

# Quaranteam: Book Two

by Devin McTaggart

## Chapter One

December 10<sup>th</sup>, 2020

Whatever Andy expected his first visit to the military base at the heart of New Eden was going to be like, being brought in with his hands cuffed together wasn't it. To some extent, he understood the reasoning behind it, but he still felt like the entire thing was an overreaction.

"You okay, hon?" Niko asked him, having not left his side the entire time. Lexi hadn't been allowed on the base, but as a member of the Air Force, they couldn't justify denying Niko the rights to escort her fiancée onto the base for what they were calling his 'executive review.'

"It's fine," he told her, as they were shuffled down a hall, two women Security Forces officers in front of them, one on either side of them, and three of them in the back, none of them part of Linda's Girls, which didn't make Andy feel any better.

"It's *ridiculous* is what it is," Niko growled. "They're treating you like you're Hannibal Lecter or something..."

"Cannibalism's not really my taste," Andy joked, trying to keep his spirits up. He couldn't really get much of a look at the base itself, what with the sea of bodies all swamped around them. "But yes, the handcuffs do seem a bit much."

"You're getting the same level of scrutiny as every other man involved in this mess," the woman in charge, a gruff Captain with the last name of Nash. "We're being thorough and we're not letting any of you fuck it up. This whole thing has been fubar in spectacular fashion, and while this didn't use to be my circus or my monkey, but I've been put in charge of security for the complex until Captain Hayes has either been permanently removed or exonerated and reinstated to the position."

"She'll be cleared and put back in charge," Andy said confidently. "Say what you like about Linda, her loyalties have never been in question."

"It's not a question of *if* she's loyal," one of the guards said, "but who she's more loyal *to*, this country or her soon-to-be husband."

"Stow it, Reynolds," Nash said to her. "Ours is not to question why and all that..."

It had been over half a year since the start of the plague, and just three weeks since the Covington household had taken their patriarch, Arthur Covington the 4<sup>th</sup>, hostage. Andy had expected the situation to be solved quickly, but instead it had been a tense three weeks, with supplies being delivered, demands being negotiated and solutions being worked out. Andy had thought it impossible that Covington himself wouldn't be released by now, but apparently the situation was far more complex than anyone had anticipated, and had only been complicated by the additional scrutiny Andy had brought down onto the base.

When he'd been interviewed by Katie Couric for 60 Minutes, she'd thought she'd captured him in a gotcha moment when it came to talking about the infamous poker games that Covington had been holding, one of which Andy had attended, purely as part of a rescue effort for some of Niko's friends. When Andy had been completely candid about the game, his role in it and how there were some people at the base who'd manipulated the pairing system, a top-to-bottom investigation of the entire base was put into place by the female senators who'd heard all about it, instead of Ms. Couric airing Andy's allegations publicly.

Considering how slowly the government moved involving most things, he'd been incredibly surprised by how fast they'd moved regarding this one particular thing. He supposed that the hostage situation with Covington had figured into it, as had Covington's sizable fortune, and that both Congress and the President wanted to get everything under control quickly and quietly, especially before any of it

leaked to the press, something it seemed like the women who'd taken Covington hostage were more than happy to acquiesce to, as long as they felt like progress was being made.

The investigation of the base itself had just started a few days ago, but Andy's good friend Phil had gone mostly dark since then, with Linda assuring them it was part of the whole process and that things would work themselves out in the end. Many of the women in Andy's house had been interviewed by members of the investigating team, generally at Rook Manor, which had put Andy somewhat at ease.

All of that had been before someone had come to Rook Manor to drag Andy away in handcuffs, naturally.

He hadn't even had warnings that it was coming – just a large military transport truck driving up and onto his property with several women armed to the teeth came to take him away. They hadn't even phoned ahead and had opened the gate to his estate without anyone in Team Rook opening it, which made Andy wonder if the Air Force had some sort of override access to all the gate systems within New Eden. He wasn't entirely certain of the legality of that, but as of late, legality had been a pretty flexible concept in the walled colony.

The squad of female soldiers brought him into an elevator, several floors downward, then back out again, taking him down a singular hallway before bringing him into a large room he felt fitting for the sort of tribunal he was expecting. He was actually dressed up for the occasion, having been getting ready for a date when the soldiers had taken him away.

At one end of the room behind an elevated desk were three women, one in military attire behind a plaque which read “3-star Lt. General Bonner” in the center,” and then one in a business suit behind a plaque which read “Engle” to the General's left, and one in much more casual attire behind a plaque which read “Giancola” on the General's right. All three looked to be in their early to mid 50s, and each of them looked incredibly tired.

“Remember baby,” Niko whispered to him. “Just be honest and you, and this should all be fine.”

“Lieutenant Redwolf,” the General said, a scolding tone to her voice. “We have allowed you to be here to ensure the safety of your household's male figure, but do not think that give you the option to address this council.”

“Ma'am,” Niko responded, moving to sit in a chair behind where Andy was sat at.

He was placed at one of two tables, an empty chair to the left of him, glancing over to the right, where a pair of women in business suits were dressed, briefcases in front of them. The soldiers did, however, remove the handcuffs from him, although they were only stationed a few feet away and they were very much still armed.

“Don't I get an attorney?” Andy asked.

“This isn't a trial, Mr. Rook,” the General said. “It's a military review of sorts, and we're currently holding it to determine who is and is not an enemy combatant. To determine if you are functioning as a rogue operator working to establish interests counter to those of the United States of America or not. We're going to review your actions of the last six months and see if you've engaged in behavior that violates the law of war. Assuming you are who you say you are, and that you only did the things you have previously said that you did, no further escalation should be necessary. But if it comes out that you were engaged in manipulation or disruption of the system, or the laws of the land, then we will determine if you are going to be considered an enemy combatant, or just a civilian in violation of unlawful behavior. Should we determine the latter, you will be detained by local law enforcement until such time as you are able to be given legal counsel and then tried before a jury of your peers.”

“General, I know you wanted me to remain silent, but is this being conducted under Article 31 and should Mr. Rook have the proceeding explained to him?” Niko asked.

“It's an informal process, Lieutenant, and if we get to anything that has immediate repercussions, we will, of course, assign Mr. Rook counsel, be that a civilian attorney or someone from trial defense services,” the General responded.

"I know this all seems rather frightening, Mr. Rook," the woman named Giancola said to him. "But I assure you, it's all on the up and up, and we're just as eager as you are to be past all of this."

"Assuming you *are* who you say you are, Mr. Rook," the other woman, Engle, said to him. "I'm not entirely convinced you aren't somehow tied to a foreign interest that is attempting to manipulate our response to the DuoHalo Virus."

"Jesus, Maddy, don't start in with this again..."

"And you are?" Andy asked.

"Representative Madeline Engle, from the great state of Idaho," she replied proudly.

"Well then, Representative Engle," Andy chuckled, shaking his head a little. "Let me be the first to say that I'm not entirely convinced of *your* intentions either, and we can move on from there."

From the moment they'd relocated Andy from the tiny little condo owned by his friend to the new mansion he'd been given in New Eden, Andy had entirely been prepared for some kind of reckoning and accountability. It felt like maybe that moment had come.

After the other woman introduced herself – she was Senator Caroline Giancola from Kansas – they moved into having Andy relate his version of the last six months or so to the tribunal. It was a long and winding story, but Andy did his best to relay all the information he had now, even at points in the story before he might have had it, starting with his friend Phil Marcos getting a few strings pulled to get Andy high in the priority list, as well as redirecting him to live within the walls of New Eden.

Andy knew Phil hadn't *technically* done anything wrong, but that the tribunal might have found concerns with the *spirit* of Phil's actions. Andy did, however, make a point to call out how as far as he knew, Phil had never stepped outside of the things he was *allowed* to do at any point, and that in many ways, Phil was acting similarly to thousands of others in the system – trying to take care of his family and friends. Was it abusing his position and privilege? Perhaps, but he hadn't set down *any* of the rules he'd used to keep Andy and his family safe.

Surprisingly, he encountered very little push back from the tribunal regarding Phil's actions, or how he'd been paired with his first few partners – Aisling, Laurel and Niko – and the tribunal kept things moving along quickly, even glossing over his relocation from the condo in San Jose to the mansion up in New Eden, although there were a number of repeated questions about how much he knew about the DuoHalo virus, when he knew it and who had told him, focusing on what both Phil (who was one the lead medical personnel responding to the DuoHalo epidemic) and his former flatmate Eric (who was a contractor working for a research and development arm of the CIA) had told him.

Andy knew that both Phil and Eric were trusting him with information that maybe he wasn't cleared to know, so Andy stuck to his guns and presented a fairly blank picture of how much information he'd picked up along the way. He relayed that while his understanding of how big the epidemic was grew a little faster and bit more in-depth than others, he'd trusted in Phil and Eric not to tell him anything he wasn't cleared to know, or, more accurately, to only tell him things that weren't prohibited from knowing, since the amount of information was changing so fast, that it was nearly impossible to keep up with what was going on in all fronts.

There were a few times over the course of the first few hours that he felt like maybe Phil had told Andy more than he should've, but each time he'd seen the tribunal's faces scrunch up in annoyance, Andy had asked if what Phil had told him was classified, and each time he was told that it wasn't, although that they'd been urging more discretion when it came to dissemination of such information. Each time Andy had responded that he hadn't told anyone outside of his Team (the term being used to describe the new family unit that had resulted from the DuoHalo virus and the Quaranteam serum used to counter it) and that he did not believe Phil was being careless with the knowledge. Eventually, he figured out *that* was why they were getting annoyed with him – there was nothing illegal about what Phil had done, nor what Andy had done; it just wasn't how they *wanted* it done.

Once Andy's story moved past talking about his arrival in the new manor, as soon as Covington entered his story, a whole new tension filled the air, with each of the three suddenly paying much more

attention to their notes, asking far more questions than they had been previously.

Despite their constant barrage of interruptions, Andy did his best to relay the tale of how Niko had informed him that some women were being assigned to men in a method that did not fall in accordance with the protocols they were supposed to be. Basically, Covington and some of his friends had gone out of their way to buy the ability to circumvent the systems designed to pair up women with men they would find acceptable, putting the man's demand up as 'nonnegotiable,' and just giving a woman to a man who requested them, something Niko had told him she found reprehensible, something which he'd agreed with.

At that point in the story, Niko had offered to fill in some gaps, only to be scolded by the General, being told that she would get a chance to tell her version of the story privately, and for the time being she should remain quiet. Niko had fallen silent in response.

Andy then detailed how Niko had worked to get Andy an invitation to the private poker game that Arthur Covington had been holding for a month or two, where men were urged to put up women assigned to them that had *not* been imprinted yet as stakes for the game, with the winner being able to choose whatever women he wanted from the stakes and then allowing the rest to be chosen by those further down in order of elimination from the poker game.

“Didn't you feel any *shame* at all, Mr. Rook,” Rep. Engle asked him, “in using these women like they were *property* instead of *people*?”

“Absolutely, Representative Engle. In fact, if you interview the women who were already my partners at that time, you will find that they will all detail for you how much guilt I had about my actions, how uncomfortable I was with them, but that I made a decision to do what I needed to for the greater good, and to protect the friends of my partner, 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant Redwolf,” Andy sighed. “I had seen first hand what kind of a cruel man Covington was to his partners, going so far as to refuse to let them even *speak* to other people in public. And even then, I didn't *truly* understand how deep the man's depravity went. It wasn't until after the game itself I would learn how dark that hole is.”

“And the women you had to enter as stakes, Mr. Rook?” the General asked him.

“One of them, Sheridan Smith, I didn't know at the time, and I made a point to choose to bring her back into the house, especially since she'd selected me during the process legitimately.”

“And the other?”

Andy shook his head with a dark little chuckle. “The other I would've sent back to the base to be paired with someone else had I not entered the game. Her name is Erin Donegal, and she and I had a relationship about a decade ago that ended... badly. I was not interested in rekindling the relationship in any way, shape or form, and to do so would've actively been detrimental to not only my mental health, but the mental health of everyone in my Team.”

“And where did Miss Donegal end up?”

“She was chosen by Mister Watkins, which I will admit relieved me somewhat.”

“Why is that?” Senator Giancola asked.

“Of the other people who were at the poker game, I found Mister Watkins to be the most reasonable and scrupulous, although I suppose I should append that by stating that the most reasonable of pit vipers remains a snake,” he chuckled. “Nathaniel seemed like the best worst option, although I have come to find that he was engaged in the poker game for similar reasons to my own.”

“And that was?”

“He was mostly trying to keep tabs on what Covington was up to, although I don't know that that fully excuses his behavior. Mister Watkins has repeatedly informed me that he would have preferred to have less partners than he did, but that the government insisted he get up to a number that would reasonably guarantee his immunity to DuoHalo, a situation I could empathize with.”

“Based on others we've interviewed before you, you did quite well for yourself at that poker game, Mister Rook,” the General said.

Andy shrugged a little. “What can I say? Despite their astute powers of business, it turns out

they're all pretty shitty poker players. And I suspect Covington kept holding the game at his home because he was using an unscrupulous dealer, guaranteeing he would generally end up on top."

"And that would be the late Veronica DeLaCruz?" Representative Engle asked.

"Yes." Andy paused, as did the others, and since no one else wanted to voice the speculation, he decided to give it air. "There's been some talk that Covington had her killed because of how poorly the game night went for him, but I can't speak to that personally. I'm certain I know less on that front than you do. That is what the New Daughters of the Revolution are claiming, however."

"Please list the women that you added to your Team as a result of that night's poker game."

"I went in to rescue Dr. Charlotte Varma and her daughter Asha, both of whom left the Covington mansion with me, but I agreed with Charlotte that no person should be forced to share a sexual partner with their parent. Charlotte said that she would have chosen Dr. Marcos, given the opportunity, and Phil was open to the option, so she was paired with him, and Asha remained with me. I was also paired with Piper Brown before leaving Covington Manor, something I was extremely apprehensive about, considering her mental state at that particular moment, but it has seemed to work out well enough for us in the long run."

"How would you describe her mental state when you first encountered Miss Brown?"

Andy frowned, his fingers curling uncomfortably at the memory of it. "Feral? Out of her mind? Covington had kept her in the in-between state of getting the Quaranteam serum and being imprinted for nearly a week, and Piper had regressed to something bestial and primitive. When she finally came to her senses a few days after being imprinted, I told her that if she wanted to leave, as soon as we could find a medical way for her to do that, I would aid her in taking that path. She has, since then, insisted she very much wants to remain a part of the family, and we are engaged to be married."

"Is that a bit of Stockholm Syndrome there I detect, Mister Rook?" Rep. Engle asked.

"I don't think so, but you're more than welcome to interview Piper, so that you can ascertain her motives for yourselves. I'm certainly not a medical professional capable of making that sort of judgment call."

"Who else joined your family as a result of that poker game, Mister Rook?"

"Sarah Washington, Emily Stevens and Hannah Nakamura."

"And how would you describe their opinions on joining your family?" the General asked him.

"Enthusiastic? Eager? Sarah had a bit of a crush on me before the pandemic. I think that's relatively easily verified. Also, Emily and Sarah were in a relationship prior to all of this, so joining the family made Sarah happy, which made Emily happy. Hannah just wanted safety but wasn't particularly enthusiastic about whom she'd been assigned to initially, as it had been under false pretenses."

"Oh?" Senator Giancola asked. "Elaborate, please."

"She'd been invited to join the Watkins family, but had assumed that the invitation had come from Nathaniel, which it had, but it turned out that the invitation was on behalf of Nathaniel's 18-year-old son Benjamin. Hannah would not have accepted had she known that, and when presented with the option of being paired with Benny Watkins or myself, she chose to be paired with me instead."

"I like this Mister Watkins less and less the more I hear about him," Representative Engle snorted. "And this was all of the women you'd acquired in the poker game?"

"Well, and the right to retain Miss Smith, as stated earlier."

"How did Miss Smith react to being put up as stakes in a poker game?"

Andy frowned. "I didn't exactly tell her that before hand, and when I came clean about it, there was a bit of a rift, but one which I think we've worked past. Sheridan understands that I was in a rather untenable situation at the time, and back then, I didn't know anything about her. In fact, I wasn't entirely certain she'd had any interest in me at all."

"Why do you say that, Mister Rook?"

"Because of how women were being presented to men in the early days... we had the impression that the survey we'd taken was shaping those decisions, but we certainly didn't have any real insight

into how they were being selected, or how they were being redirected to us,” Andy said. “We were told the conditions were favorable to us, but beyond that, we were basically told nothing about how or why women were paired with us men. Everything that I learned about the selection process was basically passed on as second-hand information from the women who joined the Team. We were never formally *told* any of this, beyond the survey we took at the onset.”

“And I understand your household has grown quite sizable since then.”

“I think most of us feel that way,” Andy said with a weary smile.

“How did you come across the additional members of your Team?”

“Recommendations from other members of the Team, generally.”

“Generally?” Rep. Engle asked.

“I sent out one request of my own, and that person accepted, but also wanted to bring someone else along with her.”

“That would be...” Sen. Giancola said, searching through her papers. “...Miss Fiona Smith and Miss Moira MacLeod?”

“That's correct.”

“And you and this Fiona had a prior relationship?”

“We were college sweethearts,” Andy replied.

“But you had not been in contact since college?”

“Her career took her one way and mine took me another.”

“And you and Miss MacLeod were familiar with each other?”

“We had been briefly intimate when we were in college. The three of us.”

“And I assume that both Miss Smith and Miss MacLeod were interested in resuming the prior relationship?”

Andy nodded. “They both came willingly and have seemed quite happy and content since their arrival, so I think that's a safe assumption.”

“Who else has joined your family since your arrival in New Eden?”

“Well, there's the staff – Katie is our groundskeeper, Jenny is our cook, Nicolette is our housekeeper, Whitney is our informational security and support, Lexi is my personal bodyguard and Mali, who should be arriving tomorrow, will be our financial manager.”

“Do any of them have any relationships outside of the one with you?” the General asked.

“Katie and Jenny are married, and I think Nicolette and Whitney might be developing a relationship, although I haven't pried.”

“Why not?”

He shrugged with a smile. “It's not really any of my business? They're both adults.”

“That's staff,” the Senator continued. “You have additional partners who aren't staff?”

“Sure,” Andy answered. “There's Lauren's no-longer ex-girlfriend, Taylor Morrison; Tala Jordan, Sheridan's friend; Jade Dillon, Lauren's friend and former co-worker; and Maya Steele, Emily's director friend.”

“How many women does that put you in sexual relations with in total, Mister Rook?” the General asked.

“Once Mali is here? Twenty-one women in total. In excess of the twelve to fifteen that is currently being recommended by the government.”

The Senator laughed, shaking her head a little. “That sounds like quite the mental and physical load, Mister Rook. My own household is only at thirteen other women, and I'm barely able to remember everyone's *names*. How do you keep track of it all?”

Andy offered her a sympathetic smile. “Well, we spend a lot of time with each other, so that helps, but Whitney also developed an app for my phone so I can easily keep track of when everyone was last dosed, to ensure everyone's needs are being addressed in a timely and prompt fashion.”

“Ever had days where you simply didn't *want* to have sex, Mister Rook?” the General asked him

rather bluntly. "No one would blame you."

"Of course, but all of these women, their very health *relies* on me having sex with them, so I do my best to never let them see me feeling like that. And besides, they are such a widely varying group of women that I find myself drifting from one style of encounter to another very regularly. My time spent sexually with Emily is dramatically different than my time spent sexually with, say, Tala."

"Would you like to elaborate on that, Mister Rook?" the Representative asked him.

"I would not," he replied curtly, "nor do I feel it is any business of this tribunal's how I and my partners enjoy each other's company."

"Would you consider the women in your household happy where they are, Mister Rook?"

He folded his hands on top of the desk, his eyes drifting between the three women. "Let me be exceptionally clear on this point, ladies. When it was discovered there was a way to reassign women to another man without the man being dead, I made sure to offer that option to each and every woman in my household. The last thing I would *ever* want is any woman feeling she's trapped by being with me. Each and every one of them declined to engage in reassignment. I'm sure you knew that already, though, considering you've been interviewing most of the members of my house individually for the past week."

"Not 'most,' Mister Rook," the Senator said. "All. And I have to admit, either you have somehow convinced nearly two dozen people to tell minor variations of the same story, or your story, as implausible as it seems, is mostly true."

Andy spread his hands. "I have nothing to hide. I'm not especially pleased with my own behavior regarding the poker game, but I was also the one who insisted that Katie Couric reach out to the government to fix the problem rather than telling her to just run what she had gathered and letting the chips fall where they may."

"Mmm," the Senator said, reaching into her pocket to grab a tube of lip balm, applying some to her lips. "Quite the hornet's nest you kicked up with that one conversation."

"Yeah, well, I think Covington was trying to throw the blame onto me to cover his own shitstorm, and I wasn't going to allow that to happen," Andy said, annoyance plain in his voice. "He made his own fucking mess, so he can stew in it. How's that going, by the way?"

"We'll talk about that in a little bit, Mister Rook," the General said. "Are you willing to bet your freedom and your life on the fact that every woman who is part of your Team is there of her own free will and volition?"

"I am," he replied confidently. "And if any of them would like to leave, I will be the first in line to help them make that happen. After all the shit I've witnessed with Covington, the *last* thing I want is to be anything at all like that shitheel. I'm guessing because you're in charge, General, that the previous head of the base has been relieved?"

"Major General Fielder is currently in the brig, and will be facing a tribunal of his own in the immediate future, and he's not the only one. A total of seven different men here on the base are either in our brig or have been arrested by federal authorities for their part in circumventing the legitimate and lawful pairing system that we have in place. We've also helped federal authorities arrest a number of people in the local government in and around New Eden, including the former Mayor of New Eden, Mister James Haunton."

"Hopefully his wife, Major Peters, is being taken care of," Andy said. "She was the one who welcomed us to New Eden when we first got here, and she seemed very nice."

"For the time being, Mister Rook, Major Peters will be assuming the role of Mayor of New Eden, and stepping down from her military posting," the General replied. "She is also considering whether or not she and the other members of Team Haunton want to be reassigned, or simply keep Mister Haunton here in a local jail for their needs to be tended to."

"Considering what your day has been like, Mister Rook," the Senator said, an amused tone to her voice as she leaned back in her chair a little. "I'm a little surprised to see you giving any kind of a

damn about any member of the Air Force.”

“They're mostly good people doing a hard job,” Andy countered. “Even these people who stormed my house with machine guns at the ready have got families to go home to at night, and they're just following *your* orders anyway. If they're not a bad egg, I'm not going to hold a grudge. They've got enough shit on their plate without me adding on to it. While you folks may have come in a little bit hotter than I think you needed to, a certain amount of paranoia involving everything that's going on in New Eden isn't entirely unwarranted, you know?”

“That's the difference between me and Andy,” Niko added. “He's very good at keeping a clear head no matter the circumstances. Me, I tend to put the health and safety of the primary before everyone and everything else, because that's my job.”

“And your diligence is appreciated Miss Redwolf,” the Representative said. “Thank you for your service.”

“I'm more concerned about my friend, Dr. Marcos, and his Team,” Andy said.

The three women of the tribunal turned off their microphones and discussed among themselves for a moment, leaving Andy to turn and look at Niko with a shrug. Andy turned back to look at the them as they started to turn their microphones on once more. “While it isn't entirely finalized yet, we have been unable to find any flagrant violations in Dr. Marcos's actions, and considering the number of human lives that he has saved, a small amount of leniency is probably warranted,” the Senator said. “Some of his actions, such as his intervention in the reassignment of Jenny Carnero to Mister Yang's house, are, shall we say, rather unorthodox, but they've also resulted in improvements in the Oracle system itself, so we're going to cut him some leeway.”

“Nothing would be gained by punishing Dr. Marcos for being human, Mister Rook,” the General said. “And quite a great deal would be lost if we *did* impose retributive measures upon him. In the early days of this disaster, people were playing fairly loose with the rules and regulations, but we're past that phase now, and I think Dr. Marcos understands that. The research that Dr. Merriweather brought with her from Russia when she was fleeing her ex-husband, Dr. McCallister, has been incalculably valuable, but there are only a handful of people who even understand what we're looking at, so we can't afford to lose him from his research. With all that on record, however, I can also stress that we're going to be putting a lot more guardrails to prevent anyone from going completely cowboy on us anymore. The last thing any of us want is Dr. Marcos accidentally fucking things up by trying to do the right thing at the wrong time.”

“Phil's a good guy,” Andy insisted. “And whatever rules he bent or broke, I'm fairly certain he had his reasons for doing so. Based on what's happening with the New Daughters of the Revolution, there were much bigger systemic problems going on here at the base.”

“Yes, well, now we come to the real reason we've brought you here, Mister Rook,” the General said with a heavy sigh. “Now, it should be noted that it's taken us almost a month to get to this point, and I wish it hadn't come down to this, but it has, as the NDR are entirely inflexible upon these terms. One of their demands involves you specifically, and as loathe as I am to ask this of you, they will be not be budged off this point. That's why we had to have all of this scrutiny. We needed to vet you as thoroughly as we could and ensure this wasn't some sort of trick or deception on the behalf of the NDR, and I expect your reaction to the demand will only confirm what I already believe to be true.”

“We gonna dance all night with your hand on my ass, General, or are you going to make your move?” Andy said. “What the hell *are* you talking about? What demands?”

“We have reached a settlement which will result in the NDR surrendering Misters Covington, Jacobson and Vikovic to law enforcement,” the Senator said. “It's not perfect, but we didn't expect that it would be going into it, yes? There's a handful of things that're... less than ideal, but it's what we gotta do to get things back into a more manageable fashion. And as the General said, one of the demands involves you, and we anticipated... well, frankly if I were you, Mister Rook, I'd tell me to go stuff it. But it's our job to implore you *not* to do that, and to find some sort of counterbalancing agent that will



make their demand more palatable to you.”

“Okay, look,” Andy snapped. “Quit fucking dancing around the topic and tell me what the fuck is going on, so we can stop wasting each others' time.”

The three members of the tribunal looked at one another, trying to silently decide who was going to tell Andy, before the General spoke again, seemingly having decided to fall on the grenade herself. “As part of the New Daughters of the Revolution surrendering Covington and the others to us, they're all going to be reassigned and not face any retaliatory actions for what they did, although we are mandating that Dr. Rachel DeMarco engage in mandatory psychiatric counseling for a period no less than one year, because of her... demonstration of physical violence in regards to Mister Covington. But that's not the hard part. They have a few demands about their reassignments that are... particular.”

“Oh no,” Andy heard Niko say behind him.

“Miss Lisa Davis is insisting she be reassigned to someone on the East Coast. She wants to be as far away from California as she can get.”

“I can understand that,” Andy said. “After the kind of thing I imagine Covington put her through, she's right to want to put it all behind her and never think about it again.”

“Dr. DeMarco is insisting she be reassigned to Dr. Marcos, so that she can continue to aid in the research on the project, although she has agreed to do so under constant supervision, and with no real authority in any way, shape or form.”

“I can't imagine Phil or Linda is particularly happy about that,” Andy muttered, mostly to himself but loud enough that the tribunal could've heard him. He expected Linda would be even more angry about it than Phil would, although he certainly didn't expect Phil to be all that thrilled with it.

“They will have extremely limited contact with one another until Captain Hayes has assessed that Dr. DeMarco is no longer a threat to anyone. She will remain on the base under supervision at all times until Captain Hayes deems otherwise. There are a handful of other demands about specific people wanting to go to other places, but there's one in particular that the NDR are adamant on, and they will not be budged from it. They want you to select one of their members to join *your* Team specifically, here in New Eden.”

Andy wasn't sure how long the silent moment was between them telling him that and him speaking again, but it might as well have been a thousand years for as heavy as the time felt.

“You *cannot* be serious,” were the first words he could summon to his lips, and they were just a hair's breadth away from him following it up with 'go fuck yourselves,' but he decided not to vocalize that last bit, at least not yet.

“Deadly serious, I'm afraid,” the Senator told him. “They're aware of your history with House Covington, and some of the disagreements their members have had with members of your household...”

“They basically *tortured* my fiancée, Piper Brown, and you want me to bring one of them *into* my home with her? You're insane. *This* is insane. It's not inviting a wolf into the hen house; it's laying out a fucking three-course dinner for her!”

“They're willing to let you choose from any of the members of House Covington, House Vikovic or House Jacobson, but obviously they would prefer you take someone from House Covington. In fact, I've been asked to convey to you that Melody Park would like to volunteer for your Team, but that she also understands if her time with Miss Brown would be a dealbreaker. She has voiced in particular a desire to make amends for her inability to protect Miss Brown. The NDR feel like you've done wonders in fighting against the abuses of the system, and they believe that having someone from their organization embedded in your Team will let them all sleep a little better, since they'll know what work you're doing to keep the system from having any other abuses, and they can communicate that work out to the others in the NDR.”

“I'm just a fantasy writer who got lucky along the way. I don't work on the Quaranteam serum. I don't know a thing about how the DuoHalo virus works. I'm not in the Air Force. I'm not what anyone would call an insider.”

"I disagree," the Representative said, a fiery anger in her tone. "When you agreed to step forward and place your liberal West Coast values forth as the new model for the American family, you took a place in the spotlight and became the sort of public figure that's going to have a firm hand in shaping the direction of this country for the next twenty years, you and your Hollywood elite women, one of whom ain't even from this country."

He could hear Niko's hands balling into fists behind him, but the taunt from the Representative from Idaho just made him smirk a little bit. "I see. So it *is* retaliatory, just not for *them*. You don't like the fact that the President asked us to step forward and talk to '60 Minutes' because you didn't get a chance to put your stake down in the culture wars. I wasn't asking anyone else to live their lives how I live *mine*, just telling people how we decided to survive with each other in the new world."

"I think you and the rest of your godless heathen sluts shouldn't get to decide anything about how our nation does anything," she sneered back at him. "You've always treated the middle of this country as 'flyover states,' people you turn your back on and ignore until you need something, and then suddenly it's nothing but handout handout handout. We in Idaho have one of the lowest sales tax rates nationwide, because we don't believe in big government."

"Great," Andy shot back. "Then you won't mind us not sending you any aid or paying for any of your federal services? Californians pay a higher tax rate than anybody else in the United States, and maybe we should start making sure we're getting what we pay for with those taxes. You've got quite a lot of our money coming into Mountain Home Air Force Base up there in Idaho, when all those resources could be allocated elsewhere."

"Typical liberal talking points," she said, rolling her eyes. "We need our military now more than ever, Mr. Rook, what with all casualties we've suffered as a nation."

"Maybe you haven't heard but we aren't the only country who lost people, Representative. Hell, you should know far better than I do what's going on internationally."

"And I do, Mister Rook, and it's not fucking pretty. But we're going to make sure it's America First no matter what happens to the rest of the world. So, you're going to take one of these fucking NDR women and add her to your household because it's what keeps this shit from getting out of hand. Because if you don't, they're going to make sure all of Covington's abuses are going to be broadcast far and wide, and I think we both know how that's going to end up, don't you? With me and mine on top, where we belong, but by God, the amount of bloodshed it'll take to get us there is unconscionable even to me, so we're telling you to do this so there's not gonna be rioting in the streets. But you will not push me and mine into a corner, Mister Rook. We're going to keep our Second Amendment strong and we're going to protect our people from immigrants and those who'd want to sully this great land of ours. The last fucking thing we need is you and your woke socialist family setting the tone for the rest of the country. Traditional. American. Values. That's what this country needs and what it's going to get."

Andy couldn't help but tilt his head to one side. "If you think you have a snowball's chance in hell in keeping this country 'traditional' when it's lost over 70% of its men, best of fucking luck to you."

"Okay, settle down, you two," the General sighed. "And you can save the speeches for the stump, Maddy. There aren't any fucking cameras in here."

"The little peasant needs to know who he's fucking with," the Representative shot back.

"Careful, Maddy," the Senator cautioned. "You may not know who *you're* fucking with. Mister Rook may not look like much, but he's still alive, which is more than I can say about your first husband. A little less religion and a little more science and you wouldn't have to be shacking up with a member of your security detail for your survival. Maybe this one'll believe in vaccines, huh?"

"Oh fuck you too, Caroline. Uptight bitch."

"I know this is a lot to spring on you, Mister Rook," the General said, interrupting the two bickering politicians, "but how difficult a sell do you think this is going to be to your family?"

"I would say the decision will be entirely in the hands of Piper," Andy admitted. "If she's okay with it, then the rest of us can make it work. And I suspect if she's deadset against us taking anyone

from House Covington, we can probably work to find someone in House Vikovic or Jacobson that'll be a decent enough fit for the family to satisfy the demands of the NDR. Melody Park might be a bridge too far, but maybe not... There's probably somebody in that mix I can make work if it's that important to this whole thing," he sighed. "I know Lisa and Ash were at least familiar with each other, so I would've said that would've been fine, but I can understand Lisa wanting to get as far away from here as possible."

"Can we consider that a 'yes,' Mister Rook?" the Senator asked him.

"Get me a short profile on everyone in each of the three houses and I'll have an answer—"

"You mean 'a selection,' don't you?" the Representative corrected.

He frowned, dropping his eyebrows as he scowled at her. "Yes, I'll have a selection within 24 hours of you dropping off profiles on all those I need to consider. That will give me time to run it by everyone in my family and ensure I don't get any conflicts or personality mismatches. I'm not adding anyone to my Team without clearing it with the rest of the Team."

"What kind of sissy man are you?" the Representative sneered.

"The kind who gives a shit what people are partnered to him think," he said. "I don't know why you'd be the kind of woman who just blindly accepts what her partner is doing without knowing about it, but that's between you and him, and I'll thank you to keep your antiquated bullshit out of my life. Are we done here?"

"Just a few final things, Mister Rook," the General said. "We've got some paperwork we need you to sign – an NDA regarding everything we've talked about today and another one to extend your Top Secret clearance regarding any and all things involving the DuoHalo virus and the Quaranteam serum." One of the soldiers brought over a couple of small stacks of paper, laying them down in front of him. "You've been operating under it long enough that we figured we might as well make it official, and we've done a full background investigation into your last 10 years, so you'll be able to come and go around the base at will moving forward. With that, however, comes an actual title – officer of civilian oversight for the Quaranteam project. The president has mandated that a handful of civilians will be given carte blanche access to the entire process, so that we can ensure that all questionable decisions have at least been reviewed by qualified members of the public. You'll be working in conjunction with the Air Force and the CDC, but there will be a number of people like yourself distributed into all aspects of this system, to make sure we aren't engaging in any unethical or questionable behavior, like Major General Fielder was. It isn't just going to be a pro forma gig, either. You'll need to go to Washington once every three months to file a report, both with the manager of civilian oversight and with the President herself."

He felt the movie line leaping to his lips and just couldn't help himself. "Not to be the materialistic weasel of the group, but do you think we'll get hazard pay out of this?"

"You'll do the job and you'll like it, egghead, or we'll ship you off to Guantanamo and disappear your ass," the Representative said to him, which felt to Andy like an empty threat at best, a gross overreach more likely.

"Do the people of Idaho know they have someone representing them who can't even *spell* the name of their state, or are they just grading on a *really* wide curve?" he countered.

"Stow it!" the General said, slamming her fist down on top of the desk. "You two don't have to like each other, but you're damn well going to have to learn how to work with one another, and if you're constantly acting like the cast of *Mean Girls*, you're never going to get shit done, and you're also never going to be able to remove my boots from your asses. Clear?"

"The Commie started it," the Representative said, and Andy chose to let it lie.

"Anything else," Andy asked, as he signed the two documents in front of him in several places, all of which were helpfully marked with stick on tabs. "Or are we done here?"

"One more thing, Mister Rook," the General said, while the Representative and the Senator turned their attention to their tablets in front of them. "You haven't been informed of this yet, but early

next year, sometime in the early spring, *60 Minutes* is going to come by to do a follow-up story on you, see how you and your family are getting along months later. We've told them not to report on the NDR, but they're probably going to ask you all about it anyway. So, we need you to talk to them about that *off the record*, let them know that we've addressed the issue, if not to your satisfaction, at least to your tolerance. For what it's worth, I happen to agree with all of the NDR's grievances but airing all that dirty laundry out in public is just going to be throwing even more fuel onto an already difficult-to-control fire that we're dealing with day to day. At this point, we've all just got to get on with getting on with it."

"How is it looking across the country, General?"

"We've still got plenty of holdouts insisting the Quaranteam process is a sin against God or a Democratic plot to inject them with microscopic tracking devices. There's some debate about whether or not we simply inject these people for their own good or not, but that's way above my paygrade. There's lots of international developments, but all of those are currently being kept between the President's team and the countries involved. I expect we'll start hearing all about them in the next few months, though. I understand you're going to be doing your mass wedding in January?"

He nodded. "End of January, yeah. The ceremony'll be on the 30<sup>th</sup>, but we're basically making a whole week out of it, what with all the people we need to get to know. It's been tricky organizing all the families to come out for it, but now that pretty much all of them are either imprinted or next in line to be imprinted, we're setting down a day for the ceremony and a weekend for everyone to come and visit. We're already looking into booking out most of the hotels down in Pleasanton and Dublin, and we're already worried that spillover might have to go to Oakland, but we'll make it work as best we can. And it will be a great chance for everyone to get to know everyone else's families."

"How many of your partners are you going to be marrying at the ceremony?"

"Seven. Aisling, Niko, Sarah, Emily, Fiona, Moira and Piper, so just their family and friends are going to be quite the collection of people, not to mention all of Sarah and Em's Hollywood friends on top of that," he laughed. "And, of course, most of my other partners are inviting out some of their friends and families as well, so the whole thing is going to basically be our own little private convention. I genuinely considered renting out something like Moscone or the San Jose Convention Center, but none of us wanted to constantly be driving there and back."

"I imagine the budget for nametags alone is already quite sizable," the General chuckled.

"Absolutely," Andy agreed. "And I'm already a nightmare with names. We're basically printing the nametags ourselves, with a bunch of information on them. Name, who they're partnered with, who they're *related* to and where they currently live. No one's going to remember all of that, so we're just doing the best we can to manage it."

The General got up and walked down from the elevated section, rubbing the back of her neck with a weary hand. "Okay, Mister Rook. I think we're done with you. Again, I apologize for all the theatrics, but we had to make sure you *are* who everyone seemed to *think* you are, especially with the demands from the NDR being so strangely *specific* in regards to you. Apparently, you're the only man they're convinced has no malice in his heart."

"Mmm. They should've seen me when your truck rolled up to pull me here four hours ago. I have a rather important dinner date tonight," he frowned before glancing at his watch. "But if we're done here, maybe I can still make it home in time to salvage that without too much fuss."

"I won't keep you any longer then. We'll have the profiles emailed to you within the next few hours, and we'll expect a response from you tomorrow night on whom you're willing to add to your family. Once that's done, they're going to let us come in and take the hostages out, and you'll have about five or six days before you need to have the person reassigned to you. We'll do that here at the base. Part of the terms of their surrender is that they all get reassigned quickly, so if you can do it sooner than that, even, that would be better."

"Let me figure out *who* it's going to be before we figure out the *when*," Andy chuckled. "I know

that at this point, you're thinking what's one more to add to the man's tally, but it's still a bit of a logistics problem to be taken care of.”

“I'm sure you'll figure it out, Mister Rook.” The General paused and then offered her hand out for him to shake. “I wasn't sure I'd be saying this, but it's been nice talking with someone else who's kept relatively grounded during all of this madness. I hope you'll stay that way moving forward.”

He reached out and shook the General's hand with his own. “Let's hope that makes two of us. Now if you'll excuse me, I have a date to get to.”

Andy and Niko walked out of the room, and for the first time, Andy realized he could go anywhere and see any part of the base, something his innate sense of curiosity couldn't wait to delve into, but for the time being he needed to get home. He glanced at his watch, frowning, as one of the six soldiers who had brought him here moved over, offering a sad smile. “Sorry about all that hassle, sir, but we had our orders. Can I give you a lift back to your house?”

“Thank you, Sgt. Curiel, that would be kind of you.”

Neither Andy nor Niko talked much on the way back to the house, mostly just considering all the information that had been dropped on them, and when they got back to the Manor, Andy had to use his phone to open the gate remotely, so whatever access the Air Force had to his property, they weren't going to wantonly abuse it. Curiel drove the Jeep up to the front door and let them out before driving off, as Andy found Aisling and Fiona waiting for him.

“Rough day at work, luv?” Ash asked him with a giggle.

“Christ, you'd think I'd invented DuoHalo myself the way they were treating me. How is she? Not too upset?”

“She was worried you wouldn't be back in time, but when the gate opened, she lit up like a Christmas tree,” Fiona replied. “How'd the interrogation go?”

“Let's just say we're going to have quite a *lot* to talk about over breakfast tomorrow morning.”

“Are you sure it'll keep, Andy?” Niko said. “The sooner we—”

“It's all things that'll wait until morning,” Andy said, putting his hands on Niko's shoulders. “The Air Force has to send all the paperwork over, and we can talk about it at breakfast. Tonight's Jade's night, and I'll be damned if I'm going to let any drama get in the way of that, okay?”

“Yeah, okay, I guess that's fair,” Niko said, leaning up to kiss him softly for just a moment as Aisling and Fiona moved to straighten out his suit and slacks a little bit. “Now you should get off to your dinner.”

He started to head into the house and behind him, Fiona couldn't help herself and yelled “And don't forget to enjoy your cherry dessert!”

Tonight, he was going to treat Jade Dillon to an excellent one-on-one dinner and then after that, he was, at her request, going to finally take her virginity.

He genuinely wasn't sure who was more nervous, Jade or him.

## Chapter Two

*December 10<sup>th</sup>, 2020*

There was a certain level of expectation that had been building up around tonight for the past several weeks. While he and Jade had been sexually intimate several times now, they'd both sort of been dancing around the subject of her virginity, until last week she'd come to him with a proposal. They could have a nice dinner date, and then they could fuck and get her past the hurdle of her virginity without anyone else present, without any real pressure, with the chance for her to have the experience exactly how she wanted. It was more than anyone could ask for, and he had hoped it would've alleviated some of the tension for both him and her.

It had seemed to work for her, as Jade had been happy as a clam all week, but Andy had found himself more than a little nervous about it, hoping that he wouldn't let her down or disappoint her. The girls, particularly the fiancées, had had *plenty* of advice, but most of it all boiled down to the same thing – just fucking *relax* already.

The person with the best advice had been, unsurprisingly, from Ash, who'd stressed that every girl's first time was important, but that as long as a good time was had by all, that was all that mattered, and considering Andy was giving Jade an entire evening of his attention all to herself, it would focus their time on each other in a way that would let Jade have center stage. They were even having a nice formal dinner beforehand, so it could feel like a private date, although Jenny had insisted on bringing the food to them.

They'd planned to have dinner out on the patio, but the weather had been uncooperative. While winters in California were certainly not as cold as most other places in the United States, they were still brisk enough that they had decided to have dinner indoors, the two of them using one of the smaller ballrooms as their dining room for the evening.

On his way over to the dining room, he stopped in one of the bathrooms to make sure his attire didn't look too off. He'd been trying on outfits for the dinner when the Air Force had rolled up and carted him away, so while he hadn't been entirely settled on this particular look before, he didn't really have time to swing by the bedroom and choose different things to try on. He made sure it wasn't askew or hanging out, tucking in one little bit of shirt that had gotten loose back into his waistline, then sighed, splashing some water on his face.

He was fairly certain the more he thought about it that *he* was more nervous about this whole thing than Jade was, at this point.

Andy walked out of the bathroom and headed down the hall, marveling at how quiet the house mostly was. All the girls had agreed to mostly stay out of the way, although he imagined a bunch of them were also grilling Niko for any information they could get from her about why the Air Force had hauled him up and onto the base with no warning and no courtesy whatsoever.

On the car ride home, Andy had stressed to Niko that he get a chance to talk to Piper first before *any* discussion of his time at the base happened. He expected Niko to hold strong, although he knew that the girls would be nonstop peppering her until bedtime. But Piper absolutely deserved to know about what was coming before anyone else, and he wanted to gauge her reaction privately, so that she didn't feel any pressure from the rest of the house, or even from him. Andy had stressed that they'd talk about it all over breakfast in the morning, but he planned on getting up early and pulling Piper aside so they could have a private chat first.

The door to the ballroom was closed, but he could hear music being played on the other side, Tom Petty & The Heartbreakers singing “Learning To Fly,” which only made him grin. He stepped up to the door, took one final check on his attire, adjusted his glasses then opened the door and headed in.

The ballroom had been set up with a small table in the center of it, lots of candles everywhere although the candle light wasn't the only illumination for the room, the lights simply turned down to half power. The table had only two chairs at it, something that was basically alien in the house at this point, with every other place having multiple seats scattered around it. There was a single centerpiece

of flowers that had been adjusted so it was slightly off to one side, a pair of plates, a bottle of wine on one side of the table, a mixed mojito on the other, as Andy wasn't much of a wine drinker.

He found himself gasping a little as he caught sight of Jade, and immediately felt significantly underdressed. She was wearing a red dress that hung down to her knees with long black leather boots that ran up underneath it. The top was low cut, but not so much that it felt scandalous, offering a generous amount of view of Jade's plump breasts, pushing them up into the best shelf she could get them to be with some push-up bra beneath the dress. Her blonde hair mostly hung down her back, although part of it had been braided up into a crown around the top of her head, keeping any of it from falling into her eyes. Her makeup had been done tastefully, although there was a heavy amount of smoke around her eyes to make those emerald orbs really stand out even more than they normally did.

The look was nothing short of breathtaking.

"It's too much, isn't it?" Jade immediately said as she started moving across the room towards him. "I kinda like how my hair turned out, but I knew the make up was too over the top. Sarah promised me you'd like it, but you kinda hate it, don't you?"

"Jade," Andy said with a wide smile. "You're *magnificent*. I feel like I should be turning and running so whoever your real date is don't see me slinking around near his girl."

Jade giggled suddenly at that, clutching her hand to her face. "You really think so?"

"Honestly, Jade, you're stunning. Are you sure what I'm wearing is okay?"

"Andy, you could be dressed in a leopard print thong and flipflops, and you'd still be handsome to me," she said, batting her long thick eyelashes at him. "Shall we sit and eat? I can tell you how the first woman's NFL team's training is going and you can fill me in on why the military took you out of your own home without so much as a polite warning."

"I want to hear your story much more than I want you to hear mine," he laughed, leaning in to kiss her lips tenderly as she pressed her body against his. "New dress?"

"New boots," she countered. "The dress was just in a collection of things that I needed to be in the right mood to put on."

"They *are* good boots," he said, moving over to pull her chair out for her. "I'm betting that mojito's got quite the kick to it, doesn't it?"

"It's date night," Jade said, sitting down, letting him slide the chair in to meet her. "If it isn't, I'll be bitching at Jenny in the morning."

He moved over to pour a glass of wine for her before going to his own seat across the table from her. "I'm sure it'll be fine. So they're really going to go for a completely female NFL?"

"They *have* to, which means the state of the game's going to change a whole hell of a lot," Jade said with a smile. "They're doing their best to get fully staffed women's teams, but they're also just having a lot of pitch in to help with training. Cheerleaders, trainers... hell, you'd be amazed at the throwing arm Lauren's got on her. I think the team's going to be trying to convince her to play any day now, not that I think she'd want to take them up on it."

"She tell you she doesn't have any interest in it?" Andy said, picking up his mojito, bringing it to his lips, finding it was indeed loaded with rum.

"Quite the opposite, actually," Jade said, picking up her wine, swirling the glass in her hand. "But she wants to have a kid first before she gets into that kind of thing. You knew that already, though. I'm sure she told you she's off her pills."

"She did," Andy laughed. "God help us all next summer. It's going to be baby central up in this house, and I don't think any of us are ready for it."

"No parent ever is," Jade said, smiling shyly. "But I figured maybe I could be the house nanny. We're going to need one, and after three or four years, I can go back to teaching, once things have stabilized down a little bit."

"Is that what you want or what you think the house needs?"

"Equal parts of each," she said, looking up as Nicolette was bringing in a bowl of French Onion

soup for each of them, setting it down on the table without saying anything to either of them.

“Thanks Nicolette,” they both said in unison, laughing a little as they caught themselves.

“Jinx, you owe me a Coke,” Andy said first.

“Nicolette, be a dear and bring me a Coke that I can pour over Andy's head, would you?” Jade smirked at the blonde in her French maid's outfit.

“Yes, ma'am,” Nicolette grinned back before heading to the door, slipping out of the ballroom.

“Two to one she's actually going to bring you a glass bottle of Mexican Coke,” Andy said, shaking his head in amusement.

“No bet. I've been around her long enough to know it's just going to mysteriously appear on the table at some point when we aren't expecting it.”

“Yeah, that sounds like her. So, back on topic, you think you're going to be okay tending to that many newborns?”

“Well, I'm hoping one of them will be yours and mine, and the rest will still be yours, which means they might as well be mine, so someone's gotta be on baby duty,” Jade said, stirring the soup just a little bit. “There will probably need to be two of us, one on daytime duty and one on nighttime duty, but one of them should definitely be me. I like babies, and I won't mind taking some time away from teaching to get the house up and running on the right foot.”

“As long as you're happy with the decision, I'm not one to tell you no for anything,” Andy said before taking a sip from his own soup, although something struck him before he could take a second. “Yours and mine, hm?”

“I'm not getting any younger, Andy, and I have a feeling that once I've got this chain out from around my neck, I'm...” She paused for a second, a strange smile crossing her lips. When they'd first met, Jade had had the habit of using fake cuss words instead of real profanity, a trait that absolutely driven Andy up the wall, and one that Jade had been working very hard to break herself of when she was around him. “I know I'm gonna like fucking, because *you* like fucking, and all the girls in the *house* like fucking, so once I *start* fucking, I don't think I'm gonna want to *stop* fucking any time soon. I haven't been on birth control before, so why start now? I'm not like Fiona, where my window is rapidly dwindling, but I've always been unlucky when it came to relationships, so I feel like my odds of getting pregnant aren't going to be any better. That means you're gonna have to fuck me a whole lot to knock me up. Hope that won't be too much of an imposition on you,” she teased.

“Looks like Sarah's swearing lessons have been helping some,” he laughed. “No, I can't say I'll be all that bothered if you want actual sex out of our encounters moving forward. I imagine you're a little tired of giving blowjobs all the time anyway.”

“Well,” she blushed a little bit, looking down at her soup before looking up at him again. “It's fun watching you sort of spasm out when you're cumming, but the minute your spunk hits my throat, I'm so caught up in the moment of my own orgasm that I can't really enjoy the sight of it for too long. And I don't want to wait to feel you inside of me any longer. I've been a virgin too fucking long,” she grumbled before digging back into her soup.

“You had your reasons,” Andy told her. “For better or worse. And those reasons don't apply any more, so we'll get you over that hump tonight, and you never have to worry about it ever again. I mean, you only lose your virginity once.”

“Well, I don't intend to give up *all* my virginities tonight,” she giggled. “I don't care how big of an advocate of it most of your brides-to-be are, I'm definitely going to want to fool around on my own with a few toys before I even *think* about having your cock lodged up my ass.”

“You don't *ever* have to have my cock in your back door if you don't want it, Jade,” he chuckled, rolling his eyes. “All of you ladies have very different tastes and nobody should be expected to share anybody else's.”

“Enough talk about that for now,” she said, finishing off her soup. “How was your trip to the Air Force base? They let you go, so I imagine it couldn't have been too bad.”



“It was both better and far worse than I'd imagined, but I probably shouldn't talk too much about it yet, otherwise all the other girls are going to be mad you got to know some of it first.”

“How am I going to tell any of them?” Jade said, rolling her eyes at him with a dopey laugh. “After you've fucked me properly, you and I are falling asleep in my bed and not moving until morning. That was the thing I made all the girls agree to. Nobody's barging into our bedroom until daybreak, and even then, if we're still sleeping, we're gonna keep on sleeping until we get up. Tonight's my night, and everybody is going to respect that.”

“Well...” he considered. “I suppose I can talk about parts of it. They ended up giving me top secret clearance when it comes to things related to the DuoHalo pandemic and the Quaranteam serum, because I've been made a member of the civilian oversight team for the New Eden base.”

“That's... good, right?” she asked, tentatively.

“Probably? It means I've got a direct line to register concerns, in case we find out things like Covington's little diversion project end up happening again, but it also means I'm on the hook for wandering around that base every now and again, just to make *sure* nobody's trying to sneak something by the rest of them. So, a bit good, a bit bad. The new General running the base seems like she's got her head on straight, but you never can tell with people these days, so we'll just keep an eye on her like we do everybody else.”

“Makes sense,” Jade said as the door opened again, Nicolette bringing in a serving tray with a couple of steaks on them, mashed potatoes and gravy on the side, placing one in front of Jade which looked slightly pinker than his own.

Andy wondered how the hell Jenny had learned he preferred his steak medium-well instead of medium-rare. He couldn't remember them ever talking about it. Hell, he couldn't remember talking steak with anyone in the house, although at this point, he supposed it was possible he'd mentioned it in passing to someone somewhere along the way. He'd long ago since decided that keeping track of who knew what when in the Rook Household was going to be an impossibility, and that people would just disseminate information at will.

“There's some other stuff as well, but we'll talk about that tomorrow, with the whole house around, although I might have a couple of private chats first.”

“Things the Brides Club needs to know before the rest of us?”

“Not even that,” he sighed. “It'll make sense tomorrow, so I just need you to trust me on this one.”

“Of course, Andy. We all trust you with our lives. If you think I should wait until tomorrow to hear about it, I'm sure you've got your reasons.”

The two ate quietly for a little bit, although Jade spent a bit of time asking Andy if he'd considered where he wanted the main nursery to go, and how he planned on divvying up kids rooms eventually, which made him laugh, simply because it was *so* far in the future to be thinking about, and was a welcome change from talking about next month's upcoming wedding, which felt like it was going to be practically a convention, and which Fiona, as the oldest, had sort of taken point on, doing planning and scheduling with nearly all of her free time.

When it came to dessert time, Nicolette brought in two slices of decadent chocolate lava cake, one for each of them, and Andy was a little worried that the amount of sweetness might put him into sugar shock, sending him spiraling into some kind of a food coma but Jade's relentless enthusiasm certainly didn't seem to let him wind down.

During the pitch process the month before, where all the girls had suggested their friends who they wanted to be brought in to safety, Lauren (who had pitched Jade) had described Jade as the human equivalent of a golden retriever – always full of boundless energy and enthusiasm and nearly impossible to put in a bad mood. Andy had thought it was a bit of hyperbole when he'd first heard it, but true to Lauren's word, Jade had never been anything less than unwaveringly positive about anything and everything, even when she was nervous.

“Just one thing I'd thought I should ask about an update on, regarding your father, Jade,” Andy said as they were finishing dessert. “You said you didn't want to ever hear from him again, and that any messages he sent over we should completely ignore and reject. That still true?”

Jade sighed, her face darkening for only a moment before the storm passed as she nodded. “That's no longer my problem, so unless he's actually dead, I don't want to hear a word about it. If he's sick or dying, he can do so without my knowledge.”

