

## **Quaranteam: Aisling's Antics**

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a 10-part commissioned spin off from Quaranteam

### **Part One – “Pogue Mahone”**

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

Most times, brunches were joyous affairs and a chance for everyone to get caught up on what they'd been up to for the last day or two, but this morning in particular, Fiona noticed Andy had approached the table with a certain amount of weight on his shoulders. Back when they'd been in college together, Fi had been able to spot when something was hanging over his head, and so she knew this morning wasn't going to be an easy one.

“Listen up, everyone,” he started as Fi sat down at the big table between Aisling and Moira. She noticed that Piper was sitting on Andy's left and Niko was on his right, and both of them had a certain degree of nervousness to them as well. “I've got an announcement to make, and I know, in advance, that it's going to be a bit of a rough one, so I appreciate everyone giving me a few minutes to speak and lay everything out in advance first, okay?”

Fi glanced over at Ash and noticed she also looked a little bit uncomfortable, but not overly so, and she immediately knew that Andy must've talked with Ash a little bit before brunch. There were rare occasions when Fiona could feel a hint of jealousy creeping in about how close Andy and Ash were, but she did what she always did and stamped them down as needless worrying.

“Everybody knows we're going to be adding Mali Merrick to our family today, but as of yesterday, the government has asked us to take on one additional person. I know everyone's been keeping tabs on the New Daughters of the Revolution, and how they've taken over a number of houses here in New Eden. Well, they've agreed to surrender, but with a number of conditions, and those conditions include that some of them stay here and keep tabs on what's going on with the Quaranteam project.”

“What's that got to do with you, Andy?” Sarah asked.

“Well, as it turns out, I'm now *part* of the Quaranteam project,” he said with a laugh that had the slightest undercurrent of bitterness to it. “One of the NDR's demands is that the Quaranteam project get some civilian oversight, people to keep tabs on each and every stage of it. And since I'm here in New Eden already, and because I have no direct affiliation with the military...”

“And because he was the whistleblower on Covington and Major General Fielder's arrangement,” Niko added.

“Right,” Andy continued. “*And* that. Because of all of that, I'm going to be one of the members of the oversight committee. And as part of that, our house needs to take in one member of the NDR for rehabilitation.”

“We are *not* taking that bitch Rachel,” Alexis said. “The one who cut Covington's hand off. I mean, I get it, being pissed and all that, but she's not going to be sleeping next to you, Andy, so if that's what this is about...”

“It isn't, and she isn't, although we are likely going to have to interact with Dr. DeMarco now and again,” Andy sighed. “She's getting paired up with Phil.”

“I bet Linda threw a shitfit over that,” Fiona laughed.

“Apparently, she was the one who suggested it, but it's got a lot of caveats with it, so I'm sure I'll get way more of the story the next time I talk to him,” Andy chuckled. “And considering

I need to be on the base once a week now, I should be seeing a lot more of Phil moving forward.”

“So, let’s just take Aisling’s friend, Lisa,” Lauren suggested.

“We were more of coworkers than friends,” Ash said. “And she wants to move as far away from New Eden as she can, so I don’t blame her there.”

“It’s already been decided who’s getting added,” Andy said. “We had someone request to join the family, and, after some discussion with a few key members of the family, I’ve decided to agree to the request.”

“You didn’t talk to the fiancées club about it, Andy,” Fiona said, trying to be just a touch scolding about it.

“Not most of them, no, but a few of them, the ones who would have the most reason to object to the request.”

“Stop beating around the bush, Andrew,” Emily said, “and simply inform us who will be joining our family.”

Andy inhaled a long, deep breath then let it slowly. He looked almost as nervous as he had on the videocall they’d had together when he’d asked Fiona to come and join him out in California as part of his family. “We’re going to be adding Covington’s former bodyguard Melody Park to the family.”

“One of the people who tortured Piper?” Sarah said. “Out of the fucking question!”

“Andrew, darling,” Emily said, trying to quiet the sudden influx of everyone talking all at once. “Are you sure you’ve given this enough thought?”

“Hey!” Piper’s voice cut through the room and brought everyone down to silence. “Look here. Andy and I have talked this over, and he showed me Melody’s video message asking us to take her in, and then let me decide if I was okay with her being in the family. If I’d had said no, then he absolutely would’ve turned her away, but Melody wasn’t all that active in what Covington did to me. She wasn’t Rachel and she *certainly* wasn’t Hope. And in the message that she sent to me and Andy, she was asking, *begging* for a second chance. And she told us if we didn’t give it to her, she was just going to give up and let herself die.”

“Jesus, what a manipulative—” Sarah started.

“And that she would be okay with that,” Piper said, interrupting Sarah as she clearly wasn’t finished talking. “She felt like she hadn’t been herself underneath Covington, that she’d been trapped and made into something that she wasn’t. That she felt like she couldn’t stand up to him, because he physically had all the power over her. But that when she watched me resist him, well, that started the seeds for the New Daughters of the Revolution. And that no matter what I decided regarding her fate, she would accept that. She wouldn’t be angry or upset. In fact, in her message, she even said that if the positions were reversed, she absolutely wouldn’t trust her either. But she had to hope that there was a sliver of a chance at redemption, that she could strive to not be defined forever by her failure, and allowed to have a second act, one where she took the right path.”

Fiona glanced over at Sarah and saw the normally fiery redhead had fallen silent, as if realizing that if Piper had decided to give this woman a second chance as the most aggrieved party, who the hell was *she* to say they shouldn’t.

“You all know me and know I’m big on second chances, big on redemption stories, big on people doing something bad and coming back to do something good, if not great,” Andy said. “It’s a common theme in my books, that we can’t *only* be defined by our mistakes but must be weighed by our good deeds as well. Now if any of you want to tell Piper that you have some reason that overrides hers on why we shouldn’t allow Melody into the house, now’s the time to

“speak your peace.”

Fiona chuckled a little bit, looking around all the lovely female faces gathered around the table, and realized she was in complete accord with them. Piper *had* been through the worst of it, more than any of them by leagues, and if Piper decided it was worth giving this woman a second chance, then none of them would have compelling enough reasons to change her mind. Andy’d been right to just talk about with Piper – this was her call more than anyone’s, even more than it had been Andy’s.

“It’s unorthodox,” Piper said. “I’ll give you that. But I’m willing to give this woman a second chance, and that means all of you should, too. You don’t have to blindly trust her – God, I wouldn’t *dare* ask anyone to do that, especially when I know that I *won’t* – but I want everyone to treat her fairly, to make her feel welcome, to try and get to know her and to see if we can make her feel like a part of this super weird, super awesome family we’ve all built together, okay?”

“The plan is we’ll be getting both Mali and Melody today and bringing them back to the house, and tomorrow everyone can start to get to know them,” Andy said, getting back to planning and scheduling for a moment. “I don’t expect everyone to be all happy go lucky with Melody, but I expect everyone to at least do their best to give her a fair shake. Piper’s going to try and be her guide in helping her get settled here in the family, and we aren’t going to sugarcoat anyone’s trepidation about having her here, so if you want to talk to her, tell her why you’re worried or bothered that she’s here, that’s okay, if you’re still willing to listen to her response with an open mind. It’s super weird. I *get* that it’s super weird. That’s sort of on-brand for us as a family. But she came to Piper and me asking us for help. And I’m never going to turn away someone asking in good faith for a second chance.”

It was *exactly* how Andy always acted, Fiona thought to herself, always working to see the best in people, trying to help people do the right thing. It infuriated her every now and then, but mostly it was one of the reasons she loved him so much – he was so damn idealistic.

After Andy and Piper’s little speech, brunch broke off into smaller groups of people talking about things, like it usually did, and Fiona took that opportunity to validate one of her observations. “He told you before brunch, didn’t he?” Fiona asked Aisling.

Ash smirked a little. “Only known me a month and you can already read me like a book, I see. What gave it away?”

“The fact that you already knew that Lisa didn’t want to remain in New Eden,” Fiona said. “There’s no shade being thrown, Ash. It’s the way Andy does things – if he thinks someone might have a personal investment in a matter, he’ll talk to them first before anyone else.”

The petite redhead nodded. “I sort of envy how much you know him, I mean *really* know him.”

“I envy you the same,” Fi countered.

“What do you mean?”

“Sure, I lived with Andy for years while we were in college, but Jesus, Ash, that was a lifetime ago, and you’ve been with him the longest here, since the beginning of all this mess, and I think he trusts you more than anyone, probably more than he does me.”

“Doubt that,” Ash said.

“He didn’t talk to *me* about the whole Melody thing in advance.”

“That was just ‘cause he knew I’d have suggested Lisa.”

“But he made sure you were okay with it before he talked to anyone other than Piper about it.”

Ash grinned all over again, giving a little shrug. “I actually knew before he told me, even.

Niko talked to me about it last night after they got back, so I guess I even knew before Piper did. She can't keep any secrets from me, and she looked so bloody worried that she had to talk to somebody before she popped. We talked about it a bit last night while Andy was on his date with Jade, and I decided that Andy was right – it wasn't really *his* call to make, or mine, or anybody else's *but* Piper's, and whatever she decided, I knew I'd go along with. So here we are."

Fiona joined in on the grin. "That's sort of what I'd like to talk to you about," she said. "I'm sure Piper told you I'm starting to put together a book about the pandemic, but also with a personal slant, sort of alternating between my perspective and stories from other people."

"She mentioned that you'd gotten a project you were sinking your teeth into, but didn't mention specifically what it was," Ash replied. "I don't think she wanted to feel like she was giving away someone else's secrets."

"And you didn't try and pry it out of her?"

"I figured you'd come around and tell me eventually, at least if you thought it was important or interesting to me. There's too many secrets in this house to go around trying to go around gathering them all. Didn't we already cover everything you'd want to know about me already, though?" The smug look on Aisling's face said she knew exactly what was coming next and that she found it utterly hysterical.

"That's the thing, Ash... When I was starting to fact check my notes based on our first interview, I kept coming across little... irregularities."

"How do you mean?"

"In that I don't think *anything* you told me about your upbringing is actually true."

"What would make you say that?"

"Well, for starters, there is *no* such place as Pogue Mahone University, so there's no way you could've graduated from there," Fiona chuckled. "Got a good laugh when I looked it up online, though."

"C'mon, Fi, allow a girl to have a bit of fun," Aisling said with a wink.

"Well, now that you've played your little prank, maybe you can do me the favor of having a real interview where you *aren't* pulling my leg all the time? You've been here since the beginning of it all, so I want to get your perspective as the First Among Equals here in Team Rook. Not only how you got here, but how you helped shape it going along."

Ash scowled a little. "I don't think I'm better than anyone else."

"I wasn't implying that you were, Ash, just that Andy trusts you more than anyone else, because you've been with him the longest now. That gives you an experience wildly different from the rest of the Team. I'll bet you've got some chaotic stories, especially towards the beginning of all of the mess. When you're not pulling my leg, anyway."

The small redhead considered Fiona's proposition for a moment before a sly smile crossed her face. It was the sort of mischievous look that sometimes made Aisling resemble a leprechaun, at least in Fi's eyes. "Alright, alright, I'll give you a fair trade interview, no lies or tall tales. On two conditions, that you have to agree to, sight unseen," Aisling said. "Much like Andy put his faith in you not to do anything he would regret, you need—"

"Agreed," Fiona replied, cutting her off mid-sentence.

"What if I—"

"You won't."

"But I *could*."

Fiona rolled her eyes with a smile and shook her head. "Ash. *Ash*. We're both going to be married to the same man in about a month's time. You're not going to do anything too horrible to

me, so if you want me to put up with a bit of hazing to get us to talk about your history, your *actual* history, then, you know, I'm down for it, whatever it is."

"Fair enough. When do you want to start?"

"How about right now?"

"Alright, let's head down to my studio then."

Fiona and Aisling excused themselves from the table and headed out of the kitchen then over to the theater, to take the secret passageway down to the hidden lower level of the mansion. Most of the fiancées had taken one of the rooms in the basement to function as their workspace, so they could be close to Andy, who'd moved his office from its original place upstairs to the secret office of the mansion's former resident, a reclusive mystery writer who'd passed away a few years before the pandemic's start. Once Andy had moved down there, several others had moved as well, keeping their offices in the protected part of the mansion. There was enough space for a second person in Andy's office as well, and the fiancées had divvied up a system that rotated between all of them, so nobody could monopolize Andy's idle time when he was working.

Aisling led Fiona past the main office, past the armory and around the corner to the door with her name on the nameplate. It was closed, something Fi had noticed before but hadn't commented on, because she figured Ash had her reasons. Ash opened it and brought Fi in, closing the door behind her. Ash's studio had a handful of easels and canvases scattered around it, with one very large one next to a small ladder, underneath a tarp.

"Once Andy came into his loads of money, he told me, well, all of us who'd been around before we moved here, actually, that if we didn't want to have to work anymore, we didn't have to, which was a load off my mind," she said, moving some of the canvases around before grabbing a chair, moving to set it in front of the easel, then grabbing another one. "You brought your little recorder doohickey again?"

Fiona nodded, reaching into her pocket to pull out her trusty digital recorder, turning it on, setting it on the chair between the easel and the other chair. "Am I posing for something?"

"Yup," Aisling said. "Strip down."

That caught Fiona a little off guard. "Excuse me?"

"Fi, it's not like I haven't seen you naked before. I'm painting a giant family portrait of all of us naked surrounding Andy, who's also going to be naked, which we can hang either in his office or in the master bedroom, just to show us all off in our prime. It's gonna be my wedding present to him, and a reminder of just how great we all looked when we were young. One of the two things you agreed to was getting everyone to pose naked for me before the wedding without knowing why. I already painted Andy, me, Niko and Lauren into it, so now I've just got to do everybody else. I figure I do one person a day, I should be just in time for the wedding."

Fiona nodded, starting to peel her clothing off. "The rest of you have got youth on your side, though."

"You're only *thirty-eight*, Fi," Ash teased. "Moira's 33, Sarah's 31, Em's 30, Piper's 26, and I'm 27. Niko's the baby at 22 and she didn't put up a fuss."

"Of course she didn't," Fi laughed, as she unfastened her bra. "At 22, it's impossible to be anything less than gorgeous. Once you cross 35, the gals start to sag a lot more than you're probably comfortable with."

"I won't make you look anything less than radiant, Fi."

"Alright, Ash, I trust you. Now how do you want to pose me?"

Ash motioned for Fiona to take a seat on the chair, which she did. Then Ash moved to

position Fiona's arms and legs, shifting her around a bit before getting her into place. "Okay, so I'm going to take a handful of reference photos right now that I can use later, but during the whole time you're interviewing me, I basically want you in this pose, because I always see things I didn't get with the camera when I'm painting live."

"Got it," Fiona replied as Ash picked up a Canon 40D and started taking a handful of photos from a variety of angles, getting complete coverage that she could refer to.

Once she was satisfied with the pictures, Ash set the camera back down on her desk and moved over to the ladder, climbing up on it as she pulled the tarp off the top of it. "Alright, I've got a few minutes of mixing paint, but you want to get started?"

"Definitely. So, let's try this again. I assume you weren't lying about where you grew up. That means your story still starts in Dublin?"

"Dublin suburbs," Ash replied. "Harold's Cross, to be specific."

"Start wherever you like."

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I grew up as part of a big family in Harold's Cross, which is an inner suburb on the south side of Dublin. Don't ask who Harold was. It's a good way to start a fight on a slow enough day. My dad, Donald, owns a plumbing business, but he's been more in charge than involved in the day to day for as long as I can remember. Maybe back near the beginning of my memories I can sort of piece together scraps of memory of him coming home smelling like sewage, but as I got older, he did that less and less. My mom, Anne, was a stay-at-home mom who also had a side hustle making clothes for the neighborhood. She's always been good at it, too. Made prom dresses for me and me sisters.

The family's large compared to most of the rest of you. My brother Dermot is the oldest. He's a banker in Dublin. He's 30. Then there's me. After that is my sister Aoife, who's 22. Then my sister Niamh, who's 19. And the baby of the family is Colin, who was sort of a late surprise. He's 10. Mom and Dad spaced them out, but I don't think it was intentional. They just sort of stumbled into having kids when they did.

We didn't live in Harold's Cross the entire time, I should say. We moved up to Coolock for about five years while I was in the end of secondary school. Dad was managing a different office of the business for the time, and mom wanted me to go to Mercy College, just like she had, up until I was off to university.

I'd love to tell you it was full of wild times and craziness, but for the most part, I just wanted to leave Dublin and come to America. I know that sounds crazy, but Ireland always felt so small to me, and I'd see these movies with America in them, and I just knew I wanted to move over here to have a real adventure. My grades were good enough that I got into Trinity College and my Dad was so damn proud of me that he insisted I go. I think he was hoping I was going to be a lawyer or a scientist, but I've always been a doodler, and I knew art ran in my blood. But I've got my father's practicality in me, which meant I didn't want to end up shite creek without a paddle. I focused on applied graphic design, which I knew would give me a skillset I could apply just about anywhere.

