

*Inspired by the work of the Rudan Brothers & Sonny Stanojevic, and by the remarkable stories of the people they surprise with a free roof makeover.*

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### ***Introduction***

*In Canada, the majority of the people own their own homes — mostly detached houses. The roof is always a lot of work to maintain, especially with the gutters running all the way around. A typical Canadian roof is covered with asphalt shingles that need replacing about every ten years. Quite an investment.*

### **A LEAKING ROOF**

Delia Archer was staring out the kitchen window, lost in thought about her finances. Things had been tight ever since her husband Richard had passed away. It wouldn't take much for the income-expenditure balance to tip the wrong way.

“Mom, when are you getting the roof fixed? The water stain on my ceiling is getting bigger, and I think I saw a drop of water coming down.”

Delia's eighteen-year-old daughter leaned against her, like she used to when she was a little girl. Delia put an arm around her and sighed. “Sweetie, you know we just can't afford that right now. A new roof costs at least ten thousand dollars.”

The savings they'd set aside for the roof had partly gone toward expenses during Richard's illness. What was left wasn't growing much, no matter how many extra hours she worked.

“Can't you get a loan or something? What if the water starts dripping onto my stuff?”

“No, Soraya. No more loans. I'm barely managing to pay off the ones we already have. You'd better move your things and put a bucket under the drip.”

“Mom! We are not that poor, are we? Rico and I both have a side job now!”

Delia gave her a quick squeeze. “I know, and I’m so proud of you two paying for your own stuff. Really, I am. But losing your dad’s income cut our budget in half. Would you rather move?” Her daughter’s eyes widened in horror. “Oh no! All our friends are here—I’m not leaving, and neither is Rico!”

“What aren’t I doing?” asked twenty-year-old Rico as he came into the kitchen and sat down at the breakfast table. As the only son, he liked to think of himself as the man of the house.

“Moving,” Soraya said. “Can you imagine ending up in a wooden shack somewhere?” She wrinkled her nose and plopped down into a chair.

“Drama queen,” Delia said, amused. “Anyway, we couldn’t sell this place the way it is.”

“I actually agree with Soraya,” said Rico between mouthfuls of breakfast. “All our friends are here — and the girls in this neighbourhood aren’t bad either. You don’t want me bringing home some trashy chick. Right, Mom?”

Delia raised an eyebrow. “Oh great, a drama king too. Now, hurry up with breakfast, I have to head out early.”

She cast a glance toward the house behind theirs. What a beautiful new roof that couple had put on. They’d done things right the moment they moved in. The previous owner, Jim, hadn’t been able to afford his home maintenance anymore and had sunk deeper and deeper into debt. Poor man — he’d become disabled and struggled to make ends meet. Selling the house had been the right move. Jim was a kind man, though they’d barely known each other. Friendly enough, but mostly kept to himself.

“What am I doing, daydreaming like this?” she muttered, then turned briskly. “Five minutes, you two — meet me at the front door.”

“Yes, Mom.” Soraya nibbled at her cracker — she was dieting and had already lost a few pounds.

“I don’t know how you can eat that stuff,” she said, eyeing her brother’s fried eggs with disgust.

“Don’t be so judgmental,” he shot back. “A month ago, you were eating the same thing.”

“Yeah, but you don’t gain weight like I do. I swear I can put on a pound by just looking into the yellow yolk of that egg.”

Rico grinned. “Let’s test that theory. Stare into the depths of my yolks!” He tilted his plate toward her until the eggs nearly slid off.

“Stop it!” Soraya squealed.

Rico laughed. “When you get a boyfriend, you’ll say, ‘Oh Hank, you have such beautiful yolks!’”

Giggling, Soraya wiped her fingers on a napkin. “Don’t even joke about that. But Hank *is* your new hockey buddy, right? He does have nice eyes.”

“I’ll tell him you said that.”

“Don’t you dare!” she warned, then glanced at the clock, jumped up, and ran to get her bag.

Her mom and brother were already waiting at the door when she came back.

“Those who labour must venture forth!” Soraya declared dramatically. “So glad I’m done with high school. Working at the pharmacy is way more interesting.” She was doing a co-op placement for her pharmacy assistant program.

“Yeah, but you’re stuck inside all day,” Rico muttered. “I like being at college — lots of outdoor sports.”

Soraya made a face. Exercise wasn’t her thing. “Mom, what are we doing for Christmas? It’s only a few months away.”

“I was thinking soup and sandwiches this year,” Delia said with a straight face.

The siblings exchanged a shocked look.

“Is she serious?” Rico whispered.

Soraya shrugged. Her mom had been stressed lately — probably because of financial worries.

Two years already since Dad died. He’d been the life of their family, full of jokes and silly surprises. He used to take them out for ice cream or fries just to shake things up. That was all gone now. What she missed most were their talks. Rico felt the same way — he missed having a man around to bounce ideas off.

### **SORAYA MET JIM AT THE THRIFT SHOP**

That evening Soraya came home carrying a box.

“I stopped by the thrift store and scored all this for ten bucks! Two puzzles for me, new gloves for Mom — look, they’re still attached to each other! And a hockey ball for my big brother, so he can practice his push and dribble.”

“Playing Santa already?” Rico asked, surprised. “Nice! This is a good ball — it’d cost five times as much new. Thanks!” He tossed it in the air and caught it again.

“I actually went in looking for clothes,” Soraya said, “but then I saw all this stuff. Couldn’t just leave it there till Christmas — it’d be gone by then.” She picked up the cat puzzle. “Wish we still had a cat. But yeah, pets are expensive. I’ll say it before you do.” She made a face at her mom, who was admiring the gloves.

“These gloves are the best! I have such a sweet daughter,” Delia said, hugging her and giving her a kiss.

“And I figured out how we can get a new roof!” Soraya went on, excitedly. “I ran into our old neighbour Jim at the thrift store. He looked great — like a whole new man! He asked if I’d seen

the new roof on his old place and said he got it for free! I asked who from, and he said three brothers — called them angels, though I don't think he meant it literally. Still, he said that roof was a godsend."

Her mom frowned. "I saw three men up there, yes. But believe me, that roof wasn't free. Steel roofs cost a fortune."

"Exactly! But because of that, he was able to sell the house. Then he moved into one of those apartments by the intersection — you know, the tall building? He says there are lots of nice people there, and he's not lonely anymore."

"Maybe we should move there too," Delia muttered. She hated stories where good things just seemed to fall into place for other people, while she was struggling to keep afloat. "But I can tell you one thing, Soraya — that roof might've been a godsend, but someone *paid* for it."

"I think it's a weird story too," said Rico. "Angels, gifts from heaven... come on."

Soraya looked indignant. "You guys *did* notice that the house behind us has a brand-new roof, right?"

"Of course. But I bet someone set up a GoFundMe for him," Rico said. "Couldn't we do that too, Mom?"

"I tried that when your dad was sick," she said softly. "People were generous — we raised just under a thousand dollars. It paid for his extra medications, and I'll always be grateful. But you can't keep doing that. I want to pay my own way."

"So, if those angels showed up here, you'd say no?" Soraya teased.

"If I was sure there wasn't a catch... I might say yes," Delia admitted. "Now let's eat."

She pulled a container of pre-made chili con carne from the fridge and put it in the microwave.

"Maybe I'll actually cook this weekend."

"I'll help," said Soraya, setting the table. "Fresh meals for a change!"

A few minutes later they were at the table.

"Yum, Mexican," Soraya said. "But I don't want too much. I'm starting a puzzle tonight — no homework for once."

"Good for you," Delia replied, before taking a bite. "I think I'll spend my evening sorting through bills."

"Fun leisure time," Rico muttered with his mouth full.

Soraya rolled her eyes. "You could at least *pretend* to be supportive."

"I am! I'm just saying Mom's idea of leisure could use some improvement."

"Haha," Delia said. "When your name is on the mortgage, you can tell me about fun."

Soraya and Rico both pulled a face.

Soraya started to talk about her day. “We watched a video about strokes and brain haemorrhages at my placement today — CVAs, you know. Super interesting.”

“Ugh... your idea of interesting,” Rico said, helping himself to a full plate. “I’ll stick to computers, thanks.”

Soraya also served herself a little more.

“Still counting calories?” her mother teased.

“I barely get the chance to forget — I’m hungry all the time,” Soraya said, crossing her eyes for effect.

Rico grinned. “There are guys who like curvier girls, you know. I wouldn’t stress about it.”

“I’ve got two more kilos to lose — because you always gain some right back when you stop. But at least I figured out today how we can get a new roof.”

“How’s that?” Delia asked with a frown. Why was she bringing that up again?

“All good things come from above, right?” Soraya said impishly, pointing upward.

Rico rolled his eyes. “Sora, that’s what you said about Dad too — when you thought he was going to get better.” He exchanged a meaningful glance with their mother, but his sister wasn’t easily discouraged.

“I know Dad didn’t get better when I prayed for it,” she said quietly, taking a sip of water. “But I still believe God can do miracles. A new roof for Christmas — that would be amazing.”

Her mother had had enough. “Let’s talk about something else, please. I don’t want to hear about that roof anymore — it just stresses me out. Tell me more about that CVA thing. My dad had a stroke, you know, and after that he couldn’t do much. He was reluctant to do the exercises the doctor told him to do, so my mom did everything for him.”

“Well, that didn’t help,” Soraya said matter-of-factly. “Because then he couldn’t re-train his brain. The coolest thing I learned today was that just *thinking* about a movement can help create new connections in the brain.”

Rico looked up, suddenly interested. “So, if you’re not strong enough to throw a ball, you can imagine doing a perfect handball smash — or a dunk shot — and your brain still builds the pathways?” He thought for a second. “So, if I picture myself scoring every night before bed, I’ll actually play better?”

“Maybe!” Soraya said, surprised. “Are you gonna test it?”

“You bet. I’ll visualize a killer push goal.”

“You’d do better to sleep when you’re in bed,” Delia said dryly as she got up to grab dessert from the fridge. She was tired of all the talk about things that supposedly came easily. Her kids didn’t quite live in the real world yet. Maybe it was their age — but she’d hoped that at eighteen and twenty they’d have a bit more sense. Still, they were good kids. She really couldn’t complain.

Suddenly she put her arms around both of them and kissed their cheeks. “My two darlings!” “Not too mushy, Mom,” Rico protested, wiping his cheek. “If you were the girl across the street, maybe...” He wiggled his eyebrows.

Or, in my case, that new friend of his, Soraya thought silently. “Why don’t you bring Hank over sometime?” she asked aloud.