Andy nodded silently, making a mental note that they were likely to revisit this conversation within a few days, then, as reports were that Cormack Dillon was indeed on his deathbed, and that he wasn't expected to last much longer, although it wasn't DuoHalo was that catching up to him, but good old fashioned lung cancer – Cormack had never been able to shake his habit of pipe smoking and it seemed like it was finally going to be the death of him.

“Besides,” she continued. “I'd rather focus on the fun we're going to have in just a little bit. I know we both agreed to wait until I was ready, but I'm starting to think maybe I should've been ready far sooner than I actually was. That's on me, though.”

“You wanted to be sure you were ready,” Andy said. “I respected that.”

“Sure, but in waiting so long, I just kept letting the pressure build and build inside of my head until finally nothing was ever going to live up to that. Spending time with Sarah's helped out for that, some, because she pointed out to me if I just relaxed and enjoyed our time together, the fact that it was my *first* time would stop mattering so much. So I'm just going to make sure we have a good time and that you give me a good and proper fucking, you know?” she giggled. “So maybe we should move this to the bedroom?”

“In your own time, obviously.”

“Oh, my time is now so get your ass up out of that chair,” she laughed, standing up, pulling him to his feet, pressing her lips against his, both of her long arms folding behind his neck, keeping her lean athletic body pressed firmly against his. When she broke from the kiss, she was grinning from ear-to-ear. “Or are you just gonna take me here in the ballroom like some sort of savage brute?”

He reached both of his hands down and grabbed her ass, hoisting her up so that her legs wrapped around his waist as he started turning and walking towards the doorway while Jade was cackling with laughter, tears starting to run down her cheeks she was laughing so hard at Andy's absurd caveman like walk, taking her out of the ballroom, down three doors before stepping into the only bedroom that was open, which, thankfully, was Jade's, carting her in before tossing her onto her bed with a loud clatter, her face still beaming with joy as he turned to close the door shut behind them.

Andy hadn't spent much time in Jade's room, but was pleased to see she'd gone all out in decorating the room to her own tastes, having even repainted the walls inside to a nice warm orange/yellow hue, like an approaching sunset. Framed artwork lined the walls, and he knew that some of them must have been gifts from her father, because they were originals and not prints, and some were quite valuable. But in addition to the modern and classical artwork, there was something that Andy had to work *insanely* hard not to laugh at, framed with as much love and care as the Matisse next to it, was a vintage black and white poster of a tiny Siamese kitten clinging to a bamboo branch with the words 'Hang in there, baby,' written on it. The poster probably wasn't even worth a tenth of the money spent on framing it, but the sheer contrast of it was so undeniably Jade, he couldn't help but being caught up in smiling over it.

She also had a surprising amount of furniture in the room, with only a twin bed, so it was going to be a good snuggle for them tonight. There was a desk, a dresser, a chair and a bookshelf, which Andy was surprised to see had a couple of his books on it. While many of his partners had just decided that they could still love Andy without reading any of his work, a few of them had taken to picking and choosing a few of his books, in an effort to learn what he did for a living without getting hung up on the big Druid Gunslinger series. Jade had clearly decided she wanted to read some of his work, though, as he could see a copy of “The Demon Dies At Midnight” had a bookmark in it most of the way

through it. There were also several books of poetry, though it seemed like they were all in French and not in English. Andy hadn't even known Jade spoke French before that moment, and he hoped the detail would stick in his head.

Jade moved to pull one of her boots off, then the other, exposing her tanned dancer's legs to his eyes as she rubbed one of her feet along her other calf invitingly. "Maybe you should give me a little striptease? Just to set the mood?" she suggested.

"We'd need music for—"

Before he had finished the sentence, she'd tapped on her phone and a little speakerbox on top of the desk starting to play Marvin Gaye's "Let's Get It On," as she giggled, bouncing her blonde eyebrows in his direction suggestively.

Andy'd never done a striptease before, but figured why not, and decided to be game for it, sliding out of the jacket, tossing it on top of the dresser. He kicked off his shoes and plucked off his socks one at a time, throwing them anywhere. He wasn't used to this, but decided to keep the pace up a best as he could, unbuttoning his shirt while turning his back to her, slipping one arm out then the other before taking the shirt and whirling it over his head.

"You're adorable," Jade giggled. "But you look ridiculous. C'mere."

He moved over to sit down next to her on the bed and she pulled him in for a fierce kiss, his hands sliding along her back as she slowly climbed into his lap, sliding her knee on the other side of him, her body moving to be atop of his. His hand reached up and unfastened the top of her dress before slowly drawing down on the zipper at the back of her neckline, beneath the waterfall of blonde locks that drizzled down her back. One of the girls must've helped her into the dress, he realized, as he slid the zipper down down down until it was at her waist.

Once it was that loose, she slipped off his lap and stood up so she could let the dress drop to the floor, crouching down to pick it up and set it on the dresser next to his jacket and shirt. She was wearing a deep purple push-up bra and matching panties. "I almost want to put the boots back on," she said with a mischievous smile. "But I'm pretty sure they'd chafe, so we'll leave them off." She moved to slip off the bra, exhaling a breath, the lines on her skin where the fabric had been clinging and pushing still visible. "God, I know it made my tits look fantastic, but I'm so glad to be out of that fucking thing. I don't understand how some women can wear them all fucking day."

"Your tits look fantastic anyway," he said, unbuttoning his slacks before she reached over and slapped his fingertips.

"Let me do that," she said as her hands grabbed at his waistline and pulled both his pants and his boxers down and off, leaving him naked sitting on the edge of her bed. He lifted his hips so he could pull out the sheets from beneath him, tugging them to one side so that they could pull them over their bodies when they finished as she put the remainder of his clothes on the dresser before she pulled off her panties, leaving her standing there in all her naked glory before him.

Jade wasn't the tallest or the shortest of his partners, neither the bustiest or the least endowed. But somehow she felt the most All American of his partners, the mess of blonde hair giving her the sort of look of the gorgeous girl next door that every red-blooded American man had dreamed of knowing, a sort of wholesome wanton sexuality cut with just the perfect amount of coquettish nervousness to make it all seem as genuine as possible. Her breasts were that perfect spot between firm and large, with rose-pink areola and small little nipples that already stood proudly stiff. She'd taken Andy to heart when he'd said he wasn't bothered by pubic hair as long as it was neatly trimmed and maintained, and so she had a wedge shaped block of brown just above her pussy, the lips themselves neatly shaven. Other than that, her skin was free of adornment, no tattoos, birthmarks or even moles to speak of across her well-tanned flesh, all of which Andy knew, having seen her naked many times before.

The second time they'd been sexually intimate, Andy had made it a point to go down on her until her whole body was constantly shaking with ecstasy and she had been afraid he was going to forget to dose her, so she'd made it a point to suck him off immediately afterwards even though it was very

clear she'd had trouble focusing, and kept giggling distractedly in the middle of it, the aftershocks of her orgasm still tingling through her body. She'd even teased Andy that he was being too giving of the wrong things for that moment, considering she was craving his cum something fierce.

“At some point, being naked in front of you's gonna get easier, isn't it?” she said shyly, folding her hands behind her back so that she didn't instinctively cover herself up. “You got used to being naked in front of lots of women *very* quickly.”

He chuckled a bit, reaching forward to slide his hand onto her hip, pulling her over towards the bed. “Not *easily*, though. I've still got a belly, even if we are slowly working it off. I shave my head because I've got a huge bald spot otherwise. And before Ash and Niko started waxing my back, I practically had a sweater on there. So I'm still *very* self conscious about my body. But all of you seem okay with it, so that's all that matters. And you're fucking *gorgeous*, Jade, with or without clothes. Men have been chasing after you your entire life. Hell, men were constantly lusting after you when you were shaking your ass on the sidelines of 49ers games all the time. What the hell have you got to be nervous about?”

She grinned a little bit, miming kicking her toe against the carpet of the room. “When you put it like that, it does seem silly. But you've got so many other beautiful partners, it's hard not to compare myself against all of them.”

He pulled Jade down to sit in his lap, his hand stroking against her face. “Let me tell you something I told Niko, right after Em and Sarah showed up, and she was having similar doubts. Just because someone likes listening to The Beatles doesn't mean they can't also like listening to The Rolling Stones or The Velvet Underground or Led Zeppelin or, shit, even the Backstreet Boys or Public Enemy! I hate ranking lists of musicians, because nobody's better or worse than anybody else – they're all just different. Don't compare yourself. To anybody. Ever. Okay?”

She bit her bottom lip in a shy smile and leaned in and kissed him with a sort of kind thankfulness he wasn't anticipating. “That's the nicest thing anyone's ever said to me, Andy. I needed to hear that. You may need to remind me of it again every so often, if that's okay.”

“Whatever you need, Jade.”

“*Well*,” she said, her smile turning devilish. “What I *need* right now is to finally get my brains fucked out. I need you to take my virginity and make me a real goddamn woman. I need you to fuck the shit out of me so hard that when I get up in the morning to go to yoga, all the girls tease me about how I'm walking funny. But I need you to love me and not be *too* rough either. I just wanna feel sore in a good way for the next few days, because you made this night count. That's what I need *now*.”

“As you wish, m'lady.” He slowly moved to turn them both, lowering her down onto her back on the bed, settling her head perfectly on the pillow. “You know I'm so tempted to give you another tongue lashing first, though, right?”

She giggled, shaking her head vehemently. “Not tonight. I'm already so fucking wet, you probably felt my cunt dripping onto your lap.”

“I didn't want to say anything but...”

She playfully slapped his shoulder. “But it turned you on and you really liked it,” she said, moving to slide her legs on either side of him, letting him get settled between them.

“Of course I liked it,” he countered. “It's nice to feel attractive, even for us guys.”

“You've got the strongest feature of all, Andy. You've got a fierce mind and a powerful heart, and you won't back down from anyone or anything, no matter how great the adversity in your way,” she said, a genuine kindness behind her eyes. “That's the most important thing.” She licked her lips a little bit as she started to grind her hips a little bit, rubbing the length of his cock across her slit. “Although you've got a very nice cock, too...”

“Let me introduce you to it proper,” he said, leaning in to match his lips to hers again as he felt her reaching down to get him lined up. His hips dipped up and in as his shaft pushed inside of her, he could hear her breath catch and felt her walls squeeze down on him as her body tensed up. “Welcome

to th—”

Whatever he'd been going to say next was lost inside of Jade's mouth as their tongues got tangled up within each others' mouths. He could feel her bare heels digging into his back, pushing his body more firmly into hers, as if she wanted them to just melt together.

He drew his hips back, to start to give her a bit of friction, but her hands and feet pulled him back down, not wanting him to be even a few inches away from her. That meant fast and shallow thrusts, his body rolling against hers in a quick tempo. Normally he would be taking longer, slower thrusts, but Jade was making her preferences clear, and he wanted to make it perfect for her.

Eventually she let her legs slide a bit more open to allow him to push deeper, to prolong the moment, even as he felt her squeal and clench down again, her body giving a heavy shiver before she opened her eyes, pulling back her lips from his for just a quiet “oh *fuck*.”

He eased up a bit, but as soon as he felt the shivers stop, he started drilling down harder and faster once more, pumping his cock in and out of her slippery snatch, tears rolling from her eyes, although the beaming smile on her lips told him they were of joy, as she could tell his breathing was stepping up a notch, as she started nodding frantically.

“Please, Andy, pleasepleaseplease, give it to me, gimme your love, gimme your cum... make me your woman... Love me, Andy, fucking love me...”

Andy wanted to prolong it as much as he could, but Jade was egging him on, and he couldn't deny her a thing, so his hips pushed his dick as deep inside of her as he could and let go, that pent up release pouring into her like a rushing river. He'd gone two days without giving anyone a dose of his cum because he wanted Jade to feel like he was pouring an endless amount inside of her, and his balls had been sitting heavy all day. He unloaded gusher after gusher of blast up her snatch, sending her into yet another wild collection of spasms before they both collapsed together, his body weighing on hers but she only purred in contented delight at the feeling of it.

“How was—”

“It was fucking *fabulous*,” she burst out laughing. “God, why the fuck did I *wait*?!” She tilted her head and kissed his cheek. “Can you stay all night?”

“Of course, Jade,” he said with a smile. “I'm going to probably be up early, though, if that's okay? I need to pull someone specific aside and have a chat about something impossible tomorrow before breakfast.”

“Ash?”

He exhaled, shaking his head. “Piper.”

She nodded. “Then I'll take every moment I can get, but when you need to get up, go ahead and take care of her. This was hella good, and I can't wait for us to have more of these for forever.”

“Whenever and wherever you want.”

Andy reached up and flipped the switch to turn the light on the nightstand off, letting the room full into darkness. He was halfway asleep before he heard Jade's voice giggle again to break the silence. “Andy?”

“Yeah?”

“Is it okay if I bring in one of the other girls next time?” she asked, laughing through all the words in a delirious whisper. “If this is what it feels like when you cum inside of me, I'm gonna hella need a helper to dilute that shit. I feel like you dumped a fucking gallon into my belly.”

That made him laugh too.

## Chapter Three

December 11<sup>th</sup>, 2020

It was incredibly uncommon for Andy to get up before dawn, but this particular morning his body just would not let him sleep, and he knew exactly why. He was going to have to have one of the more difficult conversations he'd ever had to have in his life. Skipping it, however, would've been endlessly worse.

The morning sun was just threatening to peek over the hills and nobody was awake inside of the house, not even the normal early morning risers like Lauren and Piper. He'd extricated himself from Jade's bed without rousing her, and nobody so far had been woken by his wandering the halls, not even the cats, who would normally come and investigate anytime someone was awake when they shouldn't be, especially Andy.

He was tempted to go and have a think up on the balcony, but he'd been relying on that spot too much lately. He decided to walk out into the back yard and wander the big expanse of green. He stopped to crouch down and examine the lawn itself, wondering if there were sprinklers or if it would turn into a large field of withered tan when there's no rain. There was something so strange about having a giant lawn when he'd spent over the last decade in a tiny little condo without any grass to his name. It had been raining lately, thankfully, but if the drought sprung up again, he might have to talk to Katie about transitioning to something less water intensive.

When Andy stood up, he glanced around the backyard slowly and chuckled as he spotted Lauren on a yoga mat over by the edge of the pool, doing slow stretches, the kind he'd seen Sheridan teaching her, although it didn't seem like any of the other girls were anywhere to be seen. It looked like she'd *just* gotten there, so maybe she'd walked out and just not seen him, not like he was ever up this early ever anyway.

Since the decision had been made that next year there would be an all-female NFL season and Lauren had been convinced to join the new female 49ers team playing fullback, she'd been taking her own workout almost religiously. Lauren had told the family she wasn't sure she wanted to commit to playing for years and years, but taking a turn for at least a year was an opportunity she simply couldn't pass up.

"The hell, Andy?" Lauren said as she spotted him, a broad smile on her face. "What the bugger are you doing up this early?"

"Shit on my mind, Lauren," he sighed, strolling over towards her, each footstep a little heavier than the one before it. "Shit. On. My. Mind."

The tall blonde Aussie nodded as she walked over and wrapped her arms around him to give him a firm hug, her hand on his back as she leaned down and gave him a tender kiss. "Whatever it is, Niko's got that same weight about her. Is it going to be with us for a long while?"

"Nah," he said with a cheeky grin. "By the end of the day, I'll at least have clarity on it, and once we're there, then at least I'll know what I'm dealing with. It's the not knowing that's getting me wound up. How's training going?"

"We're talking about you, boyo."

"Mmmm," Andy said. "I'm deflecting. I'm good at that. I'd rather talk about you."

"It's a bit daft, having a bunch of sheilas in pads and helmets trying to play football, considering they're teaching us the rules of the game as much as they are how to play it. But I suppose we'll make it work in the end, one way or another. To me, it feels like everyone's just clutching for some feeling of normality in this new and crazy world."

"That they are, Laur, that they are." He pulled away from the hug and let out another sigh. "You good? You need a top off or anything?"

"Strewth, Andy, you *are* having a tough time with whatever it is you're thinking about, aren'tcha? You, me and Taylor had a go 'round just a couple of days ago. I thought it was pretty memorable, I did, so I'm a little worried if you've forgotten it already."

“Right. Sorry, sorry. Let’s just say I have an incredibly big ask for one of the fiancées and I’m worried how she’s going to take it,” he said, folding his fingertips together before stretching his arms above his head.

“Is the ask for Niko or Piper?” Lauren asked him.

“Yeah, why?”

“They’re both walking this way now.”

Andy glanced over his shoulder to see the two women making their way over towards him. Instantly from Niko’s expression, he could tell she’d been true to her word and hadn’t told Piper anything, and that it was clearly eating her up inside. “Morning ladies,” Andy said to them with his best optimistic smile. “How are you both this fine morning?”

Piper and Niko were both dressed in workout gear, thick leggings and baggy t-shirts, each of them with their hair put up, the tall white brunette from Florida a sharp contrast to the short mixed race girl from the reservation in South Dakota. “Morning babe,” Piper said to him, as Niko shot him a sympathetic look. “Neeks says we need to have a chat?”

“Yeah, that’s certainly one way of putting it,” he agreed. “You mind skipping your morning workout so you and I can have a private chat?”

Piper’s face looked a little crestfallen as she immediately braced for bad news. “Did my dad die or something?” With the number of men that had been killed in the past year by DuoHalo, it was an entirely reasonable assumption that someone had died, even if it felt like the world at large was starting to get a handle on the pandemic.

“Nothing that bad,” he said with a smile. “Nobody’s dead, but by the end of the conversation, I might find myself wishing that *I* was. C’mon, let’s walk and talk so we can figure this out.”

As soon as Piper was standing next to him, she kissed his forehead, something he regularly did to her when she was worked up or stressed out. “Chin up, Andy. Whatever it is, we’ll get through it.”

“Oh, I know. It’s just going to suck when you hear what I’ve got to tell you.”

“Don’t forget, you’ve got to go meet Mali this afternoon as well,” Niko said.

“Right. Right. The woman who doesn’t want to talk to me until she’s imprinted on me. How could I forget?”

“It’ll be fine, Andy, relax,” Piper said. “Now what’s up and why do you need to talk to me about it first before the whole family?”

The two of them walked into the house and headed into Andy’s upstairs office. With the discovery of the hidden basement, Andy now had two separate offices he could work in, but the upstairs one was a little homier and easier for them to sit and chat. Andy moved to sit down on one end of the couch against the side of the room and Piper sat on the other end.

“So we’ve been mandated that we have to add another member to the house,” he said, reaching over to take one of Piper’s hands, holding it within his own. “And it has to be a member of the New Daughters of the Revolution.”

“Under no circumstances is Hope coming into this fucking house, Andy,” Piper snarled. “Nor that bitch Rachel.”

“No no, we’ve talked about your time over at Covington’s enough that I wouldn’t dare suggest that kind of thing. We can pick any one of the people from the three houses, but we have had one person express personal interest in joining the house.”

Piper’s eyes narrowed a little. “Who?”

“Melody Park, Covington’s former bodyguard.”

Andy braced himself for a shout that never came, because instead Piper simply offered a nonjudgmental, “Huh.”

He looked at her face, trying to find that expression of rage or anger that he thought he’d find there and instead saw a rather quizzical look instead. That left him a little off-balance. “Huh? That’s it? You’re not going to scream and shout about her asking to join us?”

Piper offered him a tender smile, squeezing his fingertips in her own. “You were worried about me flipping out, weren’t you?”

“Well, not as much as I would’ve been if I had to pitch Hope or Rachel to you.”

The athlete nodded. “God help whoever gets stuck with one of the two of them.”

Andy’s eyebrows bounced in amusement. “Phil’s getting stuck with Rachel, actually, so I’ll tell him you send them your prayers.”

Piper blanched with an embarrassed sort of derpy smile. “Better him than us, I guess.”

“So tell me about your experience with Melody Park,” Andy said to her.

“Well, she was there during my time over at Covington’s house, but she sort of really wasn’t *there* if you know what I mean.”

“I don’t, actually,” Andy told her. “Give me a good picture of who this woman is and what you thought of her during your time over there.”

“So the thing about Melody is that she wasn’t really much of an active hand in what they did to me under Covington’s watch, but she was around for a lot of it. I mean, she caught me and hauled me back to the room the one time I tried to escape, but even as rough as she was with me that whole time, she was also working to make sure she didn’t do any real damage. I didn’t feel like Covington had ordered her to do that and it was just something she’d chosen to do. And there was once where we had a conversation and she told me that Covington was going to win out in the end, and if I’d just go along with it, I wouldn’t be suffering as much as I was. And it wasn’t a spiteful tone, more... sad. I think that before me, she genuinely thought it wasn’t possible to resist Covington and what he’d done to all of them. She... she looked at me like I was someone getting mad at the weather. Or the seasons.”

“Knowing what she did about DuoHalo and the Quaranteam serum, she might have believed in that so badly that seeing you resist felt like you were only making things worse for yourself,” he said. “I know a lot of the NDR felt like they simply didn’t have any recourse other than the one they eventually took. They were pushed into a corner where they couldn’t take being with their assigned partner anymore but didn’t want to murder anyone to get out from under it.”

“Did she send a message?”

“She did. It’s a video file, but I haven’t watched it yet, simply because if you wanted to shut it down entirely sight unseen, I didn’t want you to feel bad about it.”

“Alright, let’s take a look at it.”

Andy turned on the television in his office and connected to it from his phone before pulling up the video message from Melody that the General had sent over. It was filmed, hilariously enough, in the same room in Covington’s house where he’d played poker a little more than a month ago. Melody was sat in the dealer’s seat at the very poker table that had turned everything in his life upside down. The look on the woman’s face could only be described as some combination of exhaustion and shame. She was dressed in a loose-fitting black silk blouse which she had the top few buttons undone of. Andy imagined several of the women of the NDR had recorded similar videos, pitches to convince those households they felt most comfortable with that they wouldn’t be harmful to those people already in them. He’d have to ask Phil to show him the one that Rachel had sent them. Andy lifted his phone up and clicked on the play button as the video file sprung to life.

“So, this message is for Piper Brown and her fiancé Andy Rook. I’m sure I’m not a face you expected to see again, Piper, but I wanted to reach out to you because, well, this revolution wouldn’t have happened without you, and I... I wanted to find some way to make up for my transgressions.”

Piper reached over and touched the button to pause the message on Andy’s phone. “This... this isn’t at all what I expected it to be.”

“Let’s watch the whole thing first,” Andy suggested, “and then we can watch it again multiple times if we need clarification.”

“Okay,” Piper said, tapping the play button once more.

“Before you came to Covington’s house, we’d... we’d all forgotten what it was like to resist. I’d



tried, like you did, to not get sucked into Covington's gravity, to not bend to his will, but in the end, I'm afraid I just wasn't as strong as you were. I made it to day eight and then I cracked, beaten down by the pain and suffering and betrayal of my own body. I gave in. To my great and almighty shame, I gave in. I fucking hated myself for it, but I didn't see any other option. And I somehow convinced myself if I couldn't do it, it couldn't be done. And on day eight, *your* day eight, I stood behind Covington as he came to you, and I was ready to watch you fail, to prove that I hadn't been weak, and instead, you reached out and slapped him."

On the screen, Melody looked down at her hands for a long moment, wringing them together atop the table, before looking back up at the camera, almost willing herself to carry on talking.

"I don't know if that means you were stronger or I was weaker or maybe I just didn't have the degree of self-faith that you did. But regardless of how, you got out. And at that point, I think all of us, the women Covington had forced to be subjugated to his will, we just wanted that. We wanted *out*. We were prepared to go the hard route, too. By any means necessary. With all of us, to a woman, willing to end Covington's life if it meant we could get free of him. Rachel knew the science behind the only possible way to get reassigned, or, at least we *thought* she did. She told us the only way we were going to be free of Arthur was to kill him, at which point we could be bonded to someone else. We were getting close to doing that thing that but then a rumor started circulating around the base, that there might be some other way to reassign people. One that didn't involve killing anyone. It was just plausible enough to give us pause."

Melody inhaled a deep breath and then let it out. She seemed like she was uncomfortable talking this much all at once, but that she realized this was her one shot to make a case for herself.

"Now I'm the kind of person who's gotten blood on her hands more than a few times over the years. I was a Ranger. There were times where the jobs that needed doing weren't the kind of jobs anyone liked having done, where you had to blur the line between civilian and enemy combatant, between right and wrong, until all that remained was a narrow path, a tightrope you found yourself laser focused on because to glance to your left or right would spell out immediate death or damnation."

Andy could see the woman was tired, and wondered how far in to their last stand the video had been recorded. He'd wager that the video was less than 24 hours old, and had probably been filmed yesterday morning. The Air Force had sent in food and water during the negotiations, but they'd still been tense as hell, and Andy had heard multiple times from Phil that even the simple exchange of basic resources had nearly resulted in gunfights, as the Air Force was eager to have the whole matter wrapped up quietly and neatly, and the New Daughters of the Revolution refused to relent on nearly any of their demands.

"With a path out that didn't involve bloodshed, I wanted to take that if at all possible. Not just for me, but for all of us. I'm not close with any of the other women here in Covington's house, but I don't want anyone to have unnecessary blood on their hands, friend or no. So, we decided to give the Air Force a chance to make things right. All that said, none of us women fully trust the Air Force to do the right thing. That's why you're getting involved, Mr. Rook – because you've sort of been mixed up in this whole mess since the beginning, and for the most part, you've seemed to stumble into doing generally right and noble things. I'd... I'd like to be a part of that. And I'd like the chance to spend part of my life learning from Piper, learning how to be better and believe in myself more."

It was odd, Andy thought, but as much as Melody spent her time looking at the camera, when it came to talking about Piper, she would often avert her gaze a bit, as if she still bore some shame with her about her inability to stop Covington.

"I'm sure you will have terms and conditions to which you'll allow me within your house, and just know as long as they won't harm anyone else, I'll agree to them. Want me to wear a ball gag for the first month? You got it. Want me to revise that tattoo on my back to have Andy's name on it? I'll do it. I don't care what it takes. I'm not going to fail again, so whatever obstacles you put in my way, I assure you, I will overcome them and will triumph in the face of adversity. When we saw that piece on

you all on 60 Minutes, you all looked... *fuck* you looked so fucking *happy*. Katie Couric gave you every chance to call out Andy for misbehaving, and instead you just made it clear that things were going fantastically. Like, I know what a fake fucking smile looks like, and you were genuine, Piper. All I'm asking is for a chance to get in on that. I feel like I've got a lot to offer the Rook family – I'm an excellent soldier and bodyguard, and if it comes down to my life or Andy's, well, I'm going to put myself in the line of fire each and every time."

A single tear formed beneath one of Melody's eyes, and she reached up to swipe it away, as if being caught in a moment of weakness physically hurt her.

"Look, I haven't got shit left in my life, okay? My mom died of cancer about six years ago, and my father and my two brothers were early casualties to DuoHalo, so I've got survivor's guilt, complicated even more by the fact that I was one of the goddamn *bad guys* for a while, oppressing my fellow women when I should've been helping them to stand strong. We didn't form a bond with each other here. We were all too angry and scared to relate to each other as human beings. I gotta get past that, and I'm hoping you two will teach me how to do that. If you tell me 'no,' I'll understand, and I'll probably just let myself die off once we turn Covington in. They tell me they haven't really tested to see what happens if a woman goes without getting semen from their man for too long, because no woman's been able to keep it together. I mean, I'm fucking *feeling* it bad right now already, and it's only been a week. We jacked him off last week and split the dose among all of us, but I swore to myself that would be the last time I'd ever take *shit* from that asshole, and I just don't know who to trust any more... But Piper, *I trust you*. And if you trust Andy, I guess that means I trust him too. So I suppose it's up to you whether or not I deserve to live or die, and whatever you two decide, I'll respect that decision. I'd like to think that I'd let you in if the situations were reversed, but I don't know, considering our history, that I could get past that mess. But fuck do I want to try. And you've seemed to always be better than me at anything, Piper, so I'm hoping you're better than me at giving second chances. I want to spend the rest of my life learning to be better, following your example, Piper. I want us to stop being enemies and learn to be friends. Anyway, I should probably end the message here. Either I've convinced you, and I'll see you soon, or I haven't, and you won't have to worry about ever seeing me again. Nobody will. I think I'm at peace with either of those options right now, so you should just follow your heart and do whatever you think is right. Thanks for at least listening and hearing me out." Melody looked like she was about to say one final thing, pausing for a long moment before just reaching forward and turning off the recording, that last thing going unspoken.

Andy and Piper sat in silence, looking at that freeze frame still of Melody turning off the recording, neither of them quite sure where to start the conversation. Andy knew how he felt about it, but had decided that he wasn't going to say anything until Piper had voiced her opinion without possible contamination of his.

"What a fucking thing to lay on us," Pipe finally said to break the calm. "I've heard about people having to make life and death decisions, but usually that's in a split second, not something where you can stop and fucking *think* about it for a while." She sat up straight and leaned back, shaking her head. "What do you think, Andy?"

"I think I want to hear what *you're* thinking before I say *anything*, Piper."

She offered him a bitter grin, rolling her eyes a little bit. "That's diplomatic of you."

"Whatever you want to do, Piper, I'm going to back you on," Andy said. "I've got some thoughts and feelings of my own on the matter, but I didn't go through what you went through over at Covington's house, and no matter how much detail you relay the story to me with, that's not going to change. I can *understand* what you went through without really *getting* it, you know?"

"Right. Right right. I hear what you're saying, Andy, and if this were Hope, this would be an easy decision, but what I told you earlier was completely true – Melody mostly just enabled through inaction rather than doing anything directly harmful to me. And yeah, that fucking *sucks* and I'm fucking mad as hell about it, but mad enough to condemn someone to *death*? I mean, fuck *me*."

“She might be bluffing,” Andy suggested, even though he very much didn’t feel like that was the case.

“Look at her face, Andy,” Piper said, gesturing to the frozen image of Melody on the television across the room. “That’s not a woman who’s bluffing. That’s the face of a woman who’s nearly given up and is looking for someone to throw her a lifeline, who needs someone to give her a hand and pull her out of the mess that she’s found herself in. That’s not a bluff, that’s a... that’s a... that’s a fucking *cry for help* if ever I’ve seen one.”

“It doesn’t have to be you that helps her, though, Piper.”

She turned to look at him with a kind smile. “Did you back down when Niko asked you to save Charlotte and Asha? No. You rolled up your sleeves and got the job done, and saved me, Emily and Sarah in the process. Oh! And Hannah! Indirectly. That’s six lives you helped with one crazy action!”

“And if I’d lost, I could’ve committed Sheridan to a life of horror, Piper,” Andy said. “Let’s not forget about that, okay?”

“Sometimes risks have to be taken, Andy. That’s all I’m saying. There’s a reason you came to me on this first, isn’t there? You wanted to see if I was going to just straight out say no, because you want to help her, don’t you?”

Andy sighed, looking away from Piper and down at his hands. “I want to help everybody. It’s one of my major failings, I know.”

She reached over and nudged her fingertip along the underside of his chin, nestled somewhere in his goatee, lifting his face up to make him look at her. “It’s not a failing, Andy. It’s one of the things we all love about you. One of the things we love *most* actually. You’re more optimistic than anyone any of us have ever met. You’re our own personal Don Quixote, jousting at windmills and sometimes, just sometimes, taking the windmills down.”

“Damn things had it coming,” he chuckled with a laugh as she leaned in and kissed him affectionately, her other hand sliding across his smooth head.

“Damn straight they did. Anyway, I want to live up to that expectation. I want to follow your example and to look for the best in people, even if I don’t entirely trust her.” She glanced back at the screen and chuckled. “Besides, she’s pretty hot, don’t you think?”

“I think I have hot women all fucking *over* me, Piper,” Andy laughed. “But you’re right, if it was just up to me, I’d give her a second chance, because that’s who I am. But it’s not up to me. Not this one. No, this is your personal call to make.”

“You think I can’t handle having her around?”

“I think you’re going to have to find a way past seeing her as Covington’s bodyguard, and that’s going to be a hell of a challenge after what she helped put you through.”

“*Helped* put me through. ‘Helped’ doing all the heavy lifting in that sentence. You saw her video. She’s willing to do *anything* to get her second chance.”

Andy laughed softly, raising a hand. “Okay, here’s where I lay down at least a *little* bit of the law, in saying I won’t have you marching her around naked like Lauren did with Taylor for the better part of a month. If you want to punish her, sure, I get that, but we’re going to have to find a way to do that which doesn’t involve hiding somebody every time we have friends over at the house.”

Piper giggled mischievously. “Oh, I can get *way* more creative than that. But I mostly just want to make sure she’s going to be dedicated to the house, not just to me or to you, but to the whole family. Especially if we’re going to eventually be trusting her with a bodyguard role in your life.”

“So, what are you thinking?”

“I’m going to have to think about it, but I think we should do it if you do,” she told him.

“I said right at the start I was going to bow to whatever decision you made.”

Piper shook her head, taking his hands in hers. “Nuh uh. This is a decision we make together, Andy. I appreciate you wanting to put me first in all this, what with my history with Melody and everything, but you can’t just bow out of a decision this big. It’s got to be something we’re in

alignment on.”

“Then yes Piper, I agree and think we should give her a second chance. If you and the rest of the girls want to haze her a bit, I get that, but it’s also going to be important that you all make her feel like part of the family. That’s going to be a lot on me as well, making sure it’s clear from the very moment she arrives that we’re nothing like that fucker.”

“Well, not the *very* moment,” Piper chuckled. “She’ll be unconscious for like most of the first day, getting reprinted. Speaking of which, how soon do they want you to do this?”

“The sooner the better,” he told her. “I got the distinct impression that if I told them we were okay with it this afternoon, they’d have her in front of me either tonight or tomorrow morning.”

“You’ve got to meet with Mali this afternoon. I think the plane’s scheduled to be landing around one or so, and she was *very* specific about how she wanted her first time to go, and how quickly she wanted it to be. If you can agree to those kinds of strange circumstances, then I don’t know how getting Melody taken care of soon would be any weirder.”

“I’m going to want to get the signoff of all the fiancées first before we agree to it.”

“If *I’m* okay with it and *you’re* okay with it, baby, then *they’re* going to be okay with it. Sure, there’ll be some griping and bitching and moaning, but the fact that I’m willing to go along with it should be enough to get everybody else to relax about the whole thing.”

“Lexi’s not going to trust her with a gun for a while, I’d bet.”

“I mean, that’s *fair*. We want to make sure this chick understands it’s family first before we arm her up, even if harming you would be the stupidest possible thing she could do.” Piper pointed at the screen. “But look at her. That’s not the face of a woman who wants to harm you *or* me. That’s a woman looking for someone to throw her a lifeline. She wants *help*, Andy. We gotta help her.”

“How does it feel to know you’re basically responsible for the NDR?” he asked Piper as she rolled her eyes a little bit.

“On one hand, I’m glad to have encouraged them to stand up for themselves and not get walked over by that asshole, but on the other, chopping Covington’s hand off?”

“A bridge too far?”

“No, I just kind of wish I’d have been the one who got to *do* it,” Piper said, and based on her tone, Andy couldn’t tell if she was joking or not. “You going to be okay *reimprinting* someone to you? I know you said you’re okay with it, but are you *okay* with it?”

“Hell, if anyone’s prepared for the experience, it’s pretty much me,” he laughed. “When you were first imprinted, you were basically in a similar state to what Dr. Merriweather was when we saw the demonstration of the reprogramming process.”

“Who else knows about Melody’s request?”

“Here at the house? Just you, me and Niko. They told us at the base yesterday.”

“Were they pushing Melody, or just that we take on *somebody*?”

“Just that we take on somebody. They told us about Melody’s request, but they didn’t seem to give a shit if it was her or if it was somebody else instead, just that we got it done and got it done quickly and quietly.”

“Instead of adding one more to the house before closing it off, it’s just going to be two, and we’ll manage. It’s not like we don’t have room for them here at the house.”

“Not that I’m going to be *imprinting* either of them at the house,” he said with a touch of amused annoyance.

“Let’s go over it with everyone at breakfast, just to make sure nobody’s going to throw too much of a shitfit, but after that, call the General and tell them you’ll take Melody this evening, but that they need to let me be there at the reprogramming.”

“She won’t be thinking too clearly, Piper, so if you don’t want to be there, you don’t have to.”

“Oh, I *want* to be there. I want to look into Melody’s eyes and make sure she understands this is her *last* chance, and that if she fucks up, it’s game over. And that she better not once disrespect my

man, otherwise we'll beat her with soap bars wrapped in towels while she's sleeping."

"Maybe lead with the kindness and not with the threats."

"One hand open and extended in welcome, the other balled up in a fist in case I gotta beat some ass."

Andy rolled his eyes, pulling Piper over to slide into his lap. "She's an ex-Army Ranger. You know that, right? She can probably kill you with your volleyball without too much effort."

"Just gotta make sure she knows who she's fucking with," Piper purred as she started to lock lips with Andy. "Thanks for coming to me first. I'm glad you trusted me with it."

"I'm *marrying* you next month, Piper," he chuckled. "I trust you with my everything."

"Think anyone else is up yet?"

"You aren't suggesting..."

"I think just about all my fellow wives-to-be have had a go at you in this office, so now it's my turn," she said, reaching her arm over Andy's shoulder to shove the door closed quietly. "Get to it."

"Yes ma'am."

## **Chapter Four**

*December 11<sup>th</sup>, 2020*

Brunch had been about as tense as Andy had anticipated it would be, with many of his partners voicing concerns about bringing Melody Park into the family, but in the end, Piper laid them all quickly to rest by pointing out that if *she* could give the woman a second chance, then all the rest of them should be able to as well. That had pretty much settled the argument, although he could see that some of his partners were certainly going to be less trusting than others.

It certainly changed the energy around the house, which was already tempered with nervous anticipation, as towards the end of brunch a text message had come in to let them know that the plane had landed at Livermore Municipal Airport. The Air Force were there doing their initial screening, but relayed that Andy should be able to come by and both meet Mali and see his airplane by around 2.

After brunch, Andy headed up to the hidden room on the upper floor and stepped out onto the balcony to make a call. He held the phone to his ear as the General's voice leapt from the other end of the line. "So, Mister Rook, what's it going to be?"

"After talking with my entire Team, we'll accept Melody Park into our home, although we're going to have some conditions for her and we're certainly going to keep a close eye on her at first."

"We would expect no less from you, Mister Rook," she said curtly. "To be frank, I'm a little surprised you're willing to even entertain the notion, considering what you told me about her history with your fiancée, Miss Brown. Piper got a real bad beat before she ended up with you, and if she were to say she held a grudge a mile wide, well, I don't think just about anyone could blame her."

"I let Piper make the final call, but she's big on second chances and so am I. We're going to be cautious about this, naturally, but I guess somebody's gotta take some risks, and if my buddy Phil's taking Dr. DeMarco, I guess I'd never be able to live it down with him if I didn't do something equally as stupid."

"We can have Ms. Park here on base and ready for reassignment as early as this afternoon."

"We won't be ready until this evening," Andy said. "I've got to go down to Livermore and pick up my new money manager and get her imprinted to me. It's about half an hour each way, and I understand we can't go get her until your people have cleared my plane."

"It's not so much the plane, Mister Rook, as it is all the people your finance manager brought with her," the General sighed, as if the entire thing was one giant pain in her ass that she would've much rather foisted off onto someone else. "You're probably aware, but she's carrying with her one of the wildest collections of spies, soldiers, diplomats, scientists and politicians than have ever shared a single privately owned aircraft before. And she struck you quite a great deal on acquiring the plane for you permanently, if I'm meant to believe what she charged for transporting all these people to the United States."

It was true, although Andy hadn't expected the General to be fully aware of how they'd gone about it. Mali had bought him a Bombardier Global 5000, which could hold 16 passengers in addition to the pilot and co-pilot. And then, in order to aide in her immigration to the United States, a deal had been struck with the United States government. The plane had been temporarily enlisted as sort of international one-way taxi service. That meant the plane, which had been purchased used from the estate of a Saudi businessman, had made nearly a dozen stops before finally arriving in California. It had picked up, in addition to Mali, passengers from Egypt, Israel, Spain, Italy, Germany, Sweden, India and Japan, with each person (or the nation representing them) paying a million dollars for the private relay service. All of that had basically paid for the plane itself.

The pilot for the flight was a military exchange from Saudi Arabia who was being paired up with a man in Valhalla Shores and the co-pilot was from the UK who was bound for Sacramento. Neither would likely ever set foot on Andy's plane again. Both Alexis and Niko were qualified to fly the jetliner, and several other girls in the house had been taking virtual flying classes. Team Rook had decided if it wasn't a skill they had in-house, they were going to get a handful of people within the

Team to learn it, although Andy himself wasn't ever going to be allowed to fly the plane.

"Your people had a long list of folks they wanted brought to the US on the hush-hush, and with me having two internationally renowned actresses in my family, I knew I was going to need to be able to get around regularly and probably without having to constantly book flights. Seemed like getting my own plane was a win-win for everybody."

"You still charged them a pretty hefty ticket price, Mister Rook."

"I had to *buy* the fucking plane, General," Andy laughed. "That ain't cheap. Regardless of how much money you might *think* I have, let me assure you that a 16-person private jet is not what I could call 'pocket money.' It was a very sizable investment, so I appreciated Mali coming up with a plan to defray the costs."

"But your little United Nations of Spies flight still needs to be scrutinized by every security expert we have on site and a handful of others we brought in just for this occasion. That includes searching your plane practically down to the studs. You don't *know* any of these people that you've helped bring into this country, Mister Rook, and neither do we. Not as well as we'd like to, anyway. They'll have spent hours, maybe even days on that plane of yours as it travelled around, picking these merry pranksters up. So, we're going to take our time and make sure everyone on the plane is exactly who they say they are, and then and only then, we will turn it and Miss Merrick over to you."

"And once you do, and once she's imprinted onto me, then we'll bring her back to the house and then come onto the base and we can see about reimplanting Melody over to us."

The General paused for a second, as if an idea had just occurred to her. "Would you rather we bring Miss Merrick back to the base and you can save yourself a trip, imprint them both here?"

"We paid several million dollars for that plane, General. I'd kind of like to see it, you know?"

"I'm just saying, if you allow us to have a full day searching and examining it, it'll be better for all parties involved," the General replied. "And it'll let us give Miss Merrick a once over by people you know that you trust, like Dr. Marcos and Dr. Varma. I'm honestly trying to help you here, Mister Rook. Trying to help make both our lives a little bit easier."

"I might feel a little strange going straight from imprinting Mali to imprinting Melody."

He could hear the General laughing on the other side of the line. "I think Melody might have it coming, but you could also take a shower in between sessions here on the base. We have the facilities for it, and you're guaranteed to have medical staff if something goes wrong, which you'd have been half an hour away from if you did it at the airport."

"Why would something go wrong?" Andy asked.

"So far, you've been pretty lucky, Mister Rook. Nearly all of your imprints have gone off without much in the way of hitches or complications."

"I think Piper and Sheridan would very much disagree with you, but okay."

"You seen a cocoon yet?"

Andy chuckled. "Yeah, Alexis had that when she showed up. Healed off all her scars, and she couldn't decide if she was angry, delighted or both."

"I can imagine. Some of us treasure our scars and don't want to see them gone. But I suspect she's missing them less and less every day," the General said. "If I'd gotten my gunshot scar through my shoulder healed up when I'd gotten imprinted, I'd probably miss it at first, but I'd be damn thankful eventually that I was back up to full strength."

"It's only been a month and change. We'll see how she feels about it this time next year. I suspect she may be nothing but thankful by then."

"Well, as fun as it is to chat with you, Mister Rook, I should probably get back to work. You want me to have Miss Merrick brought here to the base? I think it'll be much easier if you just give us a day or two to fully examine the plane. You're not in any immediate need, are you?"

"Not *immediate* need, no, but I suspect I'm going to need it before the end of the month. Not only do Emily and Sarah have some meetings they want to take down in Los Angeles, I think Maya

needs to head there as well for some final sign off stuff to get her deal finalized. The plan was to have her working on a soundstage in Oakland, but it sounds like the location isn't quite ready yet, so their backup soundstage is going to be up in Sacramento. It'll be a bit of a drive every morning and evening, but she wants to get back to work, and I don't blame her. The studio is also pushing hard to get stuff into production, so the fact that Maya has a script everybody likes already means they don't want to waste *any* time they don't have to."

"Is Hollywood really in that much trouble, Mister Rook?"

Andy sighed, knowing the General couldn't see him shrugging. "It's not for me to say, but I know Emily seems to think they don't like to keep material waiting around too long, and we've been in a vacuum for basically a year now, where nobody could make new things. For theatrical films, that's not such a big issue, but for things like television? The networks are *freaking the fuck out*. So I suspect Em and Sarah will probably pick up a handful of television projects that'll start filming almost immediately before we get back to feature films again next year. Aren't you jonesing for new television?"

"I will admit that after my third rewatch, 'The Americans' has lost a little bit of the luster. I feel like a lot of us feel like we've finished Netflix."

"Well, you'll be delighted to know that Hollywood's spinning up again and so sooner or later, there will be loads of new things clogging our airwaves again. They're working very hard to get whatever they can finished as fast as possible. They're even looking to adapt a couple of my lesser works, just because I'm relatively easy to work with when it comes to the non-Druid Gunslinger stuff. Fine, we can come into the base and pick them both up there, and if you need a few more days to inspect the plane more thoroughly, I guess it won't hurt to let you have it for a few days."

"Great," the General said. "Come by in the early afternoon and we'll have both women prepped and ready and waiting for you. Say, around two or so?"

"Sure, I can do that. We'll be by around then."

"Thanks, Rook. See you then."

He headed back down the stairs and opened the secret book case, almost jumping out of his own skin as he found Alexis standing outside of it waiting for him. "So what's the plan for the day, Andy?" she asked him. "The General throw a spanner into the works like I expected her to?"

"She wants to take more time to search the plane, so we're going to pick up Mali from the base, and we can pick up Melody right after that."

"You *know* I'm not thrilled about her joining the house, right?" Alexis said. "I mean, I get that Piper's the make-or-break decision, and she's like you in that she believes in second chances."

"You make it sound like that's a bad thing. Lex."

"If it were up to me, I'd throw the bitch in a hole and take my sweet ass time filling in the dirt on top of her," Alexis grumbled. "But if Piper can suck it up and allow her in, who the hell am I to tell that girl she's in the wrong, you know? I guess I'll just be the paranoid bitch in the house, and maybe I'll get lucky and you'll show me that second chances don't always bite people in the ass."

"Let's hope, because the last thing I want is to have bodyguards squaring off," he said, sliding an arm around Alexis's neck, pulling her in for a hug even as she laughed and shoved him back moments later.

"So, you and me and who's the third going to the base?"

"We're going to take two cars, so that means you driving one and Niko driving the other. Emily wants to be there for Mali, considering she's the person Mali's spoken to the most, and there's no way we're going to take on Melody without Piper getting a chance to set down the terms beforehand," Andy said as the two of them headed down to the ground floor. "I know Melody said she'll go along with whatever Piper's going to put in front of her, but I think we want to be sure. The last thing I want is Melody being massively unhappy here."

"You're worried about *her* being unhappy," Alexis laughed, shaking her head as they headed out



towards the back yard. “What time are we supposed to be at the base?”

“Two-ish.”

“Okay, then I’ll relay the plan to Niko and we’ll get everything ready.”

Andy had the luxury of an hour or so to himself before they gathered up to head to the base and he did something he hadn’t done enough as of late – he spent it playing with his two cats. The two of them had gotten ahold of a tennis ball and were whipping it down the hallways, chasing after one another with reckless abandon. Neither cat had gotten a firm grasp on how to move on wood floors, so the two had a tendency to slide into one another when running around corners. Andy was tormenting the two of them with a laser pointer when he saw Emily come around the corner, smiling as she tapped the watch on her wrist.

The drive over to the base was perfectly normal, what with New Eden still being on relatively high alert. Until the New Daughters of the Revolution were entirely a solved problem, there was going to be more tension and less peace on the streets. They were let onto the base and allowed to put their cars close to the building that housed the large structure where women were being given the serum before being sent out to get paired up with people.

Everything had seemed very slapdash when they’d first seen it, but now it was being done with complete precision, and trucks were arriving and leaving every hour on the hour. Emily had seemed a little bit nervous on the car ride over, and just as they were pulling into the parking lot, she told Andy why, her voice tentative and cautious, something rather unlike her.

“Andrew, there’s something I need to tell you, but I don’t want you to be cross with me, even though you might have rights to be,” she said as they were getting out of the car.

“Good lord, Em,” Andy chuckled. “What level of upset should I expect to be here?”

“Nothing too severe, I hope, my love,” she said with a smile that revealed just exactly how nervous she was at that moment. “You remember how Mali said she didn’t want to speak to you until she’d been imprinted?”

“I do recall that, Emily, and I said that while I thought it was odd, I would respect it, since she was still rather in her cups in grief.”

“That’s specifically what I needed to talk to you about before we go in there, Andrew,” Emily said, holding onto his right hand with both of hers. “So, there’s a theory going around right now that if the dose of the serum is... what’s the word Mali used... overclocked? If they overdo the dosage somewhat of the serum, it has a good chance to activate the regeneration and restoration process, so she’s going to ask them to give her a double dose of the serum.”

“That sounds... a little risky.”

“It will be, but not for you, or any of us, just for her. So as part of this, she would like you, and the rest of the family, never to talk to her about her previous partner who died earlier this year.”

Andy squinted a little with a frown on his face. “Never talk to her about it? That seems like a very stiff cocktail for grief to sit in and take very rough hold within her mind and soul.”

“That’s just it, Andrew,” Emily said, looking up at him with those soft blue eyes that were so kindly imploring. “*If* it actually works, it stands a chance of removing all memories of him from her brain, and it will be as if he never existed. She will have healed away that very dark trauma.”

“Whoa there,” Andy said, putting his hands up. “Didn’t you ever see ‘Eternal Sunshine Of The Spotless Mind’? That certainly doesn’t sound *at all* healthy to me, simply losing such a large chunk of her memories. You said that they were childhood sweethearts, didn’t you?”

“She’s the one taking the risk, Andrew. All she’s asking you is to respect her choice in the matter, and if she never brings up her late fiancé, none of us will either. I know how much you prefer to run guns blazing into any trouble you come across, but this is something that must be handled with delicacy and should not be taken lightly.” Emily had such an earnest expression on her face that Andy knew he wasn’t going to be able to say no in the end, but he wanted to be sure she understood the risks.

“Alright, Em. Alright. Since this is what *she* wants, I won’t stand in the way of that, but if we

start to see any signs of things going sideways, you must promise me that we'll get her back safely here to the base as quickly as possible so that they can try and get her to work through whatever the serum will have done to her. I think that's a fair compromise, don't you?"

"That is absolutely fair, Andrew, and thank you for not being cross with me about holding back on this for up to the last possible moment," Emily said, giving him a hug that sort of drained the nervousness out of her. "I was trying to be all British and stoic and not let it get to me, but it's been an immense amount of pressure on my conscience. I wanted her to be welcomed here with open arms, and she had been through such an unbelievable amount of tragedy. She *chose* this and she *chose* you, and I knew that you were what she *wanted* and I just, I suppose I feared that such a *brave* choice might frighten you. You're a very brave man when it comes to your own decisions, but you're still..." She looked as if she was very carefully selecting her words. "You have a tendency to still want to protect all of us, Andrew, and I know you do that with the best intentions, and I try to look at it as a noble thing, your instinct to want to protect not only the women in your life but your friends also. But this is one time where I was worried that your sense of chivalry might get the best of you, and you might confuse doing the *right* thing with doing the *correct* thing."

"The minute you're telling a woman what she can and can't do, Em, you've stopped being chivalrous and started being an asshole," Andy chuckled. "I mostly just wanted to make sure she understood the risks she was taking, and how that if it starts to crumble, it won't be something we can put back in the box again."

"Trying is all anyone can ask of you, Andrew." They headed to one of the side doors of the building rather than going through the main gate where the trucks were pulling in and out of. "Hello, love, we're here to pick up two lovely ladies, Miss Mali Merrick and Miss Melody Park," Emily said to the airwoman in fatigues behind the counter who looked practically giddy.

"Of course, Miss Stevens, we should be ready for you in just a few moments, but is it alright if I were to ask you for a selfie and an autograph? I was such a *huge* fan of Dahlia Hairtrigger, and she meant the *world* to me growing up," the airwoman whose name tag read 'Washington' asked.

"Not a problem of any sort, dear. In fact, Andrew can even take the picture for us, can't he?" Emily said as she took the phone from the airwoman's hands and handed it to Andy, who immediately started to get it lined up. Andy took a handful of pictures and then handed them back to the airwoman for her to review while Emily had taken a card from her pocket and was fishing a pen out of her purse. "What's your first name, my love?"

"Andrea, ma'am." Andrea glanced over to Niko, technically a superior officer even if she was out of uniform, with a bit of embarrassment. "Sorry ma'am, they should be ready for you shortly. Miss Merrick arrived just a few minutes ago, and Miss Park will be here within the hour."

"It's okay, airman," Niko chuckled. "You don't see me busting your balls over this, do you?"

"No, ma'am," Washington replied. "Thank you, ma'am."

Emily finished signing the card for the desk officer and then slid it over to her. "Thank you for being a fan. I'm certain you'll go on to do great things and make Dahlia proud."

A moment or so later, a familiar face came through the doors to greet them. "Hey Charlotte," Andy said to her.

"Good to see you again, Doc," Piper added.

"Bonjour, mes amis," Dr. Charlotte Varma said to them with a soft smile. "This way, please? Mali should be ready for you in about five minutes or so."

As they stepped out of the waiting room and started walking down a long hallway, Alexis moved up next to Emily, whispering low enough that Andy could just barely hear them. "Am I going to have to get used to that all the time? People asking for autographs and photos?"

"Quite often, I'm afraid," Emily whispered back. "It's been nice not having to worry about that while we've been here in New Eden, but now that the world is getting back to normal, I expect at least some of that element of my life will return."

"I'll try not to bitch about it *too* much in front of you," Alexis joked.

"Both I and my therapist will thank you for that."

"Having Doctor Merriweather here has been a godsend for us, Andrew," Charlotte told him as they moved into a small antechamber with a bed in the corner. "She's made so much headway in getting the Quaranteam serum to work for gays and trans people, in addition to helping us make the reassignment solution a little more palatable. I understand you had a hand in getting all that worked out, so thank you for that."

"I just connected a handful of people to one another, Charlotte. That's all. I didn't know we'd be running into you, otherwise I'm sure Asha would've said to give you her best," he said with a smile. "She may like to pretend like she doesn't like having you around, but I think she's secretly very happy you swing by once every couple of weeks just to check up on her."

"Yes, well, mothers can't be too overprotective of their daughters," she said, taking her buzzing phone out of her pocket. "One moment, please." She lifted her glasses up off her eyes so she could read off her phone clearly before tucking it away. "Miss Stevens? Miss Merrick is just next door, and she wanted to speak to you for a minute or two before she came in for imprinting, if you don't mind."