Trinity College is sort of the equivalent of one of your Ivy League schools, big and prestigious and highly sought after, but I found the place a bit stuffy for my like, and I think I was mostly counting my time there, waiting to get past it, waiting to get out, waiting to get on with my life. I had a couple of different boyfriends, one in first year and one in last year, and

neither of them turned out to be worth half a shite over the long run, so I was in and out of those relationships in less than three months each time. They were the two cocks I'd had before Andy, and neither of them were remarkable other than for how much of arseholes they turned into after I dumped them. Haven't even thought to check if either of them is still alive; don't much care one way or the other.

In the middle of my final year, I started shopping my portfolio around, but I tried to stick strictly to America. I knew I wanted to get to one of the major cities, preferably on one of the coasts. I'd never even been over here, but I'd seen loads of Europe during my time at uni. We'd travelled on holiday to most of the other countries, and while they were nice, they weren't America, and I dunno even why, but I'd always sort of been obsessed with the States growing up. American music, American food... I knew that I wanted to get over there so badly, but I didn't want to visit before moving there, in case it didn't live up to my expectations.

I got nibbles from half a dozen different companies, including a couple of publishing companies in New York, but I sort of knew that publishing was going to be a dead end, because print was dying out so fast. A couple of companies on the West Coast, though, made rather compelling offers. The first was from BOND, an advertising agency out in Hollywood that does all sorts of work with the entertainment industry. The other, I'm sure you've already guessed, was Google, who wanted to bring me on board as a graphic designer on a two-year contract.

They invited me to come out for an interview, and when I landed at SFO, I knew I was home. Google put me up in a hotel in Mountain View, but also extended the stay out to give me a few days to explore the region for myself. I walked around Golden Gate Park for a few hours. I walked across the Golden Gate Bridge and back. I strolled around Haight-Ashbury. I walked down Lombard Street. I went over to Ocean Beach and watched the waves for a while. And when I had my interview with Google, I sold them as hard as I possibly could on myself, trying to convince them I was absolutely the person they needed to hire.

And surprisingly, it worked.

Google offered me a two-year contract in 2016, and I moved from Dublin out to a tiny little apartment down in Santa Clara. Google had suggested places to consider housing and had pointed out that they had shuttles that would ferry people to and from the Google campus, and that looking in the San Jose area was likely my best bet. I found a tiny studio apartment not far from Santa Clara University that was just *barely* within what I could afford, and moved in.

One of the things I learned early on about working for Google is that while they claim their motto was "do no evil," it really should've been "do nothing but work," because while I worked for them, I was constantly slammed with additional tasks, not just from the project I was assigned to, but other projects as well, like art was just something we could generate by pulling it out of our arses. I didn't have much time to see San Francisco, or even San Jose for that matter, putting in between ten- and fourteen-hour days six days a week, fearing that when my contract expired, they wouldn't renew it.

After two years, they renewed me for a second two-year contract in September of 2018, with a bit more money this time, but I just didn't have any chance to enjoy it, or even to spend it. I thought about moving into a bigger apartment at least, but I couldn't honestly find a point when I believed I'd have enough time to take off to move, so I just let my savings build up.

The problem, as a contractor, is that I was here on a temporary Visa. Now, once the wedding happens, I'll become a US citizen with just a couple of pieces of paper, but prior to Andy, I was always looking over my shoulder, wondering if I was going to have to leave America. Even though I hadn't really seen much of it, I still loved it here. But then, in mid-June

of 2020, my whole world changed.

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“Jesus,” Fiona said. “It’s easy to forget you really were one of the *first* people through the whole Quaranteam process. In June, most of us didn’t even know how bad things were really getting, while you were already being dosed with experimental drugs that the government wasn’t entirely certain how they worked.”

“True,” Aisling said, swiping the brush along a portion of the massive canvas. “But the government made it very clear to me when they talked to us how dangerous it was going to be if we chose not to take part in their program. And they made a pretty compelling case for us to get entered into the system as early as possible.”

“How *did* you get into the system so quickly?”

“Google volunteered to let anyone who wanted to apply to be in the system for vaccinations, although we were given a profile screening, I guess sort of the alpha version of what would eventually go on to become the Oracle system. Way different than what you went through. Not just Google, but Apple, Netflix, Cisco, Facebook, eBay, the *actual* Oracle... most of the great big tech conglomerates got entered into the system first week of June, I think. It was a lot smaller set of questions then. Certainly nothing like the full Oracle questionnaire you probably got. I did hear from a former coworker that depending on how long they were searching for a pairing, the more times they’d take new and updated questionnaires.”

“Oh, neither Moira nor I ever saw the Oracle questionnaire. Since we were personal connections, the assumption was, I guess, that we would know what level of compatibility we would have with our soon-to-be partners.”

“Sure, but that doesn’t really test you against any of their newly acquired partners,” Ash said with amusement. “Imagine me or Lauren or Niko had turned out to be a right cunt who wouldn’t stand for someone Andy used to know coming in and trampling all over our domain.”

“I had a hard time imaging Andy paired up with someone like that,” Fiona admitted, “but I guess anything’s possible.”

“Lord Jaysis, we’re going to have to introduce you to Andy’s ex at some point,” Aisling said with a bitter giggle. “That woman was a piece of work. I mean, don’t get me wrong, she’s gorgeous, and Christ on a bike, she’s basically tits on legs, but what an utter *cunt* of a woman. After watching how she treated Andy for just a few minutes, I dunno how he ever put up with dating her for most of a year. She seemed to think he wasn’t entitled to any opinion she didn’t personally give him. I’d have done and walloped the bitch one at some point, I just know it. She just gripes and gripes and gripes...”

“I think Niko feels about the same, but she still thinks I should interview the woman at some point, just to get an entirely different perspective of the story. What was her name again?”

“Erin,” Aisling said as she dragged the brush carefully along the canvas, gently casting paint onto it. “Erin Teresa Donegal, although she’s over with the Watkins now, so maybe she’ll take their last name. You can talk to her if you like, but by the end of your interview, you may want to just bash her over the head yourself. Anyway, I bet if you ask Niko, she could get you a copy of the current Oracle questionnaire to review. Hell, she might even have historical revisions of it to walk you through step-by-step how they built it along the way. Phil could probably get that for you if Niko couldn’t.”

“That’s part of why I’m getting so many perspectives for this book,” Fiona admitted. “I



think every woman's got a unique story to tell, and each one will shine a light on a different part of what we all went through. Piper's tale was pretty dark and bleak, but I imagine yours has a very different throughline."

"Oh, absolutely. I mean, when I was getting injected, I got to pick from a selection of men, all of which they'd told me would be 'reasonably good' matches for me, but I'm skipping ahead. We'll get to that in a minute." She set down the palette and brush. "If you want to get up and stretch a little bit, now's a good time. Couple of minutes break'll do us both good."

"When do I get to look at what you're doing?" Fi asked.

"When I'm done with your part and not a second sooner."

"You can be a bit of a punk, can't you, Ash?"

Aisling grinned from ear-to-ear and offered a charming shrug. "Figured any doubts about that melted away when you looked up Pogue Mahone," she chuckled.

## **Part Two – "This guy"**

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

Fiona realized as soon as she stood up that she desperately needed the five-minute break to let her muscles work out their kinks, to get her body moving again and get her blood pumping. Her left leg had practically fallen asleep having to hold the same pose for the better part of an hour, but everything fell back into place once she started stretching, taking time to lean and bend, putting her yoga and Pilates training to good use.

"Okay, I'm adding a third thing to my list," Aisling said with a grin. "You're going to have to teach me how to get to be that flexible."

Fiona smirked, holding her body in a jack knife pose, her shoulders and arms resting against the ground as her legs lifted to point straight up into the air, then even bent back a little further until they were over her face. "I didn't just wake up and have these skills overnight. You're looking at the result of several years' worth of training and work and—"

"And I've got all the bloody time in the world, Fi, but I certainly can't get me legs to do *that* right now, and I'd rather like them to."

Fiona nodded with a wry smile. "You'll just need to start showing up a little earlier for the advanced stretching that me, Moira and Sheridan are doing before the big group work out."

"Or we can have another session sometime later in the evening, because I'm not a morning girl unless I have to be."

"Okay, okay, you like keeping Andy Hours, so I can respect that," Fiona laughed. "I swear he's always preferred being up when the stars are out and not the sun. You always been like this?"

"Well, it lets me talk to my family in their morning late in the evening here," Aisling said as she moved over to her little fridge in her studio, pulling out a bottle of water, offering it to Fiona, who nodded, then tossing it to her, before grabbing one for herself. "My older brother likes to make sure I'm doing well, and I like making sure he's doing okay and not going crazy. He only just got partnered up last month, and before then, he was basically living like Bubble Boy, nobody in or out or even allowed near his place. Andy had to send him a digital file version of the most recent Druid Gunslinger book because he was worried about contracting DuoHalo from the mailman. He wanted to mail him a signed copy right away, but Dermot didn't feel like it would've been safe."

"Now that he's partnered up, has Andy sent him a signed hardback?"

"A complete signed set of all eight Druid Gunslinger books in hardback went out in the

mail a couple of weeks ago,” Ash said with a grin. “Dermot told me I can skip Christmas this year if I want and call it good. He can’t wait to meet Andy next month at the wedding. None of the family can.”

“They’re all over the whole ‘our daughter is one of seven brides for one man’ thing?”

“Well, Dermot’s got four women stationed with him, and mom and dad added two more women into their lives to keep Dad safe, so I think they know how hypocritical it would be for them to judge me doing the same,” Ash said with a smirk. “Besides, once Dad found out one of my fellow brides was Emily Stevens, he forgot about everything else for a bit.”

“They’re big fans of the films?”

“Dad raised us reading those books to us at bedtime as we were growing up, so they’ve got a special place in his heart. The movies came along a little bit later, but he thought Em was a spot on Dahlia Hairtrigger,” she said, rolling her eyes a little. “Ma’s made him promise to not geek out too much when they finally meet. He’s been too shy to talk to her over Zoom so far, her *and* Sarah, although it was *hilarious* to see Aiofe and Niamh utterly lose their shit when they first talked to Sarah. The Ballerina Badass movies are some of their favorites, and they spent like an hour talking to Sarah about her training for all the dancing she had to do.”

“So your family thinks you’re a starfucker is what you’re telling me.”

Aisling burst into giggles. “They’re envious, you could say that. But I had a long chat with mom, and she told me she’d always known I’d liked both boys and girls, so it wasn’t a big shocker when I talked to them about it all, back when it was just the four of us, me, Andy, Lauren and Niko. I didn’t want to try and explain it to any of them before I needed to, and back then, we really didn’t know much of anything.”

“Should we get back to the story, then?”

“You feel ready to do another hour holding the same pose while I’m yapping at you?”

Fiona grinned, giving a little nod. “Remember, though, you promised not to hold back on any details.”

Aisling paused for a moment, frowning a little bit. “There’s one detail I’ll tell you, but I’d like to leave out of book, if that’s okay.”

“Why would I leave it out?”

“It’s a little bit private and it involves Andy.”

“Well, now I’ve got to know,” Fiona said before taking a long swig from her bottle of water. She set the plastic down on a table just off to the side, then took off the robe again and moved to get back into the position. “Why don’t you tell me, and let me decide for myself? We don’t really need to be in the habit of keeping secrets from each other in this family.”

“Even if it’s for their own good?”

“Tell me and I can help decide that for you.”

“That’s fair enough. Anyway, where was I?” Aisling asked, as she lifted the protective cover off her painting to allow her to work on it again.

“Just getting to June.”

“Right, right...”

\* \* \* \* \*

On June 10<sup>th</sup>, Google held an all-hands virtual town hall meeting that we were told was

mandatory, and I remember thinking at the time that it would them deciding to furlough all temp-to-hire workers, or maybe even just letting all of us go. There had been some nervousness about whether or not contract workers were going to be allowed to keep going as they were since we'd all been working from home since March, and our team's Slack channel had definitely slowed down some, with some people reporting in sick or even going to the hospital. Obviously, knowing what I know now, I'm pretty sure we were witnessing several of the early fatalities of DuoHalo indirectly when people would say they were going to the hospital and then never coming back, but at the time, we just assumed they couldn't check in from quarantine.

The meeting, as it turned out, was not about layoffs, firings or furloughs. It was about this experimental vaccine that we were being offered a chance to take part in. The CEO of Alphabet Inc., Google's parent company, Sundar Pichai was holding the meeting via Zoom, and he looked, well, he looked tired and exhausted.

"Hey Googlers. Today's meeting is to offer anyone who wants a chance to volunteer for this new slightly experimental vaccine which will, according to the Air Force, protect you from both Covid and DuoHalo. But it has some side effects that we don't fully understand. Now, I understand if this means you don't want to participate, but this is the *only* solution we are likely to have for the foreseeable future. It's going to, well, for lack of a better turn, it's going to pair you with a person, maybe a handful of people. But the government is adamant that they want people to be happy with who they're paired with. So if you decide you're willing to volunteer for the program, you can just click on the link that'll go out with the minutes of this meeting, and then take the questionnaire to get matched up with someone who will essentially start making up your Quaranteam. Ha ha. Little joke there. Now I can tell you that I've personally signed up for the program, and the first round of vaccinations are scheduled to begin in one week's time. Until then, it's vitally important that everyone take the quarantine deadly seriously, and not venture out unless you absolutely have to. Even then, you should be wearing masks if at all possible and staying as far away from everyone else as you can. Stay safe. Stay at home."

I would love to tell you I was thoughtful and considered my actions for a long time, but I'd just be lying to you needlessly. I clicked on the link as soon as the notes appeared in my email box. You were lucky in that you had someone to be quarantined *with*, but being trapped, all alone in my shitty little studio apartment, I was slowly going out of my mind. I'd mapped the entirety of my floorplan in paces and could now completely move around the space with my eyes closed, even with all my art tools strewn everywhere. Every colored pencil, every sketchbook, I knew the location of every single thing in my apartment down to the millimeter.

I was also spending way more time on Discord's voice chat than I'd like, just to hear some other voices. Sometimes it was the family's Discord; other times it was one for a handful of people from work. I'd watched so much Netflix, I was starting to go down the rabbit hole into the stuff nobody ever wants to watch, that you have to go digging for. The algorithm was one step away from telling me, "Look, girl, I ain't got nothing for you no more."

The questionnaire, even back then, was nothing to sneeze at. It was, if memory serves, about a thousand questions. Most of them you answered with a slider that ranged in five increments from "very much enjoy" to "very much do NOT enjoy." We could set the age range of what we were looking for in a partner anywhere across the board, and I'd always sort of found men my age to be too immature, especially if I was going to be paired up with them for a long period of time, so I actually set my ideal range between thirty and forty. I wanted someone smart, someone funny, someone who liked dirty talk and someone who'd be willing to entertain me wanting to fool around with both genders.

I'd fooled around a bit with girls in college, but never gotten serious with any of them. I'd shared a bed with two or three wonderful women, but at the end of the day, I just wasn't ready for that at that point in my life yet. It was tricky figuring out what it was about them that kept me from wanting a relationship, but I think it was mostly just college experimentation, and as much as I liked being with girls, I still wanted a fella to call my own.

We spent a lot of the intervening time between when we took the quiz and when we got contacted chatting about what kinds of things people answered, although more than a couple of times, people got prudish and told us to keep such chatter off Slack, so we just took it to Discord voice off the company servers. It's pretty remarkable how fast gossip travels around a company when people are stuck at home without much else to do.

It was around that point that we also got word that some of the people who had 'disappeared' from our Slack channel had died in the hospital. It wasn't official news, but the amount of detail that was in the rumors made it all completely convincing. And with that, we all agreed we were going to abide by whatever recommendations were given towards keeping ourselves out of the line of fire of the viruses.

Oh hey! Now that I think about it, I saved a bunch of screenshots of that quiz to my Dropbox, so I can dig those up for you if you want. We couldn't cut and paste them, so I couldn't get the whole thing, but I took a lot of screen caps just because we needed something to talk about, and I think I wanted to document some of what we were going through, so I knew I wasn't going crazy.

About a week later, I got an email telling me that I was in what was being called the "high likelihood candidates" pool. That meant I should pack up a single suitcase with anything I thought I would need if I was being moved to live with someone else. Anything that didn't fit into a suitcase could be picked up later, once the pandemic had subsided. The email detailed that I wouldn't need to worry about paying rent once I'd relocated – any address that was tied to a relocated person would be immune to eviction until after the crisis had passed. There was no day associated with my possible relocation, but they were expecting I would hear about the transfer within a few days. They had my cell phone number and would call to give me a few hours' notice if and when I was selected.

As crazy as it all was, I started packing.

There wasn't all that much that I really needed to have with me at any given moment, but I realized that if what the reports were saying was true, I was likely going to be sharing a bed and being intimate with whoever I was going to be assigned to, and I have to tell you, Fi, at that point, I think I would've happily fucked a dudebro with a man bun, I was so worked up. The batteries in my vibrator had died weeks ago, and I'd already used every spare in the house to try and get a little bit more of a buzz going. I'd even resorted to sitting on top of my washing machine to get a little fix here and there.

It's remarkable how little I really needed to bring with me – most of my life was inside my laptop that I'd been hauling with me everywhere since college, or the iPad that I used as a digital sketchbook most of the time. I had a handful of physical sketchbooks that went into the suitcase, a bunch of cute outfits, a couple of things that I thought were fun larks and pretty much every good piece of lingerie I owned.

