not that easy, Liv," James protested. "This is all new to me. I've never had a proper girlfriend until now... I have no idea what the fuck I'm doing."

"Well, you managed just fine on St. Paddy's Day when you got her pregnant," I said sharply. "Time to figure out the rest."

I was beyond tired of feeling like we were raising James alongside the twins. He was J's age but acted half it most days. Thank god for Aine - she was good for him, and she'd become one of Gina's closest friends. We'd all quietly agreed that if they split, we were keeping Aine. Most of us preferred her to James anyway.

"That's pretty much what I told him," J nodded, his accent thick with frustration.

"You act like this is so easy," James sighed. "Not all of us just know how to be in a relationship."

"You think we knew what we were doing when we got together?" I asked incredulously.

"That's adorable, James," J laughed. "We started dating after a five-day holiday romance. Liv was in Oz, I was here in Ireland. And if you'll recall, I had you in my ear every bloody night at the pub trying to convince me to cheat on her. It wasn't easy - we were figuring it out as we went. But we were in love, so we made it work."

"You two are different though," James protested. "You just... fit. Even back then."

"Because we chose to," I said firmly. "Because we decided what we wanted and worked for it. J moved across the world for me, then I moved here for him. We built this life together, but it wasn't magic - it was choices. Daily choices to make it work."

"And now Aine needs you to make a choice," J added. "She's carrying your child, mate. You can't keep waffling about whether you want her to move in."

"The flat's too small," James mumbled.

"Then get a bigger place," I said, trying not to sound as exasperated as I felt. "You have money, James. This isn't about the flat and you know it."

"What if-"

"No," J cut him off. "No more what ifs. You're about to be a da. Time to grow up."

Rose looked up from her toys, her fairy wings drooping as she sensed the tension. "Uncle James sad?"

"No love, Uncle James just needs to be a grown up," I explained, choosing my words carefully. "Sometimes people can be older but still not act like grown ups."

"Like how I big girl but sometimes act like baby?" Rose asked, displaying that uncanny toddler wisdom.

"Exactly. Well, Uncle James needs to act like a big boy instead of a baby," I couldn't help the smirk.

James shot me a dark look, but I pressed on, months of frustration finally spilling over.

"Look, you need to stop fucking around, James. If you're not ready for living together, fine - own that. Aine's got her life sorted - successful career, lovely flat in Douglas, her own money. She doesn't need you to rescue her. You can sort custody arrangements or visitation after the baby comes. But this constant back and forth? That needs to stop."

I leaned forward, watching realization dawn on his face. "She's been incredibly patient while you sort yourself out. Aine is steady, successful, completely put together... and that terrifies you, doesn't it? Because for the first time in your life, you actually care about someone more than yourself."

The truth of it hit him hard - I could see it in his expression. This wasn't about flats or timing; it was about James finally facing real feelings.

"Annoying how right she always is, isn't it?" J laughed softly, his hand finding mine.

"I just..." James ran a hand through his hair. "What if I'm shite at it? Being a da, being with someone properly?"

"Then you learn," J said simply. "None of us knew what we were doing at first. Christ, remember me with the twins as newborns?"

"You were terrified to change them," I smiled at the memory. "Convinced you'd break them somehow."

"Exactly. But you figure it out. Because they need you to." J glanced at Rose, who was making her fairy wings dance in the light. "The difference is, you don't have a choice about being a da anymore. That's happening. But you do get to choose what kind of da you'll be."

"And what kind of partner," I added. "Because Aine deserves to know if she's planning a future with someone who's all in, or if she's doing this on her own."

Rose looked up from her toys. "Aine pretty."

"See?" I raised an eyebrow at James. "Even Rose knows you're being daft about this."

James slumped back in his chair. "I just don't want to mess it up."

"Then don't," I said simply. "Stop overthinking it. Aine isn't asking you to be perfect - she's just asking you to be present."

"And to make up your bloody mind," J added.

"Bloody!" Rose echoed cheerfully, making both her father and uncle grin.

"The point is," I pressed on, "you need to talk to Aine. Actually talk to her, not just panic about what might go wrong."

"She's probably tired of talking," James muttered.

"Then listen," I suggested, my patience wearing thin. "Because right now, you're about to lose the best thing that's ever happened to you because you're too scared to admit how much you care about her."

"Aye, and if you think we're keeping you over Aine when this all goes tits up, you're mental," J added.

"Aye, we've talked about this. Taken a proper vote. The group has decided if you fuck this up we're keeping Aine," I said matter-of-factly.

James blinked, looking genuinely shocked. "Seriously? Jeremy, we've been mates since we were wee lads."

"Aye, which means I've put up with your shite for 40 plus years," J nodded, not a hint of sympathy in his voice.

"Easy solution. Don't fuck it up." I leaned forward. "Remember what I asked you before? When you decided you wanted to try having a girlfriend to start with?"

James nodded slowly. "You asked how I felt when I thought about Aine with another man. And I told you the idea made me sick."

"Has that changed?"

"No, it's only gotten worse. The idea of anyone else touching her enrages me," James admitted, his accent getting thicker with emotion.

"OK then, don't let that happen. If you're not ready to live with her, that's fine. But you have got to stop with these episodes of panic. Grow the hell up and be a man. Aine deserves that," I said.

"She does deserve better," James said quietly. "That's part of the problem, isn't it? She deserves someone who has their shite together."

"For fuck's sake," J muttered. "You run a successful business. You have a nice flat. You're not some deadbeat. You just need to sort your head out."

"And stop acting like Aine hasn't chosen you," I added. "She knows exactly who you are - she's put up with your nonsense for months now. She's still here, still wanting to build a life with you. Stop questioning that."

Rose had migrated to J's lap, her fairy wings slightly crooked as she started to wind down for the night.

"Look," I said, watching James process everything. "Go home. Call Aine. Have an actual conversation about what you both want. Because right now? You're letting fear make your decisions, and that's how you lose people."

"When did you get so wise?" James tried to joke.

"Clever Livvie. That's what they call her," J smiled, his voice warm with pride.

"In case I haven't said it... I'm sorry I tried to get Jeremy to cheat on you back when you were long distance," James said, the sincerity catching me off guard. James never apologized for anything.

"I-I appreciate that. Truly. And I accept your apology," I managed, genuinely surprised.

"You good then?" J asked him.

James nodded, standing. "I'm headed home to call her."

"Good, I need to get this fairy to bed," J said, lifting a drowsy Rose.

"No sleep," she protested, even as her eyes drooped.

J laughed, "Right then. I'll call you tomorrow James."

James headed out while J carried Rose upstairs. I was about to follow when my phone rang.

"Hello?"

"Hey Livvie, it's Billy. You have a moment?" he asked.

I sighed. A call from Billy could only mean one thing - more of this Power Ranger shite I'd accidentally stumbled into. "Aye, what is it then?"

"As I'm sure you know, Tiernan and Saoirse Riordan have been rebuilding their ninja academy in Tower, with Hunter's help," Billy began. "They've got their base nearly functional, but we need a system that can handle both academy security and Ranger surveillance. Should be simple enough, but I've been upgrading protocols since you breached them. Plus, the Riordans don't just draw from the Morphin Grid - their Celtic magic is like nothing I've seen. Integrating that with the upgraded systems is... challenging. I could use your help."

I ran a hand through my hair. "Look, I don't know anything about your alien protocols or magic or this 'morphin grid.' I hacked your system once by accident."

"Yes - you breached Aquitarian technology. That should have been impossible, but you managed it. You're the best human hacker I've ever encountered. I can teach you the alien codes, help you understand the grid..."

"I don't even know what the bloody 'morphin grid' is," I protested, wanting nothing to do with any of this.

"Simply put, it's the source of all Ranger powers," Billy explained.

"You're not going to let this go, are you?"

"You're the one who chose to hack my systems and uncover our identities," he reminded me.

"A choice I now regret," I muttered. "Fine. But it's late here. Call me tomorrow?"

"Will do. Thanks Livvie."

After he hung up, I stared at my phone. What the fuck had I gotten myself into now?

"Hearth & Heart"

"Rose, get back here with your brother's sling!" I called out, watching my fairy princess tear through the kitchen with Killy's arm support clutched in her hands, fairy wings bouncing with each step.

"I make pretty!" Rose announced, brandishing what looked suspiciously like more glitter.

"No!" Killy and I said simultaneously.

My phone buzzed - Billy again. That made three calls since last night. Whatever was happening with this Celtic Ranger tech must be urgent. But first, I had to prevent another glitter incident.

"J!" I called up the stairs. "Your daughter is trying for round two with the glitter!"

"Roisín Dónailín!" J's voice carried from upstairs. "Put your brother's sling down!"

My phone buzzed again as I cornered Rose, who was now trying to hide behind the curtains - though her fairy wings gave her away completely.

"You know," J appeared beside me, "when Billy mentioned Celtic magic meeting alien tech, I didn't think it would be less chaotic than our normal morning."

I sighed as I scooped up Rose, "Welcome to the O'Brien house."

J took the sling and helped Killy put it on, his movements gentle with our careful boy.

"Ro Ro, leave me alone!" Killy's outburst was unusual - he rarely raised his voice, but Rose had been pushing his limits since the glitter incident.

"I try to help," Rose said, her fairy wings drooping as she looked down.

"Rose," I kept my voice gentle but firm, "you can't help when Killy doesn't want help. You can help if he asks."

My phone buzzed again - Billy was nothing if not persistent. Between Celtic Rangers and toddler drama, this morning was shaping up to be interesting.

"Da," Killy said quietly, settling into his usual spot at the table. "Can you make my toast the way you do?"

"Course, love," J moved to the kitchen, clearly grateful for a normal request.

"Me too!" Rose wiggled in my arms. "Me too!"

"Only if you promise to leave your brother's things alone," I said, setting her down. "No more trying to 'help' unless he asks."

"Promise," she nodded solemnly, though I knew that promise would last about as long as it took J to make toast.

My phone buzzed yet again. "For fuck's sake, Billy," I muttered.

"You should probably answer that before he decides to teleport here or whatever it is Rangers do," J said, expertly cutting Killy's toast into precise squares.

"They can do that?" I asked, then shook my head. "Never mind. I don't want to know. Rose, sit properly in your chair."

I finally grabbed my phone while J managed breakfast. "What, Billy?"

"Sorry for the early calls, but we've got a situation. The Riordans' security protocols are clashing with the morphing grid's energy signature. Every time they try to access their Celtic magic, it crashes our systems."

"Billy," I pinched the bridge of my nose, "I have no idea what any of that means."

"Mummy!" Rose called out. "Ki Ki won't share!"

"Because it's my toast!" Killy protested.

"One second," I told Billy, covering the phone. "Rose, eat your own breakfast. Killy doesn't have to share if he doesn't want to."

"But-"

"No buts, fairy girl. Your toast is exactly the same."

"Not same! Ki Ki's better!"

J caught my eye, clearly fighting a smile at Rose's latest drama. "Go talk to Billy. I've got this."

"Right," I stepped into the other room, leaving J to handle the great toast debate. "Billy, start over. In simple terms."

"Their magic is essentially shorting out our tech. We need someone who understands both systems to create a bridge between them."

"And you think that's me? The person who accidentally hacked your system once and wants nothing to do with any of this?"

"Exactly. You managed to breach Aquitarian technology without even knowing what it was. Imagine what you could do with actual understanding."

I watched J successfully negotiate peace between the twins by cutting Rose's toast into different shapes than Killy's. "Billy, I have two-year-old twins, one with a broken arm. I don't have time for-"

"The Riordans are willing to pay your usual consulting fee. Plus expenses."

That made me pause. My usual fee was... significant. "They can afford that?"

"Ancient Celtic warrior clan? They've got resources."

I sighed, watching the twins through my office doorway. "You realize I don't want anything to do with this? I wish I didn't know who Michelle really was or any of the other Ranger stuff."

"Perhaps, but the fact remains you do. The question is are you going to answer the call to do something greater," Billy said, his tone annoyingly philosophical.

"Fine. Fine. I'll help. But you have to fill me in on what I'm looking at," I said as I went to my office and logged into my systems. The sooner I dealt with this, the sooner I could get back to normal chaos instead of alien tech chaos.

"Sending you the base code now. The Celtic magic operates on a completely different frequency than the morphing grid..."

"Right," I said, watching the code appear on my screen. "And you've tried... bloody hell, what is that?"

The patterns were unlike anything I'd seen before - not quite binary, not quite whatever alien language Billy usually used. This was something else entirely.

"That's the Celtic magic signature," Billy explained. "It's organic, follows the natural rhythms of the Earth. The Riordans' power comes from-"

"DA!" Rose's voice carried from the kitchen. "Ki Ki won't let me fix his cast!"

"Because you're not supposed to fix anything!" Killy shouted back.

"Billy, hold on," I covered the phone again. "J? You alright out there?"

"Got it handled!" he called back. "Though we might need to revisit the 'no helping' conversation!"

I turned back to my computer, studying the strange patterns. "Okay, Billy. Walk me through this. But know that I might have to deal with a toddler crisis at any moment."

"Just try to keep glitter away from the keyboards," Billy said.

"Very funny," I muttered, though I instinctively moved my keyboard further from the doorway. "These patterns... they're almost like sound waves, but not quite."

"Exactly. Celtic magic resonates with the Earth's natural frequencies. But when it interfaces with our tech-"

A crash from the kitchen cut him off.

"It's fine!" J called before I could move. "Just Rose trying to climb the counter to 'help' with the dishes."

"Róisín!" I heard him scold. "We talked about this."

I turned back to my screen, trying to focus. "So the magic disrupts your systems because they're operating on different frequencies?"

"Essentially. We need someone who can create a bridge between the organic and technological elements. Someone who can see patterns that shouldn't be visible to regular humans."

"Like Killy," I said quietly, remembering how my son had seen through Billy's encryption.

"Yes. Like Killy. Though we're not involving him, I promise."

"No, we aren't. I will figure this out or it won't get figured out. My son will have nothing to do with any of this," I said firmly, my tone leaving no room for debate.

"Understood," Billy agreed quickly.

I sighed, watching the patterns shift on my screen. "What sort of time frame are we looking at?"

"Honestly? Hard to say. There's no active threat at the moment, but that could change at any time. Rangers always have to be ready," Billy said.

"Right then. OK, what else do I need to know?"

"Well, Michelle might actually be able to help. Somehow her Sailor Soldier power is in harmony with her Purple Ranger power. We never really questioned it. If we can figure out how, then that might help us with this," Billy said.

"You want me to ask Michelle about this? The woman who tried to get my husband back with his ex? The one who meddles in everything?" I couldn't keep the skepticism from my voice.

"I know she can be... intense," Billy said diplomatically. "But she understands power signatures better than most. And she's managed to blend two completely different energy sources successfully."

"She's also getting ready to leave Nashville," I pointed out. "And if you think I'm interrupting her anniversary plans with Hunter..."

"Mummy!" Killy's distressed voice carried from the kitchen. "Rose is trying to put ribbons on my cast!"

"For pretty!" Rose defended.

"I swear to god," I muttered. "Billy, let me call you back. I need to prevent another decoration disaster."

"Of course. But Livvie? The sooner we figure this out..."

"Yeah, yeah. The sooner we can protect the world or whatever. First, I need to protect my son from his sister's helpful intentions."

I locked my systems and rushed out to find pure chaos in the kitchen - Rose darting between chairs with a handful of ribbons, Killy trying to escape her latest 'improvement' attempt, and J attempting to corral our fairy princess without much success.

"OK, enough!" My voice cut through the mayhem. "Róisín, do you want to be grounded again?"

Rose skidded to a halt, fairy wings askew, ribbons clutched in her tiny fist. "No."

"Then stop. Mummy is trying to work and Da has a client coming by soon." I knelt to her level. "You have got to leave Killy alone."

"I sorry," Rose mumbled, though I caught that familiar glint in her eye that suggested she was already planning her next 'helping' mission.

"I know, but you have to be good," I sighed, watching Killy retreat to his safe spot behind J's legs. "Do you want to watch a movie?"

Rose nodded, previous remorse instantly forgotten at the prospect of entertainment.

"OK, J, can you get a movie on for them? I have work to do."

"Aye Love. I'm on it, you go work," J said, already guiding our little chaos agent toward the living room while Killy followed at a safe distance.

Back in my office, I called Billy. "Sorry. I'm all yours. OK, as I was saying, I'm not interrupting Michelle and Hunter's anniversary for this."

"Michelle and Hunter are both Rangers. They will understand," Billy said, clearly not grasping the concept of boundaries.

"No, they won't," I said firmly. "And I won't. Look, they barely get any time together with her filming schedule. Plus, Hunter hates leaving Ireland these days. I'm not messing with the one week they've carved out."

"But-"

"Billy. No. We figure this out without them or we wait until after their anniversary. Those are your options."

I could hear him sigh through the phone. "Fine. But we need to at least understand how her powers work together. The harmony between Sailor and Ranger energy could be the key to-"

"Bluey!" Rose's excited voice carried from the living room. "Da, Bluey!"

"Yes love, Bluey it is," J called back.

I turned back to my computer, studying the strange patterns. "Send me whatever data you have on power signatures. All of it. But I swear to god, Billy, if one more person suggests involving my son in this..."

"Understood. Data incoming. And Livvie? Thank you."

"Don't thank me yet," I muttered, watching the files download. "I still think this is mental."

The patterns were fascinating though - even if I didn't want to admit it. The way the Celtic magic flowed like water while the Ranger tech pulsed with structured energy... it was unlike anything I'd ever seen.

"MUMMY!" Killy's voice broke my concentration. "Rose is trying to braid ribbons in my hair!"

"I make pretty!"

"For fuck's sake," I covered the phone. "J?"

"On it!" he called back. "Róisín, what did we just talk about?"

I turned back to my screen. "Billy, I need to go murder my daughter. Send me everything you've got and I'll look it over once I've sorted the twins."

"Of course. And Livvie? Try to keep an open mind about-"

"Goodbye, Billy," I ended the call, already heading toward the sound of Rose's protests and Killy's distress.

Michelle
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"And that's a wrap on Michelle!" the director called out. "Great work everyone."

I let out a breath I hadn't realized I was holding. My last scene before heading home to Ireland - to Hunter, to our anniversary. Thara watched from her usual spot in my trailer, probably counting down the minutes until we could leave Nashville.

"Michelle?" Holly appeared with her tablet. "Your flight's confirmed for tomorrow morning. The car will pick you up at five."

"Perfect," I started removing my character's jewelry. "Any word from the press office about the Jon situation?"

"It's handled. They're running with our statement about supporting Harley's artistic development in an age-appropriate way." Holly's fingers flew across her tablet. "Though Entertainment Tonight is still trying to push the Jessica Simpson angle."

"Of course they are," I sighed, reaching for my phone to check messages from Hunter. "At least we'll be home soon. Just us, no press, no drama..."

"About that..." Holly's tone made me look up. "Jon's team reached out. He wants to meet before you leave Nashville."

I sighed. Jon had been spending more time in Nashville in the last couple years since he opened a bar here. I did not like the idea of seeing Jon without Hunter present, but I also knew he was
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impossible to avoid. "Fine, but I need it private. I do not need the press seeing us in public together. Have him stop by my apartment this evening."

Holly raised an eyebrow. "Are you sure that's wise?"

"No, but it's better than him showing up unannounced or trying to create a scene in public." I started gathering my things while Thara watched disapprovingly from her perch. "At least this way it's on my terms, in my space."

"Want me to stay?"

"No, go home. But maybe have the PR team on standby, just in case." I caught my reflection in the mirror - still in Dixie's makeup. "Right now, I need to wash this character off and deal with whatever drama Jon's bringing this time."

"I'll set it up for seven," Holly made a note. "That gives you time to get home and settled first."

"Thanks," I grabbed Thara's backpack. "Come on, baby girl. Time to go home."

Thara gave me her usual unimpressed look but settled into her carrier. She'd been extra clingy lately, probably sensing we were about to travel again.

The drive home was quiet - one of the last peaceful moments I'd have in Nashville before heading to Ireland for our anniversary. The show would bring me back here soon enough, but for now, all I could think about was getting home to Hunter and the girls.

"Ms. Bradley?" my driver's voice broke through my thoughts. "We're here."

"Thanks, Mark," I gathered my things. "See you at five tomorrow?"

"Yes ma'am. Have a good evening."

I couldn't help but think it would be anything but good with Jon coming over. At least I had a few hours to prepare myself for whatever drama he was bringing this time.

Inside my apartment, I let Thara out of her carrier and headed straight for the shower. I needed to wash away Dixie's makeup and get my head straight before dealing with Jon.

"Don't give me that look," I told Thara as she watched me from her perch on the bathroom counter. "I know you don't like him either, but this is the easiest way to handle whatever he wants."

My phone buzzed - Hunter.

'Just checking you're still coming home tomorrow?'

'Wild horses couldn't stop me,' I texted back. 'Though Jon's stopping by tonight.'

His response was immediate: 'Why?'

'No idea. Holly set it up. Better than him showing up unannounced or making a scene.'

'Call me after?'

'Of course. Love you.'

'Love you too baby. Be careful.'

After my shower, I changed into comfortable clothes - no need to dress up for Jon. Thara followed me around the apartment as I tidied up, clearly unhappy about our impending visitor.

"I know, baby girl," I told her as she glared at me from the coffee table. "But the sooner we deal with whatever this is, the sooner we can go home to Daddy."

My phone buzzed - Holly confirming Jon would be here at seven. Part of me wished I'd asked her to stay, but having an audience would only encourage his dramatic tendencies.

I checked the time - 6:45. Knowing Jon, he'd either be exactly on time or deliberately late to make a point. After all these years, he still loved his power plays.

"At least this time I'm not dealing with him alone," I scratched Thara's ears. "You'll protect me from his nonsense, won't you?"

Thara's unimpressed stare suggested she had opinions about this whole situation.

The knock came at exactly seven - Jon being punctual for once. I took a deep breath and opened the door.

"Michelle," he smiled that smile that used to make my teenage heart flutter. Now it just made me wary. "You look beautiful."

"Cut the crap, Jon," I stepped aside to let him in. "What do you want?"

"Can't I just want to see you before you head back to Ireland?" He tried to sound innocent, but I knew him too well.

Thara positioned herself on the back of the sofa, watching Jon with obvious disdain. At least someone in the room wasn't afraid to show how they really felt.

"You could have called. Or, here's a thought - you could have not recorded with my daughter behind my back." I crossed my arms. "So again, what do you want?"

"About that..." he started, and I could already tell I wasn't going to like whatever came next.

"About that..." he ran a hand through his hair. "The song's getting a lot of attention. More than I expected, honestly. Harley's voice... she sounds just like you did at that age."

"No," I said immediately, already seeing where this was going. "Whatever you're thinking, whatever you're planning - no."

"Michelle-"

"She is thirteen, Jon. And unlike me at that age, she has parents who are actually protecting her from this industry."

"I'm not suggesting anything inappropriate," he held up his hands. "Just maybe a few more collaborations. Controlled environment, proper contracts..."

"Controlled by who? You?" I couldn't keep the edge from my voice. "Like you tried to control me?"

Thara's tail started twitching - she always could sense when I was getting angry.

"Control you? Are you serious right now?" Jon stepped closer, that familiar intensity in his eyes. "Michelle, I never tried to control you. I protected you from what could have happened in this industry. I loved you - still love you. I just want Harley to have the same opportunities you did."

I ran a hand through my hair in frustration. "Fine, you did protect me in a lot of ways. I'll give you that. But Jon, I was a child and you were the adult. I'm not saying it was simple... you were my first love, what we had was real, but it was also toxic as hell. I won't blame you for choices I made, even at that age... but I will not let my daughter get pulled into your world. I trusted you with her, Jon. After everything we've been through, all your speeches about loyalty - you betrayed that trust by taking advantage of my daughter."

Jon stepped back, something shifting in his expression. "I- wow... Michi, I honestly didn't think of it that way. If that's how you see it... I truly am sorry."

Thara's low growl from her perch suggested she wasn't buying his apology any more than I was. She'd always been a good judge of character.

"Sorry isn't enough this time," I said firmly. "You went behind my back with my child. Do you have any idea what that's done to Hunter's trust in me? That I let you near our daughter?"

"Hunter-"

"Don't." My voice went sharp. "Don't you dare start with Hunter. This isn't about him, or us, or whatever fantasy you're spinning in your head. This is about Harley."

"The song is already out there," Jon spread his hands. "People love it. They want more."

"They wanted more of me at thirteen too," I crossed my arms. "Doesn't mean it was right. Harley will have opportunities - when she's old enough, if she wants them. But they'll be on our terms, not yours."

"You're being overprotective."

"No, I'm being a mother. Something you didn't have to consider when I was young."

Thara moved to the edge of the sofa, her eyes fixed on Jon like she was calculating exactly where to strike if needed.

"Lea tried to keep you from me and you know how well that worked," Jon said, his tone carrying that manipulative edge I knew too well.

I sighed, "Harley isn't me."

"This is about Hunter isn't it? He's pissed and you're trying to appease him," Jon said, like he still had any right to comment on my marriage.

"This is about you doing something with our daughter behind our backs," I said firmly.

Jon scoffed, "If you cared so much about Harley being his daughter you wouldn't have lied about her paternity for almost 10 years."

I blinked, rage building in my chest. "You seriously are going there? Fuck. You."

Thara's growl got louder - she could feel my anger rising, and Jon had just crossed a line there was no coming back from.

"Get out," my voice was deadly quiet. "Get out of my apartment right now."

"Michelle-"

"No. You don't get to use my past mistakes to justify what you did. I live with what I did to Hunter every day. But I fixed it. I made it right. And now we're raising our daughters together." My hands were shaking with anger. "You? You just proved exactly why I can't trust you with Harley."

"I didn't mean-"

"Yes, you did. You meant to hurt me because I said no. Because for once, your manipulation didn't work." I moved to the door, opening it. "We're done here. And I mean done. No more friendship, no more history, no more chances. Stay away from my family."

Thara had positioned herself between Jon and me, her protective instincts in full force.

"The song-" he tried one more time.

"Will be your last collaboration with my daughter. Get. Out."

He put his hand on the door and closed it, pressing me back against it and crushing his lips to mine. In the past, this was his move - start a fight, end it in bed. But I wasn't that girl anymore. For once in my life, I was truly happy, and I wasn't going to destroy that by cheating. Not this time. Not on Hunter. Never again. I put my hands on Jon's shoulders and shoved him back.

"Don't you ever touch me again," I growled, my voice dangerous.

"Michi, you know you missed that as much as I did," Jon said, trying to pull me back in.

I yanked away from him, fury building. "Touch me again and I will fry your ass with lightning so fast... get out before I call the police or, even worse, take matters into my own hands." I could feel my powers crackling just beneath my skin. He was dangerously close to pushing me over an edge.

"Michi..."

"Don't 'Michi' me. Get out. Last warning." This time I let the purple lightning dance visibly around my fingers.

"Okay, okay. We'll talk later... this isn't over," he said, hands raised in surrender.

"Oh yes, this time, it is," I said as he finally left the apartment.

The moment the door closed, I slid down against it, my hands shaking. Thara was immediately in my lap, purring and headbutting my chin.

I pulled out my phone, dialing Hunter immediately. No secrets, not ever again. We'd promised.

"Hey baby," his voice answered on the first ring.

"He kissed me," I said without preamble, my voice shaking. "I pushed him away immediately, but he kissed me. I'm so sorry."

"Are you okay?" Hunter's voice was tight with concern and anger.

"No. He brought up the paternity thing, tried to manipulate me about Harley, and when I told him to get out..." I stroked Thara's fur, trying to steady myself. "I threatened him with lightning. Actually let him see it."

"Good," Hunter's voice was deadly calm. "Did he leave?"

"Yes. But Hunter, I swear to you, the moment he tried to kiss me, I pushed him away. I would never-"

"I know, baby. I trust you. You called me right away - that's what matters."

"I hate that he still thinks he can do that," my voice cracked slightly. "That he'd use our past, use Harley, and then try to..."

"He's never getting near you or our daughters again," Hunter's tone left no room for argument. "Holly needs to handle the song situation, but beyond that - he's done."

"I told him we're done. No more friendship, no more chances." Thara pressed closer, still purring. "I just want to come home."

"Few more hours baby. Then we'll deal with this together."

My phone buzzed with another text from Holly. "Holly's checking on me. She saw him leave."

"Tell her what happened," Hunter said. "She needs to know how far he went this time."

"I will. Hunter... I love you. Only you. You know that, right?"

"I know, baby. I've never doubted that. Not for a second."

"Even after everything with Harley's paternity?" I couldn't help asking, Jon's words still echoing in my head.

"Michelle," Hunter's voice softened. "We dealt with that. We're stronger for it. Don't let him use our past to hurt our present."

I took a deep breath, feeling some of the tension ease. "When did you get so wise?"

"Probably around the time I married this amazing woman who taught me about forgiveness and real love."

"Smooth talker," I managed a small smile. "I should call Holly."

"Okay. Call me back after?"

"Of course. Love you."

"Love you too, baby. And Michelle? I'm proud of you for telling me right away."

After we hung up, I looked at Thara. "Ready to help me deal with the fallout, baby girl?"

Her tail twitched as I dialed Holly's number. At least this time, I was handling things the right way.

"Michelle?" Holly answered immediately. "What happened?"

"Jon crossed every line possible," I said, finally standing up from the floor. "He tried to manipulate me about Harley, threw the paternity situation in my face, and then tried to kiss me."

"He what?" Holly's professional calm cracked slightly.

"Yeah. I pushed him away and told him if he ever touched me again, he'd regret it." I moved to the couch, Thara following close behind. "I need you to handle this, Holly. Whatever it takes - he's done. No more chances, no more friendship, nothing."

"Already on it. I'm calling his team now. The song-"

"Can stay out there. I won't punish Harley for his actions. But that's it. No more collaborations, no more contact."

"And the press? They're going to notice if you two suddenly-"

"Tell them whatever you need to. Creative differences, scheduling conflicts, I don't care. Just keep him away from my family."

"I'll draft statements tonight," Holly said, her fingers already typing. "Do you want me to come over?"

"No, I'm okay. Just want to finish packing and get home to Hunter." I watched Thara settle into her favorite spot on the window ledge. "But Holly? Make it clear to his team - if he tries to spin this, if he tries to use Harley or our history for publicity..."

"I'll handle it," Holly's voice was firm. "Get some rest. Car will be there at five."

After hanging up, I stared at my phone for a moment before texting Hunter again: 'Can I call you back or are you busy?'

His response was immediate: 'Never too busy for you baby.'

I hit dial, needing to hear his voice again. The sooner I got through this night, the sooner I could be home where I belonged. Where Jon couldn't touch our family anymore.

Amber
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I leaned against the balcony railing, taking in the stunning ocean view. After a month of bouncing between fashion weeks - Milan, New York, London, Paris - this was exactly what I needed. We'd sent Niamh and Rachel home to Ireland while Trevor and I escaped to Greece for our anniversary. He'd outdone himself, booking the Presidential Suite at the Four Seasons in Athens. Private pool, panoramic ocean views, and complete privacy. After weeks of constant travel, reality show cameras, and drama with Bre, this felt like paradise.

"You want some wine?" Trevor asked, already pouring himself a glass. He looked relaxed for the first time in weeks, wearing just his swim trunks in the Greek sunshine.

"That sounds fabulous," I smiled, adjusting the strap of my brown bikini. No cameras, no business demands, no sister drama - just us celebrating our anniversary exactly the way we wanted to.

Trevor handed me a glass of wine and settled into one of the lounge chairs. "First time we've been properly alone in what feels like forever."

"God, yes," I took a sip, savoring both the wine and the moment. "Between the reality show and Fashion Week and Bre's constant drama..."

"And my mother stealing our daughter," Trevor grinned.

"Please, Niamh's in heaven having Rachel all to herself for a week. Though I miss her."

"Me too," Trevor admitted. "But we needed this. Just us."

I settled onto his lounge chair with him, feeling the tension of the past month start to melt away. "Hard to believe it's only been three years since the wedding."

"Feels like we've been married longer," Trevor pulled me closer. "In the best way possible."

"Mi corazón," I smiled against his shoulder, "who would have thought that my best friend would turn out to be the love of my life?"

"Your gay best friend," Trevor laughed, "It took me a while to figure it out."

"You got there... and look at us now. We've come a long way from prep cook and struggling model," I smiled, thinking about how far we'd really come. "Three successful restaurants, two cosmetic lines, a reality show..."

"And a beautiful daughter," Trevor added, his accent getting softer the way it always did when he talked about Rachel.

"Though if you'd told me back then that I'd end up married to my gay roommate with a baby, three successful businesses, and my sister trying to destroy me on international television..."

"You'd have thought they were mental," Trevor finished, making me laugh.
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"Speaking of mental," Trevor took another sip of wine, "have you checked your phone? I'm sure Bre's found some way to create drama even with us in Greece."

"Nope," I smiled. "Phone's on silent and I'm not checking it unless Holly calls with an actual emergency. Bre can plot and scheme all she wants - I'm off duty for the next week."

"Good," he pulled me closer. "Though I still think we should have gone with my original plan."

"Mi corazón, we are not pushing my sister off a cliff."

"Could make it look like an accident," he mused. "I know people..."

"No you don't," I laughed. "You know chefs and food critics. Though I suppose Lydia can make anything happen..."

"Now who's being mental?"

I laughed and took a sip of my wine, "This is so beautiful. I love this view."

"Me too," Trevor said, although he was looking at me.

"That was incredibly cheesy, even for you," I smiled, but couldn't help the warmth spreading through my chest. Three years of marriage, and he could still make me feel like the most beautiful woman in the world.

"What can I say? The Greek sun brings out my romantic side." He set his wine glass down. "Though I did have an ulterior motive for choosing Greece."

"Beyond getting me completely alone with no reality show cameras?"

"Remember what you told me about wanting to see the Parthenon when you were modeling in Europe?"

"You remembered that?" I turned to look at him properly. "That was years ago, before we were even together."

"Of course I remembered. You were sitting on our kitchen counter at three in the morning, telling me about all the places you wanted to see but couldn't afford to visit properly when you were modeling."

"Because I was too busy trying to survive," I nodded, remembering those late-night conversations when we were just friends. "But mi corazón, the Parthenon wasn't even the main one on that list."

"I know," he smiled that smile that still made my heart skip. "That's why tomorrow we're taking a private boat to Santorini."

I nearly spilled my wine. "What? Trevor..."

"Happy anniversary, mo grá."

"You..." I set my wine down carefully. "You planned a trip to Santorini?"

"Private villa overlooking the water," he nodded. "No press, no interruptions. Just us, those white buildings you always talked about, and the Mediterranean sunset."

"When did you even have time to plan this?" I asked, still processing the surprise.

"I have my ways," he smiled. "And watching you handle everything these past few weeks - Fashion Week, Bre's drama, running two successful brands... you deserve something special."

I straddled his lap to kiss him properly. "Have I mentioned lately that I love you?"

"Once or twice," he smiled against my lips. "Though I never tire of hearing it."

"Te amo, mi corazón," I whispered, feeling completely at peace for the first time in weeks.

"Though I do have one condition for Santorini," Trevor said, his hands settling on my hips.

"Oh?" I raised an eyebrow. "And what's that?"

"No business calls. No checking sales numbers. No worrying about what Bre might be plotting." He kissed my shoulder. "Just you and me, the way we started."

"Mmm, I think I can manage that," I smiled, running my fingers through his hair. "Though technically, the way we started was as roommates who couldn't cook."

"Speak for yourself," he laughed. "I could always cook."

"True. I just pretended I couldn't so you'd keep making me dinner."

"I knew it," he pulled me closer. "You just wanted my cooking."

"Among other things," I murmured before kissing him again.

The late afternoon sun painted everything golden as Trevor's hands slid up my back. After weeks of constant travel and pressure, this felt like coming home - just us, no pretense, no cameras, no expectations.

"You know," he murmured between kisses, "we do have that private pool..."

"Are you suggesting we christen every part of this suite, Chef O'Sullivan?"

"Well, it is our anniversary," his accent got thicker, the way it always did when he was thinking inappropriate thoughts. "And we have a lot of lost time to make up for after Fashion Week."

"I like the way you think," I started to stand, pulling him with me. "Though maybe we should start with the pool before we lose the sunlight."

"Whatever you want, mo grá," he smiled, following me toward the water. "We have all week."

I untied my bikini top and let it fall to the ground, watching his expression change.

"Bloody hell..." Trevor murmured, his accent getting even thicker.

I smiled and slid my bikini bottoms off before diving into the perfect water. When I surfaced, he was already pulling off his swim trunks to join me. Even after three years of marriage, the way he looked at me still made me feel like the most desirable woman in the world.

The setting sun cast everything in golden light as he slipped into the water beside me. Here, away from everything and everyone, we could just be us - no brands, no drama, no expectations. Just Trevor and Amber, the way it was always meant to be.

Livvie

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"Got the twins down finally," J said, coming into my office. "Though Rose is still insisting Killy needs a 'makeover' tomorrow."

I looked up from the strange patterns on my screen - Celtic magic was giving me a headache. "If she goes near him with glitter again..."

"I know, I know." J settled into the chair beside my desk. "What's Billy got you working on now?"

"Some mad combination of Celtic magic and Ranger tech." I rubbed my temples. "The patterns are unlike anything I've seen before. It's like... like they're alive somehow."

"Show me?" he moved closer, and I couldn't help but smile. Even with all this Power Ranger chaos, having J know about it, being able to share it with him, made it better somehow.

"See these waves here?" I pointed to my screen. "That's apparently what Celtic magic looks like in code form."

"Not gonna lie Love, I don't understand your human codes, let alone this... but... I'm sure you will figure it out," J said as he settled onto the sofa in my office.

"I hate this Ranger thing so much," I sighed, pushing away from my desk.

"I know. But we know now and you can't walk away. We're talking about literally keeping the Earth safe," J said, his voice gentle but firm. The way he could make even alien technology and Celtic magic sound reasonable sometimes amazed me.

"When did you become the voice of reason?" I asked, moving to join him on the sofa.

"Aye, well, one of us has to be sensible while the other saves the world," he smiled, pulling me closer.

"Speaking of being a voice of reason... anything new from James?" I asked, trying to focus on normal chaos instead of alien tech.

"Aye. He gave Aine a copy of his flat key," J said, sounding almost proud of his friend's progress.

I settled into his arms, "Really? Wow, for him that's huge."

"Aye. It was Pete's idea. Not moving in together, but also opening his space to her," J explained.
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"Pete has a vested interest in keeping James from doing anything stupid, given that his wife is now besties with Aine," I pointed out. Gina and Aine had become inseparable lately.

"Aye... but this is James. He will do something stupid. The question is can Aine forgive him for it when it happens..."

"Fair," I nodded, knowing exactly how James operated after all these years.

"Though Aine's different," I said thoughtfully. "She actually calls him on his shite. Doesn't let him get away with his usual nonsense."

"True," J shifted slightly so I could curl closer. "And she's got Gina and Susan backing her up now. Plus mam."

"Niamh's adopted another one, has she?" I couldn't help but smile. My mother-in-law had a habit of collecting strays - myself included.

"Aye, you know Mam. The moment she heard Aine was pregnant, she started knitting baby things. James better not mess this up or he'll have more than just Pete to answer to."

"Your mam would absolutely destroy him," I laughed. "Though speaking of Niamh, did she say how Rachel's doing?"

"According to Amber's text, she's spoiling our niece rotten while they're in Greece."

"Of course she is," I smiled. "Though I'm glad Amber and Trevor got away. After all that drama with Bre in Paris..."

"Aye, though Trevor's still plotting ways to push his sister-in-law off a cliff," J grinned. "He and Michelle need to stop encouraging each other with that."

"At least they're on different continents right now. Less chance for chaos." I glanced back at my computer screen. "Unlike whatever this is going to turn into."

"You'll sort it," J said confidently, his hand absently playing with my hair. "You always do."

"I just hope the twins stay asleep through whatever testing I need to do. The last thing we need is Rose deciding Celtic magic needs glitter."

"Christ," J muttered. "Don't even joke about that. After today's attempts at 'helping,' I wouldn't put anything past our fairy princess."

"At least Killy's cast is glitter-resistant now," I leaned into him. "Though I'm sure she's already planning her next improvement project."

I sighed, looking up at him. "How are you really doing with the Ranger stuff? I mean, you found out your best friend is the bloody Queen of Saturn and a superheroine."

"Honestly?" J's accent got thicker as he considered the question. "It explains a lot. All those times she disappeared during emergencies, the weird incidents in Cork, how protective Hunter gets sometimes..."

"But it doesn't bother you?"

"It's mental, don't get me wrong," he smiled slightly. "But it's Michelle. She's still the same person, just with... extra responsibilities. Though I could do without knowing about alien technology threatening our son."

"That's what scares me," I admitted quietly. "Not the Rangers or Michelle's identity, but Killy somehow being involved in all this."

"Michelle promised she would keep him away from it. I believe her," J said firmly. His trust in his best friend was absolute, even after learning about her secret life.

"I just... Michelle and Hunter are Power Rangers. I mean, I didn't think Power Rangers were even real, let alone that we were friends with two of them," I shook my head, still trying to process it all. "Your best friend is literally the Queen of Saturn. How are you so calm about this?"

"Because at the end of the day, she's still just Michelle. Still the same person who trusts me with her hair and calls me at ridiculous hours to rant about Jon. The alien queen thing... it's just another part of who she is."

"Though it does explain why she's so protective of her hair before shows," J mused. "All that morphing probably wreaks havoc on it."

I couldn't help but laugh. "Of course that's what you focus on. The hair implications of being a Power Ranger."

"Well, I am a hairdresser," he grinned, then grew more serious. "But really, it explains a lot about Hunter too. All those times they've both disappeared during emergencies, how they handle crisis situations so calmly..."

"And why they're so protective of their girls," I added. "Though I suppose growing up with Power Rangers as parents is its own kind of challenge."

"Aye, and now here we are, somehow mixed up in it all." He glanced at my computer screen. "Never thought I'd be discussing Celtic magic and alien tech on a Tuesday afternoon."

"Welcome to our new normal, I suppose," I sighed, settling back against him.

Michelle

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As I stepped off the plane in Cork, excitement bubbled up in my stomach. I'd barely slept during the
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flight, too eager to get home for our anniversary week. Thara, on the other hand, had no trouble sleeping and now wore an expression of pure feline annoyance at being woken.

I adjusted her backpack over my shoulder, grabbed my carry-on, and headed toward baggage claim. The moment I spotted Hunter standing there with Tomi in her stroller, everything else faded away. I rushed toward him, not particularly caring that Thara was getting jostled in her backpack. Hunter opened his arms and I launched myself into them, wrapping my legs around his waist and my arms around his neck as he held me close and kissed me. It had only been a few days since he'd left Nashville, but being home with him, in his arms - this was everything.

"I missed you so much baby," I whispered, my forehead pressed against his.

"I missed you too," he said before kissing me again.

"Mama," Tomi babbled from her stroller.

I smiled and reluctantly untangled myself from Hunter. "My baby girl. Oh my god, you're getting so big. I missed you so much," I said as I lifted her from the stroller and pulled her into my arms. She wrapped her little arms around my neck.

"Mama!" she giggled, hugging me tighter and giving me one of those open-mouthed, slobbery baby kisses that were more drool than kiss. In that moment, it was the most wonderful feeling in the world.

"Where are the girls?" I asked, settling Tomi on my hip while Hunter grabbed my bags.

"Arissa is with Kira hanging out and Harley's at the track practicing jumps," Hunter said, his hand finding the small of my back as we walked.

I nodded, "Of course she is."

He guided us toward the parking lot, his touch warm and familiar. "How are you holding up after everything with Jon?"

"Better now that I'm home," I said honestly. "Though we should save that conversation for the car. Even in Ireland, I don't trust the press not to be lurking."

Hunter nodded, understanding without needing more explanation. As we rounded the corner to the parking area, I spotted the familiar sight of his beloved truck.

"Seriously? You brought Betsy to pick me up?" I couldn't help but laugh at the sight of his ancient Ford, looking completely out of place among the sleek European cars.

"Three of us, three seats in Betsy," Hunter defended, patting the hood affectionately before tossing my bags in the bed with practiced ease. "She's perfect for airport runs."

"Right, and this has nothing to do with wanting an excuse to drive her," I teased, opening the passenger door to find Tomi's carseat strapped into the center position. Hunter knew exactly how I felt about that arrangement.

"Not the only reason," Hunter started, then noticed what I was doing. "Hey, what are you—"

"Moving her carseat to the passenger side," I said firmly, already unstrapping the safety belts. "I'll take the middle with the lap belt. This isn't safe and you know it."

"Mich, it's perfectly safe. I drove her here just fine," Hunter protested, though he was already helping me move the seat.

"And when someone T-bones this ancient truck, you want her in the middle? No thank you." I secured the carseat in the passenger position while Tomi watched us with curious eyes. "There. Now I'll sit in the death trap position."

"Drama queen," Hunter muttered, but I caught his smile.

"You love it," I kissed his cheek before settling Tomi into her properly positioned carseat. Thara's backpack went on the floor, where she immediately voiced her displeasure at being relegated to such an undignified spot.

"Oh hush," I told her. "You'll survive ten minutes on the floor."

Once we were all settled - me squeezed in the middle with the lap belt, Tomi safely by the passenger window, and Hunter behind the wheel - he finally asked the question I knew was coming.

"So what exactly happened with Jon? Your call was pretty brief."

I sighed, glancing at Tomi who was happily playing with the small toy attached to her carseat. "He came over supposedly to talk about Harley's music, but it quickly turned into him trying to manipulate me. Brought up the paternity situation, tried to make me feel guilty for protecting our daughter."

Hunter's jaw tightened, but he kept his eyes on the road. "And then?"

"I told him to get out. That's when he..." I lowered my voice, though Tomi was too young to understand. "He tried to kiss me. I pushed him away immediately, but he actually tried to convince me I wanted it."

"I'm going to kill him," Hunter's voice was deadly calm.

"Get in line," I said, trying to lighten the mood. "I nearly fried him with lightning right there in my apartment."

"You should have."

"With the press all over Nashville? Not the best idea." I placed my hand on his knee, feeling the tension in him. "He thought he could rile me up, that we'd fight and end up in bed like we used to. But that isn't who I am anymore. I vowed to be faithful to you and I meant it."

I turned slightly to face him, needing him to see my sincerity. "I know my track record of fidelity isn't the best in my other marriages, but it's different with you, Hunter. For the first time, I'm with someone who makes me truly happy. You really are the only one I want, you have to believe that."

His hand covered mine, his eyes briefly meeting mine before returning to the road. "I do believe you, baby. I've never doubted that. I'm not angry at you - I'm furious with him for thinking he had any right to touch you."

"Well, he knows now that he doesn't," I said, leaning into his shoulder. "And Holly's making sure he understands there won't be any more chances. No more friendship, no more collaboration with Harley, nothing."

"Good," Hunter said firmly. "Though I still think we should reconsider Trevor's cliff suggestion."

That made me smile despite everything. "I thought that was your idea."

"Joint custody of the idea," he grinned, some of the tension easing from his shoulders. "Though seriously, I'm proud of you for how you handled it. Calling me right away, setting boundaries with him..."

"No more secrets," I said softly, glancing at Tomi who was now trying to catch Thara's attention through the backpack mesh. "Not after everything we've been through."

"So that's it? He's finally out of our lives for good?"

"God, I hope so," I sighed. "Though with Jon, it's never that simple. But Holly's handling it, and I've made it clear where I stand."

We drove in comfortable silence for a few minutes, the familiar Irish countryside rolling past. Being here, with Hunter and Tomi, I could already feel the stress of Nashville and Jon fading.

"Have the girls been watching the show?" I asked. Livvie had set up a VPN so they could stream it even in Ireland.

Hunter laughed, "Yes... they saw the first episode. Kinda freaked Arissa out. She said she barely recognized you."

"Well, good stylists and actual acting skills will do that," I smiled. "Dixie's about as far from me as I could get."

"And because I know that even after an international flight there's no keeping you down," Hunter glanced at me, "we're having dinner at the Cantina with everyone. Except Amber and Trev. They're in Greece for their own anniversary."

"Oh darn. I get to be with everyone and not have to deal with Amber? Whatever will I do with the peace?" I said, snapping my fingers in mock disappointment.

"I thought you two were getting along better these days," Hunter said, though his smile told me he knew exactly how that friendship worked.

"We are, in our own way," I admitted. "Though having her not around to make comments about my hair or clothes is definitely a vacation perk. Who all is coming tonight?"

"The usual suspects - Livvie and Jeremy, the twins, Niamh, Pete and Gina, James and Aine..." Hunter listed off.

"James and Aine together? That's progress," I perked up at the potential drama. "Last I heard he was still waffling about whether to have her move in."

"According to J, he gave her a key to his flat."

"Wow, that's practically a marriage proposal coming from James," I laughed. "Though if he messes this up, Niamh will probably murder him herself."

"She's already knitting baby things," Hunter confirmed. "And don't even think about meddling in that situation."

"Me? Meddle?" I pressed a hand to my chest in mock offense. "I would never."

"Right," Hunter's tone was dry. "Like you never tried to get J and Trevor back together."

"That was different," I protested. "They were clearly meant for each other."

"And yet they both found their actual soulmates, and you nearly lost your best friend in the process."

I sighed dramatically. "Fine, no meddling with James and Aine. Though you have to admit, watching him try to figure out how to be in an actual relationship is pretty entertaining."

"As long as you keep that entertainment to yourself," Hunter smiled as we turned onto the road leading to our property. "Besides, we have our own anniversary to focus on."

"Speaking of which," I leaned closer, "what exactly do you have planned for this week? Besides the Cantina dinner tonight?"

"That would ruin the surprise, wouldn't it?"

I smiled, knowing I'd pretend to try to get it out of him later, but also knowing he wouldn't crack. And honestly, I loved that about him - his ability to keep a secret, to plan something special without giving anything away.

He parked the truck and I got out, slinging Thara's backpack over my shoulder before unbuckling Tomi from her carseat. Hunter grabbed my bags from the back, and we headed inside our home. The relief of being back washed over me immediately.

In the kitchen, Mom was sitting with a cup of tea while Harley, still in her riding gear and clearly fresh from the track, was pouring a sports drink.

"Hey!" I smiled, feeling that familiar warmth of being with my family again.

"Hey baby girl! Welcome home!" Mom stood to greet me.

"Mom!" Harley put her glass down and rushed over.

I held up my hand, stopping her before she could reach me. "You are not hugging me covered in sweat and mud. Shower first, hug later. But I missed you too."

Harley laughed and nodded, understanding completely.

"Go up and shower," Hunter said.

Harley nodded and ran upstairs. Hunter took Tomi from me and followed her.

"Let me get our princess down for a nap and I'll make us some lunch," he said.

I nodded. "I'm going to put my things in our room and let Thara out, then I'll come visit with you, Momma."

I picked up my bags and headed to the master suite, grateful as always that it was on the ground floor. After setting my things on the bench at the foot of our bed, I placed Thara's backpack on the mattress and unzipped it. She emerged with all the indignation of royalty forced to travel coach, shaking each paw dramatically before making a beeline for her litter box.

I rolled my eyes at my cat's theatrical behavior and headed back to the kitchen. By the time I returned, Hunter was already preparing lunch while Mom sat at the bar chatting with him.

"OK Momma, sorry," I said, joining them.

She stood up to give me a proper hug. "I missed you too."

"Oh come on, Momma, I missed you, but I got bombarded when I walked in," I said, returning her embrace.

We both settled at the bar to watch Hunter work his magic in the kitchen, the familiar rhythm of him moving around our space making me feel truly home at last.

"Hunter mentioned something happened with Jon?" Mom asked, her voice carefully measured.

I sighed, knowing there was no avoiding this conversation. "Yeah. He tried to kiss me. I pushed him away immediately and kicked him out." I kept it simple, leaving out the part about threatening him with powers she didn't know I had.

"I swear," Mom's voice tightened with three decades of accumulated frustration, "that man cannot just let you be happy. Since you were twelve he's had this grip on you. I moved you to Angel Grove to give you some normalcy, and even there he kept interfering. Couldn't let you date boys your own age, had to sabotage you and Billy, then you and Rocky..." She shook her head. "Ended your first marriage, and now that you're finally in a good place, he just can't stand it."

"I know, Momma," I reached for her hand. "And I told him exactly that. I know my track record isn't great, which is why I told Hunter right away. I don't want to mess this up. I love Hunter more than anything. I don't want Jon anymore. Honestly."

"Well, thank God for that," Mom squeezed my hand. "Took thirty years, but you finally see him for what he is. And Hunter," she looked up at my husband with genuine affection, "thank God for you. You're exactly what my daughter needed. I've never seen her this happy, this settled. This is all I ever wanted for her."

Hunter smiled as he slid a plate of sandwiches onto the counter. "I love her, Lea, more than anything. And trust me when I say Jon will never touch her again."

"Oh, I believe you," Mom nodded with satisfaction. "Jon finally overplayed his hand. I have prayed for this day."

"I just wish it hadn't happened at all," I admitted, taking one of the sandwiches Hunter had prepared. "I trusted him around Harley, and he betrayed that trust."

"That's what hurts the most," Mom nodded. "Using your daughter to get to you... that's a new low, even for Jon."

"Speaking of Harley," I changed the subject, not wanting to dwell on Jon any longer, "how's she been doing with everything?"

"She's excited about the song coming out next week," Hunter said. "Though thankfully here in Ireland, she's just Harley - not 'Michelle Morris's daughter' or 'Jon's protégé.'"

"That's one of the reasons we moved here," I nodded, grateful again for the privacy our Irish life afforded us. "Though I'm a little worried about what happens when the song actually drops."

"Holly's got it handled," Mom assured me. "And Harley's been working on some new material with Arissa. They're really good together."

I nodded, "I know. I've heard their demos. They are both extremely talented."

"Just like their momma," Mom's eyes softened with pride. "Speaking of, the show... wow. What a fantastic performance. You really shined, baby girl. Don't know why you were worried about doing a show without Zack. You owned it."

"Because, Momma, I've never done a series without Zachary," I explained. "But yes, the reviews have been fabulous and it seems I was quite the scene stealer."

"Of course you were," Mom said with absolute certainty. "You always have been. That's how you got your first role on a series. You weren't even cast initially - you just happened to be on set with Zack helping him run lines, and you were a scene stealer then. Peter knew he had to cast you, and he was right. You've always had talent that surpassed people with ten times the experience and a command of the stage that was unrivaled."

"You're not biased at all," I teased, though her words warmed me.

"She is," Hunter interjected, setting down fresh drinks for us, "but she's also right. You forget, babe, I grew up watching you on TV. You have always been impossible to ignore. You command attention. Between your talent and stage presence, you truly are a force."

I rolled my eyes playfully, "And how lucky are you that you married Michelle Morris?"

"No, I didn't," Hunter's expression softened as he came around the counter. "I may have grown up with a crush on Michelle Morris, but when I met you, I got to know the girl you really were. I didn't marry 'Michelle Morris'. I married Mich. The girl that I know and love is better than any celebrity crush I had as a teenager."

He leaned down to kiss me, and I could feel Mom smiling at us. After all these years, after everything we'd been through, Hunter still had this way of seeing through the fame and the image to the person underneath. It was one of the countless reasons I loved him.

And that," Mom said after we broke apart, "is why I finally stopped worrying about you, baby girl. The moment I saw how he looked at you - not at the star, but at my daughter."

We settled into lunch together, the conversation flowing easily between us. Mom shared stories about the girls' antics while I was away, Hunter talked about his latest training sessions at the track, and I filled them in on the Nashville gossip they hadn't already heard.