"Not at all. Just through there?" Emily asked, as she pointed to a door on the far side of the room.

"Yes. It's unlocked. Just go through and you can come back in and get down to brass tacks whenever she's ready. I will leave you alone in here, and we will come back to get you in an hour or two for Miss Park once she's done with processing."

"Won't be a skosh." Emily moved to step through the door into the next room, closing it behind her.

"What kind of processing is Miss Park going through?" Niko asked. "I haven't been working around the reassignment area much, so I don't know the standard protocol for what we're doing with the NDR's that are being reassigned. I imagine you'd know pretty well, considering you're sharing your fella with one."

"Mmmm. Dr. DeMarco is something of a special case, simply because of her rather violent actions, so she's not being allowed off base until Linda feels safe with her, and I imagine that will be at least a few months," Charlotte said, tapping her fingertips against her phone's screen, sending a message to someone. "It's mostly a basic health and wellness check, as well as a thorough screening for weapons. So far, all the members of the NDR have been entirely peaceful and happy in getting reassigned, but that isn't to say that some won't be. Excuse me, I have to go tend to a patient. As soon as Miss Merrick comes in, Andy, you're welcome to get her imprinted and once that's done, if some of you want to take her home early before you move on to Miss Park, that would also be fine."

"Yeah, I think me and Em will take Mali home and leave you, Piper and Lexi here to handle Melody," Niko said to Andy, as Charlotte exited the room through the door they'd come in through. "I figure that's a fair enough split, don't you think?"

"I'm good with it if you all are," he told the amazing group of women he had around him.

"I want to make sure Melody's not going to try anything," Alexis said. "And I know Piper wants to have a few words with her before you pull the trigger."

Piper grinned, rolling her eyes a little. "I just want to make sure she knows what she's getting into with us, and doesn't think we're going to go easy on her, even as we are letting her in."

The door opened again and Emily peeked her head out. "Andrew? I think we're just about ready if you are. Remember, please don't say a word, and don't expect her to *say* a word until after she's woken up tomorrow, alright?"

Andy nodded and moved to sit down on the edge of the bed. They hadn't really settled how they were going to go about getting Mali paired, but he assumed she and Emily had talked about it during their conversation as Emily moved over to sit next to him, reaching down to unbutton his jeans as Mali entered the room and he got his first look of her in person.

Mali Merrick was a truly gorgeous woman from Wales, with a very rounded, almost cherubic face with rosy cheeks. She was in her early thirties, although she looked as though she could easily be half a decade in either direction. Her dark brown hair hung down to her collarbone and was parted almost in the middle of her head. She was busty, probably D cup, although it fit her frame perfectly. She was dressed in a simple one-piece dress made from a very busy pattern and a strappy thin leather belt around her waist. Her lips were a delicate shade of pink and her brown eyes looked like they were doing their best to remain stoic and unflinching. She offered Andy a shy little smile before starting to walk over towards them.

Andy knew the next few minutes were going to be some of the hardest he'd ever endured, because he strongly wanted to talk to Mali, make sure this was what she wanted, but the smile seemed to widen a little bit as she leaned in and kissed him softly for a moment. It was a trepidatious first kiss, but he could feel Mali take in a deep breath and then try again, kissing him a bit more openly now, selling herself as well as him on her dedication to this. However he might have felt about the kiss, Mali seemed focused on her plan as she moved down to kneel before him, pushing his legs apart.

"I know this will be trying, Andrew," Emily whispered into his ear, "but tomorrow, you and she will be able to start fresh. So just let her get imprinted as easily as you can."

Mali's face still seemed a little nervous, but the smile on her face had grown a little playful now, as if maybe she was trying to convince herself this was some sort of game. She reached into his pants and pulled out his cock, bringing her right hand to tap her fingers to her mouth, miming surprise at the size of his shaft, which made him chuckle a little.

Piper moved to sit down on the other side of him as Alexis and Niko moved to sit down on the ground behind Mali, just to be prepared for what was coming next.

She started to press her lips to the tip of his shaft and he could tell when the droplet of precum emerged from his tip and hit her tongue because it was the first time she'd made a noise since entering the room, a throaty moan of orgasm blowing across his cock as Lexi and Niko pressed a hand each to keep her from falling backwards, as the imprinting process was getting started. There were two orgasms a person got when they were being imprinted, one at the first taste of sexual fluid and the other with the first release.

A moment or two later, Mali turned her brown eyes up to look at him imploringly, an expression that could easily be misread as fear but one that Andy had seen enough to know was awe. Over the past year, he'd talked to all of his partners about their sexual histories before him, and all of them confessed that whatever else the Quaranteam serum had done, it had certainly ensured that the orgasms they had together were on a level of intensity they hadn't even considered beforehand. So, when Mali's mouth descended down hard over his cock, he knew why.

She was chasing the rush.

Andy wasn't sure what to do with his hands, so he was glad when he felt Emily taking hold of one and Piper taking hold of the other, both reassuring him wordlessly that he was doing the right thing, as Mali dove down until her lips were nearly at the base of his dick, her cheeks puffing out a little bit.

He'd gotten more blowjobs over the last few months than he had probably over the rest of his entire life beforehand, but Mali's tempo was unlike anyone else in the house, and she was taking her time keeping his cock inside of her mouth, her tongue basting his shaft relentlessly.

Andy didn't want to put off a poor first showing, but Mali grabbed the tops of his thighs with each hand and started thrusting her face down faster and faster. Her breath was hot on his flesh, and she was moaning each time she pulled her face back. She wasn't giving him much time to recover in between facial dives and before he knew it, he was nearing his release.

It had taken him a while to break himself of the tendency to let his partners know he was about to cum in their mouths, because frankly that was the point, and with the tip of his cock nearly pressed against the back of her throat, Andy released a heavy load into her mouth, setting off another

overwhelming orgasm in Mali's body as the imprinting process took full hold of her body.

Mali was still shaking and trembling in the orgasm as Lexi and Niko moved to lay her on her back. She was mumbling "imprinting" over and over again, but it was much faster than it normally was, and every third or fourth time the word was stuttered and a little slurred.

"Well," Andy sighed. "It looks like the double dose is having *some* kind of effect. Let's hope it doesn't go south on us."

"You should probably take a quick shower," Niko said. "So while you're doing that, I'll borrow Lexi to help me and Em get Mali to the car."

"Yeah, if he's not safe here, he's not safe anywhere. And besides, Piper can watch him while he showers."

"I'm entirely capable of taking a shower all by myself, ladies." The way the girls laughed at him made him give them back a snarky frown. "Oh, I'll remember that," he teased, rolling his eyes, as Piper helped him back to his feet while he pulled his pants back up. "Take good care of her, Em. Tomorrow she and I can have our first real conversation."

"C'mon, loverboy," Piper said, sliding her arm around his waist. "Let's get you washed off before we go see danger girl..."

## Chapter Five

December 11<sup>th</sup>, 2020

Even though he was perfectly capable of washing himself, Piper stripped down with him and entered the shower alongside him, mainly because she could tell something was on his mind. “You okay, Andy?” she said as she spread soap along his back.

“Is it that obvious?”

“It wouldn’t be to most people, babe, but I’m not most people,” Piper said, her fingertips smoothing softly along his skin.

“That’s fair. I’m unhappy that Emily is making a habit of keeping things from me right up until the moment of decision, so I can’t have time to consider things properly,” he sighed. “I understand why she’s done it, but we can’t have her keeping things from the rest of the family. I have some very genuine concerns about someone joining the family with a large chunk of her memory missing, regardless of it being for a good cause. I would’ve liked to have a bit of time to consider the further ramifications of that decision, and to talk it over with all the rest of you ladies, the fiancées at the very least, if not the whole household. This isn’t a minor thing, you know? Someone could ask her a simple question and she could have some kind of mental meltdown.”

Piper sighed, wrapping her arms around Andy’s waist, pressing her tits against the backs of his shoulders, her chin nestled against his temple. “Yeah, we need to sit that girl down and have a talk with her about keeping secrets from the family. She may think she’s doing us all a favor, trying to shoulder the big decisions on her own, but all she’s really done is strip us of our agency in these kinds of things. I know she just wants to do right by everybody, but I’m with you on this one. I don’t feel entirely comfortable having a potential mental timebomb in our household that we need to worry about either.”

“You say this as we’re getting ready to go bring another potential timebomb in,” Andy laughed as Piper rubbed her hand along his crotch, spreading the soap all over it slowly. “But that one’s okay because *you* gave her a pass.”

“No, *I* gave her a pass, but I also gave *everyone* else in the house a chance to say no, and nobody chose to take me up on it,” Piper said. “That’s the difference. Anybody could’ve shot this whole thing down. Everything the rest of you know about Melody Park is based on what I’ve told you, so that’ll be enough for the family. Everyone still had a chance to say no, they didn’t want her around, once they had all the facts. Em sort of sprung that thing with Mali’s memory on you, and *only* you, and that isn’t fair of her, especially since she waited until Mali was just a few feet away. We’ll need to have a long talk with her tonight, not just the three of us, but all the fiancées, so everyone can voice their concerns to Emily. I’m more bothered by the idea that she didn’t even tell Sarah. Those two are thick as thieves and the fact that Em was keeping it from Sarah makes me wonder how much Mali must have stressed that nobody talk about it.”

“Are *you* worried about seeing Melody again? I know you two don’t exactly have the smoothest of histories,” he said as he dipped his head underneath the water, letting it run over his freshly shaven scalp, trickling down through his goatee.

“I’ll manage, Andy,” she said softly to him, kissing his cheek. “But it’s sweet that you’re more worried about me than you are worried about you.”

“Eh, I’m convinced that whatever’s gonna get me will be something I didn’t see coming, so I’m not going to worry about it,” he said as he turned off the water. They’d hosed him down pretty good, but Piper had avoided getting her hair wet, so she wouldn’t have to dry it afterwards. “The one promise I made to myself when all of this started was that I wasn’t going to be scared all the time, no matter how dark and moody it got.”

“You think you’re going to be able to handle Melody? Covington certainly snapped the whip and kept all the girls of his house in line, but that’s *so* not *you*, baby.”

“I think you girls are going to be paranoid enough on my behalf that it’s going to be my role to show kindness, mercy and forgiveness. She rejected Covington remember, and I have to prove to her

that there's another way for us few remaining men to be."

"But not so much that she thinks she can walk all over you..."

"No, certainly not that much. But she's seen me stand my ground against her old boss before, so I think she knows that I'm not entirely a pushover."

The two of them toweled down and got dressed again, just in time for a knock at the door to the bathroom before Niko poked her head in. "They're just about ready for you, Andy. If you two are good?"

"I thought you were driving Em and Mali back and Lexi was going to stay here."

"We decided to swap, in case Piper needed emotional support from another fiancée. Anyway, you ready?"

"Yeah, I think we're good. Piper?"

"Yep, let's go induct my wicked stepsister," the athletic woman joked.

The three of them headed down the hallway and reached a door marked 'Reassignment Induction Suite #3,' with Niko opening the door to lead them inside. "You ready, Charlotte?" she said.

Inside of the room was a sort of modified gynecologist's chair, designed to elevate and spread legs, but there were also restraints on the ankle mounts, and on the base for the wrists, something Andy knew all too well why they were needed. The one time he'd seen a woman reassigned in person, it had taken several people to hold the woman from breaking loose and just grabbing the first man that she saw. The whole thing had been more than a little terrifying, considering the woman straining at the others was Doctor Merriweather, who wasn't exactly young and muscular. Andy could only imagine what a woman twenty years her younger and in peak physical condition could do unrestrained. There was also a small wooden table and a couple of soft chairs, mainly for observers or security, Andy guessed, as this kind of thing still wasn't second-nature around the base.

"Just going over the final confirmations with Miss Park here, stressing that this reassignment is a one-time only thing, and that should she go through with it, she will be inextricably tied to you until one of the two you die, so it's not a decision to be made lightly."

There were only two women in the room before they entered – Dr. Charlotte Varma and Melody Park. Melody was dressed in a white crop top and a pair of cotton white panties that weren't meant to be flattering in any way, although Andy had to admit she still looked damn fine in them. Her hair was pulled back into a neat, low ponytail, as if it was mostly to keep her hair out of her face than in any effort to try and make herself visually appealing, not that Andy minded.

"I keep telling her," Melody said, "that anyone else is gonna be way better than Covington was, so she can stop asking. Hey Piper. I know I've said it before, but I'll keep saying it – sorry about how we treated you when you were under Covington's watch."

"You weren't as bad as Hope was," Piper said with a sigh, clearly trying not to think about her time spent at the House of Covington. "But you better know we're going to keep you on a super tight leash at first, so we can ensure that you don't have any harm planned for us or our man."

"He's going to be *my* man, too, Piper," Melody said, her voice calm and a little resigned, like she was prepared to have to prove herself. "But I respect your caution and skepticism. It's good to be careful and not to just trust in unproven actors, even if that is Andy's established brand. Whatever it takes to buy my place in your house, I'll do it. Covington was... well, I didn't feel much like myself while I was there, I guess because I didn't do my homework before getting imprinted on him. I'd been given the impression that it was only a temporary thing, only to find out that it wasn't *after* it was too late to change my mind. That... that put me in a dark place for a long while, and I turned nihilistic and defeatist. It... it wasn't like me at all, but I'd lost so many people in such a short period of time. Both brothers, my father, my brother-in-law, almost all the men of my former unit... It was like anybody I knew with a dick died within the span of just a couple of weeks, and I couldn't even go to anyone's funeral. How do you handle that sort of mass grief and loss? I went from having a support network to being alone in the fucking world. When this lifeline from Covington came, I... I should've looked

before I leaped. And that was foolish of me. By contrast, I've done my fair share of homework into you, Mister Rook, and all the women of your family. Well, soon-to-be *my* family, I suppose. I'd better get used to saying it that way. Anyway, there's a surprising amount of information about you on the internet if you know how to look."

"What should I be worried about?" Andy asked. He'd certainly been a lot more public over the last month than he'd ever anticipated, and it seemed like every other day, someone wanted to do a short phone interview, or video interview, and Andy tried to agree to as many of them as he could without them utterly consuming his life. He knew that in some ways, they were being looked at as the public face of how people would get through this, so he felt expected to play the part.

"That's the thing, Mister Rook," Melody said with a little laugh, looking down at a tablet that Dr. Varma was holding out to her, skimming through the paperwork on it. "I don't see *any* of it as something to be worried about. It's kind of endearing, actually, how open and transparent you are about your life, your trials and tribulations, what sort of challenges you've been through. With the exception of the infamous poker game – which I've seen nary a whiff of *anywhere*, so bravo for that – you've been remarkably willing to talk to anyone about pretty much anything. I suspected the 60 Minutes would be a one-and-done for you, but you've done quite a few email and phone interviews since then. And you've been astonishingly willing to be frank and honest about your feelings, your fears, the loss of your brother... it's been refreshing seeing someone be so open, and if you *do* have any secrets to hide, which I assume you do because who doesn't, then you've done a phenomenal job of keeping them from even being hinted at. But you've got a very eclectic family. Whether intentionally or accidentally, you've got a wide collection of different kinds of women, from those in the upper echelons of society to people who, before they met up with you, struggled each month just to scrape together enough money to pay their rent off. Your partners range in age from 18 to 38, in height from 5'1" to 6'6"... you've got blondes, brunettes, redheads... you run the gamut. In fact, the only real surprise to me right now is that you don't have Miss Blake with you."

"Ash and I had a long conversation about both of the women we're adding today, but she didn't think she needed to be here for the actual process," Andy responded. "Whereas Emily and Piper both had stakes in these matters."

"And I'm here to make sure he's safe," Niko added.

"Ah yes, 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant Niko Redwolf," Melody said, signing her name on the tablet with a single fingertip. "You know, you might think Andy's the person Covington hates most of all in the world, but you'd be wrong." She pointed at Niko with an almost admiring smile. "He hates *you* more than *anyone else*, Miss Redwolf. More than me, more than Rachel, more than Andy. He hates you with a level of rage I cannot even begin to describe to you."

"Me?" Niko asked in surprise, seeming to take delight in her most hated status. "How the hell did I make his number one slot?"

"You maneuvered Andy into *playing* in the poker game, which is what really caused all of his eventual downfall. Andy would've turned down the game if you hadn't been there pressuring him to come in."

Niko chortled at that assertion. "Well, if he hadn't been manipulating the system to override people's personal preferences so that he could get whoever he wanted, he wouldn't have had that problem. I mean, he was trying to get both Dr. Varma here *and* her daughter, so you can imagine *why* he wanted that. Creepy old fuck."

"Is *that* why you entered the poker game, Andy?" Melody said with a dark chuckle. "And here I'd been figuring it was to try and go after Miss Washington or Miss Stevens."

"I didn't even know they were there, Melody," Andy said with a laugh of his own. He'd forgotten that everyone inside of House Covington wouldn't have known the reasons he'd gone there in the first place. "Niko had made friends with Charlotte here on the base, and refused to let Covington get his claws into both her and her daughter, Asha, whom you'll meet soon enough. I didn't know



anything about who else was going to be there until I got there.”

“For what it’s worth, Doc,” Melody said, touching her hand to Charlotte’s shoulder, “I’m glad you didn’t end up in our nightmare.”

“You’re not the only one, but thank you,” Dr. Varma responded, offering a tight-lipped smile as she looked up from her tablet, nestling the handheld computer under her arm. “So the pill is on the table, but you’re going to want to have her restrained first. Other than that, I think you all know everything you need to know, and don’t really need me here for this, yes?”

“Thank you again, Doc,” Melody said, offering her hand for Dr. Varma to shake, which she did. “See you again in a month for my checkup.”

“Checkup?” Andy asked.

“We’re going to revisit all reassignees after a month, make sure there haven’t been any additional complications we didn’t anticipate,” the Doctor replied. “It’s happening with everyone who’s getting reassigned, so don’t think it’s anything specifically regarding you.”

“We’ll make a note of it on the calendar, Doc,” Niko said to her.

“Got it, Doc,” Melody said. “I think you can leave us to it.”

Dr. Varma nodded, although she looked back at Niko one final time from the doorway. “Do *not* give her the pill until she’s fully strapped in. If you do, you are entirely responsible for the consequences of your actions, and I *will* request disciplinary action.”

“Copy that, Charlotte. You know me – I always listen when you speak.”

“Yes, well... this one bears repeating. Good day.” Charlotte moved outside of the door and closed it behind her, flipping a latch so it would be clear the room was in use for the time being.

“Shall we get to it?” Melody asked, looking over at the three of them with an almost nervous smile. “I could tell you more about me, but I think you probably know far more about me than I could tell you over just a few minutes. I told the General to give you as much information about me as they had, whatever you wanted. Military record, discharge papers, the files that the FBI and/or CIA I assume have on me... I told them you could have it all.”

“We watched your video a couple of times,” Piper said. “You seemed like you were basically at the end of your rope. You still feel that way?”

Melody looked down, a single tear falling from one of her eyes before she wiped it away, steeling back up again. “Yeah, well, I fucked up and instead of turning it around, I kept fucking up even *further* until we finally got Covington under control. And you’d think that going through that crisis would’ve made all of us ex-Covington girls form some kind of bond, but instead, we kept pushing each other further apart. Nobody in that viper’s nest trusts anybody, not even Rachel and Hope, and those two share a father. It was everybody looking out for number 1, and that’s no way to build a family. But you’re here now, both you and Andy, so maybe that means I’m getting a bit more slack in the rope again; maybe I’m going to actually get that second chance I keep hearing so much about.”

“Why’d you stop taking your dose from Covington?” Andy asked. “You mentioned that in the video, and I have to admit, that gave me a little bit of pause.”

Melody’s face turned into a stoic frown before she nodded. “It might not have been smart, but I had to do it. Most of the ladies were willing to keep milking Covington right up until the day they left to go and get reassigned, but there was something... so fucking *smug* about the prick any time we did it, y’know? Like he wouldn’t let any of us forget that we still *needed* him, that we were still *dependent* on him to remain alive. We didn’t let him talk but he could judge you just with his fucking eyes. But when we were close to getting surrender terms worked out with the Air Force, I decided I was just going to be done with him, so it’s been, uh, about ten days since I had any of his cum, and it’s *really* hard to think straight right now. But it was important to me that I try and endure something similar to what Piper went through. I know it isn’t anywhere near as bad, because I can still talk, but it’s taking everything I have to do remain calm right now, knowing that the reassignment pill is right there. And knowing that you’re right here, Andy, right now. And if I do it in the wrong order, I’m basically dead.

But the longer it takes for us to get there, the harder it is for me to keep the *right* order clear in my head. In fact..."

Melody pulled the crop top off, tossing it aside, revealing a modest pair of breasts with no adornments or piercings on her dark brown nipples, then shimmied down out of her panties, revealing a stripe of black hair above her pussy. She'd turned sideways when she did, so Andy could see the tattoo on Melody's back, wincing a little at the size of it, a large square plaque that read "Property of Arthur Covington the 4<sup>th</sup>, Bitch #4, MELODY" in very thick ink. It was the only tattoo on the woman's body.

"I can't believe that bastard made you get those," Piper said.

"Yeah, well, once I'm settled with you fine folks, I can get it removed or blacked over or whatever you like," Melody said as she hopped up into the chair. "It's just skin. Besides, where he put it? I didn't ever really have to see it that much. He'd talked about making them neck tattoos, apparently, but Rachel convinced him it would be showing off too much to other people." She shifted to place one ankle up into each of the stirrups. "We can keep talking, but I'd really rather you strap me in now, just in case my will slips a little." Niko and Piper moved to each strap one of Melody's ankles down. The leather straps were heavily padded, as it was clear attention to the care of the patient was of the utmost importance. They then went to strap Melody's wrists down as well, and the Korean American woman let out a soft sigh of relief. "Thanks. I didn't want to do anything I might regret, and the need's starting to really push on my skull."

Niko patted one of Melody's shoulders. "Andy's big on second chances, and Piper decided after your video to give you the benefit of the doubt, but I want to stress right here and now that if you've got malice in your heart, if you ever lift a threatening finger towards my man, I will end you. I will slit your throat and stand over you watching your body until the life drains from it and I can guarantee you won't ever draw another breath. If there's any part of you that isn't sure about this, now's your last chance to back away."

"Hey, I know I haven't earned any faith from you yet, Niko, but believe me, I'm going to spend the rest of my life trying to live up to the examples that you and the rest of House Rook set for us," Melody said. "It might take that long, too, but I'm not going anywhere, okay? At the end of this, I want you to think of me as a sister-in-arms as much as you do anyone else in the household, and if that means I have to jump in front of a bullet to earn that trust, believe me, I'll do it, no hesitation. He's not just *your* man; he's *our* man, and I do not take his generosity in the face of adversity lightly. Anything else, or can we get this rodeo started? You can all probably *see* I'm soaked with anticipation."

"We probably *should* just get on with it," Niko said. "At this point, I think you've asked everything you need to ask, haven't you, Andy?"

Andy frowned a moment. "I always feel like I'm just half a step behind the rhythm, like I'm supposed to be a little further ahead in the dance than I actually am. There's probably something I should ask here, but I can't think of it. You're right. Anything else we want to talk about can wait until after we're on the other side of this." He lifted his shirt up and set it down on the chair next to where Melody was tied up. "Anything in particular you like or don't that I should know about, Melody?"

She barked a tiny bit of laughter, shaking her head. "Shouldn't I be the one asking *you* that, Mister Rook?"

"At this point, you'd better get used to just calling me Andy."

"Well then, Andy, the only rule I have is no drawing blood. Anything else, have at thee."

"But what do you *like*, Melody?"

"Just..." She trailed off for a second, looking away before she turned to look back at him. "Just treat me like an honest-to-God person, okay?"

He stopped undressing, moved over, bent down to stroke her face, and then leaned in to connect his lips to hers in a tender kiss, nothing overly passionate or affectionate, but a welcoming gesture, one that made her smile when he eventually pulled back.

"That was nice," she said, another tear escaping one of her eyes. "You didn't have to do it, but it

was nice. I'm just hired help."

"Hey now," Andy scolded. "Knock that shit off right now. Whatever the hell Covington did to you, I'm not going to do that. I'm going to care about what you do and don't like, what turns you off and what turns you on. I'm gonna do everything I can to make all our time together something you look forward to and not regret. But you gotta work with me on this one. Fight to reclaim whatever humanity you lost when you were in his service, and while we can help you out with that, it's a battle that'll be won or lost in your own heart."

"Ride or die, Andy," Melody chuckled. "Either I'll get this right, or I absolutely deserve the bullet Niko's going to put in my skull if I don't. But thank you for letting me feel like I matter as a person. It's the first time I've felt that way in months. Now gimme the goddamn pill already."

Piper picked up the pill, a tiny little gel capsule and then put it into Melody's mouth before pulling her fingers away. "Remember to bite down on it."

Melody shot Piper a sarcastic smile, but then closed her lips and bit down on the capsule with her back teeth, exposing her tongue to the reassignment sperm that was contained within. Her body went through a very sudden hard shudder then began to thrash against the restraints, her nostrils flaring in wild, almost primordial breaths, her eyes widened and highly dilated all of a sudden. Despite the fact that her wrists and ankles were bound down, she still managed to thrust her hips upwards towards Andy, her vulva swollen and ready for him.

"You are going to start every day thanking him for giving you a second chance, Melody," Piper said, her hands grabbing onto the woman's shoulders, unsure her words were even getting through the blind lust/rage cocktail that was flowing through Melody's system as she waited to be reimprinted.

"And you are gonna talk dirty to him every time he's fucking you," Niko added as Andy removed his pants. "Because he likes that, and you want him to like you."

Then the oddest thing happened.

Melody started to *talk*.

"C'mon Andy, shove that dick into me," Melody moaned, her voice dripping with a carnal wanton sultriness that somehow knew exactly where Andy's soft spots were. "I wanna feel you shoving a real man's cock inside of my dripping little pussy... Fuck me... fuck me just how *you* like it... I wanna be whatever fucking kind of woman you want... a virgin, a whore, an innocent, a slut, or maybe all of the above... but you need to pound me, to rail that snatch... to fucking tear my shit up..."

It was odd, because when they'd seen Eve getting reimprinted, she hadn't said a single word. And, in fact, Andy had heard stories from Phil that all women during the reimprinting were silent beyond some howls and whines, like they were completely incapable of speech. And yet, here was Melody, running her mouth off like she was being paid by the word.

Andy pushed his cock inside of Melody's twat and she immediately convulsed with an orgasm that made her entire body light up like a newly plugged in Christmas tree, feeling her walls envelope him like she was trying to suffocate his cock inside of her.

"FFffffuck that's a big fucking dick you've got there, Andy," Melody purred. "So much bigger than that little dick Covington... bigger and *longer* and *way thicker* and just so much more fucking *satisfying*... and that was you just putting the fucking thing in... I never came that hard with that worthless fossil... c'mon, you beautiful bald bastard... I know you know how to use that weapon so lemme have it..."

Along with being more cognizant than Eve had been during her reimprinting, Melody was also more adept at using what little mobility she did have to try and get him to push even deeper inside of her, squeezing at his hips with her thighs, even if it only was an inch or so on each side.

"Mmmpphhh... I'm glad I'm positioned this way... Covington never liked to look anyone in the eyes when he was fucking them, but you're a *real man* aren't you, Andy? You like to know your women are *enjoying* feeling you *plow* their tight little pussies... I certainly fucking am... I'm loving it and I'm *your* woman now... but I want my load, baby... I wanna feel you fucking explode inside my

cunt... I wanna feel you creaming my brains out... I wanna feel your hot sticky love... gimme that load, Andy... gimme that creampie... paint my guts with your love... love me, baby... let me be worthy of your fucking love... show me I'm a good little slut who deserves to be loved... show me I can be better than what that tiny dick Covington called me when he was kicking me in the stomach... show me I can be loved... love my cunt, Andy... love me, Andy... please... I beg of you... I can't stop cumming until you blast me full... empty those fat fucking balls and unload inside me... make me your woman... Oh fuck I can feel you twitching... you're gonna do it, so do it do it do it cum in me cum in me cum cum cum ohfuckwe'recumming!"

She was clearly in the middle of yet another orgasm when he finally felt his body's resistance collapse, and he began to toss volleys of his hot semen up inside of Melody's trembling cunt, her muscles constricting and contracting around him, clenching him tightly as if trying to pull as much of his seed from him as possible before she slumped down onto the examination chair, her body completely limp.

And the first word she said was not what was expected.

Her lips opened and a word none of them had ever heard before escaped her lips. "кодировка" said only the once, only to be followed immediately by the one they'd expected to hear, "imprinting," repeated strongly. There was a wide smile on Melody's face even as her lips went through the motions a few times, repeating only the imprinted word a few dozen times before falling silent, her body completely immobile except for the slightest rising and falling of her chest while she breathed.

Andy's cock had slipped out of her and softened, but as he looked over to the table where he'd put his shirt, he noticed the room was starting to spin, and a soft warm tingle had begun to roll over his body. "W-w-what?" he muttered. "What's happening?"

"Oh hey!" Niko said cheerfully, a reassuring smile on her face. "About time this happened. Piper, quick, help me lay him down. Andy, don't panic, baby. There's nothing to fear. Just relax and drift off to sleep, okay?"

"Sleep?" Andy asked groggily. "But I... you sure?"

"Yes, baby, I'm sure, it's *fine*," Niko said. She and Piper sat him down in chair and started to put his boxers and pants on him, but before they even had his shirt on him, Andy was unconscious.

### **Intermission One – Topher**

*December 11<sup>th</sup>, 2020 – Minneapolis*

The buildings loomed large in his vision, even though several of them weren't lit up at all, capped with snow on top, the streets decently plowed but it was still cold as balls outside, and there wasn't anything Topher wanted so much as to go home. But that wasn't on the cards for him tonight. The military was slowly sweeping its way across downtown Minneapolis, and he wasn't sure how long it would be before they got to this building. And if the military beat him to the building, the task simply wouldn't get done, and he wasn't sure he could live with it if it didn't.

Most of the office buildings were locked up well, but they'd been sitting idle long enough now that it felt like they'd either been managed or they were itching to be broken into. It wasn't like Topher had set out to fall into a life of crime, but his new lifestyle wasn't easy to live with, especially since he hadn't hit the lottery like it seemed many of the other surviving men had. At least not yet anyway. He wasn't entirely sure what his life would look like in a month's time, but that was Future Topher's problem, and Today's Topher had more pressing concerns.

There should've been a guard in the lobby, but the last few months, lots of things that "should" have been happening had fallen by the wayside as the male population of the planet had dwindled rapidly. The elevators for the building were off, which meant he'd be trudging up the stairs, at least until after he figured out how to turn the elevators on.

Raiding office buildings was far different than raiding residential buildings. Topher had done his fair share of looting from the apartment highrises downtown, at least before the military had come by to

do sweep-and-clears. Apartment highrises were actually trickier, because he had to gauge if they'd only done one sweep or two. The first sweeps were easy enough to spot – there were standard search & rescue markings in spray paint on the walls outside of each units, marking if there had been survivors or if there had been dead bodies to collect. Some of the tall buildings even had people still living in them, but for the most part, they'd been temporarily moved out so the insides could be adapted into the new living structures and then moved back in. Topher knew all about that. He was scheduled to be moved into one of the buildings in early January, which would be a nice change of pace than the shitty brokedown borderline livable house he and his nine partners were currently holed up in, practically tripping over one another any time they wanted to move from one room to another.

Topher still couldn't believe the odd arc of the last year of his life. This time last year, he'd been planning on how to best drop from college, not enrolling in the spring semester because he just didn't have the money to pay for classes. His plan was that he'd take a year off, work his ass off nonstop during that year, then come back again for the spring semester in 2021, switching back to part-time work so he could continue his education. He'd picked up two part-time jobs to pair with his full-time job, and by the time the lockdown had happened in March, he'd actually been a little thankful, because it meant he could sleep. After a week's worth of sleep, he'd started to get nervous, though. His money wasn't going to hold out forever, and when a week turned into a month, the panic began.

He wasn't living so desperately paycheck-to-paycheck that he didn't have some savings to tap into, but it wasn't as though he could just go in and pick up extra shifts at Burger King, when the management over at Burger King was simply like "no, we're closed. Nobody come in."

It was early May when he realized things were completely going to hell in a handbasket. He and his roommate had scraped together the month's rent, but Mister Davies, their landlord, hadn't come by to pick up the check on the 1<sup>st</sup>. Or the 2<sup>nd</sup>. Or the 3<sup>rd</sup>. By the time the 10<sup>th</sup> had rolled around, Topher had asked Joe, his roommate, whether they were just living there rent free from now on. It wouldn't be until September that they would learn definitively that Mister Davies had died in April, but by that point, they were already pretty sure that was what had happened. When the President and the Vice President both collapsed in early July, it was obvious that the world was going to hell in a handbasket, no matter how much the government was trying to keep it under wraps. The problem was clearly bad, but it would be another month and change before Topher started to understand just *how* bad.

Mid-September, there had been a knock on the door, and both Topher and Joe were tested and then immediately relocated, each given their own house to stay in, along with well-stocked fridges. The house wasn't anything fancy – a three-bedroom two-story a decent drive from downtown and still quite a bit of distance away from the University. It was over near the Mississippi River, in a district called Cooper, but not right along the river itself.

When they'd started bringing women for him to get paired up with, Topher had been a little taken aback, but couldn't find himself complaining too much – after all, the women he was being paired up with were massively out of his league. Shit, the first one they'd brought was a goddamn *model* and while she hadn't been all that interesting to talk to (on the first day, anyway), she was gorgeous, and the second delivery three days later had contained three more women, at least two of which were exactly the kind of personalities he'd been looking for his entire life. The third had been a little shy at first, but eventually opened up. What had surprised him the most, however, was that the second batch had also brought with them a check from the government, marked 'survival funds,' for a cool twenty-five thousand dollars. That had put him more at ease, at least for a little while.

By November, though, he was starting to get nervous again, even if he was having a remarkable amount of regular sex with women far outside of his league. His ninth partner, Abby, had shown up along with a letter from the government that in the first week of January, he and his new family unit – Team Moline – were going to be relocated again. The house was just too small for him, and they wanted to be sure they all had space to grow, especially as the government wanted to encourage him to have kids. Topher had only turned legal to drink in January, and now the government was suggesting to

him that he start fathering kids. While most of the women in his Team had decent jobs and steady incomes, he still felt like he was a bit of dead weight for all of them, something they were struggling to keep him from thinking.

When the *new* President had gotten on the television in late November to inform the country just how dire straits the entire world was in, that was enough to make Topher want to crawl up into a ball and just disappear. He'd been noticing how many of his friends and former coworkers had just stopped answering their phones, and when the death toll was announced by President Pelosi, the reality had hit him in the face all at once. His friends were dead. His family was dead. And for some stupid fucking reason, *he* was still alive.

Him.

Who the fuck was *he*?

He wasn't going to cure cancer. He wasn't going to be the first person on Mars. He wasn't going to solve climate change. He'd just wanted to get through college and maybe eventually work his way up towards being the producer of a local nightly news show or something. He wasn't going to change the world with his life, and yet, somehow he'd survived where millions of other men hadn't.

When the relocation happened in January, he was being moved into the 4 Marq building at 400 Marquette Avenue South. It was a 20+ story skyscraper that was full of luxury apartments, which had immediately made Topher worry about it, because by the first of December, he was at nine partners, and the ten of them were bursting at the seams in the house they'd been assigned. But when he'd told the government rep who'd called him that the ten of them wouldn't be okay in some three bedroom apartment, the rep had told him that no, he and his family were getting an entire floor. That meant they would have a dozen or more bedrooms and several living rooms and bathrooms for them as a family. They were converting the building by knocking down some of the walls and opening the floor to be one interconnected unit, while still offering plenty of space so that people wouldn't feel so cramped in. When he asked how he was expected to pay for it, the rep had told him that it would be "handled."

Maybe that was why Topher had gotten so nervous after the phone call. It was the use of the word "handled" which had set off alarm bells inside of his head, because that meant "we don't know yet, but we don't want to *tell* you we don't know yet, so don't worry about it, even though maybe you *should* be worried about it."

So on the first of December, he'd decided to go wandering through the buildings of downtown Minneapolis, just to see which ones he could get into. They'd told him that he was very strongly resistant to DuoHalo, having been part of the pairings in September, so he didn't have any qualms about just strolling into any building he could, to see what was going on, what was locked up and what people had just *forgotten* about.

It turned out they'd forgotten about quite a lot.

The 365 Nicollet building had been the first thing he'd gone through, only to find it had already been both looted and scheduled for renovation and conversion, clearly being transformed into the Team Per Floor model that he'd heard about. So he'd headed over to the Soo Line Building, and while the renovations hadn't started yet, they were clearly getting ready to, and all the bodies and property had been taken away from the site.

That was when he decided to start moving into checking office buildings.

Now generally the buildings were all locked, but often times that was more of a general discouragement than an actual prevention of entry. Either a loading dock would be unlocked, or there'd be a side door that didn't latch properly, or even a window already smashed in around the corner, and pretty soon, most of Topher's days were getting spent looting office buildings.

Oh, he definitely set limits for himself, because he still had to carry stuff to his car then drive the car back to the house, and the last thing he wanted was someone from either the police or military to look over and see him with a carful of ill-gained plunder from some office building. But, as he learned on the first day, as long as he wasn't doing anything ridiculous, nobody seemed to give him

much mind.

The other thing that boggled his mind was that once he was in one building, he basically had access to all of downtown. Because of the brutal cold winters in Minnesota, most of the buildings in downtown Minneapolis were connected, either by skyways or by underground tunnels, and for whatever reason, when everything had shut down in the spring, they'd left all the skyways and tunnels unlocked.

(He'd find out later that they *had* been locked up at first, but that search-and-rescue had simply unlocked them all and left them that way.)

It wasn't like Topher was looking to get rich – he just didn't know what to *do* with his days, and scouring through the businesses of downtown Minneapolis looking for plunder seemed as good as anything. He was still setting his sights small, though. He'd gotten a new laptop for everybody in the house, as well as picking up a couple of extra televisions.

Once he was inside of the building, he'd wandered from floor to floor, looking in at the endless rows of cubicles that lay silent and vacant, an entire world abandoned when its occupants had gone and died off. He'd been careful not to set off any alarms, but if there was ever a night when he was going to trip one, this would be it.

Tonight, he was in the U.S. Bank's local office in downtown Minneapolis.

The door from the stairwell to the floor their offices were located on was locked, so Topher took his time and went through the process of slowly picking it. When the pandemic had started, he'd needed to take up hobbies, so he'd decided he'd always wanted to learn how to pick a lock, and taught himself. Now he was using that skill very regularly.

He let himself out of the stairwell and into the fifth story offices, far above the vaults or safety deposit boxes. Mostly it was just a collection of cubicles, desks and computers, like so many other office towers he'd broken into. But today he was just after one thing and one thing in particular.

Topher moved down the hallway and started checking offices until he found one unlocked. After that, he turned on the computer and started sweeping around the desk, looking for little post-it notes or the like. It didn't take long before he found one, giving him the login and password to the computer, so he sat down and started to get to work.

He wasn't here to do any real harm, or even to get rich. No, he had much simpler goals than that. He just wanted to make his Visa bill disappear.

One of the things he hadn't realized when he'd been younger was that credit cards were, basically, predatory practices that had just been decriminalized. The idea was that you were encouraged to be spending money you didn't have, paying interest into some faceless company that couldn't give a shit about your well-being, specifically so they could make you give them more money than something was worth. When he'd looked into how much money he'd been paying into credit cards to pay off "interest" as opposed to things he'd actually paid for, he realized the company was literally just using him as a revenue stream.

So he figured, if there was going to be anything good out of this pandemic, the risk of getting this albatross out from around his neck would be more than worth it.

The desktop computer fired up easily enough, and with the login and password he'd found on the post-it note, he was inside the bank's system very easily. It took him far longer to figure out how to void out his account than it did anything else, and he was just wrapping up when a flashlight flicked on, pointing directly at his face.

"Hands up," a man's voice barked at him. "You're not supposed to be in here."

Topher put his hands up with a shrug. "I'm not supposed to be *alive* either, but that isn't stopping the fucking bank from charging me eighteen percent interest when I can't be making money," he sighed. "I'm not here robbing anybody. I'm not hurting anybody. I'm just trying to get this fucking yoke off of my neck. Lemme put my hands down and nobody'll even know I was here."

"You can't just make debt vanish," the guard said, walking over towards Topher, not lowering

the flashlight but his tone softening a little.

“Yeah, I know,” Topher said. “It took me a bit to figure that out. But you know what I *can* do from here? I can *move* the debt over to somebody else. Somebody who’s dead. And then it’s not in my name and it’s not my problem anymore and I’m not paying this stupid fucking interest when I can’t work for a living.”

The guard turned off the flashlight, and Topher could get a look at him now, seeing the guy wasn’t that much older than he was. “Aren’t they gonna track it to you?”

Topher laughed, rolling his eyes, lowering his hands. “Why would they even think to *look*? I mean, c’mon man. The government’s moved me around once already, and they’re moving me again in January. Maybe they’re going to do this for us anyway, and they just haven’t gotten around to it yet. All I know is that I managed to rack up about twenty grand in credit card debt, mostly for food and gas, and I’ve probably paid like thirty five grand just to keep that initial twenty grand from getting out of hand. Not paying it off, just keeping it from spiraling out of control. I’m not murdering anybody. I’m not stealing from somebody else’s pocket. I’m just making sure this nameless, faceless demon gets off my back and I can start living for myself again.”

The guard’s face scrunched up for a long moment before he spoke again. “Can you fix mine too?”

Half an hour later, two Visa charge accounts fully paid off, Topher was making his way back out of the building again. During the time when he’d been fixing their credit, Topher had gotten to know Brian, the guard, a little bit, and it had been nice having another guy to talk to about the crazy shit they’d both been enduring as survivors.

Brian’s house was only four women so far, and they’d just started arriving two weeks ago. While Topher had had months to come to grips with the weird changes, Brian had been completely in the dark until the President’s speech. He’d still been coming to work, patrolling the building although mostly sticking to the main bank area, not bothering with any of the upstairs offices. The only reason he’d even noticed was that Topher had forgotten to pull the stairwell door shut, and Brian had been trudging up to the roof to go and have a smoke in the little nestled area near the doorway.

He’d told Topher that it was like living in a ghost town for eight hours a day, and that he’d actually been excited to have something different going on. Most of the time, he simply hung out in the bank lobby and watched Netflix on his phone. The conversation continued as Brian walked Topher back through the skyway over towards the building he’d come in through, and by the end of it, they’d exchanged phone numbers and Topher felt like he’d made a new friend.

“You mean they’re *all* unlocked?” Brian asked him about the skyways. “Like, I could just walk ten or fifteen blocks without going outside?”

“Well, some of the buildings are starting to get people in them again,” Topher said. “So they probably won’t stay that way for long. Most of the time it’s just people coming into their office to pick up shit and take it home – photos from their desks, paperwork they didn’t think they would need to have access to at home or even just throw out shit they’ve left in the company fridge back in March. Cleaners have generally already handled those, but sometimes you can’t be too sure.”

“So, I’m guessing you’re going to go back to school in the fall then?” Brian asked him.

“I dunno,” Topher admitted. “Maybe? I’m still not entirely sure I can afford it.”

“You didn’t watch the special after the President’s speech, did you?”

“Some of it,” Topher said. “I wasn’t listening when it was focused on that dude in his mansion, but when they were talking about the high rise conversions, I paid a lot of attention, since apparently that’s gonna be me next month.”

“Oh yeah? Which one are they moving you into?”

“4 Marq,” he said. “I think we’re supposed to be Floor 11 or 12. Something like that.”

“Hey, cool, we can be neighbors,” Brian said. “I’m getting moved into Floor 5 of that building, although it sounds like it’s way too much space for just the five of us.”



“They’ve got more women coming for you, man,” Topher said. “Just like they’ve got more coming for me. I told them nine was *plenty*, but they assured me I’m going to get brought up to a dozen once I get moved into the new place, so I can’t imagine they’re just stopping at four for you, especially if they’re putting you in a high rise and giving you a whole floor. You’re, what, about thirty or so?”

“Yeah, and been married for three years now. Kit and I were happy, just the two of us, but the government seemed convinced that we needed more women to keep me alive, and as angry as Kit was about it at first, when she came home with Katya, our first *new* partner, man the two of them couldn’t *wait* to team up on me. I felt like the luckiest man on Earth.”

“I gotta wonder if all of this is being done to help keep our spirits up, considering how many people have died.”

Brian nodded. “It’s too much to think about,” he exhaled with a deep sigh. “If I stop and think about it, I want to break down crying, so I try to push it to the back of my brain. We came through something, and those people we were, back before this, back on the other side? They aren’t who we are now. We only know the people we know *now*, and we can’t go back, can’t think back, can’t remember back, otherwise that void’s gonna eat us up from the inside, you know?”

“I hear ya,” Topher said, wrapping his arms around Brian to give his newfound friend a big hug. “You take care of yourself, man, and I’ll see you again in January when we’re both moved into the building. You and your Team can come up and visit me and mine, assuming we don’t all go crazy before then.”

“You’ll make it, man,” Brian said to him, patting him on the shoulder. “You and me, we’re survivors, man. We made it through, we’ve dodged the plague and we’re ready to see what the new world holds for us.”

“It holds loads and loads and *loads of fucking*,” Topher said with a laugh before exiting the building, heading over to his car, wiping snow off the top of it. Thankfully it wasn’t so cold that the Mazda 3 wouldn’t start, the engine protesting a couple of times before turning over as Topher sat inside it, letting it warm up a bit.

The drive back to the house was still eerily quiet. In the before times, even being close to North Loop, there would be loads of cars on the road, people heading out to dinner or to the club or to a party or something, but it seemed like people still didn’t feel ready to venture out of their homes and to try and interact with one another on the regular yet.

He pulled the car into the driveway of the house he’d been put up in near 43<sup>rd</sup> and East Lake Street, driving along and back into the little garage behind the house. He was almost a little nervous to head into the house, but one thing he’d noticed was that despite the wild collection of personalities in his new Team, fights were especially rare. If people weren’t getting along, they simply stayed out of one another’s way.

Topher headed into the building and inhaled that smell of home cooking that he was still astonished by every meal. Tonight smelled like it was Mediterranean, Greek or Italian maybe. Tiffany, his fourth partner, had been the head chef for The Butcher’s Tale, a high end surf & turf restaurant and bar near downtown, and since she couldn’t be cooking at work, she’d taken to learning what the family liked and didn’t, catering to her new family.

Angelica, his first partner, the model, met him at the door, offering him a wry smile. She was a tall, leggy brunette with a wickedly dark sense of humor. It had taken a little bit for him and Angelica to see eye-to-eye at first, mostly because they’d both been putting on false fronts for each other, him trying to come across as cooler than he was and her doing much the same. By the time she’d woken up in his arms the next morning, however, they’d both dropped the pretenses, and were swapping stories about their first few skateboarding injuries. “How’d it go?”

“Guard found me, but it turned out, he didn’t really give a shit.”

“I’m telling you, baby,” Angelica said, sliding her hand against his back. “The government probably would’ve just taken care of it. Shit, you probably should’ve just not paid it, or have let me pay

it off.”

Topher shook his head in annoyance. “Look, I understand you have money, Ang, and that this wouldn’t be a big thing for you, but for me, I would’ve always felt like I was living in your shadow, hiding behind your money, unable to prove I could do things for myself. Anyway, it’s done now and I don’t ever have to worry about it.”

“There’s some paperwork that came for you via mail,” she said. “I didn’t open most of it, but one of the envelopes was marked 4 Marq, so I figured you wouldn’t be too mad if I took a look inside.”

“I’m furious,” he deadpanned. “I hate you and I never want to see you again. Go and never darken my towels again.” He paused for a moment, seeing who could hold it longer, but they both started giggling around the same time. “That’s fine. Just blueprints I take it?”

“And asking if we had any special requests. I was thinking about having them convert one of the old apartments into a skate park for us, but then I realized the ceilings were too low.”

“Oh well,” he laughed. “We’ll just have to avail ourselves with boarding downtown during mosquito season. Everybody been getting along okay while I was gone?”

“Diane and Julia were arguing about who got to sleep pressed up against you tonight, and I swear they were going to pull each other’s hair out until I volunteered to take a night off and let one of them have my space up against you.”

“Awwww. Ang. You didn’t have to do that.”

Angelica rolled her light green eyes in amusement. “Somebody’s gotta keep the peace around here. And it’s been two months since they both joined our family, so I think they wanted to do something special to celebrate the night.”

“Dare I even ask?”

“Well, I think they’re ready to put their differences aside and spend a night actually *sharing* you, and maybe even playing with each *other* too.”

“I thought both of them were adamant they didn’t want to anything with girls.”

Angelica shrugged with a wry grin. “I think they were talking a big game, but now that the reality of us all being together forever is starting to sink in, they may be reconsidering.”

“I’m going to end up paddling one or both of them tonight, aren’t I?”

“You know they’ll only enjoy it. But it’ll wait until after dinner. Before that, though...”

Angelica wrapped her willowy arms around him, leaning her head down to kiss him with a scorching intensity that took him off-guard, his cock twitching in his pants as her body seemed to envelope his, the kiss cutting right down to his very soul.

“What was *that* for?”

“I just don’t want you getting it that thick skull of yours that those two are the only women in this house who love you, you dummy.”

“You know you’re too good for me, right?”

She leaned in so she could whisper into his ear. “I know it was just the two of us here when my ex-boyfriend came by the day after I was imprinted to you, demanding I go with him, but seeing you swing that crowbar to knock the knife out of his hand will forever be the sexiest thing I’ve ever seen. So we’re too good for each other. Now shut up and let’s eat.”

## Chapter Six

December 12<sup>th</sup>, 2020

Andy woke up at home in his own bed, and the first thing he did was glance at his watch, which told him he'd slept about 16 hours. It was just about noon the day after he'd gone to get Mali and Melody, and he felt more refreshed than he'd felt in a long while. His body felt strange, though, not quite the way it should.

"Oh hey! You're up!" Sarah's voice said and Andy glanced over to see her sitting in the big armchair that was off to the side of the master bed. She had her iPad in her lap, probably reading some screenplay. "We weren't entirely sure when you were going to be awake, so we wanted to be sure and totally have somebody here when you did. Lucky me, I won!" The tall redhead hopped up and moved over to lean down to press her lips against his, her tender fingers holding his face for a moment. "Just wait here, I'll be right back."

Andy found that the girls had brought him home, undressed him and put him to bed, his phone on its charger on the nightstand, along with his glasses. As Sarah darted out of the room, he reached over and grabbed his glasses, sliding them onto his face.

Then he began to worry.

Everything was blurry and distorted and his head hurt a little bit.

"Take those off, Andy," he heard Niko's voice from the door. "Then look up here and tell me who you see."

Andy slid the glasses off his face and then looked up to the doorway all the way across the room, finding with utter shock that he could see perfectly four of his partners with their backs against the wall, Sarah then Aisling then Moira and Niko there on the end. Each of them had on a different one of his t-shirts, with yoga pants on beneath them.

"Did you give me lasik when you had me knocked out?" Andy chuckled. "I see Sarah, Ash, Moira and you're there on the end, Niko. And I don't remember anyone telling you that my Carter the Unstoppable Sex Machine t-shirt was fair game to borrow, Moira."

Moira grinned, giving him a cheeky wink. "Every one of your shirts is fair game to borrow, sweetness," she replied. "But you kin see it's a Carter shirt from there?"

"Yeah," Andy said. "My eyesight hasn't been this good since I was like ten. What happened?"

"What happened," Niko said, "is that you finally got a full regeneration, or as close to one as you're going to get." The four women moved over across the room, hopping up on the bed, slowly surrounding him, getting close. "That scar on your leg is completely gone, you're probably a bit more flexible than your used to be, your eyesight's back to at least 20/20 and there may have been a number of other fixes."

Andy was a little agape then held a fingertip up, keeping everyone quiet as he took a deep breath in, held it and then let it out, listening... to nothing. "Holy shit, my tinnitus is fucking *gone*. I knew, I just *knew* something was off when I woke up, and it was that I wasn't hearing that goddamn high pitched humming that's plagued me for the last ten years. I'm so used to having it in the background that without it there, something felt off."

"You're probably going to be noticing lots of those things for the next week or two, because after your body goes through regen, you'll find lots of portions of your anatomy will have been tweaked and you won't even have realized it," Niko said to him. "It's almost like waking up in a brand new body I'm told. Maybe I should get Alexis in here, since she's been through it."

"I guess I was just expecting that maybe I wasn't going to go through regeneration," Andy said. "Shouldn't it have happened by now?"

Niko giggled. "Mathematically and statistically? *Long* before this. Everyone during an imprinting has about a ten percent chance of triggering a regeneration, both men and women. Considering how many partners you've got, dear, it's a little mindboggling that you didn't hit a regeneration cycle before now."

Andy rubbed his eyes and felt that a few little bumps of skin he'd had on the outside of his eyelids were no longer there. It was odd, feeling portions of your body that didn't feel like you remembered them feeling, he thought to himself. "Any idea what's changed? Beyond the eyesight and the tinnitus?"

"Like I said, the scar on your leg healed up, and there were a handful of moles on your skin that you shed off in your sleep," Niko told him. "But considering most of the stuff is internal, you'll probably never know how much or little you actually changed."

He laughed a little bit, stretching his arms over his head. "I certainly feel more rested than I ever have before, like I've been sleeping for a thousand years."

"Just as long as a normal imprinter, so you probably didn't have anything severe the regeneration had to do," Niko told him. "It's not like it was regrowing you a limb or something."

"Can..." Andy frowned for a second. "Can it *do* that?"

"In some cases, yes, but they tend to be a little rare," Niko replied. "I sort of assumed you'd gone through a regeneration with Ash or Lauren before I entered your life, and you just didn't notice because your life was so damn busy."

"I think I'd have noticed suddenly not needing to wear glasses," he joked.

"That wasn't a given," Ash told him. "But you certainly would've noticed *something*."

"How many of the girls went through regeneration?"

"Well, you *knew* Alexis did, but so did Piper, Sheridan and Fiona," Moira told him, her Scottish brogue a bit more tempered now than it had been when she'd first arrived at the house. "An' me, too. I was a bit annoyed that ye never got to see my bullet scar, but maybe it's fer the best that it was gone."

Moira and Fiona had both been imprinted on him before he'd seen them in person, something that he'd had to explain to his friends several times was fine. Phil had been up in arms, saying that what the girls had subjected him to was borderline rape, but Andy had shut down that argument quickly, pointing out that he'd known Fiona was coming, and he'd agreed to whatever Fiona's condition was, sight unseen. Never once was a decision made without his knowledge, and Andy hadn't been at all bothered by it, but he could understand why Phil had made the mistake to jump to anger. Phil dealt with questionable people all the time, although thankfully didn't have any in his Team.