On June 17<sup>th</sup>, I got the call. Someone would be coming by in the evening to pick me up and relay me over to the inoculation center. The truck showed up and the man at the door was wearing a complete hazmat suit, his air entirely self-contained. I was one of two dozen gorgeous women being loaded onto the truck, and I remember how odd I thought it was that none of *us*

were being separated or given our own individual air. There was an airman in the back who was also wearing a hazmat suit in addition to her very fashionable M4. “Why aren’t we isolated?” I asked her, having to yell a bit over the rush of wind from the open back of the troop transport truck.

“Once you get the vaccine in you, it should knock out pretty much anything in your systems, so the idea is to get it into you, and get you paired up with your partners as quickly as you can, for your safety and theirs,” she yelled back.

“How come you aren’t paired with anyone yet?”

She shrugged a bit, almost dejectedly. “Number’s not up yet.”

I didn’t recognize it at the time, but the inoculation center was a staging area over at the Pleasanton Fairgrounds, where they’d set up several giant tents. It’s only about fifteen minutes away from here, and I guess they didn’t feel safe bringing loads of people onto the base at New Eden at that point in the process. Within a matter of months, they’d have a much more permanent structure set up at the New Eden base for injections. They called the place Base Aphrodite because I guess somebody thought it was funny.

I’d also heard that they were going to convert some of the high-rise towers into staging areas, but I guess for the first wave or whatever, they wanted to have all of us nearby enough that they could keep tabs and make sure nothing crazy happened with any of us.

They put each of us into our own little vacuum sealed tent with recycled air and started coming for us one at a time to give us our shots. Back when we were doing it, it was two shots, one given in each arm, but based on what everyone’s said since then, that must’ve just been for the first wave or so, because I think every other girl in the house other than me and Lauren, said it was just one single shot.

The woman who gave me the shot was a nice, charming woman, although there were several men walking around the area, talking about us as we waited our turn. I remember asking the woman when she dosed me if it was safe for those men to be walking around, and she told me they’d already been vaccinated, and were completely safe from whatever we’d bring in. We were all dosed before 7 pm, and they wanted us to sleep on it, to make sure that it took properly and didn’t have any extreme reactions. There was only one of those that I saw, and I still don’t know what really happened to her, but one girl down about five chambers woke up thrashing in the middle of the night and was escorted out by people in hazmat suits. In the morning, they told us she’d just had a ‘reaction’ to the serum, and that she needed to be brought to her partner immediately. You should ask Phil about that, I bet he’d know what happened.

Anyway, it was a little like camping, just in an oxygen tent with a hundred or so other women, but in the morning, we were brought food and given a checkup each before we were taken out of our tents and loaded back up onto a military truck and driven down south to Milpitas, where the Air Force had commandeered this Hilton hotel, just off 680 and Calaveras Blvd. We were assigned rooms and told to wait in our hotel rooms before someone would come and talk to us about our options. Room service would be left outside of our doors, and we weren’t to leave the hotel room for any reason other than to talk to someone from the Air Force when they came to see us.

The whole “hurry up and wait” drove me a bit mad, not gonna lie, because I had an entire day and a half in that hotel room before anyone called me to come and talk to them. It was a big hotel room, though, with a little living room area, so at least I had space to walk around, and the Wi-Fi was solid, so I could call my family and let them know what was going on. The evening of the 19<sup>th</sup>, the phone in my room rang and I was told to come down to a conference room to

discuss my options.

When I got down to the room, there were three people sitting behind a desk, none of whom I've seen since. One was an African American woman in her mid-forties who looked as all business as possible. One was a blonde woman in her thirties in official Air Force dress attire whose nameplate read Harris. And the guy sitting between them looked like he was in his mid-fifties, with a receding hair line, oval shaped glasses and a thick bushy white mustache on his top lip that made him look more like a college professor than anyone I'd ever seen in my entire life. He was even wearing a cardigan sweater over a white-collar shirt.

"Miss Aisling Blake, am I correct?" he said, standing up and bowing, as if to discourage me from trying to shake his hand. "I'm Dr. Bill McKenna, one of the people working on this project. This is Major Harris and Dr. Winters, who're here to ensure you get an option that you're happy with. How are you feeling? Be honest. I'm a doctor."

"Honestly, Doc? I'm horny as all hell," I admitted to him. "Like, hard to think horny."

He nodded at me without so much as seeming even a little surprised. "That's going to happen. One of the side effects of the serum is an increased libido, but it also has the benefit of increasing the intensity of orgasms, so, y'know, balance, I suppose." He had a tendency to draw out each word, making them all sound massively considered, like he was selecting them with precision. "So we've brought you here because we have twenty men who would fit your preferences based on your quiz and theirs. Now, we didn't want to overwhelm you with too much data, so we've tried to distill them down to a handful of things you marked as 'most important' that matched up with theirs. Why don't you take a look through them and see if you find anyone you like?"

There were four sheets of paper, each with five pictures and a handful of things about each of the men on it. Andy's picture was on the third sheet, and he had such an easy way about him in the picture that it made me stop and look a little. He wasn't what I would've described as my type immediately, but in reading the details, it seemed like we meshed on all the important things – he had sexual tendencies that ran parallel to my own, with dirty talk at the top of things that were biggest turn ons, but he also seemed like the kind of man I'd want to spend a lot of time with, with interests in music, film, art and literature. I could see other men that I thought were more physically attractive than Andy or were people that I knew who they were – can you believe Elon Musk thought he and I would be a good fit? – but I kept coming back to the answers Andy had given and felt like he would be the best choice. There weren't any names on the page, so at that point, I didn't even know his name.

"This guy," I told Dr. McKenna. "I want to be paired up with this guy."

There was an interesting look of recognition as he looked at the picture before he spoke. "Okay. If that's what you want, we can make that happen. We'll start the process, and you'll be brought over to him early tomorrow."

"That's it?" I asked him.

"That's it."

"So... just back to my room then?"

"Off you go." I stood up and started to walk across the conference room before I heard him shouting at me. "Oh, Miss Blake? One more thing..." He was jogging across the room towards me before he stopped just a foot or two away from me. "Look, this may be a little unethical, but the man you've chosen, I don't know him personally, but he's a friend of a friend. And the man's mutual friend had, well, a strong *suggestion* I was supposed to relay to anyone who chose him."

This is the bit I don't want you to tell Andy about, by the way.

"Okay, and what's that? Is he a guy I shouldn't be picking?"

"No no! In fact, he might be one of the best choices you could've made, just because if he's a friend of *my* friend, well, he's got to be a great guy," Dr. McKenna chortled. "But my friend's suggestion was that you may have to be a bit overly forward and direct with your new partner. He's a good guy, but he's also one of those creative types, which means he can occasionally be plagued with illogical doubt as to his own worth and consequence. Totally unjustified, but he might have a touch of the whole 'you're too good for me' going on when you first meet him."

"Awww, that's cute," I remember saying. "I can put those fears to rest."

He nodded emphatically. "Good. Great. Wonderful. That's all I needed to hear. I just wanted you to know that he might be overly self-deprecating or have a lower than wise self-opinion, and the more you can do to disabuse him of such notions, the better off you're going to be. Can I ask why you chose him? I mean, I saw that look of recognition for a couple of the people you had options for in there, and some of those people are worth quite a lot of money."

I gave Dr. McKenna my cheekiest grin and sauciest wink. "Don't you ever listen to the Beatles, Doctor? Money can't buy me love."

I headed back to my hotel room, climbed into the shower and tried to get myself off while I washed myself clean, but just couldn't find myself a way to get to an orgasm, much to my annoyance. At the time, I chalked it up to being nervous, but I know now that it was actually being gated off from me by the serum, waiting for me to have contact with my pairing partner.

We were told via pieces of paper dropped off with our dinners that we should bundle up as much as possible during the transport between the hotel and our partners, that we would be driving through several neighborhoods and that we should do our best to remain as safe as possible. That meant scarves, masks, goggles, whatever we had to bundle up, we should wear it. I still have a mirror selfie I took of me in the getup that you can use for your book. I look like I'm preparing for Antarctic ice fishing.

There was an 8 a.m. wakeup call, explaining that we needed to be in the lobby in an hour. At 9, there were about twenty or so of us milling around, all completely bundled up. We were checked in and stickers with bar codes were slapped onto our shoulders, I guess so they could make sure everyone was where they needed to be. Then we were told we were either on bus Alpha or bus Delta, with me being on bus Delta.

Once I got on the school bus, I was sat next to Lily, Andy's old roommate Eric's first partner. You've met Eric – a good guy, very smart, very kind. Lily wasn't at all what I expected her to be, overly direct and almost a little smug, but she seemed to have a good heart. I think I caught on to her sense of humor part way on the drive, although we couldn't talk too much, just because of the high winds as they kept all the windows on the school bus open to keep us from overheating, considering how bundled up we were.

We were told we were going to be the fifth stop along the way, and most of them seemed to go fine, although the one before us seemed to have some serious problems. The trooper took the woman in question, a girl named Shelby, to the door of the house, but when they knocked on it, nobody answered. They knocked two or three times, but nobody answered. The soldier sent Shelby back to the bus and then apparently walked around the house. I'm not sure what happened, but I have to think, knowing what I know now, the guy she was supposed to be delivered to had to have been either out of the house or had died in his place. Never did figure out which it was.

Lily and I talked about what we were expecting, how we were feeling and how surreal the whole thing was. She asked if I'd stressed to my family how important it was that they take the quarantine seriously, considering what we knew about how it sounded like people were dying left and right from it. I did, and she had done the same with her parents.

When we pulled up to the condo building, I didn't know really at all where we were, but it turned out we were in the far eastern corner of San Jose, outside of a small building of condos as the guard hopped out and motioned for me and Lily to come and join him. "Your stop, you two."

We headed up to the front door as the guard rapped his fist against the door. "Open up! CDC! Delivery and I haven't got time to fuck about, so let's go!" As soon as the door opened, I got to lay eyes on him, and I think I fell instantly head over heels for him, because I could see he was concerned for us, and not thinking a damn thing about himself. "You Eric or Andy?"

"Andy." I remember being impressed with how deep his voice was, like a nice bass purr of thunder.

"Copy," the guard said, tapping on the little handheld computer he had. It was more like one of those oversized scanners UPS uses than an iPad, but after he'd tapped on it, he sprayed the surface with Lysol and then held it out to Andy. "Just use your finger to sign on the line. Any day now. I've got another seven deliveries to make today, and people are on the bus waiting so let's go."

"So how long is this for? How long are these people staying with us?" Andy really had been given even less information than we had, and I had to admit I thought that was a little scary at the time, because for a moment, I thought maybe he wouldn't want *me*.

"Which bedroom is Eric's and which bedroom is Andy's?" Lily asked him.

"Upstairs and turn right for Eric's room and left for my, uh, Andy's room."

We didn't want to wait, so the two of us pushed right past him and headed immediately up the stairs, with Lily heading into Eric's room and me heading into Andy's. I closed the door immediately, and began stripping out of all my extra layers, looking around the room. It was packed, not a whole lot of space in the room. There was a single reclining chair off to one side, a massive California king sized bed taking up, like, three quarters of the room, a little pedestal with a giant LCD TV just past the foot of it, with almost no space to move around the room itself. There were a couple of bookcases that were completely overflowing with books, and several posters on the wall that I didn't recognize at the time, but I'd later find out were for Andy's book releases.

I didn't know it, but as I sat there on Andy's bed, getting changed into the clothes I'd brought along to make a good first impression, as Muninn sat on the bed purring at me, Andy was standing on the other side of the door. He knocked on the door, and I shouted back "Five minutes please!"

I didn't want him to just see me all sweaty and whatnot, after having been in that coverup gear the whole time, so I stepped into the attached bathroom and cleaned up a little bit, washing my face and making sure I was as fit and sexy as I could get.

Just a few minutes later, I met the love of my life, and fell in love forever.

\* \* \* \* \*

"There we go," Aisling said, draping the protective cover back over her painting. "Next time for a break."



“You don’t want to tell me about your first time with Andy?” Fiona asked her.

Ash smirked. “I think a girl’s allowed to have a couple of secrets to get to herself. My first time with Andy can remain just between him and me. Besides, that’s not really of any interest to anyone in your book, is it?”

“No, not really,” Fiona said, stretching her arms out again. “They really weren’t that organized at the beginning of all this, were they?”

Ash shrugged. “They were in crisis mode, responding as quickly and capably as they could. I’m not going to judge them too much.”

“And you don’t want me to tell Andy that Dr. McKenna said he had confidence issues?”

“I don’t think he needs to know. It’s not like Bill was wrong, but we’re working on it with Andy anyway, and it’s probably best that he told me. It gave me a bit of an edge when it came to learning how to deal with him, and how to always push me to remind him how much I love him.”

“You fell for him hard and fast, huh?”

Ash blushed a little bit, looking down at her feet for a moment. “I’d never met a guy who cared so much about me and my opinions before. I mean, I get that’s how it’s *supposed* to be, but Andy and I fell into an immediate rhythm, finishing each other’s sentences. I mean, it was months before we had our first fight, and even then, it was mostly because we were both more tired than we should’ve been and we patched things up before we went to bed. You remember your first fight with Andy?”

“Not the fight itself,” Fiona laughed, “because knowing how I was back in college, someone probably did something innocuous and I blew it way out of proportion and then got mad at Andy for trying to talk some sense into me, but I remember the first time we had makeup sex, and wow, did we go at it.”

“Imagine how you and I are gonna fuck after *our* first fight,” Ash teased.

“Can’t wait. Let’s go walk around the house for our stretch break.”

“You gonna put on any clothes?”

Fiona scoffed. “At my age? If you’ve got it... flaunt it.”

### **Part Three – “Don’t Break Him”**

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

Fiona and Ash took a walk around the lower floor of the house, the two of them stretching out, even taking a few minutes to jump on the trampoline in the large playroom. The basement floor was still the least active of the three floors, but over the last month, several of the women of the house had migrated their personal rooms from the upper floors down to one of the underground ones, making room upstairs for the incoming flood of children. Ash was one of the two women already pregnant, but they hadn’t really told people outside of the family yet, in case the pregnancy didn’t take. Once they were three months out, they’d feel more certain it was going through and they’d be open about it.

Ash’s old studio upstairs had already begun being prepped for being a nursery, just a few doors down from the master bedroom. The talk was that Jade was going to be the house nanny for at least a little while, although the ladies of Team Rook were already trying to figure out who would provide relief for Jade.

Since the 60 Minutes interview had aired, they’d gone about making sure the house started feeling more like an actual *home*. And Nicolette had gone about breathing more life into the lower level, rotating in some of the artwork from upstairs. Also, the hidden doors leading into

the basement were now being left open unless there were guests or visitors at the house, which allowed the cats to wander into the basement floor any time they wanted. Both Muninn and Huginn were playing a very intense game of tag, with the two cats taking turns rampaging after each other down the hallway, although halfway through their game, they decided to take a break to demand affection from the two women walking down the hallway, rubbing against their legs before suddenly resuming the game, although at the onset, it was hard to tell who was starting as 'it.'

"Did Andy have cats back in college?" Ash asked Fiona.

"Just the one, Odysseus," Fiona said. "Andy brought him with him from his parents' place, but he died of cancer in our last year of college. Hell of a cat. He used to perch up on Andy's shoulder like a parrot and would only hop down when Andy was about to leave the house, and even then, he would act all indignant about it."

"How old was he when he died?"

"Fourteen, so he'd had a good life as a cat," Fiona sighed. "He was a such a good boy, not that Andy's two new cats aren't. How old are they?"

"They're both seven. He got them a couple of years after he split from Erin, and they've been with him ever since. You didn't have any pets to bring?"

Fiona shook her head. "Between me being away so much for doing coverage and Moira's long, brutal hours working in the ER, we didn't think it would be fair to have a pet in the house. And now between Andy's cats and Maya's dogs, we have plenty of fur babies around."

"Aye, I get that," Ash said, as they walked past the shooting range and armory, which was quiet. "You going to take Niko and Lexi up on their offer to give shooting lessons?"

"Probably, although I'm a little annoyed that Andy doesn't seem to feel comfortable with carrying a gun around."

"Oh Fi," Ash said, a touch of sadness in her smile. "It's not that he wouldn't feel comfortable with it. It's that he doesn't want to have to resist even the briefest moments of guilt and temptation about surviving when so many other people didn't. He knows we all depend on him, but you have to remember, he, like the rest of us, lost a *lot* of people to DuoHalo. He's definitely still not over Matty, and who could blame him?"

Fiona frowned a little bit, nodding as they started to walk away from the armory. "That's right, you didn't even meet him in person."

"No, although he plays in big in the next part of my story," Ash said. "He was incredibly friendly and welcoming when I got to talk to him, which is more than almost any of Andy's other partners can say. I think you, me, Lauren and Niko were about it. The staff said they would just meet him when he came to visit and, well, you know what happened after that."

"You had any bits of morning sickness yet?" Fiona asked, desperate to change the subject, even if it was only briefly.

"Just once, so I guess I've gotten lucky. That kind of luck can't last forever, though, so I know my trouble times are coming. What about you? You going to try and get knocked up soon?"