“Nope. He’s got way better snacks at his place. All-you-can-eat, basically.”

“Can’t blame you,” Soraya said. “I like hanging out at Layla’s for the same reason. Chips and pop.”

“And chocolate,” their mom and brother chimed in together.

Soraya giggled. “Never heard of it. Sounds gross.” Then she noticed her mother’s faintly sad expression. “Mom, it’s really not a big deal that we have to watch our spending. It makes us appreciate what we have — and our friends — so much more. And if we really want something, we can save up and buy it ourselves.”

“But you two don’t invite your friends over anymore,” Delia said softly. “That makes me a little sad.”

The siblings fell silent for a moment. “I thought you preferred it quiet,” Soraya said gently. “You’re always tired from working overtime.”

“That’s true,” Delia admitted. “Maybe I *should* slow down a little.”

The truth was, every extra hour she worked was about the roof. She needed to save faster — otherwise things could spiral, and they might have to move. But where? And how?

“I think that’s a good idea, Mom,” Rico said firmly. “Take it easier. In a couple of years, we’ll be able to help out. Once we finish school. Just a bit more patience.”

And a bit more plastic on the roof, Delia thought to herself. Luckily, the front part wasn’t as bad as the back. The city didn’t allow visible tarps facing the street. Every time a new leak appeared, she’d hired some so-called handyman who did a quick patch-up job and overcharged her for it. She wasn’t falling for that again.

When Rico left the kitchen, Delia stood for a while at the window, looking out into the backyard. The light from the neighbour’s house showed up the gleam of their new metal roof — it looked solid and enduring.

She wondered what it would feel like to have that kind of security again.

## **THE RUDAN BROTHERS SHOW UP**

Two weeks later, on a Thursday evening, Soraya asked, “Mom, I’ve got tomorrow off — and so has Rico. What can we do?”

“Clean your room and do your own laundry,” Delia replied.

Rico jumped right in. “We can throw mine and yours in together, Sora. I’ve gotta wear clean, neat clothes on Saturday at the store. *Ben’s Sports* wants their staff to ‘look professional’ now, so my ripped jeans are officially banned.” He pulled a face.

“Thank goodness,” their mother muttered. “There *are* still people in this world with taste.”

“I’m so not washing your stuff with mine.” Soraya wrinkled her nose. “Your underwear mixed with my delicates? Gross! I can’t even think about it!”

Delia laughed. “You two figure it out. And if you feel like cleaning, just do whatever comes to mind.”

“If I do whatever comes to mind, I’ll spend the whole afternoon gaming with my headset on,”

Rico said, leaning back in his chair. “Just chillin’.”

“That’s important too. You need a break from studying,” Delia said. “How was hockey practice last night?”

“Pretty good. Everyone was totally impressed with my Kookaburra Elite Dimple ball — that’s like, the most expensive hockey ball you can get.” He grinned and gave Soraya a thumbs up. “Nice one, sis!”

“At least you can show off at practice now,” she teased. “Or did it actually make you play better?”

“Want me to try it out on your head?” His smirk told her he wasn’t serious.

The next morning, right after getting up, Soraya threw a load in the washer — hers and Rico’s outer clothes only, of course. Then she started cleaning her room. Half an hour later, the doorbell rang. She sighed and dragged herself to the door, hoping it wasn’t someone who’d talk her ear off. She’d just found her groove.

When she opened the door, a man she didn’t recognize smiled at her. “Hello,” she said, hoping he wasn’t some scammer. A white van was parked at the curb, with two more men inside. Oh great — handymen on the hunt for a job.

“Hello,” the man said. “I’m Miloš Rudan. My brothers and I have a roofing company. We noticed your gutters and trim could do with replacing, so we’d like to install new ones for you today— completely free.”

Soraya blinked at him.

He added quickly, “We like to give back to the community. It’s our way of making the world a bit better.”

Oh no — one of *those* stories she’d heard about. “No, thank you...” She started to close the door, then froze. *Wait. She’d prayed for a new roof — and this could be the start of it!*

She opened the door wider. “Free? Like, totally free? Materials *and* labour?”

He spread his hands and smiled. “Completely free.”

“That’s awesome! Yes, please!”

“Are you the homeowner?”

“No, my mom.” Uh-oh. Mom would probably say no after all those bunglers who’d messed with the roof.

“I am,” said Rico, suddenly stepping into the doorway beside her. “Co-owner. I give permission.”

“You sure?” Miloš asked, still smiling.

“One hundred percent,” Rico said confidently. “Go ahead. My mom’s gonna freak — in a good way.”

Miloš clapped his hands together. “Great! We’ve got everything with us — we’ll start right away.”

“Nice. I’ll come check on you now and then,” Soraya said, returning his smile now.

“What are your names?” Miloš asked.

“Soraya and Rico,” Rico said, pointing at his sister and then at himself.

The man shook their hands. “Miloš. All right, guys — let’s get to work.”

When Soraya closed the door, she turned to her brother. “You’ve got guts — calling yourself co-owner.”

“I had to. This saves Mom a ton of money. I’ll keep an eye on them.”

“You’d better. What if they run off with the old gutters to sell for scrap and leave us with nothing? Then every time it rains, we’ll get drenched walking in or out.”

“He seems trustworthy,” Rico said easily. “This is a golden opportunity! You’ve been wishing for a new roof, and now that someone offers part of it, you almost slam the door.”

“Good point.” Soraya jumped up and down, grinning. “We’re getting free gutters and trim — woohoo!” She was suddenly energized. “Can’t wait to see who’ll do the actual roof!”

Rico shook his head. “Girl, this is already fifteen hundred bucks’ worth! You know what a full roof costs?”

“Maybe there’s someone in Toronto who pays for roofs for people who need help.” She lifted her chin and walked away.

“Yeah — and his name’s Santa Claus!” Rico called after her.

She thought she would have the last word: “Jim got a free roof too!”

“Then ask Jim how he got it!”



Actually... not a bad idea; if only she had his number — and the nerve to call.

By noon, they were both done with their chores.

“So,” Soraya said, “you vacuumed, I cleaned the bathroom. I’ll do the kitchen later. I’m gonna ask what they want for lunch.”

“I already offered them coffee, but they said they don’t drink coffee anymore.”

“Oh right — coffee!” Soraya pulled a face. “I should’ve thought of offering drinks.”

Rico headed outside, pausing to watch them work. “Lots of tearing out, huh?” she heard him say.

“Plenty,” said Miloš. “It’s old, rusty, broken. If we do something, we do it right.”

“Impressive. What can I get you guys for lunch?”

“Something light — maybe sandwiches.”

“I’ll head to the sandwich place then. Back in half an hour.”

“Perfect, brother. Thanks. We’ll just take a short break — lots to do.”

“Then I’ll help you with the cleanup later, all right?”

Miloš gave him a thumbs up, smiling broadly.

He’s so cheerful, Soraya thought. Maybe it really does feel good to do something for someone else — to give something big away. People must appreciate that... at least most of the time.

Just then her phone buzzed. A message from her friend Layla: ***What’s keeping you?!***

“Oh shoot, I forgot!” She texted back quickly: ***Still cleaning the kitchen — workers here. Come over! Three fit guys on our roof!*** Giggling, she waited for the reply. Of course, Layla said she was coming.

A few minutes later, Soraya opened the door for her.

“Those twins are cute,” Layla said with a grin.

“Stefan and Momčilo. Miloš is the oldest — and he’s a cutie too.”

“They’re all way too old for us,” Layla said, peeking out the window, “but hey, no harm in looking. You’d have to be seriously strong to do that kind of work.”

Soraya excitedly explained that the roofers were doing the work for no payment.

“Why are they doing it, though? New gutters, trim, and everything — for free?” Layla asked.

“They call it giving back to the community,” Soraya said. “I think they really enjoy it. And honestly, we need it. Now all that’s left is the roof itself.”

During lunch – thankfully, Rico had brought home sandwiches for the three of them too – Soraya said, “I think it’s a pretty special idea, giving back to the community.”

Miloš smiled. “We want to make a positive difference in the world. This is our way, and we hope it spreads.”

“You mean we’re supposed to pass it on, like paying it forward? That’s something to think about,” Rico admitted. “My life mostly revolves around studying, working, and sports. All about me, really.”

“No, you’re also working to help Mom out while she’s saving for a new roof,” Soraya corrected him.

“The roof’s in bad shape,” Stefan cut in. “Lots of missing, loose, and even nailed-down shingles. That’s where it starts leaking.”

“Yeah, it already leaks in my room,” Soraya said. “I’ve got a bucket in there.”

“Seriously?” said Layla. “Is it that bad already? How far along is your mom with saving?”

“I think about a third of the way. But by the time we have enough, another year will have gone by.” She pressed her lips together for a moment. “She’s working way too much. We keep telling her to slow down, or she’ll get sick.”

“Let’s hope not,” Layla said softly.

“You don’t have a dad anymore, right?” Miloš asked gently.

“Right. He passed away a few years ago.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” said Miloš, and his brothers nodded. “Your mother must have it tough,” he concluded, glancing briefly at his siblings.

“She does, but we’re probably not the only ones struggling with the fallout from COVID on the economy, such as inflation,” Soraya replied with quiet resignation.

“That’s true. That’s exactly why we are doing this. We need work and people need encouragement — something lasting,” Miloš said warmly. His brothers smiled in agreement, and Soraya found herself smiling back. What positive guys!

“Thank you. You’re doing more than you realize. It gives us hope for the future.” She hesitated, then added, “Do you have families of your own?” She wanted to know more about the Rudans; it couldn’t be all about the Archers.

“The twins are single, and I’m married. I have a little boy, and a baby girl.”

“That’s wonderful. They’ll be able to play together soon. Having an older brother can be a pain sometimes, but...” She ducked away from Rico’s hand. “But we’ve played together a lot too. And now we’re teaming up to help Mom.”

“That’s good, siblings teaming up,” Miloš said, finishing the last bite of his sandwich.

The men stood up. “All right, guys, back to work. Hopefully, we’ll wrap things up today.”

While Layla and Soraya cleaned the kitchen, they also amused themselves watching the three men outside.

"I think Stefan's the cutest," Layla decided.

"And I prefer Momčilo. Or actually Miloš... but he's already married," said Soraya.

"How can you like one twin better than the other when they are identical?" Rico asked, puzzled.