"Thank you for lunch, Hunter," Mom said as she gathered her purse. "I'll see you all at dinner."

"Where are you going?" I asked, surprised she wasn't sticking around longer.

"Niamh invited me for tea," Mom smiled. "But we'll meet you at the Cantina later."

I nodded, "OK. Have fun."

She hugged me again, holding on a little longer than usual. "Welcome home, baby girl."

After she left, Hunter started clearing the dishes, moving with that easy grace that still made me watch his every movement.

"I'm guessing Kara and Hal are bringing Arissa to the Cantina later?" I asked, already mentally mapping out the evening.

"Yeah. They're meeting us there."

I nodded, drumming my fingers on the counter.

"You're bored already, aren't you?" he asked, a knowing smile playing on his lips.

I nodded again, not bothering to deny it.

"Jesus, Mich," Hunter laughed as he abandoned the dishes and came back around the counter to wrap his arms around me. "You just got off an international flight. Can you relax for just a few hours, baby?"

"Relax? Not sure I know how," I admitted, leaning into his embrace.

"Well, lucky for you," Hunter's voice dropped lower, "I happen to be an expert at helping you relax."

"Is that so?" I turned in his arms to face him. "And how exactly do you plan to do that?"

"Well, Tomi's napping, Harley's in the shower, and we have the house to ourselves for the moment..." His hands slid down to my waist.

"Mr. Bradley, are you suggesting what I think you're suggesting?"

"I'm suggesting," he pressed a kiss to my neck, "that we take advantage of this rare moment of peace before our chaotic dinner tonight."

"I like the way you think," I smiled, wrapping my arms around his neck. "Though I should probably shower first. International flights aren't exactly glamorous."

"I could join you," he suggested, that look in his eyes that still made my heart race after all these years.

"I was hoping you'd say that."

"Race you there," I whispered, slipping out of his arms and heading toward our bedroom.

Hunter caught up quickly, his hands finding my waist again as we moved through the doorway. The moment the door closed behind us, his lips were on mine, kissing me with all the pent-up longing of our days apart.

"God, I missed you," he murmured against my skin, his hands already pulling my shirt over my head.

"Show me how much," I challenged, pulling him toward the bathroom.

The shower heated up quickly, steam filling the room as we shed the last of our clothes. Under the warm water, Hunter's hands traced familiar paths along my body, relearning every curve, every sensitive spot that made me gasp.

"I love you," I whispered as he pressed me against the cool tile, his body warm against mine. "Only you, Hunter. Always you."

His lips captured mine again, more urgent now. "I love you too, baby. More than anything."

There was something different about this time - a need to reconnect, to reaffirm what we had after Jon's attempt to come between us. Hunter seemed to sense it too, his touches more deliberate, more possessive.

The water cascaded over us as he lifted me, my legs wrapping around his waist. I gasped as he pressed me more firmly against the tile, our bodies finding that perfect rhythm we'd perfected over years together.

"Hunter," I breathed, my fingers tangling in his wet hair.

"I've got you," he promised, his voice rough with desire. "Always."

The steam, the heat between us, the intensity in his eyes - it all combined to push me closer to the edge. Hunter knew exactly how to touch me, how to move with me, his body perfectly in tune with mine.

The climax was intense and lengthy as waves of pleasure coursed through my body. It kept coming in pulses that made me wonder if it would ever stop, my fingers gripping his shoulders as he held me steady against the tile.

When we finally came down, we finished our shower and wrapped up in warm, fluffy towels before collapsing onto our bed. Hunter pulled me against him like he never wanted to let go, his arms creating a sanctuary I'd been missing for weeks.

"The idea of him touching you," Hunter's voice cracked with emotion he rarely expressed.

I held him tighter, pressing my face against his chest. "Hey, listen to me... he touched me, but I didn't touch him... and he will never touch me again."

"You know it won't be that easy. Not with him," Hunter said, his fingers tracing patterns on my back.

"He also knows I will fry him if he touches me again... and I will go the legal route and get a restraining order if I have to. That's press he certainly doesn't want," I said firmly.

"I hate that I wasn't there to protect you from him," Hunter admitted, vulnerability evident in his voice.

"I know, but I can protect myself. Downside of marrying another Ranger. I'm pretty self-sufficient," I teased, trying to lighten the mood.

He pulled back to look into my eyes, his gaze intense. "Oh, I know. You're the strongest woman I've ever known... but I don't want you to have to be. I want to keep you safe."

"And you do... I'm safe because I have you. And now I'm home, in your arms, and I feel the safest I have in weeks," I said as I snuggled back against him, his heartbeat steady under my ear.

At some point I must have fallen asleep because the next thing I knew it was three hours later and I was being enthusiastically licked in the face by Robbie.

"Huh?" I blinked awake, disoriented. "Oh, hey there boy."

"Robbie... oh geez, sorry baby. I just let him in. I didn't mean for him to wake you," Hunter rushed into the bedroom after his golden retriever, looking apologetic.

I laughed, wiping my face. "It's okay. I didn't mean to crash."

"You needed the rest," Hunter said, gently pulling Robbie back.

"Maybe, but now I need to get ready for dinner," I said, sitting up and holding the blankets against me.

After Hunter coaxed an overly excited Robbie out of the room, I headed to my closet, surveying my options. I settled on black jeans and a dark plum sweatshirt - comfortable but still put-together. A quick brush through my hair, minimal makeup, and low-heeled boots completed the look. After weeks of full glam for the show, the simplicity felt refreshing.

When I emerged into the living room, Harley was sprawled on the couch playing video games, dressed in jeans and a purple hoodie.

"Okay, ready," I announced.

Harley paused her game and bounded over, wrapping me in a hug. "I'm clean now."

I laughed, returning her embrace. "You sure are. I missed you, sweetie."

"I missed you too," she said, then pulled back with that calculating look I knew too well. "Can you talk to Dad about giving me my phone back?"

I laughed harder. "Nice try. Not happening. Just because I'm home doesn't mean you're not grounded."

Harley sighed dramatically as I grabbed my purse.

Hunter walked in with Tomi on his hip, both looking ready to go. "Okay, we're set."

I smiled as we headed out to my SUV. This - the normalcy, the family moments, the everyday chaos - this was what I missed most when I was away. As much as I loved my career, nothing compared to being home with them.

We arrived at the Cantina and went straight to the "VIP Room." Everyone except James and Aine had already arrived - no surprise there, as we were usually among the last.

"Mom!" Arissa called, rushing over and wrapping me in a tight hug.

"Hey sweetie," I said, holding her close, breathing in the familiar scent of her shampoo.

Jeremy stood and approached with open arms. I dramatically collapsed into his embrace as he held me. "I missed you so much."

"I missed you too. Hunter told me what happened. Are you okay?" he asked, his voice low with concern.

"I am now that I'm home. Hair and coffee tomorrow?" I asked, already looking forward to our ritual.

He laughed, "Aye, of course, 9 AM sharp."

We joined everyone at the table, the familiar faces of our chosen family making me feel truly home.

"So, who's seen the show?" I asked, settling into my chair.

"Oh my goodness, it is so good so far. I am hooked," Kara enthused, which didn't surprise me. It was exactly the kind of drama she would love.

"Your mum showed it to me. You play a right cunt," Niamh said with her characteristic Irish bluntness.

I laughed, genuinely delighted by her candor. "Yeah, and she gets worse."

"You really are quite good in it, Mich. You should be proud," Jeremy added.

I smiled, feeling that unique warmth that comes from people who truly know you appreciating your work. "I am. And how is our little warrior here?" I turned to Killy, noticing his arm.

"Rose pushed him down the stairs," Tiffy volunteered helpfully.

"I say sorry!" Rose defended immediately.

"I got new cast. Ro Ro got fairy dust in it," Killy explained, holding up his bright red cast.

"I try to help!" Rose's voice rose with indignation.

"I know, Love," Jeremy said gently, pulling Rose into his lap. "But we talked about this, remember?"

"Fairy dust?" I asked, raising an eyebrow at Liv.

"Body glitter," she clarified with a sigh. "Inside the cast. We had to take him back to hospital for a new one."

"Oh Rose," I couldn't help but smile. "Your heart was in the right place, but..."

"But not the glitter," Liv finished, though I caught her fighting a smile too. It was hard to stay mad at Rose's well-intentioned chaos.

"At least the new cast is glitter-resistant," Jeremy added.

"How was Nashville?" Kara asked, smoothly changing the subject.

"Good," I said, grateful for the shift. "The show's getting great reviews, and the cast is fantastic to work with."

"Michelle's being modest," Hunter said. "Her character's already become a fan favorite."

"Well, villains always are," I grinned. "Though Dixie's more complicated than she seems."

The door opened, and James and Aine finally arrived. I noticed immediately that something had changed between them - a new ease in how they moved together, Aine's hand resting comfortably on his arm.

"Well look at you, being a proper boyfriend," I teased. James wasn't my favorite person, but he was Jeremy's childhood friend which made him family.

"Aye, they grow up so fast," Pete echoed, raising his glass with a grin.

"Aine, how are you doing, Love?" Gina asked as Aine settled beside her, the two having become inseparable these past months.

"I'm good. Feel like I'm growing every day," Aine said, her hand instinctively resting on her rounded belly.

"When is the baby due?" I asked, genuinely curious despite my complicated feelings about James.

"18 December," she replied, her Irish accent making the date sound musical.

"Oh, couple more months. Home stretch," I said, remembering those final weeks of pregnancy all too well.

"Look Uncle James, I got new cast," Killy announced proudly, holding his bright red arm up for inspection.

"Looks like the one you had last I saw you, lad," James said, confusion crossing his face.

"Ro Ro got fairy dust on it," Killy explained solemnly.

"Aye, Rose dumped glitter, we went back to hospital, Killy had to get a new cast," Livvie elaborated with the weary patience of a mother who'd been through it all.

"Well, I think the new one is lovely," Aine said warmly, earning a shy smile from Killy.

"Thank you," he replied, clearly pleased with the attention from the newest addition to their extended family.

I would never admit it out loud, but it felt strangely off-balance having everyone here except Amber and Trev. As much as she drove me crazy with her fashion critiques and blunt opinions, Amber was family - the annoying sister I never had but somehow couldn't imagine life without.

We ordered our usual favorites, and Fionn emerged from the kitchen to bring out the food personally. It wasn't necessary - the staff could have handled it - but it was his way of joining our gathering without actually sitting down. Watching him chat easily with Niamh, his eyes bright with pride over the restaurant's success, I couldn't help but smile.

Our whole big, chosen family seemed to be thriving - new babies on the way, businesses flourishing, relationships strengthening. Even with Jon's drama back in Nashville, sitting here surrounded by these people who had become more family than friends, I felt that sense of peace that only came from being truly home. Hunter caught my eye across the table and winked, knowing exactly what I was thinking.

It was going to be a great week.

“Rule of Three”

The sky was just beginning to lighten when Trevor shook me awake, his excitement palpable even through my sleep-fogged brain.

"Mo grá, wake up. It's time."

I blinked at the bedside clock: 4:30 AM. "Time for what exactly?" I mumbled, burrowing deeper into the luxurious sheets of our Santorini villa. After three days of exploring whitewashed villages and swimming in crystal waters, I'd been looking forward to sleeping in.

"For the second part of your anniversary surprise," Trevor was already dressed in athletic wear, looking far too awake for this ungodly hour.

"Unless this surprise involves more sleep or coffee, I'm not interested," I groaned, though I was already sitting up despite myself. Trevor's enthusiasm was always infectious.

"It involves climbing to the home of the gods," he grinned, tossing a duffel bag onto the bed. "Pack for two days. We're climbing Mount Olympus."

That got my attention. "We're what?"

"Remember that list of places you wanted to see? You mentioned wanting to climb Olympus but never had the chance." He sat beside me, excitement dancing in his eyes. "A guide is meeting us in an hour. We'll helicopter to the trailhead today, climb to Spilios Agapitos refuge for the night, summit tomorrow, and be back in Athens for some relaxation for our actual anniversary."

I stared at him, sleep forgotten. "You arranged a two-day climb up Mount Olympus? The actual Mount Olympus?"

"Unless there's another one I don't know about," he smiled, pressing a kiss to my forehead. "Too much?"

I launched myself at him, knocking him back onto the bed. "It's perfect. Mi corazón, you remembered."

"I remember everything you tell me," he said simply, and in that moment, I fell in love with him all over again.

"But... I haven't done a climb this intense since..." I trailed off, doubt creeping in. My body had changed after Rachel's birth, and though I'd been working my way back to my former climbing strength, Olympus was no casual hike.

"Love," Trevor's voice softened as he took my hands, "you have come so far. I've seen you on the climbs we’ve done, pushing yourself every week. You can do this. I wouldn't have booked it if I didn't think you were ready."

I nodded, feeling a familiar fire ignite within me. This was exactly what I needed - a challenge, a test of how far I'd come. After months of balancing motherhood, business drama, and Bre's chaos, I needed this concrete, physical win. Something that was just for me, just about what my body could accomplish. I had almost died giving birth, but I had come back from it.

The memory of those terrifying hours still haunted me sometimes - the complications, the blood loss, the moment when I'd felt myself slipping away. But I hadn't. I'd fought my way back, rebuilt my strength day by day, climb by climb.

"Let's climb a mountain," I said, already reaching for my gear. Mount Olympus wasn't just another peak - it was a symbol of everything I'd overcome.

Trevor's smile widened, relief and pride mingling in his expression. He knew what this meant to me without my having to explain. It was one of the countless reasons I loved him.

"The guide said to pack light but prepare for changing conditions," he explained, pulling out a detailed itinerary. "We'll have proper equipment waiting at the trailhead."

I moved with renewed purpose, selecting layers, checking my hiking boots, mentally preparing for what lay ahead. The home of the gods awaited, and I was ready to prove - to myself more than anyone - that I belonged among them.

Michelle

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I arrived at Jeremy's house at precisely nine, two Starbucks cups balanced in my hands. Not for him, of course - he'd have his proper Irish tea ready. I'd gotten my usual coconut mocha latte and a caramel macchiato for Livvie. After all the Ranger tech chaos we'd dragged her into, caffeine seemed the least I could offer as penance.

I stepped into the familiar warmth of their home, following the scent of hair products to Jeremy's in-home salon.

"Hey!" he beamed, already arranging his tools with the precision of an artist.

"Auntie Michelle!" Rose's voice preceded her, a tiny whirlwind in fairy wings barreling toward me at alarming speed.

I lifted the coffee cups high, narrowly avoiding a collision that would have ended in a caffeine disaster.

"Róisín!" Livvie's warning call echoed down the hallway as she appeared, looking like someone who'd been awake far too long dealing with Celtic magic code.

"Hey Fairy Girl," I smiled down at Rose before looking up at Livvie. "Hey Liv, brought you something." I extended the caramel macchiato toward her like a peace offering.
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"Oh my god, bless you," Livvie took the cup with both hands, inhaling the steam rising from the lid as if it contained the secrets of the universe. "You have no idea how much I needed this."

"Rough night?" I asked, settling into Jeremy's styling chair while Rose danced around us, her fairy wings slightly crooked.

"Billy called at 2 AM," Livvie took a long sip of her coffee. "Apparently Celtic magic doesn't respect time zones."

"Or sleep schedules," Jeremy added, running his fingers through my hair with a professional's assessment. "Though I think our fairy princess contributed to the lack of rest as well."

"I not tired!" Rose announced, twirling in a circle.

"We noticed," Livvie said dryly, though her expression softened as she watched her daughter. "Killy's still asleep, thank god. The cast makes it hard for him to get comfortable."

"Speaking of Billy," I lowered my voice slightly, "any progress with the... project?"

Livvie glanced at Rose, who was now thoroughly distracted by a basket of hair accessories. "Some. It's fascinating, actually. The patterns are unlike anything I've seen before. But we can talk about that later."

Jeremy draped a cape around my shoulders with a flourish. "Right now, we're focusing on making this one camera-ready for her anniversary. Hunter has quite the evening planned."

"Oh?" I perked up. "Do tell."

"As if he'd tell me," Jeremy laughed, sectioning my hair. "That man guards his surprises like state secrets."

"True," I smiled, relaxing as Jeremy's fingers worked through my hair. "Though I'm hoping it doesn't involve anything too elaborate. After Nashville, I just want quiet time with him and the girls."

"You and quiet time," Jeremy teased. "How long before you're climbing the walls with boredom?"

"Hey, I can do relaxing," I protested. "Sometimes."

"For approximately twelve minutes," Livvie chimed in, settling into the adjacent chair with her coffee. "Then you're planning a concert or redesigning your kitchen or trying to get J back with his ex."

"That was one time," I rolled my eyes, though they weren't entirely wrong. Stillness had never been my strong suit.

"Auntie Michelle, look!" Rose had discovered a sparkly hair clip and was attempting to attach it to her already glitter-infused fairy wings.

"Beautiful, Fairy Girl," I smiled at her. "Though maybe ask before using your da's professional supplies?"

"It's fine," Jeremy waved it off. "Better than her trying to 'improve' Killy's cast again."

"How is he doing with that?" I asked, genuinely concerned about the quiet twin.

"Frustrated," Livvie sighed. "He can't do his puzzles properly, and Rose keeps trying to 'help' in ways that usually make things worse."

"Though with the best intentions," Jeremy added loyally.

"Always," Livvie agreed with the weary affection of a mother who'd learned to find humor in the chaos. "But enough about our drama. I'll leave you two to your coffee and gossip. Come on, Rose."

"I help Da!" Rose protested, clutching the sparkly hair clip like a treasured artifact.

"Oh no, you've helped enough for one morning," Livvie said, expertly scooping her up with her free arm while balancing her coffee with practiced precision. "Let's go check on Killy before he wakes up and discovers you've 'improved' something else."

Once they'd disappeared down the hallway, Jeremy's expression shifted from amused to concerned as he began mixing my color.

"So," he said quietly, "what happened with the wanker?" The edge in his voice made it clear exactly which wanker he meant. Jeremy had never been Jon's biggest fan, even before the paternity situation.

I sighed, grateful for the privacy to speak freely. "He crossed every line there is, J."

Jeremy's hands stilled for a moment before resuming their work. "Hunter told me he tried to kiss you."

"After bringing up Harley's paternity," I added, the anger still fresh. "Tried to use that against me, like I haven't spent years making up for that mistake."

"What a bloody prick," Jeremy muttered, his accent thickening with anger. "After everything, he still thinks he has some claim on you."

"Not anymore," I said firmly. "I made it crystal clear this time - we're done. No more friendship, no more chances, nothing."

"Good," Jeremy nodded, applying the first section of color with practiced precision. "Though I still think Trevor's cliff idea has merit."

That made me smile despite everything. "You've been spending too much time with Hunter."

"Aye, well, when someone tries to kiss my best friend against her will, I tend to get a bit protective," he said, his casual tone belying the fierce loyalty underneath.

"I handled it," I assured him. "Pushed him away immediately and threatened him with... consequences if he ever tried again."

Jeremy caught my slight hesitation. "Ranger consequences?"

I nodded slightly. "Let's just say I may have let him see a hint of what would happen if he touched me again."

"Good," Jeremy said with satisfaction. "About time he saw that side of you."

"I've never been that close to losing control," I admitted quietly. "Not since... well, not for a long time."

Jeremy paused, his hands gentle on my shoulders. "But you didn't lose control. You showed him exactly enough to make your point without compromising yourself. That's growth, Mich."

I smiled gratefully at him. Our friendship had weathered so much over the years - my complicated history with Trevor, the Ranger revelations, countless dramas - but Jeremy had always seen the best in me, even when I couldn't.

"Enough about Jon," I said, ready to move on. "Tell me about James and Aine. They seemed... different at dinner last night."

"Aye, our James is finally growing up," Jeremy's expression lightened as he returned to my hair. "Gave her a key to his flat. For James, that's practically a marriage proposal."

"I noticed," I smiled. "She's good for him. Calls him on his nonsense."

"Someone needed to," Jeremy laughed. "Though I still can't believe he's going to be a da. James, of all people, responsible for another human being."

"If you can handle twins, he can handle one baby," I pointed out.

"Fair point," he conceded. "Though I had Livvie. God help Aine."

"Indeed. But navigating teens is its own kind of terror," I said, unable to keep the weariness from my voice.

"Oh?" Jeremy's eyes met mine in the mirror as he expertly sectioned my hair. "Harley?"

"I mean, yes, but that's actually improving. Although she is still grounded." I paused. "It's Arissa. She has her first boyfriend."

"Has she now? Who's the lad?" Jeremy asked, the casual interest of someone expecting to hear about a local boy or classmate.

I sighed. "That's the complicated part. He's the son of my head guard on Saturn."

Jeremy's hands froze mid-section. "You mean Arissa is dating a lad that literally lives on another planet?"

"Yeah..." I watched his expression shift through several emotions at once.

"Right then..." he said, visibly trying to refocus on my hair rather than the interplanetary dating situation I'd just dropped on him.

"I know, I know. It's weird for you," I said apologetically. Jeremy had been remarkably adaptable about the whole Ranger and Sailor Soldier revelations, but there were still moments when the reality of it clearly blindsided him.

"Weird doesn't begin to cover it," he muttered, then paused again. "Wait, if you're Queen, that makes Arissa a princess... isn't there some royal protocol about guards and royals?"

"There used to be," I admitted. "Not anymore. I found all of that to be outdated, so I got rid of those restrictions."

"Of course you did," Jeremy shook his head, a smile tugging at his lips despite his bewilderment. "Rewrote the ancient laws of an entire planet, did you?"

"Well, when you put it that way, it sounds dramatic," I smiled. "But yes. Some of the protocols were from thousands of years ago and needed updating."

"So you just... changed them?" Jeremy continued working on my hair, his initial shock giving way to curiosity.

"I am the Queen," I shrugged. "But when I saw how outdated they were, I dissolved the entire council. Did it publicly during a ceremony so they couldn't argue."

"And how's Hunter feeling about Arissa dating?"

"Protective, of course," I said. "He was ready to send Young Arion into exile when he first found out. But he's coming around. Arissa is only thirteen, but she's always been our mature one."

"And how does this work exactly? Long-distance relationships are hard enough between countries, let alone..." Jeremy gestured vaguely upward.

"They mostly see each other when we visit Saturn," I explained. "Arion's father is our head guard, so they're always at the palace when we're there. It's new territory for all of us."

"I imagine so," Jeremy said, applying more color with practiced hands. "And Arissa? How serious is she about this boy?"

"Hard to tell at thirteen," I admitted. "But she came to me about their first kiss before telling Hunter. She trusts us enough to be honest, which is more than I ever did at her age."

"We all remember those days," Jeremy said softly. "Though I'm guessing most teenage romances don't involve interplanetary royal protocols."

"No, they usually don't," I laughed. "But then again, most teenagers aren't princesses of Saturn and TK-91. Arion and Arissa have talked about him visiting Earth, though. Not exactly sure what kind of cover story we can use, but we'll come up with something."

"Bloke she met in California visiting her uncle?" Jeremy suggested, his hands never pausing in their work.

"Maybe. I don't know. It's got to be a solid cover no one will question," I sighed, leaning back slightly as he rinsed the color. "The accent would be hard to explain. Saturn's dialect is... distinctive."

"Could say he's from New Zealand," Jeremy offered. "Most people can't place that accent properly anyway."

"That's actually not a bad idea," I perked up. "We could say he's a friend of Hunter's family or something."

"Though I'm still trying to wrap my head around all this," Jeremy admitted, wrapping a towel around my hair. "My best friend is queen of an entire planet. You've got guards and a palace and apparently unicorns?"

"Don't forget Countess Thara," I smiled. "My cat has a title and her own royal quarters."

"Of course she does," Jeremy laughed, leading me to the sink. "Only you would make your cat nobility."

"She earned it," I defended. "She's very dignified. Except when she's stealing cream puffs from the royal banquet table."

As Jeremy washed the color from my hair, I closed my eyes, enjoying the familiar routine. Despite all the chaos of my double life, these moments of normalcy kept me grounded.

"So," Jeremy said as he applied conditioner, "how are you really doing with all this? The Jon situation, Arissa dating, the whole royal family drama?"

I took a deep breath, grateful for the chance to be completely honest. "It's a lot. Sometimes I feel like I'm juggling too many worlds at once."

"You've always been good at juggling," Jeremy reminded me, his fingers working through my hair with practiced ease.

"True, but this is different. It's not just my life anymore - it's the girls, it's Hunter, it's entire planets depending on decisions I make." I kept my eyes closed, finding it easier to voice these thoughts without seeing his reaction. "And then there's Jon trying to worm his way back in, using Harley to do it."

"That absolute wanker," Jeremy muttered, his accent thickening with anger.

"Exactly. And the thing is, I handled him. I set boundaries, I pushed him away, I did everything right. But part of me is still... angry that he thought he could try at all."

"Of course you're angry," Jeremy rinsed the conditioner from my hair. "He violated your trust, tried to manipulate you using your daughter, then physically crossed a line. You'd be mad to not be furious."

"Hunter's been amazing about it," I said softly. "He trusts me completely. But I hate that Jon put me in that position at all."

"Because you're not that person anymore," Jeremy said with certainty, wrapping a fresh towel around my hair. "The Michelle who would have fallen for Jon's manipulation doesn't exist anymore. You've grown, built something real with Hunter."

"I have," I nodded, feeling some of the tension ease. "And that's what matters. Not Jon, not the past - just the life we've created."

"Exactly," Jeremy led me back to his styling chair. "Now, let's make you look fabulous for whatever anniversary surprise Hunter has planned."

Amber

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The helicopter ride to the trailhead had been spectacular, but nothing compared to the view that greeted us as we began our ascent of Mount Olympus. The morning sun cast long shadows across the rugged landscape, turning the famous mountain into a patchwork of light and dark that took my breath away.

"Incredible, isn't it?" Trevor's voice carried over the wind as we followed our guide, Nikos, along the initial path. "Hard to believe we're walking the same routes as ancient Greeks who thought gods lived up here."

"Maybe they did," I smiled, adjusting my backpack straps. The weight felt good - grounding me to this moment, this challenge I'd set for myself. "I've seen enough in my life not to discount anything."

Nikos, a weathered man in his fifties who'd been climbing this mountain for decades, glanced back at us. "The gods are still here, if you know where to look," he said cryptically. "You feel them in the wind, in the rocks. Olympus has a spirit all its own."

I believed him. Even in these early hours of our climb, there was something almost mystical about the mountain. The way the light played through the trees, how the air seemed to carry whispers of ancient times.

"How are you feeling?" Trevor asked quietly as we navigated a particularly steep section. His eyes held that mixture of concern and pride I'd grown to love - worried about pushing me too hard, but confident in my strength.

"Good," I replied honestly, surprised by how true it was. My body remembered this - the rhythm of climbing, the careful placement of each foot, the measured breathing. "Better than good, actually. I needed this."

"I can tell," Trevor smiled, his eyes crinkling at the corners. "You've got that look."
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"What look?"

"The one you get when you're exactly where you need to be." He reached out to steady me as we navigated a rocky section. "I haven't seen it in a while."

He was right. Between the reality show drama, Bre's constant sabotage attempts, and balancing motherhood with two expanding businesses, I'd lost touch with this part of myself. The woman who found peace in physical challenges, who measured her worth not by magazine covers or sales figures, but by summits reached and obstacles overcome.

"First break in twenty minutes," Nikos called back, pointing toward a plateau ahead. "The real climb begins after that."

I nodded, feeling a familiar anticipation building. The "real climb" meant steeper terrain, more technical challenges - exactly what I'd been craving. Not the manufactured drama of reality TV, but authentic challenge with real consequences.

"Look," Trevor pointed to our right, where the morning mist was clearing to reveal the sprawling landscape below. The Mediterranean sparkled in the distance, a brilliant blue against the green and brown of the countryside.

"Worth waking up at four?" he asked, his hand finding mine.

"Definitely," I breathed, taking in the view. "Though I'm still going to complain about it."

"I'd expect nothing less, mo grá."

Nikos led us through the black pine forest, occasionally stopping to point out unique flora or to share bits of mythology. We'd started at Prionia, where our helicopter had dropped us off at the 1,100-meter mark, saving us the drive from Litochoro. Now we were making our way along the E4 trail toward the Spilios Agapitos Refuge.

"This mountain," Nikos said during one of our hourly breaks, "it has many faces. Down here, the forest protects you. Up there," he pointed toward the peaks barely visible through the trees, "the gods watch your every step."

"He's really leaning into the mythology," Trevor whispered, passing me his water bottle.

"I like it," I admitted. "Makes it feel more... significant somehow."

As we climbed higher, the black pines gave way to what Nikos identified as robelo - Bosnian pines with distinctive shapes against the increasingly rocky terrain. The trail grew steeper, switchbacks zigzagging up the mountainside as we gained elevation.

"How are you holding up?" Trevor asked as we paused to catch our breath.

I wiped sweat from my forehead, surveying how far we'd come. "Better than I expected. Though ask me again in another thousand meters."

"That's my girl," he smiled, the pride in his eyes making the exertion worth it.

The trail grew more demanding after our break at the Spilios Agapitos Refuge, where we refilled our water bottles and grabbed a quick snack. As we left the treeline behind, the landscape transformed dramatically - no more forest canopy, just open sky and rocky terrain stretching toward jagged peaks.

"We're on Zonaria now," Nikos explained, gesturing to the path ahead. "One of the most famous trails on Olympus."

I paused, taking in the panoramic view - dense robelo forests below us, the gleaming Aegean Sea in the distance, and the imposing peaks of Scala and Mytikas looming ahead. My legs burned with the effort of the climb, a familiar sensation I'd missed more than I realized.

Six months ago, I wasn't sure I'd ever feel this again. The complications during Rachel's birth had left me hovering between life and death, my body betraying me in ways I'd never experienced before. I remembered the hospital ceiling, the beeping monitors, Trevor's terrified face - and the long, painful road back to strength that followed.

Each step up this mountain felt like reclaiming something that had been taken from me. My breath came harder now, lungs working against the thinning air, but the burn felt like victory. My muscles remembered this - the rhythm of ascent, the careful balance required on uneven terrain. My body was responding, proving to me with every meter gained that I had truly come back from the edge.

"Need a break?" Trevor asked, noticing I'd slowed slightly.

"No," I shook my head, determination fueling me forward. "I want to keep going."

The path narrowed as we continued along Zonaria, the rocky traverse requiring more focus. I felt a familiar calm settling over me - the kind that came only in moments of pure physical challenge, when my mind cleared of everything except the next step, the next handhold, the steady control of my breathing.

This was what I'd been missing in the chaos of reality shows and business meetings and social media drama. This clarity, this honest test of what my body could accomplish. No cameras, no scripts, no manufactured conflicts - just me against the mountain, earning every meter of elevation with sweat and will.

"You've got that look again," Trevor said as we navigated a particularly steep section.

"What look?" I asked, though I knew exactly what he meant.

"Like you've found yourself again."

I smiled, feeling tears prick at the corners of my eyes - not from pain or exhaustion, but from the simple truth of his words. With each step higher on this ancient mountain, I was reclaiming pieces of

myself that had been scattered during my recovery, during months of being defined by what I couldn't do rather than what I could.

"I think I have," I admitted, reaching for his hand as we crested another ridge. "And god, I've missed her."

Michelle

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I spent the entire morning with Jeremy, the hours slipping by in the comfortable rhythm of our friendship. After my hair was done, we lingered over lunch, catching up on everything from the twins' latest adventures to my show's reception.

"I still can't believe they're doing that to your hair," Jeremy frowned, clearly offended on a professional level. "Those flat, lifeless waves? That harsh color? It's criminal."

"Dixie's hair is a creative choice," I reminded him, amused by his indignation. "The writers wanted her to look like she's trying too hard - it's part of her character."

"There's character choices, and then there's hair abuse," he muttered. "And who's this stylist they've got? Amateur hour, from what I can see."

"You know," I couldn't resist teasing, "you could always be the one doing my hair on set..."

"In Nashville?" He looked horrified at the mere suggestion. "Not a chance, love. I've built my life here."

"Then you can't complain about who does my hair there," I pointed out.

He sighed dramatically, conceding the point. "Fine. But I reserve the right to fix whatever damage they do when you're home."

By the time I made it back to our house, the afternoon sun was casting long shadows across the garden. Hunter had just gotten Tomi down for her nap when I walked in, his smile warming me from across the room.

"Perfect timing," he whispered, pulling me into his arms. "One sleeping toddler, two teenagers at school, and a quiet house all to ourselves."

We ended up curled together on the sofa, some mindless true-crime show playing in the background that neither of us was really watching. After weeks of separation and the drama with Jon, this simple intimacy - Hunter's arms around me, my head on his chest, nothing demanding our attention - felt like the greatest luxury imaginable.

"Your hair looks amazing," Hunter murmured, his fingers gently running through the fresh color Jeremy had applied. "Though I'm pretty sure J spent half the appointment complaining about your Nashville stylist."
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"More like three-quarters," I laughed softly, not wanting to disturb the peaceful moment. "You should have heard his critique of Dixie's 'trying too hard' aesthetic."

"I can imagine," Hunter smiled against my hair. "How was the rest of your morning?"

"Good. Filled Jeremy in on all the Saturn drama with Arissa and Arion. I think his brain nearly short-circuited when I mentioned the unicorns."

"That's usually the tipping point," Hunter chuckled. "Aliens and superpowers? Somehow acceptable. Unicorns? That's where reality breaks."

We fell into comfortable silence, the gentle rhythm of Hunter's heartbeat under my ear more soothing than any lullaby. These quiet moments together had become precious rarities in our busy lives - between my filming schedule, his training commitments, and parenting three daughters across two planets, finding time to simply be together was a constant challenge.

"I've been thinking about tomorrow," Hunter said after a while, his voice that particular mix of casual and deliberate that told me he was planning something.

"Oh?" I lifted my head slightly to meet his eyes. "Dare I ask what you've got planned for our anniversary eve?"

"Nothing elaborate," he assured me, knowing my preference for intimate celebrations over grand gestures. "But I did make reservations somewhere special."

"Not the Cantina again?" I teased.

"Give me some credit," he smiled. "Though I'm not telling you where. It's still a surprise."

We stayed like that until it was time to get the girls from school, neither of us willing to break the peaceful bubble we'd created. These simple moments - just being together without cameras or responsibilities - were what I missed most when I was away filming.

"Can I go get them?" I asked, reluctant to move but eager for the chance to do something so ordinarily maternal.

Hunter smiled, understanding without my having to explain. "Of course. I'm sure they would love that. I'll go get Tomi up from her nap."

I slipped my shoes on and grabbed my purse, pausing to kiss Hunter before heading out. "Love you. Be back."

The drive to Ballincollig Community School was familiar despite how rarely I got to make it. Ireland had given us this gift - a semblance of normal life, where I could occasionally be just another mom picking up her kids rather than Michelle Morris, where the paparazzi weren't lurking around every corner. It was one of countless reasons I treasured our life here, despite the constant pull of my career in Nashville.

As I pulled into the school's pickup area, I felt that quiet thrill of doing something so mundane yet so precious. These everyday moments - the ones most parents took for granted - were luxuries in my complicated life, and I savored each one I could steal.

I parked in the visitor's section, drawing a few curious glances but nothing like the frenzy that would have erupted back in the States. That was another thing I loved about Ireland - even when people recognized me, they maintained a respectful distance. Celebrity wasn't treated with the same frantic obsession here.

As the final bell rang, students began pouring out of the building. I spotted Arissa first, her straight posture and measured pace making her easy to pick out among the throng of teenagers. She was walking with a small group of friends, her expression animated in a way that still surprised me sometimes - my serious, composed daughter who'd been denied so much normal social interaction during her years on TK-91.

Harley emerged a few minutes later, surrounded by her field hockey teammates, laughing loudly at something one of them had said. The contrast between my daughters always struck me - Arissa moving through the world with careful precision, Harley barreling through it with unrestrained energy.

Arissa noticed me first, her face lighting up with surprise. She said something to her friends before heading my way, her usual composure briefly giving way to excitement.

"Mom! What are you doing here?" she asked as she reached me.

"Thought I'd surprise you," I smiled, resisting the urge to smooth her hair the way I did when she was younger. "Where's your sister?"

"Probably still talking about the game tomorrow," Arissa rolled her eyes fondly. "She never stops."

As if on cue, Harley spotted us and broke away from her friends, jogging over with her typical boundless energy.

"Mom!" she called, drawing more attention than Arissa had. "You came to pick us up?"

"I did," I nodded, unable to keep from smiling at her enthusiasm. "Thought it would be nice to have some time with my girls."

"Can we stop and get a snack?" Arissa asked, already sliding her backpack into the car.

"No, I want to change out of this uniform first," Harley protested, tugging at her school cardigan as if it were physically painful to wear. My ever-practical daughter had never been one for formal attire, even the relatively comfortable school uniforms.

"Harley, you will live if you don't change right now," I said with gentle amusement. "How about some ice cream instead?"

"Yes please," Arissa responded immediately, her usual reserve melting at the prospect.

Harley hesitated, weighing her discomfort against the temptation of ice cream. "Yeah, ok. Fine," she conceded, though she continued to loosen her tie as she climbed into the backseat.

The small victory made me smile. Even the simplest outings required diplomatic negotiations when dealing with teenagers - especially my two, who couldn't be more different in their approaches to life.

We drove to O'Conaill's, a local chocolate shop that had become a family favorite since moving to Ireland. The girls chatted about their day as we made our way through town - Arissa discussing a challenging physics problem, Harley recounting field hockey practice with animated gestures that nearly knocked her sister's water bottle from her hand.

"...and then Coach said my stick handling was getting really good, but I need to work on passing more," Harley continued as we found parking.

"Shocking," Arissa murmured with a small smile, earning a playful shove from her sister.

"Hey, I pass!"

"When there's literally no other option," Arissa countered.

"Girls," I intervened, though I was smiling too. Their banter had evolved from genuine tension to this comfortable teasing - another sign of how far we'd come as a family.

Inside the shop, the rich aroma of chocolate enveloped us. The girls ordered their usual - a white chocolate concoction for Arissa and triple chocolate for Harley. I opted for a simple dark chocolate gelato, watching as they found us a table by the window.

"So," I said once we were settled, "how's school really going? And don't just say 'fine' - I've been gone for weeks and I want actual details."

"It's fine," Harley said immediately, then grinned at my expression. "Kidding! It's actually not terrible. I got an A on my history project about the Easter Rising."

"That's wonderful," I said, genuinely pleased. History had never been Harley's strong suit.

"Don't look so shocked," she laughed. "I can be academic when I want to be."

"And what about you?" I turned to Arissa, who was methodically working her way through her ice cream. "How's the advanced physics treating you?"

"It's challenging," Arissa admitted, her eyes lighting up the way they always did when discussing academic subjects. "We're studying quantum mechanics now. It's fascinating how it connects to some of the technology on Saturn."

I nodded, careful not to react too visibly to her mention of Saturn in public. Though the chances of anyone understanding the significance were slim, we'd all learned to be cautious.

"And how about your friends?" I asked, deliberately changing the subject. "How's Kira doing?"

Arissa's friendship with Kira had been one of the first normal teenage relationships she'd formed after moving to Earth - something I'd been grateful for, given her isolated upbringing on TK-91.

"She's good. Her parents are letting her come to the house this weekend for a study session," Arissa said.

"Study session," Harley rolled her eyes. "They actually study. It's weird."

"Some of us care about our education," Arissa replied primly.

"I care! I just don't make it my entire personality," Harley countered, digging into her ice cream with renewed vigor.

"And what about you?" I asked Harley. "How's the team looking for tomorrow's match?"

That was all the invitation Harley needed to launch into a detailed analysis of her field hockey team's strengths and weaknesses, her earlier irritation forgotten. I listened, asking questions in the right places, savoring this glimpse into my daughters' everyday lives - the normal, mundane details I missed while filming.

"...and Coach says if we win tomorrow, we have a shot at the regional championship," Harley concluded.

"That's amazing," I said sincerely. "We'll be there to cheer you on."

"Really?" Harley's eyes widened. "You'll be able to make it?"

"I wouldn't miss it," I promised, realizing how much it meant to her. How many games and events had I missed over the years? Too many to count. But not this one - not when I was finally home.

After we finished our ice cream, we headed back to the car, the girls still debating the merits of studying versus "having an actual social life" as Harley put it. The drive home was filled with their chatter - this comfortable, normal family moment that felt all the more precious for its rarity in my complicated life.

When we walked into the house, Hunter was sitting on the living room floor, helping Tomi stack colorful blocks that she seemed more interested in knocking down than building up.

Tomi looked up at the sound of the door, her face lighting up at the sight of her sisters. She scrambled to her feet with that endearing toddler wobble, arms outstretched. "Ri Ri! Ha-ee!"

Arissa immediately dropped her backpack and scooped up her baby sister, her usually reserved expression softening with genuine affection. "Hey Marshmallow. I missed you too."

Watching my oldest daughter with my youngest always made my heart ache in the best possible way. After everything Arissa had endured on TK-91, her capacity for gentleness and love remained intact - perhaps even stronger for having been denied it for so long.

"How was school?" Hunter asked, getting to his feet and pressing a kiss to my temple as the girls settled on the couch, Tomi babbling excitedly between them.

"Good," Harley answered. "Mom's coming to my game tomorrow."

"Is she now?" Hunter raised an eyebrow at me, a smile playing at the corners of his mouth. "I thought we had plans tomorrow."

"We do," I confirmed. "They just now include a field hockey match."

Hunter smiled, his eyes crinkling at the corners in that way that still made my heart skip. "I suspected they might. Okay girls, homework time."

Harley groaned dramatically, flopping back against the couch cushions. "Dad... can't I relax first? We just got home."

"No. You can relax when homework is done," Hunter said firmly, immune to her theatrical protests after years of practice. "Game tomorrow means you need to get it done tonight."

Arissa, ever the responsible one, was already gathering her backpack. "Okay Marshmallow, I have to go do homework. I'll play with you later," she said, gently disengaging Tomi's tiny fingers from her uniform.

"Mama," Tomi reached for me, her little face serious with the effort of the word. Arissa carefully transferred her into my arms before heading upstairs, Harley trudging behind her with exaggerated weariness.

"She's gotten so good with her," I said quietly, watching Arissa disappear up the stairs. "Sometimes I forget how far she's come."

Hunter nodded, his expression softening. "She's an amazing big sister. All that time on TK-91, being denied any kind of normal family connections... and look at her now."

I bounced Tomi gently in my arms, savoring her warm weight against my chest. "So, what exactly did you have planned for tomorrow before I added a field hockey match to the agenda?"

"You didn't really add it," Hunter smiled, reaching out to brush a strand of hair from my face. "I suspected you would want to go. And I certainly wasn't going to miss it either. But we do have plans after." His expression shifted to that particular mix of mischief and secrecy he always wore when planning surprises. "As for what? You'll just have to wait and see."

I rolled my eyes, though we both knew my exasperation was entirely feigned. "Fine."

Amber
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"Welcome to Kakkalos Refuge," Nikos announced as we finally approached the small mountain hut, the sun already beginning to dip toward the horizon. "Your home for tonight."

After nearly seven hours of climbing, the sight of the stone refuge perched at 2,650 meters was welcome indeed. My legs burned pleasantly from exertion, and the thin mountain air filled my lungs with each deep breath. We'd left the forest far below, emerging into an alpine landscape of rock and sky that felt closer to heaven than earth.

Small tents dotted the area around the refuge, other climbers already setting up camp for the night. The view from this elevation was staggering - the sprawling landscape of Greece laid out below us, the Aegean Sea a distant shimmer on the horizon.

"How are you feeling?" Trevor asked quietly as Nikos went ahead to check us in.

"Tired," I admitted, rolling my shoulders to ease the ache from carrying my pack all day. "But good tired. The best kind."

He smiled, understanding exactly what I meant. This wasn't the bone-deep exhaustion of recovery, the frightening weakness that had plagued me in the hospital and for weeks afterward. This was the earned fatigue of pushing my body to its limits and finding those limits had expanded again - proof that I was truly healing, truly reclaiming my strength.

"We made good time," Nikos said as he rejoined us. "Better than I expected. Tomorrow we attempt the summit - Mytikas or Skolio, depending on conditions."

"Mytikas," I said immediately. "We want to reach the highest point."

Nikos studied me appraisingly, noting my determination. "We'll see in the morning. Weather and your condition will determine our route."

I wanted to argue, to insist I could handle the more challenging peak, but I caught Trevor's warning glance and held my tongue. This wasn't about proving something to Nikos - it was about proving something to myself, and I'd already accomplished so much today.

The refuge was rustic but comfortable, with simple bunk beds and a common area where climbers gathered to share stories and meals. After settling our gear, Trevor and I stepped outside to watch the sunset transform the mountain, painting the rocky landscape in shades of gold and purple.

"Thank you for this," I said softly, leaning against him as the temperature dropped with the sun. "It's exactly what I needed."

"I know," he replied simply, his arm warm around my shoulders.

And he did know - that was the miracle of Trevor. He understood that for me, this climb wasn't just about seeing a beautiful view or checking off a bucket list item. It was about reclaiming the person I'd been before the complications, before the fear and pain and long recovery. With every step up this mountain, I was finding pieces of myself I'd feared were lost forever.

Michelle

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The next day was our anniversary. I woke to the rich aroma of coffee and the subtle dip of the mattress beside me. Blinking against the soft morning light filtering through the curtains, I found Hunter sitting on the edge of the bed, a steaming mug in his hands and that look in his eyes that still made my heart flutter after all these years.

"Good morning, beautiful. Happy Anniversary," he said softly, offering the coffee like the precious gift it was at this hour.

I sat up, pushing my tangled hair from my face and accepting the mug gratefully. The first sip was perfect - strong and sweet, exactly how I needed it. "Mmm, good morning. Coffee. My hero."

Hunter laughed, the quiet of the house amplifying the sound. With Mom taking Tomi for the day and the girls already dropped off at school, we had this rare moment of complete privacy - no interruptions, no responsibilities, just us.

"Did you sleep well?" he asked, his hand finding mine over the covers.

"Better than I have in weeks," I admitted. My bed Nashville never compared to being home, being beside him. "What time did you get up?"

"Early enough to get the girls to school without waking you," he said. "Thought you deserved to sleep in. It's not every day we celebrate another year of you putting up with me."

I smiled into my coffee. "Best decision I ever made."

The morning sunlight caught the gold in his hair, still as vibrant as the day we met. Another year together, another layer of shared history etched into our very beings. From unlikely beginnings to this quiet, perfect moment - it still amazed me sometimes, the life we'd built together.

"Thought maybe I could take you to breakfast in Cork, then we could spend some time together until it's time for Harley's game," he suggested, his thumb tracing circles on the back of my hand.

I smiled, savoring both the coffee and the prospect of uninterrupted time together. "Love that idea. Let me finish my coffee and I'll get ready."

Thara chose that moment to make her presence known, standing up from her spot on my pillow with a leisurely stretch before promptly jumping into my lap, nearly upsetting the precious coffee.

"I love you, baby girl," I told her seriously, "but coming between me and coffee is very dangerous territory."

She responded with a look of complete indifference, settling herself more comfortably across my legs as if to emphasize that my comfort was secondary to hers. Whether on Earth or Saturn, Thara maintained her royal attitude.
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Hunter laughed, reaching out to scratch behind her ears. "Even the countess knows better than to mess with your morning coffee. I'll let you get ready while I feed Her Majesty."

Hunter picked her up and left the room, Thara looking supremely unimpressed at being removed from her chosen perch. I took a moment to enjoy the quiet and finish my coffee, letting the warmth and caffeine work their magic.

Being in Ireland just hit different. There was a peace here I never found in the States - a slower rhythm to life, a gentler approach to celebrity, a respect for privacy that allowed us to simply exist as a family rather than as public figures constantly on display. I was endlessly grateful we'd made this move. Though it created challenges when I was working in Nashville, being separated from Hunter and the girls, the trade-off was worth it for moments like this - quiet mornings in our own space, without paparazzi lurking or fans interrupting.

When I was home, it was nothing short of heaven on Earth.

I savored the last sip of coffee before heading to the bathroom to get ready. After a quick shower, I studied my closet, finally settling on a pair of well-worn jeans and a soft purple sweater that Hunter had always loved. I kept my makeup light - another luxury of being home - and braided my hair into pigtails, a casual style that felt right for a day that would include both a romantic breakfast and cheering from the sidelines at a field hockey match.

When I emerged from our bedroom, I felt more like myself than I had in weeks. Nashville required Dixie's polished appearance and Michelle Morris's public persona. Here, I could just be Mich - Hunter's wife, the girls' mom, the woman behind the image.

I went downstairs and found Hunter in the living room, tossing a well-worn tennis ball for Robbie. The golden retriever bounded after it with unbridled enthusiasm, his tail wagging furiously as he returned it for another throw. I smiled, watching them together - Hunter had always been a dog person, his bond with Robbie as strong as mine with Thara.

"You ready?" I asked, leaning against the doorframe.

Hunter glanced up, his expression warming as he took in my casual appearance. "Thara's still finishing her breakfast," he said, nodding toward the kitchen where my cat was undoubtedly taking her time with her gourmet meal.

"She can stay here," I said, making a split-second decision.

Hunter's eyebrows rose in surprise. "Are you sure? You're not taking Thara with us?" The question was valid - Thara typically accompanied me everywhere, her special backpack a familiar accessory.

"Not today," I shook my head. "She'll be fine without me for a day."

The truth was, I wanted to focus completely on Hunter, on us. No distractions, no dividing my attention between my husband and my perpetually demanding cat. No carrying her backpack around

Cork or worrying about her getting restless during Harley's game. Today was about celebrating what Hunter and I had built together - Thara would survive a day of luxuriating in an empty house.

"Just us today," I added, crossing the room to take his hand. "That okay?"

"More than okay," Hunter smiled, giving Robbie one last scratch behind the ears before standing up. "Though she's going to hold it against you."

"She'll survive," I laughed, knowing he was right. Thara's capacity for feline grudges was legendary, but some extra treats would smooth things over later. "Besides, she has Robbie to keep her company."

At the mention of his name, the golden retriever looked up hopefully, tail thumping against the floor. Hunter gave him a final pat. "Be good, boy. Keep an eye on Her Majesty for us."

We headed out to the driveway where Betsy waited, Hunter's beloved old truck that he refused to replace despite my frequent suggestions that we could afford something more comfortable. There was something endearing about his attachment to the vehicle - another piece of the Hunter Bradley puzzle that made him so different from the men I'd known before.

"So, where are we going for breakfast?" I asked as Hunter started the engine, Betsy rumbling to life with her familiar growl.

"There's a new place on the waterfront Jeremy mentioned," he said. "Supposed to have the best coffee in Cork. Figured we should test that claim."

"Brave man, risking bad coffee on our anniversary," I teased.

"I live dangerously," he grinned, reaching for my hand across the bench seat. "Though I did have a backup plan in case it's terrible."

The drive into Cork was peaceful, the familiar countryside rolling past as we talked about everything and nothing - Harley's upcoming game, Arissa's latest science project, Mom's plans to take Tomi to the children's museum. Normal, everyday topics that felt precious precisely because they were so ordinary, so far removed from the chaos of my professional life.

As we approached the city, I felt that familiar sense of gratitude wash over me. This place had become home in ways I never expected when we first moved here - not just a refuge from fame, but a community where our family could truly belong.

Breakfast was amazing - the coffee living up to its reputation and the traditional Irish breakfast satisfying even Hunter's appetite. Afterwards, we wandered through Cork city, blending in with the locals and tourists alike. We browsed through small shops, Hunter patiently waiting while I tried on sweaters I didn't need, and I returned the favor when he spotted a motorcycle parts shop.

There was a beautiful simplicity to just walking hand-in-hand, talking about everything and nothing, without constantly scanning for paparazzi or preparing for fan encounters. In the States, even the

most mundane outings required a certain vigilance, a readiness to shift into "public figure" mode at any moment.

Here, we were just another couple enjoying their day together.

Jeremy had explained it to me once - the Irish concept of "notions." Basically, no one was better than anyone else, and if you thought you were, then you had "notions," which was simply not acceptable. Celebrity meant little in a culture where humility was valued and pretentiousness was the cardinal sin. That cultural mindset meant no one bothered us. They legitimately didn't care that Hunter and I were famous; we were just the American couple who'd moved to Ballincollig.

For the first time in my life, I was experiencing what it was like to just exist with my family without the weight of public expectation. It was still a novelty to me, this ordinary freedom that most people took for granted, but I was growing to love it more with each passing day. The ability to laugh too loudly in a café, to kiss my husband without wondering if it would end up on social media, to simply be Mich instead of Michelle Morris - these were gifts I hadn't known to ask for until Ireland gave them to me.

"We should probably start heading to the school," Hunter said eventually, checking his watch. "Don't want to miss the start of Harley's game."

I nodded, reluctantly ending our peaceful wandering. "She'd never forgive us if we were late."

"Especially not today," Hunter agreed as we made our way back to where we'd parked Betsy. "She's been practicing that reverse stick shot all week."

The drive to Ballincollig Community School was quick, the parking lot already filling with parents and supporters for the match. As we walked toward the field, I could feel a few curious glances - not the invasive stares I was used to in the States, but the mild interest of a small community noting the presence of the "American family" at a school event.

We found seats in the bleachers just as the teams were warming up. Harley spotted us immediately, her face lighting up before she quickly schooled her expression into focused determination. I couldn't help but smile at her attempt to look professional despite her obvious excitement at having us there.

"She's nervous," Hunter observed quietly.

"How can you tell?"

"She's doing that thing with her stick - tapping it against her shin guard. She only does that when she's trying to calm her nerves."

I watched, realizing he was right. For all her bravado and energy, Harley still got nervous before games - especially ones she cared about. And having both her parents here, on their anniversary no less, meant this one mattered.

"She'll be fine once the game starts," I said, remembering how Harley had always been that way - initial jitters giving way to focused intensity once the action began. "She just needs to get past the first few minutes."

Hunter nodded, his eyes never leaving our daughter as she joined her teammates for final instructions from the coach. "She reminds me so much of you sometimes."

I was about to respond when I caught sight of familiar faces approaching the bleachers. Arissa arrived first, slightly breathless from hurrying across campus, followed by Mom with Tomi in her arms. Behind them came Niamh, little Rachel perched on her hip, her hair caught in the breeze.

"Hey!" I smiled, making room for them to join us.

"Happy anniversary," Niamh said warmly as she settled beside us, adjusting Rachel on her lap. The baby immediately reached for Tomi, the two cousins delighted to be reunited.

"Thanks," Hunter replied. "I guess Amber and Trev are enjoying theirs in Greece?"

Niamh sighed dramatically, the Irish mother's concern evident in her expression. "I suppose they are. That boy of mine... took her climbing to the top of bloody Olympus. What kind of gift is that? Scaling a mountain when they could be at a proper resort?"

"For Amber? The best kind," I smiled, knowing exactly how much that challenge would mean to her after everything she'd been through.

"Don't understand those two," Niamh shook her head, though her exasperation was clearly affectionate. "Just hope she's ready. I don't need any calls from a Greek A&E."

"Amber's tougher than she looks," Hunter said, his tone carrying the certainty of someone who'd witnessed her resilience firsthand. "And Trevor wouldn't push her beyond what she can handle."

The whistle blew before Niamh could respond, drawing our attention to the field where Harley had taken her position, all traces of nervousness gone now that the game was underway.

The match was intense from the start, both teams evenly matched in skill and determination. Harley played with a focus I recognized - that complete immersion in the moment that made everything else fade away. It was the same state I entered during performances, though her outlet was physical rather than artistic.