"I'm a bit older than you are, Ash, so it may not be quite as easy for Andy to find fertile ground in me as it was for you, but I've been off my birth control since I got the message from Andy last month," Fiona said. "I'd like to be a mother, but I certainly won't mind if it doesn't happen until after I'm married, so I don't take too much grief from the family. They probably wouldn't care, what with the world being what it is, but it's better to play it safe in case."

"Ain't religion grand?" Ash joked. "I can't imagine your family would give you too much

stick about it. They're probably just pickled as punch that you're happy with how it all ended up."

"I like how Andy's approach to the religious ceremony for the mass marriage was to simply throw his hands up into the air and tell us that whatever we wanted, we could have, and he'd go along with it."

"You know religion's never been Andy's favorite, Fi."

"Believe me, I know. You've probably heard, but we had to pretend we weren't sleeping together in college whenever my parents would come to visit."

"But not when Andy's parents came to visit?"

Fiona waved her hand. "They didn't give a shit. They were just happy that Andy was happy. They were always worried that he didn't date more in high school."

"He was a late bloomer," Ash joked. "But Mama Rook seems to love me, and I feel like that's all that's really important. And I got Matty's approval, before he died."

"We keep dancing around that, so we should probably head back and get started with the next portion of your tale, so I can have it all on tape," Fiona said.

"Sure, but keep in mind, there's parts of this that you should probably omit from your book too."

"You tell me the story and let me make my own mind up about what's in and out of the book, okay?"

The redhead nodded as they walked back into her studio. "That's fair. Now go back and get into your position after you turn your recorder back on."

"When are you going to let me see it?"

"An indeterminate amount of time after you stop asking..."

\* \* \* \* \*

The first couple of days with Andy, if we weren't talking, we were pretty much fucking. And doing both of those, we were usually cuddling. I know there's that thing called New Relationship Energy, where all the problems and incompatibilities just disappear in the shiny newness of it all, but Andy and I got along like a house on fire immediately. We had similar interests, similar senses of humor and he was genuinely interested in learning all about me, just as much as I was him.

I think that's what delighted Andy the most early on – that I had so many questions about him and his life, and that almost none of them had to do with his writing career. Oh sure we talked about his time as a writer, about how he dealt with the process of working through fiction, where he got his ideas from and what sorts of stories he wanted to write about on the side, but I also tried not to dwell on that, because I knew he was always talking about that sort of thing, so whenever it seemed like he was running out of energy on the topic of what he was creating, we'd pivot to something else. Typically, he'd ask a question about me or my life, and I'd spiral off on a new tangent for us to talk about for an hour or so.

One thing I *had* to ask about were all the books surrounding his bed. His tiny little bedroom was crammed with so many books that it felt like he'd just built a little cave inside of a bookstore. I remember asking Andy how many of them he'd read, and he told me it was like 50-60% of them, with the rest around for whenever he wanted something new to read. Authors I'd heard of, authors I hadn't, quite a few graphic novels, loads of fantasy and sci-fi but also quite a large number of spy fiction books, many of them vintage. He had an entire run of reprints from

someone named Richard Stark about a character named Parker that he suggested I give a try, although I haven't started in on them yet. We have to unpack them all at some point and while the Air Force saved our lives, they didn't exactly do a great job of packing all the stuff in the condo for us later. I've got some pictures on my laptop of what the tiny little room looked like, if you wanted to use those for your book, although you'd need to get Andy's permission, obviously.

The morning of our fourth day together, Andy's hand had reached and gently pinched my arm, which I sort of glared at him over. "What the bloody hell was that for, you shite?" I giggled.

"Just making sure you're *really* real, and I'm not dying, delirious in some field hospital somewhere," he said with a laugh. "You're too good to be true, you know that?"

"You won't say that when it's two a.m. and I'm sending you out for a late-night pickles run when I'm pregnant with our first kid," I told him, blushing a little as the words came out of my mouth, realizing what I'd said. "Assuming you're cool with us having kids eventually. I shouldn't presume th—"

He kissed me, warm and tender, before pulling back, pushing some of my hair from my face. "I doubt I could tell you no on anything Aisling Blake. I never really saw myself as a father, but if you think you'd want kids with me, I'll learn how to manage."

"I think you'll make a great father, Andy."

"You're crazy, Ash, but I'll trust you."

Neither of us wanted to get out of bed, so we stayed underneath the sheet, the fan blowing over us. As much as I loved that cozy little condo, I *hated* the fact that it didn't have central air conditioning, so when the weather got especially hot, we just had to open the windows, run the fans and drink loads of water.

We'd been taking turns showing each other our favorite movies that the other hadn't seen, and last night, it'd been his turn, so he'd shown me this great sort of popcorn spy film called "Sneakers," and on that morning, I showed him one of my favorites, a very dark comedy called "In Bruges."

After we finished that, though, Andy asked me if I wanted to meet his best friend or his brother via Zoom. I told him I wanted to meet both of them as soon as I could. I didn't really know how bad the pandemic was going to get, but I felt a little nervous that anyone I didn't meet soon, I might not meet at all.

So he decided to introduce me to his brother, Matty. I don't know how you remember him, Fi, but Matty was one of the nicest, most welcoming people I've ever talked to. I probably can't remember this whole conversation word for word, but lemme see if I can try.

"Remember," Andy told me as the FaceTime call rang. "Matty's quite a bit older than me, so we're at wildly different stages in our lives..."

"Heya baby bro, what's going on?" Matty said as the call picked up. I don't know if you saw recent pictures of him, but he was tall, lean and fit, a little over six foot tall, but you could definitely see the resemblance between Matty and Andy. Matty still had all his hair, a sort of blonde moplike cluster, short enough to be respectable but just that little bit longer than it should've been, on account of the pandemic and the fact that he hadn't been able to have a haircut in months. Matty had a big full bushy brown beard, and was wearing a short sleeve flannel shirt, something I couldn't imagine why, considering how hot it was in the Midwest at that point.

"Hey Matty. I want to introduce you to my new partner, Aisling," he said. "Apparently they've got some way for us to get past the viruses out here, but it involves convincing utterly beautiful women they need to sleep with plebs like me, and so, here we are."

“No no, I’ve heard a little about this thing,” Matty said. “It’s coming down from the Air Force, right? Do whatever it is they tell you to do, as weird as it may sound. It’ll probably save your life. I’ve been seeing some of the chatter about it, but haven’t had a chance to really dig into it yet. Hey Aisling, how’s my baby brother been treating you? Like a gentleman I hope?”

“Well, only when I *want* to be treated like a lady,” I teased. “When I want him to treat me otherwise, he’s pretty good at that too.”

“Ha ha! Yeah, well, considering how long that bed of his has been empty, he’s probably making up for lost time, although Andy’s always been pretty good at that.”

“Tell me about you, Matty! I need to know all about my man’s big brother.”

“Well, let’s see. I’m nine years older than Andy, so there’s whole periods about each other that neither of us really knows much about. I even went off to college early, at 16. I married my college sweetheart, Samantha, in 2005 and in late 2009, our only child, Conner, was born. Me and Sam have a real estate company here in Cleveland. It’s sort of her parents’ family business, but I do okay, and we’ve taken care of Conner pretty well. Me and Andy try our best to keep in touch, but he’s out there, not that I blame him. There are a lot of days where Ohio can be a whole lot for anyone to tolerate, even me. You don’t sound like local Californian, though, Aisling.”

“Nae, I’m from Ireland originally. Only lived here in the States for a few years now, but as part of the pairing program, they had me take a compatibility test, and I guess because I’m young, smart and healthy, they sort of gave me free rein to pick who I liked, and I chose your brother, and hopefully he’ll keep me around here, and we can keep on making each other happy for as long as we can.”

“Oh I’m sure your accent’s been driving him wild,” Matty laughed. “He may be trying to hide it from you, but he loves accents, especial—”

“Especially when they’re talking dirty, oh, I know, Matty, I know,” I giggled. “So your wife Samantha works with you?”

“Yeah, although it’s been brutal having to work from home the entire time. Real estate is not a business where you can always just be at home. We need to be out showing properties, talking to people, convincing them to buy a new house and sell the one they just moved into like six or seven years ago.”

“You get that a lot?”

“Not a ton of people moving *to* Ohio, so mostly it’s just people swapping houses around here and there, although we’re starting to gain a bit of traction with people seeing property in Cleveland as a speculative investment, and who am I to tell them they’re out of their mind?” he laughed. “They want to build a new McMansion out here and hope that it’s going to grow in value and not decrease, hey, I’m happy to sell them the land for them to gamble their money on. I’m even happier to profit off their delusions.”

“What you’re saying is that you’re exploiting people who have money to burn?”

Matty clutched both of his hands over his heart with a smile and a laugh. “You have, regrettably, correctly identified me, m’lady. I am that most ignoble of beasts... a capitalist.”

I giggled pretty hard at that. “What kinds of things is your son into?”

“Typical ten-year-old stuff. Legos, Ninjago, Call of Duty...”

“Oh, so you’re raising a gamer child are you?” I scolded.

“No no, but it’s been his support network for the last few months, since he can’t go and play with any of his friends, so they’ll play Call of Duty or FIFA so they can voice chat and not go crazy being stuck at home all day with their folks,” Matty said. “I don’t blame him. We didn’t have indoor apocalypses when we were kids. But he’s doing his best to keep exercising and

trying not to think about how he's not going to be going back to school at least until the spring, maybe even later. That's not the kind of news he wanted, and the open-end date of the whole thing is only making it worse. He just wants to get back to life being normal. Who can blame him, right?"

"We can't control the path of the river, but we can do our best to keep our heads above water while we're floating downstream," I said to him.

"Old Irish proverb?" Matty asked me.

"Nah," I laughed. "Just some shit I made up, but I liked how it sounded when I was saying it."

Me and Matty and Andy talked for about an hour or so, and I remember thinking that while the two men were very similar, Matty was so much more confident and self-assured than Andy, but also that Matty had a tiny hint of sadness about him, something I chalk up to him deciding to settle with his life, as opposed to chasing the wild blue frontier like Andy had done. They'd both clearly come from the same starting place but had decided to forge wildly different paths for themselves.

Later in the day, though, Andy called his best friend Xander to introduce me to him. Now, you lived with Xander for a few years, so I'm sure you'll have your own perspective on this, but here's how I remember it going.

When Andy told me that his best friend lived halfway across the country, I was somewhat surprised. I'd already figured out that while him and Eric were excellent flatmates, they weren't the closest of friends. For that, I needed to talk to Xander Baker, and I wasn't at all sure what to make of Andy's description of him. He was a mountain of a man, sometimes ripped, sometimes just large (even fat), with a big shaggy panda-colored beard, his body mostly covered in tattoos. They'd been best friends since they were, like, seven or eight, I think Andy told me. They'd met in Little League, both hated it, but even when both of them dropped out, they remained best of friends, even throughout high school and college, even ending up as roommates. But, I mean, the man was still rocking a *mullet*, Fi! How the fuck was I *possibly* supposed to take a man with a mullet seriously?

"Hey Xander, I want to introduce you to my new partner, Aisling," Andy said, turning the phone's camera so that it included me in the shot.

"*Goddamn*, Andy, you're punching about ten steps above your weight class, man," Xander laughed. "I don't want to be mean, Aisling, but you are so far out of my boy's league that I think you may have even left the state."

"Awww," I laughed, rolling my eyes. "This is your best friend you're talking about, isn't it?"

"Best and oldest! But I have to call them like I see them! You've got to be, what, a decade younger than Andy?"

"A little more than that, but age is a number I don't give a shit about, Xander," I told him. "Besides, boys my age are fucking stupid. They're always thinking with their dicks and they don't give a shit about emotions or feelings. Andy's not at all like that."

"Well, I *try* not to be," Andy said. "But everyone's guilty of not thinking things through every now and again."

"So Xander, what do you do for a living?"

"I'm a mechanic."

"You're a Jiffy Lube guy?"

Xander didn't take it personally and just laughed at me, shaking his head. "Nah. I mean, I

do some basic car repairs and whatnot on the side, but most of my time is spent repairing and restoring classic cars. Andy keeps telling me he wants one of those 1968 Chevy Corvette C3s, but I keep trying to explain to him that they aren't just laying around the place."

"That's awfully specific."

"It's in an anime he loves, so, y'know, I guess the man's allowed to have his peculiarities. What about you, Aisling? Any specific car you'd ever want to have?"

"Wouldn't mind an Aston Martin DB7 GT if you're just giving away classics," I laughed. "Course, it wouldn't be legal to drive it here, what with the steering wheel on the wrong side of the car."

Xander shook his head. "Nothing illegal about it. I mean, it'd have to be imported here, but it's not completely out of the realm of possibility. I've actually had some right-hand drive cars come through my shop a few times. You couldn't take it through any drive throughs without a passenger, but I can keep an eye out."

I waved my hand at him. "I couldn't afford it even if you did, but thanks."

"And what do you do for a living, Aisling?"

"You can just call me Ash, Xander. And I'm a graphic designer, working freelance for Google, so sometimes that's web design, sometimes that's print or billboard signage, sometimes it's logo design, sometimes it's shite I've never even thought of that I must figure out how to do on the fly."

"You like it?"

It was remarkable that I don't think anyone had really asked if I *liked* doing what I was doing up until that point. They'd ask if I was happy with Google, or if projects were interesting, but nobody seemed to think about how much joy I was getting out of daily work, but Xander cut right to the quick of it, something I'm sure you know as much as I do that he's *remarkably* good at, and probably one of the many reasons he and Andy are such great friends.

"It's work?" I laughed. "I mean, sometimes I like it, but other days, it's as though I'm just being overwhelmed by pedantry and meaningless little shit that at the end of the day nobody's ever going to notice."

"That's why it's a job, though, innit?" he teased, poking a little fun at my accent. "Don't worry, if you get particularly bored, you can always mockup new covers for Andy's books. I'm sure he'd love that."

"Still right here, you know?" Andy interjected with a laugh.

"Can you run downstairs and make me a cup of tea, love?" I asked him.

"You just want to gossip about me behind me back."

"It's much more becoming than if we do it in front of you," I joked. "I just want a couple of minutes for Xander to tell me your deepest, darkest secrets. That's all. Promise." I leaned in and kissed him for a moment before pulling back, giving him my winningest smile.

"I find out you've been telling her about Atlantic City, Xan, and I'll have your hide," Andy said, handing me the phone as he slid off the bed and headed downstairs.

"Do I need to know about Atlantic City?" I immediately asked.

Xander shook his head. "It's a head fake, meant to pull you in the wrong direction. I have to ask you, though, how serious are you about Andy?"

"I'm certainly with him until the end of the pandemic, but I imagine it's going to be the rest of my life," I said, surprised at how protective Xander was suddenly sounding. "I'm his partner, and I take that seriously."

Xander nodded a little. "Good. I just..." He sighed, looking down at his hands before he

looked back up at me, trying to put the words together. “Don’t break him, okay? Andy’s had some truly *shit* luck with relationships over the years. Some of it’s been of his own making, but most of it, well, he’s just gotten some bad beats. His last relationship was the sort of shitshow they write country songs about, and the one before that, well, I thought they were probably in it for the long haul before life got in the way. And I’ve had my own share of women complicating my life, and Andy and my’s friendship. We stopped talking for a couple of years because... Shit, because I was a fucking idiot, and when my wife said it was her or my friends, I didn’t take it as a giant red fucking flag and run screaming for the hills. But... look, this is the important thing, the thing I want you to absolutely understand about my best friend. After two years of our friendship being basically dead, I got divorced and kicked my ex-wife Annie as far from my life as I possibly could. But the day I decided to divorce her, I called up Andy, out of the blue, and begged Andy to yell at me, to tell what a fucking moron I’d been, to say that he’d told me so, and you know what he did?”

“He didn’t do any of those things and he forgave you,” I said, trying not to tear up a little bit, imagining the whole scenario.

“Well, after I basically *forced* him to tell me ‘I told you so,’ *then* he forgave me. And he’s never brought it up since. We’ve had a few points where I’ve needed to vent about her to someone, and he’s always let me rant and rave and get whatever off my chest that needs shouting, and he’s always supported me and never been mad.” Xander inhaled a breath and wiped a tear from his own cheek. “Because of that, I consider it my sacred duty to make sure nobody fucks up my boy, you understand? You seem like a great woman, a little younger than Andy probably needs, but maybe I’m wrong and you’re right on that one. Still, Andy is my best, oldest and most reliable friend, and I won’t just go to bat for him, I’ll drive into hell with my hair on fire if there’s even the tiniest chance that I can pull him out of it, even if the odds are that I go down with him. He’s not just my ride or die, Ash. Andy’s my blood brother. He’s my family. I’m only going to say this once, because I don’t think you need to hear it, but I still need to say it. You hurt him, and you will have made a deadly enemy for life, and I *will* make you regret it.” The look on his face was one of the most terrifying things I’ve ever seen, because at that point, I understood exactly how deep the friendship these two men shared ran, and I’d never seen that level of trust and camaraderie between any two people in real life before. And that look of implied threat, it was only there for as long as it took me to recognize it before it was gone. “But I don’t think you’re gonna hurt him, so I just needed to make sure I’d said my peace. Welcome to the family, huh?”