"When you're into a twin, you just feel it," Layla said knowingly. "I saw a documentary once about twins. A girl said she could *never* fall for her boyfriend's identical twin. Then they pulled a prank and switched places. But she intuitively knew right away he wasn't her boyfriend. Different person, different vibe."

"That makes sense," Rico admitted. "But you two don't even *know* these guys."

"We're joking, Rico. We can't really tell them apart," Soraya admitted with a teasing wink.

He shook his head at them both. "Women..." Then he strode toward the back door to go help the Rudan brothers.

"Yeah, grumble all you want, dude," Soraya called after him. "But you wouldn't mind conquering a certain woman yourself!"

"Who's the woman?" Layla asked curiously.

"The girl from across the road: Kelly. But she already has a boyfriend."

"Too bad for him," Layla said. Then she nudged Soraya. "Look how eager Rico suddenly is. He's actually a big help to them."

"He's strong and handy," Soraya agreed.

Rico had decided he wanted to make a difference too — at least for the Rudan brothers. He cut the old gutters into smaller pieces so they'd fit in the van. It was a long utility van with plenty of space. But wouldn't a trailer be more suitable for transporting and dumping waste? He watched as they rolled a sheet of metal through a machine that pressed it into perfect gutter shapes.

What an invention!

Rico cleaned up all the debris that had come off the roof and stacked the old gutter sections neatly beside the van.

"So, are you working for a roofing company now?" came a female voice behind him.

Was that...? He turned around to see the girl from across the road. "They're helping us, and I'm helping them. So really, I'm helping *us* again," he said.

Kelly smiled faintly. "Well, I think it's great that you're pitching in — as long as you're not climbing up there. Those guys make it look so easy, walking and crawling all over the roof." She looked up in admiration at the roofers attaching the last gutter.

"I bet women think that's pretty hot," said Rico rather ruefully, because he had a fear of heights.

"A guy who's not afraid of anything." He kicked a piece of gutter into place.

She didn't reply right away. When he looked up, he saw pain in her eyes. "I think loyalty and honesty are more important," she answered quietly.

"Like your boyfriend?" he asked, not fully catching her meaning.

She gave him a resigned look. "My ex-boyfriend, you mean. One girl wasn't enough for him."

Rico was genuinely appalled. "No way! Why would he need someone else when he already had you? That guy's nuts!"

Kelly burst out laughing. "Thanks," she said when she caught her breath. "For the pep talk — and for making me laugh. It's been weeks."

Weeks? She hadn't laughed in weeks? "I hope you can put him behind you soon," he said. "He's clearly not worth it."

"I know, but finding out you've been lied to and that you weren't good enough — it hits hard." She leaned against the van, gazing into the distance. "And realizing I completely misjudged someone... makes me wonder if I'm naïve or just plain stupid." She sighed deeply, then added apologetically, "Sorry for dumping all this on you. My parents have been in Africa for weeks, and it keeps going around in my head. I can't seem to think about anything else."

"You're not bothering me at all," Rico said softly. "I actually like listening to you. I've always thought you were a sweet girl. You deserve way better than that loser."

She gave him a shy smile. "Thanks. And for listening too."

"Hey, I've got time." As if he wouldn't drop everything for her attention. "Are your parents still away?"

"Yeah, but they'll be home Sunday. My last weekend alone." She sighed again.

"Would... would you like to come over for dinner tonight? You know my sister from school, right?"

"Yeah, we used to take some of the same classes. What time do you guys eat?"

"Usually around six on Fridays. My sister's making curry — hope you like it. There's cream in it, so it's not crazy hot."

She giggled. "Crazy hot or not — I love curry! Sounds perfect. Thanks, and see you tonight!"

She turned and hurried across the street to her house. Suddenly she was in a rush.

Rico watched her go, heart pounding. There went his dream girl. She was single again — and coming for dinner! And all he'd had to do was listen. What an idiot that other guy was, cheating on someone like her. You could tell she was still hurting from it. Maybe he could help her heal. She shouldn't jump straight into another relationship... but if *he* didn't make a move, someone else would. A girl like Kelly attracted the attention of men.

At that moment, his mom's car pulled up. She got out looking worried.

"What's going on here? We didn't hire anyone, did we?" she asked.

“These are the Rudan brothers — professional roofers. They replaced our gutters and fascia boards for free. And the back trim too.”

Miloš walked over. “Good evening. We’ve just finished installing the gutters. What do you think?”

“That depends on what you’re charging,” Delia said cautiously.

“Nothing at all. Today’s work is completely free. Didn’t your son phone you? We do one project a week — giving back to the community. That’s our mission.”

“Mission? Roofers have a mission now?” Delia said with a touch of cynicism.

“Mom, they’ve worked hard to fix everything, and look how great it turned out!” Rico said, leading his sceptical mother closer. “You can see the difference even from a distance, and up close you can see the quality. No cheap stuff.”

His mother examined the new pieces. “That’s what worries me — the bill.”

“There isn’t one,” said Miloš behind them. “It’s all free.” He held out his hand. “I’m Miloš.”

She shook it. “Delia. But does this mean I’m now obliged to buy a new roof? Because we do need one, but I can’t afford it yet.”

The twins joined them, friendly smiles on their faces.

“That’s the second surprise of the day,” Miloš said. “We are going to install a completely new steel roof for you — also totally free.”

Rico blinked. “Wow!”

“Oh no, that’s impossible! I can’t believe that!” Delia exclaimed. “We’re not doing this, Rico. You’re *not* signing anything.”

“But it really is free,” Miloš said calmly. “We film all our projects — we have a YouTube channel with a community that supports us. Without them, we couldn’t do this. Check out our channel. Rico’s got our card. You’ll see — we build free roofs, especially for people carrying a heavy burden. To help lift it.”

Delia stared at him. “But how do you even make a living?”

Rico put an arm around her shoulders. “It’s legit, Mom. Their YouTube revenue covers the costs.”

Delia frowned. “Well, I’ll think about it. But thank you for the beautiful gutters.”

“Of course, Delia. Take your time. Here’s a flyer with the colours and styles of roofs — you can pick whichever you like.”

“Oh great,” she said, shaking her head as she took it. “How am I supposed to know if you’re trustworthy? We’ve had so much trouble with dodgy roofers.”

Miloš had a ready answer. “We also did the roof behind your house. Jim’s place.”

“Oh, Jim! My daughter mentioned him. Do you happen to have his phone number? Then I can check with him. Sorry for being so suspicious while you’re offering us such a wonderful gift.”

Delia rubbed her forehead, clearly exhausted.

“I’ll call Jim and ask him to reach out to you,” Miloš suggested.

That prompted a small smile of relief. “Thank you. This roof’s been such a heavy burden. It would be incredibly good to finally be rid of it.”

“And for your lifetime — these roofs come with a fifty-five-year warranty.”

“Even better! Thank you so much for all you’ve already done. It looks fantastic, even at dusk.”

“Almost a new house — and once the roof’s on, it’ll be the nicest one on the street. You won’t recognize your own house.”

“You’re a good salesman, Mr. Rudan.”

“Miloš,” he corrected her with a grin. “All right, guys, we’re heading out. Have a good evening. I’ve got Rico’s number, so I’ll be in touch. Thanks again for lunch and your help, brother.”

Rico gave him a fist bump. “Anytime.”

When the trio drove off, Delia let out a long breath. “Phew! What a surprise to come home to at the end of a long workweek. But what a shock too. Do you think it’s real, Rico?”

“Let’s go inside and find out — I’m freezing. I want to see Sora’s reaction.”

When Soraya heard they were getting a free roof, she started hopping around the room like an excited rabbit.

“I knew it, I knew it! A new roof for Christmas!”

Rico grinned. “They’d better hurry up then...Oh, Mom, I invited Kelly from across the street for dinner tonight. Her parents are on vacation and she just broke up with her boyfriend.” He looked at Soraya. “You are making curry, right?”

“Yeah, it’s ready — and there’s plenty for four.”

Phew, he thought. At least he wasn’t going to make a fool of himself.

Meanwhile, Delia was studying the brochure. “Have you found that YouTube channel, Rico?”

“No, my phone’s dead, but I’ll grab my laptop.” He headed to his room and, when he came back, his mother was on the phone with Jim.

“So, you got that beautiful roof completely free — and from the Rudan brothers too? But why would they do that?” She listened for a while, then smiled. “You can come for dinner; apparently there’s plenty of curry. See you at six.”

When she hung up, she said, “He was so enthusiastic and he wants to tell us in person about the roof and the new sense of hope it gave him. I still can’t believe it. Just like that — an expensive new roof we’ll never have to worry about again? It sounds too good to be true.”

“How amazing that there are people who do things like this,” said Soraya, all fired up. “I think it’s lit — and they work themselves to the bone. It’s heavy work, Mom, ripping out those old gutters. There were so many extra screws in them because they kept coming loose.”

“Your dad did that,” Delia murmured as she finally got around to taking off her coat and gloves.

“What a homecoming. I *want* to be happy, but I just can’t get my head around it.”

Rico heard the doorbell ring and went to open the door. Kelly looked freshly showered and had changed into clean clothes.

Wow, dressed up just for him! Well — for all of them probably. He’d once read that women mainly dressed for other women.

“You look great,” he said anyway. She deserved a compliment - and the soft pink in her cheeks showed she’d taken it as one.

## **JIM’S STORY**

A little later, Jim arrived, and they all sat down to eat.

Delia said grace, thanking God for the meal, for the new gutters, and for the promised roof.

“What a night,” she said as she opened her eyes. “Welcome, Kelly, and welcome, Jim. Let’s fill our plates and enjoy what my daughter’s made for us.”

They began spooning curry and side dishes onto their plates.

“What a feast — so many little bowls filled with special things,” said Jim. “When you live alone, you usually eat pretty simple meals. I do enjoy cooking for guests, though. I sometimes get invited over by one of the widows in my building. But I’ve become more careful about which invitations I accept. Turned out a few ladies had expectations I wasn’t planning to meet.”

“You don’t have to worry about *that* here,” said Delia, noticing her kids’ grins. “You’ll be able to leave unmolested.”

Kelly’s eyes went wide, so Delia added with a mischievous smile, “You’ll have to get used to our way of talking, I’m afraid. I’ve unconsciously adopted teenage slang.”

Jim chuckled. “Anyhow, it sounds like you know exactly what I mean, Delia. I never realized women would chase men so boldly. Man, it’s enough to make you conceited. But it’s nice being back in my old neighbourhood again. I should be able to see my old house from this place — but, in the dark, I can’t even make out the roof panels.”