"Go Harley!" Arissa called out as her sister made a particularly impressive defensive play, stealing the ball from an opposing player with a precision that drew cheers from the crowd.

Tomi bounced excitedly on Mom's lap, not understanding the game but feeding off the energy around her. "Ha-ee! Ha-ee!" she chanted, clapping her tiny hands.

"She's gotten so much better," Hunter observed quietly, pride evident in his voice. "Remember when she first started? All aggression, no technique?"

I nodded, watching as Harley passed the ball to a teammate - an action that would have been unthinkable months ago when she was determined to do everything herself. "She's learning to be part of a team. It's good for her."

The first half ended with the score tied 1-1, Harley having assisted on their team's only goal. As the players gathered around their coach for halftime instructions, I noticed her glancing our way, checking to make sure we were still watching.

"She's worried we'll leave early for your anniversary plans," Arissa said perceptively, catching the same look.

"We're not going anywhere," Hunter assured her. "The whole game matters."

Rachel began to fuss slightly, prompting Niamh to stand. "I'll take her for a little walk, stretch her legs a bit."

"I'll join you," Mom said, Tomi also starting to show signs of toddler restlessness. "These two need to burn some energy."

As they headed off to let the little ones explore, I turned to Arissa. "How was your day?"

"Good," she said, her voice dropping to ensure only Hunter and I could hear. "I got a message from Arion. He wants to come for Christmas. I told him about last year when I had my first Christmas and he wants to experience it too."

I glanced at Hunter, watching his expression shift through several emotions at once. Arissa's first Christmas had been a significant milestone for our family - her first real holiday celebration after years on TK-91 where such traditions were forbidden. The idea of sharing that with Arion was clearly meaningful to her.

"What about the tour?" Hunter asked carefully.

"Well, he would come after that," Arissa explained, then added hopefully, "I mean, unless he can come on the tour with us."

Hunter shot me a look that contained an entire conversation - concern about security, questions about cover stories, and the inevitable protective father instincts regarding his thirteen-year-old daughter's boyfriend.

"I think your father and I will have to discuss it," I said diplomatically, not wanting to dismiss the idea outright but recognizing the complexities involved. "We'll let you know."

Arissa nodded, clearly having expected this response but still looking slightly disappointed. Before she could press further, the whistle blew, signaling the start of the second half and redirecting our attention to the field where Harley was taking her position with renewed determination.

The second half of the match was even more intense than the first, with Harley's team pushing hard against their opponents. About fifteen minutes in, Harley executed the reverse stick shot she'd been

practicing all week, sending the ball flying past the goalkeeper and into the net. The crowd erupted, and I found myself on my feet cheering louder than I'd intended.

"That's my girl!" Hunter called out, his usual reserve forgotten in the moment of pride.

Harley's teammates swarmed her in celebration, but I caught the quick glance she sent our way, seeking our reaction. The smile that broke across her face when she saw us cheering made my heart swell.

"She's been working on that shot for weeks," Arissa said, a hint of admiration in her voice despite her usual cool demeanor. The sisters might bicker constantly, but there was genuine pride there too.

Mom and Niamh returned with the little ones just in time to witness Harley's team score once more before the final whistle, securing their victory 3-1. As the players lined up to shake hands with their opponents, I could see the barely contained excitement in Harley's posture.

"She's going to be impossible tonight," Hunter murmured, though his smile belied any real concern.

"Let her enjoy it," I replied. "She earned it."

We made our way down to the field after the teams had dispersed, finding Harley engaged in animated conversation with her coach. When she spotted us, she excused herself and jogged over, still flushed with victory and exertion.

"You saw it? The reverse stick? Coach said it was perfect execution!" The words tumbled out of her, all teenage cool abandoned in her excitement.

"It was amazing," I assured her, resisting the urge to smooth her sweaty hair. "You were amazing."

"The whole team played well," Hunter added, though his proud smile was entirely for her. "Great passing in the second half."

After the post-game celebrations wound down, we all headed back to the parking lot. I wanted to go home. Niamh quickly extended an invitation for Mom and the girls to join her for the evening.

"Come over for dinner," she insisted, her eyes revealing how much she was missing Trevor and Amber.

Niamh was feeling the absence of her son and daughter-in-law, seeking to fill her home with family to ease the loneliness.

"That sounds wonderful," Mom agreed, already helping Tomi into her coat. "The girls can have a proper visit."

We said our goodbyes, then headed home to prepare for our evening. I changed into a floor-length purple dress with long sleeves and subtle cutouts at the hips that Hunter had always loved. I let my hair down from the casual braids, curling it into soft waves that framed my face, and darkened my makeup to match the evening's more formal tone.

Throughout my preparations, Thara sat perched on the bathroom vanity, her judgmental stare making her feelings about being left behind abundantly clear.

"I know, but you're fine," I told her, applying a final touch of lipstick. "And you'll be fine tonight. If you behave, maybe I'll bring you salmon."

She looked at me as if I'd suggested she eat kibble, her royal dignity deeply offended.

"I'm sorry," I sighed, scratching behind her ears. "But you'll live."

I kissed the top of her head before slipping on my heels and making my way to the living room where Hunter waited. He stood as I entered, his black jeans and crimson button-up paired with a leather jacket creating an effortlessly masculine look that still made my heart race after all these years.

His eyes locked on me, darkening slightly as they traveled the length of my dress. "My god, you're gorgeous."

I smiled, taking in his appearance with equal appreciation. "So are you."

He closed the distance between us, pulling me into his arms. The familiar scent of his cologne - my favorite, which he wore on special occasions - enveloped me as his hands settled at my waist.

"Ready?" he whispered in my ear, his breath warm against my skin and sending a shiver down my spine.

I smiled, fighting the urge to cancel our plans entirely. "Yes, we should go before I decide to take you back to the bedroom."

"Later," he promised with a knowing smirk, taking my hand and leading me to Betsy, who waited outside like an old friend ready to carry us into the night.

The drive into Cork was filled with comfortable conversation, Hunter deliberately vague about our destination despite my attempts to guess. As we neared the city center, I expected him to turn toward one of the upscale restaurants, but instead he continued toward the harbor area.

"Where are we going?" I asked, curiosity finally getting the better of me.

"You'll see," he replied, that particular half-smile playing at his lips - the one that told me he was pleased with himself for maintaining the surprise.

He pulled into a small, private marina I'd never noticed before, parking Betsy in a secluded spot away from the main road. As he came around to open my door, I caught sight of the harbor stretching out before us, the evening light casting a golden glow across the water.

"Hunter?" I questioned as he took my hand, helping me navigate the dock in my heels.

"Trust me," he said simply, leading me toward where a beautiful wooden boat was moored at the end of the pier. A man stood waiting - someone vaguely familiar, though I couldn't immediately place him.

"Sean," Hunter greeted him with a handshake. "Thanks for making this happen."

"My pleasure," the man replied with a distinctly Irish accent. "Everything's ready as you requested."

As we approached, I realized why he seemed familiar - one of Hunter's former motocross competitors who'd retired to Ireland years ago. Hunter had mentioned him in passing, but I hadn't realized they'd stayed in touch.

"Your chariot awaits," Hunter said softly, helping me aboard the vessel.

The deck was beautifully arranged with soft lighting, comfortable seating, and a small table set for dinner. As Sean discreetly moved to the wheelhouse to give us privacy, I turned to Hunter in amazement.

"What is all this?"

"Happy anniversary," he said simply, his eyes reflecting the fading sunlight. "I thought we could use some time that's just ours. No fans, no cameras, no interruptions."

As the boat gently pulled away from the dock, I heard the opening notes of a song I hadn't heard in years - the first track from the mix CD Hunter had made me when we first started dating in 2003. The realization brought unexpected tears to my eyes.

"You remembered," I whispered, recognizing the playlist as it continued.

"Every song," he nodded, pulling me close as the harbor opened up before us, Cork's shoreline beginning to twinkle with early evening lights. "I thought we could revisit where we started, while celebrating where we are now."

In that moment, as the boat carried us toward the open water and Hunter held me against the gentle sway of the waves, I fell in love with him all over again. Not for grand gestures or expensive gifts, but for understanding exactly what I needed - time away from the world, just the two of us, remembering the journey that had brought us here.

As the boat glided smoothly through Cork Harbour, the city lights began to recede behind us. The evening air carried a slight chill, but Hunter had thought of everything - a soft blanket appeared around my shoulders before I could even shiver.

"Hungry?" he asked, guiding me to the small table where covered dishes waited. When he removed the lids, I couldn't help but laugh in delighted surprise.

"Olive Garden? You didn't."

"I did, well sorta," he grinned, revealing plates of steak and eggplant parmesan - an exact recreation of our very first date back in 2003. "Though I promise the chef's version is slightly better than Olive Garden."

"I can't believe you remembered," I said, shaking my head at the sight. That first date - a nervous 19-year-old Hunter taking 23-year-old Michelle Morris to Olive Garden because to him, that was fancy.

"How could I forget?" He smiled, pulling out my chair. "I was terrified the entire time, convinced you'd realize I was just a kid who had no business asking you out."

"And I was worried you'd think I was too old for you," I admitted, the memory vivid after all these years. "If I recall, I wore jeans and a purple shirt."

"You were gorgeous," he said simply. "You were the most beautiful woman I'd ever seen. Still are."

As we ate, the playlist continued to unfold our history - each song carrying us through different chapters of our relationship. Some brought laughter as we recalled the circumstances that had made them significant, while others carried more bittersweet memories of the years we'd spent apart.

"Do you remember this one?" Hunter asked as a particular ballad began playing.

"Of course," I smiled, the melody immediately transporting me back. “I listened to it on repeat after I moved to Reefside. Every night before bed.”

"I didn't know that," he said softly.

"There's a lot we still don't know about those years apart," I acknowledged. "But we have time now."

Sean remained a discreet presence, steering the boat toward what appeared to be a secluded cove as the sun began its final descent toward the horizon. The coastline here was dramatic - rugged cliffs and small, hidden beaches that tourists rarely discovered.

"I found this place a few months ago," Hunter explained as we moved to the bow of the boat, drinks in hand. "Reminded me of that beach in California where we used to go when we needed to escape everything."

The comparison was apt - a sheltered haven away from prying eyes, beautiful in its untamed simplicity. As the boat slowed to a gentle drift in the protected waters of the cove, Sean dimmed the running lights, allowing the emerging stars to provide their own illumination.

"Dance with me?" Hunter asked, setting down his glass and extending his hand as a slow song from our early days together began to play.

I stepped into his arms without hesitation, my head finding its familiar place against his shoulder as we swayed together on the gently rocking deck. No choreography, no audience - just us moving together as we had countless times before, finding our rhythm as naturally as breathing.

"Thank you," I whispered against his neck. "This is perfect."

"It's not extravagant," he said, his voice carrying a hint of apology.

"That's why it's perfect," I assured him, pulling back enough to meet his eyes. "You know me better than anyone ever has, Hunter. You always have."

"I have loved you from the moment I saw you," he whispered, his voice carrying that rare vulnerability he showed only with me.

I smiled, memories of our complicated beginning washing over me. "Really? And here I thought you wanted to kill me."

He chuckled, the sound rumbling through his chest against my palm. "I did, but only because I thought you were protecting the man that killed my parents. I hated fighting against you as much as you hated fighting me."

I sighed at the memory, those early days when we'd been adversaries rather than allies. "You certainly didn't show it. You seemed ready to take me out without hesitation."

"That's my training," he admitted. "Inside, I hated every minute of it. When we found out the truth and learned we were on the same side, I was really happy."

"I was too," I confessed. "I'll never forget thinking I'd met the man of my dreams and of course he would be an evil Ranger."

"Hey!" His expression of mock offense made me laugh. "I was never evil... except when Lothor brainwashed me. I was just misguided."

"Fine. Misguided," I conceded. "I remember thinking our first date was a ploy for you to get information. I had no idea at the time you even knew I was a Ranger."

Hunter shook his head, his eyes never leaving mine. "I mean, that would have been the strategic reason, but the truth was that asking you out was never part of the plan. That was all me. That date was real, and it confused the hell out of me. After we kissed that night... everything changed."

"For me too," I said softly. "I had never felt that way about anyone. I didn't know what to make of you... with you being so dark and broody, but I knew how you made me feel."

"Me? Broody?" His eyebrows rose in exaggerated disbelief.

I laughed, the sound carrying across the water. "Yes. And you still are... but not nearly as bad."

The music shifted then, the gentle melody giving way to an upbeat rhythm that immediately transported me back to those early weeks of dating. We'd been at his apartment when this song came on, and I'd pulled him to his feet despite his protests.

He laughed, recognition lighting his eyes. "Oh wow, this song."

"And you're gonna dance with me now," I declared, already moving to the music.

He joined me without hesitation this time, years of shared moments erasing the reluctance of that brooding nineteen-year-old. "I still remember when you dragged me out to dance in the rain for the first time. You were crazy."

I laughed, memories flooding back. "Yeah... and when I made you dance with me in the aisle at Target. You can dance anywhere, you know."

"So you've said," he smiled, his hands finding my hips as we moved together on the gently rocking deck. "I'd never been with anyone so free. You brought me out of my shell a lot. You brought fun into my life."

The way he looked at me then - like I was still that wild, carefree girl who'd challenged his serious nature at every turn - made me feel both seen and cherished in a way no one else ever had.

We danced through several more songs, some fast, some slow, each carrying its own memories. As the playlist shifted to a particularly meaningful ballad, Hunter pulled me close again, his movements slowing to match the gentler rhythm.

"Do you ever think about LA?" he asked quietly, his voice low enough that only I could hear.

I tensed slightly at the mention, though the memory no longer carried the sharp pain it once had. "Sometimes. Not as much anymore."

"I still remember how scared I was," he admitted, his arms tightening around me. "Seeing you like that, so consumed by grief and rage that you couldn't even recognize yourself anymore."

"You were the only one who could reach me," I said, remembering how his touch had broken through when no one else's could. "Everyone else was ready to fight me, even Tommy. But you..."

"I knew fighting you wasn't the answer," he said simply. "I knew the real you was still in there, underneath all that pain."

I rested my head against his chest, listening to the steady rhythm of his heartbeat. "You saved me that day. In more ways than one."

"We saved each other," he corrected gently. "We always have."

The boat drifted gently in the sheltered cove, the stars multiplying overhead as full darkness settled around us. Sean had made himself scarce, giving us complete privacy while maintaining a discreet presence in the wheelhouse.

"It's funny," I said after a moment, "how many times we found our way back to each other, despite everything."

"Destiny," Hunter said with a hint of a smile.

"Since when do you believe in destiny?" I teased, knowing his practical nature usually rejected such concepts.

"Since I kept falling in love with the same woman no matter how many times life pulled us apart," he answered, his expression turning serious. "Twenty-two years, Mich. No matter who else came into our lives, no matter how much time passed, we always found our way back."

"Even when I tried my hardest to keep us apart," I acknowledged, thinking of those eight years I'd hidden Harley from him, convinced I was protecting everyone by maintaining the lie.

"Even then," he agreed, no bitterness in his voice. "Though I wish we hadn't lost those years with Harley."

"Me too," I said softly. "But look at us now."

"Look at us now," Hunter echoed, his hand warm against the small of my back. "Three daughters, two planets, one very annoying cat..."

I laughed, grateful for the lightening of the mood. "Poor Thara. She's probably plotting her revenge for being left behind tonight."

"Definitely," he agreed. "But it was worth it to have you all to myself for once."

The music shifted again, this time to a slower song that had been playing the night Hunter had proposed. I felt him smile against my hair as we swayed together.

"I have something for you," he said after a moment, reaching into his jacket pocket. "It's not much, but..."

He withdrew a small velvet pouch, placing it carefully in my palm. Inside was a delicate bracelet, silver links interspersed with small purple stones that caught the starlight.

"The stones are from Saturn," he explained as I examined it with wonder. "Celeste helped me get them. They're from the area near our palace."

I touched the stones gently, amazed at the thoughtfulness behind the gift. "How did you...?"

"I wanted you to have something that connects both our worlds," he said simply. "Something that reminds you of all the parts of who you are - not just Michelle Morris or Mich Bradley, but Queen Michelle too. Every piece of you matters to me."

Tears pricked at my eyes as he fastened the bracelet around my wrist, the weight of it comfortable and grounding. "It's beautiful," I whispered. "Perfect."

"I thought about getting you something flashier," he admitted. "But that's not us, is it? We don't need grand gestures."

"No, we don't," I agreed, thinking of all the extravagant gifts and public displays from my past relationships. With Hunter, it had always been different - deeper, more genuine, based on understanding rather than showmanship. "Just you and me, remembering who we are together. That's all I've ever needed."

"That's all I wanted for tonight," he said, his thumb brushing away a tear that had escaped despite my best efforts. "With our schedules and responsibilities pulling us in different directions, I thought we deserved a few hours where nothing else exists. Just us."

I smiled, reaching into the small evening bag I'd brought. "I got you something too."

I handed him a small box, watching his expression shift to one of mild suspicion.

"Michelle..." Hunter warned, his tone making me laugh. I knew exactly what he was thinking - that I'd gone overboard again with some extravagant gift, like when I'd rented out an entire club and called in favors to get Matchbox 20 to play his 40th birthday party a couple years ago.

"Just open it," I encouraged, genuinely excited for him to see what was inside. This time, I'd managed to keep it simple - well, simple by my standards.

He opened the box carefully, revealing a sleek black dog tag style necklace with the symbol of Saturn engraved in silver. It was custom-made and certainly not cheap, but not the over-the-top gesture he'd been bracing for.

"It's beautiful," he said softly, running his thumb over the engraving.

"We know now that you're not just the King of Saturn by marriage... you have the starseed too. It's as much your planet as mine," I explained, watching his face. "I wanted you to have a reminder of that. Of who you really are."

"It's amazing," he said, genuine appreciation in his eyes as he lifted it from the box. "Thank you, baby."

He pulled me into a kiss that started gentle but quickly deepened, his hands drawing me closer as the boat rocked gently beneath us. When we finally broke apart, both slightly breathless, the look in his eyes told me everything I needed to know about how the rest of our evening would unfold once we made it home.

Amber

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Dawn broke over Mount Olympus in a spectacular display of pinks and golds, the first rays of sunlight illuminating the jagged peaks that surrounded our refuge. I'd slept surprisingly well despite the thin mattress and unfamiliar surroundings, my body embracing the deep fatigue that came from a day of honest physical exertion.

"Morning," Trevor's voice was soft as he handed me a steaming cup. "Nikos says we need to start early if we want to reach Mytikas today."

I took the cup gratefully, the warmth seeping through my fingers as I surveyed the landscape beyond the refuge windows. The alpine plateau stretched out before us, rocky and severe in the morning light, the highest peaks of Olympus rising dramatically against the clear sky.

"How are you feeling?" Trevor asked, his eyes carefully assessing me for any signs of strain or discomfort.
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"Good," I answered honestly, taking inventory of my body. There were aches, certainly - my calves and shoulders protested the previous day's climb - but it was the satisfying soreness of accomplishment rather than injury. "Ready."

Nikos joined us as we finished our simple breakfast, his weathered face serious as he studied the peaks above us. "The weather is good, but we must decide - Mytikas or Skolio?"

"Mytikas," I said immediately, meeting Trevor's gaze with determination. "We came for the highest point."

Nikos nodded, though his expression remained cautious. "It requires scrambling, some exposure. Not technical climbing, but not simple hiking either."

"I can handle it," I assured him, knowing my body's capabilities better than anyone. Six months ago, attempting Mytikas would have been foolish, even dangerous. But now, after months of dedicated recovery and training, I knew I was ready.

"Then we go," Nikos decided. "Pack light - water, energy bars, camera. Leave the rest here for our return."

The initial part of our climb took us across the Muses Plateau, a lunar-like landscape of rock and scree where mythology placed the nine muses who inspired art and science. The morning air was crisp and thin at this elevation, each breath deliberate as we made our way toward the base of the final ascent.

"Look," Trevor pointed as we paused for water. Below us, the world seemed to unfold in every direction - the forests we'd climbed through yesterday now tiny patches of green, the distant shimmer of the Aegean Sea catching the morning light, and beyond that, the hazy outline of land meeting sky.

"Worth the climb already," I smiled, taking in the 360-degree panorama. But my eyes kept drifting upward to Mytikas - the Throne of Zeus according to ancient Greeks - still looming above us, challenging us to continue.

The real test began as we approached the final ridge to Mytikas. What had been a strenuous hike transformed into a true scramble, requiring hands and feet to navigate the rocky terrain. Nikos went first, showing us the route, with Trevor following and me bringing up the rear.

"Watch your footing here," Nikos called back, indicating a section where loose rock made the footing treacherous. "And here, use this handhold."

I moved carefully but confidently, my body remembering the movements of climbing that had once been second nature. Each successful handhold, each precise foot placement felt like reclaiming a piece of myself - the woman who had scaled rock faces across three continents before motherhood and medical complications had temporarily grounded her.

The exposure was real - to our right, the mountain fell away dramatically, the drop enough to command respect but not fear. I focused on the rock before me, on my breathing, on the pure physical challenge rather than the consequences of a misstep.

"You're doing amazing," Trevor called down, his pride evident even as he concentrated on his own movements.

The final push to the summit was the most challenging yet - a near-vertical scramble that required full concentration. My muscles burned with the effort, sweat beading despite the cool air, but I pushed on, driven by a determination that went beyond simply reaching a geographical high point.

And then, suddenly, there was nowhere higher to climb. I pulled myself onto the small, rocky platform that marked Mytikas, the highest point in Greece at 2,918 meters. Trevor reached down to help me up the last step, his smile as bright as the sun overhead.

"You did it," he said simply, pulling me into a tight embrace as I caught my breath.

"We did it," I corrected, turning to take in the view that now stretched out in every direction. The world below seemed to belong to another reality - distant, miniature, while we stood in the realm of gods and myths.

Nikos gave us space, moving to the far side of the small summit to allow us our moment. I turned to Trevor, emotion making my voice catch.

"Six months ago, I wasn't sure I'd ever climb again," I admitted quietly. "When I was in that hospital bed, when the doctors were saying I might not..." I trailed off, the memory still raw.

"But you did," Trevor said, his hands warm on my shoulders. "You fought your way back, step by step. Just like you fought your way up this mountain."

I nodded, looking out over the vast landscape of Greece, feeling the solid rock beneath my feet and the strength in my body - a body that had nearly failed me but had instead recovered, rebuilt, and now carried me to the highest point in the country.

"This is what I needed," I said finally. "Not just to reach the top, but to know that I could."

I wrapped my arms around Trevor and kissed him passionately, emotion and adrenaline coursing through me in equal measure. The taste of salt on his lips, the warmth of his body against mine despite the cool mountain air, the solidity of him anchoring me to this moment of triumph - it all combined into something perfect and elemental.

He held me tightly as he returned the kiss, his hands strong and steady against my back. When we finally broke apart, both slightly breathless from the altitude and the intensity between us, his eyes were bright with pride and love.

"I never had any doubt, mo grá," he said softly, tucking a windblown strand of hair behind my ear. "You're amazing. I knew you would recover. I knew you could do this climb."

"I did it," I nodded, taking in the panoramic view once more - the vast expanse of Greece spread out below us, the distant shimmer of the Aegean, the rugged peaks surrounding us like silent witnesses to our achievement. "We did it."

I couldn't help but laugh then, the pure joy of the moment bubbling up and spilling over. "And as good as this feels, that hot tub back at the resort in Athens is going to be absolute heaven when we get back."

Trevor laughed with me, the sound carrying across the mountain top. "Leave it to you to be standing on the throne of Zeus and already planning your next move."

"Always," I grinned, feeling more like myself than I had in months. "That's how I survived - one step at a time, always looking forward."

Nikos approached, offering to take our photo at the summit marker. As Trevor and I posed, arms around each other with the world spread out behind us, I knew this moment - this victory - would sustain me through whatever challenges came next.

"Ten minutes more," Nikos announced after we'd taken in the summit views. "Then we start down. Weather can change quickly up here."

I nodded, understanding the wisdom in his caution even as part of me wanted to linger longer in this moment of achievement. Trevor and I moved carefully around the small summit area, taking photos and simply absorbing the experience of standing where ancient Greeks believed their gods had dwelled.

"They chose well," Trevor said, gesturing to the dramatic landscape surrounding us. "If I were a god, I'd definitely live here."

"You'd get bored," I teased, knowing his restless nature. "No restaurants to run, no food to experiment with. Just ambrosia and nectar for eternity."

"Fair point," he conceded with a smile. "Though the view would almost be worth it."

The descent began with careful scrambling back down the most technical section. In some ways, going down was more challenging than coming up - requiring even more precision in foot placement and a different kind of focus. My legs, already tired from the ascent, protested the new demands, but I welcomed the burn, the tangible proof of what my body could accomplish.

"Steady here," Nikos cautioned as we navigated a particularly loose section of rock. "Take your time."

I moved deliberately, finding a rhythm in the descent that allowed me to maintain control without overthinking each step. This too was part of recovery - learning to trust my body again, to believe in its strength and resilience even when pushed to its limits.

We stopped for lunch at a sheltered spot below the most technical terrain, the sun now high overhead and warming the mountain air. The simple meal of bread, cheese, and dried fruit tasted better than any gourmet dinner, hunger and accomplishment enhancing every flavor.

"How are you feeling?" Trevor asked, his eyes assessing me with that mixture of concern and pride I'd grown accustomed to during my recovery.

"Tired," I admitted honestly. "But good tired. Like I've earned every ache."

He nodded, understanding perfectly. "We've still got a long way down."

"I know," I took a long drink of water. "But we've done the hard part."

The remainder of the descent took us back across the Muses Plateau and down to the refuge where we'd spent the night. From there, we continued down through changing terrain - the rocky alpine landscape gradually giving way to scattered vegetation, then to the pine forests of lower elevations.

By the time we reached the trailhead where our transport waited, my legs were trembling with fatigue, every step a conscious effort. But unlike the weakness I'd felt in the hospital - the terrifying loss of control over my own body - this exhaustion was earned, chosen, conquered.

"You did it," Trevor said quietly as we loaded our minimal gear into the vehicle. "The whole thing. No shortcuts, no special accommodations."

I nodded, too tired for words but filled with a satisfaction deeper than simple pride. This climb had been more than a physical challenge or a bucket list item - it had been reclamation, proof that my story wasn't finished with that hospital bed, that terrifying brush with mortality.

"Back to Athens?" I asked as we settled into the vehicle.

"Back to Athens," Trevor confirmed. "Hot tub, room service, and not a single responsibility for the next two days."

I leaned against him, my body already anticipating the relief of warm water and soft beds. "Perfect anniversary gift," I murmured, feeling sleep beginning to pull at me despite the bumpy road.

"I'm glad," he said softly, his arm around my shoulders. "Though I think you gave yourself the real gift - proving you could do it."

As I drifted into a well-earned sleep against his shoulder, I knew he was right. Trevor had given me the opportunity, but the achievement itself - the knowledge that my body was strong and whole again - that was a gift I'd given myself, step by painful step up the mountain of the gods.

I slept the entire drive back to Athens, the rhythmic motion of the vehicle and complete physical exhaustion pulling me into deep, dreamless rest. By the time we arrived at the resort, my body had stiffened to the point that simply standing proved a challenge - my legs trembling like overcooked pasta when I attempted to exit the vehicle.

Trevor was there immediately, his arm strong around my waist as he helped me find my balance. "Easy," he murmured, his voice a mixture of amusement and concern. "No rush."

We made our way slowly to our suite, each step reminding me of the day's achievement in the form of protesting muscles. Despite my exhaustion, the thought of a hot shower dominated my mind - the need to wash away the mountain dust and sweat before collapsing into bed.

When I pushed open the bathroom door, I stopped short in surprise. Instead of an empty room awaiting my attention, a large soaking tub was already filled with steaming water, the distinctive scent of epsom salts rising with the steam.

"What?" I asked, turning to Trevor with confusion.

He smiled, that particular smile that always appeared when one of his thoughtful plans came together perfectly. "You need an epsom salt bath. I coordinated with the staff to have it ready when we were getting close."

The simple thoughtfulness of it - anticipating exactly what my body would need after such exertion - made my heart swell. I reached up to kiss him, my fatigue momentarily forgotten in the wave of gratitude and love.

"You're amazing," I said softly against his lips. "Join me?"

"Of course, mo grá," he replied, his hands already gently peeling away my dusty climbing clothes, his movements both intimate and practical as he helped me undress.

The water was perfect - hot enough to penetrate tired muscles without being uncomfortable. I eased in with a sigh of pure pleasure, Trevor sliding in behind me so I could lean back against his chest. His strong hands found my shoulders immediately, working into the knots that had formed during our descent.

I closed my eyes, surrendering completely to the dual comfort of the warm water and Trevor's touch, feeling the mountain's hold on my body slowly begin to release.

"Your shoulders are like rocks," Trevor observed, his thumbs working methodically into the tight muscles. "Worth it though, right?"

"Completely," I sighed, wincing slightly as he found a particularly tender spot. "I'd climb it again tomorrow if I could move my legs."

His low laugh rumbled against my back. "Let's save the next mountain for when you can actually walk again."

The water enveloped us in its healing warmth, the epsom salts working their magic on my overworked muscles. I felt the day's exertion in every inch of my body, but it was a satisfying ache - evidence of what I'd accomplished rather than a limitation to fear.

"Thank you," I said after a comfortable silence. "Not just for the bath. For everything. For knowing exactly what I needed."

His hands paused briefly on my shoulders before resuming their gentle kneading. "I wanted to give you something meaningful. Something that wasn't about the business or the show or anything else."

"It was perfect," I assured him, letting my head fall back against his shoulder. "Though I'm not sure how you're going to top it for our fourth anniversary."

"Already thinking ahead?" he teased, his lips brushing my temple.

"Always," I smiled, though my eyes remained closed, my body growing heavier with relaxation as the heat and his touch worked their magic. "It's the businesswoman in me. Always planning the next move."

"And what's your next move right now?" His voice had dropped lower, his hands sliding from my shoulders down my arms in a caress that was less therapeutic and more suggestive.

I turned slightly in his arms, the water lapping gently against the sides of the tub as I shifted to face him. "I think," I said, tracing a finger along his jawline, "that I need to properly thank my husband for the most perfect anniversary gift."

"You're exhausted," he pointed out, though his eyes had darkened in a way that sent a different kind of warmth through me.

"Not that exhausted," I countered, moving closer despite my body's protests. Some things were worth pushing through the fatigue for, and the connection between us - especially in this moment of triumph and celebration - was definitely one of them.

His smile was slow and knowing as his hands found my waist beneath the water. "If you're sure..."

"Completely sure," I whispered against his lips before closing the remaining distance between us, the mountain's exhilaration transforming into a different kind of energy entirely.

The water had cooled considerably by the time we finally emerged from the bath, wrapped in the plush robes provided by the resort. Despite my earlier insistence, my body was making its limitations known - muscles trembling with a combination of exertion and satisfaction as Trevor helped me to the bed.

"Room service?" he suggested, reaching for the menu on the nightstand. "You need to refuel after that climb."

"Both climbs," I corrected with a tired smile, earning a laugh from him as he settled beside me on the bed.

We ordered a feast - Greek specialties and comfort foods, plus a bottle of champagne to celebrate both our anniversary and our summit achievement. While waiting for the food to arrive, I stretched

out on the bed, letting my body sink into the luxurious mattress as Trevor gently worked arnica gel into my calves.

"You're going to be feeling this for days," he observed, his touch careful on my already-stiffening muscles.

"Badge of honor," I murmured, wincing slightly as he found a particularly tender spot. "Proof I made it."

When our food arrived, we ate like we'd been starving for days - which, in a way, we had been. The simple trail food during our climb had sustained us, but nothing compared to the flavors of properly prepared cuisine after a day of physical challenge.

"To conquering mountains," Trevor proposed, raising his champagne glass.

"Both literal and metaphorical," I added, clinking my glass against his. The bubbles danced on my tongue, the perfect complement to our celebration.

As the evening deepened into night, we lay together on the balcony lounger, wrapped in blankets against the cooling air, gazing at the lights of Athens spread out before us. From this vantage point, Mount Olympus was no longer visible, but I could feel its presence in my aching muscles and satisfied spirit.

"What are you thinking?" Trevor asked, his fingers absently playing with my hair.

"About how far I've come," I admitted. "Six months ago, I was wondering if I'd ever feel strong again. If my body would ever be mine again, you know?"

He nodded, his expression solemn. We rarely spoke directly about those terrifying hours in the hospital, about how close I'd come to leaving him and Rachel, but the shadow of it lingered in moments like these.

"I was scared," I continued softly. "Not just of dying, but of living differently. Of being... diminished somehow."

"You could never be diminished," Trevor said with quiet certainty. "No matter what happened. But I understand."

"Standing on that summit today..." I searched for the right words. "It wasn't just about proving I could do it physically. It was about reclaiming who I am. The part of me that takes risks, that pushes boundaries, that isn't defined by what happened in that hospital room."

His arms tightened around me. "You've always been the strongest person I know, mo grá. Even in that hospital bed."

I rested my head against his chest, listening to the steady rhythm of his heartbeat. "I couldn't have done it without you. Not just the climb - all of it. The recovery, the rebuilding, finding my way back."

"You would have," he said with complete confidence. "But I'm glad you didn't have to."

We fell into comfortable silence, the distant sounds of the city a gentle backdrop to our private moment of connection. Soon we would return to our normal lives - to Rachel, to the businesses, to the reality show and all its manufactured drama. But tonight was just for us, for celebrating not just another year of marriage but the triumph of spirit and body over circumstance.

"Happy anniversary, mi corazón," I murmured, already feeling sleep beginning to claim me again.

"Happy anniversary, mo grá," he replied, his voice the last thing I registered before drifting into well-earned rest.

The next morning, I woke to golden sunlight streaming through the partially drawn curtains, painting warm patterns across our bed. My body greeted me with a chorus of protests - muscles announcing their displeasure at yesterday's exertion with every slight movement. Yet beneath the soreness lay a deep satisfaction, a physical reminder of what I'd accomplished.

Trevor was still deeply asleep beside me, his features softened in repose, one arm flung above his head in that characteristic pose I'd come to love over the years. I carefully shifted closer, fitting myself against his side despite my protesting muscles, content to drift between wakefulness and sleep in the quiet morning hours.

Eventually, his breathing changed, his body stirring as consciousness found him. His eyes opened, immediately finding mine with a sleepy smile that still made my heart skip after all these years.

"Morning," he murmured, voice rough with sleep. "How bad is it?"

"Like I've been hit by a truck," I admitted with a small laugh. "A very targeted truck that specifically aimed for my quads and calves."

He pressed a gentle kiss to my forehead before reaching for the room phone. "Time for phase two of anniversary recovery."

Room service arrived promptly with a feast disguised as breakfast - fresh pastries, Greek yogurt with honey, eggs prepared exactly how we liked them, and most importantly, rich coffee that promised to breathe life back into my tired body. We ate in comfortable silence, the simple pleasure of good food and quiet companionship needing no embellishment.

"Ready for the next part?" Trevor asked as we finished the last of our coffee.

"There's more?" I raised an eyebrow, though I wasn't entirely surprised. Trevor had always been thorough in his planning.

"The full works," he confirmed with a smile. "I booked us into the resort's spa for the day. Mud baths, steam room, facials, and the pièce de résistance - a ninety-minute couples massage."

"Have I mentioned lately that you're a genius?" I asked, already imagining how heavenly those treatments would feel on my mountain-ravaged body.

"Not since yesterday," he grinned, helping me up from the bed with exaggerated care as my stiff muscles protested the movement.

The resort's spa was a marvel of marble and soft lighting, the air infused with essential oils and soft music. We were led through a progression of treatments, each more blissful than the last - the mud bath drawing toxins from tired muscles, the steam room loosening what remained of the mountain's hold on my body, the facial restoring skin weathered by sun and wind at high altitude.

By the time we reached the couples massage, I was already floating in a state of semi-conscious relaxation. The therapists worked magic on our bodies, finding every knot and tension point with practiced precision. Beside me on the adjacent table, I could hear Trevor's occasional sigh of pleasure as his own muscles surrendered to the treatment.

In that moment of shared indulgence, I felt a wave of gratitude wash over me - not just for the physical pleasure of the massage, but for everything it represented. The ability to feel this, to experience both the challenge of the mountain and the luxury of recovery, to have a partner who understood exactly what I needed and made it happen without fanfare or expectation.

This was what we'd built together - a partnership that supported each other's dreams while providing a safe harbor to return to. From that first shared apartment where I'd been a struggling model and he'd been a prep cook with big dreams, to this moment of earned luxury after conquering Olympus - we'd come so far together, step by step, choice by choice.

As we made our way back to our suite, wrapped in plush robes and moving with the languid ease that comes only from complete relaxation, I caught Trevor's eye with a smile.

"Our actual anniversary isn't even until tomorrow, and you've already made this trip amazing," I said, my body humming with the pleasant aftermath of our spa treatments.

"You deserved it," he replied simply, his hand warm against the small of my back as we walked. "You've been working so hard - between the cosmetics line, the restaurants, the reality show drama with Bre - you deserved some time to focus just on yourself."

The sincerity in his voice touched me deeply. In our world of constant demands and responsibilities, this recognition of what I needed - not just physically but emotionally - was perhaps the most meaningful gift of all.

Back in our suite, the afternoon light had softened into the golden hues of approaching evening. Trevor moved with practiced efficiency as he prepared for dinner, slipping into a charcoal suit that highlighted the breadth of his shoulders and the lean strength of his frame. I'd always loved watching him dress formally - the transformation from my laid-back Irish chef to this sophisticated figure never failed to catch my breath.

I chose a chocolate brown cocktail dress that complemented my coloring while offering enough give to accommodate muscles still tender from our climb. The silk fabric draped perfectly, offering an elegant simplicity that felt right for this celebration of us.

As I applied the final touches to my makeup - using products from my own line, of course - I caught Trevor watching me in the mirror, that particular look in his eyes that still made my heart race after all these years.

"What?" I asked, though I knew exactly what that expression meant.

"Just thinking how lucky I am," he said, coming to stand behind me, his hands settling lightly on my shoulders. "My beautiful wife, who climbs mountains and runs empires with equal grace."

I turned to face him, reaching up to straighten his tie though it needed no adjustment. "We're both lucky," I corrected softly. "To have found this. To have built this together."

His smile in response held all the warmth and understanding of our shared history - from those early days of friendship in that tiny apartment to the complex, rich partnership we'd forged through years of choices both easy and difficult.

Dinner was a masterpiece of Mediterranean cuisine at the resort's acclaimed restaurant, the chef having prepared a special anniversary menu after learning of Trevor's culinary background. We lingered over each course, savoring not just the exquisite food but the rare luxury of uninterrupted time together, with no business calls, no reality show cameras, no responsibilities beyond enjoying each other's company.

The night air was perfect as we walked back to our suite afterward, the stars visible even through Athens' city lights. Trevor's hand in mine felt like the most natural thing in the world, our steps synchronized after years of walking through life together.

Back in our room, with the city lights twinkling beyond our balcony and the memory of Olympus still present in my pleasantly tired body, I showed Trevor exactly how much I appreciated him - not just for the trip, but for everything he was and everything we'd built together. For being the kind of partner who understood that climbing a mountain could heal something broken inside me. For loving all of me - the businesswoman, the mother, the survivor, the dreamer.

When I finally drifted off to sleep in his arms, it was with a profound sense of completion and peace. My body had conquered Olympus, my heart had reconnected with its own strength, and my soul had been reminded of the most important summit I'd ever reached - this partnership that sustained us both through every peak and valley life presented.

I slept deeper and more restfully than I had in months, perhaps years - the sleep of someone who had reclaimed their place in the world and found it exactly where they belonged.

The gentle sound of wheels on carpet gradually pulled me from my slumber. I blinked awake to find Trevor carefully maneuvering a room service cart beside our bed, the aroma of fresh coffee already working its magic on my consciousness.

"Happy anniversary," he smiled, handing me a steaming cup prepared exactly how I preferred it - the perfect balance of cream and sweetness that only someone who had shared countless mornings with me could achieve.

"Happy anniversary," I replied, accepting the coffee gratefully before noticing the small box he was now offering alongside it. "Mi corazón, you've given me so much already."

"It's a small gift," he insisted, his expression betraying the modesty of his words. "I had to give you something today."

I laughed, taking a sip of coffee before setting the cup aside. "Okay. Well, let me grab your gift." I slipped out of bed, feeling the climb in every movement despite the spa treatments, and retrieved a carefully wrapped box from my suitcase.

"Open yours first," he urged as we settled back on the bed, the morning sunlight streaming through the windows to create a perfect golden moment.

I carefully unwrapped the package to reveal a stunning amber jewelry set nestled in velvet - a necklace, bracelet, earrings, and ring, all featuring beautifully polished amber in various honey-gold hues, set in elegant white gold. The craftsmanship was exquisite, the stones catching the light with warm, rich depth that seemed to glow from within.

"Oh, mi corazón," I breathed, touching the pieces gently. "It's beautiful. You shouldn't have."

"Of course I should have," he said with quiet certainty, his eyes soft as he watched my reaction. "Amber for my Amber. I found them in a small shop in Athens while you were having your facial."

I leaned forward to kiss him, my heart full with the thoughtfulness of his gift. "Open yours," I urged after we broke apart.

He kissed me once more before turning his attention to the box I'd given him, unwrapping it with the careful precision that always made me smile - so different from my own tendency to tear into packages.

Trevor opened the box carefully, his expression shifting from curiosity to genuine surprise as he revealed what was inside. I'd spent weeks coordinating with a master craftsman in Dublin to create a custom chef's knife unlike any other - the blade forged from Damascus steel with a pattern that mimicked the waves of the Mediterranean, the handle crafted from rare olive wood harvested from a centuries-old grove in Greece.

"Amber," he breathed, lifting the knife with the reverence only a chef could fully understand. "This is... extraordinary."

"Turn it over," I urged softly.

He rotated the blade to find the inscription I'd had etched into the steel near the handle - our wedding date alongside the words "Mo Grá, Mi Corazón" - our languages intertwined just as our lives had become.

"It's a piece of both our heritages," I explained as his fingers traced the inscription. "Irish craftsmanship with Greek materials. The woodworker told me the olive tree was over five hundred years old when it fell in a storm last year. They've been saving the wood for special commissions."

"It's perfect," he said, his voice slightly rough with emotion. "I've never seen anything like it."

"That's the idea," I smiled. "One of a kind, just like us."

He set the knife carefully back in its custom wooden case before pulling me into his arms, his kiss conveying everything words couldn't quite capture. When we finally broke apart, he rested his forehead against mine.

"Three years," he murmured. "Best three years of my life."

"Mine too," I agreed, though the words felt inadequate for the journey we'd shared. From friends to lovers to partners in every sense - business, parenthood, life - we'd built something neither of us could have imagined during those early days in our shared apartment.

We enjoyed a leisurely breakfast, the Greek sunshine warming our suite as we reminisced about our wedding day, our first date, the moment we realized friendship had become something deeper. The conversation flowed easily between laughter and more serious reflection, the comfortable rhythm of two people who knew each other's stories but never tired of hearing them again.

"Do you ever think about how unlikely we are?" I asked, setting my coffee cup down. "The gay Irish chef and the con-artist-turned-model? We shouldn't have worked on paper."

"That's because what matters was never on paper," Trevor replied, reaching for my hand across the table. "It was always about this - what we built together, choice by choice."

I nodded, thinking of all the crossroads we'd faced, the moments when easier paths had presented themselves but we'd chosen each other instead. "No regrets?"

"Not one," he said with absolute certainty. "Every step, even the difficult ones, brought us here. And here is exactly where I want to be."

We spent the remainder of our anniversary day in perfect, unhurried leisure - the kind of day that had become a rare luxury in our busy lives. The private pool attached to our suite beckoned in the late morning heat, the clear water cool against skin still faintly tender from our mountain climb. Trevor and I swam lazy laps, occasionally racing with the playful competition that had always characterized our relationship, before floating together in comfortable silence.

Later, we eased into the hot tub, the jets working magic on muscles that still held memories of Olympus. Trevor had thoughtfully arranged for a bottle of champagne to be chilled nearby, and we sipped it slowly as we talked about everything and nothing - Rachel's latest developmental milestones, ideas for the next seasonal menu at his flagship restaurant, the expansion plans for my cosmetics line.

In the afternoon, we ventured beyond our suite to walk along the shoreline, shoes in hand as we let the Mediterranean wash over our feet. The beach was relatively quiet, allowing us the rare pleasure of anonymity - no recognition in strangers' eyes, no discreet phone cameras capturing our private moments. Just another couple celebrating their love against the backdrop of azure waters and ancient history.

"I almost don't want to go back," I admitted as we watched the waves recede from the sand. "To the cameras, the business meetings, Bre's constant drama..."

"We don't have to yet," Trevor reminded me, his arm warm around my waist. "We still have tonight and tomorrow."

I leaned into him, savoring the moment. "Then let's make the most of it."

As evening approached, we returned to our suite to prepare for dinner at Ethereal, Athens' most exclusive restaurant. Getting a reservation typically required months of advance planning or the right connections, but Trevor had leveraged his reputation in the culinary world to secure us a table in their private dining section.

I chose a silk gown in deep amber that complemented the jewelry Trevor had given me that morning, the color catching the golden tones in my hair and skin. When I emerged from the bathroom, Trevor's expression of appreciation made me feel more beautiful than any runway or magazine cover ever had.

"You look stunning," he said simply, his own appearance equally striking in a perfectly tailored suit that emphasized his lean strength.

"So do you," I replied, reaching up to adjust his tie - a gesture that had become our own private ritual over the years. "Ready to see if this place lives up to its reputation?"

"Ready to celebrate three extraordinary years with my extraordinary wife," he countered, offering his arm with a smile that still made my heart skip after all this time.

Dinner at Ethereal exceeded even its formidable reputation - a culinary journey through modern interpretations of ancient Greek cuisine, each course more exquisite than the last. The chef, having learned of Trevor's own culinary background, emerged from the kitchen to discuss techniques and inspirations, turning our meal into a personal experience that transcended the typical fine dining encounter.

As the evening deepened around us, we declined the offered dessert in favor of a different kind of sweetness. Hand in hand, we made our way back to the shore, where the Mediterranean now glimmered with reflected moonlight. I slipped off my heels, the cool sand a pleasant contrast to the warm night air as we walked along the water's edge.

"Remember our first anniversary?" Trevor asked, his voice blending with the gentle rhythm of the waves. "That private dinner at the restaurant after hours..."

"The staff had all gone home, just us with the place to ourselves," I smiled at the memory. "You cooked everything yourself, even though it was supposed to be your night off."

"I wouldn't trust anyone else with our first anniversary meal," he said, his fingers interlacing with mine. "Though I have to admit, this view beats the restaurant kitchen."

"Just a bit," I agreed, looking up at the canopy of stars spread across the Grecian sky. Here, away from city lights, they seemed close enough to touch - countless pinpricks of ancient light bearing witness to our small moment of human connection.

We talked as we walked, about dreams still unrealized and memories still treasured, about the business empires we'd built and the family life we were creating with Rachel, still so new in our lives. The conversation flowed with the easy intimacy of two people who had seen each other at their best and worst, who had chosen each other daily through challenges that would have broken lesser bonds.

When we finally returned to our suite, the air between us had changed - charged with a different kind of energy, a quiet anticipation built through the day's moments of connection. Trevor's hands were gentle as he helped me remove the amber jewelry he'd given me that morning, his touch lingering against my skin with deliberate intent.

Our lovemaking held a perfect balance of tenderness and passion, the physical expression of a connection that had grown richer with each passing year. Every touch carried the weight of our shared history, every kiss a promise of the future we continued to build together.

Afterward, we lay tangled in each other's arms, my head resting on Trevor's chest where I could hear the steady rhythm of his heartbeat - the most comforting sound in my world. As sleep began to claim me, I felt a profound sense of completion, of having found my place in a universe of infinite possibilities.

Three years of marriage, a lifetime of connection, and the certainty that whatever mountains still awaited us - literal or metaphorical - we would climb them together, step by careful step.

“Purple Skies Part 1”

I landed in Cork. It was so good to be home, even if this visit would be brief. One week off from filming, and Hunter and I had made a decision - it was time to visit Saturn and TK-91. We hadn't been to Saturn in person since before Tomi was born, hadn't even properly presented our new princess to her kingdom. And we'd never visited TK-91 together. Both planets needed to see that Princess Arissa was thriving.

Which meant keeping this visit secret from our Earth friends. Hunter had told everyone they were coming to Nashville to visit me, and we'd convinced Mom to spend time with Zachary in California. The cover story was solid.

I managed to make it home undetected, finding my family waiting in the living room.

"Mama!" Tomi's delighted shriek made my heart swell.

"Oh, I missed you all so much," I breathed, carefully setting down Thara's backpack before gathering my three daughters into my arms. Then Hunter, completing our circle.

"Oh, I missed you all so much," I breathed, carefully setting down Thara's backpack before gathering my three daughters into my arms. Then Hunter, completing our circle.

“OK, are we ready to do this?” Hunter asked.

I nodded, “I am. Is Celeste ready?”

“She’s waiting for our signal to receive us,” Hunter confirmed.

“OK then, let’s grab what we need and do this,” I said as I grabbed my duffle back and Thara’s backpack.

Hunter grabbed his duffle and Tomi’s backpack while Arissa and Harley got their own backpacks.

“I’m really nervous. I was always taught people on Saturn were evil. I know you all aren’t and I get that logically, but…” Arissa started.

“Programming can be hard to break. But it will be ok. You’re a princess of Saturn now too. You need to meet your people,” I said gently.

Arissa nodded.

The teleport beam deposited us in the war room of Kronos Castle. My head advisor Celeste and Arion, commander of Saturn's military forces, were waiting to receive us.

"Welcome home, Queen Michelle, King Hunter," Celeste greeted formally.

"It's good to be back," I smiled. "You know Princess Harley, of course. And I believe some of you have met Princess Arissa. And this," I shifted Tomi in my arms, "is our newest princess."

"I had the pleasure of meeting Princess Arissa during her time on Nemesis," Arion acknowledged with a slight bow.

"I haven't had that honor," Celeste stepped forward. "Though I've heard wonderful things from the Queen. And Princess Tomi is absolutely beautiful!"

"It's lovely to meet you, Celeste," Arissa said politely. "And Sir Arion, it's good to see you again. How is your son?"

Arion's face brightened. "He's doing well. I'm pleased you two have maintained contact since your meeting on Nemesis."

I turned to my eldest, surprised. "Keeping in touch? With Young Arion?"

Arissa's face flushed as crimson as her Ranger uniform, but she tried to shrug it off. "We became friends."

Suddenly her mysterious love songs made perfect sense. My daughter had a crush on the son of my head guard?

"I know he will be very excited to see you," Arion said, either oblivious to or politely ignoring my daughter's blush.

"There is much to prepare," Celeste interjected, already pulling out her data pad. "The presentation ceremony for Princesses Arissa and Tomi must be perfect. The people have been eagerly awaiting the chance to formally welcome them."

"Of course," I smiled, recognizing my advisor's familiar nervous energy. "But breathe, Celeste. Everything will get done."

Hunter's hand found the small of my back, a subtle reminder that we had another mission after this one. We couldn't spend too much time on ceremonies - TK-91 was waiting.

"Perhaps we could get settled in first?" he suggested diplomatically. "It's been a long journey for the girls."

Celeste nodded quickly. "Of course, of course. Your rooms are prepared. Though..." she glanced at her pad again. "The royal seamstress would like to see Princesses Arissa and Tomi as soon as possible. Their ceremonial gowns..."

"After they've rested," I said firmly, noticing Arissa's growing tension at all the formalities. Her experience as a princess had been vastly different - TK-91 was all battle training and war councils. The elaborate ceremonies and formal protocols of Saturn's court would take some adjustment.

"Harley, you remember your room?"

"Yeah," she nodded, already looking more comfortable in the familiar surroundings.

"Good. Arissa's is across from yours. Show her?" I turned to Celeste. "I trust the nursery connecting to our quarters has been prepared for Princess Tomi?"

"Of course, Your Majesty," Celeste confirmed with a small bow.

"Perfect. The King and I will get the princess settled. And please see that Thara is properly attended to."

Celeste nodded, eyeing my cat's backpack. Thara, sensing imminent pampering, had already adopted her most regal pose. Some things never changed - put that cat in a palace and she immediately remembered she was royalty.

"Of course. Come, Countess Thara," Celeste said formally, using the title we'd bestowed upon her years ago.

In our quarters, I began unpacking while Hunter settled into the rocking chair with Tomi.

"I'll never adjust to being a king," he murmured.

I couldn't help but laugh. "I know, but it suits you." Then, realizing something, I paused. "This is our first time back since discovering your Saturn Starseed... since we started recovering memories of your past life."

"I know," he said quietly. "That hasn't escaped me."

"How are you feeling about it?"

"Honestly?" He looked around the room - our room - with new eyes. "I'm not sure. The idea that this is my home planet after believing I was an Earth human my whole life... it's still a lot to process."

I nodded, understanding. "I know it's overwhelming. But this is your home too. We could leave Earth anytime, make our life here instead."

"I know," he smiled down at our sleeping daughter. "But that's not what either of us really wants, is it?"

"No," I admitted. "It's not. We have a beautiful life on Earth... but maybe we should make more time for this one too."

"You're right," he agreed softly. "We should."

A soft knock at the door interrupted us. "Enter," I called, falling easily back into royal protocol.

Celeste appeared, looking slightly flustered. "Your Majesties, I apologize for the interruption, but there's a situation requiring attention."

"What kind of situation?" Hunter asked, carefully laying Tomi in her crib.

"It seems Young Arion has... well..." Celeste glanced at me nervously. "He's arranged quite an elaborate welcome for Princess Arissa. The royal gardens..."

I raised an eyebrow. "The royal gardens?"

"Have been transformed into what I believe Earth teenagers would call a 'romantic setting.' Complete with floating lights and musicians."

Hunter's expression darkened slightly - our protective father instincts apparently transcended planets. "She's thirteen."

"So is he," I reminded him gently. "And at least we know his family."

"That's not helping," Hunter muttered.

"Would you rather she was crushing on a married man?" I asked pointedly, thinking of Harley's Jake situation.

He sighed. "No. But still..."

"Your Majesties," Celeste interrupted delicately. "There's more. The High Council has requested an audience. They wish to discuss Princess Arissa's... unique situation."

Of course they did. A princess of Saturn who was also princess of their former enemy, TK-91. The political implications alone...

"Tell them we'll meet after the presentation ceremony," I decided. "One thing at a time."

"And perhaps someone should supervise whatever's happening in the gardens?" Hunter suggested.

"Already handled, Your Majesty," Celeste assured him. "Sir Arion is keeping watch. Though he seems rather... pleased with the situation."

"Of course he is," I couldn't help but smile. "His son and a princess of Saturn? Every guard's dream."

"Michelle..." Hunter's warning tone just made me smile wider.

"Celeste, please make sure Harley is settled in as well," I said, knowing our middle child would find some way to create chaos if left unsupervised too long. "And have someone check that Countess Thara isn't terrorizing the kitchen staff again."

"Of course, Your Majesty." Celeste paused. "Though... perhaps you should know. Princess Harley has already made her way to the training grounds. She's quite impressed with our training facilities."

"At least one of our daughters is staying out of romantic entanglements," Hunter muttered.