"I don't know," he said, leaning over to kiss Moira's cheek. "I think a bullet scar might've been kinda sexy."

"It hurt like shite when it got too cold, so I'm happy it's gone."

Andy laughed a little bit, moving to get up and out of bed. "Shit, I had some calls I was supposed to make last night. Did someone-?"

"I handled it, love," Ash told him as she slid off the bed next to him. "You had the call with the other publisher about the McTaggart manuscript you found, but that's pretty much just a formality. You know that and they know that. They're already ecstatic to find out that he left them one last mystery novel that they can cash in on, but to find out that he also left behind an autobiography? They're going to make an incredibly generous offer, and I figure we should honor the man's wishes and just let them print them books without any real input from us."

Andy started making his way towards the bathroom and his partners followed him into the large open space. "Well, minimal input," Andy said. "I don't want to change a word, but I want to make sure they're sticking to the cover aesthetic the guy had for all the other books, and that includes for his manuscript. Maybe I can write an epilogue for the autobiography, just explain how I came to get tangled up in all of this."

"Makes sense," Ash told him.

There was a knock at the door, which made everyone sort of look over in surprise before Niko moved to it, pulling it open, letting in Melody, who was dressed in flannel pajama pants and a big baggy t-shirt. She moved over across the room, approaching Andy before wrapping her arms around him in a big hug. "Thank you for giving me a second chance, Andy," she said to him before meshing

her lips against his for a long moment before pulling back, an almost shy smile on her face. “Just making sure I fulfill my duties. Heard you were awake. Anyway, Piper’s gonna give me a tour of the place, so I’ll see you later.” She pulled back from him and slipped away before he could even think to bring words to his lips, disappearing out through the bedroom doors as quickly she’d entered.

“She seems nicer than I might’ve expected,” Sarah said to him with a laugh. “She and Piper going to be okay just the two of them, or should I dispatch Em to play peacekeeper?”

“I bet Em’s probably gauging how Mali came through the process,” Andy sighed. “Can I just say I’m not at all keen about having to avoid talking about her past for fear of stirring up repressed memories? I get that it’s what she wants, but it just doesn’t strike me as particularly healthy.”

“We all deal with grief in our own ways,” Moira told him. “Believe me, I’ve seen folk try every possible avenue to find a way to get through those dark passageways, but it’s not up to us to tell her what’s what. We respect her wishes and do the best we can.”

“Yeah, I suppose,” Andy said, putting toothpaste onto his toothbrush. “Well, unless you ladies need something, I should probably finish getting ready for the day, unless there’s something else you all had in mind.”

Niko grinned, giggling a bit as she headed to the door. “I’ll meet you all down for lunch after you’re through with fun time.” She stepped out of the bathroom, into the main bedroom, then headed out, closing the master bedroom’s door behind her.

“Fun time?” Andy asked.

“Mmm,” Ash agreed. “Reds only.”

“Oh *ho*,” he chuckled. “Is *that* what this is?”

“Don’t worry, Andy,” Moira teased. “We’ll make sure y’kin still walk when we’re through with you.”

What should have been a quick five minute shower devolved into a frenzy inside of the shower, with each of his three redheaded fiancées taking a turn getting a load from him, and it was at least twenty minutes before the trio was satiated. He was particularly surprised how much Moira was determined to play not only with him, but with Sarah and Aisling as well, and without Fiona present.

When Fiona and Moira had joined Team Rook, Andy had sort of suspected that the two of them might be more akin Lauren and Taylor in that they would be more insular as a pair and simply delve out with the rest of the Team from time to time, but Fiona had made it clear that she wanted to be on equal footing with Ash, Niko, Em, Sarah and Piper. Andy wondered if that had left Moira feeling a little bit out on her own, and she’d been working to solidify her new relationship with Andy a bit more each and every day.

Seeing Aisling and Moira kissing each other around the head of his dick while Sarah talked dirty into his ear and ran her fingers along his chest as she pressed her sizable tits into his back, it was rather overwhelming, not the least of which because Ash and Moira were very much getting into it with each other as much as they were with him.

He encouraged all the members of his family to be open and adventurous with each other, but Moira seemed like she wanted to prove she had a place with the family outside of her pairing with Fiona, to not rely on her old connection with Andy as a kind of crutch.

With all three of them satisfied, they toweled off and got dressed.

Andy’s days had gotten a lot less easy to predict since he’d gotten all the money from Nathaniel Watkins. He left his job over at Netflix and was focusing on writing full time, but over the last month, much of his time had gone to doing follow up interviews with various media sources, including several international. His interview with the BBC had gone a little viral since a number of the girls had wandered in and out of it during his talking with the presenter. He’d also spent more time than he’d liked to in contract negotiations, doing script revisions and offering notes on pitches and proposals for adaptation of his works for television and movies. It was the *last* thing he figured anyone should be focusing on, but the people at the studios were insistent that the more people were entertained, the less

time they would have to dwell on their misery.

Andy came downstairs for lunch, finding lunch waiting for him. The girls were mostly hanging out, seeing what the plan for the day was, and wanting to check in on him after his regeneration. “So I figured I’d take Ash and Fiona with me into the city, although we’ve got room for one more, considering either Niko or Lexi’s going to be on guard detail,” he said.

There was a brief but frenzied set of Rock/Paper/Scissors games but in the end, Sarah came out on top and decided to take Andy up on the option of going into the city. As much as Niko wanted to go with them, she needed to head to the base so couldn’t head out with them, although Andy assured her there would be plenty of further opportunities in the future.

It was the first time Andy had been in the city since March, when he’d gone to see Soul Asylum at one of the very last concerts Slim’s would hold before closing during the quarantine. Apparently the closure had been planned in advance, but they hadn’t told anybody because they’d planned to have a grand farewell party in the fall, but instead, everyone had gotten locked in their homes, and the club had closed not with a bang, but a whimper.

They loaded up into one of the big Tesla SUVs and started driving south. Andy hadn’t realized it, but he hadn’t been off the grounds of New Eden since their arrival in September, and he was eager to get into San Francisco and see what the city was like, now that the Air Force had come and gone through most of the buildings, pulling all the bodies from the high end apartments and homes that hadn’t been willing to respect the quarantine.

Driving across the Bay Bridge into San Francisco, it felt like the end of one era and the beginning of another. It was the middle of the day, and yet there still weren’t any other cars on the highway. Andy had driven across the bridge hundreds of times since he moved out from the Midwest, but never once in all that time had he been on the bridge with no other cars. Of course, the new Bay Bridge wasn’t all that old – well, part of it, anyway. The eastern span past Treasure Island had opened in 2013.

As they moved into downtown, heading down from the overpass, Andy was shocked at exactly how empty everything was, how quiet the city was. No matter which direction he looked, no matter which way he listened, San Francisco was like a tomb. It was eerie and unnatural. No cars parked along the streets, nobody walking along the sidewalks, no food trucks, not even a car horn.

One of the things he’d always gotten used to was that going into San Francisco during the day time was radically different than going into it at night, but now, it was almost like being in the city at 4 a.m. except that it was two in the afternoon. He fully expected that if they wanted to head back across the Bay Bridge during rush hour, they wouldn’t even need to slow down.

That was *unheard of*.

Before, it all sort of taken on a level of unreality, the numbers too big and hard to comprehend, the losses so unimaginable that it sort of took on a sheen of imperceptibility. But driving through the once thriving downtown of San Francisco only to feel like the entire city was devoid of people, it all hit home just how monumental the loss to life had been.

They headed up Fremont Street before crossing Market to head over to Montgomery Street, passing by the Transamerica Pyramid Building before turning onto Columbus Avenue. Despite the fact that they were heading up to City Lights Booksellers & Publishers, they crossed the infamous corner of Columbus and Broadway, which was sort of ground zero for the majority of the strip clubs in San Francisco. The Condor Club was right on the corner, and it had been featured in an Eddie Murphy movie. Hell, it was the first topless club in America, opening as such in the 1960s. He hoped that it reopened at some point, but it was hard to say, especially since the clientele had to have dropped to almost zero. Maybe it could rebrand more as a bar and keep the topless part simply as a legacy part. The other nearby strip clubs – Centerfolds, Big Al’s, the Hustler Club, Vanity and all the rest – they weren’t quite the historical mainstay that the Condor Club was, and he wondered how this particular street corner was going to look in just a few years’ time.

Andy hadn't brought his partners to see The Condor Club today. No, today it was stopping at City Lights and then one other place before heading back home. As he headed into City Lights, a broad smile spread across his face as he spotted a familiar person behind the counter. "Hey Brittany," Andy said with a laugh. "Wasn't sure you'd still be here on the other side of all of the mess."

Brittany was something of a staple at City Lights – she'd been working there for almost twenty years now apparently, and her look hadn't much changed in all that time. She looked exactly how people *expected* San Francisco to look – her brown hair was in thick dreadlocks, her nose had three separate piercings, her ears had spreaders that had opened the lobes enough to slide a Coke bottle through, and what wasn't covered by the giant baggy clothes she wore stood a decent chance to be covered in tattoos. He was never quite sure how old she was – she could've been a hard-lived thirty or a well-kept sixty, and neither would've surprised him. Still, she was an utter sweetheart and she ran over to give Andy a big hug. "I saw you on the television last month, so I knew you'd made it, but I have to admit, you seemed like you're doing a lot better than you were last year," she said.

"I saw Lawrence didn't make it," he sighed.

Brittany laughed, rolling her eyes at him. "Andy, darling, Lawrence was *one hundred*. He'd lived a grand old life. I think he was ready to go long before the plague came to decimate society, although I'd wager he'd have had something wicked to say about it. That said, our rent has fallen to basically nothing for the time being, just as a way to keep San Francisco, you know, San Francisco. Ginsberg, Kerouac, Lawrence himself... we can't just let all that history disappear into the ether."

"I know, that's why I wanted to come by, see if maybe you wanted to do a charity signing for the latest Druid Gunslinger novel," he said. "I know I'm not a Beat poet or even maybe as radical a lefty as you like to normally house but—"

"We'd be delighted, Andrew," she said to him, patting him on the back. "It wouldn't hurt to remind people that we're still here, still kicking. Didn't you lose a lot of your fanbase with all the deaths, though?"

"I've done pretty well in cultivating a fifty-fifty split in my audience, so we'll see how the turnout would be. You and everyone else here was so nice to me when I got started, I feel like I have to give something back. You remember that first signing? I think we had three or four people show up total to get an autograph, and I'll bet half of them didn't even really know who I was. They were just buying a copy to be polite."

"Nancy always told us that we never knew whose work would catch on, or where people find their inspiration from. She was a big advocate for us including Tolkien and the like in their own section, saying we shouldn't devalue fantasy or science-fiction just because it wasn't always appealing to the mainstream," Brittany told him. "I'll see about setting aside the first Saturday in January for the event, so we'll have a little time to publicize it and we'll see what kind of turnout we get, but any publicity is good publicity."

"Where are my manners?" Andy laughed. "Brittany Vozsesnesky, these are my fiancées Aisling, Sarah and Fiona, and my partner and bodyguard, Alexis."

Brittany grinned over at Sarah and gave her a polite little nod. "I recognized Miss Washington as soon as she came in but figured it impolite to geek out at her. But I have to ask... Is this Fiona the same one mentioned in the thank yous in one of your early works?"

Fiona giggled, giving a little mock bow. "Guilty as charged," she said. "I read a lot of the early pieces that would become the first Druid Gunslinger novel and encouraged him to keep writing at it. We were lovers in college before we both developed a case of the stupids, which, thankfully, we've outgrown as we've gotten older."

"It's amazing how much of the world we reevaluated once we realized it might've been ending," Andy sighed.

"Larry would've been proud of you, dear," Brittany told him with a soft smile. "He always liked your books. Said you never got bogged down by telling your readers about things they didn't care

about, and kept everything moving along nicely. He admired your economical use of language. Said it was uncharacteristic for your field.”

They sat and chatted for a couple of hours, each of the women getting a chance to talk over things with Brittany while Andy sort of wandered through the stacks, looking through what books the store currently had on offer. Brittany didn't know Andy all that well, but she'd known him for decades now, and his partners were always keen to find information they didn't have previously about him. Brittany even took the time to show the women a photo that had been taken of Andy at his first signing at City Lights, and true to his word, the store looked especially empty in comparison to the rest of the photos around it in the photo album.

During his time strolling around, he would occasionally catch Fiona taking pictures of him out of the corner of his eye, never stopping to pose, but somehow knowing that Fiona would only catch him at his best. He wondered if she was taking them just for herself or if she was working on some kind of book that had him tangentially involved.

After heading out from City Lights, it was time for Andy to check on one of the people who he cared the most amount that he didn't really know personally. Just up the street a little from City Lights was a place that Andy considered to be one of the great institutions of San Francisco, a tiny little corner restaurant called Buster's Cheesesteaks.

Buster's wasn't going to be a historical site any time soon, but to Andy, it was perhaps the greatest cheesesteak he'd ever had. Buster's had been a longstanding tradition between him and his friends, the place they'd always stop after a concert to get food before driving back down to the South Bay after the show. Buster's was always open late at night, and hilariously enough because of its locale, the person working the register was inevitably a stripper who couldn't get a shift that night. There was a vaguely Eastern European blonde girl in a half-zipped up track suit behind the counter right now. But the stripper cashiers weren't the reason Andy kept coming.

Standing at the grill was the tiny smiling Latino man that Andy's heart swelled to see alive. “Oh thank god Carlos,” Andy laughed, a sort of heavy nervous tension inside of him breaking for a moment. “I was worried like hell you hadn't made it.”

Carlos was lucky if he was five foot tall, but he was built like a fire hydrant, squat and muscular. He was a Latino man somewhere in his late fifties if Andy had to guess, and his English wasn't amazing, but he'd been with Buster's for as long as Andy had been going there, maybe longer, and he was a good part of the reason Andy suspected the food was as amazing as it was. Initially Andy had suspected that Carlos might even *be* Buster, but he'd asked and Carlos had laughed, pointing out that just because he was around all the time didn't make him the place's owner.

“No worries, Mr. Rook,” Carlos said to him. “I took good care of myself when lockdown was called, and as soon as the government come calling, I do what they tell me, and they pair me up with eight lovely chicas, including Gretchen here.” He slapped the tall blonde on the ass and she giggled, rolling her eyes in his direction as she reached over to ruffle his short black hair in her fingertips. “They all love me.”

“Well, I love your cooking, amigo. So how about we get some cheesesteaks cooking?”

While normally Carlos was massively focused on his cooking and didn't talk to people seated at the counter, today he was happy to be chatty and get caught up with Andy, even if they didn't really know each other that well. Carlos lived in the city, and had been moved from his old tiny apartment into one of the tall condo towers over on Van Ness, where he'd been given his own floor, in addition to being paired up with a number of gorgeous women. And while he hadn't originally *been* the owner of Buster's he was *now* and asked Andy if he should change the name of the place to Carlos's. Andy said as fun as it might be, people might get worried that things were different if the name changed, something Carlos said he could understand.

It had also turned out that Carlos was a *huge* fan of the Ballerina Badass movies, and insisted that he be allowed to get a picture with him and Sarah together, stepping out from behind the counter



for perhaps the only time Andy had ever seen it happen. Sarah was more than happy to oblige, though, even giving Carlos a shot where she was kissing him on the cheek, which made the short order cook's tanned flesh take on a blushing highlight of deep red.

As they ate, Andy spotted Fiona snapping pictures again, not just of him but of Ash, Sarah and Lexi, as well as the girl behind the counter, who was mostly engrossed in some paperback novel she'd brought with her, when she wasn't packaging up food. Fiona also snapped pictures of the empty streets, stepping out into the street to show just how empty the city was, taking a couple of photographs standing in the middle of Columbus Ave. Lexi, for the most part, kept watch by the door. She'd gotten her order to go, planning on having it later, once they'd gotten back to New Eden, despite Andy's repeated insistence that she eat it there. Being 'on watch' meant she couldn't afford to be distracted, she'd told him, and in the end, he'd relented, because he'd promised that whenever Lexi insisted something was for security reasons, he would defer to her.

It was taking more getting used to than he'd expected it to.

Andy was surprised to see that even though Carlos was making time for them to talk, there were still plenty of orders coming in. After a few minutes, Andy began to understand why. Food delivery services had flourished under the pandemic, but the method in which everyone was functioning was entirely different. The area next to the register had become a large staging area, and women were constantly coming in and out to pick up orders and take them on their way. Fiona took pictures of those people too, and Andy started to suspect she'd begun work on some kind of book about the DuoHalo epidemic.

"I think to myself when all this start, 'who will want my food' but it turn out, comfort is something people willing to pay quite a lot for, and my food, it brings comfort," Carlos said with a big, toothy grin. "So, I find silver lining to massive cloud, and I cling onto that for *my* comfort."

Andy nodded in understanding. That was all any of them could do, cling onto what light they had against the overwhelming darkness and see the way to the other side.

Sure enough, when they were heading back across the Bay Bridge to the East Bay during what would've been rush hour, Andy still didn't see another car anywhere on the roads. Even the people who were safe to travel were still deathly afraid of moving around, for fear of catching DuoHalo, for fear of spreading it, for fear of something, anything unforeseen going wrong. Despite the president promising 'a return to normality,' the reality didn't quite reflect that optimism so far.

He wondered, looking out the window while Ash held his left hand and Fiona held his right, Sarah sitting up front, chatting away with Lexi, what more he could possibly be doing to remind people that they were still alive, still going.

The trip to SF had been meant to make him feel better; instead, he felt only more worried than he had been before they'd left. He needed to be doing more, but what exactly that meant, he wasn't sure. Not yet, anyway.

## Chapter Seven

December 13<sup>th</sup>, 2020

By morning, Andy had begun to form a handful of ideas. That meant he was up and out of bed uncharacteristically early for a Sunday. He was particularly proud of how he was able to extricate himself from the pile of bodies without so much as a stir. In fact, while all the girls were basically still asleep, Andy snuck out of the bedroom and headed down to his office to make a handful of phone calls.

The first was to his agent, Trish Geovani, who was out in New York, although not in NYC proper. She wouldn't be in her office on a Sunday, but thankfully, since Andy's recent bump in prominence, she'd given him her home phone number, so any time he needed to reach her for business reasons, he could do so.

"Trish, how the hell are you this morning?" he said, sitting down at his desk, dressed in sweatpants and an oversized t-shirt from some fantasy convention he'd been a guest at a couple of years ago. He had her on FaceTime, and she looked like she was at home in her study, wearing a giant t-shirt that had as many holes in it as one of his first drafts. She leaned back in her chair, like she expected this to be some kind of gripe session, or news of other problems he was having that had suddenly sprung up without warning. Calling unscheduled on a Sunday was very much unlike him.

"Okay Andy, who died?" Trish sighed.

"Lots of people. Maybe you've seen the news? But that's not why I'm calling," he said. "If I wanted to put together a quick little book signing tour, say, six days, how hard would it be to get that together?"

He could see Trish sitting up on the other end of the line, realizing that he was being serious and wasn't just calling to chit chat. "Theoretically? Not very? I mean, you've got your security concerns to worry about..."

"Let us handle those," he countered. "If I picked six cities, how fast could you line up a bookstore for me in each one to do a signing, and get a bit of promotion going around it?"

"I basically phone up any bookstore in America and ask them if they want to do a book signing with you, right now, they're going to leap to say yes. Sales for your stuff doubled after the *60 Minutes* interview, you know that, and bookstores are always eager for anything that gets people in through the door. Assuming you wanted me to start on this today, I could probably have your first signing tomorrow, assuming you can get there."

"I've got a private jet now, Trish, so getting there and back isn't the problem. Personal security we can also handle just fine, but logistics at these kinds of places might need law enforcement or military helping out if there's giant turnouts. I can probably reach out to the Air Force here, but if you've got contacts on the ground..."

"It shouldn't be too hard one way or another. You have a city list in mind?"

"New York City, Jacksonville, Cincinnati, Denver, Seattle and LA."

"Quite the road trip."

"Air trip," he corrected, "but yeah."

"You need me to handle hotels, ground transportation and the like?"

"We'll cover all that ourselves," he said, waving his hand. "If I wanted to, could we start in NYC tomorrow evening?"

"I mean, I might have to call in a few favors, but I can probably make that happen," she admitted. "I don't know what turnout's going to be like, though. People are still pretty gunshy about leaving their own houses."

"That's the whole *point*, Trish," he sighed, leaning back in the incredibly expensive leather chair the house's original tenant had left behind. "As long as you're paired and vaccinated, there's nothing *wrong* with leaving the goddamn house. We keep telling people that, but apparently folks in the government aren't *seeing* anyone else do it, so I gotta put my money where my mouth is. I'll go and do signings and readings, make a big show of the thing. We'll do a photo blog of the whole trip, although

maybe we'll leave out the airplane parts. Other than that, though, we'll show people, like *really* show people that it's time to stop hiding indoors. I want to have a little travel diary so that everyone who's protected knows they can go out and be part of the world again, encourage them to do so."

"We can get events thrown together fast, sure Andy, but I don't know if there's going to be enough turnout to make it worth your while," Trish said. "You can always show up and sign books, but that doesn't guarantee anyone's going to come or that you'll sell more books from the effort."

"I don't *care* about making money off it, Trish. I just want to do my part to help the country wake up from the slumber of staying in their homes, once they're vaccinated," Andy told her. "I'm also going to make a point of seeing some family members for a handful of people. We're probably going to do a stopover in Chicago, and the LA portion coincides with some meetings that Sarah and Emily need to take down there, so I figured, getting out of the house for a bit isn't the worst idea. My security team will probably chew me out for a while, but I think it's important we set precedent that we can see people, hang out with people, be around people. *Anyone* who's got the vaccine can. If I'm getting out there and being seen, that'll be progress enough. It'll be *a start*. And I want to take my fiancées around to a handful of places. We're going to stop and see Piper's parents, Fiona's parents, Niko's mom and, most importantly, introduce everyone to my nephew Connor. I know he's still in shock with his dad dying, but I need the kid to know I'm there for him, whatever he needs, however he needs it. It's safe for me to travel. It's safe for me to go *see* him, so I'm gonna do that. And I think it'll help the people of America if they don't just hear someone telling them it's safe, but actually *acting* like it. In a way where they can see it." He realized he'd been talking for quite a bit without her saying anything. "So what do you think?"

"I think... it'll be a good thing," she finally responded, shifting in her chair, having scribbled a dozen or so things onto a yellow legal pad while they were talking. "But I think you'd better clear it all with your security team first, and you'd better listen to every damn thing they'll tell you along the way. This is uncharted waters we're heading into right now, so be overly cautious rather than lax. No shaking hands, no taking pictures with people. Ask people who to make it out to, sign the book, hand them the book and then move on to the next person. Don't linger and for fuck sake, Andy, don't engage in political discussions, no matter how much I know you're going to want to. As long as you can do that, then I can have your list of bookstores ready for you by the time you're wheels up tomorrow morning. New York City's easy, so hell, I'll have that ready and booked before lunch."

"Okay, get it done and I'll start things rolling on this end," he said. "Thanks Trish. I know I can be a pain in the ass, but I'm trying to do the right thing."

"I know you are, Andy," Trish sighed. "That's when you're typically the *biggest* pain in the ass. Just take care of yourself while you're out there, okay? You went from being my favorite client for artistic reasons to my favorite client for financial reasons and I don't think I'd do well if you up and died on me, okay?"

"I'm certainly not *planning* on dying anytime soon, Trish."

"Nobody ever is, Andy. Nobody ever is." She reached forward and tapped the end call button as Andy saw the screen fall dark. One call down, a couple more to go.

His next phone call was to General Bonner over at the base, and he wasn't at all surprised when she picked up on the second ring, although this time it was strictly voice and not a video call. "Mister Rook. To what do I owe the honor of this call?" she said to him, a light undercurrent of snark in her voice.

"My plane, General. Have your people finished their inspection?"

"They did last night, and you should be thankful we did it. We found a couple of listening devices and a tracker on the plane, as well as a compartment that could've been used for smuggling. But other than that, you should be ready to go. Why the sudden need to check in on the plane? I thought you told me you didn't really have any need for it until next week."

"Change of plans," he said. "I'm going to do a sort of quick impromptu book signing tour, as a

sort of effort to show the American people that once they're vaccinated, they can get out of the house. I was in downtown San Francisco yesterday and it was utterly dead. So, we're going to do a six-day book signing tour, I'm going to blog about the whole thing. We'll take photos all over and everyone's free to link to it from wherever or share photos from the trip. It'll be good PR for me, but even better PR for everyone to see that it's safe to go out there and live again. Just telling people it's fine out there for vaccinated people wasn't enough – we need to *show* them, otherwise they're going to think it's all smoke and mirrors.”

“I can respect that,” the General said. “You want some ground support at the locations?”

“My immediate reflex is to say no, which means I should probably say yes,” Andy admitted. “I haven't told my security team yet, and I'm pretty certain they're going to throw a shitfit, but it's important that we keep making progress in showing the world that we're not going to all die out because of this plague. So, yeah, anything you can do to offer a little bit of added security on location would be helpful.”

“You got a city list?”

“New York City, Jacksonville, Cincinnati, Denver, Seattle and LA,” he told her.

“Quite the little tour you've got going on,” she replied. “I can have bodies on the ground in most of those locations, although you might be on your own in Jacksonville.”

“That's Piper's hometown, so I think I should be good. I mean, if you can get me a handful of people there for site security, I won't say no, but I don't think we'll freak out if you can't, either.”

“I can probably get a couple of people out there, but don't expect like a whole team. But if I sent you out there on tour naked, Lieutenant Colonel Hayes would probably be up my ass with a giant ass floodlight, determining if I'd engaged in conduct unbecoming,” the General chuckled.

“Linda's getting promoted?”

“Number of promotions coming down the pipe, including one of your partners. We'll do the whole razzledazzle next week, but 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant Niko Redwolf is about to become Captain Redwolf,” the General said. “It's needed to happen for a while now, but what with everything being what it is, you can understand why we're a little bit behind. You want to tell her, or should I?”

“You definitely should and *not* me,” he stressed. For the next ten minutes or so, they worked out some of the logistics of it. The Air Force would provide between two to six people on site at each of the bookstores, offering some basic security, and Andy's crew would worry about transportation to and from the sites, and at the hotels they were staying in. He would have the list of the bookstores for the Air Force as soon as they had them in their own hands, and the General thanked him for his willingness to set a good example for everyone.

He was just finishing up with the General when Niko poked her head into his office and let out a big sigh. She immediately pulled out her phone and sent a text message, which Andy suspected was to Lexi. “You can't *do* that, Andy!” Niko said to him, a cross look on her face. “We need to know where you are! At all times! I woke up and you weren't in bed, and you weren't with Lexi or even Melody, for fuck sake! It's my job to keep you safe, and I can't do that if I don't know where the fuck you *are*!”

“I didn't leave the house, Niko!” Andy sighed, realizing she was probably right but clearly being uncomfortable with the notion of being unable to even move about his own *home* freely. “I know better than to head off the property without an escort, but there's going to be times where I'm going to walk around my goddamn house by myself, okay?”

She headed over and wrapped her arms around him in a big hug, moving to slide her ass up into his lap. “Yeah, okay, I suppose that's fair, but I would've gotten up with you if I knew you were getting up so early. It's unlike you to be up at the buttcrack of dawn.”

“I know you would've gotten up if I asked you to, hon, but then you would've tried to talk me out of things *before* I set them in motion, and I'm not going to be talked out of this,” he said, rubbing his hand against the back of her neck comfortingly. “I assume Lexi's on her way down here?”

“She *can* be. Do you need her?”

“Her and Melody. The whole Team Rook Security Detail.”

Niko scowled at him, although the anger was mostly superficial and would quickly dissolve. He hoped. “I’m going to be angry about this, aren’t I?”

“Maybe a little, but then I think you’ll be okay with letting it slide,” Andy told her, as she typed on her cell phone’s tiny little screen, sending messages to the other two, letting them know where to come and meet them.

Alexis came in a couple minutes later, followed by Melody, who immediately came over, kissed Andy on the cheek and said, “Thanks for giving me a second chance, Andy.”

“You know, you don’t have to say that *every* morning,” he joked. “Anyway, I wanted to get the three of you gathered here because we’re going to do a field trip for the next week or so. We’ll take the plane and we’re going to do six different bookstore signings, starting tomorrow.”

“Jesus, Andy,” Lexi sighed. “This is the sort of thing we should have a week or two to *plan*. In advance. Like sane people. But I suspect your mind is already made up and we’re doing this, regardless of how much we’d like you to reconsider. I guess we’ll just have to have the advantage that our enemies won’t really have time to prep either. Not local?”

“Cross the country. We’ll take the plane. Stay in hotels that we’ll book on the day, so nobody knows where we’re staying in advance. A few nights we won’t even be staying in the city where the book signing is.”

“And if the hotel we want is full?” Niko asked before everyone stopped and turned to look at her. “Right. Right. Stupid.” She laughed at the notion itself. “What hotel in the world is even going to have *guests* right now? Where are we going?”

“Couple of places on the east coast, couple in the middle and a couple here on the west coast. Last stop’ll be L.A. so we can take Em and Sarah’s meetings in Hollywood next Monday.”

“You’ve got some plans for additional stops?” Niko asked.

“Yeah, we’re going to swing by Piper’s parents, stop in and check on my nephew, your mom and a few others.”

“She’s going to be out for the wedding next month, Andy.”

“I know, but you haven’t been back to the rez in a couple of years, baby. You said so yourself. And you probably need to see the state of the land with your own eyes,” he said to her. “And I know Piper says she’s okay, but I think getting her to see her folks sooner rather than later is probably the best for her mental health, anyway. And you seeing the Rez is best for you and yours.”

“Who’s going to go with us?”

“I figure we’ll take the full Team Rook Fiancée Club, and we can stop by the house in a week’s time to take care of anyone here who’s close to their time lock before we make our way down to LA. I can also take care of a handful of people while people are packing, assuming the whole RFC is going to come along. I mean, if anyone doesn’t *want* to go...”

“Are you *kidding*, Andy?” Niko laughed. “Everyone’s been so cooped up that they’re going to be tripping over themselves to get out of the *house*, much less out of the state. I mean, everyone’s been so busy planning for the wedding that a week’s break is probably something everyone desperately needs. When do we leave?”

“Just after lunch. It’s about five and a half hours from here to NYC, and that’ll let you all figure out hotels, coordinate with the Air Force and get everything prepped and ready. It’ll be our first chance to take the new plane out for its first flight. First signing will be in NYC tomorrow evening.”

“Not to be inconsiderate, sir,” Melody said, “but are you sure you feel comfortable including me as part of your security detail so soon? I wouldn’t blame you at all if you were paranoid or wanted more time to—”

“No time like the present if you ask me,” Andy said, waving his hand. “But that’s not my decision to make. Ladies?”

Lexi and Niko looked at each other, considering their situation for the moment. “I’d much rather have an extra set of hands on the security detail, Niko, if we can get them,” Alexis said, “but I’m not marrying the big lug. Final call is definitely yours to make.”

Niko glanced over at Melody for a moment then looked at Andy. “Then I’m with the big lug. We’re giving her a second chance, so that means we have to *give* her that second chance. She’s just as on the hook for his safety, if not *more so* than the rest of us. She can’t take the reassignment again, remember? The only way she’s getting away from Andy is if he’s dead, and whatever our differences, she doesn’t have that in her. So yeah, I agree with your assessment. She can help with security details, just not take point. We need all the help we can get.”

Alexis nodded, her dark curly hair hanging around her shoulders. “Okay then, I’ll start making accommodations for us in NYC, and for getting us transportation from the airfield to the hotel, as well as to and from the bookstore. Do we know what store yet?”

“I should have that before we’re landing in NYC. My agent’s on it right now. And I will defer all hotel decisions to you three. I know how last minute this is, so I want you all to feel as much inside your comfort zones as you can get.”

“The girls are going to throw a hissy fit that you’re giving them so little time to prep, babe,” Niko giggled at him. “Especially considering all the different weathers we’re going to see. Snow in NYC and Cincinnati, shorts weather in Florida... Although, now that I think about it, it’s probably *best* that you don’t give them long to pack. They can’t lose the whole day making decisions.”

Alexis smirked. “I guess that’s one advantage of being on the security detail. We get to know in advance that we need to get up and go. I’m already packed in my head, but then again, I usually am by force of habit. Any rules or guidelines for the hotels I can consider?”

Andy shrugged. “Just get us the biggest suite we can find, I suppose. If anything, this’ll also be a lesson to all the hotels that we visit that they’re going to have to change the way their business works from now on, especially if it’s going to be several people to one room on the regular. Two beds in one room isn’t going to necessarily be a great business model anymore.”

“Ten people, two cars, two security people on Andy at all times,” Niko said. “You’re not shaking hands with people come from signings.”

“No, I hadn’t planned on it.”

“It wasn’t a question, baby,” Niko told him. “It was a statement. And if people want to do selfies, they can do it with a table in between you and them. I know you think we’re being silly, but it’s our job to keep you safe and sound, okay, so that means—”

“That means I listen to everything you tell me without hesitation or reservation. I got it, Niko,” Andy sighed. “I know I can seem like a bit of a scatterbrain here and there, but I’m going to do my part for all of this. Your job is to keep me safe, and I’m not going to tell you how to do your job. You know it a thousand times better than I do. And the bookstores will all be smaller, independent bookstores. I don’t need to go into Barnes & Nobles; they’re doing just fine on their own.”

A few hours later when Andy brought the trip casually up at lunch, you’d have thought he’d flashed the Queen for the kerfuffle it threatened to cause. Many of the girls said it was impossible for them to be ready to be gone for a week in just a few hours and needed more time to prepare...

...at least they said that *until* Andy threatened to let someone else have their spot on the trip, and then very quickly it was ‘we’ll make it work.’

He gave the RFC three hours to pack and get ready, with the plan to be at the airport at four and landing in New York around ten at night. During the time they were packing, he made a point to dose both Sheridan and Tala, who were the furthest out from their last doses. He wanted to make it slow and passionate with them, but Sheridan and Tala had gotten it into their heads that he was *also* on the clock, and so they made a game out of who could get him to pop faster, and absolutely *rushed* him through their encounters. He dosed both of them in less than twenty minutes, with Sheridan proud she’d beaten Tala’s time by almost a full minute.

And then he'd banged Nicolette in a coat closet, just because she thought it would be a fun lark.

"Master Rook," the maid told him, backing him into the closet. "I am going to need you to tend to my needs before you leave." The closet wasn't a particularly big space on the ground floor, more than enough room for the two of them to maneuver around. Nicolette had, as she often did, decided to forgo panties for the day, so she'd simply leaned forward against the wall, reached behind her and hiked up her skirt.

Nicolette preferred him rough and raw, so he didn't even bother removing his pants, simply unzipped them, fished out his cock, lined himself up and then thrust deep and hard inside of her, a sultry moan escaping her lips until he clamped his hand down over her mouth, something that made her cunt squeeze down excitedly around his shaft.

For the next few minutes, he thrust his hips against her perky ass, pushing his dick in and out of her dripping hole, as she did her best to shove back into his grinding pushes. One hand stayed clamped over her mouth, the other pressed against the wall to keep his leverage, but halfway through, he realized she'd found an angle that let her snap her body into his. She was ridiculously flexible and spirited, and she'd been working out as part of Sheridan's morning exercises to improve that even more, which he suspected played into how she was rolling her hips.

All of his partners seemed to enjoy setting the tempo for him, and Nicolette wanted this one to go quick, because she was moaning heavily into his hand, knowing that Andy's was an aurally driven person, so when he felt her core crush around him, they both locked up in an intense orgasm, his natural, hers improved by chemistry and biology.

There was something fundamentally weird about his life, Andy realized, but not in a bad way.

He packed his suitcase within about fifteen minutes, hopped through a shower to wipe off the sex funk smell of three different women, and then tried to stay out of the ladies' way. He also went downstairs and grabbed a box of advance reader copies that he was going to give to the first bookstore to sell. All the other stores would have a box worth of books shipped to them for him to sign, not just the newest book, but also a selection of some of his other works as well. NYC might get some as well, but it didn't hurt to be extra prepared.

Andy also pulled Fi aside for a few minutes during the packing, explaining that he was going to rely on her to take loads of pictures during the tour, stuff they could use to show that they were living and thriving in the new world. While the new world was still all a bit scary, it wasn't the kind of thing that should keep anyone locked in their houses. She assured him she'd do everything needed to make sure they had a great photo package to push the right message across to the public.

As they were getting ready to head to the Livermore Municipal Airport where Andy's plane was being stored, Trish called with the list of bookstores they would be visiting, their signing times, the locations and confirmation that she'd dispatched books overnight to all of the locations, even in the NYC one, so that if turnout was better than expected, they wouldn't be caught empty handed. Even still, Trish advised that signings be limited to a hundred people per location, at least inside the location at the time, something she'd conveyed to the stores themselves and to the people Andy had connected her with in the military. If they wanted to have people lined around the block waiting for a chance to come in, that was fine by her. It would make for good publicity. She *also* stressed that Andy would be doing radio interviews each morning with a station in the city they'd be having a book signing later that day, just to get the word out. It would be via phone calls, unless he could actually get to the radio stations in question.

Nobody really knew exactly what to expect in terms of turnout, so they were getting prepared for both ends of the spectrum. If they held a party and nobody came, they'd still make it look like Andy and the rest of Team Rook was out in the world, setting the right example. If they got swarmed with people, well, a bit more caution would be needed, but they could make it work, and that would be even better publicity, both for getting the world back on its feet and Andy's writing career.

He was pleased to see the cars weren't insanely packed, and that each of his partners had

managed to restrain themselves to just one suitcase each. Piper and Moira sat on either side of him, with Melody driving and Niko sitting in the front, while Alexis, Aisling, Sarah, Emily and Fiona took the other car. It was only about twenty minutes from New Eden down to the Livermore Municipal Airport, where the plane was waiting for them.

It felt super strange to have his own private hangar at an airport, but it was a place where they could leave the cars, and it was all locked up behind them. They loaded up the plane while Lexi filed a flight plan for their flight over to New York City.

Andy walked through inside of his Bombardier Global 5000, the interior of the plane done in dark greys and blues, but he did find it a little surprising that there wasn't a dividing curtain or mid-section split. He'd been told it was very easy to add one, but for the time being, he didn't have one installed, meaning the interior was basically one big open space with a number of chairs, some around a table, some more like a couch. He'd brought his laptop with him, and was considering sitting down at the table, but decided to just settle in one of the single seats on his own, letting the ladies move to get settled as Lexi and Niko moved into the cockpit, although they hadn't closed the door yet.

He glanced over and saw Aisling had a deck of cards and was letting each woman draw a single card from the deck before heading towards the cockpit.

"Should I be worried?" Andy asked Piper, having leaned over to whisper to her.

Piper giggled, patting him on the arm. "Nah. We're just settling the order we're all joining the mile high club. Didn't feel right to do it any other way. I'm probably reasonably close to the front of the line. Jack of Diamonds!" She waved her card in his direction.

Andy didn't have any idea how to respond to that, so he did the only thing he could think of, and had a good laugh. He knew they weren't kidding.



## **Chapter Eight**

*December 13<sup>th</sup>, 2020*

They were wheels up a little after five, just around sunset, so they got a gorgeous view of the city sprawling out beneath them, Oakland and the Bay itself just behind them as they started their 2500+ mile flight. Andy had never flown in something so small before, and it felt even stranger to think of it as *his* plane, even if it was. He was starting to wonder if he should have Rook painted on the side of it, or maybe just a chesspiece of a rook. That might be a bit too supervillain-y, though, he decided. He'd voice the idea to his partners and was sure they'd have a consensus almost immediately about if it was a good idea or not.

But it was his first flight on *his* plane.

The flight path would take them across twelve states and three time zones, and they wouldn't be landing until the early hours of the next day, the trip five and half hours, plus the three-hour time differential meaning they would be arriving close to two in the morning local time. Niko and Lexi had been a little worried about that at first, but the first book signing wasn't until 4 pm, so they'd have plenty of time to sleep and recuperate, so they'd agree they'd find a way to make it work.

The first signing was going to be at one of the landmarks of New York City, the famous Strand Book Store in Greenwich Village. The store had been having some rough times with the pandemic keeping them closed, but they'd made a point to open as soon as their staff was vaccinated, and when Andy's agent had called to see if they could handle a last-minute book signing, they couldn't trip over themselves fast enough to say yes.

He was glad they'd gotten the Strand to agree. It was one of the first places he'd gone to visit when he'd made his first trip to New York City oh so many years ago, with their signs that said "Shop Local! Buy Early! Think Indie!" and Andy's personal favorite, "18 Miles Of Books!" There were plenty of other places he could've gone and signed, but the Strand held personal affection for him. He'd never signed there before, but it had been on his bucket list of places he wanted to sign, and the fact that they weren't just accepting of his presence but eager made it all the better. They'd immediately started calling the radio and television stations, publicizing the event, and they were hoping for a good turnout.

The plane was somewhere over the Nevada desert when Fiona and Piper came over to stand next to him. He'd brought his laptop along for the trip and had been trying to get some writing done, but some thirty minutes into the air, it seemed like a portion of the RFC had plans for him. "Hey Andy, whatcha doin'?" Fiona said in a playful singsong voice that made him suspiciously look up at them.

Most of the girls had dressed very casually for travel, with both Fi and Piper in yoga pants and a big baggy T-shirt they'd stolen from his closet. The ladies of the RFC had figured out extremely early on that Andy loved seeing them in his shirts, and so they were always stealing from his seemingly endless collection of band t-shirts. The only condition was that they needed to be able to name a song from any band whose shirt they stole, which was a great excuse to expand the girls' musical repertoire as well. Piper had on his only Jesus Jones t-shirt, while Fi was dressed in one of his many Fury In The Slaughterhouse t-shirts. Fi had her hair swept back and tucked behind her ears with a barrette, and Piper had a lazy ponytail that was off to one side like she was an 80s aerobics fitness instructor.

"Trying to get started on the next Gunslinger book," he said, a smirk on his lips. He could already sense where this was heading based on the look on Fiona's face. "Drew the high card, did you, love?"

"I did," Fi said with her trademark charm. "But we were all talking back in the back half of the plane about how we wanted to do this, and we've decided it's going to be a trio experience each time, with one of us joining the Mile High Club and another assisting, essentially 'who's got next,' so we all get a little bit more comfortable playing together as a team."

Andy's face tried to go as blank as it could. "You're suggesting turning the Mile High Club into, what, a team building exercise? Like trust falls and shit?"

“Exactly! We all need to get used to splitting our time, not only with you but also with each other, and that means we all need to get out of our comfort zones a bit. We’re gonna work you over in pairs, and we drew cards to determine the order,” Fi said with a smirk as she held up her card. “Queen of Hearts, if you can believe it. I swear, Ash would’ve accused me of stacking the deck if I’d been holding it, but I drew from the deck blind like everyone else.”

“So you’re second on deck then, Piper? Jack of Diamonds turned out to be strong enough to get you on deck? No aces?”

“Nary an ace to be seen,” Piper giggled. “Fi’s first, then me, then Niko with a Jack of Clubs, Ash with a Seven of Hearts, Sarah with a Five of Hearts, Moira with a Four of Diamonds and Em’s last in line with Two of Diamonds. But it means everyone’s mixing it up, getting a little fun and freaky with someone they haven’t really spent all that much time with.”

“Fun and freaky?”

“We need to all be willing to adapt to each other, and that means being comfortable with each other in any state, especially naked and intimate,” Fiona said.

“I thought you said you weren’t sure about dabbling with other women, Piper,” Andy said to her. “You don’t have to do an—”

Piper reached over and slipped her hand on the back of Fiona’s neck, pulling her lips to her own, a surprised blip of noise from Fiona before she sort of melted into the kiss, the two tangling tongues for a long moment. Fiona seemed caught off guard but was clearly getting into the groove of it, sliding her own hand up and into Piper’s hair before the two finally broke from their kiss, as Piper looked at Andy like the cat that had eaten the canary. “I think we need to tell Phil there’s pretty solid evidence that their serum will open women’s minds wide to the idea of bisexuality, because I can’t even begin to tell you how fucking hot that just made me,” Piper purred. “I can’t wait to devour her from head to toe, to feel her squirming under my touch.”

Fiona feigned waving her hand in front of her face to fan her. “Oh, now *that* had a *lot* more spice on it than it did in rehearsal,” she said with an almost youthful giggle. “Anyway, all the ladies of the RFC want to play doubles with you, so we decided this would be a great way to start.”

“Mmmm. Well, Niko and Ash are more than a little familiar with getting intimate with each other, but I think the rest of the pairings’ll be pretty new,” Andy admitted. “And you’re comfortable with getting frisky with Niko as well, Piper?”

The tall athlete blushed a little bit and nodded shyly. “She’s like a little fireplug of sexuality, Andy, with an ass that just. Will. Not. Quit. I can’t wait to just go buck wild and embrace this new side of me. I need to crack me off a piece of all the other girls I’m gonna be sharing my life with.”

“Hey, I’m not one to tell any of you ladies no when it comes to stuff like this. How do you want me?”

“The three of us are going to go to the back of the plane while everyone else comes to the front, so we can have a bit of privacy,” Fiona told him. “We really should look into having a divider set up, just so that if some of us want to sleep on a flight, we’ve got the room and space to do it without forcing the rest of the plane into dead silent mode.”

“I’ll keep it in mind,” Andy chuckled. “I didn’t really much think about it, but I guess since it’s our plane, we can do what we want to with it.”

“Well, what we want to do with it *now* is have some fucking *fun*, Andy,” Piper giggled, pulling him up out of his chair.

Andy put his laptop snugly into its case and set the case on the table before Piper kept tugging him towards the back of the plane, Fiona behind him pushing one hand against his shoulders. Once they got to the rear section, the women who were sitting there – Em, Sarah and Ash – got up and let Piper tug Andy to sit down on the center of the couch.

“You got this Piper?” Ash said with a sly smile. “Thought I heard Fi whimper a little upfr—”

Piper suddenly reached over and pulled Ash’s face to hers, locking lips with the diminutive

redhead who gasped a moment at first before dripping into the kiss, her hands sliding along the tall athlete's waist. They broke the kiss a moment or so later as Piper grinned almost challengingly to Ash. "I decided I'm all in, so I'm gonna *be* all in, Ash." Piper reached down and goosed the Irish woman's ass, which only made Aisling giggle, rolling her eyes a little.

"Great, just bloody great," Aisling teased. "She's gone from shy wallflower to full charge fun-time slut."

Piper leaned down and nibbled on Aisling's ear while whispering loud enough for everyone in the back of the plane to hear, "You know you fucking love it, don't you?"

Andy was surprised to see Aisling blush as much as she did when she was pulling from Piper's grasp, but he still caught her nodding with a wry smile that he suspected only he and Piper saw. "Okay, ladies," Ash said, wrangling the rest of them. "Everyone not involved in the funtime, up to the front of the plane."

"I don't suppose I could linger a smidge and watch?" Emily asked.

Piper reached over and swatted Em on the ass with a solid spank, as the tiny actress giggled furtively and scurried forward toward the fore section, followed by Ash and Sarah, although Sarah lingered just long enough to say, "Don't do anything I wouldn't fucking do, although I don't really know what that would be, because I'll—" She was still talking when Em and Ash both reached back to grab a wrist apiece and pull her away from the back.

"You just sit there and let us work," Fiona said. Andy hadn't gotten especially dressed up either. Even when he was doing book signings, he didn't get too decked out, dressed in his usual jeans and a t-shirt. Fi and Piper weren't going to take too much time with foreplay this time, tugging his cock out as they flanked him on either side of the couch, leaning their heads down to press their lips on either side of his shaft, kissing each other around his prick while they let their tongues smother his flesh.

As much as they clearly enjoyed making him squirm while they were blowing him, Fiona didn't want to wait too much, and stood up before tugging her yoga pants only down far enough to her mid thighs before scooting back and just sliding herself up and onto his dick, her head leaning back as she let out a soft moan. "God, Andy, you always feel like... home..."

Andy could understand why there was a bit of thrill in this, being high in the sky, as Fiona shimmed up and down on his cock, her ass bouncing in his lap, as Piper leaned in and kissed him, her fingertips dragging firmly against the back of his neck. One of his hands held on to Fiona's hip as Piper took his other hand and pushed it down the front of her yoga pants, sliding two of his fingers up inside of her pussy.

He wanted to savor the experience for as long as he could, but with Piper's lips locked onto his own and Fiona's weight bucking against him, he felt his release filling up Fiona's cunt much faster than he would've liked, but thankfully, his orgasm set off her own, as it always did, and she leaned back against him, nestling her face against his neck as Piper's lips finally broke from the kiss. "Remember, I got next," Piper said to him.

"And Niko's gonna make you squirm when you do," Fiona purred.

There wasn't a shower on the plane, but the three of them took turns using the sink to wipe down a little bit before making their way back into the main compartment of the plane, where Moira immediately high-fived Fiona, who had a sly grin on her face. "How was it, love?" Moira asked her.

"I don't know if it's the fact that we're so high up or if it the feeling that we're basically doing it in public, but it is a *rush*," Fiona giggled, slumping down in a chair.

Things got quiet for a bit after that, with most of them watching movies on their various laptops. It was when they were somewhere over Nebraska that Andy's phone rang, routed through the plane's Wi-Fi. He chuckled a little bit, stood up and walked into the back of the plane as he took his first airborne phone call.

"Hey Trish, what's up?" he said, having seen it was his agent on the caller ID.

"How set is your schedule tomorrow?"

“Well, the signing is set for 6, and I think it’s going to run about three hours, why?”

“If I needed you to do it from two to five instead, could you?”

Andy laughed, because he could sense there was a nervous excitement on the other end of the phone. “Trish, if there’s something you want me to do inst—”

“The Late Show With Stephen Colbert wants you to come by and do an interview. You and any of your partners who want to stop in. But they’d need you to be at their studio by 6:30-7 at the latest.”

“Are you kidding?” Andy said in amazement. “They want me?”

“Well, they want Em and Sarah, I think, but they *also* want you. It would be a nice easy conversation, unlike the long form interview with 60 Minutes, or the ones you’ve done since then,” Trish told him. “I think it’d be a good move, even if it’s just you. They don’t really have much turnout in terms of in-studio audience, so it’s in line with what you’re wanting to do in terms of giving good promotion, and they’ve got plenty of security, so it should be safe.”

“And if none of the girls wanted to do it? If it was just me, would they balk?”

“Nope, Stephen seems to think you’d be a great interview to have, even if it’s just you, and it would certainly get more people to turn out for your little signing tour. Can I tell them yes?” Trish’s voice was so heavily layered with eagerness, he didn’t want to tell her no. “I don’t ask for a lot from you, but this is one opportunity I think I’d have to strangle you if you didn’t want to take. Besides, I know you *love* Colbert. You were always asking what it would take to get him to invite you on. Now you know. So please, let me tell them yes.”

“Trish, you know I’m a fan of the guy. Of course, I’m going to let you say yes. We’ll get a little less sleep than originally intended, but sometimes you must move things around and make them work because the opportunity’s too good to pass up. I’ll get it set up on our end so we’re in and out of the hotel and the signing to make it to the Ed Sullivan Theater on time to get through make up and hop into the interview. You think you can do the prep work for them, so they have a baseline of whatever they want to know?”

“You know Stephen,” Trish told him. “He’s going to be eager to talk to you about a whole bunch of things. They want you and the rest of your Team to be the only guests for an entire show. They’ll have a very long interview with you and anyone else on your Team who wants to be part of it, so let the ladies know if they want to talk a bit, they just need to show up.”

“I’ll run it past them but tell Colbert’s people to expect at least a handful of the ladies are going to want to show up with me,” Andy said. “Anything else I should know about the tour dates?”

“Everything’s set up, and I sent Lexi the full list, as well as sending it over to that new General friend of yours,” she said, clearly trying to get him off the phone so she could call the television people. “Call me after the taping so I can hear how it went! Knock ’em dead!”

Andy shook his head with a smile. He’d long ago learned not to take it personally when Trish hung up on him before they were actually done talking; she’d always been the first one to get out of any conversation if she felt like she had other things that needed doing. He walked up back towards the front of the plane and had a wry smirk on his face. “Anyone want to do The Late Show?” he said with a chuckle as he moved to take the one open seat, Sarah immediately climbing into his lap, kissing him.

“I’m fucking in! He’s always been super fucking nice to me.”

“I’ll go along as well, Andrew,” Emily said, sitting in the chair across from him. “It won’t hurt for us to reinforce the image of the family.”

“No way in hell you’re keepin’ me off the telly,” Aisling said with a playful grin. “Niko’s flyin’ right now, but I’m sure she’ll say the same.”

“We’ll all go do it, yeah?” Piper asked, only for the rest of the women to nod in agreement.

For the next few hours, people retreated to their devices, although Aisling and Andy moved back to the couch in the back to continue their slow watch of “Farscape,” with Sarah jumping in on the other side of him, nestling his body between the two redheads.

They were about an hour outside of New York City when Lexi wandered back to talk to them.

“So we’ve got two suites at the Walker Hotel in Greenwich Village, each of which can fit five. They hadn’t really thought this new world through all too well yet, so we’ll just have to make do with what we can get our hands on. We’ll split into two rooms for the night, but you have to have at least Niko with you in the room at all times, because I’m not having you sleep without *someone* from security forces on you.”

Andy nodded. “I told you, whatever you ladies want me to do to keep myself safe, I’m going to listen to you.”

“Good. We’re going to touch down reasonably soon, and then we’ve got a trio of SUVs picking us up and transporting us to the hotel. I understand we’re shifting to do the signing earlier so we can stop off and do the Late Show,” she said with an amused look on her face. “You want to head back to the hotel afterwards or to the airport to fly down to Florida?”

“How long’s the flight down the coast?”

Lexi waved her hand in the air a bit. “Two and a half, maybe three hours, give or take. We can do it fine after the recording, as long as Piper’s family understands once we get there, we’re going straight to the hotel to crash, and we can see them in the morning. No late-night dinners or Cuban coffees, no matter how much they want to see her as soon as she get there.”

“That should work, unless you’d rather we do two nights at the Walker.”

Lexi shook her head. “Negatory. The more on the move we can stay, the easier my job’ll be. I like the idea of us being constantly in flux, staying ahead of anybody looking to pin us down.”

“Then away we’ll go,” Andy agreed. “And thanks again for going along with me on all this, Lexi. I know you’re still probably annoyed at how last minute it all is, but I think it’s important.”

Lexi smiled and shrugged a little bit. “Andy, stop apologizing. You’re the principal, I’m the bodyguard. Whatever the principal says needs to happen, it’s my job as the bodyguard to *make* it happen, so we’ll each stick to our roles and call it good, okay?”

“Couldn’t ask for a fairer deal.”

“Great. Now let me go see if I remember how to land an aircraft,” she said as she started heading back towards the cockpit.

“She’s kidding, isn’t she?” Sarah asked just a touch suspiciously.

“Oh, I’m sure,” Andy said. “Like, eighty to ninety percent sure.”