“So, who got the free roof that time?” Soraya asked. “You or the new owners?”

“I did. Probably the same setup as here — gutters first, then the roof. I couldn’t believe it when they told me. It was like someone lifted a huge weight off my shoulders. Knowing that the roof was solid — and would stay that way for the next fifty-five years — meant I could finally sell the place and pay off my debts. I could breathe again.”

He shook his head at the memory. “But I’ll tell you the rest after we finish this amazing meal.”

Delia nodded, glancing at Kelly, who still seemed uneasy. She asked where Kelly’s parents were vacationing and when they’d be back. Then Soraya picked up the thread and asked about Kelly’s studies, and little by little the young woman began to relax.

Poor girl, Delia thought. Didn’t Rico say her relationship ended? No wonder she looks so fragile — she really loved that boy.

When the curry dishes were empty, dessert came out. “So, Jim,” Delia said, “tell us more about that roof.”

“You know I had a stroke,” Jim began, “which meant I couldn’t do my old job anymore. Trouble focusing, “I’ve lost oversight of what I need to do, and I’m even clumsier now than I used to be. I had to go through a long rehab before I was independent again. But, without my old income, I couldn’t keep up the mortgage payments. I kept falling behind. Every time I paid off a debt, to be able to stay in my house, new ones popped up somewhere else. Hopeless. I couldn’t keep the place tidy either, it was too much work for me in my condition. I felt like I was sinking deeper and deeper into a black hole. Some days I thought, *I might as well give up — there’s no way out*. But luckily, there were always people who talked me back from the edge.”

“That was kind of them,” Rico said. “But wouldn’t it have helped more if they’d actually *done* something? Like cleaning your house or weeding the garden?”

“Son, I was so ashamed of the mess that I wouldn’t let anyone in — not even in the backyard. In hindsight, that was my biggest mistake. Too proud to accept help. But then the Rudan brothers came with their offer, and suddenly I saw the light again. Not just financially — emotionally too. Just knowing there are people willing to do something like that for you... it changes you. Sure, some say they do it for free advertising, but come on — you don’t keep that up so long simply for promotion. The work is hard, especially in the winter. And even the editing of those videos — it takes hours of time. You’ve got to be genuinely committed to stick with it. And they love what they do — you can see it in their faces. And man, can they *work*! I got tired just watching them. They even cleaned up my backyard so it looked neat again.”

He took a spoonful of trifle and sighed contentedly. “Mm, delicious... but, you know, it’s acts of kindness like this that restore your faith in humanity. People say no one helps anyone anymore — but that’s not true. My eyes have been opened. I see more folks doing things for others, and it



warms my heart. Maybe not on the same scale as the Rudan brothers, but every kind gesture makes an impact.”

“Yes,” Kelly said suddenly. “Just being here tonight feels like one of those heartwarming moments. Makes you believe in the future again — even if you have to work on it by yourself.” Her voice trembled, as if she was holding back tears.

Delia nodded to her, and Soraya gently squeezed Kelly’s hand.

“Exactly!” Jim agreed. “I had to work hard too, cleaning out my house — and this time I let people help me. Couldn’t have done it alone. After that, the place sold quickly for a fair price, and I was finally debt-free. I found an apartment in a building for people over fifty and those with disabilities. I qualified on both counts — fifty-three and with a chronic condition — so I took it. Now I’m one of the more mobile residents, and I can help others. So, from a depressed, lonely, disabled man, I’ve turned into a popular guy who fixes everyone’s computers.” He laughed at himself. “So yeah, you see how much of an impact a new roof can have?”

“Oh, don’t get me started. I still think this must all be a dream,” said Delia.

“It’s really happening, Mom,” Soraya teased. “You didn’t believe me when I said it would, but, before Christmas, we’ll be living under a brand-new tiled roof.”

Rico smirked. “It’s a steel roof, sis.”

“No cap? From here it looks like there are tiles on Jim’s old roof.”

Rico nodded. “That’s right — they’re steel sheets shaped like tiles. Looks completely real once it’s on. Way nicer than shingles, and way more durable.”

“Do you get a commission or something?” Delia asked dryly.

“Absolutely. Ten percent. But since you’re not paying, I’ll be left broke.” He pointed an accusing finger at her, and everyone burst out laughing.

“I just don’t understand why anyone would want to give *me* a free roof,” Delia said. “We’re talking about at least ten thousand dollars.”

“That’s their mission, Mom — giving back to the community,” Rico explained. “It’s actually kind of trendy these days. There are more companies like theirs, and those guys work their tails off too. The Rudan Brothers drive around looking for bad roofs so they can surprise people with a free replacement. That’s why you ranked high on their list.”

“But the worst part of our roof can’t be seen from the street,” Delia pointed out.

Jim cleared his throat. “Guess I might as well confess. When they were working on my place, they could see your roof too, Delia — the plastic cover and all. I thought, *maybe she could use some help as well*. So, I told them you’d lost your husband and had two kids in college, which comes with its own costs. I saw the brothers look at each other and nod. You were a perfect fit for their mission — to lift a burden off someone’s shoulders.”

Delia suddenly burst into tears. “That’s exactly what it feels like. Every day I come home, see that awful roof, and have no idea how to pay for its replacement.” She continued to sob, and Rico moved closer, wrapping his arm around her.

“Go on, Mom, say it out loud,” he said softly. “You’ve been carrying that worry for too long.”

“Yes,” she said through her tears. “All those maintenance men with their patch-up jobs kept charging hundreds of dollars at a time, so I finally had to stop the repairs. And now my daughter’s bedroom leaks because I won’t let Rico climb up there. I’ve already lost my husband — and I don’t want to lose my son.” She blew her nose, took a deep breath, and managed a trembling smile. “But maybe this will all be over soon. Thank you, Jim, for telling them about us. You’re a darling.”

That was when she noticed both her daughter and Kelly were in tears too. “Girls, no more crying,” she said gently. “The hard part’s over — at least the financial part.” She nodded toward Kelly.

“Other kinds of pain take time to heal before you can feel happy again. How about we leave the dishes for now and have coffee in the living room?” Suddenly a wave of relief washed over her. Finally — light at the end of the tunnel.

“I’ll clear the table and tidy the kitchen,” Kelly offered. “As best I can, anyway.”

“I’ll help,” said Rico, getting up. “Sora cooked, after all.”

Delia and her daughter exchanged a wink. “I’ll make the coffee,” Delia said. “Sora, take Jim to the living room — if he’s got time to stay a bit longer.”

“Oh sure, I’ve got hours,” Jim grinned. “Just have to be home by eleven — my cat goes to bed then, and she gets upset if I’m late.”

Soraya looked over her shoulder. “You have a cat, Jim? I’ve bought two cat puzzles, and I’m working on one right now. Want to see it?”

Delia smiled as she watched them walk into the living room together. Jim had changed so much — more open, more talkative.

When she came in with the coffee a few minutes later, Soraya and Jim were hunched over the table, puzzling.

“Finally, someone who can help me, Mom,” Soraya said brightly. “Jim’s got a system. We sort all the pieces by colour on placemats or trays — and we start with the edges.”

“That makes way more sense than staring at the picture with a random piece in your hand,” Delia agreed.

“Well, you’re either a nerd or you’re not,” Jim said with a wry smile.

Soraya laughed. “Rico’s a nerd too — he studies IT, combined with another program.”

“I did IT as well — it’s *the* classic nerd study,” Jim said. He paused, then added thoughtfully, “Do you find that, while sorting, you start noticing more pieces of the same colour, Soraya? Your

brain's training itself without you realising it. Since my brain injury, I've been fascinated by how the mind works."

Soraya told him what she'd learned about strokes, and he responded with knowledge he'd gained through experience.

Delia stirred her coffee, half listening, half drifting away in thought. She watched how easily the two of them connected — how naturally they listened to each other, laughing at the same moments. Sora misses her dad just like Rico does, she thought. Maybe Rico could even learn something from Jim about his studies. He's not thrilled about combining IT with business economics. He acts tough, but he's really soft-hearted — and a bit unsure of himself. Still, he finally made a move with Kelly!

She smiled to herself. He's had a crush on that girl for years but thought she'd never notice him. And now she's sitting in our kitchen. However, she hoped he'd give Kelly the space she needed — her heartbreak was still raw.

Delia reached for Rico's laptop and searched for the Rudan Brothers' YouTube channel. It was true — she and Jim weren't the only ones. There were dozens of videos of people getting free roofs. So, were they being filmed too? Well, fair enough — you had to give something in return. Jim glanced her way, then turned to Soraya. "I should talk to your mom for a bit. If I keep looking at any more puzzle pieces, I'll never sleep tonight."

"You've been such a big help, Jim," Soraya said warmly. "Thanks for your system — and for sorting everything."

"Anytime," Jim said, giving her shoulder a friendly pat. He sat down next to Delia, leaving a polite bit of space between them. "You've got a lovely daughter," he said in a low voice.

"She's a darling. Always thinking of others. Rico's starting to outgrow his macho phase too. The way he put his arm around me earlier..."

"That was lovely to see," Jim said.

"I was surprised — he hasn't done that in ages. Ever since his father died, he's been trying to act tough. But that seems to be changing."

"He told me he helped the roofers this afternoon," Jim added.

"I think kindness is contagious." Delia smiled. She picked up her phone. "I should call the brothers. They're offering me the deal of a lifetime, and I haven't even said yes yet."

She dialled Miłosz's number and, when he answered, began with an apology. "I'm so sorry I didn't believe you, Miłosz."

"No worries, Delia," he said good-naturedly. "Happens all the time. It's not exactly an everyday offer. But you *do* want the roof now, right? That's good news."

"Absolutely. Especially for us! When can you come?"

“First, you’ll get to choose the colour and the roof type you want. We provide the same service for free roofs as for paid ones. If the weather cooperates, we could come in about two weeks — and we’ll probably finish in a day. We don’t even have to remove all the shingles; the steel roof goes right over top. Let’s hope for mild weather and smooth conditions.”

“Absolutely, and I want to thank you all so much for this incredible gift. It’s truly a life changer. It’s going to make things so much better for the three of us. A large problem will be solved, but your kindness will also create more positivity and hope. I’ll have to think about how I can pay it forward.”

“That’s fantastic — exactly what we love to hear. Thanks for your call, Delia, and we’ll stay in touch about the installation day. Bye bye!”

“Bye.” Delia hung up with a big smile. “Well, that’s settled! I’ve stepped out of my own shadow.” She chuckled. “Someone at work said that this morning, and I thought it was such a weird saying. But now I am already using it, though possibly in the wrong way.”