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Fiona laughed a little bit as Ash stepped away from her canvas. “Yeah, Xander looks like a giant teddy bear, but if you rile up the grizzly bear, he can scare the crap out of anybody. I remember when Andy and I first started hooking up, he told me that shit had gone sideways a bit for Andy before me, and that there was still shrapnel in Andy’s heart that I was probably going to be picking out for a while,” Fiona told Ash. “And that was before the hot mess disaster that was Erin. She got *so* damn lucky that her time dating Andy coincided with Xander’s time with Annie, because if it hadn’t, well, I think things would’ve gone a lot differently for her. Hell, I’m still looking forward to them eventually meeting at some party the Watkins throw.”

“Lord Jaysis help us,” Ash laughed. “We’ll have to make sure Samantha knows to keep him from flying off the handle when the two eventually do meet.” She gestured that Fi could get



up from her seat and stretch again. “I think I expected Andy’s big brother to be the one with the ‘don’t you hurt him’ speech and Xander to be the ‘we’re all family here’ rather than the other way around. But Xander’s good people. And I still miss Matty, even for as little as I knew him.”

Fiona nodded. “You’re not alone there. But you got to talk to him, even a bit, which is more than most of the family’s ever going to have had. So, treasure those moments.”

“Oh, I do, Fi. I do.” Ash frowned. “I haven’t told Andy yet, but I think if it’s a boy, I think I want to name him Matthew, in honor of Andy’s late brother.”

“I think he’d like that very much, Ash,” Fiona said, giving her a hug. “And so would I.”

## **Part Four – “You and me”**

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

They were on their break walking around the basement when Aisling dropped a bombshell on Fiona. “I take it the next part of your story’s going to be about Lauren,” Fiona said as they stopped to pet Muninn, who’d begrudgingly settled down long enough for Fiona to stroke his back a few times.

“Nah, not really,” Aisling said. “I know none of this is going into the book, especially since we’re talking away from the tape recorder, but I sort of knew right away that Andy and Lauren were never going to really be on the same emotional level as me and Andy are. That isn’t to say he doesn’t love her, because he absolutely does, or that she doesn’t love him, because she absolutely does as well. But Lauren and Taylor have always been each other’s Big Love, and as much as Lauren’s biologically tied to Andy, her heart belongs elsewhere. I mean, c’mon, you’ve had to notice that for most of the last month, Taylor and Lauren have always tag-teamed him rather than going one at a time.”

“Of course I’d noticed, but I’d wondered how much of that was down to Lauren and Taylor just fully recommitting to their relationship,” Fiona said with a giggle. “I remember when me and Moira reconnected, and let me tell you, that was an *intense* couple of months. We didn’t get out of the house most nights.”

“Well, as soon as Taylor showed up, Lauren’s hesitation with Andy made total sense. It wasn’t like she was holding back with him, but I think both Andy and I could tell she wasn’t going all in the same way I was,” Ash said. “And that was fine. It was early days when she showed up – they were just starting the Oracle program and didn’t have anywhere near as large a pool of candidates. I had a few days to establish me and him first before she showed up, but I think once she landed on our doorstep, that was when we knew things were going to get a little crazy. I’ve talked to Phil a little bit about it, and he told me there was just an effort to quickly double down on the people who’d said they were open to polyamory, like a backup plan.”

They made their way to the small little lounge area downstairs where Nicolette had left them some tea and fruit, and based on how warm the tea was, they must have just missed her, only convincing Fiona even further that Nicolette was some kind of super ninja.

“I’d sort of wondered if she was feeling bad about not being asked to marry Andy, but...”

“Oh, they worked it out without much conversation, really. It was pretty amicable between the two of them, what with Lauren and Taylor talking about getting married to each other at some point in the future. They’re both still likely going to bear Andy’s children, but that’s just the way of the world now. If this family was a pyramid scheme, Lauren’s tier two.”

Both Fi and Ash had a good giggle about that. They needed to take a break, so the two of them stepped into the backyard, stripped down to nothing and then slipped into the hot tub for a little cool down. Neither was used to having their own hot tub on demand still, so they were

doing everything they could to get used to the new home. It had really been a massive adjustment, and even now, the whole layout still hadn't fully settled in almost anyone's mind. There were simply so many rooms, so many corridors, so many things to keep straight. Ash had joked around that they should have the layout on a map in their dosing app, but Niko and Lexi had immediately put their foot down, saying that it was "sensitive information" and that there was no way they were making that information accessible to anyone with an internet connection.

They'd been in the hot tub for about five minutes, sitting mostly in silence, enjoying the warm water, before Ash spoke. "Do you think I should start carrying a gun?"

Fi turned her head in surprise. "Where's this coming from?"

"Just a little bit ago, you were saying that you were disappointed Andy wouldn't carry a gun himself. I've been thinking about that. Maybe I should reconsider Lexi's offer to train me into shooting. Andy's the love of my life, but he's... he can definitely be too optimistic, too trusting of people. I know basically Niko or Lexi are going to be around looking out for his well-being any time we're out in public, but..." She sighed. "I dunno. Maybe I'm just wonderin' if that's not going to be enough. Maybe we should insist all the wives are packing."

"If you want to have a gun on you, Ash," Fiona said, "I can respect that, but I'm not keen on the idea of having one on me all the time. There's always the chance of the weapon going off, or of you shooting yourself instead of your attacker. Eventually I'm sure they'll convince me to learn how to shoot, how not to be a complete klutz with it, but having one around all the time? I'm just not up for that. I think each girl should decide for herself, but I just wouldn't feel safe having a gun on me all the time. Leave the weapons to those completely trained to handle them, you know?"

"Mmmm," Ash said. "I can respect that. But I also feel like maybe two armed guards around Andy isn't quite enough and having a few more wouldn't do anyone any harm. Besides, I'd look like a bad ass with a gun in my hands."

"That you probably would, Ash," Fi said. "I think I'd look like a soccer mom trying to front and fail on every level."

"Nah, you'd look like that actress you look like in the film where she loses her memory and fucks shit up with Sam Jackson," Ash teased. "But if you don't want to carry a piece, nobody's going to tell you that you have to."

"That's good," Fi said, before the two sat in the silence of the hot tub for a couple more minutes. Eventually, however, Fi broke the silence again. "You really think I look like her?"

"Want me to prove it?" Ash giggled. "Say 'chefs do that.'"

Both women devolved into laughs before grabbing towels, drying off as they headed back into the hidden basement of the building. When they got back to Ash's studio, they found that Nicolette had left lunch for both of them, as well as a couple of cocktails. "How *does* she know everything in the house that needs doing, *and* do it with nobody *seeing*?"

"It's the mark of a really great housekeeper."

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Like I said, there isn't all that much to talk about with me and Lauren. We got along fine, but even from the onset, I could tell there was someone else in the picture who would figure into things later. Yeah, I wouldn't know Taylor's name for months, but her presence? Sure, she figured into that time like you wouldn't believe.

We had fun with expanding Andy's mind a little bit, though. I'd figured out we weren't

his first threesome early on, but when he told me it'd been a long while since he'd gotten laid, I knew we had some major rebuilding of confidence to do, and Lauren, bless her heart, hadn't really been with men much, despite going both ways, so I sort of had to do the overselling for both of us.

It wasn't too hard, convincing Andy that he was a sort of sex god. I mean, in most ways, I'm not really exaggerating with that. He wasn't exceptional at first, but he was still good, damn good, and his willingness to learn made up for any shortcomings he might have had at first. You know that about Andy – if you give him a task and tell him it's important, he will do absolutely anything to get good at it, as good as he can be.

I mean, the man already ate pussy like a champ, but everything else? We got there soon enough. He was a very eager student, and each time, whether it was the vaccine running through my veins mixed with his DNA or just the fact that he was hellbent on learning everything he could about both me and Lauren meant we both felt pretty loved up early on.

I felt a little bit more possessive about Andy than Lauren did, but it wasn't obvious to him, I guess, even when I was at my worst. No, telling you about early days with Lauren, you're not going to learn a whole lot about me and Andy and how we got along.

Which is why we're going to skip forward a little bit and talk about the next member of our family to join, Niko. Don't grin at me like that. *You're* the one who's going to figure out how much of what I tell you you're going to want to include in your book. It might well be none of this whole next section, but hey, that's for you to decide, not me.

So, the day before Niko showed up, Lauren and I got to meet Phil for the first time, although at that point, we didn't really know how deep Phil's ties to the whole thing went. I thought he seemed like a guy well deep in the know, but it would be months and months before we found out how much Phil had to do with the Quaranteam vaccine.

Still, during Andy and Phil's conversation, we got a hint of the bigger picture to come, with Phil talking about maybe as many as five million people dead by the end of it, which, we both know now was a gross underestimation, but I like to think he was trying to keep Andy from losing his shit too much while still being able to talk to someone about what was going on. That was also the day that both the former President and the former Vice President collapsed, and early in the wee hours of the next morning, the Speaker of the House was sworn in as President Pro Tempore.

Later that day, there was a knock on the door and Niko was dropped onto our lap. While she wasn't in quite as bad a state as Piper was, Niko had clearly been given her dose much earlier than her arrival on our doorstep, because she wasn't thinking entirely clearly. Not so poorly that her judgement was impaired, but she was *not* in the mood to wait if you follow my meaning. She basically had her way with Andy in the common area of the tiny old condo, and we had to carry her up to bed afterwards.

In the middle of the night, she sucked Andy off, and in the early hours of the morning, she fucked him while he was still sleeping. It took three full dosages of Andy's love before she felt like the fog around her brain was starting to clear.

The very first thing I realized about Niko was that she was *quite* a bit younger than Andy. I mean, I'm a decade younger than him, and she's half a decade younger than me, so while Niko assured us she liked older and more mature men, I also knew it was going to be one of those sticking points with Andy for a while. She was 22 at the time, but even still, that might as well have been an entire generation for Andy.

It didn't hurt that she was *insanely* gorgeous either. I don't know if she's told you about

her heritage, but she's half Lakota, a quarter Japanese and a quarter Mexican. It gives her this exotic beauty while still making her deeply American, unlike me and Lauren. She was chill and easy-going and very approachable and friendly.

Within the first day or two, though, I was pretty sure Niko was lying to us.

I didn't think they were big lies, or important lies – well, important to *us* I suppose – but I had a strong sense that she wasn't being honest about what she did for the Air Force, or how she'd come to join our family. The last thing I wanted was for our family to be built on a foundation of lies, so about a week or so after she'd joined the family, I asked Niko to go out and take a walk with me.

We'd sort of gotten the impression from Phil that as long as we stayed away from other people, now that we were vaccinated, it wouldn't be too bad for us to take walks around the neighborhood, and I wanted to get Niko away from Andy so I could size her up and sort of lay down the law a bit.

"Sure," Niko said. "Let's walk for a bit. I could do with getting out of the house."

We waited until evening, so it was cooling off and the heat wouldn't bake us, and we took a flashlight with us, at Andy's insistence. He offered to come with us, but I told him I wanted to have a bit of one-on-one time with the new girl.

The first couple of blocks, we sort of walked in silence, until she spoke first. "Am I in trouble, Ash?" Niko said, a wry grin on her face.

"You tell me, soldier."

"Airman."

"Fine," I said, correcting myself. "You tell me, airman. Why do I get the feeling you're not being entirely truthful with us? You said you'd read one of Andy's books, but you said you didn't really remember it, and I'm thinking that's 'cause you'd never read it at all. So why lie about that? To boost his ego up a bit?"

"To make him feel like I'm not just a stowaway dropped in his lap for him to take care of," she sighed. "You know he's basically got the pick of any woman on the planet that he wants, don't you?"

I remember thinking to myself how odd that sounded at the time, and decided she was being figurative rather than literal. "You're gorgeous, you're smart, you're funny – why *wouldn't* he want you?"

"I'm *Air Force*," she said. "Lots of guys refuse to date military girls. They say we're too uptight, too unpredictable, too emotionally unavailable."

"You hear *Andy* say any of that shit yet?"

"Not *yet* but—"

"And you're not *gonna*," I said to her, "because Andy doesn't think like that. If anything, he's embarrassed *for* you, that you're stuck with *him*."

"He's a level 5, Ash. That means he's somebody really important."

I laughed at her, shaking my head. "He's a *fluke*. He got that status by doing a random stranger a favor, and the level 5 status was his reward. I mean, I get the impression that he might have some friends with a certain level of clout, but if you're worried about him thinking you're uptight, you can disabuse him of that notion any time you like. I mean, didn't you take that test we all took?"

"Yes ma'am," Niko said to me.

"Call me 'ma'am' again, Niko, and I'll stab you in your sleep," I chuckled at her. "So how did you and Andy end up?"

“That’s just it – I don’t entirely *know*. I was supposed to be paired up with somebody else, but when we got to that man’s house, he was already dead. So they brought me back to the base and told me to find another option.”

I could tell there was some other part of the story she wasn’t telling, but I didn’t want to push her. Not yet.

“Do you *regret* being saddled with Andy?”

“*Fuck no*,” she told me, suddenly very worried that I’d thought she wasn’t into our shared man. “Look, Ash, Andy seems like a great guy, and I don’t regret being paired up with him at all, but I figured it was best not to tell him he wasn’t my first choice, because he’d probably get up in his head about it.”

“I doubt that he would,” I sighed, “but I suppose you’re right in that there’s nothing to be gained by telling him that information. But that’s not my biggest concern with you.”

“Oh no?” Niko asked me. “Then what is?”

“Look, right now, the whole world is in one colossal free fall. I heard you talking with Andy the other day about how the numbers we got from his friend Phil were probably underestimates, and that we were looking at loads of men being dead before this whole thing stabilized. Now, I haven’t been with Andy all that long, but I have to tell you... I would die for that man. I don’t know if it’s the drugs, or the confined spaces, or some unique biological quirk that the two of us have, but I am head over heels for him, and I intend to marry him and bear his children as soon as things have settled down a bit. He makes me feel like nobody I’ve ever known, and that means it’s my job to look out for him.”

“What about Lauren?”

“Lauren likes Andy, and she enjoys fucking him, but I wouldn’t say she’s completely *in love* with him. Maybe they’ll get there; probably not though. And that’s okay. It means there’s a sort of established pecking order. I’m going to end up being his wife and she’s going to end up being one of the house concubines,” I laughed, as Niko laughed with me. “And now we’ve got to figure out what to do with you.”

“Hate to say it, but I think you *have* to keep me,” she teased.

I smirked, rolling my eyes. “You know what I’m getting at.”

“I do, Ash,” Niko sighed. “And I hate to say it, but I think I’m more on your side of things than Lauren’s.”

I stopped walking for a moment, the two of us on a foot bridge that crossed over the nearby freeway. “Why do you hate to say that?”

“Because it puts us in conflict, doesn’t it?”

“Does it?” I asked.

“He can’t have *two* wives, now, can he?”

“Why not?” I asked her.

“I’m pretty sure it’s against the law,” Niko said with a soft laugh.

“I’m pretty sure it’s not *going* to be against the law before the end of the year,” I told her.

“You think?”

“Men are falling like dominos, and the only workable solution they have is a vaccine that doubles as a sexually transmitted disease. They’re going to need to repopulate the country, and if they’re saddling all these women up with so few men, laws are going to *have* to change,” I told her, tugging on the top of my workout pants, making sure they were above my ass crack. “Do you want to be his wife?”

She looked down at the freeway, completely empty as it was, and tapped her palm against

the fence awning covering the bridge. “I think I do. You know in the first day of getting to know him, I basically had to tell him to stop asking questions so I could get a few of my own in edgewise. He was completely invested in getting to know me, and learning what it would take to make me happy in our new arrangement. Can you believe th—well, of course *you* can believe that. You’ve probably gotten used to it.”

“Andy’s focus is a hard thing to get used to, but you’ll get there eventually. And you’ll learn that he’s a hell of a storyteller, once you find the right buttons to push and the right knobs to twist to coax them out of him. It’s not that he’s unwilling to talk about himself; he’d just rather get to know you for a while until it feels like you’re genuinely interested in learning more about him for a change.”

“I’m interested in learning more about him *now*,” she said to me. “Are his books any good? Would I like them?”

“They’re not for everyone, but I’ve come around to them. Of course, my older brother is a fiend for them, and he’s been trying to get me to read them forever, but you’ll know pretty early on whether or not there’s any appeal to you or not.”

“If there isn’t, is he going to be mad?”

“Mad?” I giggled a little bit, shaking my head. “No, he’s not going to be mad. A little disappointed, maybe, but not as mad as he’s going to be if you lie to him about liking them when you don’t. Give ‘em a read, and don’t let me make up your mind for you. And give it a few books. You can tell with the early ones that he’s still sort of finding his footing in long form storytelling, but there’s potential all over the place. But that’s not the only thing you’re hiding from us, is it, Niko?”

Niko looked at me with a wry smile that made her seem much older than her 22 years. “You’re *very* good at reading people, aren’t you, Ash?”

“When I started to realize we were going to be getting more women in this house, I realized that Andy’s going to need someone looking out for him, making sure nobody’s taking advantage of him. His own best friend told me to protect him, so that’s what I’m going to do. That means I need to know what’s going on here, Niko.”