She punched him in the arm for that, and he probably deserved it.

Landing at the private airport outside of New York City was definitely a new experience, because Andy had to admit, not being forced to walk through metal detectors or stow things into overhead bins was a luxury he’d never imagined he’d have in his life.

The private airport wasn’t all that busy, but there were three SUVs waiting for them, each with their own driver, and Niko and Melody checked each of them, and then the vehicles, while Alexis parked the jet in the private storage hanger they were renting for the day. “Don’t lose our plane!” he teased Alexis as she headed back into it to park it. He could see her playfully flipping him off through the windshield.

Andy hadn’t even thought about things like temporary jet parking when he’d bought the plane, but it wasn’t like he could just fold it up and put it in his back pocket when he wasn’t using it, so they would rent storage places wherever they were staying over.

The drive into New York City wasn’t anywhere near as quiet as Andy had expected it to be, as his particular driver, Imani, had loads of questions. Andy, Niko, Sarah and Fiona had taken one car, and Imani had recognized both Sarah from her movies and Andy from his 60 Minutes interview.

“You mind me asking you a question Mister Rook?” she said to him a few minutes in.

“Andy, please. And go ahead.”

“What’re your thoughts about this whole MPA that Congress is talking about?”

Andy cocked his head to one side. “We’ve been in the air most of the day, Imani, so I’m not entirely sure what you’re talking about.”

“The Male Protection Act that Congress is starting to kick around,” she said. “They started talking about it this afternoon, and y’know, I agree we need to keep all y’all men safe, but some of it sounds, I dunno, like maybe dudes would take offense being told how to live their lives.”

“Tell me what you know.”

“Like, what they’re saying is that stuff that’s hazardous to men’s health would be forbidden from them. Like, y’all would have to stay in a certain degree of shape, couldn’t engage in dangerous activities, couldn’t do things designated unhealthy or perilous. Like, smoking would be right out and drinking alcohol would be regulated.”

“I don’t smoke, but I don’t know if I like the idea of the government telling me that I no longer have the right to,” Andy scowled. “And telling us we can only drink as much as they say sounds pretty suspicious to me.”

“You should look into it,” Imani said. “I mean, on one hand, I feel like it’s about time that all y’all dudes get your bodies legislated like y’all been trying to do to us women for centuries, what with all the abortion laws and shit, but on the other hand, if us women is dictating what men can do with *their* bodies, how’s that make us any better than the dudes we been complaining about all this time?”

“Yeah, I’ll definitely have to do some reading about all of this.”

As the cars made their way through the quiet late-night streets of New York City, Andy was looking up the news on his iPad, scrolling through to pick up as many of the highlights as he could. As Imani had suggested, Congress was starting to debate something called the Male Protection Act, which sounded like it would trample over a whole hell of a lot of men’s personal freedoms in order to keep them “safe” or protected. Exactly what was going to be in the MPA when it was presented was still being debated, but it ranged from limited caloric intake to essentially lo-jacking every male in America like they were prisoners under house arrest. Some of the earliest suggestions had already been struck down as “too prohibitive,” one of which would’ve forbidden men from leaving the country for any reason for the next ten years, but others, like men having to obtain specific permission to travel internationally were certainly being talked about like they were already a done deal. The whole thing made his stomach uneasy, even if he could see the root cause the women were trying to deal with.

With the survival of men and women so tangled up with one another, and so many men having died in the epidemic, the government was going through typical overreach paranoia and wanting to regulate as much “safety” as they could, in many cases going too far.

It was a little like speed limits, Andy felt. In principle, he understood them well enough, respected them and was in support of them generally. But like any other law forbidding people from doing things, they’d often been turned into a funding tool for the police in how they were enforced. Some basic measures to ensure men weren’t needlessly risking their lives, that was something he could certainly get behind, but if they were going to tell him he had to cut meat entirely out of his diet, well, they could pry his bacon cheeseburger from his cold dead hands.

*\*Click!\** went the camera shutter as Fiona took a picture of him from the front seat, looking at his tablet in the back seat of the SUV with a slightly worried expression on his face. He looked up and offered the best smile he could as she snapped another one. Making a good impression on the nation was important, and if he was moping or scowling in all the photos, it wasn’t going to be good for anyone, much less selling the impression that America was open for business again.

“Jesus Christ, this is fucking ridiculous,” Andy muttered. “Mandatory therapy for all men? No high stress jobs? Requisite eight hours of sleep each and every day? Government run doctors check ups every six months? Intrusive much?”

“Remember, though, babe,” Niko told him. “You’ve got close to two dozen women whose lives depend on you staying safe. I think asking for a bit of common-sense protections isn’t too much, wouldn’t you agree?”

“I think we gotta be very careful how far down this line of conversation we go, before it starts becoming government mandated safety blankets,” Andy grumbled. “How’d you like it if the

government started telling you what you could and couldn't eat?"

"I'm sure you'll get a chance to speak your mind about all of it at some point, Andy," Fiona said. "What was that thing you said back in college? 'Nobody's an activist until it's their butt on the line?' I remember thinking how cynical it sounded back then."

"A cynic's just a realist who hasn't had enough time to be proven right yet, Fi," Andy snorted.

They reached the hotel not too much longer afterwards, and the plan was for the SUVs to come back and ferry them from the hotel to the bookstore, from the bookstore to the Ed Sullivan theater, and then back to the airport. Everyone was keeping their larger luggage on the plane, and just taking smaller bags so there wasn't an avalanche of luggage everywhere they went, but it still felt like moving an army platoon.

At the hotel, Andy asked the front desk for an 11 am wake up call, explaining they were all going to be pretty jetlagged, and that they were going to do their best to adjust to the timezone shift, but also if they could have the wake-up call be room service bringing them all breakfast, it would be very much appreciated. All of them quickly placed an order for the morning, with Andy even thinking to order some pineapple juice so none of the girls would yell at him too much for having soda in the morning, even though many of them were putting in coffee orders.

When they got up to the suites, all the women took turns giving Andy goodnight hugs and kisses before they split for their separate rooms, with Ash, Niko, Em and Sarah taking the room with Andy, and Lexi, Melody, Fiona, Moira and Piper taking the other. Nobody was happy about sleeping apart from each other, but until the hotel rooms were equipped with larger beds, it was all they would be able to do.

Andy took care of brushing his teeth and washing his face first, and as soon as he was out, he was about to climb into bed when Emily sat down next to him, already in her pajamas, taking his hand nervously in her own.

"You're still cross with me, aren't you, Andrew? About the specifics regarding Mali? I want you to know that I had only the best of intentions."

He sighed, nodding. "I am still cross, yes Em, simply because you waited until the last possible minute to tell me. And you did that *intentionally*. Meaning you knew it was going to cause friction, but you waited until I was right there at the site so I couldn't even stop to think about the ramifications of what you were asking of me. I don't like being ambushed, Em, especially by someone who's supposed to be on my side."

She sighed, starting to cry a little bit. "I know, Andrew. It was very wrong of me, but I was so desperately afraid you might tell me that we would need to pair her with someone else, and her story made me so sad, and she has been so kind to me in the face of adversity that we needed to help her."

Andy gritted his teeth for a moment, then resolved to try and let the anger go. "And I would've come to that conclusion on my own as well, Emily, but it should've been something we decided as a family, not something that you just decided *for* us. The only way this is all going to work is if we all trust each other with our lives, and you didn't even trust me to come to the same conclusion on this as you did."

She threw her arms around him, the tears flowing a little stronger now as she clung to him tightly. "I cannot go back and fix the mistake this time, Andrew, but I can promise you that I shan't do it again, that I will remember we're all a family now, and that I need to act in a way that shows I'm putting the family's needs ahead of my own petty fears." She pulled back so that her puffy eyes could look into his own. "Can you forgive me, Andy?"

The fact that she was using the shortened version of his name meant she understood the weight of her mistake, and the fragility on her face made it impossible for him to hold onto his anger, not that he'd intended to. "Of course I can, Em, but let's stop making a habit of deciding things for the whole house without talking it out, okay?"

She smiled a little bit and leaned up to kiss him as he wiped away the tears from her cherubic

cheeks. “Thank you... I’m so used to having to think of just myself, or more recently, just myself and Sarah. But you are most assuredly correct – this *should’ve* been a House decision and I put myself above the House in making it for you all. I can’t promise I won’t ever do it again, but I’ll work very hard not to.”

“That’s all anyone can ask of you, Em,” he said just as the others were making their way over to the bed, everyone giving both him and Em a big bear hug, happy to see them having put their differences aside. “Now let’s get to sleep. Big day tomorrow.”

They all climbed into bed, Andy with his arms around Emily so she’d know he meant it when he said he forgave her, Sarah in Em’s arms, Niko holding onto his back and Ash holding onto Niko’s. Just as he was about to fall asleep, he felt Niko’s lips right over his ear, whispering into them, “You try and leave this hotel room without me, mister, and I’ll break both your legs.”

He knew she meant it affectionately.



## Chapter Nine

December 14<sup>th</sup>, 2020

When he woke up in the morning, he was surprised to find that nearly everybody but him had been up for at least an hour with one exception, as dear Emily had wrapped her arms around him in the middle of the night and snuggled in against him as hard as she could, not letting go, so her face was up against his collarbone, and she had drooled all over him in her sleep. The others, however, had quietly gotten up, showered, and dressed, and as much as they would've loved to let Andy sleep in, he needed to get up and get his shit in gear, so Sarah woke up Emily and Niko woke up Andy.

He made Emily shower by herself as he reviewed the morning news on his iPad. They'd continued with the debate about what should be in the Male Protection Act, and he couldn't bear to turn on C-SPAN to watch the discussion live, because he knew he'd only end up yelling. As soon as Em was out of the shower and drying her hair, Andy put the iPad down and headed into the shower.

By the time he was coming out of the shower, the ladies of the other room had brought all their things over to Andy's room, each of them ready to check out, with the exception of Emily, who was finishing putting on her makeup.

"Thank you for giving me a second chance, Andy," Melody said first thing when she saw him.

"You really don't have to keep saying it every morning, Melody," he laughed as Niko walked over towards him.

"You've got an interview with the New York Times in about an hour, but we can go downstairs and enjoy lunch while you're doing that," Niko told him like she had his entire schedule for the day mapped out. "They would've loved to talk to you yesterday, but they understand you were in transit, and apparently the bookstore's done pretty well in terms of letting people know they're going to have a book signing."

"I can't imagine anyone's lined up or anything."

"Oh, there's people lined up," Niko said with amusement.

"And a handful of protestors too, so we'll need to exercise some caution," Alexis added.

That sentence hit Andy in the face like a bucket of cold water. "Excuse me, what now? Protestors? What the hell are they protesting?"

"Your preferential treatment, your survival when so many other men died, plus the standard 'don't inject me with your microchips' nutcases, although the store's been advising them to steer clear of being in public, for their own health."

Andy rolled his eyes. "Okay, look, I get them being angry that I lived and lots of other men didn't, but I'm *with* them on that. And what's protesting going to get them? Protesting *me* especially! I can't change any of it."

"What's that King Missile song you used to love, dear?" Fiona asked him. "Where the man goes 'what ever happened to protesting nothing in particular, just protesting, because it's Saturday, and there's nothing else to do?' It was on the album with that 'Detachable Penis' song that was everywhere for its 15 minutes of fame."

"Yeah, well, I somehow doubt any of these people will remember that song, love," Andy chuckled. "Anyway, let's get downstairs. I'll bet the Times reporter's already here."

By the time they hit the lobby, Andy was ready to have his game face on for the interview. The last month or so, he'd done plenty of interviews either by Zoom or by phone, but this was the first in-person interview he'd had since the 60 Minutes interview that had certainly changed his life.

The woman doing the interview, Claire Russell, was in her early thirties, and more than a couple of times, Andy almost felt like she might have been flirting with him, or maybe that was just because Sarah and Fiona had gotten a little overprotective a couple of times and interrupted before Andy could answer a question. The interview hadn't felt combative, but twice Claire had asked Andy to speak *for* the women in his life, and each time, either Piper or Ash had been like, "we're *right here*, you can ask *us*, and we'll speak for *ourselves*." The rest of time, the interviewer had been smart and focused on *why*

he was on tour, what he hoped to accomplish and whether or not this was the right time to encourage people to get out of the house.

“Look, anyone who’s paired up and has taken the Quaranteam serum one way or another, it’s safe for them to travel,” Andy said, in exasperation. “We need to start getting used to the new normal, and it isn’t living at home, never going outside again. That was the old normal. *This* normal, people can go wherever, as long as they’re paired. But people aren’t going to believe that until someone’s showing it to them. So that’s what I’m doing.”

They headed from the hotel straight to the bookstore. The drivers they’d had yesterday came back to pick them up again today and would be with them until they were dropped off back at the airport in the evening.

Even in the middle of the day, New York City still felt somewhat abandoned, something he’d never seen before. Yes, there were cars on the road, but it wasn’t wall-to-wall traffic. Hell, it was barely even traffic. The only time the car stopped was for red lights, and even then, they were almost always the first in line at it. He was used to NYC being a constant barrage of car horns and people yelling “fuck you!” at nobody in particular. Instead, the city had an almost peaceful, serene vibe to it. He knew it wouldn’t last.

Andy caught Fiona taking photographs of the empty streets every so often, documenting how strange the current fear of going outside was. There was snow on the ground, and the NYC streets weren’t completely cleared. The wind had come in since the morning, and he sort of hoped it would discourage protestors from hanging around his book signing, but as they pulled up to the bookstore, he could see it hadn’t pushed much of anyone away. There weren’t a *lot* of protestors, but there were still half a dozen people outside holding picket signs. The first one he saw said, “Choose God over ‘Science!’” Another said, “You are NOT special!” One with particularly bad handwriting said, “Jesus hates you!” The last one he saw said, “Let me die how I lived – FREE!”

‘You will,’ Andy thought to himself, ‘and that right soon.’

Inside, nearly a hundred people had shown up to get copies of Andy’s books autographed, and a big cheer erupted when he entered the store. As he expected, there were also a handful of people in line who’d brought things for Emily and Sarah to sign, if they were doing signings, but both women insisted to the bookstore that they were just here to support Andy and didn’t want to deflect focus or slow things down. One of women near the front of the line pointed out that both Em and Sarah were going to be appearing in the upcoming movie adaptation of the first *Druid Gunslinger* book, and wanted to know if they could sign that for them. Because of that, and because the crowd seemed quite insistent, Sarah and Emily agreed they would sit with Andy and would sign *Druid Gunslinger* books if requested, but, like Andy, weren’t going to shake hands or take selfies.

Before the signing, Andy did a quick reading from the upcoming *Druid Gunslinger* book, “The Fatal Solstice,” which he’d finished a little more than a month ago, something he figured would be a good test of who was here for the celebrity of it and who was an actual fan of his books, and found the audience was enraptured with the section of the story he’d chosen to read, from an early section of the book that hinted at some of the bigger plot he was pushing forward with the series. The audience clapped much louder than he’d expected.

Andy moved to settle behind the signing desk they’d set up for him, Sarah to his right and Emily to hers, with Niko standing behind them as Alexis patrolled the line, sizing people up. Melody was wandering around, trying to do her best to not look like part of Andy’s entourage, so she could spot trouble if it sprung up. The Air Force had provided two people to help in terms of security, one on the door, the other also wandering through the line, just making sure people were okay. There had been a metal detector that everyone had been required to pass through to come in for the signing, but Alexis had insisted she be given the space to patrol freely. She, Niko and Melody were, of course, all armed, and they’d insisted Andy wear a bullet proof vest on beneath his t-shirt, something he’d thought was ridiculous, but he’d agreed to do whatever it was that the two women in charge of his safety instructed

him to, so he'd dutifully put it on. They'd made him wear one of his baggiest T-shirts, so the fact that he had the vest on wouldn't be obvious.

The signing went off without much of a hitch, although a handful of people had been a little hurt that Andy wouldn't shake hands or take selfies. One guy had had the balls to ask Andy if Emily was a great fuck right in front of her. Emily had, thankfully, been more than ready, and instead of blushing or shying away from it, she took glee in staring the man down, and detailing how much she delighted in ensuring that Andy's balls were never left even a little bit full. The man, completely taken aback by how direct and unflinching she was, had stuttered and stumbled away, being mocked by pretty much everyone else in line, as Emily was grinning from ear to ear.

Andy signed over 300 books over the course of two hours, with loads of people trying to edge in questions about what he was writing next, when "The Fatal Solstice" would be on store shelves, when filming was going to start on "Neon Stonehenge," if any of his other works were going to be adapted, and a couple of questions about what his relocation experience was like and if he was going to write a book about it.

They'd cut off the number of people in line at 315, but Andy agreed to hang around a little longer to sign a few things for the staff themselves, all of whom had been incredibly helpful for the afternoon, one of whom had even brought a copy of "Fatal Alliances," asking if the rumors were true about someone considering making a movie of it. He tried to keep his answers honest but still a little vague, so that no one would be run around saying he'd violated NDAs or put false hope into the air.

It was true that Maya was in the process of getting "Fatal Alliances" adapted, but she'd actually started to change her mind about how she wanted to do it over the last few weeks, with the thought of adapting it as a television series instead of a movie, something Andy had whole heartedly endorsed, as he'd been unsure that the complexities of the book could be successfully compressed down into just a couple of hours. He'd spent a couple hours a week for the last few weeks helping her break the book down into various acts and divvying things up, as well as offering her points where she could expand upon the book, add additional subplots or buff up the narrative with more time. She'd felt like she'd just about gotten it all together right before he'd left for his trip, and she had planned to start pitching to networks soon.

Once they left the bookstore, they were on their way to the Ed Sullivan Theater, and Andy couldn't have been giddier. Ever since Stephen Colbert had taken over for David Letterman, Andy had seen the man as the heir to both Jon Stewart and Johnny Carson and had always made it a point to watch at least the Late Show's monologue, either on first broadcast that night or on YouTube as soon as it went up later. But Andy had always considered himself just a silly little fantasy writer, and never thought he was going to be the kind of person well known enough to be invited onto the show.

When Andy got there, he was pleased to find that the staff was ready for not just him but the whole Team, and that they had brought in additional people to help get everyone ready in terms of makeup and asking prep questions, discussing what was okay to talk about and what wasn't. And, to Andy's delight, nobody seemed to be assuming that just because Andy was okay talking about something that all his partners would *also* be.

And, to Andy's great excitement, Stephen came in himself to sit and chat a little bit with him, talking about how weird the whole world had gotten, and if he had any tips for how to keep multiple partners getting along. Stephen's wife Evie hadn't been especially thrilled with sharing her husband with other women at first, but seemed like she was starting to come around, he'd told Andy, who'd nodded and told him that the number one question people had been asking him was, "all these women are *getting along* most of the time – is that *normal* now?" And while Andy certainly couldn't speak to anyone else's experience, he could say from his own that he'd found friction between people on the same Team to be relatively minimal, and that he too had wondered if that was simply how things were going to be from now on.

There was some talk about how much he wanted to pitch his book tour, and Andy had stressed

that while he wanted to mention it, that it certainly didn't have to be the focus of the interview, considering he knew that Stephen might've wanted to follow up on the 60 Minutes interview, or talk to any of his partners about their experiences. Stephen told Andy that they were the only guests for the evening, meaning they would do about an hour's worth of interview and then edit it down to just the stuff they could use, but would throw the whole thing up on the YouTube channel.

The last thing they asked Andy was if he had any music he wanted to come in on, any songs that the band could cover for his entrance music, and on a split second lark, he asked if they could cover The Charlatans UK's song "Weirdo," and Stephen said that he loved that song, and would be happy to see if the house band could cover a bit of it for him.

About thirty minutes before they were set to go on stage, Andy ran to the toilet and threw up, something that made all his partners laugh. Everyone knew he wasn't sick; it was just stage fright. He had his makeup retouched and then had a good laugh about it himself, shaking his head. He hadn't gotten nervous at anything else, not even the 60 Minutes interview, but somehow the thought of going out and talking to one of his favorite comedians made him so ridiculously on edge that he could barely contain himself.

All of that disintegrated as soon as he heard the Late Show band covering "Weirdo" to play him and his family on. Normally there was just room for two or three guests on the stage, but they'd set it up so they had two couches stage right of Stephen's desk and one behind those two up on risers, so that they could fit nine of them on stage if they wanted, but both Alexis and Melody had agreed they didn't want to be on stage, each preferring if they could stay off stage and do their job in terms of security.

For the better part of an hour, Stephen and Team Rook held a delightful conversation. The focus started with Andy but had drifted across nearly every one of his fiancées before the interview was done, all of them getting at least a couple of minutes chatting with the genial host, who genuinely seemed like he was fascinated by their life stories and how their experience in joining such a strange new family unit had gone for them.

As expected, Colbert did spend a good ten minutes talking to Emily and Sarah, dwelling on what they'd seen in terms of change, and when they were going to start working again. Sarah took the opportunity to mention that they were going to start in on filming of Andy's first Druid Gunslinger book, "Neon Stonehenge," next summer with the hope of getting it out for Christmas, 2022.

The charming late-night host also spent several minutes talking with Piper about what she knew about when the Olympics might start up again, but of course, she knew about as much as anyone else did, which was to say nearly nothing. But whenever they were going to go up, she would be ready and she would be there representing America.

Andy himself, naturally, got the lion's share of the conversation, and to put him at ease, Stephen even had drinks brought out for the whole Team, as well as one for himself. During the screening while they were in makeup, someone had asked Ash if she knew what everyone in the family preferred for drinks, and so the show had had drinks prepped for everyone – a Guinness for Ash, a Cosmopolitan for Niko, a Whiskey Neat for Sarah, a Mojito for Em, a Midori Sour for Piper, a Grasshopper for Fiona, an Appletini for Moira, and for Andy himself, a Piña Colada. Andy had nearly laughed himself silly when a production assistant had rolled out the drinks cart on stage and began handing them out. Colbert had bourbon on ice.

During Andy's time talking with Colbert, the host asked him about how some of the early days had been for him during the pandemic, how difficult it had been losing his brother and how things had changed for him since the 60 Minutes interview had aired less than a month ago.

They'd been talking over an hour before the host pivoted over to talk about Andy's little impromptu book signing tour.

"Why do this, Andy – can I call you Andy? – Why do this sudden, quick book signing tour of America?"

"I need people to know it's safe to go out there again, Stephen," Andy said, trying to give the

host his most reassuring smile. “As long as you’re imprinted and vaccinated, there’s no reason not to be out in the world again. We’ve all been living in terror for so long now, and with the death tolls so high, it’s no wonder people are scared. Hell, *I’m* scared, but the only way I know out of this is through, so I’m just going to go around the country, sign some books, talk to some people and show people that the world hasn’t stopped just because they’ve been afraid, and rightfully so, to leave the house. If you’ve been treated and imprinted, get out there.”

“I understand you’ve been taking pictures of the whole thing, Fiona?” Stephen asked her. “And you said it was okay for us to show some of them?”

“Absolutely Stephen,” Fiona replied, as some of the photographs she’d taken over the last day started to fill the screen for the audience both in the studio and at home. “When we were driving from the hotel to the bookstore earlier today, I was just gobstruck at how empty and desolate New York City seemed. It was what I imagined it must have been like a day or two after 9/11, everyone in this state of shock and silence. But the people who came out to the book signing today, they weren’t going to be scared into submission. Look at those smiles. They weren’t going to be sleepwalking through their own lives, and you could see the light on their faces that they were out of their houses, and that someone had told them it was okay to *live again*. We need to be safe, but we can’t give up and surrender.”

“How many more cities are you going to, Team Rook?”

Andy answered, having just glanced at their schedule before he’d walked out. “Jacksonville, Cincinnati, Denver, Seattle and LA, and then one final stop back near home in San Francisco a week or so later. Our tour sort of coincides with a lot of us going and introducing old family members to new partners, letting the families sort of blend and mingle a little bit before everything becomes official.”

“Is there a big marriage ceremony coming soon?”

“Early next year,” Ash said, jumping right in. “We talked about doing a justice of the peace kind of thing for legal reasons, but none of us wanted it to seem like any of us was more or less important than the other. That’s important to us.”

“Well, best of luck to you all, and I hope that this won’t be the last time we see each other,” Colbert said to them.

“Hey, you invite us back, we’ll be here, Stephen,” Andy laughed.

“Ladies and gentlemen, give it up for Team Rook! You can catch them at bookstores across the country for the next week, and the newest Druid Gunslinger book from Blake Conrad a.k.a. Andy Rook entitled ‘The Fatal Solstice’ will be hitting bookstores on February 15<sup>th</sup>, next year. Preorder it today!”

Once they went to a commercial, Andy looked at Stephen in shock. “I hope like hell the publisher gave you permission to announce that date!” he laughed. “I haven’t told *anyone* that date yet! They only settled on it last week.”

Stephen grinned at him and nodded. “They suggested we use the large audience to announce it for you, and your agent thought it would be funnier if you didn’t know it was coming.”

“I swear to God, if Trish wasn’t such a fucking *great* agent, I’d have killed her already,” he chuckled. “But she’s right. The look on my face will probably be great for your promos tonight. Hey, thanks again for doing this. I’ve been a fan of yours for a long time.”

“Tell you what,” Stephen said. “We can call it even if you’ll do me one last favor.” The man reached beneath his desk and pulled out a *very* well-read copy of ‘Neon Stonehenge,’ the very first Druid Gunslinger book, and slid it across the desk. “I didn’t really have time to get down to the bookstore today so—”

Mid-sentence, Andy reached across the desk and grabbed the book, flipping open the cover to the title page, and immediately began writing. “To Stephen, your shows from home during the pandemic helped keep me from losing my mind. I hope this book brought you even half that much joy. From one fan to another, Blake Conrad / Andy Rook.”

As soon as he slid the book back across to Stephen, the host picked up the book and clutched it to his chest with a thankful smile. At that moment, Andy heard a click from behind them, as Fiona

captured the moment on her camera. They took a handful of pictures, Andy and Stephen, Stephen with Em and Sarah, Stephen with all the ladies of Team Rook, and finally, one of Andy, Stephen and the members of Stephen's Team who were at the studio, which was a total of nine, although Stephen told Andy that his complete Team was currently fourteen women, and he'd not realized how much the Quaranteam serum had stoked his libido until he'd had to take stock of how many women he'd been paired with and just how much sex he'd been having.

Once all the pictures were done, Team Rook had washed their faces to remove the makeup they'd put on and headed for the cars, which were waiting at the back entrance for them, and headed straight off to the airport.

"How's security felt so far, Lexi?" Andy asked her. He'd agreed to do whatever Alexis wanted him to during this tour, but he also wanted to be checking in with her regularly, making sure she was comfortable with how things had been going.

"Good," she said. "I was worried that it was going to be a shitshow, what with the talk of protestors, but so far, that's basically just been a handful of whackjobs shaking their fists at clouds. That's no reason to relax our vigilance, naturally, but it makes me a little less concerned that we're going to have to worry about shit like sniper eye lines and whatnot."

"I don't know if we should be *more* nervous about Florida or *less*," Niko joked. "On one hand, it's Florida. On the other hand, *it's Florida*. They've got plenty of lunatics and just about as many guns as gators, and they're all on meth."

"Who's all on meth?" Fiona joked. "The lunatics, the gators or the guns?"

"We'll be fine," Andy said. "We've got the signing tomorrow at Books-A Million, and where are we staying, Niko?"

"The Hampton Inn & Suites downtown, where they've set us up with connected rooms and they've taken two queen sized beds and shoved them together in each of the rooms, plus there's an additional queen sized bed in each of the connecting rooms, so I think we're good with the exception of bathroom space, but the hotel's given us room keys for a couple of other rooms on the floor on either side of us, so if we need to, we can have lots of showers going at once."

"That's nice of them," Andy said with a smile. "And while the connected rooms instead of one big room isn't ideal, it'll have to do for now."

"They actually want to know if we can spend fifteen minutes in the morning talking to them about what we think an ideal hotel room would look like, what with teams being what they are, and I told them you'd probably have loads of ideas, Andy."

"Sure, yeah, happy to help, as long as it's over a complimentary breakfast. It delays us from meeting Piper's family a little bit longer," he joked as Piper slugged him in the arm.

"They can't wait to meet you in person, you jackass, so you be *nice* to them when you meet them," Piper said, although she knew he was just kidding.

When they hit the airport, they were all ready to ditch the cold New York weather for something warmer, the weather report promising mid-sixties in Florida. The sun had set on the drive there, and so they were taking off under cover of darkness. The flight was only going to be three hours long, so everyone got settled in relatively quickly, although Andy had nearly completely forgotten about the plan for all his fiancées to join the mile high club until Piper and Niko came and picked up from his seat when they were somewhere over North Carolina, cunning grins on their faces. Most of the girls hadn't changed out of their outfits from the appearance on the show, but Piper and Niko had, and were just wearing oversized t-shirts. "Think it's about time for you to expand the club, don't you?" Niko said with a slight giggle.

"You sure you're up for it?" Andy asked Niko, as they pushed him back towards the back of the plane.

"Why are you asking me and not her?" Niko said with a strange look, gesturing to Piper. "She's the skittish one."

“*Was*. She *was* the skittish one,” Andy corrected. “You should’ve seen her with Fiona. *Or* with Ash before.”

“Oh yeah?” Niko said, licking her lips. “Then gimme a ki—”

Piper’s hand was on the back of Niko’s neck pulling her lips to meld with her own, and Niko pipped in surprise but then moaned into the kiss, sliding her hand onto Piper’s ass while the athlete began pinching one of Niko’s nipples through the shirt. The smaller Asian woman was grinding her hips against Piper’s, and Andy couldn’t help but admit, it might’ve been one of the hottest things he’d ever seen with his own two eyes.

The taller woman broke from the kiss before looking over at Andy, a wild smile on her lips. “You,” she said, staring directly at him. “Sit. Cock out.”

Andy moved to sit down on one of the couches and unbuttoned his jeans. He pulled out his cock as Piper drew the shirt up and over her head, revealing her gloriously fit naked body to his eyes, his and Niko’s. Within moments, Piper had straddled Andy’s hips in reverse position, her ass moving to settle against his pelvis as she slowly pushed her cunt down onto his thick cock.

“That’s so fucking *gooooood*,” Piper purred. “You feel so fucking perfect, you lovely bastard. I fucking love how your cock fills my tight little pussy up.” She wriggled her hips back and forth and began to pivot on top of him, as Niko grinned drawing her own shirt up and off, tossing it to the floor of the plane. “What’re you up you, you sneaky little sluuuu—”

The last word got dragged out as Niko dropped to her knees and began to flick her tongue against Piper’s clit, edging against the line where her flesh met Andy’s. Piper’s body wasn’t even sure how to move, but it did its best, continuing to try and buck up and down in his lap, her moans loud and frantic, Niko’s tongue sending her into conniptions of pleasure so fast and hard, she could barely contain herself, and by the time Andy was emptying his load into Piper’s cunt, he was fairly certain she’d gone through a couple of orgasms at least.

Niko made a point to lick up as much as of his cum as she could before all three of them got dressed again.

It was nearly midnight when the plane landed, and Andy barely remembered the trip to the hotel, falling asleep between Piper and Niko as soon as they were safely in bed.

## Chapter Ten

*December 15<sup>th</sup>, 2020*

“Andy, we need you to get up,” Niko’s voice said to him, pulling him from his slumber. “We may have a problem.”

He never liked to hear that, especially as he was waking up, but he knew trying to go back to sleep and ignore the problem would probably only make things worse, so he moved to sit up, looking at how all his partners were awake, everyone staring at Melody, whose face was scrunched up a bit. Nothing seemed direly out of place to start, but the fact that everyone was watching Melody made him wonder what the hell was going on.

“Thank you for giving me a second chance, Andy,” Melody said, before a second sentence was already leaping from her lips, one much shorter and even more frustrated. “Fuck! I tried so hard not to say it, but it was like I was fucking compelled to do it until it was starting to hurt! I wanted to pull other words to my mouth, *any* other words, but that was all I could bring myself to say! ‘Good morning, Andy!’ ‘Can we fuck, Andy?’ ‘Get your lazy ass out of bed, Andy!’ It was like I suddenly lost every word I knew until I said that phrase!” She looked a little nervous, staring down at her hands. “Something’s fucking wrong with me.”

“Huh,” Andy said, which suddenly made everyone turn and look at him. They were all incredibly nervous and jumpy, but Andy seemed to be taking it in remarkable stride, and that made most of them even more uncomfortable, unfortunately. He’d learned that getting too worked up in advance only upsets everyone and never gained anything, so he was doing his best to remain calm and look at everything logically. He’d gotten better at tracking through logical progressions, no matter how flimsy the data or the theory. Living in a post-apocalyptic world had a lot of effects, but one of them was that Andy’s mind was always waiting, watching, wandering. And from one single data point, he’d built a quick hypothesis. Maybe he was right, maybe he wasn’t, but it wouldn’t be hard to do a fairly conclusive test. “I’ve got a theory. We could test it pretty quick, I suppose, although it might make us a little bit late for breakfast.”

“We’ve got an hour before that, Andy,” Lexi said. “Is that enough time?”

He nodded. “Should be fine. Five to ten minutes for the sex, ten minutes for the shower to follow. We’re just going to have ourselves a little dosing for Melody, but during the whole time, Mel, I want you to try and be as quiet as you can. In fact, I want you to not say a single word during all of it. If I’m right, and I have a worrying feeling that I might be, you won’t be able to, and I don’t want you to feel bad about it, okay?”

“Am... am I going to be okay, Andy?” the Asian woman said to him, her eyes tearing up a little with concern.

Andy smiled, taking her hands into his, giving her his most confident look. “If I’m right? 100%. There’ll be a few hiccups here and there, but nothing you can’t handle. If I’m wrong? Well, we’ll burn that bridge when we come to it. Anyway, let’s see if I’m right. I think that I am.” He reached his hand up and smoothed along her arm. “How fast do you want to—”

“I want you to fuck me stupid right now,” Melody said, pulling her shirt up and over her head. “Nothing gentle.” The bra was next. “Nothing tender.” Her pants and panties were off her ankles in moments. “Flip me. Fill me. Pound me. Hammer that thick dick of yours into my tight little snatch until I feel like you’re ripping me open from the fucking inside.” She crawled up onto the bed on her hands and knees then turned around, lowering her shoulders down to the top of the mattress as one hand reached back between her legs to smooth two fingertips across her pussy, which was already damp and slick, even to his eyes.

“I thought he told her to be quiet,” he heard Sarah mumble.

“Shhh!” Emily said to her, as all the women moved to form most of a circle, wrapping around the bed, as Fiona cautiously snapped some pictures on her camera, like she wasn’t sure if either of them minded, although Melody didn’t seem to mind if Andy didn’t.



“You can have anything you want, Andy,” Melody whimpered at him. “You want to have my ass? It’s a tight fucking fit, but it’s yours, *I’m* yours, your hot little slut ready to be used.” She was teasing the pucker of her asshole with one digit, whining in impatience. “I don’t even fucking care where you stick it, but I need that fucking dick and I need it fucking now…” Her fingertips moved down and she pushed two long digits inside of her cunt before sliding them back out, glistening as she curled them in Andy’s direction. “Please, baby, daddy, Master, whatever the fuck your hot little slut’s supposed to call you, Andy… can you please just fuck me already?”

The one downside of the position was that the tattoo Covington had put on Melody was staring him in the face, but he moved and put his left hand on her hip and his right hand over the tattoo, covering as much of it as he could as he shifted his torso to press his cock against her slit, sliding up inside of her as her head leaned back and she let out an utterly pornographic moan. Like many of his partners, Melody seemed to orgasm as soon as he was inside of her, although it wouldn’t be the only orgasm she’d have this session.

“Fuck yes, you glorious motherfucker, drill that cunt! Fuck me like you own me! Fuck me like you hate me! Fuck me so hard I feel it for fucking days!”

Andy’s hands tried to hold her in place, but Melody was thrusting back into him with each push of his body towards hers, and whatever tempo he was planning on setting, her body was only going to push the tempo even faster than that.

“Do it! Fuck me! Fuck me Andy! Fuck your whore! Fuck her to fucking death!”

He did his best to batter his cock in and out of her, but it was remarkable how tight Melody’s pussy was, and somewhere around her third orgasm, his own started to overload him, and he spewed a searing load of cum inside of her, and the two of them shared the intense moment together before they both rolled onto their sides, her body nestling in against his, his cock starting to soften inside of her, but mostly staying enveloped by her cunt.

She’d been talking the entire time.

“I’m *so* sorry, Andy,” Melody said, breathless and sorrowful. “I tried—”

“Hey,” Andy said, stroking Melody’s hair tenderly. “Relax. I don’t think you *could’ve* been quiet if you tried. It fits in with my theory. So, I’ve got good news and bad news, but we’re going to *have* to call Phil.” He chuckled a little bit, noticing that literally all the other women were standing around staring. He turned Melody’s head, so she was looking at him and then leaned in to give her a very soft and tender kiss. “So do you want the good news first or the bad news?”

“The good news first, please,” Melody said. “I don’t think I can take any more bad news.”

“The bad news isn’t all that bad,” Andy said. “So the good news is that what’s happened to you, I don’t think it can ever happen again, so nobody can *fix* it, but nobody can make it *worse* either. The bad news is that every morning, you’re *always* going to say thank you, and every time we fuck, you’re *never* going to be able to be quiet. But that’s it. That’s the total extent of everything that’s happened to you, and you don’t need to worry about additional changes.”

“Oh *shit*,” Piper said, moving to slide up onto the bed, sitting next to Andy and Melody, her hand sliding over Melody’s hip. “*I* did this. *I did* do this, didn’t I Andy?”

Andy sighed, reaching over to put his hand on top of Piper’s. “You didn’t do it intentionally, Piper. You didn’t know this would happen. And consider how much worse this *could have* gone if you’d said something else.”

“Andy, love,” Ash said, sitting down on the bed, putting her arm around Piper’s shoulder, not sure why she needed comforting, but instinctively just moving straight to it. “What are the rest of us missing?”

Andy gave Melody a hug, folding his arms around her as she flipped herself in his arms, her chest to his. “When we went to reimprint Melody, between the time Melody took the reassignment pill and her first contact with my semen, Piper talked to her a little.”

“I don’t remember that at all,” Melody said quietly. “Why don’t I remember that?”

“You were, uh, a little out of it,” Piper said. “I said... what did I say? I told you that you would start every morning thanking Andy for giving you a second chance, and that whenever you and him were having sex, you’d talk dirty to him, because he likes that. I’m pretty sure that’s all I said.”

“And right before she said ‘imprinting,’ I swear I thought I heard her say something in Russian,” Andy said. “But in all the chaos of my regeneration, I’d forgotten all about it.”

“I think we all did,” Niko said. “I was there at the time, but, no offense Melody, you weren’t my biggest concern at that point. And that’s my fault. I should’ve been better, more observant. Andy trusts me to keep the family safe, and...” She sighed, rubbing her eyes for a second before looking up. “And I need to get used to the idea of you being part of the family now. I can’t be so laser focused on just Andy all the time. I’m a protector of the whole family, and I’m going to have to wrap my head around that pretty fucking quickly. I think... I think you’re right, Andy; it was Russian. But the whole thing was on tape, and I’m sure Phil can get the tape without too much hassle.”

“You remember what it was?” Andy asked.

“I think... I think it was... кодировка... My Russian isn’t great but, I think that’s... is it similar to imprinting?”

“Similar, but not the exact same,” Lexi said. “It’s more... it’s like... encoding?”

“Why wouldn’t anyone notice this sooner?” Sarah asked.

“When women are reassigned, they’re... practically feral,” Niko said. “They’re not thinking clearly and above all else, they’re impatient. As soon as they get that hit from the reset, they’ll do anything to get reprinted. So it’s extremely unlikely that there would be *time* for most women to be given instructions. And it certainly wouldn’t be a common thing. We aren’t doing reassignments on a large scale. Not yet. And we need to make sure nobody else gets this done to them.”

“Shouldn’t it be tested or some such?” Emily said.

“I bet Phil can find someone who needs to be reassigned who wants to cure herself of some bad habit – smoking, nervous eating, something minor that they can give a final test over, to make sure it works like we think it does,” Niko said with a soft laugh. “You going to be okay, Melody?”

Melody sighed, looking up at Piper. “*Every morning?*” But there was a hint of a smile there that showed she understood how much worse it could’ve been. “I don’t mind talking dirty – I kinda like it that way myself – but what happens if I *can’t* start a morning that way? Do I have to write him a note or something?”

“Guess we’ll see sooner or later,” Andy said.

“Suck it up, buttercup,” Piper laughed, as if coming to accept the weight of what she done, and realizing exactly how much worse she could’ve accidentally done. It wasn’t good, being ‘encoded,’ but the potential for greater damage was so much larger than what had actually been done. “Being part of Team Rook involves a little bit of chaos for everyone involved.”

Andy grinned as he kissed Melody’s cheek. “You going to be okay?”

“Yeah, I’ll be okay,” Melody grumbled. “I just don’t like the idea of there being some kind of standing instruction in my head that I’m not allowed to disobey.”

“Consider it part of the penance you’re doing for your time under Covington,” he said, slowly pulling away from her to get out of bed. “Why don’t you go hop through a shower while I call Phil and tell him what’s going on?”

“Don’t take too long, Andy,” Piper said, handing him his phone. “We’re doing lunch with my family before the signing and then having dinner again with them afterwards before flying out.”

“How long’s the flight?” he asked Alexis.

“To Cincinatti? Couple hours, tops,” she said. “Nothing to worry about. We’re already on top of getting everything prepped for our arrival, with the hotel already picked out and prepped. The Embassy Suites RiverCenter already has a suite set up for us where we can all share one bed again.”

Niko giggled, shaking her head slightly. “Thank god they did, too, otherwise we were going to be staying at a hotel called the Covington, and I just don’t think we could bring ourselves to do that.”

As Melody headed into the bathroom for her shower, Andy tapped the first name on his contacts list – his old friend Phil Marcos, as he walked over towards the covered windows. For the next several minutes, Andy detailed to Phil what they'd learned about what happened to Melody during her reassignment, and Phil's reactions had run the gamut, thinking Andy was kidding at first before growing intensely concerned to immediately planning how to manage the issue for the time being. As always, Phil moved towards the practical as quickly as possible, and was already taking notes on what he needed to test for and new protocols they were going to need to implement during the reassignment process. Leaving people alone during the time was, at least for the foreseeable future, clearly out. By the time Melody was coming out of the shower, they were wrapping up their phone call, with Phil having a plan of attack on what he needed to do next, and Andy feeling like he'd helped some. And then he headed straight into the shower himself.

By the time he was out of the shower, everyone else was ready and they were fully packed up. Andy had to admire the almost military-like precision with which the family had taken the process of setting up and tearing down camp, although his part in the matter was pretty small. He only had one roller suitcase and his laptop bag, and that was basically it. Even his charger gear – phone, tablet, watch – all fit into his laptop bag.

Breakfast went by quickly, as Andy let the women of his family do most of the talking about how the hotel business needed to adapt to what the new family unit looked like – bigger bedroom sections, bigger bathrooms, more electrical outlets – and what the cheapest possible solution to the problem would be. Fiona, who had been taking photographs during the meeting, suggesting simply combining rooms together, two or three single rooms being connected by removing the dividing wall, letting a big room have two bathrooms and a center space with room for a bed that could hold large families in their new configuration. It *was* however Andy who pointed out that not *all* rooms should be retrofitted that way, as it wouldn't be uncommon for women to be travelling solo, which meant they would really only need a double or a queen-sized bed and a single bathroom. The hotel management thanked Team Rook for giving them their time and thoughts about how to reconsider their business moving forward.

Andy hadn't realized how tired he must've been the night before when they'd got in, because it didn't dawn on him until they were walking out to the parking lot that Lexi had rented two SUVs *for* the family to use here, instead of hiring a driving service. They loaded up the vehicles with stuff then people, and before he knew it, they were on their way driving southwest to Gainesville to meet Piper's family at their home.

The whole family had talked a little bit to Piper's family over the phone during the last month, but nobody had expected the whole Brown clan to come out in force to meet all of Team Rook when they'd decided to show up last minute to say hello. Andy had hoped that the short warning time would've kept things to a small family get together, but it seemed like Piper's parents had invited not only any of the family that happened to be nearby but the neighborhood as well. Both Lexi and Niko seemed a little annoyed at first, but Melody had teased both of them about the odds of one of Piper's parents' elderly neighbors being a secret member of the Taliban, and both women had immediately lightened up a little and laughed.

Andy had expected the hardest grilling to come from Piper's parents, but both of them had been remarkably warm and friendly right off the bat. No, the person who'd been the most intense around him had been Piper's older sister June's husband Declan, and his Team. It wasn't that Declan was mean; he was just *intense*. They definitely didn't run in the same political circles, of that much Andy was certain. Declan had seen the interview and had talked to Piper a couple of times since then when she and June had been talking over the phone. Dec had a lot of questions, but since he and Andy were close to the same age, they at least shared a sort of cultural common understanding, even if they were miles apart politically.

"I just want to make sure my wife's baby sister isn't going to be marrying a jackass," Declan

said to him while he was sipping his scotch. “You didn’t *seem* awful on television, but it’s not that hard for people to look good on tv when they’re, in fact, horrible.”

“Go easy on him, Dec,” June said. “Andy seems like a great guy.” June looked a lot like Piper, just older and not anywhere near as tall, although she wore her hair incredibly short, and the two couldn’t be any further apart in terms of dress sense, as Piper was always about sportswear casual, and June looked like she’d pulled out her Sunday’s best dress for this. But both were brunettes, both in good physical shape and both certainly easy on the eyes.

“I’m a normal guy, June, just like anyone,” Andy laughed, sipping from a rum’n’coke that Lexi had brought him. “What do you do for a living?”

“I’m a 911 operator down in Tampa,” June said. “Which, I have to say, has been pretty fucking weird for the last year. Once lockdown started, it was totally quiet almost all the time, for the first few months, although we started getting a lot of calls to pick up dead bodies after that.”

“Jesus, June, that sounds fucking brutal,” Andy said, putting his hand on her shoulder. “I’m sorry you had to go through that. How is it these days?”

“Mostly back to quiet again,” June said, her smile almost completely devoid of joy, as if she was dealing with exhaustion on a cellular level. “But that’ll pass soon enough, I’m sure, and I’ll look back at this as the time I got a paid vacation and was told to just sit around all day waiting for something to happen. Which is better than Dec, who’s had to go and actually collect the dead bodies constantly.”

“Being a paramedic’s been brutal during this time, but we’ve learned to adapt,” Declan said, rolling his glass in his hand. Andy had suspected the man was law enforcement of some kind, as he had that sort of look about him – crew cut hair, perfectly pressed trousers, dress shoes polished within an inch of their lives – but he could see paramedic now that it had been pointed out to him. “And the disease has been weeding out those that can’t take their health seriously.”

“A couple of our other partners are floating around here as well, but most of them didn’t want to do the drive up here considering they might be at the wedding soon enough,” June said. “Don’t suppose you’ll be lending out that plane of yours to ferry people to and from the wedding?”

“Ha, no, afraid even if I could afford to do that, which I really can’t, my security team would bust my balls for even *thinking* about letting other people fly around in our jet,” Andy laughed. “But we’re making sure that the accommodations nearby will be excellent, no matter how big or small your Team is, and that nobody feels overly burdened to come if they don’t want to. If you just want to come as the two of you, I promise you, nobody will mind. The size of this wedding is already more than a little terrifying.”

“What’s your headcount at for guests?”

“Basically the same as an outdoor festival?” Andy said, rolling his eyes. “I think we’ve capped attendance at two thousand people, although we still aren’t entirely sure if we’re being crazy optimistic or if everyone’s just going to pass if they can’t bring their *entire* Team with them. We’re allowing a handful of people to bring their full Teams, but we’ve suggested to most people only showing up with a few of them, more for their own sanity than for our convenience.”

“We’d *love* for everyone to come, sis,” Piper said as she stepped over to join in on the conversation, sliding her arm around Andy’s shoulders almost protectively. “But we get not everyone’s feeling comfortable traveling yet, and learning to move this many people at once? It’s a challenge.” Piper turned Andy’s head up so she could lean her head down and kiss him. “My sister’s not giving you too much shit, is she?”

“Just the right amount,” Andy said with a chuckle, thinking to himself that June had been lovely, but her husband had been borderline antagonistic.

“Hey Dec. Good to see you again.”

“Pipes,” Declan responded quietly.

“So I take it you two are a pre-DuoHalo match?” Andy asked. He really hadn’t had much time

to talk to Piper's sister over the preceding month, and he now had *so* many partners with *so* many details that nobody expected him to remember much of anything. He and June had gotten along fantastically the one conversation he remembered, though, and he wasn't sure how June and her husband could be so very different.

"Married ten years last April."

"Kids?"

"Two daughters, Natalie and Abigail, 8 and 5," June said with a smile. "They're both running around here somewhere. I think our partner Esparanza's keeping tabs on them."

"She is," Piper confirmed. "They wanted to play 'Cling To Auntie Piper's Legs' for a while, so I obliged them."

Andy smiled back a bit more comfortably at that, as both girls were safely within the pre-DuoHalo zone, and clearly still alive. He remembered Piper telling him that June had been married before DuoHalo, and that she was sort of acting as queen bee of their household while new women were added to the mix. "Glad to hear they're keeping old traditions alive."

"It's best that way, don't you think?" Declan said. "Sticking to old traditions, the way things used to be?"

Andy's head turned a little bit, his eyes narrowing. "I'm more of a forward-thinking guy myself. Traditions usually hold people back from evolving."

"Moving too far forward too fast is what gets people into trouble," Declan said. "All this focus on identity politics, it's all walking away from family values, good Christian family values."

"Well, I'm not a Christian," Andy said with a devilish smirk. "I'm an atheist. But knowing right from wrong isn't based on any religion – that's simply treating others as you want them to treat you. And you know who complains about identity politics? People whose identities haven't ever been threatened. It's easy to claim people should stop talking about how their oppressed when they've never been oppressed."

"Is this the point of the conversation where you call me racist?" Declan said.

"I dunno," Andy shot back. "*Are* you a racist?"

"The facts are the *facts*, Andy," Declan said, his temper starting to flair a little. "If there's a crime committed in America, it's far more likely to have been committed by a person of color."

"No, if there's someone *arrested* in America, they're more likely to be a person of color," Andy corrected. "That's not even close to the same thing. And considering how much more damage white collar crimes do to society, it's surprising how few white-collar criminals get arrested or do hard time. And funny how all the white-collar criminals are white skinned too."

"We have a legal system in this country for a *reason*, Andy," Declan said, his voice starting to get raised a bit. Now Andy knew exactly where the tension had been coming from.

"Sure, for the wealthy to abuse as they see fit, and to ensure they don't ever see the inside of a jail cell," Andy countered. "If you want to convince me you believe in equal justice, I want to see you demanding the death penalty for the bankers who've repeatedly and illegally crashed the economy."

"How soon before you're thinking about having kids, sis?" June asked, trying to pull the conversation away from politics. "I know the government's leaning pretty hard on this 'Repopulate the country' plan of theirs, and the tax breaks they're offering are a little crazy, but I know you want to go and do the Olympics again."

Piper nodded, nudging Andy in the ribs, as if trying to get him to back down a little. "We're going to go and lock in a second gold medal, but after that, I'm probably going to start trying. Well, *we're* going to start trying," she said with a soft giggle. "There are days where I can tell Andy is completely *over* all these gorgeous women having sex with him."

"Can you blame him?" Ash said as she moved to slide in against Andy's other side. "It's basically two to three a day, at his level. Most people have smaller scales than Andy, but Andy's a giver and he's always putting other people over himself. Some people think it's a flaw, but we think it's what

makes him the most special man we've ever met. Anyway, I need to borrow him for a bit to help me rescue Em and Sarah from your father, Piper. I think he's been talking to her about Dahlia Hairtrigger since we got here, and Em's doing her absolute best to stay polite, but she's really *really* tired of talking about it. Think you can lend me a hand, babe?"

"No problem, love," Andy said. "Excuse me."

Andy and Ash pulled away and slowly made their way across the room. It was a busy party, but he could see Niko, Lexi and Melody were stationed in a triangular pattern, so that each of them was covering the entrances and exits, and he knew they wouldn't let anything happen to him. But that didn't include protecting Emily from overly enthusiastic fans. But as they approached, Andy was a little surprised, as both Emily and Sarah were laughing, with wide smiles on their faces.

"I thought you said we needed to rescue Emily," Andy whispered to Ash.

"No no, we just needed an excuse to make Piper, her sister and her sister's husband spend some time alone chatting, so that we know they're okay," Ash said. "So, we wanted to pull you away from them. June's beau has been a little short-tempered with Piper about you. Declan's not convinced that Piper isn't stuck in Stockholm Syndrome, and the two of them have been fighting about it. June and Dec keep bickering, and so Piper wanted to help. We wanted you to have a little bit of time talking to Dec first so he could see you truly do love Piper. Dec's just having a hard time wrapping his head around this, around all of this, no matter what June thinks. We're going to let 'em hash it out."

"I shouldn't—?"

Ash shook her head. "Let 'em talk through it. Piper'll make him come around, or at least back down. Family knows family best. And once Piper's had enough time to smack some sense into her sister's husband, she'll be back over again. Even if Dec doesn't like you, he needs to learn to respect you, and that you're not going anywhere, no matter how much of a fuss he puts up."

"Andrew!" Em said, a laugh rolling from her lips. "I was just telling Piper's father here about the time we turned half a dozen cats loose on the set of the third Daggerfall Academy film. We got in *so* much trouble, but it was so, so, *so* worth it, to see all of those old, stodgy actors scrambling to catch felines who were starting to demolish the carefully constructed sets."

"You were a hellraiser as a child, weren't you, Em?" Andy said, joining in the laughter.

"Still am, thank you very much!"

"We're not going to let you have *any* animals on the Neon Stonehenge set, Ems, otherwise the director's going to throw a shitfit," Sarah said with a giggle.

"I've not read any of your books, Andrew," Piper's father, "but if Em here's going to be in it, I'm going to have to start in on them, I guess. I do hear they're... a bit more adult, though?"

Andy laughed, shrugging a little bit. "I leave the sex on the page, Mr. Brown, and figure that my audience is grown up enough to handle it. But I never let it get in the way of a good story."

As the conversation carried on, Andy noticed something he'd not had a chance to really see before – his partners were being *territorial*, almost *possessive* of him. During the entire party, at least one fiancée had been pressed against his side all the time, and they'd been making sure it was clear he was with them, as if they didn't want anyone to entertain the idea they might be able to draw Andy's eye away, something he thought was patently ridiculous, but then it occurred to him that the girls might not have even known they were doing it. They'd been having conversations and always making sure to establish their place with Andy first and foremost, and almost immediately dropping in the fact that they were a closed Team right afterwards.

He didn't *mind*.

By the time they were leaving the party, it seemed like Piper and June had smoothed things over, or at least established what was and wasn't fair game for conversations, and how he and Declan could navigate not killing one another.