“I think it can mean just about anything,” Jim said dryly. “My therapist used to say that to me too, during my convalescence — *you have to step out of your own shadow*. After a while I asked him what on earth he meant, because it’s an impossible feat. In my case, it was about accepting my limitations and focusing on what I *could* do. But that was when I was still in my negative phase.”

“And the Rudan boys helped pull you out of it.”

“Yeah, funny how that works. For me it was also a very practical solution — I was literally stuck inside my own house,” he said with a twinkle in his eye. “Anyway, I could write a whole book about how much it helped me, but I’ll stop now. Tell me about your husband. What kind of man was he? I only met him twice, but he struck me as a good guy — relaxed and cheerful.”

“He was,” Delia said, thoughtful now. “And so brave in how he faced his illness. It was awful to see him suffer, but he hid so much of it from us. I’m talking about his illness, but that’s not what you asked.” She went on to describe what kind of father he had been, how he was full of fun ideas when it came to the kids. “He was the cheerful one — I’m more the serious type in this household.”

“Well, you’ve had to pull the wagon on your own since then,” Jim said gently. “You’ve got to provide the income and pay the mortgage, insurances, and taxes...”

“That’s exactly it,” she admitted. “But I think I’m seeing things more lightly now. We’ll have a few savings again, and soon the kids will be working full-time. Then they can either chip in or get their own place.”

“Renting or buying is ridiculously expensive right now,” Jim said. “I doubt they’ll want to give up *Hotel Mom* any time soon.”

“Haha, not here. I’m gone all day, so they’ve got to run the house themselves. Today, they cleaned the whole place from top to bottom.” She raised her voice. “Sora, I didn’t say so before, but I *had* noticed how spotless everything looks. Thanks for all your hard work!”

“You’re welcome, Mom! Now you can have a *real* weekend. And so can we.”

“Rico’s working tomorrow, and Sunday’s his hockey day — he’s gone all afternoon,” Delia told Jim. “So, housework is usually left to Soraya and me.”

“Rico did a fantastic job vacuuming everything. Ugh, what a nasty chore. I was so glad I didn’t have to do it. Oh—here’s that missing piece!” Soraya triumphantly fitted it into the puzzle.

“What about you, Delia — what are you doing this weekend?” Jim asked.

“Uh... usually boring chores.” She laughed. “But I think I might actually take it easy this weekend for a change.” That thought felt heavenly.

“I’ve got tickets for a Sunday afternoon concert — music from my youth: the eighties. But I don’t feel like going alone. Would you be interested? Afterwards, I’ll treat you to something nice at the theatre café.”

“Oh wow... going out — it’s been ages...” Delia hesitated. Was this a *date*? She wasn’t sure she was ready for that with a man she barely knew.

Her daughter jumped in immediately. “You should go, Mom. You need to get out once in a while. Your thoughts just keep spinning round in circles here.”

“Think about it,” Jim said lightly. “Let me know. Is there still coffee left in the pot, or should I get going?”

“No, stay a bit if you like,” Delia said. “It’s nice having someone my age in the house for a change. We don’t invite people often because of...” She gestured vaguely.

“The finances — I get it. That kind of thing can make your world shrink.”

“Luckily, I’ve got the kids and their stories, and my job at the health insurance office.”

They talked about her work, and then Jim shared a bit about his own career. “It was going pretty well until I had that short circuit up here,” he said, tapping his temple. “I have good days and bad ones. On the good days, I help a neighbour with his website — he wants to publish his family tree online. It’s quite a project, since he’s got a huge family and wants everything to be easy to navigate.”

They chatted about their relatives, and Delia said she couldn’t imagine life without her kids.

“They really pulled me through after my husband passed — young as they were.”

“They’re kids to be proud of, I can see that,” Jim said. Then he glanced at the clock. “What time is it, anyway? You’ve all had a long week, and this lazy guy takes things slow every day.”

Delia smiled. “On Fridays we don’t really watch the clock.” She gave a nod toward the next room. “I think Rico and Kelly are having a nice, slow time in the kitchen too.”

She got up to check that he wasn't overwhelming the fragile girl, but when she peeked around the corner, she saw them deep in conversation, sitting on opposite sides of the table each.

Good, she thought. Let him talk about his life — he never does that with us.

Jim eventually said he'd better get home to put his cat to bed. Delia walked him to the door.

"She's such a funny creature — if I'm not there around this time, she gets offended and ignores me the next day."

Delia chuckled. "Cats are such characters. We always had one, but after the last one died we couldn't afford pets anymore."

"Who can, with vet prices these days?" Jim said, grimacing. "Thanks again for the great meal and the company. I hope I'll hear from you."

Delia made a quick decision. "You know what? I'll do it. I'll go with you on Sunday."

His face lit up. "Really? That's awesome! I wasn't going to go alone — but with you, it'll be twice as much fun."

"Thank you." After he left, Delia wondered whether this was a date or just friendship.

A moment later, her phone pinged with a message:

*Dear Delia, don't worry — I'm not on the prowl. I'm happy to keep it friendly.*

She let out a breath of relief. "Good — not a date." She texted back that she preferred that too.

"Rico and I wouldn't mind if you *did* date, Mom," Soraya called out, abandoning her puzzle.

"Speaking of Rico — what are those two up to in the kitchen? I'm not about to become an aunt, am I?"

Delia's eyes widened. "Whoa, that's a big leap! They're just talking — with a whole table between them. I heard Rico say, 'my dad,' so I'm glad he's finally found someone he can talk to about that."

"Wow, that would be something. They say men grieve differently than women." Soraya looked thoughtful. "I hope they can help each other process things. But Mom, on a happier note — I was right, wasn't I? We'll have a brand-new roof before Christmas!" She playfully pretended to air box her mother, who automatically blocked the move.

"You were absolutely right."

## **A COZY SUNDAY**

On Sunday afternoon, Delia walked with Jim to her car after the concert. They decided to skip the theatre café because of the crowds.

“Want to come by our place, Jim? Soraya asked about you — she wants more advice on the puzzle. And Rico was wondering if he could talk to you about his studies. He’s not too happy with his program mix and wants to know what IT work is really like.”

“I’d love to come by. I’ve been out of the game for a few years now though, and things change fast.”

“You can say that again.” Delia unlocked the car door. “I’ve picked the colour and type of roofing panel, by the way. I don’t care that much myself, but the kids had strong opinions — it had to match the house. And if I ever sell it, that does matter.”

“Definitely,” Jim agreed. “I let the Rudans choose mine for the same reason. By the way, have you heard how that chat between Kelly and Rico went?”

“He mostly let her talk,” Delia said. “But of course he knows what it’s like to lose someone you love, so he told her a bit about how it has been for him, too.”

“And how do you know that?” Jim asked.

“He shares something every now and then. Apparently, Kelly said she’d never met a boy who was willing to talk about sensitive things like that.”

“The younger generation goes through a lot,” Jim mused, “and they learn to share sooner. Though men still tend to hold back. So, Kelly’s happy with Rico. What about *him*?”

“Oh, he’s head over heels!” Delia laughed. “All that time he’d kept his feelings to himself because she had a boyfriend. But, after Friday night, there was no stopping him. Still, he’s taking it slowly for now — she’s in a deep pit, and she has to climb out first, according to my son.”

“What wise kids you have, Delia. Did you teach them that?”

“I think they figured it out themselves. I was too busy surviving these past few years to do much coaching.”

“My sister once said, ‘Raising teenagers feels hopeless, but everything you put in will come back when they’re grown.’”

Delia smiled. “That might be true. Richard and I always tried to stay positive because they learn from your example. But I’m afraid I’ve been rather gloomy these last few years.”

“Understandable,” Jim said matter-of-factly. “Losing your husband and then having to deal with everything by yourself. I’ve had relationships, but I never wanted children. I knew I wouldn’t be a good father. Looking back, I do regret it sometimes — especially when I see how much strength you get from your son and daughter. But my relationships never lasted long. I was too wrapped up in my work—and too much of a nerd to notice anyone else.”

“You don’t seem that way,” Delia said. “At least, not anymore. I know a stroke can really change someone. My father had one too. He became more stubborn, but also softer somehow. More approachable.”

“My sister says I’m actually more normal now than before the stroke.” Jim chuckled. “Though it came at a price, so I wouldn’t call it ‘meant to be.’”

“You’ve had a long, hard road to recovery,” Delia said understandingly.

“Yep. But when I sold my house and moved into my new flat, that was the real turning point. I could finally leave it all behind. It felt wonderful — a fresh start.”

“I’m really looking forward to that too,” Delia admitted.

When they got home, Jim was immediately claimed by Soraya, who dragged him over to the half-finished cat puzzle.

“Jim, tell me how to solve this part! It’s all pitch black and none of the pieces fit.”

He bent over the table. “I think you’ll have to go by the shape of each piece now —”

“That’s what I was afraid of. I doubt I can do that. You can, of course — you’re a nerd.”

Jim burst out laughing, but Delia protested, “Sora, you can’t say things like that!”

“Why not? ‘Nerd’ can be a compliment, you know.” Soraya dropped into the chair by the table.

“Come on, Jim, help me get started.”

“All right then,” he said, grinning. “Your mother’s getting tired of me anyway.”

“Your words, not mine. I’ll make tea — and something nice to go with it, since we have something to celebrate.”

“What’s that? Are you two getting engaged already?” Soraya said offhandedly.

Delia froze, ready to protest, but Jim gestured for her to let it go. Meanwhile, Soraya was giggling.

“Yeah, Mom, you and dad have said things like that to *us* ever since kindergarten — now it’s your turn.”

Delia gave a wry smile. “Revenge of the teenage children. A thriller in three parts.”

From the kitchen, she heard Rico and his hockey buddy come in.

“Boys, want some tea or something cold? I’ve got frosted brownies to go with it.”

“Both, please — we’re dying of thirst.”

“Hi, Mrs. Stevens,” Hank said politely. “You look really beautiful today, ma’am.”

Her jaw dropped. She called through the doorway, “Did you hear that, gentlemen? Someone in this house actually noticed I made an effort. Thank you, Hank!”

“I said that too, didn’t I?” Jim called back.

“Not that I recall.”

“Then I must have only *thought* it. Happens to me all the time. Very awkward.”

“Yeah, try to talk your way out of it, Jim,” Soraya teased. “Too late — you’re caught.”

Jim laughed the loudest of them all.