She sighed, and we started walking again. “What I’m about to tell you, I want you to very closely think about keeping to yourself, at least for the time being, okay?”

“Niko, we’re both bonded to Andy, which means we’re bonded to *each other* as well. I’m not about to break that trust lightly.”

“With men dying off so much, it means existing men are going to become, well, a *resource*. That means they’re now in high risk of being kidnapped, like, *all the time*. As such, it means men are going to need someone who are, essentially, bodyguards. That’s me. I’m going to be Andy’s bodyguard.”

“Quite the self-imposed role you’ve got there.”

“Not *entirely* self-imposed,” Niko said. “The Air Force is starting to think about these things now, and like you told me, Andy’s got friends in high places, so I don’t think you’d be surprised to learn that maybe one of his friends gave me a nudge in his direction.”

“You know what it’s going to mean, being his bodyguard? There might come a point where you’re going to have to choose between being his wife and being his protector.”

Niko shook her head. “It’s not even a choice – the results are the same. If he’s not alive, neither are any of us. So Operation: Protect Your Man is always going to be at the top of my priority list. But I don’t think calling attention to that in Andy’s eyes is going to do anyone any favors, do you?”

“Doesn’t he deserve to know?”

Niko sighed at me. “I don’t think he *should* know. Look, we’re probably going to have to add a bunch more women to this little pod of ours, and maybe one of them will eventually be more focused on being his bodyguard than his partner, but until then, I have to do both, but I don’t want him losing sleep over it. I made my choice. The person who nudged me this way, they’ve had more on their plate than I think anyone I’ve ever met in my life, but they still wanted to look out for their friends, to make sure that even in this whirlwind of chaos and madness, they could still try and keep a few people important to them safe. But I don’t want to burden Andy with that knowledge when there’s nothing he can really do about it. Let him enjoy his life, and enjoy us, y’know? So we can enjoy him.”

I nodded. “I suppose it doesn’t hurt not telling him. I can understand your reasoning, not wanting to worry him about these things.”

“What about you?” she said. “What are *you* hiding from *me* that I ought to know?”

I laughed, rolling my eyes at her. “I’m not hiding anything.”

“Everybody’s hiding *something*, Ash.”

“Just checking, you’re into girls as well, right?”

Niko licked her lips with a wicked little grin. “We’re not doing it in public, but yeah, I am, and I will make you squirm so hard, your freckles start blushing.”

“You think Andy can handle three women at once?”

She slapped me on the ass, and I remember squeaking when she did. “If he can’t, we’ll have to get him there pretty fast,” she told me. “We’re probably going to get a little bit of a break, but pretty soon, they’re going to unleash the floodgates, and then Andy’s gonna have women all fucking over him.”

“Here’s the thing, though, Niko. We’re gonna need to make sure we’re collectively watching out for our guy, naïve and kindhearted as he can be.”

We were walking through what should’ve been a lush green park but was instead mostly just brown and tan dried out grass, the drought having done a real number on the local flora.

“What are we talking about, Ash?”

“I’m talking a pact, you and me, always agreeing to be completely honest and open with each other, never lying to one another, telling each other everything, and together making sure our man doesn’t leap before either he or we look,” I told her. “But that means we have to have zero secrets between the two of us.” We walked down the path a little further before I continued. “Look, I like you, Niko. You’re a straight-shooter who speaks her mind, and yeah, you’re way younger than Andy probably would’ve picked on his own, but that’s probably *good* for him. He’s going to need that youthful energy around him to keep him going when things get truly bleak, and I’m pretty sure we’re not too far from those days.”

“How do you figure?”

“Indirectly, we know a few people who have died, but directly, it hasn’t hit us yet,” I told her. “We’re not going to remain that lucky forever. This plague’s gonna take someone important to one of us sooner or later. My dad, one of my brothers, Andy’s best friend... even with all of us being as careful as we can, someone somewhere’s going to slip, and then...” I snapped my fingers. “Like that, the whole world’s going to change. I don’t know who it is we’re going to lose, but we’re going to lose somebody. And we’re going to have to hold together more than we’ve ever done in our entire lives, because whoever it is, that person’s just going to want to give up, and it’s our job not to let that happen.”

Niko let out a slight whistle of admiration. “You’ve been thinking about all of this a lot,

haven't you?"

"The way I think about it is like this – right now, if you think about it like a hierarchy of needs, Andy's worrying about the base – making sure we've got food, got toilet paper, a safe place to sleep, that kind of thing. That means we have to worry about the higher-level stuff – his safety, our collective sense of family and intimacy, his confidence, with Andy taking care of the very top end as well, the sense of trying to do the best in the world that we can. I like to think of Andy as a great big Boy Scout – he's always looking to see the best in people, but sometimes that means people with less than noble intentions can get the better of him. He tell you the story of how he got the two cats yet?"

Niko laughed and shook her head. "There's a story there?"

"So this is several years back, and I'm sure he tells the story much better than I do, but he was considering getting a cat again. He'd had a cat back in college, but it had died just after he'd moved out to California, and he'd been without a cat for a few years, so he was planning on getting a new one, when Lesser Phil calls him—"

"Wait, *Lesser Phil*?"

I giggled. "Andy's got two friends out here both named Phil, but they can't *both* be *called* Phil, otherwise how the hell would anyone know which one he was talking about? So the one Andy hangs out with the most gets to just be Phil, and the other one is Phil the Younger which devolved into Phil the Lesser which devolved into Lesser Phil."

"Oh my god," Niko said, holding her hand to her mouth to try and quell her giggles. "Even his *stories* have stories!"

"Anyway, Lesser Phil calls Andy up and says, 'Hey, we found a couple of motherless kittens in our backyard. Do you want to just take them in?' And Andy, big heart that he is, says sure, he'll be right over."

"That's not much of a story."

I held up my hand. "Patience, young one. When Andy gets over there, he asks Lesser Phil where the kittens are, and LP says they're in the backyard, curled up near the patio deck."

"Let me guess – not there when Andy goes to look for them?"

"Nope, and what's worse, he can hear the most pathetic mewling coming from *underneath* the deck."

"Oh no!" Niko said.

"So Andy says they can't just leave the kittens under there, so he pries a few boards off LP's deck and crawls underneath. This is the part I wish Andy was telling you the story, because the way he spins it, it sounds like he's crawling through the fields of the dead under that deck, with racoon skeletons and wasp nests and what the hell else was down there, but eventually, after crawling on his belly like twenty feet, he comes across these two tiny little kittens, huddled together, pressed up against the foundation of the house. He grabs them one at a time, tucks them inside of his shirt so they're warm and nestled up against his chest, and he slowly crawls his way back out from under the deck."

"Awwww!"

"As soon as he gets out, Lesser Phil asks him if he's gonna fix the damage Andy's just done to the deck by prying a couple of boards off."

"He didn't!"

"And Andy, man that he is, sighs, tells Lesser Phil to go and get him a box and a towel to put the kittens in, as well as a saucer full of milk, and while the kittens are getting comfortable in the box, Andy spends another half an hour prying out the bent nails, lining up the wooden planks,



renailing them to the frame work and applying sealant over the new nails. Then he takes the box and heads home to adopt his two new kittens. And that's how he adopted Muninn and Huginn. But here's the thing – when Andy told it to me, he admitted he was pretty sure the kittens were under the deck when Lesser Phil called him, and that LP just didn't want to do what it took to get them out himself. But Andy wasn't mad, because he got two wonderfully loving cats in the end. Me? If Lesser Phil had asked me to fix his deck after getting the kittens out from under it, I'd have probably smacked him in the face with the board.”

“Yeah, I don't blame you one bit.”

We stopped over by a dried up creek bed and I stepped close for a moment, sliding my hand along the back of her head, pulling her lips to mine as I kissed her, trying to put on my best boss bitch attitude, and sure enough, I felt her sort of melt in a little bit into me, her tits pressed up against mine, and before I knew it, her hand was on my ass and we were trading tongues.

It was our first kiss, hers and mine, and the heat level... whew. I'm getting a little flustered now just thinking about it. The initial chemistry was somewhere a million miles off the charts and when we pulled back from each other, we both started giggling like we were a couple of teenagers who were afraid their parents might catch them.

“Wow!” Niko said to me, her hands still holding onto my hips. “I, uh, my relationship history is very short, but between you and Andy... I feel like all of this is fucking next level. I was actually more worried about *you* not liking me than *Andy*. With him, at least I knew I was baseline compatible, but you were a shot in the dark, and... well, you're fucking *hot*, Ash.”

I remember blushing just a little bit. I'd fooled around some with girls at uni, but I'd never had a real relationship with a woman before, and here I was, about to enter into the partnership of a lifetime.

“You and me, Niko, we make a pact right here,” I told her. “You and me, we're going to be everything Andy ever needs, so anyone else who comes along, that's just gravy, but you and me, we're going to the bedrock of this man's heart and soul. That means we're gonna have to be better than best friends; we're gonna have to be soulmates, as much as we are with Andy. That means even if we're keeping things from Andy for his own good, you and I never have any secrets from each other. We'll keep each other in check, and we'll be the backbone our man's gonna need to make it through the rest of this crisis. One of us stumbles, the other one'll be there to pick her up. You and me, Niko. The first two wives.”

She hugged me close and laughed softly. “Which secret do you want to talk about first, that it was Phil Marcos who nudged me to Andy, that you were only the second girl I've ever kissed, or that Andy was only the second guy I've ever fucked?”

I giggled a little bit. “I knew I liked Phil for some reason. Now that I think about it, I bet he's the guy the doctor was telling me about.”

“What doctor?” she asked.

\* \* \* \* \*

“She and I walked around for a couple of hours, and I told her the story about Dr. McKenna and how he'd told me that one of Andy's friends was looking out for him, but that any of the women assigned to him were going to have to get used to being a bit more aggressive and reassuring than they'd been before,” Ash said as she stepped away from the canvas again. “You can stretch again. Break time.”

“You and Niko against the world, huh?” Fiona asked her.

Ash smiled and shrugged a little. “I think we both knew there were going to be other wives to add into the mix eventually, but I wanted to set things straight with Niko first. To make sure she had Andy’s best interests at heart, I needed to give her someone to unburden her conscience to. Besides, you knew Andy longer than any of us. Was Phil wrong?”

Fiona shook her head. “Not in the least. In fact, that piece of advice Dr. McKenna gave you probably was the best piece of advice anyone could’ve ever given you in dealing with our man Andy. Back when we were in college, I was always fond of telling Andy, ‘You always believe the best about everyone but yourself.’ I’d hoped he’d grow out of it, but I think at this point, I just have to accept that it’s part of who Andy is.”

“It’s not so bad,” Ash said. “He stays remarkably humble and that’s a wonderful thing to have in a partner.”

“You going to include me and the rest of the fiancées in the Ride or Die club?”

“If I wasn’t, bitch, do you think I would’ve told you about it? What kind of dopey bitch do you take me for?”

The two women shared a good laugh over that.

## **Part Five – “Giggling Deranged Lunatics”**

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

“How long is this painting of yours going to take?” Fiona asked Ash as they began to get settled for the next section of painting. “I swear, we’ve been at this for hours and hours.”

“It takes as long as it takes,” Aisling shot back. “You want me to accidentally paint your ass too big because you moved funny while I was working on painting it?”

“I’ll have you know; I have an *amazing* ass for a woman my age,” Fiona sniffed, sounding perhaps a little hurt.

“You have any amazing ass for a woman of *any* age, Fi, so don’t get your panties in twist over it.”

“I’m not *wearing*—”

“Yeah yeah yeah, you know what I meant,” Ash laughed. “I have to ask. Was this about what you expected when Andy invited you to come out and join him? A giant harem of beautiful and witty women, all of whom love Andy but all of whom are totally doing their own thing a lot of the time?”

“I wasn’t entirely sure *what* to expect, y’know?” Fi sighed. “I don’t think I ever *stopped* being in love with Andy, no matter what I tried to tell myself when he and I weren’t speaking to one another. He was being dumb, I was being dumber, and neither one of us wanted to be the one who flinched and admitted it. I tried dating a cop for a while.”

“How’d that work out?”

“Didn’t,” Fi said. “He wasn’t a bad man, but he was... he was sort of the inverse Andy, I guess. He was used to looking for the bad in everyone and everything, convinced that everything everywhere was just one bad minute away from turning sour and going wrong. He was the most pessimistic man I ever met. Good heart, but just always prepping for the worst in everyone, and... that just gets... it gets fucking *boring*. So, one night while we’re out at dinner, and Tim, that was the cop’s name, he’s telling me how he thinks our waiter’s probably high on coke or something because of how he was acting, and I just up and decide I’m done with him, so I put the key to his apartment on the table between us, I get up and I walk out, not even saying a word as I go.”

“Damn, Fi, that sounds pretty cold.”

“It was,” she chuckled. “But I think he actually appreciated me finally living up to his expectations. Anyway, we’re not talking about me...”

“We are, actually,” Aisling said. “I want to get at least a little bit of information about you in exchange for me telling you all this stuff about me. And you didn’t really answer my question – what did you expect when you got the invite from Andy?”

“I knew a bit about DuoHalo and I’d heard about the Quaranteam serum from a confidential informant inside the Chiefs of Staff, so I wasn’t entirely unfamiliar with what was going on, even if it seemed a little bit science-fiction-y,” Fiona said. “But Andy explained himself pretty well in the message. I mean, did he show you the invite video he sent me?”

“No! I’d love to see that if you’ve still got it.”

“Hang on a second, lemme see if it’s still in my email,” Fiona said, moving over to pick up her phone. “I bet it is. I’m kind of a pack rat about these kinds of things. Ah! Here it is. Turn on the TV in here and I’ll throw it to that screen so you’re not watching on my tiny ass phone.”

A few seconds later, the television in Aisling’s studio had sprung to life, connected to Fiona’s phone and had an image of Andy sitting in his writer’s room upstairs, long before they’d discovered the hidden extra floor. It was only recorded a month and change ago, but it felt like it

had been an eternity instead. He looked a little disheveled, and it made Fi grin a little, knowing now that he'd been more nervous about recording this video than any of the other ones.

"Hey Fi. Long time no talk." He sighed, looking down at his hands before looking back up at the camera on his laptop. "How do I even start this? Where can I possibly begin? I'm sorry, okay? I can't even remember what it was we were fighting about, but I miss you, and I've been too fucking stupid and too fucking proud to get over myself and just call you, even after you sent me that Facebook friend invite. You know me, I hate confrontation. Heh. And yet, here I am, reaching out, out of the blue. I don't know how much you know about this whole DuoHalo virus, but the government *has* a solution for it. It doesn't work the way you would expect it to, though. It's... it's like a sexually transmitted disease that links women to one man, and I know how ridiculous and crazy that sounds, but here we are. I know it's real, because I'm already paired up with a handful of women.

"Now, I don't know what your situation is, so maybe you're married, or maybe you've got a boyfriend, or maybe you just don't want to leave D.C. still, but maybe, I guess, maybe there's a chance we could try and rekindle what we used to have. I can't promise you exclusivity, but I guess nobody can really do that anymore, because it sounds like the new status quo is going to be one man to a dozen or so women, and, yes, I know exactly how ridiculous all that sounds. I've been trying to be smart and adept about the women I let into my life, although this Oracle system they have is apparently very helpful too. I think you'd like all the women I'm in relationships with now.

"Fuck, what am I trying to say here? This is, like, my fourth attempt to record this, and I'm still just fucking it up like I have every other version. Look. I still have feelings for you, shit, I'm probably still in love with you, if I'm being candid, and the idea that I could help keep you safe but that my own personal pride stopped me from doing it? That's ridiculous and I'd be ashamed of myself if I let it stay that way. But I need you to know there's other women here that I love too, and while I get that it's super weird, it's where we are. That's where society is. But I want to make sure you're safe. That's important to me, okay? Regardless of all the other shit, you're *important* to me. Your safety. *That's* important.

"So, if you want to, the Air Force will relocate you from D.C. here to northern California, where you and I could be partnered. Maybe you're tired of Washington. I know your reporting for the last few years has certainly felt that way, at least a little bit. It's a lot to take in. I'm sure the whole thing actually feels a little bit insane, and I get that, but please, please, *please* take it seriously, okay? If you think there's a chance we could work on a long-term scale, and you're not with some other man, consider what I'm offering. I know it means having to put up with me for the rest of your life, or at least the foreseeable future, but...

"... I think a lot about our time together back in college, Fi. And you really were my first true love. I've got some other women I'm in love with now too, and I get that that's going to seem weird. Shit, think of how weird it is for me. I went like a decade with nobody wanting to fuck me, and now a bunch of women fuck me not only for their survival, but also saying that I'm the best fuck of their lives."

Andy laughed on the screen looking down at his hands.

"You remember that one song that was stupidly popular when we were younger? The one about sunscreen? There's a line in that, and I don't remember exactly how it goes, but it's about how as you get older, the more important it becomes to hang onto people who remember you when you were young."

He looked back up at the camera again.

“I remember when we were young and invincible, a couple of kids convinced we were going to take on the world and win. I remember us sitting on the roof of that house you’d rented, watching the stars until they set and the sun began to rise up on us, just because we’d never done it before. I remember how much you laughed when I tried to play ‘Jack & Diane’ for the first time on guitar, and how you told me I shouldn’t give up my day job. And I remember the time we sat and read each other’s work, my short story and your in-depth article, and how impressed I was by your writing, and all the kind things you had to say about my silly little story.