"For now," I teased, earning another look. "Come on, we should probably check on Arissa. Make sure she's not too overwhelmed by Young Arion's... enthusiasm."

"And make sure this 'romantic setting' stays appropriate," Hunter added.

"They're thirteen," I reminded him again. "What do you think is going to happen in the royal gardens with both their fathers watching?"

"I was thirteen once too, you know."

"Yes, and as I recall, you were more interested in your bike than girls."

Hunter nodded. "And then I met Sara Foster."

I glared at the mention of his first girlfriend - a name that still irritated me after all these years. "Right, Sara..."

"Let's go check on our daughter," Hunter said quickly, wisely changing the subject.

We made our way through the palace corridors, the familiar grandeur still striking after being away so long. Guards bowed as we passed, and I could feel Hunter fighting the urge to tell them not to. Some things about being royal still made him uncomfortable.

The sound of soft music drifted from the direction of the gardens. As we approached, I caught sight of Arissa standing at the entrance, looking both nervous and excited.

"Ready to play overprotective father?" I whispered to Hunter.

"I prefer 'appropriately cautious,'" he muttered back.

As we got closer, I could see Young Arion had truly outdone himself. The garden was lit with thousands of floating orbs - a display of power that must have taken considerable effort. Traditional Saturnian music filled the air, and the night-blooming flowers had been coaxed into early opening.

"He's showing off his powers," Hunter observed.

"Like father, like son," I smiled, remembering Sir Arion's own displays of power in his youth. "Though I have to admit, his control is impressive for his age."

Arissa hadn't noticed us yet. She stood at the garden's entrance, one hand touching the crystal pendant she always wore - a nervous habit she'd had since we found her. Young Arion was approaching her, looking equally nervous despite his elaborate preparations.

"Should we..." Hunter started.

"Give them a moment," I said softly. "Sir Arion is right there, and besides... look at her face. When's the last time you saw her this happy?"

"First Harley, now Arissa. Why?" Hunter's voice carried that particular distress unique to fathers of teenage girls.

I smiled, squeezing his hand. "Because you're a girl dad and this is what having teenagers is."

Hunter sighed deeply. "At least Tomi's still little."

"For now," I couldn't resist adding.

Before Hunter could respond to that terrifying thought, Young Arion bowed formally to Arissa. Even from our distance, we could see him trembling slightly.

"Princess Arissa," his voice carried clearly in the garden's acoustics. "I... I hope you don't find this too forward..."

Arissa's smile was shy but genuine - so different from her usual careful reserve. "It's beautiful," she said softly. "But you didn't have to go to all this trouble."

"Yes, I did," he said with surprising conviction. "You're a princess of two planets. You deserve... everything."

I felt Hunter tense beside me. "Okay, that's enough watching," he muttered.

"Hunter," I warned quietly, but he was already moving forward. Sir Arion caught my eye from his position near the garden wall, and I could see him fighting a smile.

"Princess Arissa," Hunter's voice made both teenagers jump. "I trust you're settling in?"

"Dad!" Arissa's face flushed, but I noticed she didn't step away from Young Arion. "I... yes. The gardens are beautiful."

"Your Majesty," Young Arion bowed deeply, though I caught a flash of disappointment in his eyes. "I hope I haven't overstepped..."

"Not yet," Hunter said meaningfully.

"Perhaps," I stepped in before Hunter could go full protective father, "Young Arion could show Arissa the new training facilities later? Under proper supervision, of course."

The way both teenagers brightened at this suggestion told me I'd made the right call - giving them something to look forward to while maintaining appropriate boundaries.

"And Sir Arion," I added smoothly, "perhaps you'd like to show them the royal stables? I don't believe TK-91 has any unicorns left, and Arissa should meet ours."

"Saturn still has unicorns?" Arissa's eyes lit up with genuine wonder - a rare break in her usual composure.

Sir Arion bowed formally. "It would be my honor to accompany them, Your Majesty."

"Perfect." I turned to Hunter, whose protective instincts were still clearly warring with him. "My love, shall we join Celeste in my office for that briefing?"

Hunter's eyes stayed on Arissa for a moment longer before he nodded reluctantly. "Fine."

As we walked away, I heard Arissa's excited voice asking Young Arion about the unicorns' powers. Some things transcended planets - teenage crushes and magical horses apparently among them.

"She'll be fine," I assured Hunter quietly. "Sir Arion won't let anything inappropriate happen."

"I know," Hunter sighed. "It's just... she's only been our daughter for a year, and already..."

"Already she's healing enough to let herself feel normal teenage emotions?" I squeezed his hand. "That's a good thing."

Before he could respond, Celeste appeared around the corner, data pad in hand. "Your Majesties, the High Council is quite insistent about meeting before the presentation ceremony."

"Of course they are," I muttered. "What exactly are their concerns?"

"Primarily the... unique diplomatic situation Princess Arissa presents. A princess of both Saturn and TK-91? Some council members are expressing concerns about divided loyalties."

"She's thirteen," Hunter's voice carried an edge. "They're worried about the political allegiances of a thirteen-year-old?"

"Welcome to royal politics, my love," I said dryly. "Where even teenage crushes become matters of state." I looked at Celeste, "Fine, I will speak to the council right now. I have plenty to say about this situation."

Celeste's expression suggested she recognized my tone - the one that usually preceded me putting self-important council members in their place.

"The council is assembled in the main chamber," she said carefully. "Though perhaps a more... diplomatic approach..."

"Oh, I'll be diplomatic," I assured her, though Hunter's snort suggested he knew better. "I'll diplomatically explain how my daughter's loyalty isn't up for debate by a bunch of politicians who haven't set foot on TK-91 in centuries."

"Michelle..." Hunter's voice carried both warning and amusement.

"What? I can be diplomatic." I straightened my shoulders, feeling my royal authority settle around me like a cloak. "I'll just diplomatically remind them that I'm their queen, and if they have concerns about my children's loyalties, they're really questioning mine."

Celeste looked like she was developing a headache.

I strode into the council chamber, letting my power ripple around me. The seven council elders sat in their ceremonial seats, all pompous dignity and ancient privilege. Time to remind them exactly who ruled Saturn.

"Good evening, council members." My voice carried that dangerous sweetness they should have known to fear. "I trust you've gathered to welcome my family home. After all, I'm certain you remember that this council's role is purely advisory, and all actual decisions come from myself or my proxy, Celeste."

I let my gaze meet each of theirs in turn. "I'm equally certain you all recall that this council holds no power beyond what I choose to grant it. So naturally, none of you would dare question the presence - or loyalty - of my eldest daughter."

The temperature in the room seemed to drop slightly. "The diplomatic ties we've forged with TK-91 are nothing short of miraculous. Unprecedented. A cause for celebration. That we share a princess is a blessing that strengthens both worlds. And let me remind you - until Princess Arissa comes of age, King Hunter serves as her proxy, making him, by default, King of TK-91 as well."

I straightened to my full height, letting my Saturn power flare visibly. "And I know that no one in this room - no one on this planet - would dare question King Hunter's loyalty."

The council members shifted uncomfortably in their seats. Good. They should be uncomfortable.

"Your Majesty," Elder Theron finally spoke, his voice carefully measured. "We meant no disrespect. Our concerns were merely about the... practical aspects of having a princess with dual citizenship, as it were."

"Practical aspects?" I arched an eyebrow. "Such as?"

"The girl's education, for one," Elder Mira added. "She must learn both Saturn's and TK-91's histories, customs, political structures..."

"And let me add to that, all of my daughters will marry whomever they wish, just as I did."

"But Your Majesty," Elder Mira ventured cautiously, "tradition dictates-"

"Tradition?" I laughed, though there was no humor in it. "Shall we discuss how many traditions I've broken? Starting with marrying an alleged Earth human and ending with forming an alliance with our supposed eternal enemies?"

"And look how well both of those decisions worked out," Hunter added pointedly.

"Your Majesties," Celeste stepped forward, ever the diplomat. "Perhaps we could focus on the more immediate matter of the presentation ceremony?"

"Yes," I agreed, though I kept my stern gaze on the council. "Let's discuss something productive. Unless anyone else would like to question my parenting choices?"

The silence that followed was deeply satisfying.

"Good. Now, I don't see what needs to be discussed. The ceremony is prepared, and both Princess Arissa and Princess Tomi will be presented to their people." I let my power flare slightly again. "Their people who, I'm certain, will welcome them with the enthusiasm and respect befitting princesses of Saturn."

"Of course, Your Majesty," Elder Theron said quickly. "Though perhaps... given Princess Arissa's unique situation... should representatives from TK-91 be invited?"

I exchanged a look with Hunter. It wasn't actually a terrible suggestion, though I wasn't about to tell them that.

"That decision has already been made," I said smoothly. "Everything concerning both ceremonies has been arranged. Unless the council has any other... concerns?" I emphasized the last word in a way that made it clear there better not be any.

The council members seemed to find their ornate robes particularly fascinating at that moment, none willing to meet my eyes.

"Excellent," I smiled, though it wasn't entirely friendly. "Then I believe we're done here. I'm sure you understand that after such a long journey, the King and I would like to spend time with our daughters."

"Of course, Your Majesty," Elder Mira practically jumped to her feet. "We look forward to the ceremony."

As the council filed out, I caught Celeste hiding a smile. She'd seen me handle the council like this enough times to know when they'd overstepped.

"Should we check on Arissa?" Hunter asked once we were alone. "Make sure she's not planning to elope with Young Arion to escape all this political nonsense?"

"Don't even joke about that," I warned, though I was fighting a smile myself. "Besides, we should probably check on Harley first. She's had unsupervised access to our training facilities this whole time."

Hunter's eyes widened slightly. "Good point."

We made our way to the training area, where we found Harley working with a staff - but not in any way I'd seen before. Purple lightning wrapped around the weapon, staying controlled as she moved through her forms. Her power signature was stronger, more focused than I'd ever felt it on Earth.

"Very nice," I said, genuinely impressed.

Harley stopped, grinning with pride. "Thanks. It's easier to control here somehow."

"It would be," I nodded. "Saturn is the source of our powers. Being here naturally enhances both your strength and control."

"That explains so much," Hunter said softly, and I could see the realization hitting him - why his own Thunder powers had always felt amplified on Saturn, even before we knew about his Starseed.

"Can I train here more often?" Harley asked, still maintaining the lightning around her staff with remarkable control.

"We'll try to visit more regularly," I promised.

"Really?" Her eyes lit up. "Can we-"

A crash from somewhere above us cut her off, followed by what sounded suspiciously like Thara yowling.

"What did your cat do now?" Hunter asked.

"Why do you assume it's Thara causing trouble?"

Another crash answered my question.

"Because she's your cat," Hunter smiled. "And apparently being Countess has gone to her head."

"I should probably-" I started, but Celeste's appearance in the doorway cut me off.

"Your Majesties," she looked slightly frazzled. "It seems Countess Thara has... taken issue with the royal kitchen staff's choice of fish."

"Of course she has," I sighed. "What exactly did she do?"

"She may have... knocked over several platters meant for tonight's dinner. And she's currently refusing to let anyone near the fresh salmon that just arrived from Earth."

"Earth salmon?" Hunter raised an eyebrow. "You imported salmon just for our cat?"

"Countess Thara has very specific tastes," Celeste said diplomatically.

"More like very specific attitudes," Harley muttered, though she was fighting a smile.

"I'll handle her," I said. "Though perhaps we should discuss why my cat has apparently been given authority over the kitchen staff?"

Celeste looked slightly guilty. "She can be very... persuasive, Your Majesty."

I shook my head, “She can eat food from Saturn like we do when we visit. She doesn’t need anything imported from Earth.”

I shook my head, "She can eat food from Saturn like we do when we visit. She doesn't need anything imported from Earth."

"Try telling her that," Celeste muttered, then quickly composed herself. "I mean, of course, Your Majesty."

Another crash echoed from above, followed by what sounded like several kitchen staff members pleading in Saturnian.

"Perhaps we should rescue them before Countess Thara stages a complete coup of the kitchen," Hunter suggested dryly.

"I'm coming too," Harley announced. "I want to see this."

"No, you stay here and practice," I said firmly. "That lightning control is impressive, and you should work on it while you can. Besides..." I glanced at Hunter. "We should probably check on your sister after we deal with Thara."

"Which one?" Harley asked innocently.

"The one currently touring the stables with Young Arion," Hunter's voice carried that edge again.

"Oh, that sister," Harley grinned. "The one with a crush on-"

"Training," I cut her off quickly. "Focus on your training."

We left Harley to her practice and headed toward the kitchens, where we found exactly the chaos you'd expect when a privileged Earth cat meets overly accommodating Saturnian staff. Thara sat regally atop a counter, several fish laid out before her like offerings, while kitchen staff hovered anxiously nearby.

"Countess Thara," I used my queen voice. "Off the counter. Now."

My cat had the audacity to look offended, as if I was the one being unreasonable.

"Don't give me that look," I said firmly. "You are a guest here, just like the rest of us. You will eat what is served and behave with proper dignity."

Thara's tail twitched in what might have been agreement. Or defiance. With her, it was sometimes hard to tell.

"Your Majesty," one of the kitchen staff stepped forward nervously. "We only wished to ensure the Countess was comfortable..."

"By letting her terrorize you?" Hunter asked, though I could hear him fighting amusement.

I lifted Thara up and held her, "Baby girl, you have to be nice."

She gave me her most innocent look - the one that had never fooled me, even on Earth. Here on Saturn, where she knew she had status, it was even less convincing.

"Your Majesty," another kitchen staff member ventured. "Perhaps we could prepare both Saturnian and Earth dishes for the Countess?"

"No," I said firmly, though I scratched behind Thara's ears to soften the blow. "The Countess will eat what everyone else eats. She's perfectly capable of enjoying Saturnian cuisine."

Thara's disgruntled meow suggested she disagreed with this assessment.

"Don't argue," I told her. "You're a royal cat. Act like it."

Her tail twitched imperiously, but she settled more comfortably in my arms. Sometimes being direct was the only way to handle her diva tendencies.

I sighed and headed toward my office, Thara still cradled against me.

"But Arissa..." Hunter started, glancing back toward the stables.

"...will be fine," I said firmly. "We have work to do." I settled behind my ornate desk, Thara immediately claiming her spot in my lap like this was just another day at the office. "Sir Arion is with them, and we need to review the situation on TK-91 before we visit."

The mention of our next destination sobered Hunter. We both knew that presenting Arissa to Saturn's people would be the easy part. TK-91 was another matter entirely - a war-torn planet still healing from centuries of conflict.

"According to Valeria, sentiment toward Saturn and Nemesis has softened considerably since the rebuilding began," I said, absently stroking Thara. "Bellona's forces have managed to keep the remaining rebels contained with minimal support from either us or Nemesis." I was grateful for both women - Valeria's diplomatic skills rivaled Celeste's, while Bellona had proven as capable a military leader as Arion.

"And the rebuilding itself?" Hunter leaned against my desk.

"Remarkable progress. They've restored their education systems, reintroduced arts and culture. Mia says the physical transformation in the past year alone is stunning." I smiled, remembering my last conversation with the Queen of Death. "It's beginning to look like a civilized world again. Still developing, still healing, but finally moving beyond mere survival and warfare."

"And how do you think Arissa will handle seeing it?" Hunter asked quietly. "She hasn't been back since Mia got her out."

We both fell silent for a moment, remembering. Finding out Hunter was Arissa's birth father had changed everything for her. But she'd never seen TK-91 as anything but a war zone.

"She needs to see it," I said finally. "See how her people are healing, rebuilding. She needs to understand both sides of her heritage."

"I just worry..." Hunter trailed off.

"I know. But she's ready. And she'll have both of us with her this time."

Thara purred in my lap, as if adding her own reassurance. Sometimes I wondered how much she actually understood about all of this.

"Valeria sent the latest reports," I pulled up the holographic display. "They've made remarkable progress in The Crimson Forum since Aria's defeat. The palace has been completely redesigned - removing all traces of her influence."

Hunter studied the images. Though he'd never been to TK-91, this was still his daughter's birthright - a world that had known her as their princess her entire life, until Mia helped free her from Aria's control.

"The people are anxious to see her again," I added softly. "To see how their princess has flourished away from Aria's influence. Many see it as a sign of their own potential for change."

"And those still loyal to Aria?"

"Are being closely monitored by Bellona's forces."

"And their feelings about me being their King? About being tied to Saturn?"

"Most remain loyal to Arissa, and by extension, to you as her father," I explained. "There's still some understandable hesitation about trusting Saturn, given our history, but they can't deny how our forces have helped with the rebuilding." I scrolled through more of Valeria's reports. "The Aria loyalists are the only real concern, and they're being watched carefully."

"Sometimes it still feels surreal," Hunter said quietly. "That one drunken night with Lilianna led to all of this. That Aria raised my daughter to hate everything about Saturn, about us..."

"But we got her out," I reminded him gently. "Thanks to Mia. And now she has both worlds - her birthright on TK-91 and her Sataurian heritage from you. She's living proof that these planets can move beyond their old hatred."

"Speaking of moving beyond hatred," Hunter glanced at the reports, "how is Young Arion handling the fact that he's falling for a princess of TK-91?"

"According to his father, he doesn't care about any of that. He just sees Arissa." I smiled. "Though I suppose that's what happens when you raise the next generation without all our old prejudices."

"Unlike the council," Hunter muttered.

"The council can adapt or they can watch their influence continue to diminish," I said firmly. "Times are changing. Our daughters are proof of that."

A knock at the door interrupted us. Celeste appeared, looking slightly anxious. "Your Majesties? The unicorns... it seems Princess Arissa has inherited your gift with them."

"Of course she has," I couldn't help but smile. "What exactly happened?"

"The royal herd... they're responding to her like they do to you. Even the more temperamental ones." Celeste paused. "And Young Arion appears quite impressed."

Hunter's expression darkened slightly. "Impressed by my daughter or by the unicorns?"

"Both, I imagine," I said, standing up. Thara made a disgruntled sound at being disturbed from her comfortable position. "We should probably go see this for ourselves."

"And make sure there's appropriate supervision," Hunter added.

"Sir Arion is still with them," Celeste assured him quickly.

"Yes, because he's been so helpful in discouraging his son's interest," Hunter muttered as we headed toward the stables.

"Hunter, they are teenagers, and you have to admit Arion is better than Jake," I said as we walked. "At least Arion is her age."

The mention of Jake and Harley's situation made Hunter pause. "Fine. You have a point. But I still don't have to like it."

As we approached the stables, we could hear the distinctive sound of unicorn hooves on stone, accompanied by Arissa's delighted laughter - a sound we didn't hear often enough from our usually reserved daughter.

"When was the last time you heard her laugh like that?" I asked Hunter softly.

He sighed in defeat. "I know, I know. Just... let me be an overprotective father for a little longer. I missed twelve years of it, after all."

We rounded the corner to find Arissa in the center of the royal paddock, surrounded by unicorns. Their silver and gold horns caught the light as they crowded around her, seeking her attention. Even the notoriously temperamental lead stallion, Thunder Storm, had his head bowed to her.

Young Arion stood at a respectful distance, watching with undisguised awe as Arissa stroked Thunder Storm's neck - something the unicorn usually only allowed me to do.

"She's a natural," Sir Arion said quietly as we approached. "Just like you, Your Majesty."

"The Saturn power calls to them," I explained, though I couldn't hide my pride. "And they recognize their princess."

"Both their princesses," Hunter corrected softly, and I could hear the mix of emotions in his voice - pride, love, and that lingering guilt over the years he hadn't known about her.

After spending some time watching Arissa with the unicorns, we headed back inside to check on Tomi. We found our youngest had already been tended to by the palace staff - cleaned, changed, and ready for play.

"Why did they change her diaper?" Hunter frowned.

"Because that's what palace staff does?" I couldn't help but smile at his discomfort with royal service.

Hunter sighed, scooping up Tomi. We made our way to the main hall - what would be a living room in a normal house, if anything about a palace could be considered normal. As soon as we set Tomi down to play, Thara made her grand entrance, strutting in as if she'd been born to palace life.

"Your cat has no trouble with royal life," Hunter observed dryly.

I laughed. "No, she was definitely born for this."

Tomi squealed with delight as Thara circled her protectively - my cat might be a diva, but she took her role as royal guardian seriously when it came to the baby. The staff had already arranged Tomi's favorite toys in a semicircle, though she seemed more interested in trying to catch Thara's tail.

"Your Majesties," Celeste appeared in the doorway. "The ceremonial gowns for the princesses have arrived. Would you like to review them?"

"Of course." I turned to Hunter. "Want to see what passes for formal wear on Saturn these days?"

"As long as it's appropriate for a thirteen-year-old," he said pointedly.

"Hunter, I'm not going to let them put our daughter in anything inappropriate." Though privately, I wondered how Arissa would react to Saturn's more elaborate style compared to TK-91's utilitarian fashion. "Besides, you should see what they've designed for Tomi."

On cue, Tomi looked up at her name, babbling happily as she finally managed to grab Thara's tail.

Thara hissed halfheartedly before gracefully extracting herself from the baby's grip, settling nearby to watch as Celeste brought in the ceremonial gowns. My breath caught at the sight - Tomi and Harley's dresses in purple and silver, perfectly matching my normal color scheme, while Arissa's crimson and gold gown beautifully represented both her parents.

"These are beautiful," I said softly, running my fingers over the intricate fabrics.

"Thank you, Your Majesty." Celeste's pride was evident. "I supervised the designs personally. Princess Harley's tiara is ready, along with your crown and the King's." She carefully opened another box. "And I had these made - a tiara for Princess Arissa, and a smaller one for Princess Tomi, though we'll need to resize it as she grows."

Hunter picked up Arissa's tiara, studying the intricate design. "The crimson stones..."

"Traditional Saturn royal colors," I smiled. "The crimson stones match her energy signature perfectly."

"And the purple in Harley's matches yours," he noted, examining our middle daughter's tiara.

"A perfect blend of both our Saturn powers," I agreed. "Though I suspect Tomi will end up with both."

"Should we call the girls in to try everything on?" Celeste asked.

"Better make sure Young Arion is nowhere near when Arissa sees herself in that gown," Hunter muttered.

"I'll send for the princesses," Celeste offered, but before she could leave, we heard Harley's voice in the corridor.

"You have to see what I can do with the lightning now!" she was saying excitedly. "The control here is amazing!"

Arissa and Harley appeared in the doorway, both slightly windblown from training. They stopped short at the sight of the gowns.

"Is that..." Arissa's voice trailed off as she approached her crimson gown, fingers hovering over the fabric almost reverently.

"Your ceremonial gown for the presentation," I confirmed. "For both ceremonies, actually. The design will work for both Saturn and TK-91."

"It's beautiful," she whispered, and I caught a glimpse of the girl beneath her usual reserved demeanor.

"Whoa," Harley moved to examine her own gown. "We're going to look like actual princesses."

"You are actual princesses," Hunter reminded them, though he was smiling.

"Yeah, but this is like... fairy tale princess stuff," Harley gestured at the gowns. "Not just Ranger princess stuff."

"Can we try them on?" Arissa asked quietly, still transfixed by her gown.

"Of course," I nodded to Celeste, who called in the ladies' maids. "And wait until you see your tiaras."

"Tiaras?" both girls spoke at once, though with very different tones - Harley's excited, Arissa's almost nervous.

Tomi, not wanting to be left out, toddled over to investigate all the excitement. She reached for the hem of Arissa's future gown, babbling "Pretty!" - one of her favorite words lately.

"Yes, even Tomi has one," I smiled, watching our youngest. "Though hers might spend more time in its box than on her head for a while."

"At least until she stops trying to eat everything sparkly," Hunter added, swooping in to catch her before she could put the dress in her mouth.

"Pretty!" Tomi insisted, reaching toward the gowns from Hunter's arms.

"Yes, baby girl, very pretty," I agreed. "And you'll look beautiful in yours."

"Mama pretty!" she declared, pointing at my crown which Celeste had just unveiled alongside the other royal headpieces.

"The crimson stones..." Harley studied her sister's tiara thoughtfully. "They match your Ranger color perfectly, Arissa."

Arissa smiled, touching the gems. "And the purple in yours matches your Violet Ranger power." She picked up her tiara carefully. "It's like they designed them specifically for the Crimson and Violet Thunder Rangers."

The girls disappeared with the ladies' maids to try on their gowns. When they returned, the transformation took my breath away. Arissa stood tall in her crimson and gold gown, looking every inch the princess of two worlds, while Harley - who usually preferred training gear to anything formal - twirled in her purple and silver dress, clearly delighting in the way it moved.

"Pretty!" Tomi clapped from Hunter's arms, trying to reach for her sisters.

"Very pretty," Hunter agreed softly, and I could hear the mix of pride and protectiveness in his voice.

"Now we just need to make sure Young Arion doesn't see Arissa in this until the ceremony," I whispered to him, watching our eldest daughter examine her reflection with shy wonder.

"Don't remind me," he muttered back.

After the girls changed back into their regular clothes, we made our way to the dining room. The palace staff had set the formal table, though I'd insisted on keeping it relatively casual for this first family dinner.

"OK, so... I've never had Saturnian food," Arissa admitted as we settled in.

The royal chef appeared, presenting the first course with a flourish. "We're beginning with Caelum Soup, Your Highness. It's very nutrient rich."

Arissa took a careful spoonful, considering the taste. "OK... not bad."

"It's... different," Harley added diplomatically, though I could tell she was missing Trevor's cooking.

I watched Tomi happily dive into hers - at least one of our daughters seemed to have no trouble adapting to Saturnian cuisine. Though knowing Tomi, she'd probably try to share it with Thara.

"The main course will be more familiar," I assured the girls. "The kitchen has been experimenting with combining Earth and Saturnian ingredients."

"Is that why Thara was terrorizing them earlier?" Harley asked innocently.

"Your cat is quite... particular about the kitchen staff's choices," Celeste said diplomatically from her position near the door.

"Countess Thara has opinions about everything," Hunter added dryly.

As if summoned by her title, Thara sauntered into the dining room, taking up her usual position near my chair. The kitchen staff immediately appeared with a special plate for her.

"And this is why she's impossible at home," Hunter sighed. "She gets spoiled here and expects the same treatment on Earth."

"She is not," I defended my cat. "She's a baby and she should be catered to like one. Especially after dealing with Amber for a week. Right baby girl? Yeah." I reached down to scratch behind Thara's ears as she ate delicately from her crystal dish.

"Mom," Harley rolled her eyes. "She's literally eating off of crystal while we're using the regular royal plates."

"The Countess has specific preferences," Celeste interjected, though I caught her hiding a smile.

"The Countess is spoiled," Hunter muttered.

"Says the man who lets her sleep on his pillow at home," I pointed out.

"That's different. She threatens me with her claws if I don't."

"And you wonder where Tomi gets her dramatic tendencies from," Arissa said quietly, surprising us all with her gentle teasing.

"Hey!" Hunter protested, but he was smiling. These moments when Arissa felt comfortable enough to joke with us were precious.

The main course arrived - a fusion of Earth and Saturnian cuisine that actually looked appetizing. Even Harley seemed more enthusiastic about this dish.

"After dinner," Celeste spoke up, "we should review the ceremony protocols. Particularly the formal entrances and-"

"Can we do that tomorrow?" I interrupted, seeing both girls tense at the mention of formal procedures. "Tonight's just for family."

"Of course, Your Majesty," Celeste bowed slightly. "Though perhaps we should at least discuss the schedule for tomorrow? The council has requested-"

"The council can wait," Hunter said firmly, clearly remembering their earlier comments about Arissa.

I looked at Celeste, fighting a smile. "Tell the council that their queen has respectfully stated for them to fuck right off."

Harley choked on her drink while Arissa tried to hide her grin. Even Celeste's usually perfect composure cracked slightly.

"Perhaps," she managed, "I could phrase that more... diplomatically?"

"Where's the fun in that?" I asked innocently. "Though I suppose you could say 'The royal family is taking this evening to acclimate to being home.'"

"Much better, Your Majesty," Celeste nodded, though her eyes sparkled with amusement. "I'll inform them immediately."

"And that's why you handle the diplomatic communications," Hunter noted dryly.

Usually," I agreed. "Though sometimes the direct approach has its merits."

After dinner, Harley headed back to the training grounds - probably to work more on her lightning control - while Arissa disappeared toward the library, though I suspected she might end up in the gardens where a certain young guard's son liked to practice his powers.

Hunter and I took Tomi out to the stables. Our youngest squealed with delight at her first sight of the unicorns, their horns catching the evening light.

"Horsie!" she pointed excitedly.

"Special horsies," I corrected gently, approaching Thunder Storm. The lead stallion lowered his head in greeting, surprisingly gentle as Tomi reached out to touch his nose.

"She's not afraid at all," Hunter observed, keeping a protective hand on her back.

"Saturn power," I smiled. "She recognizes them, and they recognize her."

I smiled as my youngest daughter experienced unicorns for the first time.

Arissa

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I found Arion alone in the gardens, thankfully without his father hovering nearby.

"Hello," I smiled.

"Hello Princess," he jumped to his feet, bowing formally.

"Please, we're alone. You don't need to be so formal." I felt my cheeks warm slightly. "And you can call me Arissa. Or even Riss. That's what my family and friends call me, and we're friends."

He sat back down, a shy smile crossing his face. "OK... Arissa."

I settled beside him, remembering when we first met on Nemesis while his father was monitoring my deprogramming from Aunt Aria's influence. Arion had been the first person my age I'd ever met, my first real friend. Even after I went to Earth, we stayed in touch. At first, I kept our correspondence secret because I wasn't sure I could trust my new family, but later... later it became something precious I wanted to keep for myself.

Now, sitting here with him, I had to admit what I'd been feeling for a while - I might be falling in love with him.

"The gardens are beautiful at night," Arion said softly. "Though not as beautiful as you looked in your ceremonial gown earlier."

I felt my face heat up. "You saw that?"

"Just for a moment, through the window," he admitted. "I wasn't spying, I promise! I was just... passing by."

"Right," I smiled. "Just happening to pass by the exact window at the exact right moment?"

"Pure coincidence," he insisted, though his grin suggested otherwise. "Though I should probably avoid any more coincidences. Your father seems... less than pleased with me."

"He's just being protective," I said. "And after everything with Harley and Jake..."

"The married guy?" Arion's face scrunched in disgust. "That's different. I would never..."

He trailed off, realizing what he was implying about his intentions toward me.

"Never what?" I asked softly, my heart beating faster.

"I would never hurt you," he said finally, his eyes meeting mine. "Or make you uncomfortable. Or do anything to make your parents not trust me."
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"I know," I said, and I did. Arion was nothing like the calculating, manipulative people I'd grown up around on TK-91. He was genuine, honest.

"Are you nervous? About the ceremonies?" he asked, changing the subject.

"A little," I admitted. "Saturn is... very different from TK-91. All these formal protocols and ceremonies. Back there, everything was about warfare and training."

"But you're handling it perfectly," he said. "The way you were with the unicorns earlier... it was amazing. Like you were born for both worlds."

"Maybe I was," I said quietly. "Dad's heritage... maybe this is exactly where I'm supposed to be."

"You are..." Arion's voice was soft as he reached up, gently brushing my hair back from my face. My heart raced - I'd never been kissed before, but in that moment, I wanted nothing more than for him to be my first. I leaned in slightly, encouraging him, and he slowly brought his lips to mine. The kiss was gentle, sweet, and perfect. I might not have had anything to compare it to, but somehow I knew this was special.

When we finally parted, his eyes searched mine anxiously. "I hope I didn't overstep..."

"You didn't," I assured him quickly. "I... I really liked that. Maybe we could... try it again?"

His second kiss was just as perfect as the first. I wrapped my arms around him, losing myself in the moment until-

"Seriously? Ew..." Harley's voice shattered our bubble.

Arion and I jumped apart like we'd been shocked. My face felt like it was on fire.

"Don't you have some lightning to practice with?" I asked, trying to sound annoyed instead of mortified.

"Oh, this is way more interesting," Harley grinned. "Wait till Dad finds out-"

"You wouldn't," I stood up quickly. "Harley, please."

She studied us for a moment, and I could see her thinking it over. "Fine. But only because you've been cool about the whole Jake thing."

"That's different," Arion spoke up. "At least we're the same age..."

"Wasn't asking you, lover boy," Harley smirked. "Though for what it's worth, Dad probably won't kill you. Probably."

"We weren't... it was just..." I fumbled for words, wondering if it was possible to die from embarrassment.

"Your first kiss?" Harley's teasing tone softened slightly. "Don't worry, your secret's safe with me. For now."

"Thank you," I managed, though her 'for now' was slightly concerning.

"But maybe find somewhere less obvious next time?" she suggested. "The royal gardens aren't exactly private."

Arion looked like he wanted to disappear. "I should probably go. My father will be looking for me."

"Yeah, and he's way scarier than our dad," Harley added helpfully.

"Not helping," I muttered, watching Arion retreat with as much dignity as he could manage.

Once he was gone, Harley turned to me with a gleam in her eye. "So... how was it?"

"I'm not discussing this with you," I said, trying to sound firm despite the smile I couldn't quite hide.

"Oh come on," Harley dropped onto the garden bench. "I need details. Was it magical? Did sparks fly? Did his powers literally make sparks fly?"

"Harley!"

"What? I'm just trying to be a supportive sister." Her grin turned mischievous. "Besides, it's nice to see you actually acting like a teenager for once."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"You're always so... controlled. Perfect princess, perfect student, perfect everything." She shrugged. "It's nice to see you doing normal teenage stuff. Even if it is with the son of Mom’s head guard."

I sat beside her, surprised by her insight. "I guess I'm not used to... normal teenage stuff."

"Well, you better get used to it. Because if Mom finds out about this, she's definitely going to want to have 'the talk' with you."

"Oh god," I groaned. "Please don't tell her either."

"You know they're gonna find out. Mom and Dad always find out," Harley said matter-of-factly.

I sighed, knowing she was right. "I guess I should tell Mom. She can handle Dad."

"That's the way I would go." Harley paused. "But also, is Arion your boyfriend now?"

"I... I don't know. Maybe?" I pulled my knees up to my chest. "We didn't get to talk about it because someone interrupted. But if he is... how do I tell Kira? I can't exactly tell her I have a boyfriend on Saturn."

"No, you can't," Harley nodded thoughtfully. "And if you tell her you have a boyfriend that lives far away and she can't meet him, it sounds like you're making him up..."

"But Kira's my best friend," I said quietly. "How do I just not tell her I have a boyfriend? That is... if he even is my boyfriend..."

The reality of our situation hit me hard. Being a princess of two planets was complicated enough. But trying to have a normal teenage relationship while keeping half my life secret from my best friend? That felt impossible.

"Maybe..." Harley started carefully, "maybe you could say he's from Australia? I mean, you lived there before, and lots of people have long-distance relationships these days."

"But then she'll want to video chat with him," I pointed out. "And how would I explain why he can never visit? Or why I can only see him at certain times?"

"Yeah, that could get messy." Harley flopped back on the bench. "Being a Ranger is hard enough to hide. Being a princess of two planets is like... next level secret identity stuff."

"At least we're in this together," I said. "Both of us hiding the whole princess thing."

"Yeah, try explaining to your friends why you disappear every time there's a monster attack," Harley sighed. "Or why you can't sleep over because you might have to go save the world."

"Or in my case, why you might have to go to another planet for a royal ceremony."

"That's both of us," Harley sighed. "It sucks. I think Kora and Kira would understand. I mean... assuming Kora is still my friend."

"She's really mad at you, isn't she?"

Harley nodded, pulling her knees up to her chest. "I was kinda mean to her about the Jake thing. Honestly, I don't know what came over me."

"Yeah, you've been different since Hawaii," I said carefully.

"Thinking about Jake just makes me so crazy." She stared at the garden flowers. "I think I really do love him."

"Maybe," I said gently. "But he doesn't love you. He loves his wife... and he's way too old for you. Just because Mom dated Jon... and you know everyone thinks that was a huge mistake. You need to try to move on."

"It's not that easy," Harley's voice was quiet. "But I will try."

"It's not that easy," Harley's voice was quiet. "But I will try."

"And maybe apologize to Kora?" I suggested. "She's your best friend."

"Yeah..." Harley looked thoughtful. "I miss her. And she was just trying to look out for me. I was just too obsessed with Jake to see it."

A flash of movement near the palace caught my eye - Arion, probably heading back to his quarters. Harley noticed too.

"So... are you going to tell Mom about your garden activities tonight?"

"Tomorrow," I decided. "After the ceremony stuff. She'll be less likely to freak out if everything goes well."

"Smart," Harley nodded. "Though you might want to watch the unicorns around Arion. They're total snitches - they'll tell Mom everything."

"They do not-" I started, then caught her grin. "Very funny."

Michelle

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After getting Tomi settled in her nursery, Hunter and I retreated to our royal quarters. I always felt at home here, even though we rarely visited. The spacious rooms were easily triple the size of our master suite on Earth, but I could feel Hunter's discomfort with the grandeur.

I climbed into bed beside him, leaning against his chest as his arm wrapped around me. "I know you're not loving this."

"I don't like the extravagance," he sighed. "It's not me. But I get that it comes with being king... which is still fucking weird. Me? A king?"

I pressed a kiss to his shoulder. "Yes, you are a king. And I know the pomp and circumstance isn't your thing, but you are a wonderful king."

"I try. I really do. I care about the people of Saturn."

"I know you do. So do I." I paused. "That's why I think we need to disband the royal council."

Hunter looked down at me sharply. "Seriously?"

"If you're on board, yeah. The whole idea is outdated and they refuse to let go of archaic traditions. Celeste and I handle things fine. They're in the way more than anything."

"Because of what they said about Arissa?" Hunter asked carefully.

"That's part of it," I admitted. "But it's more than that. They resist every change, every attempt to modernize. They're still living in the past, clinging to old prejudices against TK-91, still treating Earth like some primitive backwater..."

"Against their queen choosing an Earth husband," Hunter added dryly.

"Exactly. Ironic considering it turns out you have a Saturn Starseed anyway." I shifted to look at him. "And now they're trying to interfere with our daughters' lives. Questioning Arissa's loyalty, I don't like it. At all."

Hunter nodded slowly. "I'm on board, but you know they won't go quietly."

I smirked. "Oh yes they will. I have a plan. They can't out maneuver me."
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"Of course you do. Wanna let me in on it?"

"Nope, just play along when the time comes."

Hunter sighed, but he knew better than to argue. "Of course."

I turned off the light and curled into his arms. The purple glow from Saturn's atmosphere filtered softly through the windows, casting familiar shadows across our royal chambers. As I closed my eyes, I smiled to myself. Tomorrow I was going to shake up my kingdom for the better.

“Purple Skies Part 2”

The next morning dawned with Saturn's perpetual purple glow filtering through the palace windows. As we prepared for the presentation ceremony, I couldn't help but smile, knowing this would be a day Saturn would never forget - for more reasons than the council suspected.

I sat at my vanity, carefully applying my makeup while watching Hunter through the mirror as he wrestled Tomi into her ceremonial gown. He'd firmly refused any help from the palace staff, insisting on taking care of our youngest himself. Not that I could blame him - after missing so much of Arissa and Harley's early years, he treasured every moment with our daughters, even the challenging ones.

Of course, he had the luxury of time this morning. While I had to perfect my makeup, style my hair, and manage my elaborate gown and crown, his preparation consisted of brushing his hair and donning his formal suit - black pants and a crimson jacket, classic king attire. The crown he'd have to wear was currently sitting on its cushion, being studiously ignored. Three years of being king, and he still hated that particular symbol of royalty.

"No, Tomi," Hunter's voice carried that mix of patience and exasperation unique to parents of toddlers. "The tiara stays on."

"No hat!" our youngest protested, reaching up to grab at her new crown.

"It's not a hat, princess. It's a very special-" He caught my amused look in the mirror. "A little help here?"

"Tomi," I turned from my vanity. "Look at Mama's crown. Pretty?"

"Pretty!" she agreed enthusiastically.

"Want to match Mama?"

She considered this seriously, then nodded. "Match Mama."

"And that's why you're the queen," Hunter said as Tomi finally allowed him to adjust her tiara.

"The girls seemed quiet at breakfast," I commented, returning to my makeup. Both Arissa and Harley had been unusually subdued during the morning meal before heading off to get ready.

"Probably nervous about the ceremony," Hunter suggested, though I caught the slight worry in his voice. "The ladies' maids will help them with their gowns."

I nodded, though I suspected there might be more to our daughters' behavior than just ceremony jitters.

With hair and makeup finally perfect, I slipped into my gown - a flowing purple creation that never failed to make me feel like the queen I was. The cape attached with intricate silver ornamentation, completing my favorite royal ensemble. After securing my heels and settling my crown in place, I turned to Hunter.

"How do I look?"

His expression made me feel like the most beautiful woman in any galaxy. "Absolutely beautiful. You're breathtaking, baby."

"Good." I smiled, gesturing to his crown still sitting on its cushion. "Now put yours on and let's do this."

Hunter sighed but complied, and we headed to collect our daughters. They were waiting in the formal receiving room, both looking stunning in their ceremonial gowns - Arissa in crimson and gold, Harley in purple and silver, both carrying themselves with a grace that made my heart swell with pride.

Hunter held Tomi, who managed to look both regal and adorable in her tiny formal gown, her tiara miraculously still in place.

"The crowd has gathered, Your Majesties," Celeste announced.

"The area is secure. We can begin," Sir Arion confirmed.

I nodded. "Wonderful."

Celeste led us toward the balcony, Sir Arion following close behind. The council members were already in position, their formal robes marking them as the old guard they were. We waited just inside while Celeste made the formal announcement.

"Presenting Her Royal Highness, Princess Harlyn, and Their Majesties, Queen Michelle and King Hunter."

We stepped onto the balcony, greeting the cheering crowds with practiced waves. I stepped forward to address my people.

"It is a joy to join you here today. This moment has been long in coming. As you know, you have two new princesses to welcome - one who signals the end of a long and painful chapter in our planet's history, and another who represents our might and future. I am proud to present Princess Arissa of TK-91, Nemesis, and now Saturn, and Princess Tatum of Saturn."

Arissa stepped forward with Tomi in her arms, both princesses drawing delighted cheers from the gathered crowd.

"Princess Arissa," I continued, my voice carrying across the square, "represents a new era of peace and unity between Saturn and TK-91. Her powers, inherited from her father, King Hunter, combined with her birthright as TK-91's princess, make her uniquely suited to bridge our worlds."

I could see the council members shifting uncomfortably at this direct acknowledgment of our alliance with our former enemies. Good.

"And Princess Tatum," I smiled at my youngest, who was surprisingly well-behaved in her sister's arms, "born of Lightning and Thunder power, represents the strength of our future."

The crowd's enthusiasm was genuine - they loved their princesses, regardless of what the council thought. It was time for the next phase of my plan.

"Which is why," I continued, my voice taking on an edge that made Hunter glance at me sharply, "it's time for some changes in how Saturn is governed."

I turned slightly to face the council members before addressing the crowd again. "For too long, Saturn has remained stagnant, bound by traditions that no longer serve our people. As your Queen, I have worked to lead us forward, to embrace change and growth. It is in that spirit that I make this announcement."

I paused, letting the tension build. "The royal council served an important purpose before I awakened and regained my memories. However, it has become clear that this institution has become outdated, resistant to progress, clinging to traditions simply for tradition's sake. Therefore, as of today, I am formally dissolving the royal council."

The gasps from the council members were audible, but I continued firmly. "Henceforth, Saturn will be governed by myself and King Hunter, with the counsel of our trusted advisor Celeste and a new team of royal advisors who understand our changing times."

The council members erupted in protests, exactly as I'd expected. Elder Theron stepped forward, his face red with indignation. "Your Majesty, you cannot-"

"I can and I have," I cut him off, my voice carrying the full weight of royal authority. "Your positions were always at the pleasure of the crown. That pleasure has ended."

"The people won't stand for this!" Elder Mira declared.

The crowd's continued cheering suggested otherwise. They'd long since grown tired of the council's resistance to progress.

"Guards," I said calmly. "Please escort the former council members from the palace grounds. Their personal effects will be delivered to them."

Sir Arion's men moved forward smoothly. I caught Celeste hiding a satisfied smile as the council was led away, their protests fading into the crowd's approval.

"My people," I addressed the crowd again. "This is a day of new beginnings. Not just for our princesses, but for all of Saturn. We will maintain our proud heritage while embracing progress, fostering peace with our neighbors, and building a better future for all our children."

I gestured to my daughters - Arissa still holding Tomi, Harley standing tall beside them. "Look at your princesses. They represent everything we can become when we let go of old prejudices and

embrace change. The strength of Thunder power united with Lightning. The promise of peace with TK-91. The future standing right before us."

The cheers grew louder. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Hunter trying not to smile - he hadn't known exactly what I'd planned, but he clearly approved.

"And now," I smiled, "let us celebrate our princesses and our future."

Hunter stepped forward. Though he hated public speaking, he carried himself with quiet authority as he addressed the crowd. "I want to thank you all for welcoming Princess Arissa so enthusiastically." His voice grew stronger as he continued, "I am proud to stand here with my family today as we lead Saturn into a new era. Our beautiful Queen Michelle has only ever guided Saturn with your best interests in mind, and your trust in her is valued. Know that we will strive to earn that trust daily and not let you down."

The sincerity in his voice touched something in the crowd - they might love my dramatic flair, but they respected Hunter's straightforward honesty. The cheers that followed were, if possible, even louder than before.

We concluded the formal presentation, and as we turned to head back inside, I caught sight of Young Arion among his father's guards. His eyes were fixed on Arissa, who was still holding Tomi but somehow managing to look both regal and shy under his gaze.

"Your Majesty," Celeste approached as we entered. "The celebration feast is prepared, and the guests are assembling in the great hall."

"Including several young noble families," Sir Arion added meaningfully, glancing at his son.

"How convenient," Hunter muttered, but I squeezed his hand.

"It's a celebration," I reminded him quietly. "Let them celebrate."

"As long as they celebrate at appropriate distances from each other," he replied, though I could tell his heart wasn't really in the protest anymore.

Arissa handed Tomi to Celeste for her nap while we made our way to the banquet hall. The scene before us put every Earth gala I'd ever attended to shame - and I'd been to plenty. Sometimes it still struck me as surreal that I wasn't just celebrity royalty anymore, but actual, legitimate royalty. Though watching the way people vied for our attention, I had to admit there wasn't much difference between Hollywood and Saturn when it came to social politics.

Hunter and I worked the room, greeting nobles and dignitaries with practiced ease. Finally, we made our way to the dance floor for the traditional first dance. As we moved together, all eyes on us, he pulled me close.

"You are stunning," he whispered. "And you were amazing out there. I can't believe you dissolved the council so publicly. That was impressive."

"I figured they couldn't argue if I did it in front of everyone," I smiled. "Public opinion has been against them for a while. They just didn't want to see it."

"Even Celeste looked surprised."

"Good. The fewer people who knew, the less chance the council would catch wind of it." I watched as our advisor efficiently directed the staff, already adapting to the new order of things. "Though I think she's pleased with the outcome."

The music changed, and other couples joined us on the dance floor. I noticed Arissa trying to maintain a polite distance from Young Arion while still clearly wanting to dance with him.

"Don't," Hunter warned, following my gaze.

"I didn't say anything."

"You were thinking it. That look always means trouble."

"Fine," I conceded.

"So, new advisors?" Hunter raised an eyebrow.

"Yeah, I kind of made that up on the spot," I admitted. "I have no idea what it looks like yet. Figure I'll let Celeste bring in a couple of advisors she trusts. Keep it more informal."

"You know some people will think we hold too much power," Hunter said carefully.

I couldn't help but laugh. "That's your Earth perspective showing. Hunter, a unified planetary government with advisors is standard on most worlds. No divided territories, no competing government structures. Earth's system is the messy one. They'll figure it out eventually."

"What stops any planet from falling under a dictator?"

"We keep each other in check," I explained. "If Queen Lita started ruling Jupiter with an iron fist, she'd violate the intergalactic alliance code, and the rest of us would hold her accountable. You still have a lot to learn about intergalactic politics, my king."

"It would seem so," Hunter smiled, pulling me closer for a kiss.

The moment was interrupted by a commotion near the refreshment tables. I turned to see Thara, somehow having escaped her royal quarters, perched regally atop the dessert display while several staff members tried unsuccessfully to coax her down.

"Your cat," Hunter sighed.

"Countess Thara," I corrected with a smile. "And she's just maintaining her dignity."

"By terrorizing the kitchen staff? Again?"

"She's making a political statement about the quality of her dinner," I said, watching as my cat delicately selected a cream puff. "I should probably..."

"Go handle your cat before she starts a galactic incident?"

"Hey, she outranks most of the people in this room now that the council's gone," I teased, making my way toward the chaos. Behind me, I heard Hunter mutter something about 'impossible women' that definitely included both me and Thara.

I scooped up my cat, who managed to look both regal and unrepentant. "Baby, this party isn't for you. Celeste, please see that the Countess is returned to her quarters."

"Right away, Your Majesty," Celeste accepted the cat, who had somehow maintained possession of her cream puff.

Returning to the celebration, I took in the scene - Harley confidently working the room like she'd been born to do it, while Arissa... was dancing with Young Arion. The look on Hunter's face suggested he was contemplating how to make the young guard's son disappear without causing a diplomatic incident.

I rushed back to my husband's side. "Don't."

Hunter sighed heavily. "Fine," he conceded, though his eyes held a glimmer of pride at how the ceremony had gone.

As the last guests departed and the palace quieted, our family retreated to our private quarters. The formal attire that had marked us as Saturn's royal family gave way to more comfortable clothes - I traded my elaborate gown for jean shorts and an oversized sweatshirt while Hunter slipped into his favorite worn jeans and a crimson t-shirt. Tomi had already been changed into a purple sundress.

We gathered in the living room, the formal atmosphere of the day melting away. Harley bounded in wearing jeans and her favorite hockey jersey, her entire demeanor shifting back to the energetic teenager I knew so well. The transformation from princess to tomboy was striking - and welcome. A few minutes later, Arissa joined us in a casual skater dress, her quiet grace present even in relaxed clothing.

"Dad," Harley fidgeted, practically vibrating with contained energy, "I've been stuck in that stuffy dress all day. Can we hit the training grounds?" The familiar spark in her eyes was back - this was my Harley, not the lovesick girl mooning over Jake.

"Of course," Hunter said, carefully transferring Tomi to my arms. I caught the subtle softening in his expression - seeing Harley like this, eager to train rather than chase after an impossible crush, brought back echoes of the Harley we knew. When she'd been his 'son' in all but biology.

I watched them head toward the training grounds, grateful to see Harley so enthusiastic about something other than Jake. Once they were gone, I settled more comfortably on the plush sofa with Tomi, who was contentedly playing with the hem of her purple sundress. Arissa lingered, fidgeting with the edge of her skater dress in a way that instantly caught my attention - my usually composed daughter only fidgeted when something was on her mind.

"Everything okay, baby?" I asked casually, not wanting to pressure her.

Arissa sat beside me, her cheeks flushing slightly. "Mom... can I tell you something? But you have to promise not to freak out. Or tell Dad. Especially not tell Dad."

My heart skipped a beat, but I kept my voice steady. "Of course. You can tell me anything."

"I... well..." she twisted her hands in her lap. "Arion and I... we kind of... kissed. In the garden. Earlier." Her voice dropped to barely a whisper. "It was my first kiss."

"How do you feel about Arion?" I asked gently, watching her face.

"I like him... a lot." Arissa's usual composure wavered, her voice soft with wonder. "Mom, I think I might be falling in love with him. I've read about it, studied the physiological responses, but this feels different. More. Is that what love is?"

My throat tightened with emotion. My eldest daughter, who'd been denied so much growing up on TK-91 - music, affection, normal teenage experiences - was discovering love for the first time. The weight of that trust, of her sharing this moment with me, made my eyes sting.

"Those feelings are intense, aren't they?" I kept my voice soft. "And maybe it is love. Maybe it's the beginning of love. What matters is that it's real to you. Tell me about the kiss?"

"Amazing," Arissa breathed, falling back against the sofa with uncharacteristic abandon. "Mom, I never knew anything could feel like that. Like everything just... made sense."

I couldn't help but laugh warmly at her expression - so like mine had been after my first real kiss. "That sounds exactly right. But sweetheart, we should talk about the practical side too. You're on Earth, he's here on Saturn..."

Arissa's smile dimmed slightly. "I know. We haven't really talked about what we are or how we'd make it work, but..." she sat up straighter, that familiar determination in her eyes, "I want to try."

"Then you two need to have that conversation," I said. "Figure out what you both want and how you might achieve it."

"Do you have any advice?" The vulnerability in her question reminded me just how young she still was, despite her maturity.

"Actually, I do," I shifted Tomi in my lap. "Your dad and I make it work with me filming in Nashville while you're all in Ballincollig. Sure, Saturn's a bit further than Tennessee," I smiled at her soft laugh, "but the principles are the same. We talk every day, even if it's just for fifteen minutes between scenes. We make time for visits. We prioritize our connection."

"But how do you handle missing him?" Arissa asked, her usual composure slipping. "Even thinking about going back to Earth makes my chest hurt."

"That never really gets easier," I admitted, watching Tomi play with her dress. "But you find ways to make it work. Video calls help, though the time difference between Saturn and Earth is tricky. And being a princess of both Saturn and TK-91 means you'll have legitimate reasons to visit."

"Dad's going to freak out, isn't he?"

"Probably," I smiled. "Though at least you picked someone age-appropriate, unlike your sister's current situation."

"Mom," Arissa's voice got quieter. "Harley caught us. In the garden. She promised not to tell Dad, but..."

"But your sister isn't exactly known for her subtlety," I finished. "Maybe it's better if you tell him yourself. Before he finds out some other way."

"How?" She looked genuinely nervous - a rare expression for my usually confident daughter.

"Well, definitely not while he's training with Harley. He's already on edge about the Jake situation. Let him calm down first."

"Will you tell him?" The plea in her voice was so unlike my usually confident daughter. Battle-trained Arissa, who never backed down from a fight, was actually nervous.

"Of course I will," I assured her. "Though you know your father - he'll want to have a conversation with you after."

"I know," she sighed. "But at least he'll have time to process it first. And you can handle his... initial reaction."

"You mean stop him from threatening Young Arion with exile to Triforia?" I teased, trying to lighten her mood.

Arissa reached for Tomi, who went happily into her sister's arms. "What do you think, Marshmallow? Should we be worried about Dad?"

"Ba ba ba!" Tomi babbled enthusiastically, making us both laugh.

"See? Tomi's not worried," I smiled, watching my daughters together. The contrast still struck me sometimes - Arissa, who'd once been TK-91's perfect soldier, now so naturally gentle with her baby sister.

"Ri Ri!" Tomi snuggled closer to Arissa, her latest attempt at her sister's name making us both smile. At seventeen months, she was right on the edge of that language explosion I remembered from Harley.

"Love you too, Marshmallow," Arissa pressed a kiss to Tomi's head.

A tentative knock at the door interrupted the moment.

"Enter," I called, already suspecting who it might be.

Young Arion appeared in the doorway, looking equal parts nervous and determined. "Your Majesty, I apologize for the interruption, but..." his eyes found Arissa's, "might I speak with Princess Arissa?"

I headed to the kitchen with Tomi in my arms and Thara trotting eagerly ahead. Celeste was there, deep in conversation with Chef Nova about tomorrow's menu.

"The princess and countess need snacks," I announced, including Thara since she certainly thought of herself as royalty.

Nova nodded immediately, already moving to prepare something. "Right away, Your Majesty."