“Cheerful crowd in here,” Rico said. “Jim, you’re just the man I want. Can I talk to you about your work later?”



“Maybe another time,” Jim said with a tired smile. “My brain’s overloaded right now.”

“Same here. All right, then come over for dinner sometime — or I could drop by your place?”

Delia noticed how easily her children spoke with Jim, as if he were one of their own friends. But it was a good sign — acceptance. And Jim clearly enjoyed it. She also found him very easy to get along with.

Carrying the tray into the room, she saw Hank now standing behind Soraya, studying the puzzle with her. Her daughter’s cheeks were flushed. Then Soraya looked up at him and said, “Are you a nerd?”

“Maybe a little,” Hank admitted. “Why?”

“Then you’re probably good at puzzle shapes — I’m hopeless with them.”

Smiling, he leaned over the desk. “Let’s take a look.”

“You can sit down, you know.”

Shyly, Hank pulled up a chair.

Delia caught Jim’s eye and gave a small nod toward the two young people. Something was definitely beginning to bloom there — something that had been quietly growing for a while.

“How was the concert, Mom?” Rico suddenly asked.

She blinked. Her *son* asking this? That was new. “It was wonderful. We even sang along — completely off-key, both of us. I laughed till I cried.”

“I can believe that. Dad could actually sing, but you... struggle with pitch.”

Delia wasn’t offended. “I know, sweetheart. What should we eat tonight?”

“Takeout?” Soraya suggested immediately. “Thai! So good.”

“We had that too recently,” said Hank, still puzzling. They started discussing the menu.

“Would you like to stay for dinner, Hank?” Delia asked — and only then realized Rico might not like that.

“You should, Hank,” Rico said right away. “Finally, more men than women at the table. I’m always outnumbered here.”

“Friday night was even,” Soraya said. “But you brought a girl along. Not that I minded — Kelly’s great. Layla and I watched a movie at her place this afternoon. Her parents went out again.”

Rico’s eyes lit up a little. “I bet she liked your company.”

“She said so. Her parents are kind of... weird,” Soraya said thoughtfully. “Very different from Kelly. They’re very focused on themselves, I think.”

Delia noticed Jim listening in with amusement. “So, Hank, are you staying for dinner?”

“I’ll have to check with my parents, ma’am. Sometimes we go to my grandma’s on Sunday evenings.”

What a polite boy, she thought.

It turned out his parents didn't mind.

"Tomorrow, I'm telling the office I'm not working overtime anymore," Delia announced. "It's not that urgent, and someone else can take a turn."

"You're often nothing more than a cog in the machine these days," Jim mused. "If you can't function, they just replace you. Loyalty's a one-way street now."

"Exactly. I need to think about myself for once. Oh, that lovely new roof that's coming — what a blessing from above."

"AHEM!" Soraya said loudly. "You realize you just said the same thing I did, right?"

"You're right! 'All blessings come from above,' wasn't it? Haha, you caught me."

Delia handed the Thai menu to Jim. "Here, choose something you'd like if you're joining us."

"I'm not just joining — I'm paying half. Deal?" He sounded so decisively she couldn't argue.

Today had been a wonderful day — no worries, just laughter and warmth.

### **THE RUDANS ARE BACK!**

Two weeks later, on a Saturday morning, the three brothers walked up to the front door, where Delia was already waiting for them.

"The truck is on its way with the materials. Excited?" Miloş asked with his usual smile.

"Very! I was so excited last night I couldn't sleep. But that's okay — I don't have to get on the roof."

The three men laughed. "No, better not — leave that to us."

"My son Rico has to work today, so his friend Hank will come over to assist with the cleanup."

Miloş gave a thumbs up. "Perfect. If he does as well as Rico, he'll be a great help."

"You've infected our entire household with your enthusiasm, and Jim's becoming a family friend. My kids keep asking for him to come over," Delia said with a self-conscious laugh. "It's nice for me too — someone my own age. And he can also cook well! It's lovely to come home to a cooked meal."

"That's good to hear," Miloş said. "A ripple effect of the blessing you've received. Okay, guys, let's get to work."

"Good luck and stay safe," Delia said, closing the door. The cold wind bit at her — those men must be freezing up on that roof. She returned to the meal she had prepared for her family - and the Rudans too, if they felt like eating. Not too heavy, not too spicy, she'd learned. Working on a full stomach wasn't ideal, but you still needed fuel and energy.

She heard the truck unloading the materials and went to take another peek. “What solid panels these roof sheets are,” she remarked.

Miloš immediately chimed in. “Lower heating bills in winter, a cooler house in summer. No more blown-off shingles, no more repairs, and lower insurance costs.”

“And all free,” Delia said. “Guys, thank you so much. I still can’t quite believe I’m getting such a huge gift.”

“You needed it,” he said with a smile. “We usually help people who really need it. Otherwise, they would have renewed their roof already. But we’re also regularly turned down—people don’t trust it; afraid there’s a catch. That’s why we always start with gutters. Once they see the quality we provide, they’re more likely to take the next step.”

“Like me,” Delia admitted, a little embarrassed.

“You made the right choice. Okay, let’s get started.”

“Will you take a coffee break or something?” Delia asked. “I can prepare it.”

“Tea at eleven will be perfect, Delia. Thanks.” He clapped his hands together and went to the materials. He and Stefan grabbed the wooden battens to place them along the roof edge.

“Guys,” Momčilo called, “Come up here. I think some of the shingles under the plastic need to come off — the wood there is damaged and needs replacing.”

“We couldn’t see that properly last time. That’s a setback. We might not finish today,” Stefan said.

“Here’s Sonny!” Momčilo waved to their friend who often helped them on projects. “Hey, brother! Good to see you.”

Sonny stepped out of his vehicle with a big grin. “How u dóóó-in’?”

“Good, and you?”

“Good, bro, good. I didn’t bring my son this time — he had sports.”

“No worries. A family friend will help clean up. But first, we need to remove some shingles from a section of the roof.”

“Bummer. I’ll fetch my ladder.”

Hank arrived on his bike, parking it against the garage. “Just going in to say hello,” he said, pointing to the door.

Meanwhile, the Rudans used their sharp-toothed shovels to lift the shingles from the roof ridge and edges. When Hank came back outside, he introduced himself. Names flew back and forth.

“Stefan and Momčilo,” he repeated, pointing from one to the other. “Stefan’s wearing blue pants. As long as you don’t swap pants, I’ll know who’s who.” He noticed the twin brothers exchanging a knowing smile — swapping clothes to fool people was a routine for young twins, no doubt.

The men continued working. Miloš seemed to work and supervise at the same time.

“Momčilo, focus on the ridge ventilation. Sonny, will you help hand up the materials — starting with the membrane to cover the roof. Thanks, bro.”

“How u dóó-in’?” Sonny greeted Hank, who helped stack the wood along the roof edge.

“Fan of *Lil’ Mo Mozarella*?” Hank asked, amused at Sonny’s pronunciation.

“You bet!” Sonny grinned, giving a thumbs up. “Throw all the scrap metal in my car later, but be careful not to grab the wrong piece, bro. Miloš is emotionally attached to certain steel parts.”

Hank chuckled, waiting for the debris to come down. Soon all the removed shingles were dropped — a real mess. He threw everything onto a tarp to avoid carrying it separately. Then came plastic and wood.

“Is it a lot of extra work?” he asked.

“Just one section under the plastic — the wood is rotten. Delia’s daughter must’ve been bothered by that.”

“She’s never mentioned anything when I’ve been around.”

“Positive mindset,” Miloš said. “Makes life easier.” He picked up a piece of hardboard to replace the damaged wood.

“Yeah, she has a wonderful personality.”

“Do you like her?”

Everyone suddenly looked toward Hank.

“A lot,” Hank admitted honestly.

All the men laughed. “Oooh,” they teased, “so that’s why you’re helping!”

“Actually, I’m covering for my friend Rico. Otherwise, I wouldn’t have known about it.”

Sonny gave him a playful nudge. “This’ll score points with her, bro.”

Hank grinned. “I hope so.”

At midday, the men came inside to warm up and eat something.

“Today’s a particularly cold one,” Stefan said, taking another slice of pizza. “We don’t usually like wearing these insulation suits, but today we have no choice.”

“Are you dressed warmly enough, Hank?” Soraya asked, concerned.

Hank ignored Sonny’s winks. That man liked to tease! “At first, no, but I soon warmed up from all the work. But I’ve not been sitting in the wind on the roof.”

“Luckily not. It’s enough that these mountain goats are up there. Though you guys do seem completely at ease,” Soraya said.

“That’s dangerous,” was Sonny’s reaction. “Too relaxed and you lose focus. We stay alert, so there’ll be no tripping, no slipping, no losing our balance.”

“I’m glad we don’t have to do it,” Delia said. “I was always terrified when my husband was up there. And the best thing about this roof? I’ll never have to repair it again. Otherwise, I’d still be saving up for the next ten years.”

“Nope, the first fifty-five years are covered,” Miloş said, grabbing a slice too. “And you’ll have all the perks, like lower energy bills. We were at a single woman’s house recently — she’s saved a hundred dollars a month.”

“That much?!” Delia’s eyes widened. “I could do so many fun things with that amount!”

“A cat, a cat, a cat...” Soraya said immediately.

“I’ll ask Jim if he’ll bring his cat over,” Delia said smartly. “He’d also like to take care of the garden. There are beautiful roses, lilacs, and other flowering shrubs I’ve neglected.”

“Dad’s pride,” Soraya murmured.

“It’s a beautiful garden; we noticed it too,” Stefan said. “But it does need looking after.”

“We see a lot of neglected gardens,” Momčilo said. “Sometimes young trees are too close to the house for us to work on the roof. It’s fine here, but at Jim’s we made good use of our saws. We got the chain saw from a generous sponsor, then bought more ourselves, because they do come in handy.”

“That’s amazing, other people getting on board with you. I also noticed that the number of your video followers has increased a lot. Great news!” Soraya gave a thumbs up.

“Yes, over the million,” Hank said. “Heading for two million, eh?”

The twins laughed. “Let’s hope so.”

Soraya said, “My colleagues and classmates think it’s such a weird story — some don’t even believe it. I’ve told them to watch the video.”

Delia nodded. “I got the same reactions at work. They need to see it for themselves.”

“Exactly!” Miloş stood up. “Guys, back to work — it gets dark early.”

“Will it be finished today?” Delia asked cautiously, glancing up at the tall men.

“Hopefully. We’ve made good progress thanks to Sonny’s help. He always shows up when needed.”