“Come. Don’t come. Just let me know you’re safe and sound from this horrible virus, Fi, and know that if the only thing stopping you from coming is me not asking you to come, well, I’m asking, okay? I’m not so proud that I can’t admit I was wrong, I *was* wrong, and I should’ve reached out, and it shouldn’t have taken a once-in-a-lifetime epidemic to get me to swallow my pride, but here we are. So, uh, be safe, and maybe I’ll see you soon. Still love you. Bye.”

The image of Andy tapping the stop button on his laptop hung on the screen for a minute before Fiona wiped it away, letting the screen turn black, hoping it would distract a little from the single tear she was trying to wipe away and hide. But when she glanced over, the smile on Aisling’s face told her that she’d seen it, so Fi offered a little smile. “Sorry. I haven’t watched that since I was on the plane flying to California with Moira in tow. I’d forgotten how eloquent he can be when he’s trying, and especially when he’s scared.”

“I keep telling you, Fi,” Ash said, wiping her own eyes, finding them a little damp. “You’re basically the only member of the entire family whom *he* chose, no strings or conditions attached, no outside forces influencing him, or even other girls in the family. That puts you in a league entirely on your own.”

“I don’t think I’m any better than you, Ash,” Fiona laughed. “Just a little bit older.”

“You think he loves one of us more than the other? I don’t. I don’t think he’s capable of that, differentiating levels of love, not consciously at least,” Ash said. “He’s just following his feelings. I don’t feel any lesser than you. Never have. Don’t expect I ever will.”

“Good, because if he ever thought one of us thought we were better than any of the rest of us, you know we’d never hear the end of it from him.”

“So, if I’m First Among Equals, you’re Most Senior Among Equals.”

Fiona laughed, moving to get back into place. “Something like that. You ready to keep going?”

\* \* \* \* \*

When we heard we were being relocated, none of us were quite sure what to make of it. The word had come from Phil that they knew we were going to need more space, so they were relocating us to someplace bigger. I think around that time, at least I’d figured out things were way worse than Phil was letting on. I’m pretty sure Andy knew too, but we were putting on brave faces, clinging to the notion that if we stuck together, we’d get through it together. I tried not to ask Niko about it, because Niko had promised to tell me everything and I... I didn’t think I was ready to know just how badly fucked we were just yet.

But Phil had come by and told us to be prepared to move, and so in typical Andy fashion, we went home and figured out everything we would possibly need if we were to move and got to packing. It was late August, and with the news that we were being moved, Phil had upped how bad he was describing things, making it sound like we were looking at nearly half the male US population being dead.

He was still underselling it.

When Niko and Andy came back from their meeting with Phil, Niko told me that Andy had figured out she and Phil knew each other. I asked her what the giveaway was, and she said it was the fact that Phil had let her call him *Mister Marcos* without correcting her, even though she worked at the research lab. That was all it took for her charade to come tumbling down. She was surprised Andy wasn't mad at her; I wasn't. I'd even told her that he wouldn't be.

Phil had made it sound like they were just going to come get us immediately that day in August, but it turned out it was a few weeks later, in September, when they finally showed up to relocate us. Us girls had basically just packed our suitcases back up and some of the other stuff we'd brought with us, and Andy had thrown most of his stuff into his large suitcase, as well as breaking down his desktop computer, and packing up food, water and litter for the cats. We had some excess stuff that we had to load into Eric's car, but it was just him, Lily and Jenny at that point, so there was room for a bit of Andy's things in Eric's car that Andy just couldn't bear to leave. Like, you'd better *believe* he brought that box of advance reader copies with him, ha ha. If just *one* of them got him all *this*? Can you imagine what an entire box must be worth?

We got into Andy's car and drove up 680 past Pleasanton, Dublin and San Ramon, and I remember laughing that there was a Dublin in California, which I'd never really noticed, since I'd been more of a peninsula girl rather than living out on the eastern side of the Bay. A little bit north of San Ramon, we turned west and started headed up Bollinger Canyon Road, working our way up into the hills until we turned onto Bear Tree Road, which eventually brought us to the entrance point of New Eden.

Even at the time, I realized that the pavement on Bear Tree Road was very new, and almost all the buildings behind the military checkpoint gate screamed recent development. Nothing in the area felt like it could be more than a decade or so old, and even then, that was being generous. I haven't really been able to dig into it that much, but the satellite data on Google Maps for the area when I last looked was marked 2017, and it only had about three mansions in the area, with the little single building off to the side that I know *now* is the Quaranteam lab. It was all still technically San Ramon land, I guess, up until it was finally zoned as New Eden in September or October.

You've seen the drive it takes to get up here now. We're nestled in obscurity, completely off the beaten path, and yet, not *really* that far from anything. It's only an hour and change to San Francisco if the traffic is cooperating. I'm not surprised nobody knew it was going up, even before people were locked in their homes. Once it needed to expand, construction happened at warp speed, because the workers were given immunity from DuoHalo themselves just to make sure everything zipped along nonstop.

It's amazing how much incentive it is to cut to the front of the line when your life's on the line. And with New Eden, they built Little Eden, the sort of adjunct area for support staff and local services, not quite mansions but great houses nonetheless. I've asked Phil about it, and almost all the manors of New Eden were like 70-80% of the way done, but all work had stopped because of Covid and DuoHalo. But the idea of making the staff commute further meant the people working on Quaranteam would be at risk, and so the Air Force bundled them up nice and tight.

I remember driving up to the mansion thinking it was insane, that even split between the two households – Andy's and Eric's – the place had more than enough space, and I remember suspecting that they were going to add two or three more households to the mansion, because it was way too much space for just us. That was around the point when Eric made a joke about how

the place clearly wasn't big enough for our *two* households. And then we found out Eric wasn't staying with us, but, in fact, had the mansion next door, which sort of blew everyone's minds.

Now, keep in mind, I think we were all sort of expecting someone to jump out and yell "Ha ha! Fooled you!" at any minute while we were being given the tour, but that never happened. In fact, Andy and I split our attention during the tour a little bit, because while I was busy reveling in the fact that the house came with its own pool and hot tub, Andy was doing *math* and not liking the numbers he was coming up with. Major Peters, our tour guide, had told him that there were twelve bedrooms in the house, so not enough that every woman he would eventually have could have her own bedroom, which I had *totally* glossed over, but Andy was already starting to panic a little bit, thinking about how many women he was going to be sallied up with.

A little bit later into the tour, Major Peters told Andy that men were being paired up with between twelve and fifteen women, but that more was definitely an option. We were also told that once we'd passed our 'induction quarantine,' we would be free to move about New Eden as much as we wanted, and without any sort of protective or safety gear. There were restaurants, a movie theater, a bookstore... we were eager as hell to get out of the house but were told it was going to be three weeks of isolating inside the mansion. In fact, food would be delivered to us, so even the staff – Jenny, Katie and Nicolette – weren't allowed to leave the grounds either. I've never been entirely sure of the reasoning for it, but I think I heard Phil say at one point it was to ensure we weren't spreading Covid instead of DuoHalo.

I remember being introduced to the staff and immediately knowing there was going to be some initial weirdness we were going to have to overcome. So, first thing's first – Phil had told Nicolette to call herself Yvette and to put on an atrocious French accent, because he wanted to see how long it would take Andy to figure it out. Nicolette was *terrified* we were going to be pissed at her when we found out, but we laughed about it like any reasonable people would. (You get the Clue movie reference, right? Just checking.)

And while it's just the two of us, let me just say that if I had to pick a member our household to swap bodies with, holy shit would it be Nicolette in a fucking *heartbeat*. I am so fucking jealous of her tits that I don't even want to admit it, but I can't fucking hide it either, they're so fucking ridiculously perfect. I'm very glad she's cool about playing with other members of the household, because I will confess, I've had some fun with her more than a few times, sometimes with Andy around and a couple of times without. They're not the *biggest* tits in the family – that honor, I think, is *always* going to go to Hannah, because, well, *dayum*, but I'd say that Nicolette's are the *ideal*. Large but not overwhelmingly so, perfectly shaped, perfect ratio of nipple to breastflesh... they even jiggle great! I mean, fuck *her*, right? Heh. Anyway, getting settled in with Nicolette was easy. Even before the serum, she was the perfect definition of volunteering sexual submissive.

Andy was more than a little nervous about getting settled with Katie and Jenny, though, because he was suddenly stepping into someone else's *marriage*. Katie and Jenny had been married for a couple of years at that point, I think, although I'm not entirely sure. And they'd told the government they were both bisexual, which, theoretically might not be a lie *now*? But it probably was at the time. Katie was a strict lesbian, and didn't have any attraction to any man, but Jenny swung both ways, although Andy sort of figured that out immediately. That's one of his secret superpowers – he's so damn nice that people just *tell* him things. He told me he was talking to Jenny and Jenny just blurted it out at him.

Anyway, Katie got mad at Jenny, because they'd agree to hide it from Andy, and she was

just going to sort of fake it or consider it a job task, but Jenny said she didn't feel right deceiving Andy, since he was being so nice to them. Andy wasn't mad at them about considering lying to him, and told them if they wanted to leave, he'd okay that. Of course, he also knew that they'd been injected with the Quaranteam serum about two or three days earlier, and that it was probably starting to get to them, so he just laid all his cards down on the table, gave them their options, and told them whatever they wanted, he'd endorse.

The plan, the *original* plan, was that he'd never deliver to one of the two women without the other, and that he'd never push them into trying anything they weren't comfortable with. He genuinely would've been okay with Jenny just jerking him off into Katie's mouth, if that's what it took. They'd both been briefed by the government about the effects of the serum, but Andy told me Katie didn't really believe what they'd been told, until she got that first hit from tasting his precum, and that priming orgasm rattled her to her core.

Here we are, some four months later, and I have to tell you, Fi... Katie's not as much of a staunch lesbian as she used to be. I've talked to her and Jenny about this, and the way Katie feels about it is the strangest thing. She doesn't find *men* attractive, at all. She's looked at straight porn and there is nothing exciting about it in any way shape or form to her. And I've shown her loads of pictures of various hot guys, from the slender and heavily groomed to the big, bulky and rough around the edges, and none of them do anything for her at all.

But Andy?

Don't tell him this, although I bet he already knows, but I'm pretty sure that before the end of the year, Katie's going to *ask* him to fuck her. Like, genuinely *fuck* her. And I bet she's going to *love* it. We've been starting to see that with a couple of people in the household in the inverse – women who said they strictly weren't into women when they got here but have become a little bit more open and curious the longer they're with the family. Even Lauren's admitted that while she thought Andy was kind of cute at first, he wasn't necessarily what she would've called "her type," but the longer she's in the family, the more sexually attractive and compelling he becomes to her. She used to be shy and nervous in her first couple of encounters with Andy, but as of late, she's been voracious and ridiculously eager. Like, I don't think it'll ever overtake her love of Taylor, just like I don't think Katie's attraction to Andy will overtake her love of Jenny, but it's interesting to see how much the serum affects us all in little ways that we're still just beginning to learn about.

And even though they've all said they're just staff, I saw that slight hint of jealousy in Nicolette's eyes when she heard that Niko and I were pregnant, and I'm willing to bet that most, if not all, of the women on staff will eventually want to have a child with Andy. I don't think he'll mind. I don't expect any of us fiancées will either.

You know what the hardest part of the move into the mansion was? Keeping tabs on the damn cats! Ha ha! I swear, Muninn and Huginn loved to find all sorts of nooks and crannies in this place long before anyone else. Shit, they even found the hidden basement, after we'd been living here for *months*, none of us at all the wiser. You'd have thought we'd have figured it out at some point during that period, but I think we had more than enough going to distract us.

Also, Fi, I gotta tell you – during the period of time where we were locked in the mansion, we fucked in a *lot* of different places. Like, it was almost like we made some sort of silent pact that if Andy hadn't dosed *somebody* in a particular room of the house, it wasn't really *ours* yet. So, we got *around*. Also, we didn't have much of anything to decorate with, meaning for the first few weeks, it felt a lot like we were living in somebody else's house. We didn't think to bring pictures or posters or wall art with us, so we were stuck living in this massive space with



no interior design beyond these endless white walls. That's why we were so mad to go get everything from the old condo once they told us we could leave New Eden, and how we decorated the *shit* out of the house after that. I know you still think it's a little too busy in some places, but believe me, we wanted every person in this house to feel like there was some expression of who they are somewhere on the walls of the house, and we wanted to make sure *nobody* got left out.

Oh! Oh! I also totally forgot to tell you about the one crazy day where I think we all nearly lost our fucking minds! It's hilarious. We'd been in mansion lockdown for over two weeks, and out of the blue, Andy asks Katie if she's got any paint, so that maybe he can paint the walls in a room, to add some color. She responds that yes, she's got loads of buckets of paint in the tool shed, and though we couldn't do the whole house, if we wanted to do a room or two, she could paint it up for us. Andy immediately told her that she wasn't going to lift a finger and that he was going to do it, or that *we* were going to do it. I can't remember which first, but I know that before the paint had made its way to one of the rooms, we'd badgered Andy into making sure all of us were going to paint it as a group.

Now Katie, clearly not trusting us giggling deranged lunatics, put down tarps, taped off kickplates, covered up windows and made sure we couldn't do too much damage, which was smart, and then set down like three or four various buckets of paint, opening the tops of them for us, so we could pick the one we wanted to do the whole room in.

This, it turns out, was her *worst idea ever*.

For the next hour or so, instead of putting splotches on the wall to see what we thought of the color, we spent the time chasing each other around the room with paint-loaded paintbrushes, slapping paint on the wall like we were each trying to out Jackson Pollock the other.

Hang on, I still have a picture of it on my phone. Let me show you. Look at that! Isn't that *insane*? I think that's my tits imprinted off in blue to the side, and that's got to be Lauren's ass done in red paint splotches over here. I know for *sure* that's Niko's handprints up here. And that white outline over here? That was when we decided to paint like a chalk outline of Andy against the wall like he was a murder victim.

Anyway, the next morning, after about twenty minutes of laughing at what total *prats* we'd been the day before, we decided on a nice pine green and painted the inside of the room from top to bottom. That became Andy's writing studio (at least until we found the basement), and we painted the room next to it in shades of oceanic blue, which was *my* studio, although let's be real – I spent... well, *spend* most of my time in Andy's studio with him. I feel a little antsy when he's somewhere I can't see him. Nothing severe, just, like, a tiny bit on edge.

We also spent *loads* of time on FaceTime. With my family. With Andy's brother Matty. With Niko's mom. With Lauren's mom. Even spending hours talking to Eric or Lily or Jenny (Eric's Jenny) or even Phil, just to have people to talk to.

And I'd also be remiss if I didn't tell you there were plenty of times when we got lost in our own house. We've been here, what, four months now, and I *think* I have a pretty good handle on the whole layout of the place? But there's still loads of points where I forget whose room is where, which is why we eventually went out of our way to put doorplates next to each door, just so that we'd remember if a particular bedroom was going to be used for something or someone. We didn't need it right then and there, but Andy was clearly thinking about what was going to happen when new women started showing up, and he wanted to be ready, which I respected. Besides, it gave us all something to do.

During that month, Andy tried *really* hard to get the staff to relax a bit, but that was a

push-and-pull battle the final results of which *still* aren't entirely in. They all *say* they want to keep a completely professional working relationship split away from the sexual dynamics associated with the Quaranteam serum, but I think to some extent, we all know that's bullshit. But there are lines they don't want us to push them to cross – like joining the family for every meal – and it took us a bit of time to sort of wrap our heads around that rule. Sure, when there's a big party or something, they'll spend a little bit of time mingling, but they also go as much as they can out of their way to ensure that we never let that line of separation be completely wiped away, because at the end of the day, they have their own emotional connections and bonds that they don't want us intruding into.

They *love* that we love *them*; they just don't want to feel obligated to have to love us *back*, if that makes any sense.

We did spend a ton of time exploring the mansion, though, including each of us having sex in both the pool and the hot tub at least once. Andy found the whole idea of having a 'pool house' sort of ridiculous, and as soon as we were walking through the place, he was already joking about having to repurpose it. I remember joking that if he wanted to, he could relocate some of my family in, only to be absolutely horrified when he took it very seriously and I had to back him down off it. Don't get me wrong, Fi. I love my family, but no way in hell am I letting any of them live in our back yard.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Anyway," Ash said. "That sort of gets you through to the point where things get chaotic, and I had to really start putting my foot down." She stepped away from the canvas, a laugh on her lips as she started to pull the sheet over it to cover it up. "The next real milestone in the house happens right around the time that they were going to let us explore New Eden, which was the arrival of Taylor, but we can talk about that tomorrow. I think we've done enough for one day, don't you?"

"Yeah, we've covered a lot of ground today," Fi said, "but I think I'm really starting to get a good idea of how much you're the glue behind the scenes that holds everything together. I'm sure Andy doesn't know half the stuff you do for him."