We settled in the dining room, Celeste joining us with that knowing look she'd perfected over years of palace service. "Sir Arion mentioned the garden incident," she said carefully. "Apparently it was Young Arion's first kiss."

"Arissa's too," I confirmed, watching Tomi bounce excitedly as Nova appeared with a plate of Solis Cakes - sweet, purple-tinted pastries that had become a palace favorite. Thara's fish arrived simultaneously, served on her crystal dish because of course it was. "She's completely smitten."

"As is he," Celeste observed as Nova bowed and disappeared. "His father says he's been practicing his forms twice as long since meeting her. Trying to impress her, I suspect."

I broke a Solis Cake into smaller pieces for Tomi. "Honestly? After dealing with Harley's impossible crush on Jake, this feels like a gift. Young Arion is exactly who I'd want for her first romance - age-appropriate, well-raised, already dedicated to Saturn's service."

"Speaking of service," Celeste smiled, "he's already being groomed to take his father's position. Sir Arion II has quite a ring to it."

I nodded, absently watching Tomi with her snack. "Celeste, I've been meaning to ask - have you recovered any more memories lately? From your past life?"

Celeste's expression turned knowing. "You're referring to those involving the King, I presume?"

"Yes. I'm realizing now that so many of the memories I thought I had were incomplete or planted. As I recover my actual memories..." I paused, making sure Tomi was occupied with her cake. "Hunter and I were together in our past life. He was a soldier and engineer."

"I've recovered those memories as well," Celeste confirmed. "Queen Michelina, your mother, was not happy with the romance because he was a commoner."

"No, she wasn't," I said quietly. "And she found out because Hunter confided in his superior officer for advice, and that officer told my mother."

"I remember you telling me it was Princess Mia who betrayed you," Celeste said carefully.

"I thought it was. Though now it seems impossible that Mia was ever my best friend in any life," I shook my head. "But Hunter recovered his memories too. He said it was his superior officer. Hunter

killed him for the betrayal. Before he could tell me, the big battle started and..." I trailed off. "Well, we know what happened then."

"Yes," Celeste said softly. "The fall of the Silver Millennium. Queen Beryl's attack devastated everything."

"It's strange," I said, watching Tomi with her cake. "All these years thinking Mia betrayed us to my mother, only to find out it was Hunter's superior officer. And Hunter..." I paused, lowering my voice. "He killed him for that betrayal, but before he could tell me what happened, Beryl's forces attacked. The whole system fell - not just Saturn, but everything."

"Those planted memories," Celeste mused, "they made us believe so many things that weren't true."

"Like believing there were 2 Sailor Saturns or that I was the princess over the Outer Solar System.," I shook my head. "But at least we're recovering the truth. Hotaru being Sailor Titan and the true Outer princess makes so much more sense than what we thought before."

Tomi reached for another piece of cake, oblivious to the weight of our conversation. Thara continued her delicate consumption of fish, equally unconcerned with past life revelations.

"Should I warn Sir Arion about his son's whereabouts?" Celeste asked, changing subjects. "Given King Hunter's likely reaction to finding them together..."

"No, let them be," I said, then leaned forward slightly. "Celeste, don't change the subject. Have you remembered anything else new?"

Celeste's expression turned thoughtful. "Not much, but... I do remember working alongside King Hunter when he was just a soldier. I didn't know about your relationship until the Queen told me, but I remember seeing you together often. You were close - everyone thought it was just friendship between the princess and one of her guards, but looking back now..."

I couldn't help but laugh softly. "We were so different then. Me, the quiet, proper princess - no drama, no chaos, just dutiful dedication to Saturn. And Hunter..." I shook my head, remembering. "He was brilliant with engineering and technology. More like Billy in that way, actually. "Sometimes I wonder how we ended up so different in this life."

"You're literally different people," Celeste pointed out. "Same souls, yes, but shaped by different experiences, different lives. Though," she smiled slightly, "you do look remarkably similar to your past selves."

"We all do," I nodded. "I think it's connected to Princess Hotaru's reincarnation magic combining with Queen Serenity's power."

Celeste studied me carefully. "You don't usually dwell on past lives, my Queen. Why the sudden interest?"

"Finding out about Hunter and me..." I absently watched Thara finish her fish. "I always knew we belonged together, but I had no idea our connection went back that far, ran that deep."

"It's a blessing you found each other again," Celeste said softly.

"And nothing will ever separate us again," I said, just as Hunter walked in, still sweaty from training with Harley. He leaned down to kiss me before scooping up an eager Tomi.

"Da! Daddy!" she exclaimed, surprising us all with the new word.

Hunter's face lit up with pure joy. "Did you just say 'Daddy'? That's my girl!" He hugged her close, all traces of exhaustion forgotten in this moment of fatherly pride.

"Celeste, could you get Hunter some lyrion?" I asked, figuring he'd need the Saturn equivalent of water after training. She nodded and slipped out quietly.

"Sit," I patted the space beside me, deciding his post-training exhaustion might work in my favor for this conversation. "We need to talk."

"That sounds ominous," Hunter settled next to me with Tomi still babbling "Daddy" in his lap. "What's going on?"

I took a breath. "Arissa had her first kiss."

"She WHAT?" The Thunder energy crackled slightly around him before he caught himself, conscious of Tomi.

Celeste's timing was perfect as always, appearing with the lyrion before discretely vanishing again.

"Hunter, breathe," I said calmly. "She's thirteen. This is completely normal."

"With Young Arion?" he asked, though his tone suggested he already knew the answer.

"Yes," I confirmed. "And honestly? He's exactly who we'd want for her first kiss - her age, well-raised, respectful. It could be much worse." I didn't need to mention Jake's name for Hunter to catch my meaning.

"That's not the point," Hunter said, though I could see him trying to stay calm for Tomi's sake. "She's too young."

"She's older than I was when I started dating," I pointed out carefully. "Though unlike me, she's chosen someone age-appropriate."

"Exactly why I don't want her dating yet," Hunter muttered. "I remember what I was like at that age."

"Ba ba!" Tomi reached for Hunter's lyrion, effectively breaking some of the tension.

"No, baby girl," I redirected her hand. "That's Daddy's. And Hunter, before you go into overprotective dad mode, you should know she came to me about it. She trusted me enough to tell me herself."

That caught his attention. "She did?"

"Yes. She's nervous about telling you, which is why I'm doing it first. But she wants to do this right - no sneaking around, no secrets." I watched his expression carefully. "And you have to admit, Young Arion is a vast improvement over Harley's current situation."

"Don't remind me about that," Hunter sighed, taking a long drink of his lyrion. "Where is Arissa now?"

I hesitated slightly. "Actually..."

"Oh my god, Mom!" Arissa burst into the room, freezing mid-step when she spotted Hunter. "Oh... hi Dad."

"We were just discussing you," Hunter said, his voice carefully neutral.

"Oh..." Arissa shifted uncomfortably. "Um..."

"Sit," Hunter gestured to a chair, his tone making it clear this wasn't a suggestion.

Arissa sank into the seat, studying her hands in her lap. "Am I in trouble?"

Hunter sighed, the sight of his usually confident daughter looking so uncertain softening his expression slightly. "No. But we need to talk about what's going on with you and Young Arion."

"Actually..." Arissa glanced at me before meeting Hunter's eyes. "I came to tell Mom... he just asked me to be his girlfriend."

"That's wonderful!" I exclaimed before I could stop myself.

Hunter shot me a look that clearly said 'not helping.'

"Well it is," I defended. "He's a good kid, Hunter. And look how happy she is."

"Fine," Hunter ran a hand through his hair - his classic sign of surrender. "I'll work on accepting this. But there will be rules, and you need to be completely honest with us."

"What kind of rules?" Arissa asked cautiously.

"For starters-" Hunter began, but I cut him off quickly.

"Your father and I need to discuss this first," I interrupted. "We'll talk about everything tonight."

"But Mom-" Arissa started.

"No buts," I said. "Your father and I need a minute to process this. You're thirteen - your first boyfriend is a big deal, even if he is a good kid."

"Ri Ri!" Tomi reached for her sister, sensing the tension.

Arissa took her from Hunter, clearly grateful for the distraction. "I understand. And we want to be honest about everything."

"We?" Hunter's eyebrow raised.

"Arion wants to talk to you," Arissa said quietly. "He's kind of nervous about it, actually."

I couldn't help but smile - the thought of Young Arion, who could face down training drills with hardened Saturn guards, being scared to talk to Hunter about dating Arissa was kind of adorable. "Your father's not that scary."

"Says you," Arissa muttered, then caught Hunter's look. "I mean... where's Harley?"

"Still at the training grounds," Hunter said Arissa bounced Tomi gently.

"Why don't you take Tomi out to see the unicorns? Invite Arion to join us for dinner," I said.

"Okay," Arissa brightened. "Come on, Marshmallow." She headed out with Tomi, who was already babbling excitedly about the 'horsies.'

Once they were gone, I turned to Hunter. "You can't just make rules without talking to me first."

Hunter ran a hand through his hair. "I know. Sorry. I'm not handling this well."

"Clearly. So what exactly were these rules you had in mind?"

"No being alone with Arion..."

"Stop right there," I cut him off. "Be realistic. You can't tell her she can't be alone with her boyfriend. But you can say no closed doors if they're in a room together."

"Fine. That. And he's not allowed in her bedroom. And she needs a curfew."

"Hunter," I couldn't help but laugh, "they're only going to see each other when we're here visiting Saturn. They literally don't leave the palace grounds. A curfew is kind of pointless."

"Not the point," Hunter muttered. "She's thirteen."

"Yes, and unlike her sister, she's chosen someone her own age who actually respects her," I pointed out. "Besides, you've known Arion since he was little. His father is one of our most trusted guards."

"That's what makes it worse," Hunter sighed. "I can't even hate the kid."

"No, you can't. Because he's a good kid who clearly adores our daughter." I reached for his hand. "And you have to admit, watching Arissa experience normal teenage things? After everything she went through on TK-91?"

"I know," Hunter squeezed my hand. "It's just... she's my baby."

"And she always will be. But she's growing up. They all are." I smiled slightly. "At least she came to us about it. That's more than I did at her age."

"Don't remind me about you at thirteen," Hunter groaned. "That's exactly why I'm worried."

"The difference is, Arissa has both her parents watching out for her. And unlike Jon, Arion is actually age-appropriate."

"Meanwhile Harley's turning out more like you every day," Hunter said pointedly.

"True, but Arissa isn't Harley," I reminded him. "She's always been the more level-headed one."

"I still don't like it."

"You don't have to," I squeezed his hand. "You just have to be fair about it."

Hunter sighed heavily. "Fine. No closed doors when they're together, no leaving palace grounds without someone with them, and he goes back to the guard quarters at night - no hanging around the main palace after we've gone to bed."

"See?" I smiled. "That's actually reasonable. And something they'll probably follow since you're not trying to completely restrict them."

"Yeah, unlike someone else we know who snuck out constantly at their age," Hunter gave me a knowing look.

"Hey, I turned out okay," I protested. "Eventually."

"After how many years of chaos?"

"Not the point," I waved him off. "And speaking of chaos, maybe we should check on Harley before she accidentally sets something on fire trying that new technique."

"She wouldn't..." Hunter paused, considering. "Actually, yeah, we should probably go check."

"I'll tell Celeste about dinner," I stood up. "Though watching Arion try to make it through a formal meal while you glare at him might be entertaining."

"I do not glare," Hunter protested.

"Please, you perfected that 'intimidating father' look the moment we found out about Harley." I headed for the door. "Just try not to terrify the poor kid completely. He is going to be head of our guard someday."

"All the more reason to make sure he knows what happens if he hurts our daughter."

While Hunter headed off to shower, I decided to change for dinner - Arissa would appreciate the effort to make this feel special. I was in the middle of switching out of my casual clothes when I heard the shower running in our suite's bathroom. I smiled, knowing exactly how to help Hunter relax about this whole situation.

Instead of finishing getting dressed, I slipped into the shower with him.

"Well, hello," he smiled, immediately pulling me close.

"Hi," I pressed a kiss to his lips, feeling the tension about Arissa's news melt away as he held me.

Once we finally finished our shower, I put on the jeans and purple babydoll top I'd originally planned on. Hunter seemed considerably more relaxed about the whole boyfriend situation as we got dressed for dinner.

Celeste was waiting in the living room when we emerged, a knowing smile on her face. "I've arranged dinner in the private dining room. Young Arion looks terrified."

"Good," Hunter muttered, earning an elbow in his ribs from me.

"Be nice," I warned. "Where are the girls?"

"Princess Harley is still at the training grounds - though she's moved on to target practice now. Princess Arissa and Princess Tomi are still with the unicorns, and Young Arion is with them." Celeste's expression turned amused. "Thunder Storm seems quite taken with him."

"Of course he is," I sighed. Even my temperamental unicorn was on Arion's side. "Hunter, why don't you go get Harley while I collect the others?"

"You just don't want me seeing them together yet."

"Exactly," I smiled sweetly. "Give me a chance to warn the poor boy before you start with the intimidating father act."

"I do not-" Hunter started to protest, but caught both Celeste's and my expressions. "Fine. I'll get Harley."

A few minutes later, we were all settled in the sitting room - Harley off getting cleaned up from training, Tomi content in my lap, and Arissa sitting nervously next to an even more nervous-looking Arion on the couch across from us.

"So," I broke the tension, "Arissa tells us you two want to try dating."

"Yes, Your Majesty," Arion's voice was steady despite his obvious anxiety. "I hope I haven't overstepped..."

I couldn't help but laugh. "First of all, drop the 'Your Majesty' - I'm just Michelle right now. Or Ms. Bradley if that makes you more comfortable. But this isn't about titles or status or any of that formal nonsense. This is just about two kids who like each other."

"She speaks for herself," Hunter's voice carried a warning edge. "I'm still your king."

"Hunter!" I shot him a look.

He sighed, catching my expression. "Fine. Mr. Bradley is... acceptable."

Arissa looked mortified. "Dad..."

"What? I'm being nice," Hunter protested.

"No, you're not," I shifted Tomi in my lap. "But you're going to be, right?"

"Look," Hunter leaned forward slightly, "you seem like a good kid, Arion. And I've known your father a long time. But Arissa is my daughter..."

"And I would never do anything to hurt her," Arion spoke up, surprising us all with his conviction. "I really care about her."

I caught the slight softening in Hunter's expression - he recognized that earnest determination, probably remembering his own teenage self.

"Ba!" Tomi chose that moment to reach for Arion, effectively breaking the tension.

"See?" I smiled. "Even Tomi approves. Now, there are some ground rules we need to discuss..."

"Like what?" Arissa asked cautiously.

"Nothing crazy," I assured her. "Just basic stuff - no closed doors when you're together, an adult needs to be with you if you leave the palace grounds, and once we've gone to bed, Arion heads back to the guard quarters."

"That's completely fair," Arion nodded, his formal guard training showing in his response.

Arissa reached for his hand, and I felt Hunter tense beside me. I squeezed his knee in warning, reminding him to stay calm. "Good. I'm glad we all agree."

"Mr. and Ms. Bradley," Arion straightened slightly, his voice carrying a maturity beyond his thirteen years, "I want you to know how much I care about Arissa. I've watched her transform since Queen Mia rescued her from Aria - she's amazing. And while protecting her is my duty as a guard in training, keeping her safe is something I want to do because of how much she means to me."

Hunter's expression shifted slightly - clearly caught off guard by Arion's sincerity. I could practically see him trying to find something to object to and coming up empty.

"Well..." Hunter started, but was interrupted by Harley bounding into the room, freshly showered and full of her usual energy.

"Are we having a family meeting? Did Arissa get in trouble for kissing Arion in the garden?" she asked with her characteristic lack of filter.

"Harley!" Arissa turned scarlet.

"What? It's not like they don't know. I mean, that's why we're all sitting here being serious, right?"

I fought back a smile at Hunter's pained expression. "Actually, we're discussing Arion and Arissa dating."

"Oh cool," Harley flopped onto the nearest chair. "So does this mean I can date-"

"No," Hunter and I said simultaneously.

"But-"

"Dinner should be ready," I cut her off quickly. "Shall we?"

"Yes, please," Arissa jumped up, clearly eager to escape any more discussion about Jake that her sister might try to start.

"Da da!" Tomi reached for Hunter, who took her automatically.

As we headed toward the dining room, I caught Celeste's eye - she had that look that meant she'd already handled everything perfectly. Sure enough, the table was set beautifully but not too formally, and there were extra Solis Cakes waiting.

"I had the chef prepare Young Arion's favorites," she whispered to me as we entered.

"You're too good to us," I smiled.

We settled around the table - Hunter still looking slightly pained as Arissa and Arion sat next to each other, while Harley continued giving them knowing looks that made Arissa blush.

"So," Harley grinned as soon as we were seated, "was it a good kiss?"

"Harley!" Hunter choked on his lyrion.

"What?" Harley asked innocently. "I was there, remember? Besides, it's not like they were doing anything wrong. Unlike-"

"So how was training?" I cut her off quickly before she could mention Jake again. "I heard you were working on that new Lightning redirection technique?"

"Oh yeah!" Harley's eyes lit up, successfully distracted. "Dad, you should have seen it! I managed to redirect the Lightning without losing any of its power!"

While Harley launched into an enthusiastic description of her training, I caught Arissa mouthing 'thank you' to me. Arion was studying his plate intently, his face still red from Harley's question about the kiss.

"Speaking of training," Hunter said once Harley paused for breath, "Arion, I understand you're following in your father's footsteps?"

"Yes sir," Arion straightened slightly. "I start advanced combat training next month."

"Da!" Tomi interrupted, throwing a piece of her dinner toward Thara, who had appeared hoping for handouts.

"No no, baby girl," I caught her hand. "Food stays on your plate."

"Hey Arion," Harley leaned forward, "you should come visit Earth sometime."

"I'd love to see it," Arion smiled. "Everything I've heard about Earth sounds fascinating."

"We'd love to have you visit," I said, "but you'd need a cover story. Earth is still... limited in its understanding of the universe. They don't even know there's life on other planets yet."

"Really?" Arion looked genuinely surprised. "They think they're alone in the universe?"

"Most of them do," Hunter nodded. "Hard to believe, right?"

"It seems impossible," Arion shook his head. "To look at the stars and think nothing else exists..."

"They'll figure it out eventually," I assured him. "But until then, if you visit, you'll need to stick to whatever story we create. No mentions of Saturn or being a guard-in-training."

"I understand," Arion nodded seriously. "I won't risk exposing your Earth life."

"We could say he's from California," Arissa suggested. "Since we visit there sometimes anyway."

"The accent might be a bit hard to fake," I smiled. "But we'll figure something out."

"And I can show you all our Earth stuff!" Harley bounced in her seat. "Like video games and-"

"Let's focus on one thing at a time," Hunter interrupted, though I noticed his tone had softened considerably since the start of dinner. "Like finishing dinner before planning galactic visits."

"Speaking of Earth," I looked at Harley, hoping to redirect her enthusiasm, "how's field hockey going?"

"It's actually kind of fun," Harley admitted. "I mean, ice hockey is better, but Coach says I have good stick handling skills and-"

I caught Arissa and Arion sharing a small smile as Harley launched into her detailed description of her latest match. Even Hunter seemed more relaxed, focusing on helping Tomi with her dinner instead of glaring at their joined hands.

"Daddy!" Tomi announced, clearly feeling left out of the conversation.

"Yes, baby girl?" Hunter smiled at her, wiping some food from her face.

"I think someone's ready for bed," I noted, watching Tomi's eyes start to droop despite her attempts to stay engaged in the conversation.

"No seep!" Tomi protested, though her head was already starting to nod.

"I should probably head back to the guard quarters anyway," Arion said carefully. "Early training tomorrow."

I caught the flash of disappointment on Arissa's face, quickly masked. Hunter noticed too, but surprisingly didn't comment.

"Thank you for dinner," Arion stood politely. "And... thank you for being understanding about everything."

"Just remember the rules," Hunter said, but without the earlier edge in his voice.

"Can I walk him to the door?" Arissa asked hopefully.

Hunter started to protest but I squeezed his hand. "That's fine. We need to get this little one to bed anyway."

After getting Tomi settled, Hunter and I retreated to our room, both of us thinking about tomorrow's visit to TK-91 - Arissa's first time back since everything with Aria.

A soft knock interrupted our thoughts. "Mom? Dad?"

"Come in," I called, recognizing Arissa's voice.

She slipped in and settled on the edge of our bed, looking unusually vulnerable. "I was wondering... could Arion come with us tomorrow? To TK-91?" She twisted her hands in her lap. "It's just... I haven't been back since... since Aunt Aria and the deprogramming, and I'm kind of nervous. Having him there would help."

I glanced at Hunter, watching him struggle briefly before sighing and nodding.

"Of course he can," I said softly. "Sir Arion will be with us anyway - if he's okay with Arion coming, then we are too."

"Thank you!" Arissa's face lit up. "I love you guys!"

"Love you too. Now get some sleep," I smiled as she headed out.

Once she was gone, Hunter flopped back against the pillows. "I hate this."

"I know you do, baby," I said, turning out the light. "But you're handling it well."

"Am I?" Hunter pulled me closer in the darkness. "Because every time I look at her with him, I see our little girl growing up way too fast."

"That's because you're a good dad," I settled against his chest. "But she's doing everything right - being honest with us, following the rules, choosing someone who actually respects her. We got lucky with her first boyfriend."

"Yeah," he sighed. "I just hope tomorrow goes okay. TK-91 has a lot of bad memories for her."

"That's exactly why she wants Arion there," I pointed out. "She's being smart about it - facing her past but making sure she has support."

"When did our daughter get so mature?"

"She's always been our old soul," I smiled in the darkness. "Though I'm pretty sure having Harley as a sister helps make her look extra responsible in comparison."

Hunter's laugh rumbled under my cheek. "True. Speaking of which, we should probably get some sleep. Something tells me tomorrow's going to be... interesting."

"Definitely," I agreed, already feeling myself drift off. "But we'll handle it. We always do."

Thara chose that moment to claim her spot on my pillow, purring contentedly as our little family settled in for the night. Tomorrow would bring its own challenges, but for now, everything was perfect.

“Uneasy Alliance”

The teleport beam deposited us in what I assumed was TK-91's equivalent of a war room, though it looked nothing like the stark military chamber I remembered from my previous, less friendly visits. The most striking change was the color - where harsh green had once dominated under Lilianna and Aria's rule, deep crimson now flowed throughout, reflecting Arissa's true power signature. Even the brutal architecture seemed less oppressive under the warmer tones.

I felt Arissa tense beside me, her hand finding Arion's as she took in the transformation. Hunter's expression was unreadable as he surveyed his first glimpse of the planet he now helped rule - the place where his daughter had grown up without him.

"Welcome to TK-91, Your Majesties," Valeria stepped forward, her formal greeting carrying genuine warmth. Beside her, Bellona stood at attention, though her eyes kept drifting to Arissa with barely concealed emotion.

"The Imperial Citadel has been fully restored," Valeria continued, but Harley's excited voice cut through the formality.

"Mom, this is nothing like what you described!" She spun in place, taking in the transformed chamber. "Wasn't everything green before? Now it's all crimson - like Arissa's Ranger color!"

"The change reflects our new beginning," Valeria explained with diplomatic grace, "and our princess's true power signature."

"Bellona," Sir Arion stepped forward, greeting his counterpart with professional respect.

"Welcome," Bellona's formal tone softened as she turned to Arissa. "Welcome home, Princess."

"It's so different," Arissa's voice wavered slightly as she looked around. "When I lived here, half the palace was in ruins, walls missing..." She caught herself, squeezing Arion's hand. "I'm sorry, I'm a bit overwhelmed. Let me introduce everyone properly - my father, King Hunter, my sisters Harley and Tomi, and you know my mother, Queen Michelle." She smiled softly. "And this is Arion of Saturn, Sir Arion's son... and my boyfriend."

Valeria's diplomatic mask didn't slip, but I caught the slight warmth in her eyes at Arissa's obvious happiness. "We welcome you all." She turned to me, her tone measured. "Queen Michelle, we acknowledge that your previous visits here were... less than welcoming. While I cannot promise our people's complete trust immediately, we are committed to peace. You are, after all, the mother of our princess."

"That's all I can ask," I said quietly. "Thank you for welcoming us now."

Tomi chose that moment to squirm in Hunter's arms, reaching toward the massive windows. "Red! Red!"

"Yes, baby girl," Hunter's voice carried barely controlled emotion as he looked out over what had once been a war-torn wasteland. "Everything's very red."

"Perhaps a tour?" Valeria suggested smoothly. "The rebuilding efforts have transformed more than just the Citadel."

"The Crimson Forum especially," Bellona added, her eyes on Arissa. "You won't recognize it, Princess."

I watched Arissa's face carefully - she was trying so hard to maintain her composure, but I could see how overwhelming this was for her. Arion seemed to sense it too, his thumb rubbing small circles on her hand.

"The Forum?" Harley bounced on her toes. "Is that where all the training happens? Arissa told me about the combat drills-"

"Harley," I cut her off gently, seeing Arissa tense at the mention of her former military training.

"Actually," Valeria smoothly redirected, "the Forum has become our cultural center. Though the military academy remains active under Bellona's leadership, we've worked to balance our warrior traditions with other pursuits."

Thara, who had been investigating her new surroundings with typical feline superiority, suddenly hissed at something in the shadows.

"Just a Scourger unit," Bellona explained as a sleek machine emerged from the shadows, clearing debris from a far corner. "We're still finishing restorations in some areas."

"The whole planet feels different," Arissa said softly. "The energy... it's not harsh anymore."

Hunter's hand found my shoulder as we followed Valeria into the corridor, and I knew he was thinking about all the years our daughter spent here, surrounded by that harsh energy. Tomi babbled happily in his arms, completely oblivious to the emotional undercurrents.

"We've incorporated elements from both Saturn and Nemesis in the rebuilding," Valeria explained as we walked. "Though we've maintained TK-91's core identity, of course."

"The Crimson-root gardens are particularly successful," Bellona added. "The integration of Saturn's agricultural techniques has improved yields significantly."

"Gardens?" Arissa stopped suddenly. "But nothing grew here before except in the military compound's hydroponic labs."

"Much has changed, Princess," Valeria's voice carried gentle understanding. "Would you like to see?"

"Yes," Arissa's voice was barely a whisper. "Please."

As we followed Valeria through the restored corridors, I noticed Hunter taking everything in with an intensity that worried me. This was his first time seeing where Aria had raised their daughter, where she'd twisted Arissa's entire childhood into something dark and militaristic.

"Look, Daddy!" Tomi pointed at elaborate murals that now decorated walls I remembered as stark and militaristic. "Pretty!"

"The Lectors have been recording our history," Valeria explained, gesturing to the artistry. "Both the old and the new."

"Including the truth about Aria's regime," Bellona added, her voice hardening slightly. "And Princess Arissa's liberation."

Harley, who had been uncharacteristically quiet, suddenly spoke up. "Is that Aunt Mia?" She pointed to a section showing a dark-clad figure leading others to safety.

"The Queen of Death is honored here," Valeria nodded. "Her role in saving our princess, in helping forge this alliance-"

"There's me," Arissa cut in, her voice strange. "But I don't... I don't remember it like that. Everything from that time is still... confused."

Arion's arm slipped around her waist, supporting her as she stared at the mural of her own rescue.

"The deprogramming process can leave memories... fragmented," Valeria said gently. "But the truth is here, in these walls. You were never meant to be a weapon, Princess. You were meant to be a bridge between worlds."

I felt Hunter tense beside me. Even now, months after getting Arissa back, the knowledge of what Aria had done to their daughter still hit him hard.

"Bridge between worlds is right," Harley tried to lighten the moment. "I mean, you're literally princess of three planets now."

"True," Arissa managed a small smile. "Saturn by birth, TK-91 by inheritance, and Nemesis by blood magic. Aunt Mia made sure I'd always have a home there too."

"The gardens are through here," Bellona gestured toward massive doors that I remembered as leading to training grounds. "Unless you'd prefer to rest first? The Citadel's residential wing has been fully restored."

"No," Arissa straightened slightly, and I recognized that determined set of her jaw - she got it from Hunter. "I want to see everything. I need to understand what my home has become."

Thara, who had been prowling along beside us, suddenly darted ahead as the doors opened, revealing what had once been a combat arena. What we saw now took my breath away.

Where stark training grounds had once stretched, a vibrant garden now bloomed - somehow thriving in the red soil. Crimson-root plants twisted up elegant trellises, their deep red leaves catching the alien sunlight. Fountains that once served purely practical purposes now created peaceful pools among the greenery.

"Oh," Arissa's voice caught. "This is where... this was the combat arena. Where Aria made me train for hours until I couldn't stand."

Arion's arm tightened around her waist as Hunter shifted Tomi in his arms, clearly fighting the urge to go to his eldest daughter.

"Now it feeds our people," Valeria said softly. "We've learned there's strength in nurturing life, not just in combat training."

"Ba!" Tomi pointed excitedly at something moving among the plants - small, eel-like creatures swimming through shallow channels.

"Sand-eels," Bellona explained. "We've adapted their habitat into the garden system. They help fertilize the soil."

Thara had positioned herself regally by one of the pools, watching the sand-eels with predatory interest.

"Don't even think about it," I warned my cat, though the moment of normalcy seemed to help Arissa relax slightly.

"Can we look around?" Harley asked, already eyeing one of the winding paths through the garden.

"Of course," Valeria nodded. "Though you might want to wait before exploring too far. The people have gathered in the Forum to welcome their King and princesses."

I felt Hunter tense again - this would be his first time addressing the people he now helped rule. "How many?"

"The entire Crimson Forum," Bellona reported. "They're eager to see their princess return. And to meet you, Your Majesty."

"They want to see their king," Valeria added gently. "Not just their regent."

"Dad," Arissa turned to Hunter. "They'll love you. Just... be yourself. That's what they need to see - not some formal ruler, but the father who helped save their princess."

I caught the flash of emotion across Hunter's face at her words. Here was our daughter, in the place where she'd been raised to hate us, now encouraging her father to meet her people.

"Speaking of formal," I glanced at Hunter's casual clothes, "maybe we should change before addressing the Forum?"

"Do I..." Arissa tensed visibly. "Do I need to wear my military uniform?"

"You could," I said gently, "or you could wear that dress from Saturn. Show them the princess you've chosen to be."

The relief on her face was immediate. "I'd like that better."

"Let me show you to your quarters," Valeria offered smoothly. "Bellona will escort Sir Arion and Young Arion to the military wing."

"Actually," Hunter spoke up, surprising me. "If it's appropriate, I'd prefer Arion stay in the Citadel. He's here as Arissa's guest, not as a guard."

I caught the flash of approval in Valeria's eyes - Hunter's first real decision as King, and it was one that honored both his daughter's feelings and TK-91's new direction.

"Of course, Your Majesty. The royal guest quarters have been prepared."

As we followed Valeria deeper into the Citadel, I noticed Arissa taking everything in with new eyes - not as the soldier she'd been forced to be, but as the princess she was choosing to become.

The residential wing of the Citadel had undergone the same dramatic transformation as the rest. The harsh green lighting had been replaced with warm crimson tones, and what had once been militaristic quarters now felt like actual living space.

Valeria opened an ornate door, revealing a sprawling set of connected chambers. The main living area managed to blend TK-91's imposing architecture with touches of Saturn's elegance - high ceilings softened by flowing fabrics, brutal lines offset by comfortable furnishings.

"The King and Queen's chambers are through here," she gestured to double doors on the left. Inside, I glimpsed a space that somehow reminded me of our Saturn suite but yet very different at the same time - plenty of room for Tomi's crib and Thara's inevitable takeover of any surface she deemed worthy.

"Princess Harlyn, your room is just through there," Valeria pointed to another door.

"Sweet!" Harley darted off to investigate.

"And Princess Arissa," Valeria's voice softened slightly. "Your chambers are here." She opened a final door, revealing a space that took my breath away. The room perfectly balanced who Arissa had been with who she'd become - one wall held her military honors, but displayed like achievements rather than obligations. Another featured a mural of all three of her worlds - Saturn, TK-91, and Nemesis united in her heritage.

"It's perfect," Arissa whispered, taking in the space that finally acknowledged all parts of who she was.

"Your formal attire has been prepared in the dressing chambers," Valeria gestured to yet another door. "Including something special for Princess Arissa."

"Special?" Arissa asked, but Valeria just smiled.

"The Ancilla worked with artisans to create something that represents all three worlds you bridge," she explained, opening an ornate box on a nearby table.

Inside lay a tiara that took my breath away - delicate metalwork somehow managed to weave together the signature elements of all three worlds. Crimson stones represented TK-91, purple gems for Saturn, and black diamonds for Nemesis, all united in a design that spoke of both strength and grace.

"The Ancilla suggested it might help with... integration. Accepting all parts of who you are," Valeria explained softly.

Arissa reached out to touch it, her hand trembling slightly. "It's beautiful."

"Will Arion need formal attire?" I asked, realizing we hadn't planned for that. "We didn't think to bring any."

"We can have something brought from the military quarters," Valeria offered. "Though perhaps something less... ceremonial than standard military dress."

Thara had already claimed a velvet chaise by the window, clearly approving of our accommodations. Tomi toddled after her sister, reaching for the sparkly tiara.

"No no, Marshmallow," Arissa caught her. "This isn't for playing."

"Come on, baby girl," I lifted Tomi into my arms. "Let's get ready." I caught Hunter's eye, silently communicating that Arissa might need some space to process everything. We headed to our quarters, leaving our eldest daughter alone with her thoughts.

Arissa

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Once my family left, I slowly walked around my new chambers, trying to reconcile these elegant surroundings with my memories. My old room had barely been habitable - just a military cot in a half-destroyed space with a partially intact roof. Now... now it looked like it belonged in an actual palace.

I ran my fingers along the smooth walls, remembering the crumbling concrete that used to be here. The whole space felt surreal - like my past and present were colliding in ways I never could have imagined.

I moved to the window - intact now, with actual glass instead of the plastic sheeting we'd used to keep out the red dust storms. The view of the Crimson Forum stretched out below, so different from the war-torn wasteland of my childhood. Where training grounds had once dominated the landscape, I could see actual buildings, gardens, people going about their lives.
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The tiara caught the light from its box, drawing my attention back. Three worlds, three identities - all somehow united in this one piece. I'd spent so long thinking I had to choose, had to be either TK-91's warrior princess or Saturn's lost daughter. Even after Aunt Mia made me her heir on Nemesis, I'd struggled with how to balance these different parts of myself.

A soft knock at my door interrupted my thoughts.

"Come in," I called, expecting Mom or Dad.

Instead, Arion stepped in, looking slightly uncertain in this unfamiliar space. "Hey. I wanted to check on you. This must be... overwhelming."

"That's one word for it," I managed a small smile. "Everything's so different. I keep expecting to turn a corner and find ruins, or hear Aria barking orders for combat drills."

Arion crossed the room to stand beside me at the window. "Your people seem happy. The rebuilding... it's given them hope."

"My people," I echoed softly. "It's strange. Under Aria, being princess meant being a weapon, a symbol of military might. But now..."

"Now you can be whatever kind of princess you choose to be," he said, taking my hand. "Like on Saturn."

I turned to face him. "Thank you for coming with me. I know this can't be easy - seeing where I grew up, what I was like before..."

"Hey," he squeezed my hand. "Nothing about your past changes how I feel about you. If anything, seeing all this just makes me admire you more. You survived this, Arissa. You became something beautiful despite everything Aria tried to make you be."

I felt tears threatening and blinked them back. "When did you get so wise?"

"Must be all that guard training," he smiled, trying to lighten the moment. Then his expression turned more serious. "Your father's been asking me about what it was like, you know. During your deprogramming on Nemesis."

I tensed slightly. "What did you tell him?"

"The truth. That you were the strongest person I'd ever met. That even when you were fighting through Aria's programming, there was something in you that refused to be broken." His thumb traced circles on my palm. "I didn't understand then why I felt so drawn to you, but looking back now..."

A knock at the door interrupted whatever he was about to say. This time it was Mom.

"Sorry to interrupt," she said, though her knowing smile suggested she wasn't really sorry at all. "But we should start getting ready. The Forum's waiting."

I watched Arion go, then turned back to my reflection. The formal dress I'd brought from Saturn somehow felt right here - a perfect blend of royal elegance and warrior strength. My hands only shook slightly as I worked on my hair, muscle memory from years of military-precise styling now being used for something gentler.

The tiara caught my attention again. Three worlds, three identities - Saturn's lost princess, TK-91's warrior heir, Nemesis's chosen daughter. For so long, these parts of me had felt like they were at war with each other. But looking at how the gems caught the light - crimson, purple, and black working in perfect harmony - I finally understood. They weren't competing pieces. They were all just... me.

I lifted the tiara carefully, settling it into place. The person looking back at me in the mirror wasn't Aria's weapon anymore, but she wasn't just Saturn's rescued princess either. She was something new. Something whole.

A knock at my door announced it was time. The Forum was waiting.

Michelle

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Hunter was fidgeting with his formal attire, clearly uncomfortable with the whole situation. This wasn't like Saturn, where at least he could usually get away with being casual. Here, he had to play the role of actual king to people he'd never met - about as far from his comfort zone as possible.

"You look very handsome," I assured him, adjusting Tomi's little dress. She was wearing her Saturn princess attire, tiara and all.

"I hate this," he muttered, tugging at his collar. "All this formal stuff... I'm just a dad who happens to have a title."

A knock at our door revealed Harley, for once not complaining about formal wear. "Arissa's ready," she announced. "And... wow. You guys need to see this."

We stepped into the main living area just as Arissa emerged from her chambers. The sight stopped us all in our tracks. She stood there in her Saturn formal gown, but the new tiara changed everything - the way it wove together all three of her worlds seemed to complete something in her. This wasn't the broken soldier we'd rescued from Aria's influence, or even just Saturn's recovered princess. This was a young woman who had finally found a way to unite all the pieces of who she was.

"You look beautiful, baby," Hunter's voice carried barely controlled emotion.

"Thanks, Dad," Arissa smiled softly, then caught his nervous fidgeting. "You don't have to make some big formal speech, you know. Just... be you. That's what they need to see."

"Pretty!" Tomi reached for her sister's tiara.
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"Not this time, Marshmallow," Arissa caught her hand gently.

Valeria appeared in the doorway. "The Forum awaits, Your Majesties."

"Ready?" I asked Hunter quietly.

"No," he admitted. "But let's do this anyway."

We followed Valeria through the restored corridors, Arion falling into step beside Arissa. The sound of the gathered crowd grew louder as we approached what had once been the military assembly area. Now, according to Valeria, it had been transformed into a proper Forum for public gatherings.

"Remember," Valeria paused before the massive doors, "they're not just here to see their King. They're here to welcome their princess home."

I caught the slight tremor in Arissa's hands as she straightened her spine - that familiar military posture, but softer now, more natural.

Valeria stepped out onto the balcony overlooking the Forum. "Welcome! Today marks a momentous occasion. It is my honor to present our Princess Arissa, returned home at last, and her father, our new King Hunter. We also welcome Queen Michelle of Saturn, Princess Harlyn, and Princess Tatum - Princess Arissa's family."

As we stepped out, I deliberately held back with Harley and Tomi, letting Hunter and Arissa take the forefront. I felt Hunter's quick glance back at me - he always wanted me by his side - but we both knew this was necessary. TK-91 was still healing from Lilianna's legacy; they couldn't see Saturn's queen appearing to take control.

Hunter took a deep breath, and when he spoke, it was with simple honesty rather than formal ceremony. "Hello, people of TK-91. I stand before you today honored and humbled. I know this is unexpected - having Saturn's king as your regent. I'm not Takotian by birth, but my daughter is, and until she comes of age to rule, I promise to lead with her guidance and your best interests at heart."

"I'm not here as a conqueror or to impose Saturn's will," Hunter continued, his voice carrying naturally across the Forum. "I'm here as a father who wants to help rebuild his daughter's homeland. The alliance between our worlds isn't about power or control - it's about healing. About creating something new together."

He glanced at Arissa, drawing strength from her presence. "I may not have been here for my daughter's childhood, but I'm here now. And just as she bridges our worlds - Saturn, TK-91, and Nemesis - I hope to help bridge our peoples. Not as separate kingdoms, but as allies working toward a better future."

I watched the crowd's reaction, seeing heads nod as Hunter's sincerity reached them. This was why he was perfect for this role, even if he hated the formality - he spoke from the heart, as a father first and a king second.

"The rebuilding you've accomplished is incredible," he gestured to the restored Forum. "You've taken ruins and created beauty. You've transformed training grounds into gardens. You've proven that strength isn't just about military might - it's about resilience, about growth, about change."

"But most importantly," Hunter's voice softened slightly, "you've welcomed your princess home. Not as a weapon or a symbol of military might, but as who she truly is - a bridge between worlds, a symbol of what we can accomplish together."

I caught the subtle tremor in Arissa's hands as she stepped forward beside her father. The tiara caught the light, its three colors gleaming - a perfect visual representation of everything Hunter was saying.

The crowd's reaction was immediate - not the rigid military response I remembered from my previous visits, but genuine warmth. They weren't saluting their warrior princess; they were welcoming their daughter home.

"My father speaks truth," Arissa's voice rang out clear and strong. "I stand before you not just as your princess, but as living proof that change is possible. That we can honor our warrior heritage while building something new. Something peaceful."

I heard the slight catch in her voice - emotion bleeding through her composure - but she held steady. This wasn't Aria's perfect soldier speaking, but it wasn't just Saturn's rescued princess either. This was purely Arissa, all her pieces finally unified.

The crowd erupted in cheers - genuine, spontaneous celebration that would have been unthinkable under Aria's regime. Tomi, startled by the noise, buried her face in my neck while Harley bounced excitedly beside me.

"Did you see?" she whispered. "They actually love her. Like, for real, not just because they have to."

I nodded, watching as Hunter placed a supportive hand on Arissa's shoulder. The gesture was small, but it spoke volumes to the watching crowd - this wasn't a king claiming authority over their princess, this was a father standing proud beside his daughter.

Valeria stepped forward again. "In honor of our King and Princess's return, the Forum will host a celebration. The Lectors have prepared a historical presentation, showing the journey that brought us to this moment of unity."

I noticed Arissa tense slightly - wondering, probably, how they would portray her time under Aria's control. But Arion had moved closer to her, his presence offering silent support.

"The Crimson-root gardens are open to all," Bellona added from her position near the entrance. "And the kitchens have prepared traditional dishes from all three worlds."

"Wait," Arissa's voice rang out clear. "Before we celebrate, I want you to hear from Saturn's Queen. My mother."

The request surprised me - this wasn't planned. But as I handed Tomi to Harley and stepped forward, I understood its importance. This was Arissa's way of showing her people that the future really could be different.

"People of TK-91," I began carefully, "I stand before you today humbled. Our worlds share a painful history, and I know many of you may never forgive what happened with Queen Lilianna. But we don't have to let that past define our future. We can acknowledge that pain while still moving forward together, building something better."

I paused, letting my next words carry the weight they deserved. "Arissa chose me as her mother, and I was honored to adopt her. As I do for all my children, I will always act in the best interests of their people - and that includes all of you. Thank you for giving Saturn - for giving me - the chance to prove we can be more than what we once were."

The silence that followed my words felt heavy with meaning. Then, from somewhere in the crowd, a voice called out in Legionian - TK-91's ancient language. Others joined in, and though I couldn't understand the words, the tone was clear: acceptance, if not yet full trust.

Valeria's slight smile suggested this was going better than she'd expected. Even Bellona's usually stern expression had softened.

"Now," Arissa's voice carried a hint of her old command presence, though gentler now, "I believe there was mention of a celebration?"

The formality broke as the crowd responded enthusiastically. As people began moving toward the gardens, I felt Hunter's hand find mine.

"That was unexpected," he murmured.

"She's learning to bridge worlds in her own way," I whispered back, watching as Arissa moved among her people, Arion at her side. "Just like her father."

"I still hate speeches," he muttered, making me smile.

Harley appeared with a squirming Tomi. "Can we go see the gardens now? I smell food and I'm starving."

"Yes, but first," I took Tomi from her, "make sure Thara is secured in our quarters. This isn't Saturn - if she decides to terrorize the kitchen staff or crash the celebration, it could cause an actual diplomatic incident. Once she's contained, you can join us."

Harley nodded and darted off, clearly motivated by the promise of food.

"You were both amazing," I said softly as Arissa joined us. "I couldn't be prouder of either of you."

"It's strange," Arissa's voice carried wonder. "This is the first time I've actually felt like TK-91's princess. Not their weapon or their symbol, but their actual princess."

Hunter pulled her into a hug, his formal demeanor dropping completely. "You are their princess. And I promise you, baby, I'll do everything I can to help you and your people until you're ready to take the throne yourself."

"Speaking of your people," Valeria approached carefully, "they're eager to properly welcome you, Princess. Many remember you from... before, but they want to know who you are now."

I caught the flash of anxiety across Arissa's face - interacting with people who had known her under Aria's control wouldn't be easy. But Arion appeared at her side, as if sensing her unease.

"I'll go with you," he offered quietly.

"We all will," Hunter added, though I noticed him scanning the crowd with barely concealed protective instinct.

"DaddyThe gardens had been transformed for the celebration. Floating lights reminiscent of Saturn's design cast a warm glow over the crimson foliage, while touches of Nemesis's elegant darkness added depth to the decorations. The blend of all three worlds' influences was subtle but effective - just like Arissa's tiara.

People parted respectfully as we moved through the crowd, but their greetings lacked the rigid formality I remembered from previous visits. They called out to Arissa with genuine warmth, many speaking in Legionian - which she answered fluently, surprising even Valeria.

"You remember the old language?" Bellona asked, impressed.

"Aria made sure I knew it for military commands," Arissa explained, then smiled slightly. "But I also used to sneak books from the ancient library. The poetry was... beautiful."

"Still is," a voice spoke up - one of the Lectors, carrying what looked like an ornate tablet. "Perhaps, Princess, you would honor us with a reading later? The old verses of homecoming seem appropriate."

I watched Hunter's expression soften as he realized his daughter had found ways to preserve her soul even under Aria's harsh regime - secret moments of poetry hidden between combat drills.

!" Tomi reached toward the gardens, completely oblivious to the emotional undercurrents around her.

"Yes, baby girl," I adjusted her on my hip. "Let's go see the gardens."

Harley reappeared, slightly out of breath. "Thara's locked in with enough treats to keep her occupied. Can we eat now? Those Crimson-root things smell amazing."

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The change in Arissa was remarkable as the evening progressed. With each interaction, each genuine welcome from her people, the tension in her shoulders eased a little more. This wasn't the militaristic world of her childhood - TK-91 had transformed just as much as she had. And through it all, Arion stayed close, offering quiet support whenever she needed it. I caught Hunter watching them together, his protective instincts warring with the obvious recognition that Arion was exactly what our daughter needed right now.

Even Tomi was embraced by the Takotians, who seemed enchanted by how their princess doted on her baby sister. My youngest, ever the social butterfly, babbled happily at anyone who approached, completely unfazed by being on an alien world. The way the people responded to her - Saturn's youngest princess being welcomed so warmly on TK-91 - felt like proof that real change was possible.

As the evening drew to a close, an elder named Marikea approached me. Her bearing spoke of someone who had seen TK-91 through all its iterations.

"Queen Michelle," she began carefully, "I must confess my deep hesitation about your presence here. For decades, I have harbored hatred for you over Queen Lilianna's death. While I may never fully forgive that act, watching Princess Arissa with you... seeing the genuine love between you... And witnessing Saturn's dedication to rebuilding our world..." She paused. "Perhaps it is time to let old grievances rest."

"I understand your anger," I said softly. "What happened with Lilianna... it was self-defense. I never wanted to take her life, but she left me no choice. Had there been any possibility of peace between us, I would have embraced it. But I also recognize how beloved she was by her people."

Marikea's eyes studied me intently. "Looking at you now, I believe you speak truth. Which means..." she sighed heavily, "it was one more deception from Lady Aria. Any of us would fight to preserve our own life. Thank you - for what you've done for our princess, for our planet. Perhaps we were all fed

more lies than we realized." She straightened slightly. "As long as our princess welcomes you, so do her people. And King Hunter... his sincerity is clear. He will serve us well until Princess Arissa takes the throne."

"Your words mean more than I can express," I said quietly.

A small, sad smile crossed her face. "It seems even we elders have truths yet to learn." With that, she moved away into the crowd, leaving me to process the weight of what had just happened.

Hunter appeared at my side, Tomi half-asleep in his arms. "Everything okay?"

"Yeah," I watched Marikea's retreating form. "Just... making peace with old ghosts."

Across the garden, Arissa was speaking with a group of young Centurions, Arion beside her. The way she carried herself now - balanced between royal grace and warrior strength - made my heart swell with pride.

"She's going to be an amazing queen someday," Hunter said softly.

"She already is," I replied, watching as she switched effortlessly between Legionian and English/Common, bridging her worlds without even thinking about it. "Though I have to admit, seeing her here, like this... it's hard to believe how far we've come from that first day on Nemesis."

"Mama," Tomi's sleepy voice interrupted. "Seepy."

"I think that's our cue," Hunter smiled. "Where's Harley?"

I scanned the crowd, finally spotting our middle daughter deep in conversation with some of the younger Tribunes, probably asking about a million questions about TK-91's technology.

As the celebration wound down, we retreated to our quarters, everyone exhausted but in a good way. The girls headed to their rooms, Arion to his guest chambers, while Hunter and I took a very sleepy Tomi back to our suite. Thara sat regally on our bed, looking thoroughly offended by her evening of confinement.

"I know, baby girl," I scooped her up, already reaching for her treats. "But we couldn't risk you starting an intergalactic incident." She accepted the peace offering, though her expression suggested she was doing me a favor.

Hunter changed Tomi and got her into pajamas, our youngest already asleep before he laid her in the crib. Once we were changed ourselves, I curled into his arms, Thara claiming her usual spot on my pillow.

"It's strange," I said softly. "I never thought I'd feel safe sleeping on this planet. The changes in just one year..."

"A lot can change in a year," Hunter pressed a kiss to my head. "Look at our family."

"One more day here, then back to Earth," I sighed. "And Nashville for me."

"For how long this time?"

"Just a week. I'm taking time off for our anniversary - want to be home with you and the girls."

I felt his smile against my hair. "I like that plan."

"Me too," I snuggled closer. "I love you so much."

"I love you too," he whispered as we drifted off, the unfamiliar planet feeling, finally, like just another piece of our extraordinary life.

"Living in Paradise"

3:32 AM. I woke up and couldn't get back to sleep. Jon's album had dropped, and despite my better judgment, I needed to hear the song he'd recorded with Harley. I sighed and slipped out of bed, the emptiness of my Nashville apartment a stark contrast to the warmth of home in Ireland.

Thara opened one eye, fixing me with a look of feline indignation at having her sleep disturbed.

"I'm sorry, baby girl. Can't sleep," I whispered as I padded into the living room and settled on the sofa. Thara followed reluctantly, her irritation evident in the deliberate slowness of her movements as she finally jumped onto my lap, making it clear this middle-of-the-night excursion was a significant imposition.

I turned on the TV, keeping the volume low out of habit even though there was no one else to disturb, and navigated to YouTube to find Jon's channel. There it was, prominently featured: "Living in Paradise feat. Harley Bradley." I couldn't help but sigh at the sight of it. Jon had initially tried to credit her as Harley Morris, insisting that using my last name would boost her career. Hunter and I had shut that down immediately - one of the rare instances where our unified parental front had actually made Jon back down.

With a mixture of dread and curiosity, I clicked play. The familiar opening notes filled the quiet apartment. Why was he still writing songs about me after all these years? And to pull my daughter into it... the manipulation was so transparent it made my skin crawl.

The first verse was all Jon, his voice unchanged by time - still that perfect blend of rasp and smoothness that had captivated audiences for decades. Then the second verse began, and Harley's voice emerged, unmistakable and surprisingly powerful.

She sounded incredible. Jon had said she sounded like me, and there were definite similarities in our tone and phrasing, but her voice carried a slightly grittier undertone than mine had ever possessed. It was distinctly Harley - not a carbon copy of my sound, but something uniquely hers. And like me at that age, she didn't sound like a child. That's how I'd gotten away with recording some of the songs I did at thirteen - I never sounded thirteen. Neither did Harley.

It made the duet almost work. The only issue was that with Harley's grittier sound, her voice didn't blend as seamlessly with Jon's as mine once had. But for a first release, it was good. Really good.

I found myself caught in an internal tug-of-war - maternal pride in my daughter's undeniable talent warring with fury at Jon for manipulating her into this position. For using her to maintain his connection to me, for exploiting our complicated history through my child. The fact that she sounded amazing only complicated my emotions further.

I played the song again, this time listening more critically. The lyrics were clearly crafted to evoke our past - veiled references to our history that the casual listener might miss but that landed like precise

arrows for me. Jon had always been skilled at writing songs that seemed innocent on the surface but carried deeper meaning for those who knew where to look.

What bothered me most was how he'd positioned Harley in the narrative - not as herself, but as an extension of me, a vessel for his nostalgia. I could only imagine how Hunter would react when he heard it.

My phone lit up with a text, the notification breaking my concentration. Holly.

'You up? Song's trending already. 500k views in first hour.'

Of course it was. Jon's fanbase was nothing if not loyal, and the novelty of hearing my daughter would drive curiosity clicks. I typed back a quick response.

'Listening now. She sounds good.'

Holly's reply was immediate: 'She sounds amazing. We need to talk strategy in the morning. This changes things.'

She was right. Whatever our feelings about Jon's manipulation, this song would thrust Harley further into the spotlight. We needed a plan to protect her while supporting her talent - a delicate balance I was all too familiar with navigating at her age, though I'd done it without parents watching out for my best interests.

I checked the time difference - it was mid-morning in Ireland. Hunter would be up, probably getting the girls ready for school. I debated calling him immediately but decided against it. This conversation needed to happen when I wasn't exhausted and emotional at 3 AM.

Instead, I pulled up my text thread with Harley.

'Just heard the song. You sound incredible, baby. So proud of your talent. We'll talk more tomorrow. Love you.'

I hesitated before sending, wondering if I should acknowledge the complexity of the situation. But Harley was thirteen - still navigating the blurry lines between child and teenager. There would be time for nuanced conversations about Jon's motives later. For now, she deserved to hear that her mother was proud of her voice, regardless of the circumstances.

After sending the text, I found myself scrolling through the comments under the video. Most were overwhelmingly positive:

'Harley sounds EXACTLY like Michelle did at that age!' 'The Morris-Bradley genes are STRONG' 'Jon found himself Michelle 2.0'

That last one made me wince. Exactly what I was afraid of - people seeing Harley not as her own person but as a younger version of me, a replacement in Jon's narrative.

Thara stretched across my lap, her purr a steady vibration against my legs as I continued my late-night analysis. The song would be a hit - that much was clear already.The question was how to handle what came next, how to protect Harley from the industry that had nearly consumed me at her age.

My phone rang, startling Thara who shot me an accusatory glare before resettling. Hunter's name lit up the screen. Of course - the time difference meant he'd be awake, and Harley had obviously shared my text.

"Hey babe," I answered, the familiar comfort of his voice already easing some of my tension despite the miles between us.

"The girls have the day off school," he said without preamble. "Harley told me you texted. I guess you heard it."

"Yeah," I shifted on the sofa, drawing my knees up. "I'm guessing you did too?"

"Of course. As soon as it dropped," he replied, his tone carefully measured in that way I recognized - Hunter containing his anger, keeping it controlled.

"Thoughts?" I asked, though I already knew the answer.