“A special gift,” she said.

“And Hank’s work helps too,” Soraya said with a smile, causing the young man to blush slightly.

By late afternoon, the brothers went to fetch the Archer family.

“Delia, your roof is done, and everything’s cleaned up.”

“I’m so curious! But I haven’t looked yet,” she said.

“Nope, you have to cross the street together first, then turn around to see it.”

Delia chuckled — he spoke as if they were children again — but she loved it.

“Too bad Rico’s not here,” she murmured to her daughter as they walked.

“You may turn now,” Miloş said.

They both spun around at the same time, jaws dropping.

“Is that my house?” Delia breathed. “It looks completely different. An upgrade. A makeover! Now I understand what you meant by ‘you won’t recognize it.’”

“Oh, it’s beautiful,” Soraya said, hands over her mouth. “Never thought I’d say that about a roof. But it looks way cooler than the neighbours’ roof.”

“Everything’s solid and well-finished,” her mother agreed. “No flimsy stuff, just sturdy roof edges and gutters, combined with that steel-tile look.”

The Rudan brothers smiled, enjoying their reactions.

“Happy with the colour?” Momčilo asked.

“I’d be happy with any colour, but this is a perfect match. Light gutters, dark roof.”

“It matches the red bricks nicely,” Miloş said. “It almost looks European now.”

“You’d know more about that than we do!” Soraya laughed. “But I think it’s simply chic. Far beyond what I expected.”

Miloş smiled broadly. “Good, we’re satisfied then.”

“We’re so happy and relieved you lifted this burden from us,” Soraya said, hugging the brothers and Sonny one by one, followed by Delia.

“It still feels unreal, but we’re thrilled,” Delia added. “Oh, here comes Jim. Jim, what do you think of our roof?”

“Wow,” he said, nodding as he approached. “Professional work, guys. I’ve never seen roofers work this fast and as professionally as you do. Like a well-oiled machine.”

“We’ve known each other thirty-five years,” Miloş said dryly. “Plus ten years of roofing experience together.”

“A different colour combination than mine, but it works just as well.” Jim nodded approvingly again.

“Shall we head inside for a drink? Or are you eager to get home, Miloş, to your family?”

“We’re glad it’s done, and we can’t wait to get home,” he admitted. “Luckily, Sonny and Hank pitched in, so we can just chill tomorrow. It’s freezing out here.”

“You’ve really had to tough it out,” said Delia. “But now you’re done. Let me thank you once again — I truly appreciate it. Oh, Soraya, could you grab that card for them? In the meantime, I’m giving all you guys another hug. Too bad Sonny already left. I wanted to thank him too.”

“I’ll also get in line,” Jim said with an innocent grin.

“You deserve one as well,” Stefan replied. “You’re the one who told us about Delia’s situation.”

“That’s right!” Delia laughed as she went down the line, giving each man a hug — and Jim even got a kiss on the cheek. “You’re all awesome. You have no idea how much I appreciate you and everything you’ve done for us.”

Soraya came outside with an envelope. “We put some dinner vouchers in here, and a thank-you card. You can open it when you get home,” she added shyly.

They took one last group photo, and then it really was time to say goodbye. Delia found it hard to watch the brothers leave. She’d grown so fond of them in such a short time.

“We hope you’ll raise enough funds for the next lucky family to discover the surprise is even bigger than they expected! We will never forget your generosity.”

“That’s all right,” the Rudan brothers said almost in unison. “We’re just happy we found the right people. You’re a kind family and you took good care of us with drinks and food. Thank you.”

“You’re very welcome,” said Soraya. “God bless!” she added as they walked away.

“It was our pleasure.” With a thumbs up, the brothers got into their truck and drove off, waving at the Archers on the curb.

“Wow, do you think we’ll ever see them again?” Delia said a little wistfully.

“We will. In their videos, at least,” Jim said. “Let’s go inside to the heating.”

Inside Soraya wrapped her arms around herself. Feels so good to be in our warm, dry home. I’m going to get rid of that bucket in my room. Everything can finally go back in its rightful place! So awesome!”

When the food was delivered, they were ready to sit down for dinner. But Rico still hadn’t shown up. A moment later he came in, Kelly right behind him. Excitedly, he began talking.

“You won’t believe this — I rode right past our own house in the dark! I thought, am I on the wrong street? But I recognized the other houses. It was so confusing. Then I saw Hank’s bike and thought, wait, what? This is our place? With that big new roof? Man, what a transformation. Epic!”

He pulled off his jacket, still buzzing, and took Kelly’s as well. “And I brought your bike inside, Hank. Bike theft’s been wild since COVID. Kelly came to check out our new roof, and since she was eating alone, I invited her over. She brought her own food, Mom.”

“You’re very welcome, Kelly,” said Delia warmly. “And where five can eat, six can too.”

Kelly smiled shyly. “Otherwise, I’d have to throw it out, and my parents don’t like that. Although your food looks amazing.”

“Give me half of yours, and I’ll give you half of mine,” said Rico, coming back from the hallway.

“Are your parents often away, Kelly?” asked Soraya, a little surprised.

“Yeah, they own a furniture store. They get invited out to dinner by clients whose interiors they’ve decorated — as a thank-you for the service and advice. I don’t go along, of course. All they talk about is money and stuff, and I’ve heard enough of that. Here, I hear something different for a change.”

Jim burst out laughing, followed by the three Archers. “What do you hear about here then? Money worries and all the ins and outs of steel roofs and aluminium gutters?”

“I don’t mind that,” Kelly said. “Because you’re all so happy with what you’ve been given.”

“All right,” said Delia, smiling, “I’ll start the meal with a short prayer of thanks — for our beautiful roof and for Hank’s help — and then we’ll talk about something else.” She winked at her young guests.

## **CHRISTMAS EVE**

On December 24th, Soraya and Hank were decorating the Christmas tree together before dinner. Secretly, she hoped for a little romance. They’d been out together a few times lately, but their relationship had stayed safely in the friendship zone. Maybe she should give him a little sign? Hank could be so shy...

Rico and Kelly had also been hanging out more often. Still, Kelly was too shaken by what had happened with her ex to get close to anyone new. Rico, being considerate, played it cool — though he talked about her constantly at home.

“Ouch, these needles!” Hank muttered, frowning. “I don’t remember them being this sharp when I was a kid.”

“That’s the price of a real tree,” Soraya said with a grin. “I think Dad used to hang most of the ornaments for us. We just pointed at the branches. Otherwise, there wouldn’t have been many old decorations left. Look — this tiny glass church is from when he was a kid.”

“You must really treasure his things,” said Hank.

“I do. Mom teases me because I keep everything in my desk drawers. Maybe one day I’ll build a shelf or a little cabinet for all the things that belonged to him and my grandparents.”

“Are none of your grandparents still around?”

“No, they were already pretty old when we were born. But we’ve got an aunt with kids, and Christmas at their place is always great. We’re going there tomorrow, right after Church, and I can’t wait.”



"I'm heading to my grandma's too, after the service," Hank said. "All my uncles, aunts, and cousins will be there. It'll be tons of food and candy, and lots of just goofing around."

"Then it's *extra* nice that you could be here with us tonight."

"Yeah, same. I already visited my other grandma earlier today. She totally got that I wanted to spend Christmas Eve with people my own age. My parents weren't thrilled, but I told them I'm an adult and need my own life now. Dad couldn't argue with that."

"Do you have any pictures of home on your phone?" asked Soraya, curious about his family.

"Yep." He pulled out his phone and showed her a few photos.

His place looked a lot like theirs—something that somehow made her feel comfortable. His parents looked nice too. "Oh, that's your sister! You can tell right away. She's cute."

"She's sweet, but she still needs to grow a backbone—too agreeable for her own good." He handed her the phone and started draping tinsel over the branches. "At least this part doesn't hurt—ow!" He stuck his finger in his mouth.

"Poor guy! Want me to kiss it better?" she teased, handing back his phone.

He turned red. "Uh, no thanks. Anything else to put on the tree?"

"Some fake snow—the last bit we've got. Not very eco-friendly, though." She started spraying the tree, circling around it, until she bumped into Hank as he straightened the topper.

"Toot toot—Santa Claus coming through!" she said with a laugh.

His eyes moved from the tree to her, and he smiled back.

*This is totally a kiss moment*, thought Soraya. But when he stepped back, she sighed and went on spraying. Fine—then she'd make the move herself later.

She admired their work. "It looks gorgeous. I'm so glad you helped. Let's see it with the lights off."

She flipped the switch while Hank plugged in the string lights.

"Oh wow, the snow glows in the dark!" She came to stand beside him. "This is the prettiest tree we've ever had."

Could it get any more romantic? Christmas lights, glow-in-the-dark snow... But Hank stood there stiff as a hockey stick. So, she tiptoed up and kissed him on the cheek. "Thanks for helping."

He didn't react right away, maybe surprised, but his voice was warm when he finally said,

"You're welcome."

"Liar—you hate decorating trees," she teased. "They're mean." She turned on a lamp.

He chuckled. "Next time I'll wear armour. So, do the gifts go under it now?"

"Yep! I'll grab them." She came back with the neatly wrapped presents and placed them beneath the branches. She noticed Hank spotting the one with his name but being too polite to mention it.

“There. Now let’s set the table for the tabletop grill. It’s always chaotic—but that’s half the fun.”

It really was. Between the sizzling food, the laughter, and everyone claiming their spot on the grill, it turned into joyful chaos. Even Kelly loosened up, laughing at the jokes and teasing.

After cleaning up, they gathered by the glowing tree with coffee, tea, and Christmas chocolates.

The pile of presents under the tree had grown noticeably.

“When do we start unwrapping?” Soraya asked, barely containing her excitement. Sitting cross-legged on the floor beside Hank, the gifts seemed to be winking at her.

“As soon as we’ve finished our first drink,” said her mom. Delia and Jim sat so close together that Soraya couldn’t help smiling. Her mom had been so cheerful lately—kind of sweet, that senior romance thing. They started to open their presents which also generated laughter and delight.

After a while, Mom said, “Let’s take a break, I’m parched. I feel so blessed with all my presents that I want to look at them again before I open more gifts.”

She poured mulled wine into glasses to hand them round. “The alcohol has evaporated, I think. No harm in drinking and driving.”

Hank was telling Rico about the hockey game he and Soraya had gone to.

“All good, buddy,” Rico said, giving him a mock-stern look, “but you should’ve been *playing* with your own team.”

“There was a sub lined up,” said Hank, bemused. “He’s probably better than me anyway.”