Declan wasn't really *that* bad; he was just misguided. Andy'd known a lot of people just like him growing up. It was hard getting people to look past what they'd been taught and get them to

understand systemic fundamental underpinnings that could lead them to bad conclusions. They'd been taught to follow the basic logic – cops arrest criminals, and if most criminals cops arrested weren't white, then most criminals must be not-white. But usually they didn't stop to see the bigger picture, how large scale criminals often weren't punished because they used their wealth to protect them from consequences, which let them continue to commit crimes.

His entire life, underpinning anything he'd ever written, Andy was always writing about systems, how easy it was for a pattern to become a system and for a system to just blend into the background until people didn't even notice they were doing it. Malice was rarely intended, but confronting systems was hard, because people often felt like they were being judged, and Andy was just as guilty of coming across overly harsh as anyone. He and Declan were never going to see eye-to-eye, but they didn't have to be at each other's throats about it the whole time either.

The signing back up in Jacksonville was much smaller than the one in New York had been, but the fans were no less enthusiastic, and the reading portion of the event had gone over especially well. Piper's parents had come up from Gainesville for a short dinner after the signing, and before Andy knew it, he was back at the airport already, climbing back into his private jet.

While his encounters on the jet so far had been slightly on the wilder side, Niko and Ash had wanted to keep it as soft and tender as they could, almost like a reminder of how the early days had been (excepting, of course, Lauren's absence), and while Niko certainly got off with Andy, the cuddling they did afterwards was far more important.

On the drive from the airport to the hotel, Andy made it a point to check in with Melody, to be sure that she was taking her new situation okay, and it seemed like she'd mostly made peace with it. She'd thought about it and realized that as long as she either said thank you or texted him thank you first thing, she'd probably be okay in managing the compulsion, and thinking about how much worse it could've been had made the whole thing much easier to swallow.

When they made it to the hotel, Andy was already starting to get nervous about tomorrow. It would be the first time he'd seen his nephew since his brother's passing, and out of all the things that scared Andy, that scared him the most. The ladies were trying to be optimistic, trying to keep Andy's spirits up, but everyone sort of understood the weight he was carrying around with him.

His partners were also nervous, but for entirely different reasons. Tomorrow they were also going to meet Andy's mom (and the Team she'd been saddled up with), and other than Fiona, none of them were entirely sure what to expect. She'd been hospitalized for months, but had been released a few weeks ago, and hadn't really been in a state to talk to any of them, even over the phone. But she'd insisted that she get a chance to meet all of Andy's soon-to-be wives in advance of the wedding. Apparently after getting imprinted a week ago, her health had completely rebounded and she felt like she was in the best shape of her life. Andy knew they'd all do fine, though.

With all that weighing on them, they were glad to have one giant bed they could all crawl into and pile on top of one another in a sea of arms and legs, Ash snuggled in against his left, Piper tucked in on his right.

Right before he was about to fall asleep, Ash whispered quietly into his ear, "Wonder if any of your old flames are going to be at the signing tomorrow. Won't that be fun to show off for them." That certainly woke him up for a little bit longer, but eventually he drifted off to sleep, realizing that if he could make it through tomorrow, everything else would seem easy by comparison.

## **Intermission Two – Billy**

*December 16<sup>th</sup>, 2020 – Athens, Georgia*

William “Billy” Monteiro was on the verge of losing his goddamn mind. In the spring of 2020, most of the students of the University of Georgia had been sent home, and the college temporarily shuttered to try and ride out the epidemic, but for some students, like Billy, whose parents had already rented out his former room in their house, leaving wasn’t really an option. A small handful of students had been forced to remain on campus and done their best to band together, and some of the faculty had stayed to make sure the campus wasn’t completely in the hands of the students.

That had been mid-March.

By April, it had been relatively evident that the semester had just been totally cancelled, but again, the students who were trapped on the UG campus still couldn’t leave. The administration had done everything possible to make sure that the students weren’t simply abandoned, but that they were taking care of one another and that the staff who made their homes on campus were still working while keeping safe. Hot meals were delivered to students in their dorm rooms twice a day, the bathrooms were still getting cleaned and above all else, the internet access never, *ever* went down.

When summer rolled around, Billy had asked his parents if there was any chance of him moving back home while the campus was running on autopilot, but his dad had insisted that everyone had been told to shelter in place now and that even the woman who was renting his old bedroom had started working from home full time, so none of them were leaving the house if they could help it, and they certainly couldn’t displace their renter because Billy didn’t want to stay on campus or get his own place off-campus.

They’d argued for a bit, but at the end of the day, Billy agreed that he *had* told his parents they *could* rent out his old room when he’d moved out, but he hadn’t expected them to take him up on it quite so *quickly*. So going back to his parents’ place was out of the question.

That meant he had chosen to remain on campus along with the handful of other students and faculty who didn’t have anywhere else to go. But then the rules changed, and fast. May was a whirlwind of whispers, rumors, and gossip that everyone was going to die. There were reports drifting through the Internet that the death tolls were clocking much higher than anyone was putting up on the news, so the students had decided to take matters into their own hands.

Within the first week of June, the students built their own operating protocols – how people could move across campus, how they could pass things between each other while still avoiding contact, and how they could keep from going insane with isolation sickness. Rules were being bent, sure, maybe even broken, but they weren’t dying. In fact, the mini community that had sprung up at UG hadn’t had a casualty yet, something the students were taking as a mark of pride. There were only about 400 students on the entire University of Georgia campus, and half that in terms of faculty living on campus, but they’d formed their own small village to make sure nobody took any unneeded risks, that nobody got into trouble or stepped outside of their safe zones.

They’d even divvied up the risks for supply runs, by making sure whoever went (usually one of the few paired of people already sharing a room, either student or faculty) was picking up supplies for a few dozen people and then delivering it to doorsteps. They’d commandeered a couple of the handtrucks and rolling pallets so they could get things in bulk, and CostCo was doing what it could to help everyone stay safe. People would Venmo their share of what they owed and then things would be delivered to their doorstep.

By September it was clear they weren’t going to have a fall semester either, but by that point, the campus was getting more comfortable with their new processes and procedures. The community – they were calling themselves the R.E.M. Runners, after the famous band – had a working set of guidelines that were helping everyone manage, but even though they were physically fine, they were still fighting a losing battle against the depression that was settling in.

In October, Billy heard from one of the staff members on campus that there was going to be



some kind of a solution coming, but that it was going to take a while. Stay put, they were being told, and hold fast. It was starting to eat away at him, not really being able to see or talk to anyone. He'd built friendships with a couple of other students on campus – they'd started 'hanging out,' if being hundreds of feet apart yelling across a courtyard could be called that fairly. Mostly guys – Dwayne, Eric, Cal – but a couple of girls too, like Ella and Molly. More often than not, they were spending nights on their Discord server, in one of the dozen voice channels, sometimes playing party games like JackBox or Among Us, other times just playing Call of Duty. It wasn't much, but it was a band-aid situation designed to keep them from getting too antsy. Voices in the head were giving a little solace, but not anywhere near as much as a simple hug would've put him at ease.

When November rolled around, the weather cooled but it hadn't snowed, and so while the outside meetups were still happening, people were in much heavier clothing, and the fatigue was starting to show. The lack of physical contact was eating away at everyone something fierce. More than a couple of times, some of the other students had broken down crying, saying they didn't care if they died anymore, if they could just hold another person's hand again, even for a few minutes, it would be worth it. Collectively, they were doing everything they could to keep anyone from going off the reservation, but the last thing most people wanted was to succumb and die when they'd been so dedicated and careful thus far.

Billy was doing his best to keep a level head about it, but it was clear how close to breaking everyone on campus was. They weren't going to be able to hold up their quarantine all that much longer, no matter much they tried to adapt. There were limits to what the human soul could be expected to endure. People had broken down crying too much lately, and a couple of people had broken protocol and gone rogue in early November. They'd left campus, headed for who knows where. Somehow, deep down, Billy knew they were dead the minute they'd headed off campus, but he couldn't let himself take the time to grieve them, because those who still going were pretty sure the casualty rates were off the charts.

Hell, at this point, they were starting to expect they'd be fighting off hordes of flesh-eating zombies before 2021.

At least spending a few weeks planning how to handle a zombie apocalypse had kept them busy for a while. It made a lot of people laugh, and everyone ping-ponged between treating it deadly seriously and cackling their damn heads off, which was good. Some of the blueprints people were doing for "zombie defenses" were truly the kind of thing that made everyone laugh, even the people having the hardest time. Idle hands were the devil's work, and the idea of zombie planning kept everyone busy for most of the month.

Then, towards the end of November, all the shoes dropped at once.

An entire fucking closet of them.

The President's speech had clarified a lot of what was going on – not just one plague, but *two*. Covid and DuoHalo. The worst fucking double-act in human history. The details weren't expected, because the casualty rates were brutal, but they weren't even. That was the biggest shock. Men were dying in such large volumes that they were now being considered precious resources. Everyone on campus had been so isolated, they hadn't really been aware how the deaths had been split. But with the information about how many men had died, suddenly all the unanswered phone calls were making sense, not because people didn't want to get back to them, but because there wasn't anyone alive on the other end of those lines.

He'd watched the 60 Minutes story with rapt attention, figuring this was going to be the blueprint about how his life was going to go moving forward. He needed as much information as he could get, and even if the story was at least somewhat propaganda bullshit, it would still be the general plan he'd be following for the next few months.

They were pairing men up *hard*, and the plan was to make sure men were safe, sexually active and producing offspring. The new family unit was going to be something like one man and a dozen or

so women, all bringing new children into the world. Whatever he had been planning on doing with his life, those plans were going to have to go through a complete rework. He'd been thinking about getting into cybersecurity, since it seemed to be a field that was always growing, but now, he didn't have a fucking clue what he should be doing with his life.

By the end of that singular episode of 60 Minutes, it dawned on him – maybe people had just forgotten they were even out here, what with most of the universities closed during the pandemic. People were concentrating on areas they knew where people were, but what if someone somewhere along the way had just assumed the campus was empty and marked it off on some map as 'deserted land?' So he did the only reasonable thing he could think of to do...

...he made a phone call.

On November 22<sup>nd</sup>, at 10:25 am, he contacted the Air Force and informed them that approximately 150 men were safe and secure on at the University of Georgia campus, but that it had been getting harder and harder to keep people on campus and prevent them from getting out of line or running off. There were also about 200 women on campus, as well as about fifty faculty, of which he thought the male-to-female split was maybe three-to-one. That meant he had close to two hundred men, all alive and safe, who were wondering when they could get this treatment they'd just seen on television. The woman who'd answered, a civilian named Sherry Spender, had been so astonished she'd nearly dropped the phone, but insisted that he stay on the line while they gathered as much information as they could from him.

They didn't let him off the line until the afternoon, with him having to plug his phone into the charger and talk to them on speaker as he detailed how the students were keeping safe, what protocols they had in place to keep them all separated but safe, the teachers and faculty who were still on campus, and how tense it was all getting, what with the news of just how many men had died.

Billy hadn't really felt like he was much of a leader, but as he talked with Sherry, he felt like maybe he'd been underestimating how much he'd been doing with keeping the campus safe, having coordinated food deliveries, plate takeaways and cleaning regimes, so much that the other buildings around campus had taken their cues from the systems Billy had helped design. All he'd really wanted to do was keep those who were trapped on campus like he was safe, from themselves and each other.

By the end of the day, the Air Force had a plan for someone to come by and test them in the immediate future, telling Billy to rally the wagons and keep everyone strong, that before the end of the year, he would be able to share a bed with not just one, but several people, and that every single one of the people he'd been talking to at distances for the better part of a year would be able to sit down and shake his hand to say thank you for keeping them alive.

Word traveled around campus fast after that, and within a day, all slack had been picked up, and everyone was back to taking everything intensely seriously again, knowing that they were so close to the finish line, a sense of renewed energy and reinforced potential, that there was a finish line in sight.

(It certainly didn't hurt that they were being promised overly eager sexual partners as well, considering most of the people who'd stayed on campus had been single beforehand, and, in the words of one of the guys, "I've seen *all* the porn there *is to see*." If they hadn't seen the special, with the slightly frumpy looking author and his bevy of unbelievably gorgeous women, the whole thing might've been a bridge too far. But everyone was watching it, and thinking the same thing – if *that* guy can pull *those* women, what the hell is waiting for *me*?)

Billy heard back from his dad that he'd been contacted by the Air Force the very next day. He had, of course, paired up with Billy's mom, but also that the woman who'd been renting out Billy's old room had been added in almost immediately, as well as a couple of other women, including one who was barely older than Billy, which felt fucking *strange*. Thankfully, they were hours away, and he had problems of his own to keep him busy.

On December 7<sup>th</sup> through the 9<sup>th</sup>, the Air Force came and tested all the men and women on the University of Georgia campus to ensure nobody had DuoHalo or Covid, and to get everyone to take

their Oracle questionnaire. It had almost felt like an invasion, with a dozen troop trucks rolling onto campus and each building getting a complete sweep for dead bodies, of which they apparently found a couple. While everyone on campus would've loved for things to move along quicker, they were told they were being considered a precious resource at this point, and the last thing anyone wanted to do was to get them sick just before the finish line.

The hurry up and wait was, still, more than a little brutal, as some of the students were then moved from one hall to another, being put into places so that a couple of the buildings – Rutherford Hall and Rooker Hall – were getting adjusted to be able to house the sort of new family units that were to be expected on campus moving forward. Rooker Hall was already known for its apartment-like dormitory space, but apparently even more modifications were needed to get everything up to spec for how they would be expected to live while attending college there. The Corps of Engineers came in and did quickhack alterations to the buildings, but what exactly those alterations were hadn't been detailed to the students or faculty, who were just as much in the dark as everyone else, but it had all been done incredibly quickly, as the renovations took only a few days, and most people were too busy discussing how they'd responded to the Oracle test.

The Oracle questionnaire was everything Billy had expected it to be and much, much, much, *much* more. To his surprise, a large portion of the questionnaire was under the heading 'Dealbreakers,' and gave each student a chance to lay down the things that they positively, absolutely would not endure under any circumstances. At first, he'd been surprised that there was no mention of infidelity, but then he remembered the portion of the 60 Minutes special where they'd been talking about 'negative exposure of unpaired partners,' as well as the rather gruesome photos they'd shown, just to drive the point home. He'd kept his dealbreakers relatively simple – nobody allergic to dogs, no vegetarians and nobody who was into the far extreme of filth-based sexuality. (It boggled Billy that there were people who found piss and shit to be *turn-ons* rather than *turn-offs* but he supposed to each their own.)

He was supposed to be in the middle of his sophomore year and instead, his freshman year had never really ended, and he was on month 12 of that second semester. And the Oracle questionnaire, it was a nice little distraction to take his mind off the fact that he felt like he was in a total holding pattern, just waiting for the world to wake up again, and to prevent him from thinking about just how many people he knew were now dead. Hell, if he'd been even a single year younger, he would've been a fatality instead of a survivor. (He'd actually heard from a member of the Air Force that the two dead bodies they'd found had probably died very early on in the pandemic, and they were both under the age of eighteen, having started college early.) He could start to dream what kind of women they were going to be pairing him up with, what his life would be like on the other side of it.

During the time they'd had to wait, he'd watched the recording of the President's speech a bunch, as well as the 60 Minutes story, the entirety of which was up on YouTube. He wasn't particularly thrilled at the idea of being a father so young in his life, but the news of the last few weeks had made it *abundantly clear*, he was expected to be fathering kids as quickly as possible. And it did mean he was going to be the center of attention for a bunch of beautiful women who would be somewhat hand-picked to share his interests.

Billy was starting to wrap his head around all of it, now that that news embargoes had been dropped, that the number of fatalities across the world were epic and awesome and terrifying, all in the truest senses of the words. In hunkering down on campus, Billy and the others had probably evaded the deadliest plague in human history.

Through dumb *fucking* luck.

But just after he'd finished his morning exercises, there had been a knock on his 4<sup>th</sup> floor Church Hall dorm room door. Billy had damn near jumped through the roof. With the exception of the time the troops had come knocking on his door on Dec. 7<sup>th</sup>, nobody had knocked on that door since March. Even when food or supplies were dropped off, the people bringing things never knocked – they would leave things on the doorstep, head back to their own room, and once in their own room, they'd

call to say that things had been dropped off. It was all to make sure nobody was breathing quite the same air as anybody else, and while it certainly wasn't a guarantee, it was a measure, and all the measures they'd taken had been enough to keep them all alive.

"Who is it?" Billy said.

"Corporal Alice Hickman," a female voice said. "United States Air Force. Can I come in?"

"Is it safe?"

"I assure you, Mister Monteiro, I couldn't be any safer if I tried."

Billy moved over and opened the door, seeing a single woman in grey and blues of urban camouflage waiting for him, a kind smile on her lips. She looked like she was in her mid to late twenties, but she was ridiculously fit, a sort of Nordic beauty the likes of which he'd spent much of his high school years dreaming of, her blonde hair up in a bun, her blue eyes staring right at him. "Well, I guess you should come in, then," Billy said, stepping back into his 10' by 10' prison dorm room. "Close the door, though. We're still observing all our protocols until it's safe for us to be moving around the place again, and I certainly don't have this Quaranteam vaccine the President was talking about, so I'm still what you would call high risk."

Corporal Hickman moved into the room and closed the door behind her, as Billy moved to sit in his desk chair and she moved to sit down on the couch, looking over at him. "So you're the Bulldogs' Bodyguard, huh? I thought, I don't know, I thought you'd be *older*. You don't look like you're even old enough to share a beer with me."

He'd heard the nickname every so often for the last few months, based on how he'd just sort of told people how to do things. He wasn't trying to be an ass about it, but whenever it felt like people didn't have an idea on how to handle things, he'd just told them what to do and how to do it, and they had, because maybe they'd been too caught up in their own shock, or maybe fear and indecision had taken hold. The UG mascot was the English Bulldog, specifically named Uga, and a couple of the students in May had jokingly referred to him as the Bulldogs' Bodyguard, since he was shepherding them through the crisis. In late September, after he'd talked a couple of students who were having a particularly hard time with isolation into staying put instead of running off, one of them had made a special order, found out Billy's hat size, and a black bowler hat had been left with his next food delivery. Billy had laughed about it, but had kind of liked how the hat looked on him.

"I'm not, but you make it sound like I'm some kind of fucking superhero," Billy said, his hand pushing back his unruly black mane of hair out of his face. "I've just been trying to keep everyone here safe, not let anyone get too distraught or depressed and make sure we're all taking care of each other." Billy grumbled and moved over to his desk, opening the drawer to take out a rubber band, tying his long black hair into a ratty ponytail at the back of his head. "Sorry, I very badly need a fucking haircut, but that isn't exactly the kind of thing we can do a lot of on our own. I thought about shaving it off, but in the winter that can be too fucking cold." He laughed a little bit. "I'm rambling. Sorry. I haven't really had an in-person conversation with another human being in seasons."

"I thought you and the other students were doing outside conversations."

"Shouting from one rooftop to another isn't 'an in-person conversation' no matter how you want to spin it. Yeah, I've seen people, but not so close I could reach out and touch them if I wanted to. I assume you're here to tell me about what's going to go on with what's happening to all the people here on campus."

"I am," she said, crossing one leg over the other. "We're going to keep you in place, but we're converting the campus into a small village for the time being. Consider it like temporary housing, some place for us to keep you all safe and together and allow you to go through college before you move off and away. That'll give us time to establish real housing off campus for you in a slightly more leisurely pace, and you'll all continue to get your further education on whatever it is you want to do going forward, other than fathering the next generation, that is."

She had a very straightforward and direct approach to conversation that Billy had to admit he

admired. She knew that *he* knew exactly how many fucking people had died, so there was no reason to dwell on that – they could just move forward and focus on actions instead.

“So, wait, we’re going to stay trapped on campus?”

She laughed, and to Billy’s ears, it felt like music. “Not in the least,” she said. “Over the next nine days, we’re going to get everyone on campus paired up with as many matching partners as we can, and at the end of that, anyone who wants to take their new family to meet their existing family on Christmas Day is welcome to do so. While we were taking a slower roll approach for pairing up women with men, the enclave you’ve set up here demands rapid response, so we’re having to take a, ah, slightly more aggressive approach here. That means we’re sort of dumping several women on each man all at once. Now, we haven’t started that yet, mostly because I wanted to get your read on whether that would be a good idea. It might be a bit of whiplash with the sudden—”

“The sooner the better,” Billy said. “The people here, they are literally starving for physical contact of any kind. Most places, people who were told to shelter in place were in households with a handful of other people, who formed a pod. That meant while they weren’t seeing a *bunch* of other people, they were seeing *some* people. Most of the people here, they’ve been going completely solo since March. You probably already know this, but we had a couple of the girls who just started relationships with the nearest boy they could get their hands on after a few months, so they could have a shelter buddy. Most of them came clean about it, but I know there’s a couple of others who are still trying to be on the sly about that. As long as they’re just seeing that one other person, though, I’ve told them we’re looking the other way. Most of the time, it’s just someone to wrap your arms around and cry yourself to sleep at night. I assume that probably got figured into your pairings?”

“It did, although I have to admit, I’m impressed that you knew there were couples on campus.”

Billy clicked his tongue. “By my count, we had about dozen couples when lockdown started, and that maybe doubled over the course of the quarantine, but once people paired up, they stayed paired up, and they stayed safe and on campus, so I figured better that than running off into the world.”

“See? You’re smart,” she said, admiration in her voice. “I told them you were smart. One of the other soldiers bet me that you didn’t know some of the guys and girls had paired up, but you were even pretty close to the number of them.”

“Let me guess – I was off by one pair, one way or the other.”

“Twenty-five couples, not twenty-four,” she grinned.

He snapped his finger with a chuckle. “Missed it by *that* much. But yeah, I think if you’ve got five to ten women ready for each guy here on campus, you should bring them all on immediately. Yes, there’s going to be some initial awkwardness, but if you pace them, you’re letting them establish a pecking order, whether you know it or not. I get that normally you can’t normally control that, but what it sounds like to me is that you can here, and if that’s true, I think it’s probably the better plan. And, y’know, keep in mind, everyone who’s here and isn’t staff? We range from 19 to 22, and we know what we’re up against now. We’ve all watched the President’s speech a bunch, and that 60 Minutes special. All that grieving you’re worried about? We started that months ago, and while we’re certainly not done with it yet, neither is anybody else on this fucking planet.” Billy sighed, reaching to open his minifridge, grabbing a 7-Up. He looked at her and she nodded, so he tossed it to her, then pulled out another for himself, cracking it open. “The longer you wait, the harder it’s going to be on all of us. At the end of the day, we’re barely more than fucking kids, ma’am. But we’ve been doing what you’ve been telling us to. We’ve been hanging on, holding out, waiting for someone to come in and fix this. You’ve got that. Don’t go slow – go as fast as you fucking can.”

She nodded. “That’s about what I expected you’d say, but I wanted to be sure you felt that way before we moved you.”

He took a swig from his soda. “Moved me? Where am I going?”

“Over to Rutherford Hall,” she said. “You can come back and get all your stuff tomorrow or the day after. Today, I think we just need you yourself.”

“Nice,” Billy said. “I’m getting one of those swanky double units on the fourth floor? You think that’s going to be big enough, Corporal Hickman?”

“We’ve been retrofitting the whole building, Billy,” she said to him. “We took the 29 units up on the 4<sup>th</sup> floor of Rutherford and converted them into 7 units. There’ll be an excessive number of bathrooms, but we had to do what we had to do to make it all work. You’ll be getting the largest unit, the center space, which used to be 6 units, all sort of merged into one. Yours is the only floor where we had to cut out the passthrough space between the left side and the right side, but we figure people will get used to going downstairs and up again if they want to see people on the other side.”

“How many people am I getting paired up with?” he said, grabbing his laptop and his phone charger, tossing them into his laptop bag as he looked at her.

“Right now? We’ve got ten other women lined up for you, all waiting in the new space. They’ve spent the last twenty-four hours getting to know each other while they’ve been under observation, making sure the injections didn’t have any side effects, so once you get over there, you’re going to be pretty busy for the first few days. After all, you’ve got nearly a dozen women to get imprinted onto you, so we’re sure you’ve completely protected from DuoHalo.”

“Wait, *other* women?” he said with a raised eyebrow as they were making their way to the door, Billy so eager to get away from this room he could barely wait.

“Sure,” Alice replied. “You’re basically the Mayor of Bulldog Bourg, and men are a precious resource, so we’re doing our best to try and assign someone from either the armed forces or protective services to each man in America, and I thought to myself, ‘he looks cute enough,’ so I had them run my Oracle test against yours, and we actually came up at an 87% match. Unless you think I’m not *pretty* enough to be part of your family,” she said, undoing the top button of her uniform.

“Did not mean to imply that *at all*, Corporal.”

“Call me Alice, Billy. Call me Alice.” As they walked out of the room, Alice took a cellphone out of her pocket, making a quick call while they waited for the elevator to rise to their floor. “Captain? We are go for Full Force Integration. As soon as I’ve reached Rutherford, start sending in our girls in groups of five every ten minutes, and we should have all the men relocated before dinner. Copy that.” She chuckled a little bit. “Oh, I intend to, Captain. I intend to.”

“What happened to all the women on campus?” Billy said as the elevator doors opened and they stepped inside. This wasn’t new territory; he’d done this once a day for the entire pandemic, but he could still feel the pressure of the changes already starting to weigh on him.

“We gave all of them the Oracle questionnaire like we did the men, but we also gave women the option of requesting their results be run against men here on campus if they wanted. We also respected all the existing couples, so those people got paired up last night and we’ll move them into their new rooms this afternoon, once they’ve recovered from their first imprinting.” She glanced over at him with a smile as the elevator opened on the ground floor. “You were quite the popular request, you know? I think a number of the girls on campus came to think of you as their personal savior. It was a good thing we had your questionnaire to go on to figure out how to whittle them down, otherwise you might’ve been overwhelmed with thirty or forty women jockeying for your attention.”

They stepped out and walked out of the building, Billy taking a deep breath of fresh air. They’d walked a couple of minutes before he finally spoke again. “Any of them match up with me in the end?”

“Any you were particularly hoping for?”

Billy chuckled, rolling his eyes. “I feel like that’s a trick question, because if I say yes and they *aren’t* there, the ones who *are* going to be there will feel devalued and the ones who *aren’t* will have trouble looking at me again later.”

“C’mon, Billy. We’re gonna be fucking at least once a week until one of us is dead. At least tell me *one* person you were kind of hoping might be over there,” she teased as they walked farther than Billy had travelled in several months, down S Lumpkin Street and over the UGA Myers Quad, the area not well kept, but at least kept in check by the cool weather. “Just *one*.”

“Well...” Billy chuckled, looking up at Rutherford Hall. It wasn’t even half a mile away from where he’d been, but it might as well have been Mars at that point. “It’s probably a pipe dream, but there’s been one girl I’ve been talking to on Discord like every other day for the last few months, and I figured once we were out of the quarantine, I was thinking about asking her out.”

“Oh yeah? What’s her name?”

“Molly,” Billy said. “Molly Warner. The nose ring’s kind of a turnoff, but she’s so amazingly optimistic and chipper... whenever *my* energy was running low, I’d talk to Molly for a pick me up, and I’d store it to give it back to her when she needed it.”

“Molly Warner,” Alice said, as if struggling to remember the name. “Molly Warner. If I said I didn’t remember her name being on our list, would you be disappointed? I mean, I could try and requisition her for you if—”

“No no,” he said as they stepped into the elevator at Rutherford Hall, pressing the 4 button. “If she doesn’t want me, I don’t want to force it.”

As they stepped off the elevator, Billy could immediately see how the changes had been made, with a number of rooms having been combined into larger units, sections of the building combined together to make larger apartments. They moved out of the elevator and towards the section that had a newly constructed wall and door where a hallway had originally gone through. On the door was the number 404, which made Billy chortle a little.

“What’s so funny?” Alice asked.

“404 is the old web page error for page not found.”

“Ah, I see,” she said, unlocking the door. “Oh, Billy? I remember Molly now...”

He wasn’t even halfway through the door before the nearly naked form of Molly Warner had wrapped her arms and legs around him, clinging to him in just a bra and panties before she kissed him as hard as she could, her tongue practically demanding entrance to his lips, as they moved into the room, where several other beautiful women were waiting for him.

As she closed the door with her inside of the room, Alice said to him, “Little Molly here matched you at 97.4% and she claimed dibs on first go around.” She started stripping as well, as most of the women were already wearing as little as possible, hoping to get an early position in line, as Molly directed Billy further into the room and towards the nearest couch. “Go Bulldogs.”

## Chapter Eleven

December 16<sup>th</sup>, 2020

Andy hadn't had the heart to tell any of the girls when they'd crashed the night before that they weren't *technically* sleeping in his home state of Ohio. In her effort to avoid them staying at a place with Covington in the name, Niko had missed that the Embassy Suites RiverCenter by Hilton Cincinatti wasn't actually *in* Cincinatti. *Or* Ohio. Oh, sure, it was in the greater Cincinatti area, but it was across the Ohio River. In Kentucky. In a town called, sadly, Covington. Thankfully, his partners had all sort of laughed it off in the morning while they were getting ready.

Melody had tried sending Andy a text when she first woke up, thanking him for taking her in, and when he opened his eyes, generally the last one to get out of bed, he saw her grinning, standing over him. "You're a big-dicked bastard, you know that?" she said, and then turned to high five Piper. "Fuck yeah, that worked!" Andy hadn't *seen* the text when she said that, so he was momentarily confused until Piper showed him his phone.

"Melody sent you a text message as soon as she got up, babe, but we had your phone in silent mode so it wouldn't wake you," Piper told him. "So, as long as she sends you a message while you're asleep, it's pretty easy sailing for everyone in dealing with that. We just wanted to test it without causing too much of a fuss."

"Hey, anything that makes your lives easier, you know I'm all for," Andy said, as Lexi and Niko wheeled in a few carts from the hallway that contained plenty of breakfast options for them to all have, Andy delighted to see an entire decanter full of pineapple juice. Sometimes the girls made special requests, and Andy's *only* request was that he always wanted to have either pineapple juice or orange juice for breakfast, never *ever* grapefruit juice, or, as he described it, squint in a glass.

As breakfast was starting to wind down, Andy asked Piper to phone up her sister, so that he could talk to Declan. He hadn't liked how they'd left things the day before. "Dec? Hey, it's Andy. Look man, I feel like we sort of got off on the wrong foot yesterday, and I'm afraid I probably came across looking like a bit of an asshole, which was never my intention."

"Yeah, well, me too, Andy," Dec sighed on the other end of the line. "You know how it is. Politics flare up and tempers kick up and suddenly we're at each other's throats for no real reason. I did a bit of reading while you were gone, and you're right, we aren't tackling white collar crime as much as we probably oughta be. I voted for Trump 'cause he promised to drain the swamp, but you know, it's swampier in DC now than its ever been. Nothing got done the whole time he was there and that fucker *still* raised my taxes and spit in my eye. Fool me once and all that. Wouldn't have voted for him a second time, even if he'd lived. Wouldn't have voted for Biden neither, but I mean, Trump fucking stared into an eclipse and decided he knew more about hurricanes than the weather people, so he just changed a map with a sharpie and thought nobody would notice. Fuck *that* guy. I'm glad he's dead. He's not one of us. He was fucking *rich*. That's the problem. I sort of realized, we gotta be looking at rich and poor before *anything* else. I'm tryin' not to think about it in terms of race, but in terms of economic status, and, hoo boy, does that turn a bunch'a shit on its head."

"And I'm sorry I bit at the racist comment," Andy sighed. "I should've known better, because I really *don't* think you're racist – I just think systemic problems get ignored a lot by people who *think* they're looking at one set of data and think they have the whole picture. It tends to make people *look* racist when they just occasionally *act* racist, and most of the time, they don't even realize they're doing it, otherwise they'd stop and think about it some. We question each other and suddenly we're both shouting like a bunch of drunken idiots." He laughed a little. "We *gotta* find some better way to get past these entrenched habits of ours to get our hackles up the minute we're questioned, y'know?"

"You find a way to do it," Declan laughed in response, "you let me know and I'm pretty sure we can make a fortune off of teaching it to people. Anyway, you're not a vegetarian, and you weren't bitching about my Garth Brooks t-shirt, so I'm certain we can find somewhere in the middle to make it work, even if we don't see eye-to-eye on a bunch of stuff."



Andy grinned. “They can have my cheesesteak when they pry it from my cold dead hands, Declan. Glad we were able to talk through it and not end on a bad note. You decide if you’re coming up for the wedding yet?”

“Yeah, I think it’ll just be me and June coming up for it while the kids and the rest of the partners stay home. We’re filling out the RSVP card right now and we’ll have it off to you in the mail, so maybe it’ll even be waiting for you by the time you get back home.”

“Sounds great, Dec. We’ll look forward to seeing you in January then.”

“Cover your ass out there, Andy,” Declan said. “We got unreasonable folks on both sides of the aisle, your camp *and* mine. Never take your eye off the ball.”

“You got it, man.” Andy ended the call, handing the phone back to Piper. He looked over at Alexis, who was basically playing schedule keeper for the whole trip, which was good, because Andy was pretty sure he’d have gotten lost down the rabbit hole for logistical planning. “What’s our schedule for the next few days look like?”

“We’re going to meet up with your mom and your nephew early in the afternoon at the house you grew up in, the book signing in the afternoon, then we’re flying up to Chicago to meet Fiona’s family. Crash the night there, then the next day we fly up to Pierre, South Dakota, driving down to the Rosebud Reservation to meet Niko’s mom for lunch, then driving back up to Pierre, and flying from Pierre to Denver, where we’re crashing for the night,” Alexis told him. “Going to be a very busy few days for us, but tomorrow’s got lots of travel time you can write during, and the day after’s pretty lax as well with just the book signing and then the flight up to Seattle, but that’s a three-hour flight, whereas everything we’ve got today is just a couple hours here and there. Plus you can sleep in again.”

“How far from the Rosebud Reservation is Pierre?” Andy asked, gathering up his things, making sure all his various little electronics were tucked into his satchel bag.

“A couple of hours each way.”

“Can’t we fly straight there?”

Alexis sighed. “Yeah, we can, I suppose. Rosebud does have its own airport – Rosebud Sioux Tribal Airport – but it’s not exactly what I would call a security-rich environment.”

“How big is Rosebud as a city?” Andy asked, a smile on his face.

“Like, barely a thousand people?”

“Think we can afford to be a *little* laxer and just fly straight there instead?” he laughed. “We didn’t tell anyone we were going there, it’s not on the public schedule and it’s remote enough that you should be able to see any threats coming a mile away. Besides, Niko’ll be on her home turf.”

Alexis chuckled, nodding. “Yeah, okay. I’ll get the flight plan updated, but either me or Melody stays with the plane the whole time.”

“Why not both of us?” Melody asked.

“Because Niko’s going to be home again, so she won’t be as critically sharp as she normally is, and that means either you or me’s gonna be on full security detail,” Alexis said. “No offense, Neeks.”

“None taken,” Niko replied, doing one final sweep of the hotel room, making sure nobody had left anything behind. “It’s totally fair to say I won’t be on my A game back on the rez. Place is going to bring up a lot of old memories, even as tiny as it is. But anything out of the ordinary there will stand out like a sore thumb.”

“You mean us,” Moira joked.

“I do, indeed, mean us.”

“Any reason we’re not doing a bookstore signing tomorrow in Chicago?” Ash asked Andy.

He sighed, having been hoping to dodge this particular bit of conversation. “You’re gonna make me get into it, aren’t you?”

Suddenly, all the women turned to look at Andy. “Oooooo! There’s gossip!” Sarah cackled. “Andy’s got an unkind word to say about somebody!”

He shook his head, rolling his eyes a little bit. “I did a book signing at Myopic Books a couple

of years ago, but they've got a hard-and-fast total no-cell-phone policy for the whole store, and I had my cell on me there and it rang during the Q&A, which got me a *major* talking down to by the manager of the store, despite the fact that it was actually important and time-sensitive business information I needed at that moment in time. They told me they were going to put me on their blacklist and I would be persona non grata from the store, now and forever more," he scoffed. "The whole thing just put me off the idea of doing a signing in Chicago, even if we'd gone somewhere else like the Sandmeyer's or Open Books instead. And I figured I know the Smiths are going to want to have some serious time grilling me again, so I suspected having a couple of days off to meet family and travel in the middle would give everyone time to decompress a little bit. I don't want Fi's parents or Niko's mom to feel rushed. I was a little worried that we hadn't allotted enough time for Piper's family, but—"

"But I insisted we not give them more than a couple of hours otherwise I figured Andy and Declan might be at each other's throats," Piper said with a laugh. "I'm not deluding myself about who my sister married. Dec's a good guy, but he's also definitely a bit of a Florida redneck."

"We've mostly got it worked out, him and me," Andy said. "Although it did take a couple of tries to get there. But yeah, Piper told me to keep it quick to a nice in and out visit with only a few hours there."

"You probably could've done the same with me and mom," Niko said. "The reservation's so damn tiny, you'll have seen the whole thing by the time we land the plane."

"It can't be *that* small, Niko," Andy said, sliding his arm around her waist. "Your mom's a teacher there, so they've got a school, and that means they've g—"

"Like a thousand people *tops* Andy," Niko shot back. "It's going to feel like the tiniest little town you've ever been in in your entire life. It's utterly boring, I promise you. I'm glad you want to see where I grew up, but don't set those expectations high, because you will be disappointed no matter how low they are. If after an hour or so chatting with my mom, you all want us to take off and head to Denver, I'm with you all the way."

"It's where *you* grew up, Niko, so that makes it important to *me*," he said, kissing her cheek, feeling her blush under the sudden focus and attention. "Besides, you're all getting to see where *I* grew up today, and I dunno how comfortable about that *I* am."

"Well, *part* of where you grew up," Fiona corrected. "Unless we're swinging by and seeing both houses?"

Andy shook his head. "Nah, just the one where I was from ages eight to eighteen. The house my folks lived in before that I don't even remember. That was more of where Matty grew up than where I did." He winced a little, mentioning his late brother, but did his best to hold it together. So much had happened over the last few months, it was almost easier trying *not* to think about all the people they'd lost, but the death of Andy's brother in early November still stung hard. "Sorry, it's going to be hard today not crying."

"Nothing's wrong with crying, Andrew," Emily said, moving close to join in a group hug around Andy, all of them closing around him. "Come. Let's get going and see your house."

It wasn't too much of a drive, back across the river then just on the east side of Hyde Park, not too far from Mt. Lookout, and when they drove up to the house in their SUVs, it felt to Andy almost like nothing had changed. It was a two-story house that had to have been built sometime around 1930 or so, with a white stucco exterior and stacked stone accents, a couple of chairs on the porch, with his mom, Virginia, sitting in one and his sister-in-law, Samantha, sitting in the other. Conner, Andy's nephew, was sitting on the stairs playing with his Nintendo Switch.

"Conner! Your uncle's here!" Samantha said as they all started to get out of the vehicles. Sam was in her early forties, but was still quite the attractive woman, with long, blonde hair that she typically kept up in a bun. Andy had almost expected to see her in a suit, but she was in casual attire today, clearly not showing any houses to anyone.

Conner pushed pause on his game, set the Switch down, then took off like a bolt towards Andy,

rushing straight at him before giving him a massive hug. He looked so much like a younger version of Andy's late brother Matt, it was hard for Andy not to cry seeing him. The boy was only about four feet tall, with a massive flop of blonde curly hair that hung down past his shoulders. He still had Matty's eyes, though. Conner wore a giant Billibong t-shirt that Andy was absolutely sure was from Matty's collection, considering it hung down nearly to Conner's knees. He'd just eeked in under the fatal range for DuoHalo and had caught the disease off the back of his father, but now that he'd recovered from it, he was essentially immune to the virus. Even though he could still be a carrier of the virus, he would never suffer the same fate of collapsing lungs that DuoHalo normally killed people with, the way an entire generation had gone. Andy didn't even want to think about how many of Conner's friends had probably suddenly died over the summer.

"It's good to see you're okay, Uncle Andy," Conner said, clinging tightly, not even looking up at him yet. "Dad hasn't been gone that long and already Mom's got a new boyfriend. I hate it."

"I know, Conner, and it sucks, but you know your Dad would've wanted your mom and you to be safe, and your mom having a new boyfriend's part of that," Andy said as Conner pulled back so he could look up at him. "That's a weird part about how they're treating this disease, but it is how they're doing it. I heard you were hospitalized with DuoHalo for a few weeks. I'm glad you came out okay."

Conner looked to his left and to his right at all the women surrounding Andy before the boy's eyes turned back to him, his gaze a little wider. "Is this *all* your girlfriends, Uncle Andy?"

Ash laughed a little bit and moved over to get a bit closer to Conner. "No, your uncle's quite the important man, so they made sure he has a *lot* of girlfriends to help keep him safe. Most of us are his fiancées though, which means we're all getting married soon, although Alexis and Melody over there are just dedicated bodyguards, although they're his girlfriends too. They're specifically here to keep him safe. Hi! I'm Aisling, but you can call me Ash if you like."

"Like the boy from Pokémon?"

"Pronounced the same, but spelled different," she said with a smile.

Conner's innate shyness came to the forefront a little, and he smiled nervously. "You talk funny."

"I'm originally from Ireland, all the way on the other side of the planet."

"How come you want to marry Uncle Andy?" Conner said, almost trying to hide himself behind Andy for safety. He kept looking over to one side, but Andy couldn't figure out which of his partners Conner seemed to be repeatedly glancing at before returning his gaze back to Ash.

"Because I think he's the neatest guy I've ever met," she said with a big smile. "He's my *favorite* person in the *whole world*. We met back in June and since then, I haven't let him be away from me for more than a *day*. I like him *that much!* But you know what's *crazy*? I like him enough that I think he's *so* special that he needs *lots* of us girls to marry him, and I'm gonna share him with all the girls here. Can I introduce you to them? Would that be okay?"

"Okay," Conner said shyly, starting to come out from behind Andy.

"So this is Niko, Piper, Sarah, Emily, Fiona and Moira," Ash said.

Fiona laughed, taking her phone out of her pocket, as she moved in close to Conner. "Can I show you something, Conner? Take a look at this..." She leaned down and showed Conner a picture of her and Andy together, back in college, with Xander, back when they were all roommates. "Your uncle and I used to be special friends before you were born, but after we finished school, we went different directions, so I didn't get a chance to see you when you came into this world. But now I'm back together with him, and it's a pleasure to meet you."

Before they did anything else, Virginia moved forward to take Andy's phone from him and get a picture of him and Conner sitting on the steps, surrounded by all of Andy's partners, and Conner seemed to be grinning like he'd won the lottery at that. "Can you send me that picture, Uncle Andy?" Conner said. "I want to show it to some of my friends."

"Course I can, Conner."

They all started walking up towards the house, a soft smile on Andy's face, as he moved to give his mom a big hug. "Hey Mom, hey Sam," he said. "Should we all go inside? I know Lexi and Melody would feel much safer indoors."

"Sure," Virginia said, leading them all into the house.

Andy's mom was in her late sixties, and there was still a tiny hint of a Brooklyn accent to her voice. She was about five and a half feet with curly brown hair. She had on a loose shirt and a pair of classic mom jeans. She looked tired, more than anything, but was clearly trying to put on a brave face. She brought them all into the living room, where the wall behind her couch was covered with pictures of the family, many of whom were now dead. Andy's father, who'd died several years ago, Matty, who'd died last month, both of Virginia's brothers (Andy's uncles), neither of whom had survived DuoHalo, but also included pictures with Samantha, Conner, and even a printed version of the photo Fiona had shown Matty earlier.

"I don't feel like I've got time enough to learn everything about all these wonderful women you're going to marry, Andy," Virginia said to them. "So if you don't mind, Fi, I'm going to go kind of quick and gloss over you a bit, since I feel like out of all you ladies, I at least know you the best already, although we definitely have to catch up at some point about what you were up to while you were out of my son's life."

Fiona chuckled a bit and nodded. "I get that, Virginia, and I don't mind."

"You've barely aged a day since you were in college, my dear; I'm so jealous. Three different famous women, hm?" Virginia asked, putting on her glasses, as she smiled, looking over at Piper, Em and Sarah. "Two actresses and an athlete. Quite a lot of celebrity for one household. There aren't jealousy problems between the three of you, are there?"

Sarah giggled, taking Emily's hand in her own. "Well, Em and I sort of came as a prepacked deal, so there's never any fucking jealousy between the two of us, well, no *serious* jealousy," the tall redhead laughed. "And we've all bonded with Piper super fucking well."

"You're not bothered by my son being a bit out of shape, Piper?" Virginia asked the volleyball player, who had opted not to sit down, but was looking at all the pictures of Andy when he was younger on the wall. "You're *very* fit and he's, well, he's my son and he's always preferred writing to exercise."

"Not at all, ma'am," Piper said. "I couldn't really talk about it during the television interview, but Andy pulled me out of the toughest situation of my life, and the first thing he did afterwards was *apologize for not being able to do more*." She was starting to tear up a little bit, thinking about it. "I still have the letter he wrote me, and I'm going to carry that with me every day for the rest of my days. I don't say this lightly, Mrs. Rook, but I'd *kill* someone to keep your son safe. He saved me. *SAVED ME*. Maybe I'll try and get him to lose a few pounds around the mid-section, but even if he doesn't, I am going to love him with all my heart until the last breath leaves either my dying lungs or his." She placed her hand on Andy's shoulder and gave it a firm squeeze, so he reached up to hold her hand for a moment. "I'm sort of hoping we'll go together."

Virginia smiled softly, nodding. "That certainly *sounds* like my son. Well, let's get to know one another then as best we can in our short time together, shall we?"

For the next few hours, Andy's mom grilled all the girls, sometimes one at a time, sometimes in pairs or even as a whole, and while they tried to get to ask some questions about Andy growing up, or about Virginia herself, Andy's mom, much like her son, had an uncanny ability to deflect questions around herself and back towards the people asking.

There was even a point in the conversation where Virginia asked about if Ash had felt bad, considering she'd shown up first and yet Andy seemed insistent on keeping all his fiancées on even ground, to which Ash said she'd always thought Andy seemed larger than life, and having extra sets of hands around to keep him from getting idle was for the best. But Ash also pointed out that even in the house, she was sort of First Among Equals, although she rarely went out of her way to use that power. And the fact that *all* the other women laughed implied tacit agreement on their parts.

Andy excused himself from the conversation for a while to check in on Conner and Samantha. It was true, Sam had been assigned a new partner, a man named Steve who had politely asked not to intrude on the family moment, something Andy found himself a little thankful for, as it let Conner sort of come out of his shell more.

It turned out part of the reason Conner had been so shy was because he'd recognized Emily from the Daggerfall Academy movies, and while he knew she was an actress *playing* that part, he also knew that meeting her was a little bit special, and he'd been at a loss for words. Andy hadn't realized that Conner was a fan of the books, otherwise he might have seen that coming, especially since he found out that Matty had read Conner the books before bedtime for the last few years, which meant his brother's ghost was all over the boy's feelings.

Andy did his best to try and keep Conner's spirits up, and told him that any time he wanted to, he could always reach out to Andy, and that Andy would do his best to help Conner feel connected to his late father. "I miss him too, buddy," Andy said, giving Conner a hug as the boy cried for a little bit. "Each and every single day."

When Andy, Conner and Samantha came back to the living room, he found that his mother had, as he expected, busted out the photo album, and was showing off pictures of Andy as a child, usually in the most embarrassing attire or poses she could. They'd already taken a quick tour of the house, but the room that had been Andy's growing up had been converted into a guest bedroom and there were very few signs of him from his youth, which was why she'd reverted to the photo album.

Because he knew it would make his day, Andy situated Conner in a photo with Emily, Sarah and Piper, the three women surrounding him, each of them with an arm around him, as Conner had the biggest smile possible on his face when Andy snapped the picture. Conner shyly asked if he could get one of just him and Emily together, and Em had happily obliged, all of which brightened Conner's mood considerably. Andy was sure that his nephew would be showing that photo to all of his friends for months to come, telling them how his uncle was marrying Dahlia Hairtrigger (or the actress who'd played her, anyway).

"We've got to get going, Mom, but I hope you'll come out to California a few days early for the wedding," Andy told her. "If you can't, I understand, but it would be nice to give you a bit of uninterrupted time seeing the new place and getting to know all my partners as much as you wanted to. Like I said, if you can."

Virginia nodded, a bittersweet smile on her lips. "I'll make the time, honey. Niko, I hope you, Lexi and Melody will do whatever you can to keep him alive, okay? Losing Matty... it nearly broke me. I don't know what I'd do if I lost Andrew as well."

Niko smiled a little bit sadly herself, moving to give Virginia a big hug. "Well, we're going to do everything we can to keep him safe, especially since he's going to be a *father* next year." His mom gasped a little at that, as Andy smiled. He was fine with them telling his mother whenever they wanted to, and while they were still in the early days where risk was high, they'd clearly wanted to reinforce her spirits a bit. "It's still early and we're not really telling anyone yet, but both Ash and I are pregnant, so you're going to be Grandma to a lot more kids in the next few years, so you hang on as well, okay? We think we're due sometime early June, but we'll know more for sure next year."

Andy's mom started to tear up, motioning for Ash and Andy to join her, as the four of them had a big hug, Virginia moving to kiss Andy's cheek. "You're going to be a good father, Andy," she told him. "I've always said that. I'm glad you'll have a chance to prove me right. Your late father, God bless his soul, thought so, too, and he'd have been proud of all you've done this year."

Everyone was a little teary-eyed as they climbed back into the SUVs and headed back towards downtown, driving the seven or so miles to get to the Ohio Book Store. A four-story building that had been in use since 1961, the Ohio Book Store was something of a Cincinnati institution, one that Andy had spent countless hours in his youth walking the various stacks, in search for the next great story that would lead him down a rabbit hole in the way only truly fantastic fiction could.

What nobody in Andy's crew had expected was the sizable number of protesters outside of the building, somewhere between forty and eighty people. The protesters were divided into two camps, one who seemed to be "anti-new government" and one side that seemed to be just generally "anti-men." The signs each side carried made it pretty clear who was on which side.

'Why did you live and my husband die?'

'The patriarchy oppresses us!'

'Not my government!'

'DuoHalo is hoax!'

And on the other side...

'Men deserved to die!'

'God hates men!'

'Burn in hell, sinner!'

'Men, stay at home and let women handle things!'

It was enough to make Andy more than a little bit nervous, especially since the two sides, which had been yelling at *each other* long before Andy showed up, turned all their attention to *him* when he did, as if both sides hated the other, but they hated Andy *more*.

Lexi had been in contact with the members of the local police who'd been stationed outside to keep the peace, and so she knew what they were rolling into. There were a few officers stationed inside the bookstore as well. They made it a point to bring Andy in through a back entrance, but once he was inside and they started letting people who'd shown up for the signing (and had passed through a metal detector/quick search) into the building, and that was when tempers flared up out front.

Andy did his best to get through the reading portion of the signing even while there was conflicting chanting outside. He was aided by the fact that the bookstore had set up a microphone and speaker to amplify his voice a bit indoors. And he was pleased to see that the fans he had who'd come out for his book were all eager to hear a bit from the next one.

After that, he'd agreed to do a short bit of Q&A, against the advice of Lexi and Niko, because it had been tradition. He'd made it through four questions before the audience had asked anything about something other than what was in his books. The fifth question was from a young man in his early thirties who looked exactly like Andy envisioned a lot of his readers looked like – a bit overweight, a bit shy but well-educated if a touch socially stunted. "Mr. Conrad," the young man said, "what are your thoughts about the Male Protection Act it sounds like Congress is trying to push through into law?"

Andy sighed, closing his iPad cover over the tablet. "I don't want to get into a deep dive about politics, especially on such a complex issue, but I also feel like you've asked a genuine question and it deserves a genuine answer. In principle, I understand the desire and design to try and keep men safe, especially since there are so few of us left in the world right now, but I also think it's *very* dangerous for anyone to start dictating how people are allowed to live their lives. Maybe there are some things we men are used to that we *should* put on hold for a while – smoking, extreme sports, extraplanetary travel – but I also don't want them to think they can tell me I need to never leave my house again until I've fathered a few dozen children, because I've still got to *live my life*, you know? Human nature is often to overreact when course correcting, but we've still got plenty of time to make sure we can achieve their stated goal of protecting men without telling those men they aren't allowed to enjoy a whiskey sour and a good bacon cheeseburger every now and then."

The answer seemed to go over better than Andy had expected it to, with strong applause from both the few men and the many women in attendance for the signing. After that question, though, Andy was pretty sure it was going to devolve into more things along that way, so he told the audience it was time to get signing, as he cut the Q&A portion off.

The autograph line was long, and Andy did his best to keep it moving along, although, as expected, a number of people Andy had gone to grade school and/or high school had shown up, and many of them wanted to chat for at least a minute or two, which slowed the line down considerably.

Andy could've brushed them along, but never wanted to come across as rude, and so did his best to straddle the line between friendly and professional and was willing to give everyone a few minutes of time before pointing out the line behind them.

Two thirds of the way through the line, though, came a rather drastic surprise, as a woman about Andy's age strolled up with a copy of his first book, a giant smile on her face, her top featuring as daringly plunging a neckline as she could get away with without being booked for indecent exposure. "Hey there stranger," she said as she walked up for her turn at signing.

"Marie?" Andy laughed. "Holy shit, I haven't seen you since college. How've you been?"

Marie Anderson had been the girl Andy had been dating right before Fiona, and it was him and Marie's breakup that had led to Andy and Fi exploring their feelings for each other in college. She looked good for her age, certainly very busty, and dressed like she was auditioning for a Bon Jovi video in the 1980s, with leather pants, her blonde hair hairsprayed up into a lion's mane. "Hey Andy," she purred at him. "How've you been? Miss me?"

Andy felt Fiona's hand squeezing his left leg beneath the table and he smiled a little bit, knowing this wasn't going to go at all how Marie had envisioned it to. "Haven't really thought about you much, Marie," Andy told her. "Not with how we left it at the time."

"Oh, come on, Andy," Marie said, trying to give him a gaze down her top. "We were just kids back then, and neither of us really knew what we were doing. But you've grown up into a hell of a man, one *hell* of a man, and it just so happens my husband died in August. I'm not paired up with anyone, so I was think—"

Fiona took that as her cue to jump in, cutting the woman off suddenly. "You were thinking you could go back to the guy you dated in college until you two split up because you were constantly making fun of his lack of sexual experience?" Fi said, not raising her voice at all. Fi was a professional at being cutting without being loud, a highly refined skill from her journalist days. "Why on *earth* would you think *that*, Marie? Because you saw him on television, saw he'd made a little money and you're still playing receptionist at your daddy's feed business?"

"I think Andy's capable of deciding these things for himself, don't you, Fiona?" Marie practically growled.