"She's talented," he acknowledged, the pride in his voice unmistakable before his tone hardened. "But I fucking hate that bastard. He used her to sing the parts he wanted you to sing."

I sighed, running a hand through my hair as I stared at the paused video on my screen. "I know. And yes, she is talented."

The unspoken complexity hung between us - the delicate balance of supporting Harley's obvious gift while protecting her from the manipulation that had defined my own early career.

"She's been playing it on repeat since it dropped," Hunter continued. "She's proud of it, Mich. Really proud."

That was the heart of our dilemma - Harley deserved to feel that pride in her work, regardless of Jon's motives. The last thing I wanted was to diminish her achievement by focusing solely on the problems with how it had come about.

"She is going to be insufferable," I sighed, already imagining Harley's triumphant swagger, her tendency to amplify any success into epic proportions.

"She already is," Hunter confirmed with a mixture of exasperation and affection. "Arissa is not having it."

I could picture it perfectly - Harley playing the song at maximum volume while Arissa retreated further into her headphones, their sisterly dynamic amplified by this new development. Arissa was the more reserved of the two, uncomfortable with attention while Harley sought it like oxygen.

"Do you want me to talk to her?" I offered, even as exhaustion pulled at me. The digital clock on my TV showed nearly 4 AM now, and tomorrow's call time loomed uncomfortably close.

"Let me try first," Hunter said, his voice gentle but firm. "You need to try to sleep. I know you're filming tomorrow."

He was right, of course. A sleepless night wouldn't help anyone, least of all me with fourteen hours on set ahead. Still, the mother in me resisted the practical solution.

"Not sure how well sleep will come, but sure. I'll try." I paused, the weight of our complicated situation settling over me again. "I'm so sorry, Hunter." The apology encompassed everything - Jon's continued presence in our lives, the way my past kept intruding on our present, the challenges our daughter would now face.

"It's not your fault, baby," he said with the quiet certainty that had anchored me through so many storms. "Get some sleep. I love you."

"I love you too," I replied, reluctantly ending the call.

I sat in the silence of my Nashville apartment, Thara purring softly on my lap, the paused image of Jon and Harley's promotional photo still on my screen. Mother and daughter, connected by talent and circumstance, separated by an ocean and years of complicated history. And Jon, somehow still at the center of it all, pulling strings I'd thought were long since cut.

Livvie

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"Rose, no, we are not putting fairy dust on Daisy," I said firmly, scooping up my daughter mid-mission and confiscating the glitter spray from her determined little grip. After the cast incident with Killy, you'd think I'd have learned to keep all glitter products under lock and key. Clearly, I needed an actual safe with a combination that wasn't her birthday.

"But Daisy fairy dog," Rose insisted, her lower lip jutting out in that stubborn expression that was pure Jeremy.

"You're right, Love, she is," I agreed, adjusting her on my hip as our Australian Shepherd looked up with what could only be described as canine anxiety. Daisy was already ditzy enough without being covered in glitter - the poor thing would probably run in confused circles for hours if Rose got her way. "So she makes her own fairy dust. She doesn't need yours."

Rose considered this logic with surprising seriousness for a two-year-old before nodding reluctantly. "Daisy magic."

"Exactly," I confirmed, carrying her to the living room where J was watching TV with Killy, our son's cast-encased arm propped carefully on a cushion. The contrast between our twins never failed to
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amaze me - Rose constantly seeking new surfaces to embellish with glitter, Killy content to sit quietly and absorb whatever was happening around him.

"Crisis averted?" J asked without looking away from the screen, somehow sensing exactly what had transpired.

"For now," I replied, depositing Rose next to her brother. "Though I'm seriously considering a glitter-proof safe at this point."

Daisy followed us into the living room, her mismatched blue and brown eyes watching Rose warily as she settled at J's feet. For a dog with boundless energy and the attention span of a goldfish, she showed remarkable awareness when it came to Rose's "improvement" projects.

"What did she try this time?" J asked, finally glancing up from the television.

"Glitter spray. On Daisy," I said, tucking the offending canister into my pocket to dispose of properly later. "Where did she even find this? I thought I'd hidden them all after the cast incident."

"Da has sparkles," Rose announced proudly, betraying J without hesitation.

I raised an eyebrow at my husband. "Does he now?"

J had the grace to look slightly embarrassed. "For a client's hair. Not for general fairy princess use."

"And yet," I gestured to the canister in my pocket.

"Sorry, Love," he offered with that smile that still worked on me despite my best efforts to maintain a stern expression. "I'll put them in a higher cabinet."

"Higher won't help. She climbs," I reminded him, thinking of the time I'd found Rose perched on top of the refrigerator, happily eating biscuits I'd hidden on the highest shelf. "We need actual locks."

"I help Daisy be pretty," Rose explained earnestly, clearly still fixated on her mission.

"Daisy is already pretty," Killy said quietly, his good arm reaching out to pat the dog's head. "She doesn't like glitter, Ro Ro."

"How do you know?" Rose challenged.

"She told me," Killy replied with absolute certainty.

J and I exchanged a glance over their heads.

"Well, there you have it," I said, settling onto the couch beside J. "Daisy has spoken. No glitter."

Rose seemed to accept this authority, though the calculating look in her eyes suggested she was merely regrouping rather than surrendering. My phone buzzed in my pocket - probably Billy with more questions about the Celtic magic code. The man had no concept of downtime.

"You good with the twins if I go meet Amber for a cuppa?" I asked, already anticipating the brief escape from glitter vigilance.

J nodded, his eyes never leaving the television where some cartoon was playing. "Aye, Love. Go. I got this."

I slipped my shoes on and grabbed my purse, already mentally composing responses to whatever Ranger crisis Billy was texting about now.

"Mummy, I go?" Killy asked, his voice small but determined as he looked up from his spot on the couch.

I paused, studying my son. He'd been especially clingy since the cast incident - more attached to me than usual, which was saying something for my naturally cautious boy.

"Mummy is going to have a cuppa with Auntie Amber. You don't wanna go. It will be more fun here with me and Rose," J tried, clearly hoping to salvage my peaceful afternoon.

Killy's lower lip trembled, his eyes already filling with tears. "But I want to go with Mummy."

I sighed, recognizing the signs of an impending meltdown. The rational part of me knew setting boundaries was important, but the look on his little face made my resolve crumble. Besides, given how tired he'd been lately, he'd probably fall asleep in the stroller within minutes.

"OK, fine. Let's get you some shoes on," I conceded, earning a grateful smile from my son. "Rose, you stay with Da."

Rose nodded, her momentary disappointment instantly forgotten as she seized the opportunity for one-on-one attention. She giggled and launched herself at J, who caught her with the practiced ease of a father well-accustomed to his daughter's acrobatics.

"We'll be back in a couple hours," I promised, helping Killy with his shoes while trying to avoid jostling his cast. "Try not to let her redecorate anything while we're gone."

"No promises," J replied, already resigned to whatever fairy transformation awaited our living room.

Once Killy was ready, I carefully lifted him, mindful of his cast, and carried him out to my Jeep. After securing him in his car seat with the precision that came from years of practice, I headed toward Castle West shopping centre. Killy remained unusually quiet during the drive, clutching his favorite book with his good hand while staring out the window.

Amber was already waiting at Starbucks when we arrived, her designer sunglasses perched on top of her head despite the typical Irish overcast day. Two cups sat on the table in front of her - her standard mocha and what I recognized as a caramel macchiato for me. Even with all her success, Amber never forgot the little details about the people she cared about.

"Oh, I didn't know mijo was coming or I would have ordered him something," Amber said, her expression softening as she noticed Killy in his stroller. She'd always had a soft spot for my quiet son.

"It's fine. It was a last minute decision," I explained, settling into the chair across from her. "Killy, you want some hot cocoa?"

"Aye, please," he replied with that careful politeness that always made him seem older than his two years.

I smiled at his perfect manners. "Amber, can you watch him a moment?"

She nodded, sliding her sunglasses back down as if preparing for serious bodyguard duty. "Of course."

At the counter, I ordered a kid's hot cocoa, making sure they knew to make it lukewarm rather than hot. By the time I returned, Amber had already engaged Killy in conversation about his book, though he was responding with his typical economy of words.

He accepted the cocoa with a solemn "thank you" before returning to his book, content to be included without being the center of attention.

"So," I said, taking a sip of my perfectly prepared macchiato, "heard you had a lovely birthday." The understatement was deliberate - Amber's birthday had been the week before, and the whole group had been buzzing about Trevor's extravagant gift. Especially impressive considering he'd just taken her climbing Mount Olympus for their anniversary barely a week earlier.

"Oh my god," Amber's voice dropped to an excited whisper, her eyes lighting up with genuine delight. "It was so amazing. I thought Trev was taking me to a B&B in Kinsale, but he took me to the dock and we got on this yacht. I figured he'd rented it for dinner or something, but then he told me we were staying there."

She paused for dramatic effect, leaning forward slightly. "So then I thought he'd rented it for the night. Then he told me that the yacht was my gift. Trev bought me a fucking yacht for my birthday!"

"That is bloody brilliant," I said, genuinely impressed despite my general skepticism about extravagant gifts. There was something perfectly fitting about Trevor - who'd grown up with so little - now being able to give Amber something so spectacular.

"Right?!" Amber's excitement was infectious, her eyes bright with genuine joy. "I didn't think he could top our anniversary, but he found a way. So now I own a yacht!"

I laughed, taking another sip of my coffee. "And I'm guessing that just irks Michelle to no end given her decided lack of a yacht."

Amber's smirk was answer enough, that familiar competitive gleam appearing in her eyes. "Yes, a pretty nice bonus."

I rolled my eyes, familiar with the strange dynamic between my sister-in-law and Michelle. Their relationship had evolved from genuine animosity to something more complex - a rivalry that sometimes resembled friendship but never quite crossed that line completely.

"How is the show coming?" I asked, deliberately changing the subject.

Amber shrugged, absently stirring her mocha. "It's fine. It's weird having cameras follow my every move at work, but thankfully they aren't allowed in my house, so I can deal."

The casual response didn't quite mask her fatigue. I'd known Amber long enough to recognize the slight tightness around her eyes, the way her normally perfect posture had a hint of tension.

"How is Trev handling it?" I asked, checking on Killy who was now carefully turning pages with his uninjured hand.

"Fine," Amber replied with a small shrug. "He's actually headed to Limerick next week to check on progress of the new restaurant, and of course the crew is going with him." She rolled her eyes slightly. "I think they're also going to have a crew stay behind at the Cantina to film how it runs without him there."

There was a hint of amusement in her voice. Trevor had been the one to push for the show initially, his competitive streak and determination to outshine Gordon Ramsay driving the decision. Amber had agreed primarily to support his ambition, though I suspected she was now bearing the brunt of the invasion of privacy.

"And Bre? She causing any more trouble?" I asked, keeping my tone casual though we both knew her sister's capacity for drama was limitless. The last public confrontation between them at Paris Fashion Week had made international tabloid headlines.

Amber laughed, though there was little humor in it. "She has gone radio silent. Hasn't recorded an episode of her podcast in ages, not even during the various fashion weeks. The last episode that was recorded, Dr. Dalton had a guest on in place of Bre." She took a deliberate sip of her coffee before continuing. "I haven't heard from her since the end of Paris Fashion Week, and aside from Doll 10's desperate bid to sell their product through the new Ulta marketplace, there hasn't been a peep from Bre or really the company as a whole."

"So do you think she's retreating given your launches were so successful?" I asked.

"Oh, I doubt it," Amber's expression turned knowing. "She's laying low. Planning her next move. She's not smart, but she's cunning. It will take time, and it will probably flop, but she's definitely plotting something."

"Sisterly love," I teased, though we both knew the situation was far beyond normal sibling rivalry.

"Bre isn't my sister anymore," Amber said with a finality that spoke volumes. "She made that clear. We may share DNA, but you're far more my sister than she is."

The sentiment touched me deeply. After losing my parents and beloved younger sister in the accident when I was eighteen, family had become something I'd had to rebuild from scratch. Though

my parents and I had never been close, the loss of my sister had left a wound that never fully healed. Hearing Amber claim me as sister resonated in ways she probably didn't fully realize.

"If you need me to keep tabs on her digitally..." I offered, the suggestion casual though we both knew my hacking abilities were anything but ordinary.

Amber shook her head, stirring her coffee absently. "Not right now. I'm really not worried. I was concerned about her sabotaging my launch. Now that we've launched successfully..." She shrugged with practiced nonchalance. "She really isn't smart enough to do anything to really hurt me."

"The offer stands," I said, glancing over at Killy. As predicted, he had finished his cocoa and was now fast asleep in his stroller, his book still loosely clutched in his good hand. The cast seemed even more pronounced against his relaxed form.

"Mijo ok?" Amber asked, following my gaze with genuine concern.

I nodded, adjusting the light blanket I kept in the stroller to cover him better. "Yeah, he's just sleeping a lot since he broke his arm, and he's been extra clingy since the second trip to A&E. I think he's just healing."

"Poor kid," Amber said sympathetically. "Though he's tougher than he looks."

"How's Rach?" I asked, deliberately shifting the conversation to happier territory.

Amber's face transformed instantly at the mention of her daughter, that particular softness appearing that I recognized from my own reflection whenever the twins were mentioned. "She is good. We're already planning for her first Christmas. I convinced Lydia to make her a dress for the occasion."

I raised an eyebrow, genuinely surprised. "I thought Lydia didn't do kids' clothes."

Amber laughed, a hint of mischievous pride in her expression. "Normally she doesn't. But I reminded her she designed a dress for Tomi for Sosaidh's wedding and that it was her fault I was stuck with Diabla for London Fashion Week, so she owed me." She took a triumphant sip of her mocha. "I also told her if she couldn't design for my baby, she couldn't use my husband as a model for her pending men's line."

"She really wants Trev, doesn't she?" I smirked, remembering Lydia's not-so-subtle admiration of Trevor at various events.

Amber rolled her eyes dramatically. "She's ridiculous. She called him an 'Adonis with perfect proportions.'" Her voice shifted to a passable imitation of Lydia's distinctive accent. "As if I didn't know my own husband was gorgeous. But if she wants him in a photoshoot, she's making my daughter a Christmas dress."

I couldn't contain my laughter, "Adonis?! Bloody hell."

"Yeah..." Amber rolled her eyes, though her expression held more amusement than irritation. "I mean, I don't disagree... but I'm his wife!" She laughed, shaking her head at the absurdity of it all.

"Guess you and Trev are a legit power couple now," I said, taking another sip of my macchiato. The transition from struggling model and prep cook to international business moguls with their own reality show was quite the trajectory.

"So it would seem," Amber replied with a casual shrug that didn't quite mask her pride. "Guess Mich isn't the only celebrity in our group now." She couldn't resist the small smirk that followed, her competitive streak regarding Michelle never far from the surface.

The dynamic between them had always fascinated me - two strong-willed, successful women who respected each other's achievements while maintaining a perpetual state of friendly rivalry. It was like watching a peculiar form of sisterhood that neither would ever fully acknowledge.

"Did you hear Harley's song got released?" Amber asked, stirring her coffee absently.

I nodded, glancing at Killy to make sure he was still asleep. "Yeah. I'm guessing Hunter isn't too happy."

"No, he's not," Amber confirmed. "He was venting to Trev earlier this morning."

I couldn't help but smile at the strange dynamics of our interconnected group. "How does that even work? Trev and Hunter are practically best mates, Rach and Tomi are inseparable... and then there's you and Michelle..."

The contrast between the men's easy friendship and the women's more complicated relationship had always been a source of mild amusement for J and me.

"Yeah, we tolerate each other for the sake of our families," Amber shrugged with practiced nonchalance, though we both knew the reality was more nuanced. Their relationship had evolved from genuine animosity to something resembling mutual respect, even if neither would ever admit it outright.

The complex web of relationships that connected our families defied simple explanation - a testament to how life rarely followed neat, predictable patterns.

Michelle

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My alarm blared at 5:30 AM, far too soon after my late-night YouTube session. I'd managed maybe two more hours of fitful sleep, my mind refusing to quiet despite my body's exhaustion.

With practiced efficiency born from years on set, I showered quickly and pulled on comfortable sweats and a worn t-shirt - the transformation into Dixie would happen in hair and makeup anyway. No point in trying to look put together at this hour.
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Thara watched from the bed with her usual morning indignation, clearly unimpressed with my early call time disrupting her sleep schedule. "Come on, baby girl," I coaxed, holding her backpack open. "You can sleep more once we're on set."

She gave me a look that perfectly communicated her feline disdain before reluctantly entering her carrier, settling in with regal displeasure.

The Nashville streets were mercifully quiet as I drove to set, stopping at my regular coffee shop where the baristas already knew my order - a triple shot latte that might give me a fighting chance at functioning through today's fourteen-hour shoot.

I pulled into the studio lot just as the sky was beginning to lighten, the familiar routine providing comfort despite my exhaustion. Whatever drama Jon's song had stirred up would have to wait - for the next several hours, I'd be someone else entirely. Dixie didn't have a complicated history with Jon or a daughter caught in the middle. Dixie's problems were scripted, contained, solvable.

Right now, that sounded like exactly what I needed.

I made my way to hair and makeup, greeting the familiar faces of the crew with a tired smile as I settled into my chair. Thara immediately claimed her usual spot on the windowsill, curling up to resume the sleep I'd so rudely interrupted.

I was halfway through my coffee, listening to Maria chat about her son's baseball game, when Jon's face appeared on the TV mounted in the corner of the room. The morning entertainment show had been playing in the background, but suddenly it had my full attention.

"Oh, turn that up," I asked, setting my coffee down.

Someone raised the volume just in time to catch Jon mid-interview, looking healthier and more energized than I'd seen him in years.

"That's right," he was saying, that familiar confident smile in place. "We're ready to go back on the road. Next fall. Five dates at Madison Square Garden, then we're heading to London, Glasgow, and Dublin."

I blinked, genuinely surprised. Jon hadn't been on the road in years, not since his vocal surgery had almost forced him to cancel his last tour. For a while, he wasn't even sure he'd ever be able to tour again. The news hit me with conflicting emotions - I was still furious with him for the kiss, for using Harley, for all of it... but I also knew how much performing meant to him, how devastating it had been when doctors told him he might never tour again.

Then the full implications registered. A tour date in Dublin.

Shit.

Ireland was our sanctuary, the one place where my family could live relatively normal lives away from the constant shadow of my history with Jon. And now he was bringing that history directly to our doorstep, to the country where we'd built our home specifically to escape the Hollywood machine.

This wasn't a coincidence. Nothing Jon did ever was.

Maria's voice broke through my thoughts. "You okay, Michelle? You look like you've seen a ghost."

"Fine," I managed, forcing a smile that felt brittle. "Just surprised. Jon's voice was in pretty rough shape last I heard."

I kept my tone casual, though my mind was racing. The interview continued, Jon answering questions about the upcoming tour with practiced charm. The host was now asking about the song with Harley, and Jon's expression shifted to one I recognized all too well - the look he got when he was about to say something calculated for maximum impact.

"It's been amazing to connect with Harley through music," he was saying. "She's got her mother's talent, that's for sure. Who knows? Maybe she'll join us for a song or two on the tour."

My coffee cup froze halfway to my lips. He hadn't discussed this with us. Hadn't even hinted at the possibility. Yet here he was, on national television, casually suggesting my thirteen-year-old daughter might join his tour.

"That man never changes, does he?" Maria muttered as she began sectioning my hair, having worked with me long enough to understand the complicated dynamics at play.

"Never," I agreed, setting my cup down before my white-knuckled grip could shatter it.

I needed to call Hunter immediately, but I was due on set in twenty minutes, and Dixie's elaborate hair and makeup process couldn't be rushed. This would have to wait until my first break - though I could already picture Hunter's reaction. The careful control he'd maintained since the song's release would be severely tested by Jon's latest move.

The interview shifted to questions about the tour logistics, and I forced myself to tune it out. Getting worked up now wouldn't help anyone, least of all me with a full day of filming ahead. I'd learned long ago to compartmentalize - to put Michelle's problems in a box while Dixie took center stage.

But as Maria worked on transforming me into my character, I couldn't help wondering if Jon had timed this announcement deliberately - knowing I'd be on set, unable to immediately respond or intervene. It would be just like him to ensure he controlled the narrative for as long as possible.

The thought made my jaw clench, and Maria gently reminded me to relax my face so she could apply my makeup properly. I took a deep breath, pushing the anger down where I could access it later. Right now, I needed to focus on the job at hand.

Jon and his manipulations would still be there when I finished filming. They always were.

"Hey Chris!" I called to my co-star as I walked onto set, Dixie's confident swagger already settling into my movements despite my inner turmoil.

Chris looked up from his script, his expression shifting to one of concern as he approached. "Mich, you ok? I saw the news this morning."

The simple question carried layers of understanding. Chris and I had both grown up in the industry, and while we hadn't really known each other until this show, our paths and circles had crossed countless times over the years. Hollywood wasn't that big, especially for child stars of the 90s. Chris knew all too well the history between Jon and me - it had been the worst kept secret in Hollywood back then, fodder for gossip columns and industry whispers long before social media made privacy obsolete.

I sighed, adjusting Dixie's statement necklace with practiced fingers. "I'm pissed... but I can't dwell on it now."

Chris stepped closer, giving me a quick but supportive hug. "Use it. Dixie is fired up today. Let your fire channel into hers."

I nodded against his shoulder, grateful for the professional understanding that came from shared experience. "I will."

"And after filming you wanna grab a drink and vent?" he offered as we separated, his expression suggesting he knew exactly how much I needed an outlet that wasn't a carefully worded press statement.

"Hell yeah," I agreed with genuine relief, already looking forward to the chance to speak freely with someone who understood the industry's unique pressures. "Thanks."

With a final reassuring nod, I moved to my mark, taking a deep breath as I fully stepped into Dixie's skin. For the next several hours, Jon's tour announcement, Harley's song, and all the complicated emotions they stirred would have to wait. Dixie had her own problems to deal with, and right now, becoming her was the only way I could effectively handle mine.

"Places everyone!" the director called. "And... action!"

For the next several hours, I was fully immersed in Dixie's world, her sharp comebacks and calculated moves providing a welcome escape from my own complicated reality. By the time we broke for lunch, I was mentally exhausted but professionally satisfied - the morning's scenes had gone well, my focus remaining intact despite everything.

When I returned to my trailer to check on Thara, I finally picked up my phone. Twenty-seven missed calls. Damn it. The screen showed a parade of notifications - several from Jon, even more from Hunter, a couple from Holly, and a handful I recognized as media outlets already hunting for my reaction.

I was about to call Hunter back when my phone rang again. Jon's name flashed on the screen, and against my better judgment, I answered.

"Speak of the devil," I said, my voice still carrying Dixie's distinctive southern drawl. The character always lingered in my speech patterns for a while after intense scenes.

"I take it you saw my announcement," Jon replied, sounding energized in a way I hadn't heard in years.

"Oh, I saw," I sighed, settling onto my trailer's small sofa as Thara immediately claimed my lap. "I'm happy for you. I really am. I know how much touring means to you."

It wasn't a lie - despite everything, I understood the profound connection to performing live, the irreplaceable energy of an audience that studio work could never replicate.

"I'm on cloud nine," Jon's voice carried genuine joy. "When the doctor cleared me, I thought I was dreaming. I'm so happy, Michi."

The use of my old nickname, the sincere excitement in his voice - I felt my resolve softening despite myself. This was the Jon I'd first fallen for all those years ago, the passionate musician who lived for the stage.

"I can't even imagine what a relief this must be," I said honestly. "I know you've worked really hard to recover and make this possible."

"And I'm sure you saw I have a date in Dublin?"

The direct question snapped me back to reality. "Yeah..."

"Would you be willing to let Harley perform with me? You don't live far from Dublin, so it's not like she would have to be away from home," he suggested, as if this were a perfectly reasonable request after everything that had happened.

I sighed, running a hand through my hair and dislodging some of Dixie's carefully placed pins. "I'm not sure. I mean..."

"Please, Michi, one song," he pressed, his voice taking on that persuasive quality that had talked me into so many things over the years.

I could feel myself wavering, the familiar pattern reasserting itself despite all my promises to maintain boundaries. "I can't make any promises, but I will talk to Hunter."

"Thanks."

"You're welcome. And I am truly happy for you."

"Thanks, Michi. Gotta run. More press. Talk to you soon. Love you, bye." He hung up before I could respond to that casual "love you" - another calculated move, no doubt.

I stared at my phone in disbelief. How had I just agreed to even consider this? After the kiss, after using Harley without permission, after everything - I'd still let him talk me into potentially allowing our daughter to perform with him in Dublin.

Hunter was going to be livid, and honestly, I couldn't blame him. I wasn't even sure how I'd been talked into this myself.

Some patterns were harder to break than others, it seemed.

I pulled up Hunter's number and hit 'call,' mentally preparing for the conversation ahead. He answered on the third ring.

"Hey babe," he greeted, his voice carrying that particular warmth he reserved for me.

"Sorry I missed your calls. I was on set," I explained, absently stroking Thara who had settled more comfortably on my lap.

"No worries. I figured it was something like that. I just saw Jon was going on tour and that he was coming to Ireland. Wanted to make sure you knew. I ended up calling Trev to vent. I'm good now," he said, his tone surprisingly measured given the circumstances.

"Not sure you will be when I finish my next sentence..." I said hesitantly, already regretting the conversation I'd had with Jon.

Hunter paused, wariness creeping into his voice. "What?"

"Well, Jon asked if Harley could perform a song with him in Dublin," I said, bracing for his reaction.

"And you told him no," Hunter stated rather than asked, absolute certainty in his voice.

"I told him I would talk to you about it," I admitted, closing my eyes as I waited for the inevitable.

"Are you fucking kidding me?!" The explosion came exactly as expected, Hunter's carefully maintained control shattering. "Michelle, what the fuck?! After everything he's done, you're entertaining the idea? There is nothing that man can do for you to truly be done, is there?!"

"Hunter, I just, her career, I mean..." I fumbled for an explanation that suddenly seemed inadequate even to my own ears.

"No. Over my dead body," he cut me off, fury radiating through the phone. "You do what you want with Jon. Go fuck the bastard for all I care, but I will divorce you before I let you take my kids anywhere near that man again!"

The word hit me like a physical blow. "Divorce? Hunter... you don't mean..."

"If it means protecting my girls, I do, because clearly you're incapable of protecting them if he is involved." The cold certainty in his voice was worse than the anger.

"Hunter, I..."

"I can't talk to you right now. We'll continue this later. Maybe you will come to your senses," he said, ending the call abruptly.

I sat there staring at my phone, Thara looking up at me with curious eyes as if she too was trying to process what had just happened. The word "divorce" echoed in my mind, Hunter's threat landing with devastating precision because we both knew it wasn't empty. For all his love for me, his devotion to our daughters was absolute - he would do anything to protect them, even if it meant walking away from us.

And the worst part was, I couldn't even blame him. What had I been thinking? After everything with Jon - the kiss, the unauthorized recording with Harley, years of manipulation - I'd still let him talk me into considering this. Still fallen into the same pattern that had defined our relationship from the beginning.

The knock on my trailer door startled me back to reality. "Five minutes, Michelle!" the PA called.

I had to pull myself together. Had to be Dixie for a few more hours before I could fully process what had just happened with Hunter. With shaking hands, I texted Jon:

"Harley is not performing in Dublin. Not happening."

His reply came minutes later: "I'm doing press in Ireland the next couple weeks. What about her appearing with me on the Late Late Show?"

I stared at the message in disbelief. After that call with Hunter, after the clear threat to our marriage, Jon was still pushing for access to Harley? The audacity was breathtaking, even for him.

I paused, a sudden clarity cutting through my emotional turmoil. Why was I the one getting yelled at? Why was I the intermediary in this situation? Let Hunter direct his anger at the person actually responsible.

"Ask the parent that is actually with her in Ireland," I typed back, a small act of rebellion against being placed in this impossible position.

"You want me to ask Hunter? OK."

I sighed, already imagining Hunter's response. At least now his fury would be aimed at the right target. Jon had no idea what he was walking into, but that wasn't my problem anymore. I'd spent too many years managing the fallout from Jon's actions, smoothing things over, being the buffer. No more.

I gave Thara's head a quick kiss, checked my appearance in the mirror to ensure Dixie was still intact despite my personal turmoil, and headed back to set. The afternoon's scenes were emotionally demanding - Dixie confronting her ex about his betrayal, ironically enough. At least I'd have plenty of authentic emotion to draw from.

As I took my position, waiting for the director's call, I couldn't help wondering if I'd just made things better or worse. Either way, I'd taken a step toward breaking the pattern that had defined too much of my life for too long.

Hunter's anger was justified. Jon's manipulation was predictable. But for once, I wasn't going to be caught in the middle trying to please everyone. It was time they dealt with each other directly.

"Action!" the director called, and I channeled all my complicated emotions into Dixie's confrontation scene, delivering one of the most powerful performances of my career.

Hunter

I stared at my phone, still seething from the conversation with Michelle. The word "divorce" hung in the air of my workshop, heavier than I'd intended but not entirely untrue. When it came to protecting my daughters, there were no limits to what I'd do - even if it meant walking away from the woman I loved more than anything.

The familiar smell of motor oil and metal surrounded me as I tried to focus on the bike I'd been working on before Michelle's call. Mechanical problems were straightforward, fixable with the right tools and knowledge. Human problems - especially those involving Jon - were infinitely more complicated.

I'd been in this position too many times before - watching Michelle get pulled back into Jon's orbit despite her promises that she was done with him for good. The pattern was so predictable it would almost be funny if it wasn't tearing our family apart. Jon would cross a line, Michelle would be furious, boundaries would be set, and then somehow, inevitably, those boundaries would erode until we were right back where we started.

But using our daughter? That was a line I wouldn't allow to be crossed again. Harley was thirteen - talented, yes, but still a child. My child. And after what happened with the unauthorized recording, I'd thought Michelle and I were finally on the same page about keeping Jon at arm's length from our family.

Clearly, I'd been wrong.

I set down my wrench with more force than necessary, making Robbie look up from his spot in the corner of the workshop. The golden retriever had been keeping me company, his steady presence a calming influence that wasn't quite working today.

"Sorry, boy," I said, giving him a quick scratch behind the ears. "Just trying to figure out how we ended up here again."

My phone buzzed with a call. I half expected it to be Michelle, but the name that appeared on my screen made my jaw clench.

Jon.

What the hell did he want now?

I let it ring several times, debating whether to answer or let it go to voicemail. The rational part of me knew ignoring him wouldn't solve anything, but the part of me that was still furious at the thought of him using my daughter as a prop in his career revival wasn't feeling particularly rational.

Finally, knowing this conversation was inevitable, I answered.

"What?" My greeting was deliberately curt, making it clear this wasn't a social call.

"Hunter, hey," Jon's voice carried that false casual tone he always used when he wanted something. "Michelle suggested I talk to you directly about Harley."

Of course she did. At least that showed some progress on her part - redirecting him to me instead of trying to play mediator as she usually did.

"There's nothing to talk about," I replied flatly, moving outside the workshop so Robbie wouldn't be disturbed by what was likely to become a heated conversation. "Harley will not be performing with you. Not in Dublin, not anywhere."

"Look, I understand you're protective," Jon continued, undeterred. "But this is a huge opportunity for her. I'm doing press in Ireland the next couple weeks, including the Late Late Show. Having her appear with me would give her amazing exposure."

The audacity of this man never ceased to amaze me. After recording with her behind our backs, after trying to kiss my wife, after years of manipulation - he still thought he had any right to make decisions about my daughter's career.

"Let me be crystal clear," I said, my voice deadly calm despite the anger building inside me. "You will not use my daughter to boost your relevance. You will not drag her into the spotlight before she's ready. And you will absolutely not undermine my authority as her father again."

"Hunter, be reasonable. She's talented. The world deserves to hear her. And she wants this - have you even asked her?"

That was it - the match to the powder keg of my patience.

"Don't you dare pretend to know what my daughter wants," I growled. "You had no right to record with her without our permission, you have no right to plan her appearances, and you have no right to question my parenting. Stay away from my family, Jon. All of them."

Jon chuckled, the sound grating against my already frayed nerves. "Now you know that isn't going to happen. Michi and I will always have a bond."

I clenched my fist, ready to unleash another round of fury, when something Trevor had said to me earlier suddenly resurfaced in my mind. 'Oh, the wanker is going to be in Ireland? Invite him to the Cantina... show him some Irish hospitality,' he had suggested with that particular smirk that always meant trouble.

Taking a deep breath, I forced myself to sound calmer than I felt. "Look, Harley is not performing or appearing with you. That's non-negotiable." I paused, the words I was about to say feeling foreign on my tongue. "However, if you'd like to meet for dinner, I would love to have you join us at my friend's restaurant next week. Mich will be home by then, and maybe we can clear the air."

The invitation physically pained me to extend, but continuing this battle over the phone was getting me nowhere. Trevor's idea had merit - on our turf, surrounded by people loyal to us, we could make it abundantly clear to Jon exactly where the boundaries stood.

"Dinner?" Jon sounded genuinely surprised, clearly having expected more resistance. "That's... unexpected."

"Take it or leave it," I replied, keeping my tone neutral. "But understand that it doesn't change my position on Harley's involvement with your tour or press."

"Fair enough," he agreed, a bit too quickly. "Text me the details. Looking forward to it."

As we ended the call, I couldn't help wondering if I'd just made a strategic move or a massive mistake. Either way, I needed to call Trevor immediately. If we were going to host Jon at the Cantina, we needed to make sure the evening went exactly according to our plan, not his.

One thing was certain - this dinner would be anything but the friendly reconciliation Jon was likely imagining. It was time he understood exactly what happened when he messed with my family on our home turf.

I ended the call and immediately dialed Trevor, my mind already mapping out how this would play out. He answered on the second ring.

"How'd it go with Michelle?" he asked without preamble, the background noise suggesting he was at the Cantina.

"Not great," I admitted. "But that's not why I'm calling. I just spoke to Jon."

"The wanker himself? What did he want?"

"To get Harley on the Late Late Show with him while he's doing press in Ireland." Even saying it out loud made my blood pressure rise again.

Trevor's colorful curse confirmed he understood exactly how outrageous the request was. "And what did you tell him?"

"That Harley won't be performing or appearing with him, but..." I hesitated briefly. "I invited him to dinner at the Cantina next week."

There was a pause, then Trevor's laugh - low and slightly dangerous. "You took my suggestion seriously? Brilliant. When?"

"I didn't set a date yet. Wanted to coordinate with you first." I moved back into my workshop, grabbing a rag to wipe the grease from my hands. "Michelle should be home by then too."

"Have you talked to her since..." He didn't finish the sentence, but he didn't need to. Trevor was one of the few people who knew exactly how serious my earlier threat had been.

"Not yet," I admitted. "She's still filming. We'll talk tonight."

"Right then. How about Wednesday? The place will be busy enough to have witnesses, but not so packed that we can't have a proper conversation."

I could hear the strategic thinking in his voice - Trevor might be a renowned chef now, but he'd never lost the street smarts from his rougher days. Like me, he understood that sometimes messages needed to be delivered in person to truly be effective.

"Wednesday works. I'll let Jon know." I paused, then added, "This isn't just dinner, Trev."

"I know exactly what it is," he assured me. "A chance to make it crystal clear what happens when he messes with your family. Don't worry - I'll make sure everything is... perfect."

The emphasis on that last word told me Trevor was already planning something beyond a simple meal. Good. Jon needed to understand that Ireland wasn't Nashville or LA. Here, we had home field advantage, and the rules were different.

"I need to call Michelle," I said, realizing I should give her a heads-up about the dinner before Jon inevitably contacted her about it.

"Go easy on her," Trevor advised, surprising me slightly. "She's caught in the middle, and Jon's manipulated her for decades. Old habits and all that."

"Since when are you the voice of reason?" I asked, though I knew he was right.

"Since Amber knocked some sense into me," he replied with a laugh. "Besides, you love her. And she loves you. Don't let that wanker come between you."

After ending the call with Trevor, I stared at my phone, debating whether to call or text Michelle. Our earlier conversation had ended badly - the word "divorce" hanging between us like a loaded weapon. I'd meant it in the moment, but the thought of actually walking away from her... No. That wasn't the answer. We needed to present a united front against Jon, not let him drive a wedge between us.

I finally decided on a text, knowing she was likely still filming:

'We need to talk when you're done on set. Jon called me. I invited him to dinner at the Cantina next Wednesday. Not to make peace - to set boundaries. I love you. We'll figure this out.'

"Boundaries"

For reasons that eluded me, Hunter had invited Jon to join our family for dinner at the Cantina. He was way too calm about it. He was definitely up to something, and he absolutely wouldn't tell me what.

I was home for a week - much needed time before I had to return to Nashville for filming and then the touring schedule that loomed ahead. The brief respite felt both luxurious and insufficient, knowing how quickly it would pass.

"Hunter, please, will you tell me what your plan is?" I asked, following him into our bedroom as he selected a shirt from the closet.

"I told you, Mich. We're going to clear the air and set some boundaries. That's all," he said, his tone deliberately casual in a way that screamed he was holding something back.

I crossed my arms, studying him carefully. "You invited him to dinner at the Cantina, invited all our couple friends, but insisted the kids not be there. You and Trevor are definitely up to something. I know you are."

Hunter turned to face me, that particular smile playing at his lips - the one that meant he was enjoying keeping a secret. "Like I said, just setting boundaries. Now, you should wear that plum dress with the slit on the side. You look amazing in it."

"We're dressing up? For the Cantina?" I asked, genuinely confused. While the restaurant was upscale, it wasn't typically the kind of place where formal wear was necessary, especially for a private dinner with friends.

"It is an occasion," he replied, moving past me to grab his leather jacket.

"What occasion?" I pressed, following him down the hallway.

He paused at the top of the stairs and turned back with that infuriating smirk. "To understandings."

I sighed heavily, feeling my anxiety spike. Whatever Hunter and Trevor had planned, it went far beyond a simple dinner conversation. The fact that they'd coordinated outfits, invited specific people, and were being deliberately mysterious about it all suggested something more strategic was at play.

"Hunter, you're making me nervous," I admitted, unable to hide my concern.

"Good," he replied simply. "Jon should be nervous too."

I got ready as Hunter instructed, slipping into the plum dress that hugged me perfectly, applying my makeup with careful precision, and fastening delicate heels that clicked against the hardwood floors. When I made my way downstairs, Hunter was already waiting - dressed in a full black suit that made my breath catch slightly. I had to practically force him into formal wear for red carpet events, yet here

he was, choosing to wear one on his own tonight. The deliberate nature of it only heightened my anxiety.

"You look beautiful, baby. Grab Thara and let's go," he said, offering me his arm.

I studied him carefully. "You WANT me to bring Thara? You usually try to talk me out of taking her or begrudgingly accept it."

"She makes you happy," he replied simply. "Bring her."

The casual acceptance threw me off balance more than anything else had. I sighed, already sensing that tonight would be unlike any dinner I'd experienced before, and retrieved Thara from her favorite perch on the window seat. She tolerated being placed in her travel backpack with her usual feline dignity, though her eyes promised retribution for the indignity later.

The entire drive to Cork, I begged Hunter to tell me what the plan was. He refused every attempt, his calm demeanor never wavering despite my increasing anxiety.

When we arrived at the Cantina, Trevor led us directly to the VIP Room. I immediately noticed the significant change - the large round table that normally dominated the space had been replaced with a long rectangular one, positioned with clear intention.

"Welcome," Trevor greeted us with a smirk that matched Hunter's perfectly.

"Is everything ready?" Hunter asked him, as if I weren't standing right there desperately seeking answers.

"As requested," Trev nodded, exchanging a look with Hunter that confirmed they'd been planning this for some time.

"What is going on?!" I demanded, my patience completely exhausted.

"A lovely dinner," Trevor replied smoothly as Amber walked through the door, followed by the other couples we'd invited.

I turned to her desperately. "Amber, do you know what's going on?"

"Dinner with your ex as far as I know," she said with a sympathetic smile that suggested she knew more than she was letting on.

I sighed, realizing I was completely outnumbered and outmaneuvered. Whatever this evening was, Hunter and Trevor had orchestrated it with military precision, and I was about to find out exactly what they had planned.

As Livvie and Jeremy walked in, I immediately gravitated toward my best friend's side.

"Jeremy, do you know what is going on?" I asked desperately.

"Sorry Love, all Trev said was we were having a nice dinner with the wanker," Jeremy replied with a shrug that suggested he'd already accepted his role as an unwitting participant.

I sighed heavily. "Something is up. I know it."

"Probably," he agreed, his expression turning amused. "But best to just go with it. Hunter and Trev know what they're doing. And there probably won't be any cliffs involved."

"You're not helping," I said as Hal and Kara walked in, greeting everyone warmly.

"Who else is coming?" I asked Hunter, trying to piece together the puzzle from the seating arrangement.

"Pete and Gina. I invited James and Aine, but they couldn't make it," Hunter replied, already gesturing for everyone to find their seats.

I watched as the table filled strategically - Hunter positioned at the head with me on one side, an conspicuously empty seat on the other. Jeremy sat next to me, followed by Livvie, then Amber, with Trevor anchoring that end. Across from me sat another empty seat, with Hal and Kara beyond it. When Pete and Gina arrived moments later, they completed the opposite side of the table, their placement clearly predetermined.

"Gang's all here," I observed, my unease growing with each carefully orchestrated detail.

"Except for our guest of honor, who should be along shortly," Hunter smirked, checking his watch with the satisfaction of someone whose plans were proceeding exactly on schedule.

The knowing looks being exchanged around the table confirmed that everyone except me had been briefed on whatever was about to unfold. I settled into my seat, Thara's backpack resting against my chair, and braced myself for whatever came next.

"Give me Thara," Hunter said suddenly.

I looked at him, confused. "What?"

"Give me Thara," he repeated, his tone brooking no argument.

"I can't take her out inside the Cantina," I protested.

"It's fine, this once," Trevor affirmed from across the table, clearly in on whatever this was.

How did my sweet baby girl factor into his plans? I sighed and carefully lifted Thara from her backpack, handing her over to Hunter. He held her with practiced ease in one hand while stroking her silky fur with the other. She purred contentedly, completely unbothered by the unusual arrangement.

Trevor dimmed the lighting in the room, creating an almost theatrical atmosphere that made my stomach clench with apprehension.

"Are you Sonny Corinthos now?" I asked, referring to the mob boss character from General Hospital - a show Hunter and I had watched together countless times. The setup was beginning to feel uncomfortably like a scene from that very show.

Hunter just smirked, his hand continuing to stroke Thara as if she were some kind of prop in his carefully orchestrated scene.

The door to the VIP room opened, and Jon was led in by one of the staff members. His expression shifted from confident to uncertain as he took in the tableau before him - the long rectangular table, the strategic seating arrangement, the deliberately moody lighting, and Hunter sitting at the head like some kind of crime boss, casually petting my cat.

"Welcome, welcome," Hunter said smoothly, gesturing to the empty seat beside him. "Please, have a seat."

Jon hesitated for just a moment, clearly sensing that something was off about this entire setup, before moving to sit down.

"Hey," I said softly, offering him a genuine smile despite my own confusion about what was unfolding.

"Hey," Jon replied, settling into the chair beside Hunter. His eyes flickered briefly to Thara, who was now contentedly purring in my husband's lap, before returning to survey the room.

"You know all of our friends?" I asked, trying to establish some semblance of normalcy despite the theatrical staging.

Jon looked around the table, his gaze cataloging faces. "Some. I know Livvie and Jeremy, good to see you both again. I have met Trevor and Amber in passing. Oh, Hal and Kara. I've hired Hal to fly me before and Kara has interviewed me. Not sure I've ever met you two."

I nodded, gesturing toward the remaining couple. "That's Pete. He's Jeremy's childhood friend, and his wife Gina."

"Nice to meet you both," Jon said politely.

"Likewise, mate. Heard about your tour stopping in Dublin next year. Very exciting," Pete offered, his tone friendly but measured.

"It is," Jon agreed, seeming to relax slightly at the normal conversation.

Fionn appeared then to take our drink order, and I immediately noticed something odd. Fionn was one of Trevor's head chefs and managers - he shouldn't be taking drink orders. The deliberate choice only reinforced that every single detail of this evening had been meticulously planned.

"What can I get everyone?" Fionn asked, his expression professionally neutral.

We all ordered drinks - I went with a glass of wine while Hunter ordered an Irish whiskey, neat. Jon ordered a craft beer, and the others followed with their usual preferences. As Fionn disappeared to fetch our drinks, I caught Hunter's eye. He was still stroking Thara with that infuriating smirk, looking completely in control of whatever was about to happen.

"So, Jon," Hunter began, his voice casual but carrying an undertone of steel, "we're glad you could join us tonight."

"Thanks for the invitation," Jon replied, though I could detect a note of wariness creeping into his voice. "Though I have to admit, I'm not entirely sure what this is about."

"All in good time," Trevor interjected smoothly from across the table. "All in good time."

"I thought you wanted to clear the air," Jon said, his earlier confidence beginning to fray at the edges as he recognized the calculated nature of this setup.

"Oh, yes. That is our primary objective tonight," Hunter replied, his voice dropping into a tone that was distinctly different from his usual demeanor - more commanding, more dangerous. "But first, let's enjoy our drinks. No need to rush right to business."

The casual statement carried an undercurrent of threat that made even me shift uncomfortably in my seat. This wasn't the Hunter I knew - the laid-back motocross champion who preferred actions to words. This was a version of him I'd rarely witnessed, and it was both impressive and slightly terrifying.

Fionn returned with our drinks, distributing them with practiced efficiency before disappearing again. The moment he left, the atmosphere in the room seemed to shift, becoming heavier, more charged.

Hunter said, still stroking Thara with deliberate, almost hypnotic movements. "So... how was your tour announcement received?"

"Quite well," Jon took a long pull from his beer, clearly trying to settle his nerves."The press seemed very interested. Especially the Irish date."

Jeremy leaned back in his chair, exchanging a meaningful glance with Livvie. Amber caught my eye from across the table, her expression unreadable but clearly invested in how this would unfold.

"You know what I find interesting?" Hunter continued, his eyes never leaving Jon's face. "You've been in Ireland for press the past couple weeks. You've done interviews, photo shoots, the whole circuit. And yet, you haven't once reached out to check on how Michelle was doing after that little incident in Nashville."

Jon's jaw tightened almost imperceptibly. "I didn't think it was appropriate given the circumstances."

"How thoughtful of you," Trevor said dryly. "Considering you were the one who created those circumstances."

The tension at the table became palpable. I watched as Jon's hands clenched around his beer bottle, clearly realizing he'd walked into something far more orchestrated than a simple dinner conversation.

"Look," Jon said, attempting to regain control of the narrative. "If this is about the kiss, I apologized for that. Michelle and I have history. Sometimes things happen in the moment."

"Things happen," Hunter repeated, his voice dangerously quiet. "You mean like you trying to manipulate my wife into letting our thirteen-year-old daughter perform with you on television?"

Jon opened his mouth to respond, but Hunter continued, his tone brooking no interruption.

"Or like you've spent the better part of three decades using my wife as an emotional crutch while simultaneously undermining her at every turn?"

"You don't know anything about my history with Michi," Jon said defensively, his voice rising slightly.

"I know you weren't man enough to satisfy a woman, so you manipulated a twelve-year-old girl instead. And you couldn't even satisfy her," Hunter started, his words cutting through the room like a blade.

"Hunter!" I cried out, shocked by the directness of the accusation being made so publicly.

Hunter held up his arm in a gesture that silenced me completely. "The time will come for you to speak. That time is not now."

I blinked, stunned. Hunter had never, in all our years together, shushed me like that. The fact that he did now, in front of everyone, underscored just how serious this was.

Hunter turned his attention back to Jon, his expression cold and measured. "I know what you did with my wife. I know your pattern. How can I assume anything else but that you're doing the same with my daughter?"

"I would never touch Harley like that and you know it," Jon insisted, his voice taking on a desperate edge as he realized the gravity of what was being implied.

"Perhaps not," Hunter acknowledged, his tone remaining glacial. "But you can see how one might wonder given your recent actions. And if there is one thing you and I have in common, it is that family is everything. I will do whatever I must to protect mine."

The threat hung in the air between them, unspoken but perfectly understood. Around the table, no one moved. Even Thara seemed to sense the shift in energy, her purring ceasing as she settled more firmly against Hunter's chest.

"That includes," Hunter continued, "making sure you understand exactly where the lines are drawn. And what happens when you cross them."

Fionn returned then with food for everyone, the timing almost theatrical in its precision. It was clear Trevor had orchestrated a prepared menu down to the finest detail. Each plate was set down with careful deliberation, the presentation immaculate.

"Has the food been prepared to my specifications?" Trevor asked formally, his chef's authority evident in every word.

Fionn nodded respectfully. "Yes Chef, exactly as you requested."

Jon looked up, clearly catching the exchange and sensing there was more to this than a simple meal.

Fionn moved to Trevor's side, and they spoke briefly in Irish - a language Jon didn't understand. Whatever was said made Fionn nod with understanding before he disappeared back toward the kitchen.

"Please, enjoy. Compliments of the chef," Trevor announced, settling back into his seat with the satisfied expression of someone who had just executed the first phase of a carefully planned operation.

Jon looked down at his plate, then across at me, confusion and wariness etched across his features.

I shrugged, genuinely uncertain what Trevor had prepared, though I suspected it was far more than just food.

"What specifications did you give the chef?" Jon asked, his voice carrying an edge of suspicion.

"Oh, nothing for you to worry about there, mate," Trevor replied smoothly, cutting into his own meal with practiced precision. "Just wanted to make sure everything was perfect."

Hunter nodded in agreement, taking a deliberate bite of his food. "You're our guest after all. Eat, please."

The casual invitation felt anything but casual. Everything about this evening - from the seating arrangement to the dimmed lighting to the carefully chosen words - was designed to make a point. And as Jon reluctantly picked up his fork, I realized this dinner wasn't about clearing the air at all.

It was about sending a message.

Hunter wouldn't poison Jon, right? Trevor wouldn't. No, surely not...

I picked at my food nervously, watching as Jon tentatively took a bite of his meal. Nothing happened. He didn't collapse or convulse or show any signs of distress. I felt my shoulders relax slightly, though the tension in the room remained thick enough to cut with a knife.

"So, as I was saying," Hunter continued, his voice calm and measured as he cut another piece of his meal, "I will protect my family at all costs. Especially from a literal grandfather who can't let go of his lost youth."

Jon's fork paused halfway to his mouth at the deliberate jab about his age.

"Michelle is my wife," Hunter stated with absolute certainty. "And Harley is my daughter. You have no claim to them. Whatever you were able to get away with when she was married to Rocky..." He paused, letting the implication hang in the air. "Well, I'm not him. Unlike him, I am a man that will keep them safe from you."

The words landed with precision, each one calculated to wound. Around the table, I could feel everyone's attention fixed on this exchange - Livvie and Jeremy exchanging knowing glances, Pete and Gina watching with the fascination of people witnessing something they'd never forget, Amber's expression unreadable but clearly invested.

"That's not fair," Jon protested weakly. "You don't know what Rocky and I—"

"I know exactly what Rocky was," Hunter cut him off coldly. "A man so broken by his own insecurities that he couldn't see the treasure he had. A man who let you manipulate him and his wife for years. A man who ultimately failed to protect the people he loved."

Hunter set down his fork with deliberate slowness. "I won't make his mistakes."

"Hunter, come on," Jon tried again, attempting to appeal to some sense of reason. "We're both men who care about Michelle. Surely we can find some common ground here."

"Common ground?" Trevor laughed from across the table, the sound sharp and humorless. "The only common ground between you two is that you both love Michelle. But that's where the similarity ends, mate. Because Hunter actually puts her needs above his own ego. Something you've never managed to do in your entire life."

I watched as Jon's face flushed, anger and embarrassment warring across his features. This wasn't a conversation - it was a carefully orchestrated dismantling of everything Jon had built his relationship with me on.

"You've spent decades," Hunter continued, his voice dropping lower, more intimate in its cruelty, "convincing yourself that what you did was love. That manipulating a child was protection. That betraying my wife repeatedly was somehow justified because of your history together. But here's what I see when I look at you, Jon: I see a man terrified of irrelevance. A man so desperate to hold onto the past that he can't see he's destroying the present."

Jon opened his mouth to respond, but Hunter raised a hand, silencing him.

"I'm not finished," Hunter said quietly. "You want to know what really bothers me? It's not that you tried to kiss my wife. It's not even that you recorded with my daughter without permission. What bothers me is that you genuinely believe you have the right to these things. That somewhere in that aging rock star brain of yours, you've convinced yourself that your feelings, your needs, your nostalgia somehow trumps my family's wellbeing."

The room had gone completely silent. Even the ambient noise of the restaurant seemed to fade away.

"So here's what's going to happen," Hunter said, stroking Thara with renewed focus. "You're going to eat this meal. You're going to listen to what I have to say. And then you're going to understand, crystal clear, that your time with Michelle - the time where you had any kind of hold over her - is finished. Completely and utterly finished."

I looked at Jon wide-eyed, then turned to Hunter and finally Jeremy, pleading silently with my eyes for someone to do something. Anything.

Jeremy grabbed my hand under the table and gave it a reassuring squeeze, his touch grounding me even as the conversation spiraled into territory I hadn't anticipated.

"Mate, if I were you I'd listen to him," Jeremy said calmly. "Hunter isn't a bloke you want to trifle with."

"Really? And what about you? You're awfully close to Michelle. How is that any different?" Jon shot back, clearly trying to deflect by attacking from another angle.

"For starters, what we have is platonic," Jeremy replied without hesitation. "I love her dearly, but never romantically. For another, I didn't take advantage of her as a child." His accent thickened with emotion. "You and I are nothing alike, mate. You best believe that. I actually love Michelle. She is my best friend. Not a pawn."

"And I trust Jeremy," Hunter added, his voice carrying absolute certainty. "He has Michelle's best interests at heart. You do not. You never have."

"I loved Michi, you do not understand what it was like..." Jon started, attempting to appeal to some shared understanding.

"I don't understand?" Hunter's voice dropped dangerously low. "You're right. I don't understand what it was like to grow up a child star. I can never know what it was like to have adult pressures at ten years old. I can never know what it was like to have a room full of rock stars twice my age taking advantage of me. And I can never know what it was like to have full grown fucking men fawning over me like a prize." He paused, his jaw clenching. "Certainly I can't know what it was like for one in particular to claim he was in love all the while staying with his high school girlfriend and making her be the other woman at fucking twelve."

The rawness in his voice made my stomach clench.

"Do you get how disgusting you are?" Hunter continued, his control slipping just enough to show the fury beneath. "Even if you hadn't cheated with her, hit her, abused her mentally and physically... all of that would be disgusting. But you did it all to a child. What kind of man does that?"

"OK, that's enough!" I cried out, unable to sit silently any longer. "This is my life. Don't you think I should have a say in how this is discussed?"

Hunter turned to me, and I saw something in his expression that stopped me cold - not anger directed at me, but a fierce protectiveness that bordered on desperation.

"You believe it was all consensual," he said, his voice gentler now but no less intense. "But you were too young to consent. I know your childhood wasn't typical and you felt like an adult. I know you thought you were in love with him. But at the end of the day, all of that is irrelevant because you were a child."

He paused, letting the weight of his next words settle. "And to this day, he still has a hold on your mind because he groomed you."

My eyes widened. I had never heard that word applied to what happened between Jon and me. It wasn't how I had categorized it, and hearing it now felt like a serious accusation - one that made my skin crawl even as I wanted to deny it.