Soraya chuckled, stroking Jim’s cat on her lap. “According to Hank, *everyone* on the team’s better than he is.”

“Of course he says that,” Rico shot back. “‘Cause you hate guys who brag.”

“Oh, shut up.” Soraya blushed and quickly changed the subject, by asking Kelly, “Why don’t *you* two go see a hockey game together?”

“No way,” said Kelly with a shiver. “Sitting in the cold watching a puck fly back and forth? I’ll take a cozy movie any day.”

“I actually like hockey games,” Soraya said. “Probably because I grew up with Rico explaining every rule while he watched. I even liked field hockey back in school—though I’m not exactly sporty.”

“I’m not much of an athlete either,” Kelly admitted.

“So how do you keep your great figure?” Delia asked.

“I got it from my mom,” Kelly said with a shrug. “But I do stretch and work out a bit to stay flexible.”

“Good for you. And how’s school going?”

As Kelly talked about her legal assistant study, Rico just sat there smiling, glancing from one to the other.

Soraya nudged Hank and nodded toward her brother while she murmured, “He’s so in love.”

Hank smiled. “Shall we go check out the stars on the veranda? It’s a really clear night, I noticed, when I rode here.”

“Oh yes, it’s extra beautiful now everything is covered in snow.”

“We’re going outside for a bit, to get some fresh air,” she said to her mother, who winked back.

Soraya rolled her eyes in response. *As if so much was happening between Hank and herself.*

Maybe he was a slow-burn lover. Grinning, she slipped into her coat and grabbed Hank’s as well.

Outside, her jaw dropped at the brilliance of the night sky. “Wow, I’ve never seen so many stars in Toronto.”

“I noticed it too,” he said.

Soraya leaned against the railing and stayed quiet. She’d talked too much; poor Hank barely got a word in.

“Soraya,” he began hesitantly, “I’ve never met a girl like you. I think you’re really special.”

She felt herself blushing and was grateful for the darkness. “I don’t feel that way,” she said, “but I do think *you’re* very special. You’re just yourself. A little shy, but you don’t hide it by pretending to be tough. That’s nice.”

He laughed softly. “I wanted to tell you something similar. You’ve stolen my heart with your spontaneity and honesty. That’s why I want to know if there’s a chance for more than just friendship between us.”

What? Was he asking her to become his girlfriend? Had she understood correctly? She stared at him. His expressive eyes were shining almost as brightly as the stars.

“Like, what do you mean?” she asked.

He looked embarrassed. “That we will feel more for each other than just friendship...”

“I’ve felt that for a long time,” confessed Soraya.

“Really?”

The pure surprise in his eyes—just too cute. “Yes, and you?”

“Me too.”

They looked at each other sheepishly until he said, “I want a hug!”

They embraced, enjoying the love they had just discovered.

Soraya looked up at him. “Now a kiss!”

He complied immediately. After half an hour, they realized they were freezing and had to reluctantly pull away from each other.

Back in the living room, Soraya said, “The stars are so beautiful tonight, Mom. The whole sky is sparkling as if diamonds are scattered across it. And we’re officially a couple!”

“Congratulations!” her mother exclaimed happily.

“What?” Rico said, almost indignantly. “But you’re two years younger than me!”

“Then you better step up,” Soraya said with a nod toward Kelly.

“Shall we admire the stars too?” Rico asked the girl.

As Kelly hesitated he quickly added, “I won’t push you, Kelly. I know you’re still recovering from that lying cheater.”

“That’s true... but I *would* like to see the stars with you.”

Outside, Rico was just as amazed by the starry sky as his sister. He slipped an arm around Kelly, who was staring up in awe as well.

“Like in a fairy tale.”

He pulled her close for a couple of seconds, then let go and turned to face her.

“As far as I’m concerned, things can stay exactly as they are between us. I don’t expect anything from you. But I’d really like to tell you how I feel. Is that okay?”

She hesitated, then murmured, “Okay.”

He took both her hands in his, warming them with his palms.

“I’ve had a crush on you for years, even before I really knew what kind of person you were. But now that I’m getting to know you better, I’m falling for you more and more. You’re kind, sincere, honest — and you care about people. You don’t want some shallow life full of expensive stuff and parties. You want real connection. That means so much to me.

I try to protect my mom and sister from my feelings and problems, but I sense that there’s space for expressing who I am and what I feel, with you. And that’s something really special. You’re the first person I can truly be myself with.”

Tears streamed down Kelly’s face, but he kept talking, because he needed her to hear it.

She sniffled a few times and said, her voice trembling, “Thank you. My ex really broke me down inside — he kept criticizing me, constantly. All the things you just said you like about me were things he blamed me for. He was the man, he knew everything, and I was just some silly girl who wasn’t on his level. And I believed him.”

“I know. He tried to destroy you from the inside. And you were too gentle to fight back.”

“He said a lot of the same things my parents used to say. So, I figured it really *was* my fault. But I know better now — and our talks help me so much.”

“They help me too. But don’t you think it might be good to have a professional counsellor as well? I’m not a therapist — I don’t fully understand how people like your ex operate.”

“You mean people with a personality disorder.”

“Yeah. You need a therapist who can help you stay grounded and to stand up for yourself.”

“That would definitely help...” She looked past him for a moment.

“Do you want to tell me how you feel about me? You don’t have to, if it’s not the right time.”

She looked up at him with bright eyes and gave a shy smile.

“I think you’re cute, no question. Your gentleness and the way you care — that really gets to me. Your strong personality sometimes scares me a little, though. I find myself thinking: *Is this still okay?* when you start making decisions for me. It’s never about big things, but I’m just so unsure of myself.”

“I only step in when I think you need it, but you’re right — it’s better if you learn what you want and don’t want, and if you should push back when I go too far.”

She took a deep breath. “You’re right. I need to get some help. But you’ve been an amazing friend. I’m trying *not* to fall for you — that would just make things even messier inside my head.”

“Very wise,” he said with a self-deprecating smile.

Suddenly, she leaned in and kissed him. “You’re a sweetheart — and you’re at the top of my list of guys I like.”

“Wow... but please, don’t feel any pressure. You can totally keep me in the friend zone if that feels safer.” He kissed her hands gently.

“Thanks.” She looked away again. “I think I’d really enjoy a romantic friendship.”

“Sounds good.” Rico shivered suddenly. “The stars are beautiful, but I’m freezing. How about we get back to the rest of the presents?”

Hand in hand, they walked back into the living room.

“We have friendship with a little extra,” said Rico. “Kelly’s still processing her previous relationship, but we like each other a lot.”

“Very wise, sweetheart. Maybe you should think about getting some professional help?” his mom suggested, glancing at Kelly.

“Yeah, Rico said the same thing, so I’m going to look into it.”

The young couple sank down onto the couch side by side.

Then all the eyes of the youngsters turned to Jim and Delia.

“Spill it, Mom, and Jim. Do *you* have something to tell us?” Soraya teased.

“Well, something is growing between Jim and me,” Delia admitted. “We’ve both noticed it.”

Soraya burst out laughing. “Quite obvious! You gave the Rudans a hug, but Jim got a kiss.”

“That happened spontaneously. And when I apologized later, Jim said he actually liked it,” Delia confessed.

“And now?” Soraya asked.

“Nothing,” Jim said. “We’ll just continue as we are. We like being friends and don’t know each other well enough to throw ourselves into a relationship.”

Soraya, fiddling with a spoon, replied thoughtfully, “You fit in really well with us, Jim. We all like you, and we’ve missed having a man to talk to since Dad passed away. So, I think I can speak for

Rico too when I say: I'm glad you've come into our lives, and that you make Mom happier. We think it's fantastic."

"Completely agree," said Rico, still holding Kelly's hand.

"Thank you," Jim said, a little hoarsely. "I'm having an amazing time here and feel like the luckiest man alive to be friends with this wonderful woman and also to be getting along with such great young people."

Delia joined in. "Thank you, sweet daughter. I feel so blessed with you all and with my special friend. Shall we have a drink to celebrate all this love and friendship?" She stood up to grab the tray with prosecco she had prepared.

"We've doubled in number in such a short time, Rico and Soraya, did you notice that?" she said with a smile. She wanted to raise her glass, but the men had other plans.

"I actually want to give Soraya a special gift," Hank admitted. "Can I do that now, before the drinks, Sora?"

"Of course," she said. "How sweet that you got me something special."

"And I got something special for Kelly," Rico said, taking advantage of the moment and pulling a small package from his pocket.

"And I got something for Delia too, I suspect," Jim said with a grin. He pulled a wrapped box from the shopping bag at his feet.

Soraya unwrapped her package first, to reveal a small box. She opened it and her eyes widened.

"Oh wow, a silver ring!" She spun it around, with a huge smile on her face, to admire it from every angle. "So beautiful, with a stone set in the silver."

Hank hurried to explain. "According to the jeweller, it's a friendship or promise ring."

"How romantic," said Soraya, slipping the ring onto her finger. "Perfect." She gave Hank a warm hug.

Kelly also received a piece of jewellery - a silver bracelet - which she truly appreciated because she had returned the ones she had received from her ex. "This is the nicest bracelet I've ever been given," she said, with sparkling eyes. "It's my style."

"Of course, I only buy things you'll like," said Rico.

She looked at him affectionately. "That's one of the things I appreciate about you: that you take the trouble to find out who I am and what I like. I'm not used to that."

He smiled back dreamily.

Delia had unpacked her gift as well. "Look at this, a copper tealight holder. And it's so cute." She admired the little house with the open windows and door.

"How sweet!" Soraya examined it closely. "It just the cutest thing."

“I thought only a copper roof would be a bit meagre,” Jim said dryly. “But that roof brought us together. That was the underlying symbolism. I’m not very good at choosing presents.”

“But I think it’s *spot on!*” Delia replied. “And it’s a lovely reminder of the Rudan brothers’ special gift, so I’ll always remember what they’ve done for us.”

Rico raised his glass. “To us and the Rudan brothers and Sonny, may they continue their remarkable generosity to the community for a long time.”

“Cheers!”

*You might be thinking something like this only exists in books—such a large and unexpected gift to strangers. But the Rudan brothers and Sonny are real. They fund their charitable work thanks to their YouTube community. You can support them too, by clicking the free “subscribe” button. The more subscribers, the more revenue, and it doesn’t cost the viewer anything. You might discover other giving-back-to-community channels this way—but be sure it’s legit before you donate.*

*Happy holidays!*

*Dee Vandorn*

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