"He is," Andy said, shaking his head. "And his family is more than completely full, Marie. And even if it wasn't full up, when we split up, or, to be more accurate, when you *dumped* me, you made it clear that you didn't ever look back with regrets, so I couldn't *bear* it if I was the one responsible for you breaking your oath to yourself." He signed the book 'Good luck with the new direction, Blake Conrad,' then slid it back across the table to her. "I'm sure you'll find someone else sooner or later."

Marie picked up the copy of the book with a deeply offended look on her face before stomping away, moving to head out of the front door of the bookstore, as Andy felt Ash's hand on the back of his shoulder, reassuringly, as Fi merely quietly laughed. "I am *so* much better than that girl could ever *dream* of being," Fi said. "Aren't I?"

"Was the engagement ring not enough, Fi?" Andy teased.

"A girl likes to be reminded every now and then."

"Yes, Fi, I was *always* happier with you than I was with Marie. Then *and* now. With her, back when she and I were dating in college, it felt like I was trapped in the same argument for a decision I made years and years ago that never got let go of, and no matter how many times she claimed to forgive me, it always came back to 'You went to Todd and Jenny's party without me, even though I told you to go, because I wanted you to decide not to go without me on your own' since she was explicitly not invited to the party. Her and Todd had been arguing about something, and somehow, I got caught in the middle of it. No matter what I said, whenever I disagreed with her on something, it always came back to that, or back to her usual defense mechanism of complaining that I'm always telling her she's wrong. Seriously, there's only so much drama a guy needs in his daily life."

"And we comprise the entirety of that, Sarah and I," Em said, reaching over to rub her smooth

fingertips against the back of his neck. “But I think we offer equal recompense.”

“Oh, you most certainly do,” Andy chuckled.

That was the moment when everything changed in Andy’s life.

The moment he heard a gunshot outside of the building, and everything went mad.

Niko pulled him down to the ground as Alexis and Melody closed ranks around him, forming a triangular human shield around him, pinning him in a small ball before they started to pull Andy to his feet and evac him out the back way that they’d come in, Lexi taking point, Melody watching the rear and Niko practically glued to Andy. The rest of Andy’s team were pulled in close, somewhere between Lexi and Niko or Melody and Niko, but it was clear everyone was basically bundled around Andy as the primary point of protection as they all began moving quickly and efficiently towards the back door.

Within moments, all ten of them were inside of the two SUVs, Lexi, Niko, Andy, Ash and Em in the front car with Melody, Sarah, Piper, Fiona and Moira in the rear car. The two vehicles pulled out hard and fast from behind the bookstore just in time to see tear gas cannisters being launched into the protesters out front. Niko was on her phone immediately, trying to get answers. “What the hell happened out there?” she said, talking to someone with the local police or someone in the Air Force reserves who’d also been covertly keeping tabs on the gathered crowd outside. “Right. Okay. Just the one then? Any idea what started it? It related to us or just people being stupid? Sure, I get that. Alright, keep me posted. No, I don’t care how unreliable the early information you’re getting is – I want it as soon as you fucking *have it*. Am I making myself clear, or do I need to head down there and put a boot up your ass personally? Sorry. No, I get you’re just trying to do your job. You’re right, it was uncalled for. I’m still just amped up in combat mode with the adrenaline spike. I apologize. I just... let me know when you know more, yeah? Thanks.”

“The *fuck* happened out there?” Lexi asked.

Ash was practically shivering, clinging to him, and Emily had reached back one of her hands, which Andy was holding, and he could feel her trembling a bit as well. While everyone else felt on edge and wound up, Andy felt the complete opposite, almost cold and dead inside, and he started to wonder if maybe he was in shock at what had just happened.

“Someone in the crowd shot someone *else* in the crowd,” Niko said. “They were only screening for weapons for people going into the building, not standing outside. I told them they should’ve had the two factions further apart, but Cincinnati PD assured us they had everything under control.”

“That was very much *not* under fucking control!” Lexi shouted before catching herself. “Sorry. Sorry, Niko. You know I’m not mad at you. You handled this like a pro.”

“Hell of a fucking test run to see if the three of us can handle something like this, huh?” Niko said, trying to force a laugh that everyone inside the SUV could tell was unnatural.

“You holding it together, Andy?” Lexi asked.

“I’m kind of numb, Lexi, if I’m honest.”

“You checked him for wounds when we got him into the SUV, right, Niko?”

“Complete sweep. Not a scratch on him,” Niko said. “Always secure and verify the health of the asset first thing.”

“You’re probably just a bit shellshocked for the moment, Andy,” Lexi said. “It’s not uncommon for someone to be that way their first time in a firefight. We’re going to double back to the hotel for a bit, you all are going to hang out in the lobby while I go and do a quick security sweep of the jet before you all join us, and then we can get the hell out of this town.”

“I’m going to call Mama Rook and let her know that we’re all fine,” Ash said. “It okay if she meets us at the hotel?”

“That’s a good idea, Ash. Have her head over, and you all can spend a bit more time talking with her while I’m doing a sweep of the airport,” Lexi said. “It’ll give you all a chance to cool down, take a moment, clear your heads a bit and start to feel normal.”

“I don’t know that I’m ever going to feel normal *again*,” Andy said.



## Chapter Twelve

December 16<sup>th</sup>, 2020

A few hours with Mama Rook had put everyone a little more back at ease, although Ash had immediately commented on how Andy had gone straight for getting a drink, when he was known to dabble with drinking alcohol only occasionally. He'd asked for a Coke with a heavy splash of rum and had even needed a refill. During the time at the hotel, he'd been twitchy, jumpy and almost inconsolably nervous.

His mother had reminded him that it hadn't been his fault, and within the first hour of their waiting, news had come in that they hadn't even been shooting at *him*. The shooting had happened between the two groups of protesters, and a woman had died, and another woman had been arrested. He hadn't recognized the name of either woman involved in the matter but was at least a little relieved not to see Marie's name there in either case, nor anyone else he might've known. They did call out that it was outside of his book signing, though. Andy was certain his name was going to be mentioned again in the news stories about the matter tonight, but he hoped it was more of just in a foot note capacity, so that the news could focus on the real conflict between the two sides and just how heightened that tension truly was. It wasn't something he wanted the news to blink and look away from.

All was *not* well across the country.

When Lexi came back to the hotel, Andy had calmed down a little bit, but not entirely. His hands had stopped shaking at least, but he was still more than a little hyperaware of his surroundings, all his senses cranked up to 150% against his own will. He felt like he could hear things halfway across the hotel, and the sound of a suitcase tumbling over made him jump much more openly than he'd have liked. It wasn't a gunshot, but it sure as fuck *felt* like one in his ears. He spent much longer than he wanted reminding himself it wasn't.

Once Lexi had given them the all-clear, they'd all loaded back up into the SUVs and headed straight to the airport, Ash on one side of him, Sarah on the other, Niko in the front passenger seat, Lexi behind the wheel. He was wagging his leg impatiently until he felt Sarah put her hand on his knee, smiling over at him, understanding his nervousness.

"Sorry," he said, looking outside of the window, unable to focus on much of anything for very long. "I keep hearing the gunshot replaying over and over in my mind. It felt like it was right in front of me. In front of me, or, or behind me or..."

"Andy," Sarah said, taking his hand in hers, holding it firmly. "You heard the report. It wasn't you they were shooting at."

"I don't think that really matters, Sarah," Andy said quietly. His voice had a defeated tone to it that even *he* didn't care for, but he couldn't find a way to shake himself loose from the sense of impending doom that was crowding in on his soul. "It could've been. All the guns, all the talk about how dangerous it is... Niko's told me. Lexi's told me. Melody's told me. Fucking *Phil* has been telling me non-fucking-stop. The danger is fucking real, it's all around me, and I need to stop wearing fucking *blinders*. How could I be so fucking stupid?"

"You're not fucking stupid, Andy," Sarah said, putting one of her arms around him, trying to provide some comfort. "You're human. There's nothing wrong with being human. It's a good thing, having faith that the world around you isn't all doom and gloom. There's enough of that in the world. *You* can do better. You usually do, and we love you for that. You've always been trying to see the best in everyone and everything. The best in people, the best in the world, the best in those around you." She tensed up a little bit. "Please don't lose that. Please? We're all relying on you, Andy."

Ash was holding onto his other hand, interlacing her fingers with his. "You know what people are capable of, love. You know the human condition better than anyone I've ever met. You've written stories about the good and the bad, about the heroes and the villains and how that line isn't always as clearcut as we as people would like it to be. Because in the end, nobody sees themselves as a villain, and anyone who sees themselves as a hero is a goddamn narcissist. There's... at the end of the day,

there's just people. People, for better or worse, don't always do what's best for them, or think about what's going to happen more than thirty seconds in the future. It's a different world out there now, but it's not *that* different. People are still just *people*. They're still running in fear, struggling against the darkness, trying to make sense out of the madness that's everywhere we look. I know this whole thing is going to change you, baby," she said, placing her head on his shoulder, trying to be close enough to practically climb inside his heart and help bolster up the defenses. "You'd be a fool for it *not* to. But you can't let it *define* you. You can't be that person who got shot at once and spent the rest of his life wondering why he didn't get killed. Especially when they weren't even shooting *at* you," she teased. "We're fine. We're together. It's okay to *not* be okay about this, but I refuse to let you throw the hat in and abandon who you are fundamentally just because some idiot decided to shoot some other idiot while you just happened to be around, okay?"

Andy had to laugh a little bit at that, drawing a bit of strength into himself from the beautiful women on either side of him who were clearly terrified of him falling apart. And they were right – he'd been teetering dangerously to wallowing in misery, and that was something he didn't want to find himself ever doing. Regroup, pull yourself together and push forward, he told himself. You don't take shit off nobody. "Right. Right. I'll shake it off. It's... it's just gonna be a hot minute."

"Absolutely, baby," Ash told him, snuggling hard against one side of him while Sarah did the other, basically smothering him in soft, pliant, lovely smelling girlflesh. "We just want you to be okay, to remain *you*."

"I'll get there. Just gonna take time."

They were almost deathly quiet when they were getting loaded up on the plane, nobody talking to anyone else, everything being done with utter precision and in total silence. Ash and Sarah basically hauled Andy straight back to the couch in the back of the plane and kept snuggling him, hoping to soak up some of the despair and replace it with their hope.

Once they were airborne, Ash pulled out her little Bluetooth speaker and set it down next to the couch, turning it on as she set her phone to shuffle on The Afghan Whigs catalog, that slinky little intro of "John The Baptist" kicking in as she and Sarah moved onto the couch on either side of him, wicked little smiles on each of their faces. "You didn't think you were getting out of starting the Red Run just because of some stupid gunshot, did you?" Ash said, purring at him. "You know how this song goes... 'Take me, taste me, erase me, I'm yours, let's get it on'..."

Normally Andy had gotten a bit adept at being able to resist the girls when they were trying to turn up the charm, but the look in Ash and Sarah's eyes was *intense*, like they were going to eat him alive, or, more accurately, they were going to remind him what it was like to *feel alive*.

The two of them were naked so fast, he'd barely had time to process it happening, as Sarah slid up alongside of him, her hand smoothing along his chest, tugging up on his t-shirt. He vehemently loved the fact that both Ash and Sarah kept small patches of red pubic hair, taking pride in their ginger nature. The music was turned up loud enough that he couldn't hear the conversations on the other part of the plane, and that added a bit of intimacy for the moment, as Sarah's tongue lashed along the shell of his ear, while Ash turned and started to sway her ass before him, bringing it down to rub against his crotch like he was getting his own private lapdance, her hands reaching up along the back of her neck to pull up those red curls of hers, looking back over her shoulder at him with such intense lust, Andy had to wonder if maybe she'd gone a bit longer between doses than she should've.

"I got the devil in me," Ash growled at him with such wanton seduction that no matter what foul or foreboding mood Andy had been in before, it was quickly abandoned and replaced with heady lust, his cock throbbing beneath his jeans.

"Not yet you don't," Sarah teased, "but you will fucking soon. Go on, Ash. Show me why you're the boss bitch around here."

Andy shivered a little bit when Ash let her hair fall down along her back before spinning around, reaching forward to grab Andy's jeans, yanking them down only as far as mid-thigh, letting her

fish out his cock, before slowly climbing onto the bench seat, moving to straddle him, reaching down to get his shaft perfectly lined up and then sinking right down on it at the exact moment she locked lips with him, so her moan was gifted to him, her breath mixing with his as he felt her enveloping him, their bodies locking together, her pussy clenching hard onto his dick like she couldn't bear to let him go.

The two of them remained like that, for a good moment or so, listening to the horn section of the song slowly faded down before "I Keep Coming Back" started to slink its way into their ears, the kiss breaking as Ash giggled a little bit. "Am I laying it on too thick?"

"Ash, you always know exactly what I need and when I need it," he chuckled.

"Hey," Sarah joked. "I'm here too." Ash turned her head and slid her hand against the back of Sarah's neck, pulling her in close as the two women began to kiss directly in front of him, his cock giving an excited pulse throb for a moment before Ash turned them, making room as she maneuvered them into bringing Andy into the kiss, a slow and sloppy tangle of lips and tongues, Sarah whimpering excitedly. "That's more fucking like it."

"You get your turn on the ride next, Sarah," Ash said to her, "so I need you to be cranking that shit this whole time. I need you to help me respark Andy, to reignite that fire inside of him. You need to bring your best, but I want you to keep it *very* quiet, just for the three of us. You think you can do that?"

Sarah nodded licking her lips. "Gonna be quite the contrast between the start of the Red Run and the *end* of the Red Run," she giggled mischievously.

"Why's that?" Ash asked.

"Moirra seems like she's a quiet, delicate little sunflower, you know?"

Ash smirked, shaking her head a little. "I think she's gonna surprise the *fuck* out of you, Sares. You two haven't spent too much time together yet, so it'll be good for you. You can dial your tongue up to fifty and I bet you Mo will want it even higher. But this is my moment, so get your game face on."

Sarah lifted her right hand up to her temple and offered a mock salute as Ash turned back to lock lips with Andy once more as the cymbal crashes marked the opening of the song "I'm A Soldier." The taller redhead leaned in and purred into Andy's ear. "You know she fucking loves it when you're willing to be a little more rough'n'tumble with her, right? Go on, slap her ass and feel how much the little slut'll moan for you."

Andy thought this was going to be the perfect time to see if the two reds were on the same wavelength or out of synch with each other, so he lifted his right hand from Ash's back and brought it down to spank Ash's buttock, feeling her indeed clench down on his shaft and burble a throaty moan into his mouth. He could swear he also felt Ash's nipples get even stiffer than they already were, like two firm points pressed against his chest.

One of Sarah's hands reached in between them and moved to play with one of Ash's nipples, which induced a sudden squeak followed by another hungry whorish sound into his mouth, as Ash started trying to rock her hips along his lap, doing her best to lift up and off him before pushing back down to swallow him entirely within.

"You feel that?" Sarah said quietly to him. "She *loves* when you fuck her hard, just as much as she does when you're soft and tender. You're her *everything*, dude, just like you're *mine*. Give her the ol' giddyup. I'm so fucking jealous right now. I wanna get fucked too..." She had that tone of an impatient child being told to wait their turn before opening a present on Christmas.

Andy's hand slapped down on Ash's ass again, but this time he dragged his fingernails along the reddening flesh, feeling her trying to squirm herself down even further into his lap. Ash's hand pulled on the back of his neck, keeping his face attached to hers, as the heat started to burn even hotter between the two of them.

"I fucking love you, Andy," Ash said, parting the kiss just long enough to gaze lovingly into his eyes, holding that eye contact for as long as she could. "And I love you that you trust me enough to share me with all these other amazing fucking women. And I will love you until the fucking day I die, but whenever you go, I'm going with you, you lovable bastard. That means you and I are lifebound,

you fucking hear me?"

Andy smiled softly, leaning his forehead against hers, feeling her snapping her hips back and forth, lifting up and dropping down. "Yes, my love," Andy said to her. "Butch and Sundance, to the very last."

"Good boy," she giggled. "Now are you gonna fuck your fiancé for real or you just gonna pretend and make her do all the work?"

He laughed a bit with her, as he felt Sarah nibbling on his ear. The two women were hitting all his soft spots, Sarah talking dirty to him while Ash plied on his nerves. The tempo increased and built upwards, and before he felt that familiar telltale squeeze of Ash's pussy around the base of his dick, and as soon as she was in the throes of her orgasm, he matched her and released a load inside of her, which set Sarah off giggling ferociously in his ear.

"She's always easier to deal with when she's gotten her fucking rocks off," the taller redhead said to him, giving Ash's clit a little spank before pulling back and away.

"You're just annoyed you have to wait until tomorrow for your turn," Ash joked.

"You're fucking right I am," Sarah said, sliding her legs around Andy's waist, pulling him to lean back into her, wrapping her arms around him, one of her hands reaching forward to stroke Ash's face. "But it's okay. I'll keep. I'm like fine fucking wine, meant to be savored."

"Then you'll go well with Scotch," Ash said before both girls devolved in a fierce bout of giggles, kissing each other and Andy, holding together.

Half an hour later, they were landing in Chicago. Despite the fact that they were on a relatively tight schedule, Andy insisted they swing by the hotel first, dropping off all their stuff and hopping through a quick shower before they went to go meet the Smiths. Andy was preparing for quite the grilling, and he didn't intend to do it reeking of fresh sex, especially since it wasn't with their daughter.

The Smiths had always liked Andy, at least he *thought* they had, but the new world was throwing everyone off, and Andy hadn't had a chance to sit down and talk with them since the 60 Minutes story had aired, so he wanted to make a great first (re)impression. After the shower, Lexi even took the time to give him a fresh shave with a razor herself. He still tended to use the electric when he was in a hurry, but on important days (or days when he could afford the extra time), Niko and Lexi had traded off shaving him with a straight razor, almost like he was some sort of old school Mafioso.

He had to admit – it was *way* fucking better, even if it was time consuming.

All things worth doing, though, were worth doing right.

They were staying at the Cambria Hotel in the theatre district, and while it was a bit of a tight fit, the room had been configured to have the two queen beds pushed together to form one mega bed, although there was also a sofa sleeper, and an attached secondary suite with a queen-sized bed, mostly to provide a second bathroom. The hotels were doing their best to adapt to the new world, and everyone was doing their best to make it work.

As much as Andy wanted to take time to decompress and chill, he knew the Smiths were going to be eagerly awaiting their arrival for dinner. Andy had offered to bring the family to their house, but Seamus, Fiona's dad, had insisted they, as a group, were all going to meet up at a restaurant and have a nice meal prepared for them. He'd placed a reservation for one entire section at a place called Mastro's Steakhouse, with a reservation for 25, a number that made both Lexi and Melody a little nervous, although Niko seemed much more nervous about meeting Fi's parents.

The drive down felt strange – it had been quite some time since Andy had been in Chicago, but he'd never seen the streets quite so empty, only a couple of cars sharing the roads with them. It felt unearthly, unnatural, although Andy was starting to think nearly every major metropolitan city might be a little like this.

The entire drive, Fi was snapping pictures out the window, documenting all of it.

"You okay with this, love?" Andy asked her, his hand squeezing her thigh.

She turned to smile back at him, placing her hand over his. "I'm just more worried about how

Dad and my brothers are getting on. I imagine Dad's head has got to be incredibly spinning."

"I'm sure we'll manage them just fine."

After parking and enjoying a short walk to the restaurant, Andy wasn't entirely surprised to find that the restaurant had just given them the second floor all to themselves. There were a lot more people than Andy had been expecting, although when he thought about it, it did make sense. Fiona's parents, Seamus and Ellen, were both there, but Seamus also had six new women partners to introduce to both Andy and Fiona herself, which helped set an easier tone than Andy had expected. Also in attendance were two of Fiona's three brothers, Julian and Paul. Rob wasn't present, something Andy immediately thought to make a mental note to ask after in case something had happened to him. Julian had his wife, Alana, with him, as well as seven other women whose names just flew in one of Andy's ears and out the other without even pausing to linger. But Andy had been at Julian and Alana's wedding so he knew them well enough. The rest of his partners, though, Andy retained basically nothing. The same was true for the nine women accompanying Paul. It was just too many names flying past for Andy to pick them up, so he decided to do the only reasonable thing he could think of – focus on Fi's parents, and let his partners divide and conquer the rest of the women.

Lexi and Melody were on full alert now, although they also made a point to get orders in for food, each of them sitting in carefully chosen strategic places, something Andy expected to get a little bit of guff about before the night was through. Melody was technically sitting at one end of the table, with Lexi at the other, although they were there mostly for placement.

"It's good to see you again, Andrew," Seamus said, shaking his hand. The end of the table had Andy, Fi, Moira, Seamus and Ellen at it, although Ash and Piper were both next in line at the long table, so they could interject if they needed to. "It's been some time since we saw you last. Obviously, we saw your time on 60 Minutes, which brought with it a few, ahem, surprises." He was looking directly over at Moira when he said it, but he didn't seem cross about it.

"Ach, well, we didnae know how to tell ye, Mr. Smith," Moira said. "Fi and I have been in a relationship for years now, but Fi wasn't sure how ye'd take it."

"When the Pope sent out the papal decree not only permitting homosexuality but going so far as to endorse it," Ellen, Fiona's mom said. "Well, we had to reevaluate a lot of things. And all the additional women sleeping with your father now has obviously changed things as well, but that's all very new. We'd seen the story with you on television, Fi, and naturally we recognized Moira, but in that moment, it became rather clear that our daughter had been hiding things from us." The proclamation felt dangerously close to condemnation.

"To be honest, Ma," Fiona said, "I wasn't entirely sure how you'd react to finding out that I was in a relationship with a woman. But it wasn't like this was the first time I'd sort of been hiding something you from and Dad."

Ellen scowled, looking directly across the table at her daughter. "What does that mean? Fiona Abigail Smith, what have you been up to behind our backs?"

"Mother, you *had* to know that back when Andy and I were dating the first time, back in college, we were sharing a bed, and he *didn't* have his own bedroom. Not *really*. I figured you weren't comfortable with Andy and I sleeping together, so we sold you a fantasy. I always thought you'd probably known the truth, but maybe you were that much in denial. I also knew when I started getting involved with Moira that you'd have very complicated feelings about that, me in a long-term relationship with another woman."

"It's... very untraditional, Fiona."

Fiona threw her hands up in frustration, scowling at her mother. "Look around you, mom! Nothing's traditional anymore! And it never will be again! Do you know how much it angers me that you're paranoid of all the people I've ever fallen in love with?"

Ellen's face deepened even more, a complex conflicting set of emotions dueling inside of her. Some mix of shame, embarrassment, anger and frustration, directly not only at Fiona but herself as

well. “I only ever wanted what’s best for you, Fiona.”

“I know, Mom! I get it! But back in college, I was in love with Andy, and all you could ever talk about how unfortunate it was that I couldn’t find a good Catholic boy to settle down with! And then when I was in Washington, you were always trying to convince me to marry a cop or a politician. So I couldn’t tell you about Moira when we moved in, because Heaven forbid that Ellen Smith’s only daughter turn out to be as queer as a three-dollar bill! But we were in love, Mom! We still are! I love her and I love Andy and I love all these other women here! You know what? Fuck it. Let’s just spill *all* the tea. Moira met Andy and I at Julian and Alana’s wedding in Scotland, Mom! We all slept in the same bed that night! Well, I *say* sleep, but we didn’t do much of that—”

“That is enough, Fiona!”

“It’s enough when you back *off*, Mom! When you finally just say ‘we’re happy for all of you’ and let *us* deal with everything else. I am as my Creator made me, mother, and if that means He condemned me to Hell for being as He intended, well, there’s very little I can do about that, now, is there? But I still believe in God, mom. I do! I just believe God wants me to be who and what I am, and to value love when and where I find it. The flaws are in the teachings and the scripture, because sometimes when people are writing down the Word Of God, the message can get a bit jumbled in translation! So, either you can accept us, accept all of us, as a family, or we can all just get up and leave you to it, Mom!”

Ellen’s frustration was evident on her face, but it wasn’t until she spoke again that Andy realized it was directed inward. “I’m... I’m sorry if I ever made you feel anything but loved Fiona. You’re right; it’s not fair of me to judge you, or them, and if you’re happy, that should be enough for me. No, that isn’t good enough. It *is* enough for me. I’m... I’m very glad you’re happy, and that you reconnected with both Andy and Moira, since it seems like they hold the keys to your heart. I do hope they’ll be as careful with your spirit as we tried to be.”

Finally, Fiona seemed to smile again, shaking her head. “Well, I’m *marrying* them, Mom, so I sure as hell *hope* so!”

The next few hours, it was like he was getting to meet Fiona’s parents all over again. The same with her brothers, although Rob not being present was strange, at least at first. Then Andy found out that Rob had moved to Spain with his girlfriend a few years ago, and they were still sheltering in place, not having gotten access to the serum yet.

Seamus, Fi’s dad, had always liked Andy, and the two men found an easy peace between them almost immediately. “I knew, of course,” Seamus told him quietly so only the two of them could hear. “Back then. That the spare bed was just that, and not your actual bedroom. I didn’t mind, and I didn’t want to cause too much of a fuss, so I went on letting Ellen believe what she wanted to believe and let Fiona convince herself that we didn’t know. It seemed better than kicking up too much dust.”

“I know that feeling,” Andy said with a soft laugh. “Sometimes I feel like the best thing we can do as men is to keep our head down and stay out of the way of the women who know better.”

“Now now, my boy. Don’t go sounding like those damn Male Protection Act people, Andy,” Seamus said. “We few men, we’re all that’s left, so we have to take care of each other, and look out for each other, make sure nobody’s trying to put us out to pasture.”

“Yeah, well, I understand their concerns about keeping us all safe, but I’m certainly not going to live the rest of my life in a padded room with no sharp edges or corners because someone tells me I can’t live my life the way I choose to,” Andy chuckled. “They can try if they want to, but I can make a *hell* of a stink, and they’ve given me a bit of a platform to do it, too. I’m going to look out for my family, and that includes looking out for myself, for better or worse, no matter what the government thinks of me.”

“I saw the news of the shooting,” Seamus said to him. “That sort of thing can do a real number on a fella’s psyche, but it sounds like it wasn’t aimed at you.”

“*Aimed*,” Andy scoffed, shaking his head in anger and annoyance. “They were two people

fighting about whose idea of the end of the world was the *right* one. It was ridiculous. Nobody gets to decide how the world ends, or what the state of it is after people start picking up the pieces. And yet, one of them decided to shoot the other. I was freaking out about this a few hours ago, but now? Now I just feel sorry for *all* of them. They're raging against the dying of the light, but it's the *wrong light*."

For the next hour or so, Andy, Fi and Moira entertained all the questions that Fiona's parents had, although they had a certain amount of information about Moira already. It was just a matter of reincorporating what they'd already learned about Moira when they lived together. Fi's mom had come around, at least mostly, and was now getting excited about the idea of the wedding, although she was a little annoyed that it wasn't going to be a Catholic wedding, despite the fact that Fiona, Moira *and* Aisling were all Catholic. But, as Andy pointed out, Emily belonged to the Church of England, Piper was Methodist and both Sarah and Niko were atheists. Andy was as well, which apparently was the most scandalous thing he said all night. But with such religious diversity in the family, it was going to be a non-denominational ceremony, but there would be hints of the big G here and there, to help soothe everyone over. The vows would all be custom tailored, though, and each person would speak entirely for themselves.

The fact that it wouldn't be an entirely God-less ceremony seemed to calm down Ellen a bit and let her focus on the parts of the wedding she was most excited about – the music, the dresses and what Fiona was thinking about saying.

By the time dinner was being served, almost all the tension had entirely dissipated, and everyone at the table was laughing again, and it felt like just a normal (if abnormally large) family get together. Seamus was even calling Andy "son" which Andy knew would probably *always* feel weird. The meal was excellent, and the dessert was even better.

Andy felt nearly halfway normal again by the time everyone was saying their goodbyes and heading towards the hotel again. Most importantly, Fiona was smiling, radiant and exuberant, joyous and wondrous, she and Moira were joking and laughing like they didn't have a care in the world.

It was a great moment.

He hoped it would last.

## Chapter Thirteen

December 17<sup>th</sup>, 2020

The next morning, he was up earlier than most of the women were, something that caught him off-guard, but he found that Melody and Lexi were both up, although none of his fiancées were. He hopped through a quick shower then moved from the bedroom into the little foyer where Melody and Lexi were enjoying coffee, both having showered and gotten dressed before he'd risen.

"You're not usually up this early," Lexi said to him. "Everything okay?"

"Still a little rattled, maybe, from the whole shooting thing, but I'm alright."

"Thanks for giving me a second chance, Andy," Melody said before giving a tiny bitter laugh, looking down at her hands. "Dammit. Forgot to send the text. Thought you wouldn't be up for a bit. This is going to take some getting used to."

He moved over to stand behind her, placing a hand on her shoulder. "Hey, don't worry about it. If you think *that's* going to take some getting used to, I hate to tell you this..." He leaned down and made a big production of his mock whisper. "In *addition* to me, you *might* have to fuck other women."

Melody burst out giggling, trying to put on her most caught off guard face. "No! Who would expect such a thing?"

Andy waggled his eyebrows. "I hear the head of the household's a real asshole when women let him be, but maybe that's just talk." He leaned down to kiss Melody on the cheek, but she suddenly turned her head and pressed her lips against his, her hand rubbing against the back of his neck with more affection than he might've expected.

"Even without the compulsion, I am *very* lucky that you and Piper gave me a second chance, Andy, and I'm very, *very* glad that you did," Melody whispered to him when the kiss broke. "You may not see it, but you're a hell of a catch, and if the day ever comes, I will *gladly* take a bullet for you."

He smiled, feeling his face turn a little red as he blushed. "Well, thanks, I guess. I genuinely hope you don't ever have to, but it's good to see you're making up for your time spent causing trouble with Covington."

She shuddered, closing her eyes. "You know, I did black bag shit with the military, and I'm *still* not sure if I'm more grossed out by what I did as a Ranger or by what I did for *that* asshole. At least the shit I did as a Ranger, I was doing that in the service of our country."

"Well, I highly doubt I'm likely to ask you to kill anybody on my behalf, Mel," Andy joked.

"If you do, you best mean it, boss, because I'm gonna do it, no questions asked."

She was grinning like she might've been joking, but the tone in her voice told him she very much was not. It was a little strange, knowing he had that kind of power in his life, and he wasn't entirely sure that he cared for it.

"How you want to handle security today, Lexi?" he asked her. "I mean, the reservation is so goddamn tiny, I think whoever's waiting by the plane is going to be bored out of their damn mind, the place is so damn tiny. I was looking at it on a map, and I'm not entirely sure how we're going to get around, unless it's mostly just walking."

"Niko's mom is coming to pick people up from the airport and drive you all around. Might be a little crowded, but it won't be for all that long. And you're right, I can't imagine we have all that much to worry about in terms of security. Anything feels out of place, we're going to see it miles and miles away. But I'll hang with the plane, and we'll let Melody have a test run in the point position, making sure your safety is priority number one in the literal most lax environment we have."

"You sure, Lex?" Melody asked. "I don't want to jump the queue or do anything before you think I'm ready."

"This should be easy rider, so we'll just let you run the table," Lexi replied. "Don't worry about it, other than worrying about the standard thing, which is keeping Andy safe."

"Obviously."

Niko was the next to be up and it might've been the first morning since he'd met her that he



remembered seeing her truly trepidatious. He smiled and patted his lap, so she came over and slid down to sit on top of him on the couch, leaning in so he could give her a tender kiss. “You’re nervous about me meeting your mom,” Andy said. “It’s all over your face. I’m sure it’ll be fine.”

“That’s *one* of us, then,” she sighed. “No, I’m sure you’re right, it’ll be fine. I just... after seeing where you grew up, it’s a little weird knowing you’re going to see the sort of poor squalor I grew up in. They don’t call it the Badlands for nothing, and it really is the middle of absolute nowhere. Hell, the casino where most of the folks work is still half an hour drive away from the center of Rosebud, if you can call it that. It’s right on the border, to give all the Nebraskans who want to gamble another option than going across the river into Council Bluffs, Iowa.”

“Hey, as much as you’re worrying about it, we’re going there to meet your mom in person. If you don’t want us to hang around long, or not to wander around the reservation too much, we won’t. Whenever you want us to get back on the plane and fly away, we will.”

She smiled shyly at him. “You have *no* idea how much it means to my mom that you’re coming out to see *her*. She already liked you, but the fact that you’re making a point to stop and show her respect by coming to her home?” Niko shook her head. “Major brownie points, Mister Rook.”

“You only get one chance to make a first impression,” he laughed. “Besides, I want to see where someone as remarkable as you *came from*.”

Niko rolled her eyes, but she was also still blushing a little at the compliment. “Oh, no nookie on the plane ride there, though, okay? My mom’s sense of smell is *uncanny*, so if you, Sarah and Moira could wait until we’re flying into Denver, I’d much appreciate it.”

“I’ll tell them, and I think it shouldn’t be too big of a deal.”

“Well, even if it is, put your goddamn foot down. Tell them, ‘Woman! I’m the man around these parts and I say when we is and isn’t gonna fuck!’ And if they won’t listen, spank their asses!” Niko said, giggling feverishly the entire time she said it.

“Yeah, that *totally* sounds like the kind of thing I’d say.”

“I’m just saying that maybe once in a while, you should try and put on the stomping boots and see if you can’t kick some ass among the fiancées.”

“And that totally sounds like the kind of thing I’d *do*. Oh no. Wait. Strike that. Reverse it.”

“Spoilsport,” Niko said, sticking her tongue out at him. “Should we start getting everyone up?”

“Probably,” he said. “It’s only an hour and change to fly there, so as long as we’re around to meet your mom for lunch, we should be good to go.”

Niko leaned in and kissed him once more. “Thanks again for making me stop and see home again, even if I spend the rest of the day bitching about it. It means a lot to me, even if it is a whole lot of nothing to look at. It’s still where I came from.”

“Hey, you didn’t give me shit about Ohio,” he teased.

“You *came* from *Ohio*. No more shit need be *given*, babe. That’s punishment enough.” She giggled as she headed from the foyer back into the bedroom and started clapping her hands in the air loudly. “Up! Up! C’mon you dopey bitches, everybody UP! Your man snuck out of your bed and none of you even noticed! What kind of good-for-nothing whores are you? It’s time to get up already!”

There was a collective grumbling as all the women started to roll out of bed, eager enough to wake up that they were using the shower in pairs, willing to split the hot water if they could get under it and get washed down quickly. Andy did notice, to his amusement, that he saw Moira tossing one of the bland white hotel towels into her bag before they left, but he didn’t say anything, nor did Sarah, the only one of the girls who saw her do it.

Within an hour or so, they were checking out of the hotel and heading to the airport. Andy had to admit, having his own jet was extremely nice – no long security lines, no waiting to drop off or pick up bags – but he also wondered just how utterly abandoned the inside of the airport must be right now. Sure, there were flights coming and going, but it still felt almost desolate for how few people they saw.

As soon as the flight took off, Sarah and Moira started to approach Andy, but Niko had

threatened them playfully with a glass of water and the two redheads had giggled and backed down, instead just sitting next to him on the bench while he was typing away at the next Druid Gunslinger novel, which was still in just the very earliest stages, having only finished up “The Fatal Solstice” six weeks or so ago, but the publisher was leaning on him to up his output if at all possible, so he was leaning into writing nearly every spare moment he had. Sarah had also turned into a remarkably good sounding board for him to bounce ideas off, and to even offer suggestions for possible twists and turns he could send Dale down for his next adventure. He was in his rough outlining section and had put down plenty of narrative guideposts and road signs so that when he started working towards fleshing out his skeleton, he knew where things were going to go, and he could plow through them much faster. It was a helpful tool, and he’d probably spend the next two or three weeks just sort of laying down the foundations before he got to actual writing.

Of course, just when he’d gotten into the groove of things, Lexi’s voice came over the intercom that they were nearing in on Rosebud airport. Andy leaned over and looked out the window, pointing down at a small town below. “That it?”

“Nope,” Niko said. “That’s Mission. It’s bigger than Rosebud itself. Hell, Rosebud’s not even a real incorporated town. I spent a lot of time hanging out either in Mission or Saint Francis once I got old enough to drive, just because there’s fuck all to do in Rosebud proper.”

“There truly isn’t a whole lot out here, is there?” Fiona said, looking out another window.

“Nope,” Niko agreed. “Nothing times nothing, carry the nothing, to the power of nothing is still a whole lot of nothing. Mom’s going to meet us at the airport. She said we’re the first non-local flight they’ve had other than the Air Force vaccination brigade in two years.”

It turned out that while the term “airport” was *technically* correct, it was certainly being generous. There was no tower, no hangars to store planes in, just a single runway with the equivalent of a tiny airplane parking lot off to one side and a building marked Guardian Flight – Rosebud Base off to another. Andy had to look up the company, but it turned out they specialized in delivering emergency medical services to remote and rural locations, and their building *did* have a hangar with their own plane stored inside of it, as well as a helicopter on top.

Once they landed, Lexi taxied the plane over to the little concrete plane parking area and moved into a spot cordoned off with pavement markings, a large faded 1 written in the center of it. And then she powered down the plane, moving out of the cockpit and back into the cabin. “Well, we’re here, although I don’t see anyone here to meet us here.”

“Give her a couple of minutes,” Niko said. “We weren’t sure when we were going to get in, so I told Mom just to head over to the airport when she heard the plane coming in. She’ll be here in a couple of minutes.”

They started to get off the plane and onto the tarmac of the parking lot, looking around them. “So, this is what the center of America looks like,” Emily said. “I’ve always known there were rural parts of the country like this, but I’d simply never seen them.”

“Yeah, when I moved out to California, I drove through lots of areas like this. It’s a great big country, but there’s tons of empty land where nobody lives and nobody’s really doing anything with it,” Andy said. “I mean, I’m sure somebody owns the land, but it’s all just sitting there.”

“There’s plenty of this kind of vacant land east of here too,” Fiona said. “I thought it would only be the Midwest, but there’s lots of rural spots on the East Coast also, so don’t think you’re so special, Mister Rook, for having driven through loads of nowhere.”

“Here comes Mom,” Niko said, pointing over towards a dust cloud traveling down an unpaved road towards the airport. “We probably should’ve paved concrete out here, but the airport’s so rarely used, I guess nobody much saw the point in it.”

When the dust started to clear, Andy couldn’t help but laugh, seeing a giant yellow school bus pulling up alongside the plane parking lot. Along the side of it was written “Rosebud Reservation Elementary” and Andy remembered that Niko had told him his mother was a teacher. Since schools

hadn't started back up yet, he supposed the school bus was probably the best option for transportation they had available.

After bringing the bus to a stop, Niko's mom hopped off the bus and made her way over to the group of them, a warm smile on her face. She looked a lot like her daughter, short and slender, barely five foot tall if she was lucky. She was half-Lakota and half-Japanese (Niko's father had been half-Lakota and half-Mexican), dressed in a brown leather jacket with fringe on it, a t-shirt that read "Teachers Make The Best Lovers," and a pair of well-worn and faded blue jeans, as well as black leather boots that nearly came up to her knees. Her black hair was hanging long and loose down her back, and she wore a pair of giant reflective aviator style sunglasses. "Hínhañni láchčij, little one," Niko's mother said to her, opening her arms as her daughter ran to give her a massive hug.

"Háu, mama," Niko said, clinging to her tightly. "Lemme introduce you—"

"Háu Andy," Niko's mom said to him as she pulled away from her daughter. "I'm Spotted Wing Redwolf. Welcome to Rosebud." She reached over to offer him a handshake, but instead he moved over and gave her a hug, which she laughed and leaned into. "You're taller than I expected."

"You're *exactly* as I expected," he said with a broad grin. "I love the school bus."

"Ay ya, you've got such a large entourage, I couldn't think of any other way to haul all you and your collection of owned ass around," she said with a smirk. Her sense of humor was immediately reminiscent of her daughters. "C'mon, let's get on the bus, and we can do all the introductions once we get to the house."

It wasn't a long drive, as they took a small off-road past a Dialysis Clinic followed by a large Health Care Facility. It gave the impression that maybe the area wasn't quite as thin on the ground as it could've been, but once they hit Highway 1, they were back in the middle of nowhere, buildings looking like they were at least half a mile apart, most of them much, much further. Eventually, they turned onto West White Street and eventually pulled in front of a small house, parking the school bus on the street against the curb.

Andy was about to get off the bus first, but Melody leaped in front of him, pushing him back, as she stepped off the bus first and looked around for a moment before she gestured for him to come out. "Are we worried about a tree throwing an acorn at me?" he said in a slightly annoyed tone.

"Don't be silly," Melody said as they all walked over towards the house, ignoring his annoyance. "These trees don't *have* acorns."

The house wasn't even half as large as Andy's mom's house, but it wasn't because they didn't have the room, as the neighbors were still at least a few minutes' walk away. The house wasn't run down, but certainly didn't look new, with a sort of heavy weathered look to it, the exterior paint cracked and flaked away in large swaths.

Inside of the house, the furniture was sparse and simple, a picture of the man Andy assumed was Niko's late father up on the wall, as well as plenty of pictures of Niko throughout the years, from her as a child all the way to pictures of her in uniform.

"You haven't moved in with Chatan yet, mama?" Niko said.

She waved a hand through the air. "I know what I need to do to keep the serum going, Niko, so he and I have a weekly date, and that is enough. I did pay attention to all the information that you sent me, so I understand how serious it is, but I brought you into this world in this house, and I will not be pulled from it by some silly disease."

"I just want you to be safe, mama. That's all."

Spotted Wing tilted her chin up and towards Andy. "You. Manchild. You're keeping an eye on my daughter, yes? I see you've got a lot of ass around, so you best be making sure not to neglect my little girl."

"Wouldn't dare dream of it, Mrs. Redwolf," Andy said. He was starting to feel at home with all the grilling from parents he was getting. "Your daughter proposed to *me*, and that's an honor I'm never going to forget as long as I live."

Spotted Wing nodded approvingly. “That sounds like my Niko, always making sure she established her stake in whatever she was a part of. I’m a little surprised she’s not already with child.”

Niko grinned awkwardly. “Funny you should mention that, mama...”

Spotting Wing gasped and then burst into a big smile, rushing over to hug her daughter. “It *must* be early. You’re not even showing.”

“Somewhere between two and three months along, mama, which is why we haven’t really told anyone yet,” Niko said pulling back a little. “But I figured you should know since we’re here. Not just me, but me and Ash as well.”

Spotted Wing moved over to give a hug to Ash, kissing the woman on the cheek. “You’ll both be fine mothers. You’ve been a good partner in crime to my daughter, firewoman. When she first came to stay with you and Andy, she was worried that you might not accept her for who she is, but since then she’s told me you’ve become her best friend.” She looked over at Andy. “And you her true love. So I am happy for all of you. You didn’t bring the blonde giantess with you?”

Ash chuckled, shaking her head. “Lauren’s part of the family, but doesn’t want to be married to Andy, so we’ve chosen to respect that decision. This trip’s only for fiancées and bodyguards.”

“That makes sense,” Spotted Wing said. “Besides, if you have too many children showing up all at once, how will you ever manage? One Niko was more than enough for me, and I had a whole reservation to help with raising her, after her father died.”

“And you did a great job, Mom.”

“It sounds like I may have to try and give you a sibling soon, if possible, my little one.”

“I know, Mom. And I get it.”

Spotted Wing frowned a bit, as if she was still mulling over the notion of it. She couldn’t be older than her mid-forties at the oldest, clearly having had Niko when she was young. “I can’t say I’m fond of the idea at my age, but I guess it’s something I must endure for the good of the nation. But I’m old enough that it’ll be a challenge.”

“Mom, I understand,” Niko said, reaching over to take her mother’s hand. “And if it happens, it happens, and if it doesn’t, it doesn’t.”

“They’re talking about quite the financial incentives to help people bear the burden of having to refill several lost generations. Have you settled on how many children you’re going to have as a family? I imagine with so many wives, it’s going to be up there.”

“At least enough to front our own soccer team, I think, but I wouldn’t be surprised if we get two or three times that,” Piper said. “Some of us are taking our time before starting the race to become mothers. I want to do one more Olympics, and I know both Sarah and Em are probably going to start filming movies next spring, but that’s just a delay for all of us.”

Spotted Wing smiled over at Emily. “I remember when I had students with your picture on their tablets’ lock screen, from those movies. You were quite the hero to a lot of those little girls.”

Emily offered a polite bow. “Thank you, but I was just an actress trying her best to play her part in a remarkable story.”

Suddenly, Niko’s mom took in a big inhalation of breath, closed her eyes, and then very slowly let it out again. “Sorry, it’s just difficult thinking about how many people I’ve taught over the last several years who are all dead. I’m an elementary school teacher, so it’s not that hard to just think of entire years of students as gone.”

Niko moved over and wrapped her arms around her mother, and both women shared a good cry for a couple of minutes, Andy and the rest moving to join the giant hug, each of them hoping to leech off a little bit of the sadness and darkness, to carry the weight in Niko’s mother’s place.

Before they left the house, Andy insisted on seeing Niko’s room. Spotted Wing was happy to show them, but she’d mostly converted the room back to a neutral state, all the furniture there, but none of the embarrassing posters Andy was certain had to have lined the walls only half a decade or so ago.

After that, Spotted Wing gathered them all back up and onto the bus to give them a driving tour

of the reservation, which truly was as sparse and unpopulated as it had seemed from the air. In fact, she drove them down to Saint Francis, which only had a population of a couple hundred, and then back again. She offered to drive them up to Mission, South Dakota, only fifteen minutes away, which she assured them had almost twice the number of people, but admitted that it really wasn't worth the trip, even if she did have to drive up there regularly.

"Everything on the reservation's so scattered out," she said, driving them back to the airport. "That's why we have the buses, to bring everyone in from all the little, tiny farms and homesteads that are out there, miles away from everyone. It's not much to show, but it's home."

"If you ever wanted to move out to California, mom, and bring Chatan and his other partners, we certainly wouldn't mind the help in raising all the kids."

Spotted Wing smiled. "I'll think about it, Niko, but to be that far from our sacred lands? Ay ya, I don't know how happy I'd be."

"Give it some thought when you're out for the wedding and we'll talk about it again then, okay? Love you."

"Love you too." They all gave their goodbyes and were starting to walk over towards the plane when Spotted Wing gestured at Andy. "White boy. A moment, before you go?" Andy started to move back towards her, and Niko was about to go with him, but Melody put her hand on Niko's shoulder and then went to join Andy. Spotted Wing looked over at Melody, arching an eyebrow. "When you said this one wasn't a fiancée but a bodyguard, I must confess I thought you were joking."

"If I die, there's a good chance that all of those women over there do as well, Mrs. Redwolf," Andy said quietly. "Respectfully, I owe it to them to take my safety deadly seriously, not just for my own sake, but more importantly, for theirs."

"You say it like that, it makes sense," she said, nodding quietly. "The Lakota didn't really have a marriage ceremony before encountering Christianity, but they also weren't opposed to a man having multiple wives, if entire families got along. But I'd like to have some of our heritage represented at the wedding if you don't mind, and I would rather you not tell Niko about this in advance. Now, for the important question – what size shoe are you?"

"11, why?"

"I will make you a pair of moccasins to wear on your wedding day, so while you should pretend to get dress shoes, you will not wear those, but will instead wear the moccasins I will bring you when I come out for the wedding, yes?"

"Of course, Mrs. Redwolf."

"You can call me Uncisi, which is Lakota for mother-in-law, but I won't hold you to the old traditions of not being allowed to talk to me or speak directly to me," she said gruffly. "Some traditions can stay in the past for all I care. And I will call you Wicaha, which is son-in-law, but only every now and again, to keep you on your toes."

"Thank you, Uncisi," he said smiling.

"You strike me as a noble heart, Wicaha, although perhaps you may need to look a moment longer before you constantly go leaping into fires to prove your bravery."

"I'm not trying to prove anything to anyone, Uncisi," he sighed. "I'm just trying to be a good man with a relatively uncomplicated moral compass."

"Mmm. That you are and that you have, but if you die young on my daughter, I will never forgive you, and will set the spirits of my ancestors to the task of haunting your spirit for the rest of eternity. You hear me?"

"Yes, Uncisi."

"Good. Now give your Uncisi a kiss and off with you. I'll see you next month for the wedding."

Andy gave Spotted Wing a hug, kissed her cheek and smiled at her one more time, mouthing the words 'thank you' before turning back, walking towards the plane where most of the ladies had boarded, but Niko was still waiting at the bottom of the steps.

“What did mom want?”

“Just the usual ‘break my daughter’s heart and I’ll obliterate your soul’ kind of thing,” he chuckled. “Nothing to worry about. C’mon, let’s go.”

They loaded up into the plane, taxied down to the end of the runway, turned around and then took off into the skies. As they passed the midsection, Andy could see Spotted Wing standing atop the center of the school bus, waving farewell to them, which he made sure Niko saw.

About twenty minutes into the flight, he saw Sarah and Moira peering over at him before they bum rushed him and pushed him back towards the rear section of the plane. He’d known this was coming, but he was a little surprised by how giddy the two of them looked as they approached him, both of them having already stripped down to nothing, as Sarah grinned at him. “You ready to get rough and randy, Andy?”

“You were talking rather a big game earlier, Mo,” Andy said with a chuckle. “You think you can hold up to it?”

“Oh, Andy, believe me, we intend to give you a *good time*,” Moira said, licking her lips. She grabbed Sarah and pushed the much taller woman up onto the couch on her knees. “Sarah’s always talking a big game, about how she always wants to be yer dirtiest slut, but we both know she’s got a long way to go for that, doesn’t she?”

Sarah looked back over her shoulder with a wry smirk. “I’ve certainly got the dirtiest fucking mouth of the house.”

“Do ye though?” Moira asked. She lifted her hand up and then brought it down in a hard spank on Sarah’s upturned ass. “I think it’s time we put ye to the test.”

“That actually fucking stung a little bit,” Sarah giggled. “I think I liked it.”

“We’re gonnae put that to the test, ‘cause I think you’ll look prettiest getting railed on your hands and knees like Andy’s good little bitch,” Moira said, her fingertips moving down to rub two fingers across Sarah’s exposed snatch, the taller redhead whimpering and leaning back a bit into the smaller one’s touch.

Andy closed up his laptop and then rose up to his feet, unbuttoning his jeans. There was something about Moira’s attitude that made him want to keep as much of his clothing on as possible, and Moira had a sly little look in her eye as she pushed Sarah’s head down against the top of the couch seat, and Sarah’s thighs open a little wider. “Fuck, I need you to fuck me so fucking hard, Andy, that I want you to fucking break me, so that people at the fucking book signing ask if I hurt my leg or some shit like that.”

Moira brought one of her fingers up to her lips, making a little shushing motion towards Andy, as she moved over and grabbed her purse from beside the bench where she’d left it when she’d gotten on the plane. From it, she pulled out a tube of clear lubricant, and began to drizzle it on Andy’s cock, wrapping her fingers around it, making sure to get it good and slick. Andy arched an eyebrow, but Moira leaned up and kissed him tenderly before whispering in his ear. “You watch how this is gonnae make her cum...”

“Don’t make me fucking *wait*, Andy,” Sarah whined. “Your good little slut needs you to *fuck her*. So fucking badly.” She was even waggling her hips back and forth, trying to lure him in, and he could see that her pussy was dripping, glistening with so much clear excitement as to be starting to dribble down the inside of her thighs, threatening to fall off onto the couch.

“Towel,” Andy said to Moira, who immediately grinned, reaching back into her bag, pulling out the towel he’d seen her stash away earlier, moving to lay it beneath Sarah, lifting one of Sarah’s knees to wedge it in, putting it back down, and then repeating on the other side. “You sure you want me to make you walk funny, Sarah?”

“*Yeessssssss Andy*,” the taller redhead purred. “Whatever you want to fucking do to me, I fucking want it too. I want to fucking feel how much you own my fucking body, own my fucking soul. I wanna feel you complete my fucking life.” Andy shrugged with a smile to Moira, who then moved to

smear some of the lubricant on her own fingers before taking her fingers to Sarah's exposed asshole, smearing the cool gel there. "Oh. *OH!* Oh, fuck *yeah*. Nobody else's done this here in the skies, so you better fucking *believe* I am one hundred fucking percent *that bitch*. C'mon, Andy, have at my fucking ass. You know it's fucking yours. You fucking *know* I fucking *adore* it. Do it. Fuck my ass. I can't fucking wait any longer." She even reached a hand back to pull those asscheeks apart a little wider invitingly, her hips wiggling.

"Look at what you've wrought, Andy," Moira whispered into his ear. "She's the most gorgeous filthy slut I've ever laid eyes on. And while you're fuckin' her in the ass, I'm gonna be making out with her the whole fucking time. Now make good on your end. Fucking ruin her day. Make it clear who owns that delicious ass of hers. I'm gonna go keep the other end busy." The tiny Scottish woman moved over to sit down on the couch next to Sarah and then did her best to slide underneath her, bringing her lips to lock with Sarah's, one of Sarah's hands moving to hold the back of the couch, the other playing with the silver barbell through Moira's nipple.

Andy knew his part to play and moved over to hotdog his cock between Sarah's butt cheeks, smearing even more of that lubricant over her pink pucker before he lined the head of his shaft up and slowly thrust forward, planning on taking it slow, but instead, Sarah just shoved her ass back onto his cock like she wanted to engulf the whole fucking thing on the first pass, a complicated moan erupting until Andy realized it was both Sarah *and* Moira moaning together, and he saw that Sarah's hand had moved from Moira's tits down to between her thighs, rubbing against the Scottish woman's slit.

Early on in their relationship, he'd learned that Sarah and Emily often had a rivalry about being the first to do things, and that had extended to their relationship with Andy, with Emily taking great pride about being the first of the two of them to try anal with Andy (or, in fact, at all). And now Sarah was countering by joining the Mile High Club by going through the back door.

He was doing his best to keep his pace in check and not to rush, but there was no mistaking that for as much as Sarah *loved* anal now, she was still *very* tight, and the constricting snugness wasn't going to let him last all that long. So, when duration was going to be a problem, he'd learned to compensate by countering with intensity. Because of that, he grabbed onto Sarah's hip with one hand and reached forward to slide his fingers around her neck, giving it a little squeeze, which he felt surge as a shiver down her spine.

Andy kept plowing his hips forward, using her hips and her throat to keep her in motion, but he also felt Moira's fingertips moving to smooth over his hand on Sarah's hip, as if connecting the three of them, and just as he started to cum, he thrust down hard, which was when Sarah truly surprised him. Her thighs slide wide to each side, practically doing the splits against the towel and the couch, as her body tensed up and she let out the most intense, fierce monster of an orgasm into Moira's mouth, her ass swallowing his jism, the two of them locked in a feedback loop that seemed to never end until finally, seconds or minutes later, Andy's surge stopped, his hand slipped from her throat and he grabbed the back of the couch himself, his own legs feeling a little unsteady.

"That's why I stole the towel from the hotel room," Moira whispered to Sarah, who began to giggle hysterically in the aftermath of her overwhelming orgasm.