"I did no such thing," Jon insisted, his voice rising defensively.

"She. Was. A. Child," Hunter said with absolute finality, each word a hammer blow. "And so is Harley. And you're still manipulating children. I can't save teenage Michelle from you. But I sure as hell can keep my daughter from you."

The silence that followed was deafening. Around the table, no one moved. Even Thara seemed to sense the magnitude of what had just been said, her body going rigid against Hunter's chest.

"This is all so heavy for dinner conversation," Trevor said smoothly, breaking the suffocating tension. "Jon, have you seen much of our beautiful country? The cliffs are beautiful this time of year."

"Oh yes, Irish cliffs in the fall are remarkable," Hal interjected with a grin. "Though I hear some people find them absolutely *cliff-hanging*."

I stared at him in disbelief, my glare sharp enough to cut glass. Of all the moments to attempt a dad joke, this was decidedly not it.

"Really, Hal?" I said flatly.

"What?" He held up his hands defensively, though his eyes glinted with amusement. "I'm just saying the views are *precipitous*."

Despite everything - despite the intensity of what Hunter had just said, despite the weight of accusations hanging over the table, despite Jon's obvious discomfort - a few people around the table let out reluctant chuckles. It was exactly the kind of absurd deflection needed to break the stranglehold of tension.

"Mate, those are absolutely terrible," Pete said, shaking his head but smiling.

"I try," Hal replied with exaggerated pride.

Jon looked between them, clearly confused by the sudden shift in tone. But that was the point, I realized. Hunter and Trevor had made their statement. Now came the part where they reminded Jon that this was their territory, their people, their rules. The lightness was deliberate - a reminder that while they could be brutal, they could also be merciful. As long as Jon understood the boundaries.

"Actually," Hunter said, his voice returning to its normal cadence as he continued to stroke Thara, "the cliffs near Doolin are spectacular. You should visit before you leave Ireland, Jon. Really get a sense of the landscape."

There was something in the way he said it - something in the deliberate casualness - that made it clear this wasn't a friendly suggestion.

Jon set down his fork carefully, the color draining from his face as he registered the implication in Hunter's words. The mention of cliffs, combined with everything that had come before, wasn't a casual tourism recommendation.

"I'll... keep that in mind," Jon said quietly, reaching for his water glass with a slightly trembling hand.

"Do," Trevor said pleasantly, cutting into his meal. "They're really quite breathtaking. Literally life-altering views."

I felt Jeremy's hand squeeze mine again under the table, a silent acknowledgment of what was happening. This was psychological warfare dressed up as dinner conversation - a masterclass in threat delivered with Irish charm and veiled references.

"You know what I find interesting about the cliffs?" Hunter continued conversationally, as if they were discussing the weather. "People often talk about how they're a metaphor for life. You stand at the edge, and you realize how small you really are. How insignificant your problems become when faced with something so much larger than yourself."

Jon didn't respond, just pushed food around his plate without eating.

"I think you need that perspective, Jon," Hunter said. "I think you need to understand that your hold over Michelle, your ability to manipulate situations, your importance in her life - it's all very small in the grand scheme of things. She's moved on. She has a family. A real family. And you're just... noise."

The word landed like a final nail in a coffin.

"The thing about cliffs," Trevor added, his Irish accent somehow making the threat even more menacing, "is that they're beautiful precisely because they're dangerous. You respect them. You keep your distance. You certainly don't go poking around where you're not wanted."

"Are you threatening me?" Jon finally spoke, his voice barely above a whisper.

"No," Hunter said simply. "I'm explaining reality to you. There's a difference. A threat would be me telling you what I'm going to do if you continue to contact my wife inappropriately or attempt to manipulate my daughter. This is just... friendly advice from one man to another."

He paused, stroking Thara with deliberate slowness.

"Consider this your only warning, Jon. Stay away from my family. Completely. No calls, no texts, no surprise appearances. No using mutual friends as intermediaries. No trying to 'reconnect' with Michelle through nostalgia or shared history. Nothing."

"And if I don't?" Jon asked, though his tone suggested he already knew the answer.

"Then you'll find out why it's not wise to make an enemy of someone in their own country," Hunter replied calmly. "Someone with resources, connections, and absolutely nothing left to lose when it comes to protecting what's his."

Around the table, everyone had stopped eating. The only sound was the soft clink of silverware as Hunter continued his meal as if he hadn't just essentially threatened Jon's life in the most civilized way possible.

"I think we need more drinks," Trevor said, breaking the suffocating tension with practiced ease and waving Fionn over with a casual gesture.

"Yes Chef?" Fionn appeared almost instantly, as if he'd been hovering just beyond sight, waiting for his cue.

"Another round of drinks. And have Kenzie prepare dessert," Trevor ordered, his tone shifting back into professional chef mode - a masterful pivot that somehow made the entire evening feel less like an interrogation and more like a carefully choreographed performance.

"Of course, Chef," Fionn replied. He exchanged a few words with Trevor in rapid Irish, their conversation clearly pre-arranged, before disappearing back toward the kitchen.

The drinks arrived with impressive speed, fresh glasses distributed around the table. I accepted another glass of wine, grateful for something to occupy my hands.

"So, Jon, it must be exciting to be touring again," Kara said smoothly, picking up the conversational thread with the practiced ease of someone accustomed to navigating difficult social situations. Her interviewer's instincts were clearly on high alert, recognizing the need to steer us back toward civilized dinner conversation.

"It is," Jon replied, his voice still slightly strained but visibly attempting to recover some composure. "I... um... it's been a lot of hard work. The recovery process was intense, but I'm excited. I really hope you all will attend the Dublin show."

I felt the weight of the moment - Jon extending an olive branch, however tentative, trying to salvage something from this evening that had become decidedly hostile.

"We would love to," I said, my voice carefully neutral. I glanced at Hunter, waiting for his reaction, unsure if this was acceptance or another trap in his carefully orchestrated evening.

Hunter nodded slightly, a gesture that could be interpreted as agreement or simple acknowledgment. The ambiguity was clearly intentional.

"The Dublin show should be spectacular," Amber added, her tone friendly but measured. "You've always had a strong connection with Irish audiences."

"That's true," Jon agreed, seeming to gain a bit of confidence from the shift in conversation. "Ireland's always felt like a second home to me."

"Is that so?" Jeremy said quietly, his Irish accent thickening slightly. "Interesting, considering how little time you've actually spent here outside of touring."

The comment was delivered with a smile, but the edge was unmistakable. Even as the conversation attempted to normalize, the underlying current of threat remained present, a shark circling beneath calm waters.

"What was it you said in your RTE interview? You have a spiritual connection to Ireland?" Hunter pressed, his tone conversational but his eyes sharp as a blade.

"Well, yes," Jon nodded, clearly uncertain where this was heading.

"Did you feel that connection before Michelle moved here?" Hunter asked pointedly.

Jon blinked, his jaw tightening. "If you're implying something, say it. You've been forward all night. Don't stop now."

"I just think it's interesting," Hunter replied, setting down his glass with deliberate precision, "that you're only doing shows in New York in your home country, but you've found more than enough time to make it to multiple dates in Michelle's part of the world."

The implication hung in the air like a physical thing. Jon's entire tour schedule suddenly looked less like a triumphant return and more like a calculated attempt to maintain proximity to me.

"That's not fair," Jon protested weakly. "The European market has always been strong for me. Ireland especially—"

"Before or after Michelle moved here?" Hunter interrupted, his voice cutting through Jon's excuse like a knife through silk.

"After," Jon admitted reluctantly. "But that doesn't mean—"

"It means exactly what it looks like," Trevor interjected smoothly. "It means you've structured your entire comeback tour around being in the same country as a woman who has made it abundantly clear she wants nothing to do with you romantically."

Livvie leaned back in her chair, observing the exchange with the calculating gaze of someone used to reading people's motivations. Jeremy squeezed my hand again, a silent reminder that I wasn't alone in this.

"That's not true," Jon said, but his voice had lost its conviction.

"Isn't it?" Hunter asked. "Five dates at Madison Square Garden. How many in Britain and Ireland, which is conveniently close to where my family lives?"

The silence that followed was answer enough.

"Ok, can we please stop talking about me like I'm not here?" I asked, indignantly, reaching over to take Thara from Hunter's lap. My cat immediately curled into my arms, purring contentedly before shooting Hunter a look that seemed to communicate her preference for my company over his.

"She's right," Jon said, and for once I actually agreed with him. "Michi is a grown woman capable of speaking for herself."

Before anyone could respond, Kenzie walked through the door carrying a tray of desserts, which she began distributing to each of us with practiced efficiency. The timing felt almost choreographed, another perfectly executed element of Trevor's orchestrated evening.

"Kenzie, these look great," Kara smiled warmly at her younger cousin.

"Thanks. Tiramisu orbs with a dash of cinnamon," Kenzie replied proudly, setting the delicate desserts in front of us with obvious care.

"Oh, have you met Kenzie Danvers?" Trevor asked Jon, gesturing toward his apprentice. "She's Kara's cousin and a culinary student who works for me."

"Nice to meet you, Kenzie," Jon said, attempting to regain some social footing through polite conversation.

"Thanks for coming in tonight, Kenz. This looks amazing - nice work," Trevor smiled at his apprentice with genuine warmth. Kenzie was an aspiring pastry chef, though Trevor had initially hired her as a prep cook. She was working her way up from the bottom, but he and Fionn made sure to let her practice her pastry creations whenever time permitted.

Kenzie beamed at the praise before disappearing back toward the kitchen, leaving us with our delicate desserts and the lingering tension that no amount of culinary artistry could quite dispel.

I looked down at the tiramisu orb in front of me, grateful for the momentary reprieve from the intensity of the evening. Thara sniffed curiously at my plate from her perch in my arms, clearly interested in investigating what smelled like coffee and cream.

"Don't even think about it," I murmured to her, earning a small meow of protest.

I dug into my dessert, which was absolutely incredible - the tiramisu perfectly balanced between bitter and sweet, the cinnamon adding just the right amount of warmth. For a moment, I allowed myself to simply enjoy the food, a brief respite from the emotional minefield of this evening.

"I have to say, Hunter, I never pegged you as the controlling type," Jon said as he took a bite of his dessert, his tone carrying a note of calculated provocation.

Hunter stopped his spoon halfway to his mouth and looked at him with an expression that could have frozen fire. "Excuse me?"

"Speaking for Michi, telling her who she can and can't interact with, defining her story," Jon continued, clearly emboldened by the shift to dessert and what he perceived as a weakening of

tension. "I thought you knew her better than this. You know damn well this is the fastest way to alienate her and chase her back to my arms."

I sighed heavily, setting down my spoon. And despite everything - despite the evening's intensity, despite Hunter's protective fury, despite my own anger at Jon - I had to acknowledge that he had a point. I did bristle at being told what to do, even when it was coming from a place of love and protection.

Hunter set his spoon down with deliberate care, his composure never wavering despite the obvious provocation. "Don't confuse my protection for control, Jon. Mich is her own person. I know that, and I love that about her. But no one has ever protected her from you. Not really."

He paused, his eyes meeting mine briefly before returning to Jon. "Lea tried. Zack tried. Hell, even Rocky tried in his own broken way. But none of them ever really stood up to you the way you needed to be stood up to. Until now."

"That's not your decision to make," Jon countered, but his voice had lost some of its edge.

"It's not," Hunter agreed calmly. "But it is my responsibility as her husband to make sure she understands what happened to her. What you did to her. And to make absolutely certain it doesn't happen to our daughter."

I felt the weight of his words, the truth in them settling over me like a heavy blanket. He wasn't trying to control me - he was trying to wake me up to something I'd spent decades rationalizing away.

Still, I had always been adamant about defining my own story. What Jon and I had wasn't conventional, but I never saw myself as a victim. I still didn't. He was my first love. I knew how it looked to the world, especially now that I was a mom to teenagers myself, but it was still MY story to tell. I appreciated what Hunter was trying to do, but I was also furious at him for humiliating Jon, for speaking for me, for defining my first love in such clinical, damaging terms.

But I also wasn't going to undermine him in front of everyone. I was pretty sure he knew that too.

I took another bite of my dessert as Thara tried to reach a paw up to grab some cream. I let her, watching as she delicately licked the tiramisu from her fur with obvious satisfaction.

"All Hunter means to do is ensure you know your place within the family," Trevor added, his tone conversational but deadly serious. "That is to say, you don't have one."

"Nor should you, until and unless you can stop using Michelle and be the kind of friend she deserves," Jeremy interjected, his Irish accent thick with emotion. "A friend that actually puts her needs first before your petty games and ego. And bloody hell, stop using her."

"Not that Michelle and I have any love lost between us, but I have to agree," Amber said, her voice calm but carrying an edge. "You have used her at every opportunity for decades. As someone who was used by my own father my whole life, I recognize the pattern. You positioned yourself as her

protector while simultaneously using her to fulfill your own needs. You recorded with her daughter without permission. You tried to kiss her. You're structuring your entire tour around proximity to her. That's not love, Jon. That's obsession dressed up as nostalgia."

The accusation hung in the air, and I felt Jon's entire body stiffen. The comparison to manipulation and exploitation - something Amber knew intimately from her own traumatic history - was clearly hitting harder than anything else that had been said all evening.

"That's not the same," Jon protested weakly.

"Isn't it?" Amber continued, unmoved by his denial. "The mechanics are identical. Grooming. Isolation. Making the victim feel special while simultaneously taking advantage of them. The only difference is my father used me for money and control. You used Michelle for ego and nostalgia."

I watched Jon's face crumble slightly, and despite everything - despite my anger at Hunter for speaking for me, despite my complicated feelings about my own history with Jon - I felt a flicker of something uncomfortable. Pity, maybe. Or recognition of how deeply he'd convinced himself of his own narrative.

As dinner mercifully came to a close, Hunter set down his napkin with finality and looked at Jon one last time. His expression was calm, but there was an absolute certainty in his eyes that made the threat feel more real than any raised voice ever could.

"I meant every word I said," Hunter stated quietly. "I will protect my family at all costs."

"And he isn't alone," Trevor added, his voice carrying the weight of absolute conviction. Around the table, the other men - Jeremy, Pete, even Hal - nodded in silent agreement. It was a show of solidarity that transcended friendship and entered the realm of family loyalty.

Jon looked around the table, finally seeming to grasp the full scope of what he was facing. This wasn't just one man's anger - it was a unified front of people who cared deeply about me, who had witnessed years of his manipulation, and who had collectively decided that his time in our lives was finished.

"I think it's time you headed home," Hunter said, his tone brooking no argument. "You have a lot to think about. And when you're in Dublin for your tour, I suggest you focus on your music and nothing else. Is that clear?"

Jon nodded slowly, pushing back from the table. He looked at me, as if seeking some kind of reprieve or understanding, but I simply looked away. I wasn't ready to absolve him, wasn't ready to soften the blow of this evening, even if I had reservations about how it had all been orchestrated.

I simply nodded, not knowing what to say.

Trevor stood and escorted Jon toward the door, his hand on the other man's shoulder in a gesture that was both courteous and unmistakably final. The message was clear - Jon was being removed from our space, from our circle, from our lives.

As the door closed behind them, I felt Hunter's hand find mine under the table.

"You okay?" he asked quietly.

I pulled away from Hunter, my voice low but seething. "You're a fucking bastard."

The table went silent. Livvie's eyes widened slightly, Jeremy shifted uncomfortably, and even Amber seemed surprised by the venom in my tone.

"Michelle—" Hunter started.

"No," I cut him off, standing abruptly and setting Thara down on the chair. "You don't get to do that. You don't get to orchestrate some elaborate takedown of my past, speak for me like I'm incapable of handling my own life, humiliate someone in front of our friends, and then act like you were just protecting me."

"That's exactly what I was doing," Hunter replied calmly, though I could see the tension in his jaw.

"You were controlling," I said, my voice rising slightly. "You were making decisions about MY story, MY history, MY feelings without asking me what I wanted. You treated me like I was some fragile thing that needed saving instead of a grown woman capable of setting her own boundaries."

"Is that what you think this was?" Hunter stood as well, his expression hardening. "Me trying to control you?"

"What else was it?" I demanded. "You invited all our friends here like you were putting on a show. You had everything choreographed - the seating, the lighting, the timing of the food. You made me wear a specific dress. You took my cat from me. And then you sat there and told Jon - and everyone at this table - what my trauma means, what my choices mean, what my relationship was."

Jeremy looked like he wanted to say something but remained silent, respecting the fact that this was between Hunter and me.

"I appreciate that you want to protect Harley," I continued, my voice shaking slightly. "I do. But you don't get to rewrite my history to do it. You don't get to decide that what I experienced was grooming if I don't see it that way. You don't get to speak for me."

"Even when you're too blind to see what's happening?" Hunter asked, his own frustration finally breaking through his calm facade. "Even when you keep falling back into the same patterns with him?"

"That's MY choice to make," I shot back. "Right or wrong, it's mine. And what you did? It was cruel. Unnecessarily cruel and dehumanizing. But you know what? You made your point. You sure let Jon have it. And you let me know exactly what you think of me."

My hands were shaking as I carefully slid Thara into her backpack, the familiar motions grounding me even as anger coursed through my veins. The cat seemed to sense my distress, settling quietly without her usual protests.

"I want to go home," I said quietly, the exhaustion in my voice more cutting than any shout could have been.

Hunter nodded but said nothing, and somehow his silence was worse than any argument. It felt like acceptance - like he'd known this would be the outcome and had decided it was worth the cost.

I gave our friends a brief look, not quite able to meet their eyes. Whatever they thought of the evening - whether they agreed with Hunter's methods or sympathized with my anger - I couldn't face right now. I turned and left the VIP room, my footsteps echoing through the restaurant as I made my way toward the exit.

The drive back to the house was suffocating in its silence. Normally, a fight between Hunter and me would devolve into a yelling match - passionate, heated, but ultimately cathartic. This was different. I was seething beyond the point of even yelling, my anger so profound it had crystallized into something cold and sharp.

Hunter drove with both hands on the wheel, his jaw clenched, his eyes fixed on the road ahead. He didn't attempt to explain himself. He didn't try to justify his actions. He just drove, and I stared out the window at the Irish countryside passing in the darkness, wondering how we'd gotten to this point.

When we finally arrived at the house, I unbuckled my seatbelt before the truck had fully stopped.

"Michelle," Hunter said quietly as I reached for the door handle.

I paused but didn't turn to face him.

"I stand by everything I said tonight," he continued, his voice steady despite the tension radiating from him. "Every. Single. Word."

I got out of the truck without responding, slamming the door behind me harder than necessary. The sound echoed in the quiet night, a punctuation mark on everything that had happened.

Inside the house, I let Thara out of her backpack. She immediately padded toward her food bowl, clearly unaffected by the emotional turmoil of the evening. I envied her that - the ability to move past conflict so easily.

I went directly to my room and turned on the shower, letting the hot water cascade over me as I tried to process everything. The evening replayed in my mind - Hunter's calculated coldness, the way he'd orchestrated every detail, the way he'd spoken about my past like it was a clinical case study rather than my lived experience.

I understood what he was trying to do. I did. But understanding didn't make it hurt any less.

When I emerged from the bathroom, towel wrapped around my damp hair, I found Hunter already in bed, changed into pajamas and waiting. He was on his side, facing away from me, giving me space but also making it clear he wasn't going anywhere.

I pulled on my own pajamas in silence and slid into bed, deliberately positioning myself with my back to him. The mattress dipped slightly as I settled into the familiar groove, but the distance between us felt vast - a chasm created not by physical space but by emotional rupture.

I curled up on my side, pulling the quilt around myself like a protective barrier. Hunter didn't reach for me. He didn't try to bridge the gap. He just lay there, and I lay here, and between us was the weight of everything unsaid.

Sleep felt impossible, but exhaustion eventually claimed me anyway - a restless, shallow sleep filled with fragmented dreams of cliffs and choices and the echo of Hunter's voice saying words I couldn't unhear.

“Life Happens”

A week. It had been a full week of Michelle barely speaking to me unless the girls were in the room, and I couldn't bring myself to care as much as I probably should. She was back in Nashville now, throwing herself into her filming schedule with the kind of intensity that suggested she was using work to avoid thinking about me, about us, about what had happened at the Cantina.

I sat in my workshop with a glass of Irish whiskey in hand, the amber liquid catching the late afternoon light filtering through the windows. Robbie lay at my feet, his presence a steady comfort as I waited for Trevor to arrive. We'd fallen into a rhythm lately - him coming over after the Cantina closed, us talking through the chaos of our lives over drinks.

My phone buzzed. A text from Michelle, brief and businesslike: 'Harley needs new cleats for hockey. Can you order them?'

No 'hey,' no 'how are you,' just a task. I typed back: 'Already did. They'll be there tomorrow.'

No response. There never was anymore.

The thing was, I didn't regret what I'd done at the Cantina. Not for a second. Jon needed to understand the consequences of his actions, and Michelle needed to hear some hard truths about her past, even if she wasn't ready to accept them yet. She'd come around eventually. She always did.

The sound of Trevor's SUV pulling up broke me from my thoughts. Moments later, he appeared in the workshop doorway, already looking like he needed a drink.

"Rough day at the restaurant?" I asked, gesturing to the chair beside me.

"No. It’s Amber. Bre's been causing trouble again," Trevor said, settling in and accepting the glass of whiskey I poured for him. "Apparently she's been calling suppliers, trying to undermine Amber's orders. Nothing's worked, but it's the principle of the thing, you know?"

I nodded, taking a sip of my drink. "At least your woman's fighting back. Mine's just... silent."

"She'll come around," Trevor said, echoing my own thoughts back to me. "Michelle's angry, but she loves you. She knows you were protecting Harley."

"Exactly," I agreed, feeling validated by his certainty. "That's what I don't understand about her reaction. I was doing the right thing."

"You were," Trevor confirmed. "Though..." he paused, swirling his whiskey thoughtfully. "Amber did mention that Michelle felt like you were speaking for her. Like you were deciding what her trauma meant instead of letting her define it herself."

I waved a hand dismissively. "She needed someone to spell it out for her. She's been rationalizing Jon's behavior for decades. Sometimes people need a wake-up call."

"True," Trevor said, though there was something in his tone that suggested he wasn't entirely convinced. "But there's a difference between giving someone a wake-up call and orchestrating an entire intervention without their consent."

"I didn't orchestrate anything," I said, defensive now. "I just made sure Jon understood his place. And that Michelle understood what he'd done to her."

"Right, but you did it in front of everyone. You made it public. You took her private pain and turned it into a dinner theater production," Trevor pointed out, taking another sip of his drink.

I felt irritation spike through me. "Are you saying I was wrong?"

"I'm saying," Trevor chose his words carefully, "that maybe Michelle's reaction isn't just about being angry at Jon. Maybe she's angry at you for taking away her agency in how she processes her own history."

I stood abruptly, walking over to the workbench and gripping its edge. "She'll get over it. She always does."

"Will she?" Trevor asked quietly. "Or are you just assuming that because it's easier than actually dealing with the fact that you might have hurt her?"

"Do you think I hurt her?" I asked, and I realized I genuinely wanted to know. That hadn't been my intent at all.

"Look, mate, I don't know," Trevor said carefully, leaning back in his chair. "I'm not Michelle, and you know her better than I do. And I didn't say you were wrong. I mean, I bloody helped set the whole thing up." He paused, taking another sip. "I think you did the right thing for Michelle. Now, for your marriage? That may be another matter entirely."

I sighed heavily, moving back to my chair and dropping into it with more force than necessary. "She'll cool off eventually. We've been through too much for this to be permanent."

"I understand what it's like dealing with unwanted exes," Trevor said, his tone shifting to something more sympathetic. "Brody's still a pain in the arse, constantly trying to worm his way back into Amber's life. But here's the difference - Amber is willing to stand up to him. She doesn't have some complicated history with him that makes her second-guess herself."

"Jon has a hold on Michelle that just won't let go," I said, frustration bleeding into my voice. "And I'm tired of it. I'm tired of watching her rationalize his behavior, tired of him using their history as an excuse to manipulate her, tired of him thinking he has any right to our family."

"That's fair," Trevor acknowledged. "And you're right to be tired of it. But Michelle's tired too - tired of being told what her own experiences mean, tired of having decisions made for her, tired of being treated like she can't handle her own life."

I didn't respond immediately, just stared into my whiskey glass as if the answers might be floating in the amber liquid.

"The thing is," Trevor continued, his Irish accent thickening slightly as he got more serious, "you can't force someone to see things your way, no matter how right you are. Michelle has to come to these realizations on her own terms, in her own time. Otherwise, you're just another person controlling her narrative."

The words hit harder than I wanted to admit.

"Okay, maybe some of the words I used were wrong," I conceded reluctantly, "but I stand by the spirit of what I said. I didn't mean to tell her how to define her past, but I want Jon out of our present. Out of our family's life. Completely."

Trevor nodded, understanding the distinction even if he wasn't entirely convinced. "And I would pay money to get Brody out of mine... but instead here I am getting paid to deal with the drama."

I laughed despite the tension. "Bro, you literally signed up for the reality show knowing they would try to cause drama between Brody and Bre and you and Amber."

"Yeah, true. Doesn't mean I like it," Trevor said, reaching for his phone as it began to ring. He glanced at the screen, and something in his expression shifted. "Trevor O'Sullivan... yes... yes... oh really?" His voice was steady but I could see his hand trembling slightly. "Okay... yes..."

There was a long pause, and I watched as tears began to well up in Trevor's eyes - something I'd rarely seen in all the years I'd known him.

"Yes, thank you so much. I appreciate the call," he said quietly before ending the call.

"Dude, you okay?" I asked, sitting up straighter. Trevor wasn't the type to cry over phone calls.

He shook his head slowly, his eyes still glistening. "The Michelin Guide just released the new batch of stars for Austin..."

My stomach dropped. "Oh no, did you lose your star?"

"No," Trevor said, his voice cracking slightly. "They upped it. From one to three. I got three fucking Michelin Stars!"

For a moment, I just stared at him, processing what he'd just said. Then the enormity of it hit me, and I stood up, pulling him into a fierce embrace.

"Oh wow... congratulations, man! That's incredible!"

Trevor couldn't stop the tears now, his entire body shaking slightly as he held onto me. This was everything he'd worked for his whole adult life - validation at the highest level of the culinary world. From a kid who'd grown up with nothing to a chef with three Michelin Stars.

"I need tell Amber," he said, pulling back and wiping his eyes roughly. "She's going to lose her mind."

"Do it," I said, genuinely happy for him despite everything else going on in my own life. "This is huge, Trev. You deserve this. I'll catch you tomorrow. Go."

As he headed out to go home to Amber, I found myself thinking about how quickly things could shift. One moment we were discussing the wreckage of my marriage, and the next, my best friend was achieving the pinnacle of his career. Life had a way of putting things in perspective.

Trevor

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I calmed down enough to drive home, though my hands were still shaking on the steering wheel. Three Michelin Stars. Three. I kept repeating it in my head like a mantra, half-convinced I'd misheard the caller, that this was some elaborate prank.

But it wasn't. It was real.

I had to tell Mam and Amber about this news. I had to see their faces when they heard. Mam, who'd watched me claw my way up from nothing, who'd believed in me even when I didn't believe in myself. And Amber, who'd supported every crazy dream I'd ever had, who'd stood by me through everything.

I had finally done it. Three stars. I had proved I was as good as Ramsey - better, even, because I'd done it my way, on my terms. I had proved I was an elite chef, that all those years of sacrifice and obsession and relentless pursuit of perfection had meant something.

The drive home felt both endless and impossibly quick. My mind raced with possibilities - what this meant for the restaurants, for our brand, for everything we'd built together. The Austin location would become a destination restaurant now. People would travel specifically to eat at our table.

When I pulled into the driveway, I could see Amber through the kitchen window, and I felt that familiar surge of gratitude that she was mine. That she'd chosen to build this life with me despite everything.

I practically ran to the door, my heart pounding with anticipation.

"Mi corazón, are you okay?" Amber asked, looking up from the tea she was preparing. Her expression immediately shifted from curiosity to concern as she registered the emotion on my face. Mam was sitting at the bar across from her, Ráichéal cradled contentedly in her arms.

"Mo mac, what is it?" Mam asked, her maternal instincts clearly on high alert.

I couldn't contain the grin spreading across my face. "I did it. Austin's Michelin stars were just released. Shamrock got three."
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For a moment, there was complete silence. Then Amber's tea cup clattered onto the counter.

"Three?" she breathed, her eyes going wide. "Trevor, three?"

"Three," I confirmed, and I could hear the wonder in my own voice. "Three fucking Michelin Stars."

Mam set Ráichéal down gently in her bassinet before standing, tears already streaming down her face. "My boy," she said, her voice thick with emotion as she crossed the kitchen to pull me into a fierce embrace. "My brilliant boy. I always knew you would do it."

Amber was around the counter in seconds, her arms wrapping around both of us as we stood there in the kitchen - three people who'd all fought so hard to get here, who'd all believed in this dream even when it seemed impossible.

"I'm so proud of you," Amber whispered against my shoulder. "So incredibly proud."

I held them both, feeling the weight of every sacrifice, every late night, every moment of doubt finally crystallize into this singular achievement. Three Michelin Stars. The validation I'd been chasing my entire adult life.

After the hug broke, I picked up my six-month-old daughter, cradling her small frame against my chest. She blinked up at me with those blue eyes that were already so distinctly hers.

"My sweet Ráichéal, I know you're too young to be proud of your Da yet," I said softly, pressing a kiss to her dark hair, "but someday I hope you will be."

Amber placed a hand on my shoulder, her touch warm and grounding. "Oh, love, she will be. How could she not? Look at this wonderful family she was born into. A three-Michelin-Star chef for a Da and a mom that's built a cosmetic empire."

I looked at my wife, seeing the genuine pride and love reflected in her eyes, and felt something settle in my chest. This was what it had all been for - not just the stars, though God knew they meant everything to me. It was for this moment. For building something real with someone who understood the obsession, who matched my ambition with her own, who'd stood by me through every struggle.

"We did good, didn't we?" I said, looking between Amber and Ráichéal. "You, me, Mam... we actually did it."

"You did it," Mam corrected gently, squeezing my arm. "This is your achievement, mo mac. Your talent, your dedication. We're just proud to witness it."

But as I stood there holding my daughter, my wife beside me, my mother beaming with maternal pride, I knew the truth was more complicated than that. I hadn't done this alone. None of us ever really do.

Hal

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I was sitting in the backyard drinking a beer when Jeremy joined me. It was nice being next door neighbors with my best friend - convenient for moments like this, where we could just grab a drink and decompress without having to plan anything.

"Hey mate, how ya going? Drinking that American swill I see," he teased, settling into the chair beside me.

I rolled my eyes. "Whatever. I like it. Not all of us want to eat our beer."

"Not all of us have taste. But you're American. I won't hold it against you," he smiled, the familiar banter comfortable between us.

"How kind of you," I replied dryly. "Hey, you hear from Mich lately? Hunter said she's still not speaking to him."

"Oh aye. I've heard from her. And she is still pissed," Jeremy confirmed, taking a sip of his own drink.

"She needs to get over it. Nothing Hunter did was wrong. He was protecting his family," I said, shaking my head. "I would have done the same if it had been Grayson."

"Aye, but Kara isn't Michelle," Jeremy said thoughtfully. "Mich needs to feel a sense of autonomy. I think it comes from feeling like she didn't have much as a kid because of her career."

"Oh please, we all know what she did on Sunset. She had more autonomy than most kids," I scoffed, not bothering to hide my skepticism.

"True, but it wasn't exactly healthy," Jeremy countered. "And outside of that, the image she was forced into... I don't know, I wasn't there obviously, but she talks about her early career with both admiration and disdain."

"She's a spoiled brat," I said simply, taking another pull from my beer.

Jeremy laughed, the sound genuine and unbothered. "She can be, but she has a good heart."

"I don't know why you're best friends with her," I said, genuinely curious about his reasoning.

"She says the same about you. Guess I have a habit of befriending arses," Jeremy teased, his grin widening as I shot him a look.

"Touché," I admitted, unable to help but smile despite myself.

"So, how's the family?" Jeremy asked, settling back in his chair.

I smiled, genuinely pleased to talk about this. "Good. Kara is seriously considering quitting her job and switching to independent journalism."

"How do you feel about that?" he asked, clearly knowing there was more to the story.
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"How do I feel about her not being forced to work with Grayson anymore? How do I feel about her not being beholden to corporate media?" I shrugged. "Yeah, I'm on board. She's been miserable at that station for years."

"Fair point," Jeremy agreed. "And the kids?"

"Kira is good. Really good, actually. She likes her cheer program in Cork, and honestly, being around Catholics at school and being best friends with Arissa... it's changed her perspective. She isn't the judgmental kid she was back in the States. She still has her faith, but she isn't telling everyone they'll burn in hell if they aren't the same faith as her anymore," I said, genuinely pleased with how far my oldest had come.

"Progress," Jeremy nodded approvingly. "I knew Arissa was good for her. Good kid, that one."

"As for Kora..." I paused, considering. "Things between her and Harley are still strained, but getting better. I think Kora is softening, and Harley isn't talking about Jake twenty-four seven anymore. She's also cooling it about the song situation. I think they'll be fine eventually. And of course Tiffy is Tiffy - doing well in school, adapted to Irish primary better than I expected."

"Tiffy's only in first class, so she's basically starting with the Irish children from the beginning," Jeremy pointed out.

"True, and it helps that Kora is in the same school. Though I know Kora hates it," I sighed, running a hand through my hair. "Being in middle school with her best friend and her older sister one year, then pushed back to primary the next because of the different school systems... I think that's been the hardest part of the move for her."

Jeremy nodded sympathetically. "The Irish system is different. That's a tough transition for a kid her age."

"Yeah, it is. I hate that she's struggling with it," I admitted. "But hopefully she'll adjust eventually. And how are the twins?"

Jeremy sighed heavily, the sound carrying the weight of parental exhaustion. "Oi. Róisín... my sweet fairy girl is going to be the death of me."

"Yeah? What did she do now, and is Killy okay?" I asked with a chuckle, already anticipating the answer.

"Aye, he's fine. Rose has decided that we're wrong for hiding her Halloween sweets, so she keeps climbing on everything in sight and tearing the house apart to find them. And Killy, sweet lad, is following her around trying to stop her. It's a full-time job to keep Rose from sweet hunting," Jeremy said, shaking his head with a mixture of exasperation and affection.

"And I bet your house is a mess," I laughed, picturing the chaos.

"Aye. Trying to keep it clean, but with Storm Rose... it's hard," he admitted, taking another sip of his drink.

"How is Killy's arm healing?" I asked, genuinely concerned about the kid. The fall down the stairs had been scary, and then the whole glitter incident with the cast had been ridiculous.

"Good. A few more weeks and that cast can come off," Jeremy nodded, relief evident in his voice. "Can't come soon enough, honestly. He'll be able to do more, and Rose will hopefully find a new obsession that doesn't involve destroying the house."

"Fat chance of that," I grinned.

"Aye, you're probably right," Jeremy agreed with a rueful smile as his phone vibrated. He glanced at the screen and smiled. "Oi, Trev is coming by. Telling him I'm here."

"OK cool," I said, settling back in my chair. "Man, it has to be weird that your ex-boyfriend is now basically your brother."

Jeremy shrugged, completely unbothered by the observation. "Not really. Trev and I broke up so long ago. It was like another life. And he's in love with Amber, and I'm completely in love with Liv. I do love Trev deeply, but he really is my brother now."

There was a certainty in his voice that spoke to how completely they'd moved past whatever romantic history they'd shared. It was actually kind of beautiful, if I was being honest.

A few minutes later, Trevor and Amber joined us in my back garden - still getting used to calling it that instead of backyard. Trevor looked radiant, though there was definitely evidence of recent tears on his face.

"Hey mate, what brings you to our part of Ballincollig?" Jeremy asked, standing up to embrace his friend.

"You okay, man? You look like you've been crying," I observed, noting the red-rimmed eyes.

"Aye. Suppose I have, but happy tears," Trevor said, his voice trembling with emotion. "I had to tell you right away, Jeremy. Next to Amber and Mam, you've played the biggest part in my career. They announced the Austin Michelin stars. Shamrock got three. I did it, Jeremy. I finally did it. I'm a three-star Michelin chef."

"Bloody hell, that is amazing," Jeremy said, pulling Trevor into another fierce hug. "I always knew you would do it."

For a moment, I could almost imagine a younger version of these two - just entering cosmetology and culinary school, in love, full of dreams about their futures in Dublin. But that really wasn't who they were anymore. This was two brothers supporting each other, their bond having evolved into something deeper and more meaningful than romance could have ever been.

"Congratulations, Trev," I said, raising my beer. "That's incredible."

"Thanks, mate," Trevor said, accepting a beer from Jeremy as Amber beamed beside him, clearly already having celebrated this news at home.

"This is massive," Jeremy said, shaking his head in wonder. "Three stars. That puts you right up there with the best in the world."

"I know," Trevor said, and I could hear the awe in his own voice, like he still couldn't quite believe it himself. "I still can't wrap my head around it. All those years, all the late nights, the obsessing over every detail... it finally paid off."

"More than paid off," Amber added, squeezing his hand. "You earned this, love."

"So what happens now?" I asked, genuinely curious about the logistics. "Do the restaurants get some kind of official recognition? More customers?"

"Aye, the Austin location becomes a destination restaurant," Trevor explained, his excitement building as he talked through it. "People will travel specifically to eat there now. It changes everything - reservations will be impossible to get, pricing can go up, we can be more selective about our clientele. It's validation at the highest level of the culinary world."

"And it proves you're as good as Ramsey," Jeremy said with a grin.

"Better," Trevor corrected with a laugh. "I didn't have to be a complete arsehole to get here."

We all laughed at that, and for a moment, the tension that had been lingering around our group since the dinner at the Cantina seemed to ease slightly. This was good news, uncomplicated and genuine. No drama, no manipulation, just a man achieving something he'd worked his entire life for.

"You should be proud," I said sincerely. "This is a massive accomplishment."

"I am," Trevor said, his voice thick with emotion. "I really am."

Kara walked out onto the back garden then, clearly not expecting to find such a crowd. "Oh, we have more company than I realized. Hi, y'all!"

"Hey Kara!" Amber smiled warmly, standing to greet her.

"It looks like a celebration out here," Kara observed, taking in the energy of the group.

I laughed. "It is. Trev got his three Michelin Stars."

"Oh goodness! Congratulations!" Kara squealed, immediately pulling Trevor into a hug. She had that American enthusiasm that the Irish still found endearing.

"Thanks, Kara," Trev said, clearly touched by her genuine excitement.

"Oh, that is a celebration!" Kara declared, already in hostess mode. "Okay, you all must stay for dinner. And Jeremy, call Livvie and the twins over too."

"Oh Kara, you don't need to do that," Trevor protested, though I could see he was touched by the offer.

"Nonsense," Kara waved him off. "Call up your mom and invite her too. And Hunter and his girls, of course. We're doing a proper celebration."

I watched my wife spring into action, already mentally cataloging what she had in the house and what she'd need to prepare. This was her element - bringing people together, creating moments. It was one of the things I loved most about her.

"Kara, you're amazing," Amber said appreciatively.

"I'm just making sure this achievement gets properly celebrated," Kara replied, already heading back inside. "Hal, come help me figure out what we're cooking?"

I stood, catching Jeremy's eye with a smile. "Looks like we're having a dinner party."

"Could be worse," Jeremy grinned.

Kara

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I had already made pork chops for dinner, but they would keep. I needed something to feed the whole family - and this was definitely a family occasion, even if half of them weren't technically related by blood.

I looked in my freezer, mentally cataloging what I had available. Ground beef. Perfect. Meatloaf, potatoes, and green beans - simple, hearty, and something I could pull together relatively quickly without too much fuss.

I started defrosting the hamburger meat in the microwave, the familiar hum a comforting backdrop as I put away the pork chops for another night. They'd keep until tomorrow, and honestly, after a celebration like this, nobody would be thinking about pork chops anyway.

"You need help?" Hal asked, appearing in the kitchen doorway with that easy confidence he always carried.

"Can you grab the potatoes from the pantry? We're going to need a lot," I said, already pulling out my mixing bowl for the meatloaf. "And maybe peel some while you're at it?"

"On it," he replied, moving with efficiency. It had been hard to get to a point where I didn’t feel like a failure accepting his help in the kitchen. But now? I loved having him help me.

I pulled out eggs, breadcrumbs, and seasonings, my hands moving through the motions automatically. This was good - this was what life should be. Unexpected celebrations, good news, family gathering around a table. After everything that had happened with that dinner at the Cantina, after all the tension and drama, this felt like a reset.
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"You know," I said as I mixed the meat, "I never thought we'd end up here. In Ireland, throwing together a dinner party for all these people."

"Best decision you ever made?" Hal asked, grinning as he started peeling potatoes.

"One of them," I smiled, glancing at him. "Marrying you was definitely up there."

"Smooth talker," he replied, but I could see the warmth in his eyes.

I shaped the meatloaf and slid it into the oven, then turned my attention to the green beans. As I worked, my mind was already planning - how many place settings would I need?

Hal shook his head with a smile as he watched me. "Your spontaneous dinner parties are legendary at this point."

"Is that a compliment?" I asked, chopping green beans with practiced efficiency.

"Definitely," he said. "One of the things I love about you."

I smiled back at him and returned to preparing dinner, my hands moving with practiced efficiency. Soon enough, everyone had arrived - the house filling with voices and laughter and that particular energy that came from a genuine celebration.

I called the girls down for dinner, and we all gathered around the table. The smallest kids - Rose, Killy, and Tiffy - sat with the adults while the teenagers (Kora, Kira, Harley, and Arissa) took their plates outside to eat in the garden, eager for their own space away from the younger children.

"I go to garden too?" Rose asked hopefully, clearly not thrilled about being separated from the older kids.

"Oh no. Not happening," Jeremy said firmly, his tone leaving no room for negotiation. "You can go out after dinner. You're eating right here next to Da."

Rose pouted but didn't argue further, settling into her chair as Jeremy began cutting up her meat into manageable pieces.

"Mummy, help?" Killy asked politely, pointing to his own plate.

"Of course, Love," Livvie said, moving to help him with his food, her movements gentle and practiced.

"Mommy, more potatoes?" Tiffy asked, looking up at me with hopeful eyes.

"Finish your meat first, and then if you want more, you can have more," I said softly, keeping my tone encouraging rather than demanding.

Tiffy nodded seriously and turned her attention back to her plate, determined to earn that second helping.

"Trev, we are all so happy for you. You earned this," Livvie said, raising her glass in a toast.

"Yeah, you did! First Shamrock, next the Cantina. When do Irish stars get announced?" Hunter asked, clearly already thinking ahead to Trevor's next potential achievement.

"February or March, so a few months yet," Trevor replied. "But I'm not sure the Cantina is star material. It's not quite as formal as Shamrock."

"Don't sell yourself short," Amber said, squeezing his hand. "The food is incredible."

"The atmosphere is different though," Trevor explained. "Shamrock is fine dining - white tablecloths, formal service, the whole experience. The Cantina is more casual, more about the community feel. Stars usually go to the more formal establishments."

"Still, you never know," I said, passing the green beans around the table. "Three stars is already incredible. You should just enjoy this moment."

"You're right," Trevor said, his expression softening. "I'm being ridiculous. Three Michelin Stars. I still can't believe it."

"Believe it," Jeremy said firmly. "You deserve every single one of them."

Hunter raised his glass. "To Trevor. For proving that hard work and dedication actually mean something."

"Hear, hear," Hal added, and everyone around the table echoed the sentiment, raising their glasses in celebration.

The conversation flowed easily as we ate - stories about the restaurant, memories of Trevor's journey from prep cook to three-star chef, gentle teasing from Jeremy about how insufferable Trevor would probably become now that he had the validation he'd always wanted.

"I'm not going to change," Trevor protested, though he was smiling.

"You absolutely are," Jeremy said with certainty. "You're going to become even more obsessive about perfection, if that's even possible."

"Fair point," Trevor conceded.

Killy ate quietly, as he always did, focusing intently on his food. There was something about his methodical nature that reminded me of Trevor in some ways - that attention to detail and precision.

"Mommy, can I have more potatoes?" Tiffy asked, having finished her meat.

"Of course, sweetheart," I said, adding another scoop to her plate.

"The teenagers are going to be out there gossiping about us, aren't they?" Livvie said with a laugh.

"Absolutely," Hunter confirmed.

"Let them," Amber said. "They deserve their own space. God knows they need it with everything that's been going on."

I caught the slight tension that crossed Hunter's face at the mention of recent drama, but it passed quickly. Tonight wasn't about rehashing old arguments. Tonight was about celebrating Trevor's achievement and being together as this strange, complicated, beautiful family we'd all somehow become.

After dinner, we moved to the living room and continued to visit, the conversation flowing easily between us. I felt my wrist buzz with a notification and glanced down at my smartwatch, doing a double take to make sure I'd read it correctly.

Breaking news: "Woman comes forward claiming affair with Grayson Moore when she was only 17."

"Oh my gosh," I said softly, my voice cutting through the conversation.

"What is it, Kara?" Amber asked, immediately picking up on my tone.

"News is breaking that Grayson had an affair with a seventeen-year-old when he was married to me," I said, still struggling to process what I was reading.

Hal's expression hardened instantly. "But he said he was faithful. Made you out to be the awful one for cheating on him."

"Yeah," I nodded, my voice bitter. "Even tried to take my daughters from me."

"How did I miss this?" Livvie wondered aloud, her hacker's mind clearly already working through the implications. "I went through every one of his systems... how did I miss something like that?"

"No idea," I said, shaking my head. "And I'm not even sure if this is true yet. He'll deny it, of course. He denies everything."

"Aye, but I will uncover the truth," Livvie said with determination, her eyes already sharp with focus. "Count on it."

"Love, no," Jeremy warned, his protective instincts immediately surfacing. "Leave Grayson alone. He already has you on his radar after what happened last time."

"Yes, but he can't do anything to me. Besides, I won't get caught," Livvie smirked, that particular expression crossing her face that suggested she was already three steps ahead of everyone else.

"Be careful, Liv," was all I could manage, my mind still reeling from this revelation. After everything Grayson had put me through - the custody battles, the public humiliation, the lies - this felt like validation. But it also felt dangerous, like opening a door that might not close easily.

Livvie

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After dinner, J and I went home and got the kids bathed and put to bed. Unfortunately, with Killy still in a cast, we couldn't let the twins bathe together right now - Rose splashed far too much water
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everywhere, and soon enough we wouldn't be able to anyway as they got older and more self-conscious.

I gave Killy his nightly bath, being extra careful around his cast, then got him settled into bed with his usual bedtime story. Meanwhile, J was still in the bathroom wrestling with Storm Rose, her delighted squeals echoing through the house as she resisted every attempt at cleanliness.

While J was occupied upstairs, I made my way down to my office and closed the door quietly behind me. How had I missed Grayson having an affair? The question gnawed at me relentlessly.

I'd checked every single one of his hard drives, phones, everything. I'd uncovered all of the embezzlement, every white collar crime meticulously hidden in encrypted files and offshore accounts. I'd even uncovered substance movement - he still denied using anything, but he was certainly helping move product and launder money, and I suspected he'd been using as well. But somehow I'd missed something as simple as an affair?

It didn't make sense. It violated everything I knew about my own skills.

I got to work, my fingers flying across the keyboard as I reached out to a few sources I still had in the US. I didn't have many people left there I could trust - most of my old contacts had moved on or reported back to authorities I couldn’t trust - but there were a few who owed me favors.

It didn't take long to figure out the answer, and when I did, I nearly threw my keyboard across the room.

The texts that the media was running with? They came from a burner phone. A goddamn burner phone. If the woman - who was staying anonymous - hadn't had her lawyer release them, no one would have ever known they existed. Burner phones left minimal digital footprints, and if Grayson had been careful about disposal, there would be almost nothing to trace.

Damn it. I should have thought of that.

The realization stung more than I wanted to admit. I'd gotten complacent, too focused on the obvious crimes - the financial ones that left clear digital trails. I'd assumed that if something existed, I could find it. But burner phones were specifically designed to avoid detection, and Grayson, for all his faults, clearly had enough sense to use one for his indiscretions.

I pulled up everything I could find about the woman coming forward. The media was being deliberately vague, protecting her identity while simultaneously plastering the story everywhere. Smart legal strategy - create enough public pressure that Grayson couldn't simply deny it or make it disappear.

My fingers hovered over the keyboard as I considered my options. I could dig deeper, try to trace the burner phone through cellular records, but that would be risky. That would leave traces of my own involvement. Jeremy's warning echoed in my mind - Grayson already had me on his radar.

But this was personal now. Not just because Grayson had hurt Kara, though that was certainly part of it. But because I'd failed to find something, and that failure sat like a stone in my chest.

I heard J's footsteps upstairs as he finally got Rose settled, and I knew I should probably log off and go to bed. We both had early mornings ahead.

Instead, I kept digging.

A few minutes later, J came downstairs and found me hunched over my desk, the blue glow of the monitor casting shadows across my face.

"Love, what are you doing?" he asked, his tone already suggesting he knew exactly what I was doing.

I looked up at him, trying to play it casual. "Oi? Oh, nothing..."

"Olivia Paige... don't lie to me," he said firmly, using my full name in that way that meant he wasn't going to accept any deflection.

I cringed at the use of my whole name. "OK fine, I'm trying to see what else I missed on Grayson."

"Bloody hell, I knew it," J said, moving into the office and closing the door behind him. "Love, let it go. We already can't go back to the States because Grayson would love nothing more than to use his connections to have you arrested."

"Aye, I know," I said, but the frustration was evident in my voice. "But... Love, those texts came from a burner phone. I should have thought of that! I should have located those charges, triangulated photo records. I... I missed this and it was huge."

J pulled up a chair and sat beside me, his expression patient but firm. "Not compared to what you actually did dig up on him."

"Aye, but... I shouldn't have missed anything," I sighed, running a hand through my hair in frustration. "That's not who I am. I don't miss things."

"Even you aren't perfect, Mo Chori," J said gently. "And you did amazing work. He would still be in prison if he hadn't been pardoned."

I sighed again, feeling the weight of that truth settle over me. "Aye... and I know with his connections to power nothing is going to stick to him now... but... I hate that I missed this."

"I know you do," J said, his hand finding mine. "But obsessing over it isn't going to change anything. And it's certainly not going to help Kara."

"Kara doesn't even know I'm looking into this," I pointed out.

"Exactly," J said meaningfully. "Which is how it should stay. You've already done enough. Let it go."

I knew he was right, but accepting it was another matter entirely. The perfectionist in me - the part that insisted on being better, smarter, and more careful than everyone else - couldn't let it go.

"Love, let's go to bed," he said softly, extending his hand toward me.

I finally sighed and locked up my systems, securing everything with practiced efficiency before following him upstairs. The house was quiet around us, the twins safely asleep in their rooms, the day finally winding down.

When we reached our bedroom, I started to change into my pajamas, my mind still partially engaged with the puzzle of what I'd missed. J came up behind me, wrapping his arms around my waist and pressing a kiss to my neck - a gesture that was equal parts comfort and deliberate distraction.

I leaned back against him, feeling the tension in my shoulders begin to ease slightly. He was trying to pull me away from the obsession, trying to remind me that there were other things in life besides solving puzzles and uncovering secrets.

I appreciated it more than I could articulate, and I certainly wasn't about to object.

"You're thinking too much," he murmured against my skin, his lips finding that sensitive spot below my ear.

"Always," I replied softly, turning in his arms to face him.

He smiled that particular smile - the one that suggested he had absolutely no intention of letting me return to my office tonight. His hands moved to the hem of my shirt, and I decided that maybe, just this once, the puzzle of Grayson Moore could wait until morning.

Some things were more important than being perfect.

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“The Space Between”

I was sitting at the table with Kara, nursing my tea while the sound of the children's laughter drifted in from the back garden. Tiffy and the twins were occupied enough that we had a rare moment of peace—J and Hal had disappeared off to play basketball or some other form of male bonding I'd never quite bothered to understand.

"I don't know, Liv," Kara sighed, wrapping her hands around her mug. "I enjoy my job. I really do. But being forced to appear as a correspondent on Grayson's show..." She trailed off, her frustration evident in the tightness around her eyes.

"That's absolute shite," I said flatly. "I thought that was supposed to be rare."

"That was the idea," Kara replied, her voice carrying the exhaustion of someone who'd been let down by broken promises. "But it's turned into at least once a week now. Minimum." She paused, her jaw tightening. "I'm seriously considering quitting and trying my hand at independent journalism."

I nodded slowly, considering. "That sounds like a solid plan. Is Hal on board with it?"

"He is, which means everything to me," she said. "I'm just... scared. It takes time to build traction as an independent journalist. What if I can't do it? What if I fail?"

"Kara," I leaned forward slightly, meeting her eyes with absolute certainty, "you're a fantastic journalist. You absolutely will build a following. That's not a question."

She looked down at her tea cup, her fingers tracing the rim absently. "I wish I had your confidence," she said softly.

"Well, you should," I said, not unkindly. "I've watched you work, Kara. I've seen how you dig for the truth, how you refuse to let stories die just because someone powerful wants them buried. That's not something you can fake or learn—you either have it or you don't. And you have it in spades."

Kara looked up at me, her expression shifting from doubt to something more hopeful. "When did you become the voice of reason in our group?"

"Oi, I've always been the voice of reason," I replied with a slight smile. "You lot just don't listen half the time."

She laughed, the sound genuine and warm. "Fair point."

I took a sip of my tea, considering my next words carefully. "Have you thought about what kind of stories you want to pursue? Independent journalism gives you freedom that working for a station never will. You could actually chase the stories that matter to you instead of whatever Grayson decides is ratings gold."

"That's the dream, isn't it?" Kara said, her eyes brightening slightly. "Real investigative work. Stories that actually change things instead of just entertaining people."

"Then do it," I said simply. "You've got the skills, you've got the support from Hal, and honestly, you've got nothing to lose. The worst that happens is you build something incredible and prove everyone who doubted you wrong."

A comfortable silence settled between us, broken only by the distant sound of children playing and the gentle clink of teacups. Outside, I could hear Tiffy's high-pitched giggle, followed by Rose's indignant protest about something—probably glitter-related, if I knew my daughter.

"How do you do that?" Kara asked suddenly.

"Do what?"

"Make everything seem so simple. So possible."

I considered the question, thinking about all the complications in my own life—the Ranger tech, the Celtic magic, Billy's constant demands, the endless puzzle of keeping my family safe while maintaining some semblance of normalcy.

"It's not that I think everything's simple," I said carefully. "It's that I've learned most problems are just a series of smaller problems. You solve them one at a time, and eventually you've solved the whole thing. Independent journalism isn't one impossible task—it's research, pitching, building relationships with sources, creating a platform. All manageable pieces."

Kara nodded slowly, absorbing this. "When you put it that way..."

"It's doable," I finished. "Because you're capable, and you're determined, and you've already proven you can handle pressure."

The back door slid open, and Tiffy bounded in, her school uniform already looking like she'd been through a war. "Mummy, Rose says I'm not a real fairy because I don't have wings. But I told her fairies aren't real anyway, so she shouldn't be one either. And now she's upset."

I exchanged a knowing look with Kara before standing up. "Right then. I suppose I need to go mediate the great fairy debate before it escalates to glitter warfare."

"Good luck," Kara called after me, amusement in her voice.

"I'll need it," I muttered, already mentally preparing for whatever Rose had planned as retaliation for Tiffy's logical assault on fairy authenticity.

Michelle

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I was sitting in my Nashville apartment with Thara draped across my lap, her purring a steady vibration against my thighs. The TV played in the background—some mindless entertainment I wasn't actually watching—while my mind churned through everything except what was on screen.
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The CMA Awards were tomorrow night.

Hunter was currently on a flight to Nashville. He'd be here in a few hours, ready to walk the red carpet beside me in that effortless way he had, looking like he belonged in front of cameras despite his obvious discomfort with the spotlight.

The problem was we still weren't speaking. Not really. Not since the Jon incident.

I stroked Thara's fur absently, my fingers finding the familiar rhythm that usually calmed me. She opened one eye, apparently assessing whether my distraction was acceptable, before closing it again with what could only be described as feline judgment.

If I was being honest—and I tried to be with myself, at least—I missed him. God, I missed him. The way he made coffee in the morning. The way he knew exactly when to push and when to let things be. The way he looked at me like I was the most fascinating person in any room, even after all these years.

Part of me was genuinely looking forward to seeing him tomorrow. That small, hopeful part that believed maybe we could work through this, that maybe one night on a red carpet could be a fresh start.

But that was the problem, wasn't it? There was that other part of me—the part that refused to be diminished or managed or spoken for—that was still furious.

He'd violated my autonomy. He'd made decisions about my trauma, about my past, about what I needed to hear and when I needed to hear it. And when I'd called him on it, when I'd told him how much it hurt, he hadn't apologized. He'd defended his actions.

I was protecting you, he'd said.

I was doing the right thing, he'd insisted.

As if his certainty about what was right for me somehow made it acceptable to override my own voice.

I loved my husband. That was never the question. But love and hurt weren't mutually exclusive, and I was discovering that having both at the same time was exhausting.

Thara shifted on my lap, repositioning herself with the dramatic flair only a cat could manage. I smiled despite myself at her obvious annoyance with my emotional turmoil. As far as she was concerned, my lap should be a peaceful place for napping, not a repository for complicated feelings about complicated men.

"I know, baby girl," I murmured, scratching behind her ears. "I'm a mess."

She purred in response, which I chose to interpret as agreement rather than comfort. With Thara, it was usually hard to tell the difference.

Tomorrow was going to be interesting. Hunter arriving with flowers and apologies that weren't quite apologies. Me in a designer gown, smiling for cameras while we pretended everything was fine. The red carpet performance of a marriage that needed more than a few hours and some professional lighting to repair.

This was going to be a very interesting visit indeed.

I was lost in thought when a sharp knock on the door startled me back to reality. Thara shot me a look of pure indignation as I stood, forcing her to abandon her comfortable position on my lap. She leapt to the floor with deliberate drama, her tail flicking in disapproval.

I hesitated at the door, taking a steadying breath before opening it.

Hunter stood in the hallway, duffle bag slung over one shoulder, exhaustion evident in the shadows beneath his eyes. His hair was slightly disheveled from the long flight, and he'd missed a spot shaving—that little patch just under his jaw that he always missed when he rushed. Despite everything, my heart did that familiar skip it had done since I was twenty-three.

For a moment, we just looked at each other, the silence heavy with all the things we weren't saying. I felt myself warring with conflicting impulses—the urge to throw myself into his arms battling with the still-simmering anger that had kept us distant for weeks.

"Come in," I said finally, my voice carefully neutral as I stepped aside.

He crossed the threshold, his familiar scent—that mixture of leather and whatever soap he used momentarily overwhelming me. I closed the door and retreated to the safety of the sofa, putting distance between us.

Hunter set his duffle down with more force than necessary, the soft thud punctuating the silence.

"Really?" he asked, frustration evident in the tightness of his jaw. "So this is what we're doing? You're not even going to speak to me?"

I rolled my eyes and offered a noncommittal shrug, knowing it would irritate him and unable to stop myself from wanting that reaction.

"Do not test me right now, Michelle," he said, his voice dropping lower, that dangerous edge I recognized creeping in. "I just flew almost twelve hours to fucking be here for you."

Something in me snapped. I stood up, hands on my hips. "Oh, thank you *so much* for your kindness," I said with an exaggerated bow, sarcasm dripping from every syllable. "How generous of you to support your wife at a major industry event. Shall I prepare your medal now or later?"

"Do you want me to apologize for protecting my wife?" Hunter demanded, taking a step toward me.

"I want you to apologize for speaking *for* me and taking away my autonomy!" I fired back, not backing down. "For deciding what my trauma means, for telling me how I should feel about my own past, for making it a public spectacle!"

"That is not what happened and you know it!" he yelled, color rising in his cheeks.

"That IS what happened and YOU know it!" I countered, my voice rising to match his. "You decided what was best for me without even asking what I wanted!"

"You're being a bitch!"

"You're being an asshole!"

The tension between us crackled like electricity, the air suddenly charged with something beyond anger. Hunter moved toward me in two quick strides, his eyes dark with a mixture of frustration and desire. He backed me against the wall, one hand bracing beside my head, the other finding my waist with familiar possessiveness.

For a heartbeat, we just stared at each other, chests rising and falling rapidly.

Then his mouth was on mine, hungry and demanding. I kissed him back with equal fervor, weeks of separation and anger transmuting into something urgent and primal. My hands found their way into his hair, pulling him closer as his body pressed mine against the wall.

We stumbled toward the bedroom, a tangle of limbs and half-removed clothing, neither willing to break contact long enough for grace or coordination. My shirt disappeared somewhere in the hallway; his belt hit the floor with a metallic clatter that neither of us acknowledged.

We fell onto the bed in a graceless heap, the familiar weight of him above me both comforting and maddening. This wouldn't solve anything—we both knew that somewhere beneath the haze of desire—but in this moment, the physical connection was easier than the words we couldn't seem to find.

Livvie

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I headed out to the back garden, following the sound of increasingly heated child voices. The scene that greeted me was exactly what I'd expected—Rose standing with her arms crossed, fairy wings askew and face flushed with indignation; Tiffy mirroring the posture with equal determination; and Killy perched on a garden chair observing the whole drama with his usual quiet intensity.

"Mummy!" Rose spotted me immediately, her voice rising to that particular pitch that only emerged when she felt deeply wronged. "Tiffy said fairies aren't real!" She gestured dramatically, her wings fluttering with the movement.

Tiffy, never one to back down, jutted her chin forward. "Rose said that Uncle Jeremy said that God isn't real," she countered, her American accent making the accusation sound somehow more serious.

"Wait, what?" I turned to Rose, momentarily blindsided by this unexpected theological detour.
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Rose nodded solemnly, her expression suggesting she was simply sharing an established fact. "Da say Uncle Hal's Sky Daddy not real," she reported with perfect innocence, clearly repeating J's exact phrasing.

I closed my eyes briefly, mentally adding another item to the endless list of "conversations to have with J about what he says around the children."

"OK," I said with the forced calm of a mother rapidly recalculating her approach. "I think it's time for Aunt Kara to take Tiffy home."

As if summoned by my words, Kara appeared at the garden door, already reaching for her purse. "I agree," she said, clearly having overheard enough to assess the situation. "Come on, Tiffy. Let's head home before we start an international theological incident."

Tiffy gave Rose one last look—half defiance, half truce—before taking her mother's hand. "Bye, Aunt Livvie. Bye Rose. Bye Killy."

"See you later," I called to Kara, offering an apologetic smile as I began herding the twins toward the house. Rose was still bristling, her wings catching on the doorframe as she stomped inside with all the wounded dignity a fairy princess could muster.

"Fairies real, Mummy?" she demanded once we were in the kitchen, her wide eyes fixed on me with complete trust that I would set the world right again.

I knelt down to her level, gently straightening her crooked wings. "Of course they are, Love," I said softly. "Tiffy just doesn't think so because she's never seen any." I brushed a strand of hair from her forehead. "Some people need to see things to believe in them."

Rose nodded sagely, as if I had confirmed a fundamental truth she'd always known. "Like Ki Ki," she said, glancing at her brother who had settled at the kitchen table with his coloring book. "Ki Ki sees things."

I felt a slight chill at her words, remembering how Killy had seen through Billy's encryption, how he seemed to perceive patterns that shouldn't be visible to anyone, let alone a child. I pushed the thought away, not wanting to dwell on Ranger tech and Celtic magic when I was supposed to be resolving a fairy existence crisis.

"Yes, well," I said, standing up. "How about some juice? Then maybe we can draw some pictures of fairies to show Tiffy next time she visits?"

Rose brightened immediately at the prospect of both juice and the opportunity to prove Tiffy wrong through artwork. "I make glitter fairies!" she declared, already racing toward her craft supplies.

"No glitter!" I called after her, though I knew it was probably too late. Once Rose had glitter on her mind, containment was rarely successful.

Killy looked up from his coloring, his expression serious. "She already has the sparkly glue," he reported calmly.

I sighed, mentally preparing for the inevitable cleanup that would follow. At least fairy crafts were a step up from theological debates between toddlers. Small victories.

While the twins settled into their coloring—Rose with chaotic enthusiasm, Killy with methodical precision—I busied myself tidying the kitchen. The familiar rhythm of wiping counters and sorting stray toys was almost meditative, a brief respite from the constant vigilance required to prevent glitter-related disasters.

The front door opened with its distinctive creak—the one I'd been asking J to fix for months but had grown oddly fond of as our own domestic early warning system.

"I'm home, Love," J called, his voice carrying through the house with that particular lilt that still made my heart skip even after all these years.

I abandoned the dishcloth on the counter and made my way to the entryway, a smile already forming. He stood there in his gym clothes, hair slightly damp at the temples, that familiar warmth in his eyes when they met mine.

"Love, I missed you," I said, moving toward him without hesitation.

He laughed as I wrapped my arms around him, his hands hovering slightly at his sides. "Oh Love, I'm sweaty," he protested, though he made no real effort to keep me at bay.

"I don't care," I murmured, pressing myself closer to him, breathing in the scent that was distinctly J—a mixture of his cologne, shampoo, and yes, the evidence of whatever masculine bonding exercise he'd engaged in with Hal.

He chuckled, finally giving in and wrapping his arms around me. "Right then," he said softly, his accent thickening slightly the way it always did when he was pleased but trying not to show it too much.

Our moment of quiet connection lasted approximately three seconds before the thundering sound of small feet announced the imminent arrival of our fairy princess.

"DA!" Rose's voice reached us a split second before she did, a blur of pink tulle and glittery wings as she launched herself at J's legs with the single-minded determination of a heat-seeking missile.

J released me with one arm, bending down to scoop Rose up with the practiced ease of a father accustomed to enthusiastic aerial assaults. "I missed you too, mo stór," he laughed, settling her on his hip despite the glitter now transferring from her wings to his workout shirt.

Rose immediately began patting his face with her small hands, a habit she'd had since infancy that somehow managed to be both endearing and slightly invasive. "Da, Tiffy say fairies not real," she reported solemnly, clearly expecting him to share her outrage at this heretical position.

J's eyes met mine over Rose's head, a silent question in them. I gave a small nod and mouthed "Sky Daddy" with raised eyebrows, watching his expression shift from confusion to understanding to mild chagrin.

"Ah," he said carefully. "Well, mo stór, everyone believes in different things."

"But fairies real," Rose insisted, her brow furrowing with the seriousness of the matter.

"Of course they are," J agreed without hesitation, adjusting her wings which had twisted during her flying leap. "Why else would you have such lovely wings?"

This simple logic appeared to satisfy Rose completely. She beamed at him before wriggling to be put down, already racing back toward the kitchen, presumably to continue her glitter-based proof of fairy existence.

J turned back to me with a slightly sheepish expression. "Sky Daddy?" he asked quietly.

"We'll talk about it later," I promised, trying and failing to keep the amusement from my voice. "Right now I'm just glad you're home."

His smile returned, warm and familiar. "Me too, Love. Me too."

We made our way to the kitchen where Rose had already created what appeared to be a fairy crime scene—glitter scattered across the table in patterns that would likely be embedded in the wood grain for years to come. Killy remained in his spot, carefully coloring within the lines, his cast resting on a cushion I'd placed earlier to keep it elevated.

I filled a glass with cold water and added a slice of lemon. He settled into his usual chair at the table, carefully avoiding the worst of the glitter zones.

"Did you have fun?" I asked, setting the water in front of him.

He nodded, taking a long drink before answering. "Aye. Hal and I played James and Pete." His mouth quirked up at the corner. "We won."

"Of course you did," I said, leaning against the counter and enjoying the simple domesticity of the moment. "I'm surprised James went, though. He usually avoids basketball like it's a personal affront to his dignity."

"We needed a fourth since Hunter's gone," J explained, absently reaching out to straighten Killy's coloring book. "And Trev certainly wasn't going to play."

"No, he'd sooner risk his Michelin stars than his precious hands on a basketball court," I agreed with a small laugh. I paused, remembering what J had said. "That's right—Hunter went to Nashville. Did he and Mich patch things up?"

J's expression shifted, a slight furrow appearing between his brows as he shook his head. "No. I told him to take her a gift, try to smooth things over." He lowered his voice, mindful of the twins though they seemed absorbed in their activities. "His reply was 'why, I didn't do anything wrong.'"

I rolled my eyes, not entirely surprised. For all Hunter's good qualities, his stubborn streak was a match for Michelle's own. "So he flew across an ocean to walk a red carpet with his wife while still convinced he was completely in the right?"

"That about sums it up," J confirmed, taking another drink of water. "Should be an interesting award show tomorrow."

"That's one word for it," I muttered, already imagining the tension that would be radiating from that particular couple. Michelle had a remarkable ability to maintain a perfect public face regardless of personal turmoil, but Hunter's emotions tended to show in the set of his jaw, the tightness around his eyes.

"Da, look!" Rose interrupted, holding up a paper covered in what appeared to be equal parts drawing and adhesive glitter. "Fairy house!"

J dutifully examined the creation, his expression shifting to one of exaggerated awe. "That's brilliant, mo stór! Is that where the fairies sleep?"

Rose nodded enthusiastically, sending a small shower of glitter cascading onto the table. "And they eat here," she added, pointing to a shapeless blob that might have been a table, a mushroom, or possibly a small explosion.

"It's lovely," J assured her, earning a beaming smile before she returned to her artistic endeavors.

He turned back to me, his voice lowering again. "You think they'll sort it out? Mich and Hunter?"

I considered the question, thinking about the complicated dynamics at play. "Eventually. They always do. But Hunter needs to understand that this time is different—he crossed a line with the Jon situation."

"Aye," J agreed. "Though trying to tell Hunter he's wrong about anything to do with Jon is like trying to convince Rose that glitter isn't necessary for every surface in our home."

I laughed despite myself, glancing at our fairy princess who was now liberally applying more sparkles to her creation. "A losing battle if ever there was one."

Michelle

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After we had sex, Hunter rolled away from me, the mattress shifting as he got up without a word. I listened to the bathroom door close, the shower starting moments later. The familiar routine of our anger—passion followed by distance, connection followed by retreat.
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I stared at the ceiling, my body still humming with the aftermath of our encounter, my mind no clearer than before. We'd always done angry sex well. Too well, perhaps. It gave us the illusion of communication without requiring actual words, allowed us the physical reconnection while keeping the emotional walls firmly in place.

With a sigh, I gathered the sheets around me, allowing myself one more moment in the warmth before facing the reality of our situation. The shower continued to run, giving me time to collect myself, to slip back into my armor of casual indifference.

I dressed deliberately, choosing comfort over style—soft leggings and an oversized purple sweater that slid off one shoulder. No makeup, no pretense. If we were going to have this conversation, I wouldn't hide behind perfect eyeliner and a camera-ready smile.

By the time I made my way to the living room, the shower had stopped. I curled up on the sofa, phone in hand, scrolling through delivery options. Nashville had its perks—food delivery being chief among them, especially compared to our limited options in Ballincollig. I settled on Thai, ordering our usual without asking. Some habits remained, even in the midst of conflict.

Several minutes later, Hunter emerged from the bedroom, hair still damp at the temples, dressed in jeans and a simple black t-shirt. He looked good—he always looked good—but the careful distance in his eyes told me more than words could about where we stood.

"I ordered food," I said simply, my voice carefully neutral.

He nodded, moving to sit at the dining room table rather than beside me on the sofa. The choice wasn't lost on me—establishing physical space to match the emotional gulf between us.

"Thank you," he replied, his tone matching mine in its deliberate lack of inflection.

The silence stretched between us, heavy with all the things we weren't saying. We'd been here before, this emotional standoff where neither wanted to be the first to extend an olive branch. But this time felt different, weightier somehow. The issues ran deeper than our usual disagreements about parenting approaches or career decisions.

This was about autonomy and respect, about the fundamental ways we saw each other and ourselves. About whether Hunter truly understood that protecting me couldn't mean controlling me, even with the best of intentions.

I looked at him across the room, this man I'd loved for over half my life, and wondered how we'd fix this—or if we could.

The food arrived, breaking the silence with the cheerful chime of the doorbell. I answered, exchanging pleasantries with the delivery person—slipping into my public persona with practiced ease, the smile that appeared and disappeared the moment the door closed.

I brought the bags to the dining table, unpacking containers with methodical precision. The familiar scents of lemongrass and basil filled the apartment, momentarily masking the tension in the air.

"Wine?" I asked, already moving toward the kitchen.

"Sure," Hunter replied, his eyes following my movements.

I returned with two glasses and a bottle of Riesling, setting them on the table before taking the seat across from him rather than my usual place at his side. Small rebellions, quiet declarations of where we stood.

We served ourselves in silence, the clink of utensils against containers painfully loud in the quiet apartment. Thara watched from her perch on the windowsill, her tail twitching with feline judgment.

"How are the girls?" I asked finally, unable to bear the silence any longer.

Hunter looked up, something softening briefly in his expression. "They're good. Arissa's science project won first place. Harley's been practicing that reverse stick shot for field hockey. Tomi learned to say 'unicorn' last week."

I smiled despite myself, a genuine one this time. "Of course she did. Saturn's influence, no doubt."

"Probably," he agreed, the corner of his mouth lifting slightly.

For a moment, we were just parents sharing pride in our children, the simplest and most honest connection we had. But the reprieve was temporary, the underlying tension returning as we lapsed back into silence.

"The show tomorrow," Hunter said after a while. "Holly sent over the schedule. Red carpet at five?"

"Yes," I nodded, grateful for the neutral topic. "We should leave by four to account for traffic. I have hair and makeup in the morning, final fitting at two."

"I brought the suit you asked for," he said.

"Thank you," I replied, noticing how formal we sounded, like business associates rather than husband and wife. "We'll coordinate well."

More silence, more careful navigation around the real issue. I pushed my pad thai around the plate, appetite fading as frustration built inside me. This was ridiculous. We were adults, parents, literal defenders of the universe—and here we were, unable to have an honest conversation.

"This isn't working," I said suddenly, setting down my fork.

Hunter's eyes snapped to mine, wariness and something like hurt flashing across his face. "What isn't?"

"This," I gestured between us. "The silence, the pretending. We had sex and now we're acting like polite strangers sharing a meal."

He sighed, running a hand through his hair—that familiar gesture that had always betrayed his frustration. "What do you want me to say, Michelle? I flew across an ocean to be here for you, to support you at this event. I'm trying."

"Are you?" I challenged, feeling the careful control I'd maintained beginning to slip. "Because trying would be acknowledging that you hurt me, that you crossed a line."

"I was protecting you," he said, his jaw tightening. "Jon was manipulating you, using your history against you, and I put a stop to it."

"That wasn't your decision to make!" My voice rose despite my best efforts. "You didn't protect me, Hunter. You decided what I needed to hear and when I needed to hear it. You took my agency away from me."

"Your agency?" He leaned forward, eyes flashing. "He was using Harley, Michelle. Our daughter. Was I supposed to just stand by and let that happen?"

"Of course not," I countered. "But there's a difference between protecting our family and publicly humiliating me by acting like I couldn't handle my own past."

"I never said you couldn't handle it," Hunter's voice had that dangerous edge now, the one that appeared when his control was slipping. "I said you shouldn't have to. Not alone."

"But it was my choice to make," I insisted. "My trauma, my history with Jon, my decision about how to address it."

"And what about my trauma?" Hunter asked quietly. The question caught me off guard, the sudden shift in his tone making me really look at him. "What about what it does to me to watch him manipulate you, to see you fall into the same patterns with him over and over again?"

I blinked, momentarily silenced by the raw honesty in his voice.

"Do you have any idea what it's like," he continued, "to love someone so completely, to watch them being hurt, and feel powerless to stop it?"

"Hunter—"

"No, you wanted to talk about this," he cut me off. "So let's talk. Yes, I spoke up at the Cantina. Yes, I made it public. But it wasn't about controlling you or speaking for you. It was about not being able to watch him hurt you anymore without doing something."

I sat back, absorbing his words. There was truth in them—painful truth that I hadn't wanted to acknowledge. Hunter had been watching Jon's manipulation of me for years, had seen the patterns I sometimes couldn't recognize until I was already caught in them.

"I'm not saying I handled it perfectly," Hunter admitted, his voice quieter now. "But I'm not going to apologize for standing up for my wife when someone was hurting her."

"Even if that hurt me too?" I asked softly.

He looked up, meeting my eyes directly for the first time since he'd arrived. "Did it? Hurt you?"

"Yes," I said simply. "It made me feel small, Hunter. Like I couldn't be trusted to handle my own life, my own decisions. Like you saw me as someone who needed to be managed rather than supported."

Something shifted in his expression, a flicker of understanding that hadn't been there before. "That was never my intention."

"I know," I acknowledged. "But intention doesn't change impact."

We fell silent again, but it was different now—less hostile, more contemplative. The first real crack in the walls we'd built around ourselves.

"I don't know how to fix this," Hunter admitted after a moment.

"Neither do I," I said honestly. "But I think recognizing there's something to fix is a start."

He nodded slowly. "For what it's worth, I'm sorry that I hurt you. That was never what I wanted."

It wasn't a complete apology, not an acknowledgment that his actions themselves had been wrong. But it was something—a recognition of my feelings, of my perspective. A small step toward understanding.

"I know," I said quietly. "And I'm sorry too. For shutting you out instead of explaining why I was hurt."

Hunter reached across the table, his hand extended palm up—an invitation, not a demand. After a moment's hesitation, I placed my hand in his, feeling the familiar warmth of his fingers as they closed around mine.

"We'll figure it out," he said, his voice carrying a certainty I wished I felt. "We always do."

I nodded, wanting to believe him, wanting to trust that we could navigate this like we had so many challenges before. But as I looked at him across the table, our hands connected but our perspectives still divided, I couldn't help wondering if some chasms were too wide to bridge with good intentions alone.

We finished our meal in relative silence, the momentary connection fading back into uncertainty. Neither of us seemed to know where to go from here—how to move forward when we'd said what needed to be said but hadn't truly resolved anything.

"Do you want to watch a movie?" Hunter asked finally, his voice carefully casual as he gathered the empty containers.

I nodded, grateful for the suggestion. A movie meant shared experience without the pressure of conversation, a neutral territory where we could coexist without confrontation. "Sure."

We migrated to the living room, Hunter taking the containers to the kitchen while I scrolled through Prime's offerings. I settled on something mindless—an action thriller with enough explosions to discourage conversation but not so complex that it required full attention.

The sofa suddenly felt smaller than I remembered, the cushions a battleground of invisible boundaries. Hunter sat at one end while I curled up at the other, a careful foot of space between us that might as well have been miles. Thara, sensing the tension, abandoned her windowsill to settle in the no-man's-land between us, her presence both a buffer and a bridge.

The movie played, all noise and motion, but I barely registered the plot. Instead, I found myself hyper-aware of Hunter's presence—the familiar rhythm of his breathing, the way he absently rubbed his thumb against his palm during tense scenes, habits I'd memorized over decades of loving him.

In Nashville's artificial light, away from the life we'd built in Ireland, everything felt slightly surreal. This apartment wasn't home—it was a way station, a place where Michelle Morris existed separately from Mich Bradley. Hunter's presence here always created a strange dissonance, worlds colliding in ways that never quite aligned.

As the credits rolled, neither of us moved immediately. The silence stretched, punctuated only by Thara's soft purring.

"It's late," Hunter said finally, standing with a slight stretch. "We should get some sleep. Big day tomorrow."

I nodded, switching off the TV and following him to the bedroom. We moved through our nightly routines with practiced efficiency, the choreography of a long marriage allowing us to navigate the small space without collision. Teeth brushed, faces washed, alarm set for my early call time.

The bed felt vast as we slipped beneath the covers, each of us retreating to our respective sides. No good night kiss, no casual touch, none of the small intimacies that had defined our relationship for so long. The physical distance mirrored the emotional one—close enough to feel each other's presence, too far to bridge the gap without deliberate effort.

I lay in the darkness, listening to Hunter's breathing gradually slow and deepen as sleep claimed him. My own thoughts refused to quiet, cycling through our conversation, searching for paths forward that I couldn't yet see clearly.

Tomorrow we would stand before cameras, his hand at the small of my back, smiles in place, the perfect picture of Hollywood romance. The irony wasn't lost on me—that I'd spent my career pretending to be other people, and now would pretend to be a version of myself.

As sleep finally began to pull at me, one thought remained clear: whatever happened on that red carpet, whatever came after, something fundamental had shifted between us. Whether that shift would strengthen or fracture what we'd built together remained to be seen.

Livvie

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J and I had finally managed to get the twins settled for the night—a feat that had required three bedtime stories, two glasses of water, and a solemn promise to Rose that no one would disturb her fairy house construction while she slept. The blessed silence of children actually sleeping had allowed us to retreat to the living room for some rare adult time.

We were sprawled on the sofa, controllers in hand, the new Hyrule Warriors game casting its colorful glow across the darkened room. I was leading our cooperative assault against waves of enemies, my fingers dancing across the controller with the same precision I applied to complex code. J provided solid backup, his character drawing enemy attention while I executed devastating combo attacks. There was something deeply satisfying about working together to battle digital foes after a day of mediating fairy theology disputes and preventing glitter catastrophes.

"So," I said casually as I executed a particularly devastating special move that cleared a path through the enemy forces, "we need to talk about your daughter's proclamation to Tiffy about God not existing." I couldn't help the laugh that escaped me, remembering Rose's matter-of-fact delivery.

J chuckled, his thumbs working steadily on the controller as he positioned his character to guard my flank. "So what exactly did she say? Word for word, I need the full quote."

"When Tiffy told her fairies didn't exist," I explained, coordinating with J to unleash a powerful joint attack on a mini-boss, "she countered with—and I quote—'my Da said Uncle Hal's Sky Daddy isn't real.'" I mimicked Rose's solemn expression and definitive tone while simultaneously directing our characters through the battlefield.

J burst into laughter, momentarily distracted enough that his character took a hit. "I have never been prouder," he declared, wiping at his eyes as he quickly recovered and rejoined the fight. "The perfect delivery. The confidence. My little protégé."

"Jeremiah Callaghan," I said, infusing my voice with that particular warning tone that I reserved for both my husband and my fairy princess when they crossed lines.

J visibly cringed at the use of his first and middle names, his laughter subsiding though his eyes still danced with amusement. "Oi, don't 'Jeremiah Callaghan' me. No harm done." He refocused on the screen, expertly blocking an attack that would have hit my character. "Besides, it's not like I told her to say it to Tiffy specifically."

I sighed, navigating our characters toward the next objective while giving him a sideways glance. "I suspect Hal will find it funny, but..." I paused to direct a powerful attack at a group of enemies, "you have to watch what you say around the twins. They repeat everything, and they have no concept of context or audience."
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J winced as we coordinated our attacks against a particularly tough enemy. "Point taken," he conceded, our characters working in perfect tandem to clear the screen of enemies. "Though you have to admit, Rose's delivery was impeccable."

"It was," I allowed, unable to maintain the stern façade any longer as we successfully completed the level together. "The look on Tiffy's face was priceless. Pure moral outrage."

"Just like her mother," J observed with a grin. "Kara's got that same expression when she's reporting on political scandals."

We fell into comfortable teamwork for a while, our characters moving across the battlefield with complementary skills—my strategic precision paired with J's intuitive timing. The only sounds were the click of controller buttons and occasional callouts to coordinate attacks. It was these moments I treasured most—the quiet normalcy of being together after the chaos of the day, no Celtic magic or Ranger tech demanding attention, just us working together against digital enemies instead of intergalactic threats.

"Billy left another message," J said after a while, his voice carefully casual in a way that immediately put me on alert. "While you were putting Killy down."

I sighed, my character's rhythm barely faltering despite the unwelcome news. "What did he want this time? More code breaking? Another impossible task involving alien technology that shouldn't exist?"

"He didn't say specifically," J replied. "Just that it was urgent and related to the 'project' you're working on."

"It's always urgent with Billy," I muttered, focusing on coordinating with J to defeat the level boss. "The universe is always five minutes from collapse, according to him."

J paused the game, turning to face me properly. "You know you don't have to do this, Love. You could tell him no."

I looked at him, appreciating the concern in his eyes but knowing we both understood the reality of our situation. "Could I, though? Now that we know what's out there?" I shook my head slightly. "I'm already involved, whether I want to be or not."

"I know," J said quietly. "But that doesn't mean you have to jump every time Billy calls. You've got a life, a family. The universe can wait its bloody turn."

I couldn't help but smile at his protective indignation. "My hero," I teased gently, leaning over to kiss him. "Defending me from the demands of alien technology and ancient magic."

"Someone has to," he replied, his hand finding mine. "Might as well be the bloke who benefits most from having you here rather than saving distant planets."

"Selfish of you," I observed with a smile.

"Entirely," he agreed without a hint of remorse.

I sighed, knowing I should call Billy back but reluctant to break the peaceful moment. "I'll deal with it tomorrow," I decided. "Tonight is just us. No Rangers, no Celtic magic, no crises beyond defeating this boss together."

J grinned, unpausing the game. "Ready to finish this level?"

"Always," I replied, already coordinating our attack strategy, settling back into the comfortable rhythm of our evening, the weight of intergalactic responsibilities temporarily set aside in favor of something far more precious—ordinary time with the man I loved, battling digital enemies together instead of real-world threats.

Michelle

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The next morning I was up before dawn, much to Thara's vocal disapproval. She fixed me with a baleful stare from her pillow fortress as I slipped out of bed, her tail twitching with feline indignation at the disruption of her sleep schedule.

I showered quickly, the hot water doing little to ease the tension that had settled between my shoulders overnight. Award show days always carried their own particular brand of stress—the endless cycle of interviews, the scrutiny, the performance of public happiness—but today's added layer of marital discord made it feel even more daunting.

By the time I settled at the kitchen counter with my first coffee of what would undoubtedly be many, Thara had reluctantly followed, her displeasure evident in the deliberate slowness of her movements. I absently scratched behind her ears as I reviewed the day's agenda on my phone.

Two morning interviews with entertainment shows, then straight to hair and makeup, followed by the final fitting for Lydia's creation before the red carpet. The dress was a masterpiece. It was also, like most high fashion, an instrument of elegant torture, the corseted bodice restricting everything from full breaths to the consumption of actual food. The price of beauty, as Lydia would say with her practical shrug.

Hunter padded out of the bedroom as I was pouring my second cup, his hair still mussed from sleep, wearing only pajama bottoms. Despite everything, I couldn't help but appreciate the view—some reactions were hardwired after decades together.

"Hey," I said, the casual greeting feeling strangely formal between us. "I'm ordering in breakfast before I have to leave for interviews. You want something specific?"

He nodded, running a hand through his hair in that familiar gesture that still made my stomach do a small flip. "Sure, just get me whatever," he replied, moving past me to make his own coffee, carefully maintaining the invisible boundary we'd established.
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I placed an order from the café down the street—my usual avocado toast and his preferred breakfast burrito—then retreated to get dressed. I opted for comfort over style for the morning interviews, knowing I'd be spending the afternoon being pinned, painted, and polished into my public persona. Worn jeans and a soft purple v-neck would do until then.

When I emerged, Hunter had already changed into jeans and a crimson t-shirt that highlighted the gold in his hair.

The food arrived promptly, and we ate in the kitchen, the silence broken only by Thara's persistent meows as she lobbied for a share of Hunter's burrito. He slipped her a small piece of egg when he thought I wasn't looking—another familiar routine that felt both comforting and painful in its normalcy.

"We should leave in twenty," I said, checking the time. "Holly arranged a car."

Hunter nodded, finishing his coffee. "I'll be ready."

I gathered my essentials and coaxed a reluctant Thara into her specialized backpack carrier—a custom design that accommodated her royal attitude while allowing her to travel safely. She settled in with her usual dramatic sigh, clearly communicating that she was doing me a tremendous favor by accompanying me to work.

The morning passed in a blur of practiced smiles and carefully crafted answers. I fielded questions about my latest project, deflected inquiries about future plans, and navigated the inevitable Jon-related speculation with the diplomatic skill of a career politician. Hunter stood just off-camera during each interview, his presence both reassuring and unsettling—a visual reminder of what we presented to the world versus the reality we were living.

Between interviews, we existed in a strange limbo—physically close but emotionally distant, moving through the choreography of our public life with practiced ease while the private tension remained unresolved. We spoke when necessary, coordinated movements with the efficiency of long partnership, but the usual undercurrent of connection was muted, replaced by something more cautious.

After the final morning interview, we had a brief window for lunch before the afternoon's preparation marathon began. The restaurant Holly had chosen was quiet and discreet, the kind of place that catered to celebrities who preferred not to be photographed while eating.

We sat across from each other at a corner table, the elegant setting a stark contrast to our strained silence. I studied the menu without really seeing it, hyperaware of Hunter's presence across from me, of the careful way we were both avoiding anything beyond surface interaction.

"The salmon is good here," I offered finally, the silence becoming unbearable.

Hunter glanced up, his eyes meeting mine briefly before returning to his menu. "Thanks," he said simply.

When the waiter came, I ordered a salad I knew I wouldn't finish—my stomach too knotted with tension and the looming constraint of the evening's gown. Hunter chose the salmon, his voice carrying that particular neutrality he used when navigating uncomfortable situations.

As we waited for our food, I found myself studying him across the table—the familiar lines of his face, the slight furrow between his brows that appeared when he was troubled, the way his fingers absently traced patterns on the tablecloth. I knew every expression, every gesture, could map his moods by the smallest shifts in his posture or tone. Yet right now, despite all that knowledge, I couldn't bridge the gap between us.

Our food arrived, offering a welcome distraction from the weighted silence. We ate methodically, the excellent cuisine wasted on our preoccupied minds. Thara watched from her discreet position in the specialized carrier beside me, her eyes tracking each movement of Hunter's fork with predatory focus.

"Are you ready for tonight?" Hunter asked suddenly, breaking the silence that had stretched between us.

The question held layers—was I ready for the red carpet, for the public scrutiny, for pretending everything was fine between us while cameras captured every interaction? Or was he asking something deeper—was I ready to move forward, to find resolution to the conflict that had driven this wedge between us?

"As ready as I can be," I replied carefully, opting for the surface interpretation. "Lydia outdid herself with the dress."

He nodded, his expression softening slightly. "What color?"

"Brown," I confirmed, a small smile tugging at my lips despite everything. It was a departure from my usual purple for major events—a calculated choice that had raised Holly's eyebrows when I'd insisted on it.

"I brought the suit you like," he said, his voice carrying a hint of the warmth I'd been missing. "And the tie."

"Thank you," I said softly, the simple acknowledgment briefly bridging the gap between us.

But the moment passed, and we lapsed back into silence, each retreating to our own thoughts as we finished our meal. The afternoon stretched ahead of us—hours of preparation culminating in an evening of performance, of presenting the united front the world expected while privately navigating the uncertain territory of what came next.

After lunch we returned to my apartment, the quiet between us now familiar if not comfortable. I checked my phone, messages from Holly confirming the glam team's imminent arrival. Thara emerged from her carrier with an indignant stretch, immediately claiming the best sunspot on the windowsill as her rightful domain.

Hunter disappeared into the bedroom to prepare his own things for the evening, giving me a moment alone to mentally prepare for the transformation ahead. I stood at the window, looking out at Nashville's skyline, feeling the familiar pre-show jitters mingling with the more complex emotions of our current situation.

The doorbell announced the arrival of the glam squad. They swept in with cases of products and tools, converting my living room into an impromptu styling station with practiced efficiency.

I settled into the designated chair, surrendering to the process I'd experienced countless times before. The hairstylist began working ok my hair while the makeup artist prepped my skin, the two of them working in perfect synchronization around me.

Hunter emerged from the bedroom, now in comfortable clothes but freshly showered, his hair still damp at the temples. Without prompting, he picked up his phone and began filming snippets of the preparation process—another ritual we'd developed over the years. The fans loved these behind-the-scenes glimpses, and I would use them strategically across social media platforms later.

"Tilt your chin up for me," the makeup artist directed, and I complied automatically, years of experience making these interactions second nature.

Hours passed in the familiar rhythm of beauty preparation—the gentle tug of the brush through my hair, the featherlight touch of makeup brushes across my skin, the quiet professional chatter of the team as they worked. Hunter moved around the edges, capturing moments without intruding, his presence both familiar and strange in its new distance.

Finally, it was time for the dress. The stylist unzipped the garment bag with reverent care, revealing Lydia's creation in all its glory. The light brown lace caught the late afternoon sun, the intricate pattern creating depth and dimension across the fabric.

I stepped into it carefully, holding my breath as it was zipped up, the material embracing every curve with precision. The dress was a masterpiece of contradictions—delicate lace paired with daring design, the modest color contrasting with the provocative cut. The bodice was structured to emphasize my chest without artificial enhancement, while the skirt clung to my hips before flowing into a slight train. The slit was bold, rising nearly to my hip, revealing just enough leg to be tantalizing without crossing into vulgarity.

The choice of color and design had been deliberate—a response to the ridiculous rumors that had been circulating for weeks. Ever since Dixie's character had debuted with her enhanced cleavage courtesy of industrial-strength push-up bras, the tabloids had been obsessed with speculation about whether I'd had work done.

No matter how many videos I'd posted showing the actual Victoria's Secret bras used for the character, no matter how many times Holly had issued statements, the headlines persisted. So I'd decided to have some fun with it—to show off what was actually mine, no padding or pushing

required. The dress was my elegant middle finger to the gossip mill, a way of reclaiming the narrative on my own terms.

"Wow," Hunter's voice came from across the room, genuine appreciation breaking through our careful neutrality.

I turned to face him, watching his expression shift from polite interest to something more familiar—that particular look that had made my heart race since I was twenty-three. For a moment, we were just us again—Michelle and Hunter, not the public figures preparing for a red carpet.

"You look..." he paused, searching for the right word. "Stunning."

"Thank you," I replied softly, holding his gaze. In that moment, I could almost forget the tension of the past weeks, could almost believe we were simply getting ready for another industry event like the dozens we'd attended together over the years.

The stylist approached with my shoes—towering stilettos in a shade that perfectly matched the dress—breaking the moment between us. As I slipped them on, gaining several inches in height, Hunter returned to his role as documentarian, capturing the final touches for the social media narrative we'd craft later.

"Five minutes until the car arrives," my team alerted me.

I took a final look in the full-length mirror, taking in the complete transformation. The woman reflected back was Michelle Morris, country music star and actress, confident and camera-ready. But beneath the perfect hair and makeup, beneath the designer dress and carefully constructed image, I was still Mich—still wrestling with the complicated reality of my marriage, my career, and the space between who I was and who the world thought I was.

Hunter appeared behind me in the mirror, now changed into the suit I'd always loved—the one that fit him perfectly, highlighting the breadth of his shoulders and the lean strength of his frame. His tie matched my dress exactly, another piece of our public choreography.

"Ready?" he asked, offering his arm in a gesture that felt both familiar and strangely formal.

I nodded, taking a deep breath as I slipped my hand through his arm. "As ready as I'll ever be."

Together, we moved toward the door, preparing to step into the spotlight and play our parts to perfection, whatever uncertainty lay between us carefully hidden behind practiced smiles and public personas.

The red carpet at the CMAs was a carefully orchestrated chaos—camera flashes creating a constant strobe effect, reporters calling out names over the steady roar of fans behind barricades, publicists herding their clients through the gauntlet with military precision. Holly materialized at my side the moment our car door opened, earpiece in place, tablet in hand, ready to navigate us through the evening's first challenge.

"E! wants you first, then Entertainment Tonight, then the official CMAs press line," she murmured, her voice low enough that only Hunter and I could hear. "Chris and Jessica are already here, about halfway down the carpet."

I nodded, taking a deep breath as Hunter's hand found the small of my back—a gesture so familiar it felt automatic despite the tension between us. We stepped onto the carpet, his arm sliding through mine as we faced the wall of cameras.

"Michelle! Hunter! Over here!" "Michelle, look this way!" "Can we get one with both of you looking left?"

The commands blended into a familiar cacophony as we moved through the practiced poses—his arm around my waist, my hand on his chest, both of us angled to showcase the careful styling we'd spent hours perfecting. The smiles came automatically, the subtle shifts in position designed to give each outlet their unique shot while maintaining the illusion of marital harmony.

We managed a few minutes of this performance before I spotted Chris and Jessica posing together further down the carpet. The sight provided the perfect escape route from the increasingly uncomfortable charade.

"I see the cast," I said to Hunter, my voice carrying a forced brightness. "You should get some footage for social."

Before he could respond, I was already moving away, leaving him little choice but to pull out his phone and shift into the documentarian role I'd just thrust upon him. It wasn't our usual arrangement—normally Hunter remained at my side throughout these events, my anchor in the swirling social current—but tonight, the thought of answering questions about our relationship or maintaining the pretense of perfect happiness felt unbearable.

"Mich!" Chris called as I approached, his genuine smile a welcome contrast to the forced one I'd been wearing. "Get in here!"

I slipped between my castmates, Jessica's arm immediately wrapping around my waist as Chris draped his across my shoulders. I angled my body deliberately toward them and away from where Hunter stood, phone raised to capture the interaction.

"Damn, girl," Jessica whispered, her smile never faltering for the cameras. "That dress is doing all the things."

"That's the idea," I replied with a wink, turning to give the photographers our best three-quarter angle.

"The rumors can officially die now," Chris added with a low chuckle. "Though they probably won't."

I laughed more loudly than necessary, making sure Hunter captured the moment—another few seconds I wouldn't have to spend beside him, another interaction that would keep me occupied

elsewhere. I could feel his gaze on me, confusion mingling with hurt as he realized what I was doing, but I pushed the awareness away, focusing instead on the performance.

As soon as the photographers had their fill of the cast photos, I spotted Leanne Morgan nearby and made a beeline for her, calling over my shoulder to Hunter, "Get this for Instagram!"

His jaw tightened slightly, but he followed, dutifully recording as I hugged Leanne and launched into an animated conversation. I could see the realization dawning in his eyes—that I was using these social interactions not just as part of the normal red carpet dance but as a deliberate buffer between us.

I moved from one celebrity to the next with barely a pause, giving Hunter no opportunity to rejoin me as my date rather as my personal photographer. Steve Martin, Reba McEntire, Kelsea Ballerini—each conversation was brief but enthusiastic, each interaction another few minutes I didn't have to stand beside Hunter and pretend everything was fine.

"Michelle! How about a couple shot with Hunter?" a reporter called out as I finished chatting with Luke Bryan.

"Oh, he's busy documenting everything for social media," I replied with a practiced laugh, already moving toward my next target. "You know how it is—gotta feed the Instagram beast!"

I caught the flash of hurt in Hunter's eyes before he masked it, his expression settling into the neutral professionalism he'd perfected over years of accompanying me to industry events. This wasn't our normal dynamic—he was accustomed to standing beside me, to being my partner rather than being relegated to the role of photographer—but tonight, the distance felt necessary, a physical manifestation of the emotional gap between us.

When an Entertainment Tonight reporter cornered us both, asking how we kept the romance alive after all these years, I launched into a rehearsed answer about date nights and quality time, my hand finding Hunter's arm in a gesture that would look affectionate to cameras but felt mechanical to us both.

"And what about you, Hunter? What's your secret?" the reporter pressed.

Before he could answer, I spotted Chris waving from near the entrance. "Oh! We need to get inside for the presenters' meeting," I interrupted, offering an apologetic smile to the reporter. "Sorry, duty calls!"

I pulled away from Hunter, calling back, "Get some shots of the entrance for social, babe!" The endearment felt hollow, a performance piece rather than an expression of affection.

As I made my way toward the venue entrance, weaving through the crowd with practiced ease, I caught sight of Hunter in my peripheral vision. He stood alone for a moment, phone lowered, watching me with an expression I couldn't quite decipher—something between resignation and revelation, as if he finally understood exactly how far apart we'd drifted.

Then he raised the phone again, resuming the role I'd assigned him, capturing footage of a wife who was doing everything possible to avoid being his date.

When it was time to take our seats for the ceremony, I rejoined Hunter in the auditorium, the brief separation of the red carpet behind us as we settled into the familiar monotony of award shows. These events followed the same predictable rhythm—applaud politely for peers, maintain camera-ready posture for random broadcast cuts, and stay alert for any moment that might generate press or social media buzz.

I scanned the crowd as the seats filled around us, the glittering assembly of Nashville royalty taking their places before the broadcast began. My eyes landed on Keith making his way down our row, and I felt myself tense. The industry gossip mill had been working overtime about his infidelity, the details growing more salacious with each retelling. His wife—someone I considered a genuine friend rather than just an industry colleague—had finally filed for divorce after trying to salvage things for months.

I turned to Hunter, grateful for a topic that might bridge the awkward silence between us. "How can he cheat on her?" I asked, keeping my voice low. "What was he thinking?"

Hunter's expression darkened slightly as he glanced at Keith. "No idea," he replied, his tone carefully neutral. "When they were at Tomi's birthday, they seemed happy."

The simple observation carried weight I hadn't anticipated. Appearances versus reality—a theme that hit uncomfortably close to home given our current situation. How many people had seen us at events over the years and thought the same? That we seemed happy, seemed solid, seemed like we had it all figured out?

The show began with its typical opening spectacle, but I found myself distracted, hyperaware of Hunter beside me. The careful inches of space between us on seats designed to keep celebrities packed tightly together for camera angles. The way his hand rested on the armrest between us, close enough to touch but maintaining that deliberate distance.

When it was time for my segment, I excused myself with a murmured, "Be back soon," and made my way backstage. The familiar pre-presentation routine provided a welcome distraction—last touch-ups to hair and makeup, sound check for microphones, brief review of teleprompter lines with Jessica and Chris.

Our presentation went smoothly—the practiced banter landing the right laughs, the timing perfect, the chemistry between the three of us translating well to camera. As we announced the winner and exited stage left, I felt that familiar rush of professional satisfaction, the momentary high of a performance well executed.

It evaporated the moment I returned to my seat and caught the tension in Hunter's jaw, the careful way he shifted to accommodate me without making eye contact. Something had changed during my absence, his simmering frustration now evident in the rigid set of his shoulders.

"What is wrong?" I whispered, leaning slightly toward him.

"Not here," he replied, his voice clipped as he kept his eyes fixed on the stage.

I sat back, my mind racing through possibilities. Had something happened while I was presenting? Had someone said something to him? The uncertainty gnawed at me through the next segment, making it impossible to focus on the performances.

When the broadcast cut to commercial, I turned to him decisively. "Let's go backstage."

He nodded once, following me as I navigated the crowded aisles with practiced ease, smiling and nodding at colleagues while maintaining our purposeful exit. I found an empty dressing room—one of the small, private spaces reserved for presenters—and ushered him inside, closing the door firmly behind us.

"What?" I asked, turning to face him in the sudden quiet.

"Am I your assistant or your husband?" The words burst from him, raw with a mixture of anger and hurt that made me flinch. "Because I'm starting to wonder."

I sighed, crossing my arms defensively. "I was just trying to keep us out of awkward situations."

"Us?" His eyebrows rose, challenge evident in his stance. "Or yourself?"

"Hunter..."

"No." He cut me off, his voice rising slightly. "What is this? Am I losing you? Because if I am, I'd really like to know now. It would be far less humiliating than being your errand boy while you parade around avoiding me."

The accusation hit harder than I expected, tears springing to my eyes before I could stop them. "Losing me?" My voice cracked slightly. "You're the one that pushed me away. You're the one that threatened to divorce me."

Hunter sighed, running a hand through his hair in that familiar gesture of frustration. "Okay, I shouldn't have done that..." He shook his head, the anger in his eyes tempered with something more vulnerable. "Damn it, Mich, you infuriate me sometimes."

"That goes both ways," I shot back, feeling the familiar heat of our arguments rising between us.

"I was trying to protect you!" he cried, taking a step closer.

"By doing what everyone my whole life has done!" The words tore from me with unexpected force. "Defining my story! Telling me what to think and speaking for me!"

The truth of it hung in the air between us—the core of what had been festering beneath the surface. Not just about Jon, not just about the Cantina, but about patterns established long before Hunter had entered my life. Patterns I'd fought against for decades, only to have the man I trusted most reenact them with the best of intentions.

We stared at each other, the air charged with the electricity that had always defined our relationship—that volatile mixture of passion and stubbornness that could either tear us apart or bind us more tightly together. The moment balanced on a knife's edge, and then we were moving toward each other, argument transforming into something more primal.

His hands found my waist as mine tangled in his hair, the kiss fierce and desperate—an expression of everything we couldn't seem to say with words. We stumbled toward the small sofa in the corner of the dressing room, our bodies remembering each other even as our minds struggled to reconcile.

Afterward, I straightened my dress with shaking hands, the reality of what we'd just done—and where we'd done it—sinking in. My hair would need fixing before I could return to the audience, but the more pressing concern was the emotional tangle we'd created.

"We can't keep doing this," I said quietly, smoothing the fabric over my hips. "Using sex instead of actually resolving anything." I took a deep breath, turning to face him fully. "But... as much as I'm hurt by what you did... I do think we're worth saving. I love you, Hunter. I've been without you, and I'm miserable."

Hunter sighed, adjusting his tie as he met my gaze. "I feel the same. I love you too, Mich." The simple declaration carried the weight of decades—of choices made and unmade, of a bond that had weathered more storms than most.

"Okay, then," I nodded, taking a tentative step toward resolution. "I'm sorry for my part. I should have been more mindful and kept Jon at bay." The admission wasn't easy, but it was necessary—an acknowledgment of my own role in the situation that had brought us here.

He ran a hand through his hair again, his expression softening. "I'm sorry for my part. I love you, and... I get that you didn't appreciate the way I went about protecting you. I should have told you what I was planning." He paused, vulnerability replacing the earlier anger. "I should have trusted you to handle it your way."

He opened his arms to me, and I walked into his embrace, the familiar contours of his body against mine offering a comfort I'd been missing. It wasn't a perfect resolution—we both knew that—but it was a start. An acknowledgment that whatever lay between us was worth fighting for, worth the difficult work of understanding each other more deeply.

As we held each other in that quiet backstage room, the sounds of the award show continuing without us, I realized that the path forward wouldn't be simple. We'd need to rebuild trust, to establish new patterns that honored both his protective instincts and my need for autonomy.But for the first time since the Cantina, I felt something like hope—a tentative belief that we could find our way back to each other.

After a quick visit to the makeup artist for touch-ups and some strategic hair rearrangement that wouldn't raise eyebrows about our backstage activities, I took Hunter's arm and we headed back to

the ceremony. The subtle shift in our dynamic was immediate—his hand covering mine where it rested in the crook of his elbow, the careful distance between us now closed.

We slipped back into our seats during a commercial break, exchanging polite nods with those around us. As the broadcast resumed, I found myself leaning slightly against Hunter's shoulder, the familiar comfort of his presence beside me no longer something to avoid but something to savor. When the camera panned across our section, we smiled naturally—not the practiced red carpet grins but something more genuine, if still tinged with the fragility of recent repair.

"That performance was incredible," Hunter murmured during one segment, his commentary meant only for me rather than for social media content.

"Mmm," I agreed, allowing my hand to find his between our seats. "Reminds me of when we saw her in Austin last year."

These small exchanges—the private shorthand of a long relationship—continued throughout the remainder of the show, each one a stitch in the fabric we were cautiously mending.

After the final award, we made our obligatory appearance at one of the industry after-parties—this one, with cosmic irony, held at Jon's Nashville establishment. The universe had a twisted sense of humor sometimes. Fortunately, Jon himself was absent, having flown to New York to meet his newborn grandchild. Small mercies.

"You okay being here?" Hunter asked quietly as we entered, his hand protective at the small of my back.

I nodded, scanning the crowded space. "It's fine. He's not here, and we need to make an appearance."

We worked the room together this time—Hunter at my side as my partner rather than trailing behind as my photographer. We chatted with industry executives, exchanged congratulations with winners, and made the requisite promises to "get together soon" with colleagues we rarely saw outside of these functions.

After the minimum socially acceptable time had passed, Hunter leaned close to my ear. "Ready to go home?"

The simple question carried layers of meaning after our tumultuous day. Home. Not just my Nashville apartment, but the concept of us, together, finding our way back to what mattered.

"More than ready," I replied, giving his hand a gentle squeeze.

Back at the apartment, Hunter helped me out of my dress—his fingers careful with the delicate lace as he lowered the zipper. There was tenderness in the gesture rather than just practicality, his touch lingering against my skin in silent appreciation.

I washed away the layers of performance—the makeup, the hairspray, the public persona—and emerged from the bathroom in soft cotton pajamas, my hair piled messily on top of my head in a clip that prioritized comfort over style. The transformation from Michelle Morris back to just Mich was always a relief, but tonight it felt particularly significant. This was who I really was—not the glamorous figure on the red carpet but this woman in worn pajamas with a bare face and messy hair.

And this was who Hunter had fallen in love with, long before awards shows and red carpets had become part of our reality.

"Better?" he asked, looking up from where he'd settled on the sofa, already changed into sweatpants and a t-shirt.

"Much," I sighed, sinking down beside him and tucking my feet beneath me. "I was starting to forget what it felt like to breathe normally."

We ordered late-night food—greasy, delicious things that would have horrified my stylist but satisfied the hunger that fancy event canapés never quite addressed. Thara emerged from whatever hiding place she'd claimed during our absence, stretching dramatically before deigning to join us on the sofa.

The television played something mindless in the background as we ate, but I found myself more focused on the comfortable silence between us, on the way Hunter's arm draped casually across my shoulders, on Thara's steady purring as she settled across my stomach. This was the reality beneath the glamour—these quiet moments of connection that had nothing to do with cameras or careers.

After we'd eaten, we moved to the bedroom by unspoken agreement, the day's emotional and physical exhaustion catching up with us both. I curled into Hunter's arms, my head finding its familiar place against his chest where I could hear the steady rhythm of his heartbeat.

"I love you," I whispered into the darkness, the words simple but weighted with everything we'd navigated that day.

"I love you too," he echoed, his voice a low rumble against my ear as his hands found their way beneath my shirt, not with the urgent hunger of our earlier encounter but with gentle reverence.

This time, there was no anger driving us together, no desperate need to connect physically when we couldn't emotionally. This was something slower, more deliberate—each touch an affirmation, each kiss a promise. Not just sex but love expressed through physical connection, our bodies remembering what our minds sometimes forgot: that beneath the arguments and misunderstandings, we belonged together.

Afterward, I lay in his arms, my body curved against his in the perfect fit we'd discovered decades ago. The tension that had been my constant companion for weeks had finally released its hold, replaced by a peace I'd almost forgotten was possible. We still had work to do—conversations to

have, boundaries to establish, trust to rebuild—but in this moment, in the quiet darkness of my Nashville bedroom, I felt something settle into place.

We were going to be okay. Not perfect, not without effort, but okay. And for tonight, that was enough.