## **Chapter Fourteen**

*December 18<sup>th</sup>, 2020*

The book signing in Denver the day before had gone off without a hitch. They'd flown into Denver airport and headed straight towards The Tattered Cover, where Andy's fans were eagerly awaiting his arrival, albeit in smaller numbers than originally anticipated. The cold weather had discouraged people from protesting too heavily, although there had been a few hardened, determined people who had insisted on parading around with their signs, although the media coverage was still lingering around, the story of the shooting a few days ago still lingering over the general reporting around his book tour.

The fans had been incredibly gracious and welcoming, and when he'd read an excerpt from the book under development, he'd gotten a standing ovation for almost five minutes. The security was also a little bit stronger this time around, but it didn't feel constrictive, and if an attendee wasn't observant, they might not have even noticed there were additional guards stationed around The Tattered Cover bookstore the event had been held at, one of the largest bookstores in America.

Overall, it had let Andy relax a little bit yesterday, since he had been nervous of a repeat of the experience back in his home state of Ohio. The time spent with Niko's mom had certainly soothed his nerves some, as well as how welcoming to their family she'd been. (The fact that she'd just found out she was going to be a grandmother probably helped also.) And since the signing had been without issue, Andy's guard had been slightly lowered when they got back to the hotel on the night of the 17<sup>th</sup>.

The hotel itself had been set up incredibly well, with one massive bed, plus a couple of additional beds so that security could sleep somewhere during their down time. It felt like it was nice and safe, and they'd slept well, all huddled together in one big pile like they preferred to, given the option. It was a good time at rest.

That should've been what set warning flags up inside his brain, but he was hoping that maybe, just maybe, he'd earned a bit of a respite.

Instead, he woke up on the morning of the 18<sup>th</sup> to Niko shaking his shoulder.

"Andy, I think you'd better come take a look at this."

He was going to remember this exact morning for the rest of his life.

Andy got out of bed, extracting himself from the sea of still slumbering bodies with a casual adeptness he'd gotten better at over the last few months, and moved out of the bedroom into the foyer, where Alexis and Melody were already awake, watching the television, a sort of almost exhausted shock having settled in on their faces, and the look had Andy concerned, more concerned than he'd thought he'd ever been.

The clock read 9:52 a.m MST.

"We bring you continuing coverage of the crisis in New Zealand, I'm Shannon Mason for CNN. For those of you just joining us, allow us to recap the events of the last few days," the woman on television said to them from her studio somewhere in Atlanta. She was the sort of blonde talking head that seemed to be a staple on the news networks, but she looked like she was exhausted, the toll of what she'd been talking about clearly weighing on her. He wondered how long she'd been on the air. "In February of this year, the small country of New Zealand shut its borders down just as the twin pandemics of DuoHalo and Covid began, and as such, had circumvented the heavy casualties that had affected the rest of planet. Since February, they had reported zero cases of either disease. Up until three days ago, when people in New Zealand began dying off in large numbers. The government of New Zealand initially attempted to keep it quiet, at first, to try and prevent a panic, while reaching out to the US government for emergency support but word broke internationally late last night."

"Oh god," Andy said, moving over to sit down on the couch as Niko sat down next to him, snuggling in hard against him, her lip quivering a bit nervously. He felt that nervous pit in his stomach that he'd only had once, half a lifetime ago, early in the morning on September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001. He'd been nineteen, just starting his second year of college, when he'd been walking to class in the morning,



seeing that people were huddled around televisions. He'd sat down in the lobby of one of the buildings with several dozen other students watching on a television that had been playing the same thing every other television across America was playing. He imagined that might be happening again right now, endless masses glued to the television in fear and shock.

"The United States *had* been in negotiations to start delivering the serum to New Zealand starting in January, because the small country had been confident that they had the disease under control," the reporter said. "As such, they were not prepared to discover that the disease known as DuoHalo had somehow invaded their shores, unbeknownst to its citizenry. This problem was compounded by the fact that because New Zealand was so confident in how secure their borders were that they had given their citizens free access to travel *within* during that entire time. Because of this, the..." The reporter stopped, looking down at her hands nervously before looking back up and into the camera again, a tiny tremble visible in the woman's hands atop the news desk. "Because of this, we are currently operating on the assumption that the entire population of New Zealand is currently carrying the DuoHalo virus. As such, the United States is making an emergency shipment of the Quaranteam serum to the country that should be touching down shortly. We have with us via remote satellite Doctor Charlotte Varma, who is part of the United States's team dedicated to combating the DuoHalo epidemic, and one of the researchers who worked on the Quaranteam serum almost since its inception. Thank you for taking the time to talk to us this morning, Doctor Varma."

"I only wish it could be under better circumstances, Ms. Mason," Charlotte's familiar face said, split screen on the television, with the reporter on the right and the doctor on the left.

"I think we all feel that way, Doctor," the reporter said, clearly shaken. "Can you tell us what the current state of the population of New Zealand is right at this moment in time?"

"Yes, ah. Yes." Andy had seen Charlotte during dark times before, when he'd helped pull her and her daughter from the clutches of Arthur Covington the Fourth, but her face looked like she was desperately struggling to keep it together, something which made the whole moment even more uncomfortable for Andy to watch. "So, two days ago, the city of Christchurch reported its first casualty from DuoHalo, something which wasn't supposed to be possible. Because the country had closed its borders off, many initial reports which were presenting as DuoHalo were ignored by local authorities, until things turned severe in rapid succession."

"Why did local medical authorities discard diagnoses of DuoHalo in such large numbers, Dr. Varma, and did that disregard complicate things?"

"It certainly did not help them any, Shannon, although even if they had correctly diagnosed DuoHalo upon first presentation, it would've really only bought them an additional twenty-four to forty-eight hours, and while that may sound like a lot of time, many of the consequences of their actions were already, at that point, unavoidable."

"At this point, I feel the need to warn our viewers that we will be showing some fairly graphic footage over the next few hours, and that they may wish to look away from their televisions," the reporter said, her hands balling up into fists. "How bad is it looking for the country, Doctor?"

"New Zealand has... *had* a population of around five million people, Shannon, according to the most recent estimates, with about fifteen percent of that being in the immediate, incurable age range from 11 to 18. Almost all those young people are already dead, and those that have not yet expired will do so shortly. There is nothing that can be done about that."

The word 'expired' hung uncomfortably in Andy's head for a moment, making the deaths of approaching a million young people sound like a show on a streaming service being cancelled, rather than the mind shattering number of dead people that it was.

"The graphic footage which we are about to rebroadcast comes from local New Zealand television media, taken yesterday afternoon local New Zealand time. Doctor, can you explain to us what we're seeing here?"

The screen cut away from the two women to show a distant shot of what looked like hospital

staff tossing bodies into a large open pit in the earth. The shot was taken from enough distance so that the faces of anyone involved could not be made out, but even from the distance, it was clear the pit already held hundreds, maybe even thousands of bodies, many of them teenagers.

“Yes, ah, the death toll is so high in New Zealand right now, Shannon, that individual graves are impossible and even mass cremation is basically unscalable at the rate of which new casualties are arriving at the hospitals,” Charlotte said, her face shown in a corner of the screen that couldn’t cut away from the horror, all the color having drained from her face as she was watching it along with everyone else. “Considering the infection rate, the incubation period and the lateness with which we are arriving with the serum to try and help these people, we are expecting the best-case scenario for New Zealand is to have somewhere between twenty and thirty percent of its population alive this time next week, although I have to admit more realistic projections are putting it significantly lower, within the ten to twenty percentage range.”

“Is there a reason none of the hospital workers are wearing personal protective equipment, Doctor?” the reporter asked.

“Because, at this point, Shannon, it would be completely wasted,” Charlotte sighed. “Everyone you see in these videos, the corpses, the hospital workers, even the very camera crew filming all of this, each and every one of them is already nearly guaranteed to be infected with DuoHalo. That’s one of the reasons we’re projecting such high casualty rates. There is no one to tend to the cases that might have been less severe in terms of women’s cases, meaning that basically every person in the country that we cannot get the Quaranteam serum into within the next three to four days is going to die, both men and women alike.”

The video cut to a closer shot, showing one of the hospital workers taking a photo of one of the dead bodies with that person’s identification on their chest. The man looked like he was in his early thirties, and Andy wondered how many more just like that had already been catalogued.

“In such catastrophic conditions, all hospital workers can do is quickly catalog the dead before disposing of the bodies in the safest way possible, so as to not contaminate the soil or the ground water,” Charlotte said. “All of this information is being cataloged, but at the same time, many of the hospitals have abandoned the practice, simply choosing to focus their time on doing what they can to try and keep those cases who might be borderline salvageable alive long enough to try and get some of the Quaranteam serum into them. In the words of their Prime Minister, it is looking increasingly likely that it will be easier to take a census of those that survived than to catalog those who have died.”

The video feed cut to a shot from what looked like a block away from a major hospital, the entire building surrounded by people clogging nearly every way in or out.

“We’re getting reports that many of the hospitals are simply turning people away at this point, unable to provide them any help or support, at least until the Quaranteam serum arrives,” the reporter’s voice said. “You can see here that in some cases, the hospitals have simply been abandoned by the medical staff for the time being, as doctors and nurses have either gone home to be with their loved ones, or to try and get into line to get the Quaranteam serum as quickly as possible. Do you know anything at all about the Air Force’s plans on how they plan to deploy the serum, Doctor?”

“The Air Force will be landing two or three planes each in each of the five major cities of New Zealand – Auckland, Wellington, Christchurch, Hamilton and Tauranga. As you know, you have reporters embedded with a couple of those units. I expect they should be contacting you soon, as they will be able to give you much more up to date information that I can, although I’m here to help speak to the medical concerns.”

The video cut to shots of a local store apparently being swarmed with looters and rioters, the windows completely shattered, people simply walking out with armfuls of things, although the health of the rioters looked suspect, many of them coughing, staggering in their walk, their eyes heavily bloodshot, their noses dripping with mucus.

The reporter’s voice spoke again, overlaying the footage of looting. “Law enforcement has, at

this point, almost mostly abandoned their efforts to keep the populace in check and are also either with their loved ones or attempting to get in line at locations that it has been reported the serum will be delivered to shortly. In some cases, they have tried to establish some crowd control at locations suspected to be serum drop points, but for the most part, they are simply completely overwhelmed on all fronts. Doctor, how fast will they be able to distribute the serum?”

“It’s not a complicated process, Shannon, but the—”

“Sorry to cut you off, Doctor, but I’m just getting word that we’ve made contact with one of our embedded reporters with the Air Force salvation team. One of our southern Pacific correspondents, Jenny Sheppard, joins us now. Jenny, can you hear me?”

The feed cut in with a shot of a brunette woman with a giant airplane in the background. She was dressed in what looked like a typical reporter’s attire but had a decidedly non-standard flak jacket on over it. Her hair was done up in a bun, and she looked like she’d only recently been woken up from a bad night’s rest, which Andy suspected she’d had on the plane on display behind her.

“I can hear you, Shannon. I’m here with the 102<sup>nd</sup>, who arrived just about ten minutes ago in Auckland, as they are preparing to head over to Eden Park, a sports venue here with a capacity of 50,000. They are planning on using this as a staging ground for the first wave of patients in Auckland, and we are expecting to roll out within just a few minutes, a little past 3 a.m. local time. It will be the first stop of nearly half a dozen this team will make over the next twenty-four hours. Between the two planes landing in each of the five major cities, there are over two and a half million doses of the Quaranteam serum that have just arrived within the last couple of hours. I asked the commander of the task force before we deployed if this would be enough and was told that this was all the supply they had available, and that they would provide as much of it as they could to people in need.”

“Jenny, how many—”

“I’m sorry to cut you off, Shannon, but I’m being told we need to move right now to relocate with our hosts, so we should be able to get back to you in twenty or thirty minutes,” the reporter said, clearly being hurried by her Air Force handlers, the trucks starting to drive off as the feed froze on a still of the last image.

“Stay safe over there, Jenny, and we’ll talk to you again a little later.” The shot cut away from the field and back to the split screen of the main reporter and Charlotte. “That was Jenny Sheppard, southern Pacific correspondent, and she’ll be joining us again later. Doctor Varma, what kind of recovery can we expect from those New Zealanders who are able to get access to the serum in time?”

“The results will vary significantly, depending on what happens to them *after* they get the serum, but many of them stand a good chance of recovery,” Charlotte said. “Assuming they are able to find and partner themselves.”

“I want to get more into that, but we need to take a quick commercial break. Don’t go anywhere, our coverage of Crisis In New Zealand will be back in just a few minutes.”

The screen faded and then turned into a commercial about some older man and his need for finding a comfortable catheter, which gave Andy a moment to look away from the screen for a moment, suddenly aware that a couple more of his partners had woken up during the time he was watching and had moved to snuggle in as much as they could. He realized at some point, Emily had taken his hand and wrapped it around her own.

“This is horrifying, Andrew,” she whispered to him, her eyes filled with tears.

“I know, Em. I know.”

Melody went to go wake the rest of his partners, as Andy recognized they might not be leaving the hotel room for a while, unable to turn away from the tragedy that was unfolding on the other side of the planet but was still only as far away as their television set. By the time the rest of his partners were moving to sit on or in front of the couch, the reporter had returned to the screen. Other than some very brief filling in of what was happening to the partners who’d awoken last, nobody much felt like talking.

When the reporter came back from commercial, it was in a three-panel split screen, with

Charlotte on the right-hand side and the same reporter from before, Jenny Sheppard, who was now standing inside what looked like some sort of large sports arena, where it looked like pallets of serum had just been yanked off the trucks and stacked down in large sections. Many tall plastic dividers had been laid out on the field, funneling the open area down into twenty stations, each staffed by two people, one nurse and one armed soldier, before just opening out to the back.

“We’re back with Jenny Sheppard in Eden Park within the city of Auckland in New Zealand, and Jenny, it looks like behind you, they’ve set up stations where people can get injected with the serum quickly, although I don’t see any area set up for post-injection observation.”

“Shannon, the situation here is currently so dire that the commanding officer, General Natalie Scrimshaw, told me just a few moments ago that they simply do not have *time* for any observation or post-injection care, as the situation here is so dire,” Jenny said, her voice starting to crack just a little bit. “They do not have time for Oracle screenings or even to ensure that people are getting paired up appropriately. As soon as someone is injected, they are given a pamphlet explaining how the serum works, which instructs them to go and find a male partner as soon as they are able to, and sent onward. Any men who try to show up in this area are being redirected from entering the lines and being sent to stand around the back, so that any women coming out of the area can collectively grab a partner or form ad hoc Teams before leaving the site, if they do not have someone already in mind who they know and is both available and alive.”

“I’m sorry, can you repeat that, Jenny? Are you saying the Oracle system isn’t being used *at all* over there?” Shannon asked.

“That’s right, Shannon,” Jenny confirmed. “The decision was made en route here that New Zealand was in a complete triage situation, and that the maximum amount of the serum would have to be distributed and that the New Zealand citizenry would simply need to be trusted to fend for themselves once they were given their dose. The General told me the situation is far from optimal, but the choices were this or essentially treating all New Zealand as hospice care, so the decision was made to save as many living people as possible.”

“What kind of preparations were made in advance of your arrival there, Jenny?”

“All of the syringes are preloaded, so staffers can simply remove the cap, stick it in the shoulder of a woman, press the plunger, pull it out, toss it into a bin, hand the person a pamphlet and send them on their way. The entire process should take no more than twenty seconds, meaning they’re hoping to get thirty-six hundred women done every hour at this location alone, or close to ninety thousand women within the next twenty-four hours,” Jenny told them. “Each city has two Air Force teams in it, one stationed and one mobile. Each stationary unit will remain at its location for three days, or until their supply of the serum is exhausted. The mobile units will be changing location every two hours within the major city they’re stationed in, offering those who are too ill to travel larger distances the chance to possibly get an injection of the serum. The chyron below will list those locations for our viewers in New Zealand, although we will *not* be broadcasting their locations outside of New Zealand, for fear of someone attempting to hijack Quaranteam serum.”

“Jenny, have you had a chance to read the pamphlet they’ll be handing out?”

“I have, Shannon, and it’s a straightforward and almost brutal explanation of how the serum works, as well as the side effects associated with it. The pamphlet gives instructions to find a partner, what the imprinting process is like and what to expect moving forward. The Prime Minister of New Zealand is also going to be recording a message that’s showing on taped loop on most of the local television and radio stations, repeating the instructions from the pamphlet, as well as listing both static and mobile locations the teams will be coming to.”

“Did you get a chance to see if there were people gathered up outside of the Arena, Jenny?”

“We did drive past the crowd that had gathered in the Eden Park Outer Oval,” Jenny said as the screen cut away to show footage of tens of thousands of people all gathered up, trying to remain calm, although as with any crowd that big, it looked like there were some disputes going on, with some

people struggling to try and push their way forward. “A few members of the Air Force have gone towards the gates with megaphones, telling any men who are gathered there to go the other side of the stadium, and to try and find someone to partner up with, although they are reminding those men that they should not leave with just one partner, but only once they have found *several*. They...” The reporter choked up for a moment before continuing on reading off of some of her notes. “They are also telling anyone between the ages of eleven and seventeen to get out of line, to go home immediately, as there is nothing that they can do for them, which is a horrible thing for these women have to tell the children of New Zealand.”

“I’m sorry, Jenny, didn’t you mean to say women *and* men? I would have assumed the Air Force would have sent mostly female staff members, but also some of those staff members’ imprinting partners, in case they were needed to stay longer.”

“That’s an understandable assumption to make, Shannon, albeit a wrong one,” Jenny said, as generators were being turned on and heavy flood lights were filling the entire area with illumination, as the camera operator struggled to adjust to the new lighting conditions. “The general told me on the flight over that there was a concern that if there had been any men as part of this relief effort, they might have been tempted to offer themselves up to partner with some of the women here, not out of any personal gain, but simply out a sense of empathy for what these people have already endured and are continuing to endure. We were not permitted to bring our male partners with us for those same reasons, as the number of women here in need is almost beyond the mind’s ability to comprehend. This rule also ensures there is a time limit to the amount of effort the Air Force can put in here in New Zealand, and helps serve as a reminder that if any of the women here, be it Air Force or press, is starting to feel the need to be reinforced, then it is likely too late for anyone in New Zealand who has not already been injected with the serum, and that we should return home to our partners.”

“So, the Air Force deployment will be there for how long, Jenny?”

“Best guess at this point is five to six days, although if the casualty count continues to escalate as quickly as it has over the past day, the general tells me staying past three or four days is likely a waste of time and resources.” There was something terrifying and stark about how she said that Andy thought to himself, like after four days the only people on the island nation would either have the Quaranteam serum flowing through their veins or they would be dead.

“How does the Air Force feel—”

“Sorry to cut you off, Shannon, but I’ve just gotten word that they’re about to start letting people into the arena, so we want to turn the camera over to that and let you know that it’s happening.”

The shot cut away from the reporter to point across stadium, with waist high steel railings erected before the plastic dividers, an effort to funnel people into orderly lines to get the serum injected, but within moments, it was clear that wasn’t going to happen. Women started rushing towards the railings as fast as they could, shoving other people out of the way, clearly panicked that those few moments were the difference between life and death.

“It looks like the people are charging towards the line, Jenny,” Shannon said, concern in her voice. “Are you going to be safe?”

Suddenly, there was a spray of machine gun fire into the air, which made people suddenly stop in their tracks. An Air Force officer with a microphone hooked up to a large set of speakers shouted out like the Voice of God. “Citizens of New Zealand! Walk, do not run, towards the lines! If we see people pushing, shoving or forcing their way forwards, they will be detained and maybe even shot with rubber bullets or bean bag rounds. They still hurt like a motherfucker, ladies, so you do not want to make us do it, believe me!”

The stampede shorted itself out, although whether it was the officer’s voice or the half a dozen Air Force officers with their rifles pointed into the crowd, no one could be sure. Many of the women in the crowd weren’t yet showing signs of infection, but there were others who were clearly battling with early or mid-stage DuoHalo onset. As some of the zombie-like horde began to approach the rows,

members of the Air Force security team had to direct a few men out of the line, as well as some women who had brought their teenage children with them.

“If you are between the ages of 11 and 17, this serum is a guaranteed death sentence,” the officer said over the speakers. “If you are male, taking the serum directly will only result in your immediate and incredibly painful death. Please proceed to the other side of the stadium and attempt to find yourself several women to partner up with, as that is your *only* chance for survival.”

“It’s...” the on-location reporter started before stopping then starting again. “It’s incredibly difficult to watch this, Shannon, knowing that the people we are seeing here represent some of the few survivors this once great island nation will have in just a few short days.”

“Jenny, we’re going to leave you for a few minutes and go over to Kayley Post, who is set up at Hagley Oval in Christchurch. Kayley, how are things going where you are?”

The screen cut to an open park area, which looked like it was filled to the brim with people being funneled through lines similar to the ones they’d seen at the sporting arena. It panned over to a bottle blonde in her late twenties, standing next to an airwoman in Air Force garb, a Latina who looked like she wanted to just go and lay down.

“Shannon, the Air Force has been up and running here for a little over an hour now, and medics are being rotated in an hour-on, hour-off shift rotation so that nobody feels too overwhelmed or hopeless regarding the situation. I’ve grabbed one of the medics just to talk with us for a few minutes about how the process has been going so far. Staff Sergeant Alice Mayer joins us briefly. Sergeant, how has it been?”

“Uh, it’s been brutal, ma’am. We’re doing our best to get as many shots into as many arms as possible, but because of the overwhelming number of infected, we can’t do any of the post-care that’s important in making sure this solution works long term that we’re accustomed to doing. We’ve been giving pamphlets and brief explanations of how it all works, but we don’t have time to answer questions. We don’t even know if they’re reading the damn things, but we’ve told them they have to take the information in the pamphlet to heart, or they could die. Most of them seem so happy just to be getting the serum, even though we’ve explained to them that’s just the first step, and that it won’t mean much if they don’t follow the rest of the steps.”

“Have there been any problems?”

The staff sergeant sighed, nodding slightly. “We’ve had a couple of people try and grab handfuls of syringes and run off with them, but we’ve been told not to waste precious time chasing them down. We’ve also had some people ask for additional syringes that they say they’re going to bring to those too invalid to make their way here.”

“Is that what you think they’re being used for?”

“Some of them, sure,” the medic said. “We suspect that some those people, however, are either attempting to give them to those in the 0% survival zone, i.e. kids and teenagers, or are disregarding our instructions and attempting to give them directly to men, which will be completely fatal. We’ve done as much as we can to warn people about those consequences, with both the pamphlets and the announcements being given every ten minutes over the loudspeakers, but there’s only so much we can do at this point. We’re attempting to triage as best we can, but the situation’s a full-blown disaster.”

The Rook family had been watching the horror show for more than a couple of hours before any of them could bear to look away, many of his partners crying or shivering, clinging onto him, his hands, his arms, any part of him they could get in contact with, as if the sights of it all were terrifying them, and that staying in contact with him was helping them get through it.

For Andy, it was like watching 9/11 all over again, only in slow motion, with the cameras able to capture the faces of the dying, except the scale was magnified to proportions that were almost unfathomable. On that fateful September morning, the death count had been only 3000 or so people. The suspected total dead, at that moment in that location, was approaching 1 million people within the last day or so, just in New Zealand alone.

The pandemic's isolation strategy of quarantining had detached them from the reality of it all a bit, all the information having been leaked out in bits and pieces, but this was like being smacked in the face with it all at once, up close and personal, unable to turn away or hide from what was happening.

It was a microcosm of the entire mass culling of the male population of planet Earth.

Live and on television.

By the middle of the day, they were all so numb from it that they made it to the airport without anyone saying much of anything, pulling away from the television long enough to leave Denver and head up towards Seattle. Nobody joined the Mile High Club that evening. Everyone was still too in shock, praying for the people halfway across the world to hold on just a little longer, to find their way to an Air Force team, to get the serum, to live.

Just...

...live.

## **Chapter Fifteen**

*December 19<sup>th</sup>, 2020*

Sleeping had been difficult, but before they'd crashed for the night, things had looked like they were stabilizing in New Zealand, even as disastrous as it was. Current estimations were that the New Zealand population would end up somewhere between 15-20% of what it had been two weeks ago, and that was an improvement upon how terrifying it had looked just twelve hours earlier.

Even while they'd been traveling, Team Rook had done everything they could to keep track of what was going on overseas, someone on their phone or laptop, hooked into the plane's Wi-Fi, streaming CNN, MSNBC or the BBC, unable to look away from the latest news coming from halfway across the world. It wasn't like the death tolls were massively higher than the rest of the world – especially now that the Air Force was pushing the serum into every female arm it could find – but because New Zealand had gone from zero to sixty within a couple of weeks, it was an easier visual display of what the whole world had been dealing with for months and months. And the sudden severity of it meant that they hadn't time to adapt like most of the rest of the world had.

As individuals had died off across the globe in key logistics or support positions earlier during the pandemic, the deaths had been spread out enough that new people had been brought on, trained up and, as soon as it was available, vaccinated with the serum. And as long as the keystones in terms of utilities and services were being upheld, it was easier to overlook the massive number of casualties. In most cases, it had been men dying and women being trained up and/or promoted to fill in the slack.

There had been some shortages, naturally, as certain things dwindled in the supply, but by working to keep ahead of the problem, the Air Force had done a remarkable job in keeping all of the major industries needed to keep the country functional running, although many of them were operating only at a fraction of what they once were. That was okay, though, as the demand had also dropped, for obvious if depressing reasons.

Less people meant less demand for power, water, food, toiletries, etc.

The ridiculous thing to Andy was that it was all basically just a bunch of dials, and the decreased production for, say, meat, hadn't resulted in anywhere near the sort of panicked shortages people would've expected was because the *demand* had dropped accordingly.

The bigger challenge had been distribution and transportation, but the Air Force had thought of that too, which was why the watchword of surviving the pandemic was *consolidation*.

As it turned out, the people who'd most noticed the pandemic happening in America were those who'd been in smaller to mid-size cities in the United States. It was something Andy had been doing a bunch of reading on. The top 300 largest cities in the US all had populations over 100k (or at least they had before the start of the epidemics), but there were loads and loads and loads of cities across the country with populations between 10k and 100k, and those were the ones that were getting hit the hardest. As such, much of the population of those smaller towns were being consolidated upwards into larger cities.

Consolidation was something people had been advocating for in the United States for literal decades, long before the virus. High density housing hadn't been happening across the country because rich people had pushed for single-home land development to be the only kind of thing that was being allowed to be built, which led to the suburbs.

(There were lots of reasons, but the common denominator was, of course, racism.)

As the sprawl expanded, the problem worsened.

The suburbs made up only 25% of the population of the country, but they accounted for more than half of the greenhouse gases being released in the US. Too many people were just taking up too much space and using too much energy to do it. Single family houses were infinitely more expensive to heat and cool than centralized towers or even midsize complexes. The United States had needed to consolidate down into more efficiently designed and constructed cities, so with the dramatic reshaping they already needed to do because of the pandemic, the government agencies in charge of relocation



and social pairing started pushing toward more efficient clustering.

All of the zoning laws had been completely gutted and thrown into the trash.

A completely new United States was rising from the ashes, and it was generally going to look a lot more European, a lot more centralized and a lot more focused. Mixed use structures were going to become *way* more prevalent, with stores and shops on the ground floor, and residences on the several floors above that. The sprawl was going to stop going outwards and start going upwards. That meant changes would be hitting every level across the board.

In an effort to keep supply lines from running too thin, many men and women in those smaller towns that were dying out had been offered free relocation to larger cities, chances to move into more centralized locations. Often these were existing metropolitan areas, but in some cases, it was taking key smaller sized cities and scaling them upward, essential crossroads points in the supply chain getting reinforced by being built out as quickly as possible. Anything which was determined to be a keystone in a logistics chain was immediately marked for reinforcement and development.

Andy'd been reading about some of the so-called 'culture clashes' that had been happening in some of the bigger cities. People who used to live in towns of ten or twenty thousand were now living in modified downtown highrise apartments and condo buildings, surrounded by a bunch of people who had been living in the city for decades. That had been by design, too, apparently. If people were going to be forced into new villages, the old tribal political lines had to be broken, and the tribes had to be intermingled, left wingers and right wingers sharing a building, sometimes even a floor.

Farming, agriculture and livestock were still incredibly important, but again, in newly adjusted proportions. There were plenty of farms that had simply been abandoned, because their owners had died and they weren't needed to keep the supply line within scale. Those who hadn't chosen to move into central city hubs had also been offered a chance to take some of these farms over. The existing farms had been redirected to drop off to new, more centralized redistribution centers. It seemed like a lot of farms had nominated one or two women from their Team to be designated 'drivers,' delivering their goods to the bigger centers before being sent upstream even further.

So while states like Kansas, Iowa, Nebraska, South Dakota, Oklahoma and the like had previously had several smaller towns that would feed up to bigger depots, now the middle man was being cut out and farm deliveries had further to travel to reach larger centralized hubs. It was a bit inconvenient, but a little inconvenient was better than everything suddenly shutting down, or farmers having to give up their land. In some cases, they'd actually *expanded* to take over the land from neighbors who had died, as much as they could manage.

That was how the United States was adapting.

But because everything in New Zealand had collapsed all in the span of two weeks, there hadn't been time to employ any of those lessons to help manage the fallout. All the systems had basically shut down at the same time, and instead of being able to shift resources around to manage the problems until the demand for resources decreased accordingly, the dam had just given way, and everything was spiraling out of control.

One thing Andy did have to admit that gave him hope was that injected women were being allowed to leave New Zealand in search for partners abroad, if they wanted. Obviously, the New Zealand government was encouraging people to stay and find partners locally, but they also understood the need to get paired with people they trusted, which meant some women were leaving on boats or even planes, trying to get to Australia, Indonesia, Singapore, Japan or even Honolulu, although none of those were guaranteed to make it, or even to be allowed to land if they did.

The media was reporting that only between ten and twenty percent of New Zealand women were attempting to leave in search for partners in other countries. When they *were* trying to depart the country, the women the reporters talked to said they simply couldn't bear to be in New Zealand anymore, as everywhere they looked, they were reminded of exactly how many people had died in such a short period of time. They needed to start over, start fresh, start something totally new. Not that

anyone could blame them.

One of the moments of levity Team Rook got, somewhere over Idaho, was when one of the reporters had been talking to a New Zealand man who'd chosen to just wait at the far end of the stadium, so that all the women who'd just been injected would walk past him. When the reporter had interviewed him, he had six women, all of whom seemed wildly out of his league, waiting for him to pick two more before taking them all back to his place. Men were being asked to pair up with as many women as possible, so they'd asked any man to wait until he had at least eight partners before leaving. The man being interviewed said he'd just been talking to any woman he thought looked attractive as they exited, and while loads had turned him down, many were thrilled to have found a partner so soon that they leaped on their first opportunity. He'd even been holding up a sign that read "available cock" and it had brought a smile to many of the women's faces as they trundled out of the arena. And while the man admitted that they didn't have access to the Oracle system, the standing and waiting allowed them all to get to know each other first. A couple of women had left after standing with him for a while, only to be replaced by others who seemed better fits, so he considered the whole thing a success, even if it wasn't optimal. The women had all collectively agreed that while the man, whose name was Zed, wouldn't have been their first choice, he was friendly and he was intelligent and he had a sense of humor, and they were hoping that would be enough to last.

It was hard to turn off or look away from the news for too long, as if they were looking at a window into what had happened worldwide over the last few months under the cover of darkness. So much of the catastrophe had happened while people weren't looking.

Andy had wanted to cancel the signing in Seattle, expecting no one would want to show up, but had been informed by the store that there were people lined up outside, waiting for his arrival. Loads of people were either not watching the news or were looking for something to escape from it with. As such, Andy agreed to donate all the proceeds from his appearance to New Zealand support.

They'd chosen to have the signing at The Elliott Bay Book Company, which had been around since the 70s, and was always a welcome home to visiting authors, and the event itself felt like it went relatively well, although someone from Andy's Team was always on their phone, keeping tabs on the news, trying to stay up to date with how things were going in New Zealand. The gathered crowd was a lot more subdued than the previous events had been, though, so Andy knew that many of them were also still keeping tabs on the situation abroad just as much as they were. But they wanted Andy to distract them from all of that, and so he did his best to keep them smiling and laughing.

One of the things Andy had decided what felt like lifetimes ago but really had only been earlier that year was that he was always going to be moving forward, thinking about how to improve things as he lived his life. That meant learning how to detach himself from tragedy and not letting himself be consumed by loss.

He'd done that by reminding himself of the sense of scale. Death, in such large numbers, had mostly become a statistic, and while he could put names and faces to dozens, if not hundreds of people he'd known who'd died between February and December of 2020, they had all basically blended together, and through consolidation, he'd found detachment.

Consolidation wasn't *always* a good thing, but its use as a survival tool was undeniable.

So as long as he didn't focus on any one person, face or memory, he could keep his mental sanity drifting a little bit above the sea of melancholy and depression that he was sure had infected every living survivor on the planet.

The problem was that the section of the upcoming book he'd chosen to read today was inspired by his late brother, and Andy had to work to hold it together so that he wasn't thinking about Matty the entire time he was reading it. It took effort, but he got through it.

It was when things got to the Q&A portion when things got a little bit crazy. Andy was used to having to dodge questions about politics, his appearance on 60 Minutes, his partners and everything else that had sprung up, but several people wanted his opinion on the situation in New Zealand,

something Andy hadn't prepared for at all.

He found that after a few questions, though, the crowd was willing to back off, simply because Andy wasn't sure what he could really add to the conversation, other than to hope for the best for the people of New Zealand. He didn't know any more than what was on the television, even though he had a partner from nearby Australia. Someone asked if he would consider expanding his family further if it meant saving the life of a New Zealand woman fleeing the country, and he said while he'd happily do his part, he was certain there were closer eligible men who would hopefully take care of those women in need.

Sarah joked to the crowd that "no" was Andy's least favorite word, which brokered a few more empathetic laughs.

After the questions about New Zealand, things had suddenly gotten politically sticky, but Andy had already used up most of his tricks in getting out of the New Zealand questions.

"Mr. Conrad, what do you think about the continued push for the Men's Protection Act? Are you in favor of taking severe actions to limit the restrictions of men in order to provide for women's safety, to ensure a Team's increased survival odds?"

"It's a complicated issue," Andy sighed, feeling like he was cornered and was going to have to provide a real answer. "I fully understand women's desires to want to feel safe and secure, but I also think we have to be *very* careful not to go around stomping on men's civil rights in order to do so. It's the classic 'society' versus 'individual' concerns, and yes, I think we as men are going to lose a little bit of the freedoms we've been accustomed to over the years, but that's part of the price we're going to have to pay for being so integral in the new society moving forwards. I'm not against some of the ideas behind it, but I also want to caution anyone from taking it too far. So, minor actions, maybe, but severe actions, probably not. Let's just say if my government wants to tell me I can't go skydiving or mountain climbing, I'm fine with that. But if someone tries to get in the way of me having my weekly cheesesteak, well, let's just say I don't envy that person. That'll wrap it up, so let's get to signing. Remember, if you want a selfie, you have to stay on the other side of the table, and I'm only signing stuff that I wrote. Since a couple of people have asked, yes, both Sarah and Emily have volunteered to sign copies of 'Neon Stonehenge' since they'll be appearing in the film, but only if you're making a donation to the New Zealand Survival Fund. There'll be someone walking the line, taking donations and giving tickets to those who do. Anyone without a ticket can't get a signature from the ladies. Okay? Let's get signing!"

The signing portion went off without a hitch, and Em's idea to take donations for New Zealand for and Sarah's signature had raised nearly a thousand dollars. Also, several women had wanted to get selfies of themselves with Em or Sarah, and as long as they'd made a donation, they'd been cool about it, although Melody was keeping a watchful eye on both women for security purposes.

The staff of the bookstore was thankful he'd come out, everyone desperately in need of some distraction from the madness of the news, even if it sounded like New Zealand was starting to stabilize. Early reports were starting to come in, and it looked like *most* of the people who'd gotten the serum had gone on to build semi-stable teams, at least that was how it had looked on first glance. The initial impression had been the worst possible starting point, but the diligent work of the Air Force doctors had been getting jabs into arms as quickly as possible, and the hope was that, by the end of the second or third day, they might have gotten somewhere between half a million and a million people in New Zealand with the Quaranteam serum running through their veins, directly or indirectly, although those numbers were still targets, not confirmed finishing points. It would be weeks, if not months, before they had concrete information about the survivor count, as well as how many people had relocated to other countries.

They closed off the line around 9 p.m. and Andy was finishing up the last couple of signings for the staff, when one of the people running the event said there was a small group of people claiming to be friends of his waiting outside for him afterwards, if he could spare them some time.

“They’re cleared,” Lexi said to the store manager. “You can go ahead and let them in.”

“I wasn’t aware we were expecting guests,” Andy said to Lexi, a smile creeping on his face. “Hell, I don’t really *know* many people in Seattle.”

“Yeah, well, when you decided you wanted to spring this little surprise trip on us, we built a few surprises of our own into it, and this is one of them,” Sarah said, waving at the group of people coming in, heading towards them quickly, as Sarah moved to hug a short, round woman somewhere in the center of the pack of them. “You came!”

“You told me you were only going to be three hours by train away and you thought we wouldn’t make the trip up to see you fuckers?” a boisterous familiar voice said, cutting through the air, as Andy began to laugh. “Rook! Get your bony ass over here!”

“Ris, what the *fuck* are you doing in Seattle?” Andy said, signing the last of the books before standing up from the table, heading over towards the group. As Sarah moved to the side, he could see the familiar face of his friend and fellow author Larissa Cotton, someone he’d extended an invitation to join his family a month or so ago, only to be rebuked because she already had a husband, the massive chunk of meat and muscle standing a few steps behind her, Will. ‘Ris and Will had gotten married in late 2018, some six months after he’d seen her last, but they’d sort of kept it quiet. Will had even taken her surname.

Larissa wasn’t even 5’ tall, portly, with the silver septum ring still staunchly in place. She was, as she’d told him, Mestizo, the daughter of a Mexican mother and a second-generation Cajun father. Her hair was dyed a shade of bright green that could only be described as ‘atomic lime.’ And despite how Andy had thought of her as “covered in tattoos” when he last saw her, they’d only proliferated, having grown to run up along her neck all the way to the underside of her chin and behind her ears, as well as all over the backs of her hands. Her goth Lolita look had been dialed up even further, with bright orange and green striped leggings that would’ve made Jhonen Vasquez proud. They were beneath an overly frilly black poofy dress that only complimented the black leather bustier that was holding on for dear life against Larissa’s more than ridiculous bosom, the material propping her boobs up into the kind of shelf an entire drinks platter could safely rest on.

Will, by contrast, looked like he was some sort of hipster chic lumberjack, with a truly magnificent beard that threatened to cover the top third of his chest. He was dressed in red and black flannel and the skinniest set of skinny jeans he’d ever seen spray painted onto muscular man legs before. Andy almost wanted to grab a knife, though, because Will’s brown hair was done up in a ridiculous man bun that Andy *hated* on sight, but it was Larissa’s husband, not some random guy off the street, so he exercised restraint. Maybe she found that sort of look attractive. Last time Andy had seen Will, he’d only been Larissa’s boyfriend, so Andy wasn’t surprised to see a heavy gauge titanium and gold wedding ring on the man’s left hand now.

When Sarah had suggested Andy invite Larissa into Team Rook, Andy had been *relatively* certain that Larissa had already gotten married, but he hadn’t been *entirely* certain, so the invitation had been extended. Larissa and Will were not only already married at that point, she’d gotten in on one of the first rounds of people to get the serum in Portland, since she and Will were already in a throuple with another woman. They’d actually gotten the vaccine around the same time Andy and Aisling had. He hadn’t been at all bothered by the rejection – if anything, he’d been relieved because it meant at least someone he knew was safe.

“It’s only like 3 hours by train, and nobody’s going fucking *anywhere* these days, so we decided if you can make it that far, we could meet you the rest of the fucking way,” ‘Ris said to them with a laugh, still hugging Sarah. “He half as good a fuck as I always thought he’d be?”

Sarah giggled and blushed but nodded immediately. “All that and so much fucking more,” she said, a note he hadn’t heard in months in Sarah’s voice, that of nervousness. “I’m still mad that you didn’t get me his fucking phone number though, ‘Ris. You knew how fucking hard I was crushing on him back then!”

“Well, I hadn’t fucking *seen* him to *ask* if it was okay, Sarah!” Larissa laughed. “I don’t just go around giving fucking personal information because somebody fucking asks me for it. And I didn’t just want to call him up out of the blue with no other reason than to ask if it was okay to give out his phone number to a complete fucking stranger, no matter how fucking hot she was. Can you believe he’d never mentioned *his* fucking crush on you to me?”

“I don’t exactly go around telling coworkers who I’d like to sleep with, ‘Ris!” Andy cackled. “That seems like *incredibly* bad form.”

“One, we’re not fucking ‘coworkers,’ Andy, we’re colleagues, cohorts, friends at best, B, I always told you I’d be happy to wingwoman your scrawny ass if that was what it would take to get you laid, and Charlie, that story about Sarah and Emily asking you that question at OmegaCon was, like, pinnacle fucking meet-cute of all fucking time. I mean that was the GOAT’s GOAT right there. How could I ever have deprived the two of you of that?”

“One, B and Charlie?” Emily asked quietly.

“I’m terrible at organizational structure in arguments,” Larissa said, “so hush.”

“Speaking of OmegaCon,” Andy said, “how come *you* weren’t there last year? Something about your health? I got super worried, and you were ridiculously cryptic any time I asked about it. You wouldn’t even take my calls, just texted me.”

Larissa frowned and nodded. “Ovarian cancer. I had to have one of my ovaries removed, and I was on chemotherapy, making sure the cancer hadn’t spread anywhere else. I was advised not to travel for a while. The chemo fucked my voice up for a good while.”

“Jesus, Ris, I’m so sorry,” Andy said.

The heavyset woman smiled and shrugged. “It turned out not to be such a big deal, because apparently when I got imprinted onto Will, my missing ovary grew back. Like, they’d told us that any lingering health concerns we had might be affected by the serum, but when I went in for my sixty-day checkup after I’d gotten imprinted, they wanted to do a full body scan, and as it turns out, I had a whole new collection of eggs that just *appeared*.” She tossed her free hand up into the air. “Whole new ovary had grown in me overnight to replace the one they’d cut out of me. Shit’s fuckin’ wild, innit? How big your count end up?”

“Twenty-two women,” Andy chuckled, shaking his head. “Which is, what, twenty-six or twenty-seven more than I probably deserve?”

Fiona reached over and smacked Andy across the back of his head with her palm, loud enough to sound like a crack. “Sorry, we sometimes have to discourage him from disparaging himself,” Fiona said with a grin. “Andy likes to make sure nobody else can take potshots at him by *insisting* he fire first. I’m Fiona, Andy’s old college girlfriend and soon to be wife,” she said, extending a hand for Larissa to shake, but the plump woman pulled her in for a quick bear hug instead.

“The old romantic soul herself!” Larissa said, patting Fiona on the back. “I’d been wondering if you were going to take him up on it. It made sense he extended you an offer, considering he’d still been pining over you for decades.”

“What’s *that* supposed to mean?” Niko asked with a broad grin on her face.

“In the list of dedications for ‘Neon Stonehenge,’ there’s like, five or six people and then the last person was ‘the old romantic soul,’ which I’d thought Andy had just put in there to fuck with people, but when we were out drinking years back, he told me that was something he used to call his first true love Fiona back when they were dating, and that if she’d ever seen it in the book, she’d have known it was for her.”

It was Fiona’s turn to blush for a little bit now, as she nodded. “I *did* know it was about me. I was a little nervous about it, but I figured it was maybe because I’d encouraged him to start writing a book, long long ago, telling him there was a lot of potential in his writing. I didn’t take it as him still holding a flame for me.”

“You probably should’ve, luv,” Moira teased, poking her partner in the ribs. “I told you he

wouldn't have lost the faith."

"Yes yes, dear," Fiona said. "You're right, I'm wrong and you're *much* smarter than me for it. We're all past it now, so no reason to beleaguer the point."

Over the next few minutes, Andy introduced Larissa to everyone in his Team who was present, and Larissa did the same with her own, although Andy was fairly certain nobody was going to hold all the names in their head properly.

The group of them walked down the street to a place called Linda's Tavern, that advertised itself as "the official tavern of the N.W." The place was mostly quiet, as it seemed like nearly any restaurant that Andy and his Team set foot in. That was the thing Andy was most worried about in America, even still – how many restaurants, diners, eateries, bakeries, sandwich shops, ramen joints, sushi bars and other places to grab a bite to eat weren't yet able to recover, because those people who'd already received the serum wouldn't leave their houses?

And yet, when he looked at the news in New Zealand, it was insanely easy to see why they were still afraid of going out *anywhere*.

Between Andy's ten and Larissa's eight, they needed to have some tables pushed together, but the place was ecstatic to have a large crowd show up, the hostess looking upon them like they were a godsend, especially as Fiona made a point to take several photos, including one of the name of the place out front.

The food and the drinks started flowing, and once it did, so the stories, everyone having a great time, plenty of laughing and general merriment. And after Larissa had told a rather embarrassing story about how she had tripped and fallen walking up to accept her Nebula award, Niko had made a crack that nobody had embarrassing stories about Andy, which immediately made Fiona start giggling like a fiend as Andy glared at her.

"Don't you dare," he cautioned playfully.

"It's a *funny* story," she said in between fits of giggles.

"It makes me look like an *idiot*," he sighed.

"No, it makes *us* look like idiots, which is why it's *funny*, Andy!" Fiona said, leaning in to put her head on his shoulder. "C'mon. I haven't heard you tell this story in years, and it always makes me laugh so hard I'm nearly peeing in my panties. It's time."

Aisling, who'd been sitting on the other side of him, leaned in against him with a wicked smile. "We're going to get this story out of you one way or another, Mister Rook, so we can do it the easy way, or we can do it the hard way."

"What's the hard way?" he asked.

"It involves me waking you up in the middle of the night with blowjob while my mouth's full of ice cubes," she grinned.

Andy shuddered in fear. "Alright. Alright! I'll tell the fucking story already, okay?" A cheer erupted from the crowd. "But nobody better interrupt me until I'm finished otherwise I'm going to stop telling it, you hear me?"

Niko suddenly raised her hands and shot an intense look at the gathered group of people, an almost deranged grin on her face. "So you know, I'm gonna shoot anyone who interrupts this story, you lot here me? I've been trying to get this out of him for almost two months now! And I've got a gun on me, I promise you!"

The group tittered with a little bit of laughter, but fell quiet as Andy sighed and smiled wearily, realizing there was no getting out of it. "Fine. Fine, so most of my time in college, I was doing some opinion writing for the newspaper that Fi also worked at. In fact, she was dating my boss when I first met her, which is much better and less embarrassing story to tell than this one, but you put your quarter in the jukebox, so you're gonna hear the whole song now. In the spring of my junior year, a column I wrote called 'The Next Great Disaster' went what I guess you'd now call viral. Pieces we wrote for our local paper could get picked up and printed in other college newspapers when somebody found

something interesting or they had column inches they needed to fill. As it turned out, my op-ed column, which had been a mostly satirical piece about how we were always hopping from one ‘the world is ending’ narrative to another, and how we never stopped to really look at any of them, because deep down, we knew they were all bullshit.”

“Quit talking about the column and get on with the story,” Fi said. “Otherwise I’ll tell it and I don’t tell it as well as you do.”

Andy shot her a dirty look and then turned back to the enraptured crowd. “I’m only telling you this because it’s important to understand that it got a *lot* more notice than anything else I would do for years, in that it was reprinted in, like, thirty different college newspapers across the country. That was in the spring of my junior year. In the fall of my senior year, I was told that it had won a nationwide award, which came with a two-thousand-dollar cash prize, and that I would be officially given the award at the student newspaper’s fall party.”

Fiona was struggling not to giggle, but it was clearly taxing on her.

“Since the newspaper’s party was going to be on October 26<sup>th</sup>, it was going to be a Halloween party, and we were supposed to come in costume, and told there was going to be a prize for the most elaborate costume, the prize for which would be five hundred dollars. It’s at this point that I need to tell you that my fiancée Fiona Smith is one of the most ridiculously competitive people it’s ever been my privilege to meet. I tell her all of this, and she *insists* we’re going to win that costume contest. We’d been told the party started at 8 p.m. and given the address.”

“Oh *no*,” Ash said, trying not to start giggling.

“As it turned out, the party actually started at 7 p.m. Also, and perhaps *more* importantly, it was *not*, in fact, a Halloween party, but a formal dress attire party, and the governor of Ohio, Bob Taft, had come to give me the award personally, in recognition for my excellent in communication, and that the award was to be given to me at 8 p.m. So, Fiona and I showed up to the party at five minutes to eight and realize that the editor-in-chief, my dear friend Gabby Cunningham, has set me up for the punchline of a lifetime, because Fi and I are dressed... as clowns. And I don’t mean we made some sort of half-assed attempt at it. Oh, no no no, Fi was not to be outdone when it came to this sort of thing, so we had full production costumes with accompanying wigs and face paint and giant floppy shoes.”

The crowd of his partners, guardians and friends were all trying desperately not to break down laughing, but everyone had the image of Andy as a clown in their head, and it seemed like it was impossible for anyone to shake it loose, all of them wanting to burst into giggles.

“Knowing full well there was no time to change or even try and take *some* of that ridiculous get up off, I did the only possible thing I could do in those circumstances, and I leaned into it. We’d walked in through the door just two minutes or so before the presentation was supposed to start, so Fiona and I walked over to our reserved places at the table right in front and sat down and waited for the whole presentation to start. When the presenter got up on stage, they began extolling my virtues, how my writing had transcended beyond being just a short satirical piece and had crossed over into something of a statement upon the mindset of humanity, how easily we can be distracted by bad news and how we needed to focus on the lighter side of life, how to take comfort in the things that made us smile and laugh and sing and dance. And now, the presenter said, the governor was going to come, say a few words, and present me with my award.”

Andy had practiced telling this story, because it was one of those things he would occasionally break out when people would tell him he was being too serious, and he looked around, seeing everyone on pins and needles, waiting for him to continue, so he did.

“The Governor got up and gave a brief speech about how the youth were important, and how we were so often dismissed because of our age, accused of being unable to tackle serious subjects, and how my article had been a reminder that we should never judge a book by its cover, never judge a writer by their age, to always give anyone a fair chance. And so he wanted to present the award to Andrew Rook, and invited me to come up on stage and say a few words.”

Fiona was still quiet, but was in tears, she was laughing silently so hard it must've hurt, as the rest of the people started to laugh even more.

"I stood up and at that point, I realized the governor hadn't seen me because of the bright lights being shone in his face, nor had he been told about the practical joke my EIC was playing on me, because I kid you not, I watched the whites of his eyes grow three sizes that day. I made my way up onto stage as if I was dressed perfectly normally, with the exception of when I made my way up the stairs, which I had to sidestep up, because of the length of my ridiculous shoes. I walked across the stage and shook the governor's hand, seeing the utterly aghast look on his face as we both turned to face the front so the cameras gathered there could capture the image for posterity's sake. As soon as he could, the governor made his way offstage, trying to get as far away from me as he could, out of embarrassment, perhaps? Or maybe he was just worried what kind of image a photo of him giving an award to a clown would send. But I turned to the microphone, I cleared my throat, and I began to speak. It was important and momentous occasion for me, so I wanted to have as much gravitas as I possibly could, which, I'm sure you can imagine, was quite difficult dressed as a clown in face paint, to say nothing of my bright orange wig."

The group was nearing that bursting point that Andy knew how to cultivate oh so well, so he continued.

"I said to the gathered audience, 'Thank you all for this award, and the recognition of my column about how farcical the doomsayers of the world often are. As you can imagine, for someone with my condition, gelotophobia, there's always a moment when you put something creative into the world that you're terrified it's going to be the subject of ridicule and mockery. But I wanted to put this article out there, so you know that even those of us who are just crying on the inside types have the capacity to reach beyond our station, to elevate our work through dedication, hard work and perseverance, and that the work, our work, can move beyond us, live beyond us. I just want to thank my loving girlfriend Peaches, and my parents, who in addition to naming me Andrew, also bestowed upon me a culturally significant name, one relevant to my heritage. So on behalf of all those of you whom also bear the name 'Chuckles' in observance of our ancestors, thank you all.' And then I picked up the award and the check, and walked off stage and back down to Fiona, who had been laughing then, much as she is now, so hard that her makeup was running, as she threw her arms around me, and the entire newspaper staff cheered. And when that died down, I said, 'And fuck *all* of you for this, I'll have you know.'"

Much as it had back then, it set the entire room to laughing so hard people were struggling to breathe.

A few minutes later, when people had finally regathered their composure, a process that had been interrupted by Fiona showing the picture of Andy, in full clown regalia, standing behind a lectern, accepting his award, followed by one of him shaking hands with the former governor of Ohio, the food arrived, and the rest of the evening felt informed by that story, everyone trying to find their little bit of light in a dark day.

A handful of people had wandered in sometime during Andy's story, and it felt like maybe the fact that their presence had given the place some life for a Saturday night had drawn some other people out to have a good time.

The next day was a Sunday, one Andy's Team was going to spend traveling down to Los Angeles, and Andy offered to transport Larissa and her team back down to Portland on his private jet, but Larissa insisted they'd enjoyed taking the train up too much, so they were just going to do that tomorrow morning. But that meant they could all stay drinking and telling stories until the tavern closed at 2 a.m.

Andy picked up the bill at the end of the night, and left a tip equal to 100% of the bill, refusing to let Larissa pay for even a tiny amount of the tab. He hugged Larissa hard. "Thanks for this," he said. "After the news out of New Zealand, I was starting to feel a little numb, to everything and everyone."



“Hey, I’m just giving you back your own lesson, amigo,” Larissa said to him. “You don’t remember?”

He cocked his head to one side. “No?”

“Back when we first met, you remember how I was up for a World Fantasy Award, and I didn’t get it? I was super fucking bummed that night, but you cheered me up. You remember what you said?”

“I honestly don’t, ‘Ris,” he laughed.

“You said ‘As long as you’re alive, you’ve got another chance, and a chance is all it takes.’” She blushed a little bit. “I’ve never told you this, but I have that tattooed on my thigh. I got it tattooed as soon as I got back to Portland, and while I’ve got loads of other stuff around it now, I refuse to let anyone cover up any of it, because it’s the best advice anyone’s ever given me. So take your own fucking advice, Rook. As long as you’re alive, you’ve got another chance, and a chance is all it takes.”

“We’ll see you again next month for the wedding, yeah, ‘Ris?”

“We RSVPd for just me and Will, as much as I think everyone else would love to come.”

Andy looked left, looked right, then shrugged. “Bring ‘em all.”

“Isn’t that going to wreak havoc on cakes, seating placements, dinners, chairs, all that?”

“I’ll handle it.”

“Thanks Andy,” she said, kissing his cheek. “See you then.”