"Eh, I prefer it that way, actually," Aisling replied. "He's got enough on his mind day-to-day without him thinking that I'm stressed out about this, that and the other th—" Her phone began to ring, playing Tom Petty's "American Girl," which made Ash tilt her head as she picked it up. "Niko, hey, what's up? Something go wrong over at the base?" She paused a minute, letting the woman on the other side explain things to her. "Well, fucking *finally*. I was starting to wonder if Andy was just the unluckiest person ever when it came to that kind of thing. You and Piper got both him and Melody loaded up okay? Yeah, no worries. I'll grab Fi and a couple of others and we'll meet you out front to help. Yeah yeah, two minutes, we should be out front right as you get here." She tapped her phone to end her call. "Andy's finally getting his turn at a regeneration cycle. Apparently, his pairing with Melody triggered it, so it's just Niko and Piper conscious in the car and two zonked out bodies laid down in the back. Get dressed and we'll go help them."

Fiona got dressed as Aisling did, wondering exactly how much Andy was going to change as part of the regeneration. She'd been reading up on it, and sometimes the effects were minor, like regrowing lost hair or fixing a trick back, but sometimes they could be incredibly strong, curing longtime ailments or regrowing missing organs. Xander's spleen had grown back,

which had taken *everybody* by surprise, and the scar from the surgery he'd had to remove it when he was like nine was completely gone as well.

As they were heading upstairs, Ash was already on her phone, sending a text message, and when the two of them were arriving on the front steps, Niko was pulling up in the Tesla. Just as she brought the Tesla to a halt at the bottom of the main staircase, Nicolette, Sarah and Lexi came walking out the front door. "You said you wanted extra sets of hand, Ma'am," Nicolette said, "so I grabbed the first few people I saw. What's up?"

"Andy's regeneration triggered when he was imprinting Melody," Ash said, as Niko was getting out of the car. "How's our man?"

"Other than out like a light?" she giggled. "Perfectly normal. Heartrate, breathing, the whole nine yards. Had him entirely checked out before we left the base, and they say he's five by five, nothing for us to be worried about."

"Right," Ash said, interlacing her fingers together and cracking her knuckles. "Piper, you, Sarah and Lexi carry Andy up to the master bedroom. Neeks, you and me, we'll get Melody and take her to one of the last couple of open bedrooms. Fi, run down real quick and get a bottle of orange juice and a bottle of water to put on the nightstand. Nicolette, can you bring in both Melody's bag and the sack Niko threw Andy's stuff into?"

"Yes Ma'am," Nicolette said. "Anything else we need?"

"Meet us up in the master bedroom after you've done that."

A few minutes later, both Melody and Andy had been put to bed in their respective rooms, Andy stripped down to nothing, and the whole house was aflutter with talk about Andy's regeneration. In fact, nearly every woman in the house had gathered around Andy's bed to peer down at him.

"Okay, I know everyone's all a bunch of gossipy bitches," Ash said, clapping her hands, "but this is no big deal, okay? Andy's just going to go through about a day's worth of recovery time, so we'll keep someone stationed in the room at all times, make sure there's cold orange juice waiting for him when he gets up, but other than that, this is no big deal, alright? Anyone who wants to can come in and check on him, and anyone who wants to sleep in bed with him *can* but just don't be touching him, which, yes yes, I know it blows, but he's regenerating, so let that happen, and we'll just find out how much has changed tomorrow. Now scoot!"

Once the room was mostly empty, Ash put Andy's phone on his charger on the night stand next to the bed, set his glasses next to them and then turned on the speaker to play Andy's list of post-rock bands to give him something quiet and mellow to sleep to.

"C'mon, Fi," Ash finally said. "Let's go get dinner."

## **Part Six – “This Is Penance”**

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

Fiona and Ash enjoyed dinner with the rest of the girls, but it felt *insanely* odd doing it without Andy around. In fact, for Fiona it had been the first dinner since she had arrived in New Eden without Andy at it, and that definitely changed the energy. All the women seemed a little nervous, even though they understood what was happening to Andy. Still, it was a very different between knowing and being comfortable with his absence.

And *nobody* was especially comfortable.

“You get your friend settled in, Em?” Ash asked the blonde brit, although Fiona could sense that the redhead almost wanted to get into it with the movie star.

“She’s still unconscious, Ash,” Em replied, trying to dodge the fight it looked like she was sensing approaching. “But I’m sure once she’s awake, she’ll be in a fine state and right as rain once more.”

Fiona had seen Niko pull Ash aside right as they’d gotten to dinner, and the two had had a brief conversation, one that had seemed a little bit heated, although Aisling hadn’t seemed annoyed at Niko so much as annoyed at someone else sitting around the dinner table, but it hadn’t been until this moment that Fi had figured out exactly where that anger was pointed.

She almost felt sorry for Emily, because the tiny Brit had no idea what she was in for.

“Did you think maybe you wanted to tell us all about the fact that we aren’t supposed to talk about her late fiancé with her, Em?” Ash said, a frown on her face. “You kept that from Andy until it was basically too late for him to back out, and you kept it from the rest of us even longer, so we didn’t have a chance to talk about this in advance.”

Sarah, Em’s closest confidant in the world, turned to look at Em, a look of surprise on her face, maybe one tinged with a streak of hurt. At that point, Fi realized Emily hadn’t even told Sarah, and the taller woman looked wounded over it. “What’s she talking about, baby?”

“I heard from Niko that Mali’s hoping that her regeneration is going to *erase some of her memories,*” Ash said, more than a little annoyed. “And that we’re supposed to avoid talking to her about her previous partner in any way, in case it might trigger a mental schism inside of her brain, if the things we ask try and trigger her thinking about memories about him, things her mind doesn’t have access to anymore.”

“Jesus, Em!” Sarah said. “What are you thinking?”

“Look!” Emily said, suddenly on the defensive. “I knew there would be some risks involved, not just for her, but for all of us, but I had to make the call about whether it was the sort of thing we could handle, because she asked me not to tell anyone in advance. She was terrified we would’ve turned her away in concern, no matter how ridiculous I told her that was. I *implored* her to be honest and open with the family, but my God, ladies, this woman was *hurting*. The only man she’d ever loved, ever been *intimate* with, he was gone, and she so desperately wanted to join him! She was talking suicide! We’ve been there, if not there, somewhere close to it! We understand what it’s like to have something so profoundly important taken away from us, just on the cusp of achieving our dreams. It was a gamble, and I knew that, and I still took it regardless, and if that’s going to make the rest of you cross with me, then I am sorry that my decision hurt you, but I was not about to abandon a friend in need simply because of a difficult choice that we would’ve deliberated too long in the making.”

“We’ll never know how long we would’ve have taken talking about it,” Niko said, clearly none too pleased with Emily either. “Because you didn’t come to us with it. You simply unilaterally decided *for* us. I *know* Andy’s going to be pissed about it when he wakes up, because

he was pissed about it before he fell into the regenerative state. And you know what? He *should* be pissed off. Because *I'm* pissed off! *I* didn't get a say in someone I'm going to have to deal with on a regular basis, someone who might turn out to be unstable or even dangerous. We're a goddamn *team* Emily, and if you can't respect that, you should just fuck *right* off!"

With that, Niko grabbed her plate, stood up from the dinner table and stormed off. Fi was about to stand up to go check on her when she felt Ash's hand on her thigh, imploring her to stay seated, as if pointing out to her *this* was where the action was going to be.

There had been conflicts within the group of women before, but Niko had seemed *livid*, and her anger had been almost palpable. And Fiona started to look around the table, to see if that opinion was reflected on other faces and found that most of the women present for dinner were none too pleased with Emily, including Sarah, who looked more genuinely hurt than angry.

"I take it the rest of you share that sentiment?" Emily said, looking more fragile than Fiona had ever seen her. "Perhaps I should eat alone for the foreseeable future, then, until I find some recourse to repair the damage that I have done."

She began to stand up, but Ash stood up first. "Emily Stevens, sit the fuck *down*," Ash said, her Irish accent dialing up to match the authoritative tone she was taking. Em looked startled but took her seat again immediately. There was something about the way Aisling spoke that took total control of the situation right from the get-go. "I see you about to run away from your problems, and you're going to learn we don't *do* that in Team Rook. I know we're used to having to look out for ourselves first and foremost, as if we're the only person that matters in this world, but we don't *live* that way anymore. This is *a family*. This is *our* family, and every one of you crazy bitches is part of it. We work on problems *together*. We run headfirst *into* danger *together*. And that means we need to know what it is we're up against, and we shouldn't keep secrets from one another. I am willing to put my ass on the line for any of you, but we cannot be a bunch of gossip girls, keeping our friends, partners, wives and fellow sex fiends in the dark when shit that's going to affect us will come to light in the end. You know what? Yeah, you fucked up, Em. You did. You're gonna have to work on that, and there's gonna be some bridges between you and members of this family that probably need rebuilding. You're going to need to apologize to most of us, and you're going to have to demonstrate that you understand *how* you fucked up, why it was a fuck up and convince us you're not going to do it again. But it's not the end of the fucking world, alright? And I won't have you making some kind of grandiose production about it to try and elicit sympathy because you thought you were doing the right thing. You were doing a *dumb and selfish thing*, one that didn't take in account the feelings of both the man you're looking to marry, nor the women you're going to share him with. Learn from it. Repair the damage done. Do better next time. Questions?" Ash looked around the table, and nobody seemed to want to add anything to it. Most of the women respected Ash's points, although a few of them seemed a little shocked at how direct and straightforward she'd been about it. "Alright then. Class dismissed."

As Ash sat back down, Fiona immediately noticed that Emily had turned to Sarah, and begun her apology tour in earnest, with the tiny Brit talking quite intently to her long-term partner in very hushed tones, and while Sarah certainly didn't look happy, she was at least listening, which might've been more than she would've initially gotten without Aisling's little speech. Ash had set the terms of how offended everyone was allowed to be and reminded them that they all had to get over this shit for their wedding next month. Fi leaned in and whispered to Ash, "Quite a bit of damage control you did there, Ash."

Ash politely shrugged it off. “You can go at things head on and solve them quickly and efficiently, or you can let them fester and it’ll come back and bite you in the ass later. Something I learned *very* early on in this little experiment we’re living in is that, like it or not, we’re all beautiful women, and beautiful women often have a tendency for men to try and solve problems for them. But when our problems are *each other*, if we didn’t find a way to solve shit for ourselves, we were just going to end up making Andy *miserable*,” she said with a giggle. “There’s only one of him and *loads* of us. So that means if I see conflict brewing between any of the women in the house, I tend to try and shut that shit down quickly, quietly and effectively. Hang on, lemme go over and remind Em that I’m not mad *at* her, but I’m mad *with* her actions, and then we can go check on Andy again before we head back down to continue our work. Sound good?”

“Works for me,” Fi agreed.

Aisling got up and moved over towards Emily and Sarah, who were still locked in intense conversation. They were far enough from Fiona that she couldn’t hear the conversation over the din of the various other conversations all going on at once around them at the massive dinner table, but when Ash put her hand on Em’s shoulder, the young Brit looked up at her with tears in her eyes. Ash crouched down and put her arms around Emily and let the two of them share a hug of forgiveness for a long moment. Fi could see Sarah mouthing ‘thank you’ to Ash, even from across the room.

Fi got up and was about to bus her own plate when Nicolette snatched it from her fingers, shooting her a sly grin, shaking her head, like she’d caught Fi trying to do her job for her. “I’ll take the plates to wash up, ma’am,” Nicolette said. “Go tend to the Master.” She then spun on one heel, making her skirt swish up to show off frilly lacy panties before walking back towards the kitchen. Nicolette had never been one to let others do her job for her, no matter how much they tried.

Once she’d relinquished her plate to Nicolette, Fiona headed back upstairs towards the master bedroom. Sleeping with so many people in one bed had certainly taken some getting used to, but now after about a month of doing so, it actually just felt *right*. They had to rotate who was next to Andy, simply because being next to him felt fundamentally important, but really, he couldn’t get more than two or three women touching his torso no matter how they tried to organize themselves while he slept. So while sometimes Andy would specifically ask for one of them to be up against him for the evening, he generally was happy to let them sort it out amongst themselves, and nobody had put up too much of a fuss about it.

When Fiona got into the room, she saw that Niko was eating over in the armchair next to the bed, and she’d just finished her meal for the evening. “I don’t blame you for being pissed at Emily,” Fiona said. “I’m none too pleased myself, but Em seems genuine in her apology, so sooner or later, you’re going to have to forgive her.”

“Oh, I’m sure it’ll be sooner rather than later,” Niko sighed. “But I want Em to stop asking for forgiveness and start talking about shit with us in advance. I’m as guilty as anybody else in this house of keeping secrets, but all of mine have been to *protect* people in this house, not to put them further at risk. But because she’s the little starlet princess, everyone’s just going to let her get away with it.”

Fiona chuckled, moving over to sit down on the footstool for the chair. “C’mon, Niko. You know Andy better than that. Do you really think he’s just going to let Em slide with putting the whole house in danger because she was in a bunch of movies that people like?”

Niko giggled a little. “When you say it like that, I sound like kind of an idiot, don’t I?”

“I’m just saying – Ash took Em to task after you stormed out, and I think Em knows she screwed up,” Fiona said. “I remember when I was her age, and I was worried that I wasn’t going to be able to help someone very important to me, and I’m sure I did the sorts of sneaky shit she’s pulling, barring, you know, memory erasing and imprinting and all that. And you know Andy sets the bar so fucking high by trying to help every person he meets it’s ridiculous,” she said with a soft laugh, glancing over at his sleeping form. “Yeah, that’s right I’m talking to you, shithead.” She giggled a little bit, rolling her eyes. “Andy’s willing to stick his neck out for people he just met, and we’ve all just hopped on his little crusade with him. Trying to fix the world one problem at a time.”

“Yeah, well,” Niko said, getting up before leaning down to press a kiss to Andy’s sleeping forehead. “He sets a good example. What’s that lyric from that song he loves? ‘Try and get better and don’t ever accept less’? Who sings that?”

“Frank Turner,” Fiona responded. “And thank God *he*’s still alive, because too many musicians Andy’s loved have died over the last year, but Frank got married just before the pandemic set in, and so I think he and his wife stayed isolated and are waiting for the UK version of the serum to get to them.”

“Right. Between them and that German band he loves—”

“Fury In The Slaughterhouse,” Niko said.

“Right, them. All six of those guys are still alive too, so maybe the musicians Andy likes most get a free pass or something.”

“Ha!” Fiona said. “Wouldn’t that be a riot? ‘C-list Fantasy Author’s Favorite Bands And Why They Survived The Pandemic.’ Anyway, I think Ash and I are going to sit watch for a little while, so you should go hammer out your beef with Emily before it gets its claws too deep into you.”

Niko scowled, fidgeting in her chair. “You think I should forgive her, don’t you?”

“Forgive, but don’t forget,” Fiona said. “Em’s a smart woman. She gets why you’re angry at her, and she knows you have every right to be. But look at it like this – Em’s trying to protect someone. Who do you think she learned that from?”

Niko rolled her eyes, shaking her head. “He really can be a total pain in the ass to all of us, can’t he?”

“Mmm,” Fi agreed with a smirk that said she knew neither of them meant it. “But I think he makes up for it in other ways.”

“He’s lucky he’s cute,” Niko teased, grabbing her plate, although she only made it halfway to the door before Nicolette had appeared, holding out her hand to take the plate away from her, not willing to let Niko bus her own dirty dishes. As soon as the tall blonde had wrestled the plate away from Niko, the maid turned around and headed out of the bedroom, leaving Niko to look back at Fiona in admiration, shaking her head once more. “I’ve seen her do that for months now, and I’m still not entirely sure how she knows.”

“She’s part faefolk,” Fiona offered.

“I would not be surprised,” Niko said, heading out of the bedroom just as Aisling was coming in. The two exchanged a little hug, but immediately after, Niko headed out, closing the door behind her.

“I was thinking maybe we just sit and keep watch on Andy while I’m telling you the next part of the story,” Ash said. “Give me a little bit of a break from painting.”

Fiona nodded, reaching into her pocket, pulling out her digital recorder, turning it on and setting it on the nightstand next to Andy, gesturing for Ash to take her seat there. “Works for me. You remember where we were?”

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So even though we’d gotten this beautiful mansion, being in lockdown in it still felt like we were just in a new setting for that. Of course, we also had all the staff to contend with, although we found our levels with them pretty quickly. The next challenge came in late October, and this one blindsided us all. We were just about to be given our release and allowed to integrate with the rest of New Eden, something I cannot adequately describe to you how eager we were to go do.

We wanted to go shopping. We wanted to go for walks around the new little township we lived in. We wanted to sit in a restaurant and order food off a menu and pay way too much for cocktails with way too little booze in them.

We just wanted to do *normal shit*.

So when October 26<sup>th</sup> rolled around and we were given the greenlight to leave the house as long as we stayed within the borders of New Eden, we were ecstatic. As of noon, we could leave and go exploring our new home at large. Which, of course, meant we were due for a surprise and boy did we get one.

The next of Andy’s partners had been dropped off a few hours before we were allowed off the manor grounds, but it was the rockiest arrival I think we’ve had before or since. Niko signed for her, and she was waiting in one of the living rooms while everyone got up and dressed and ready for their day.

What none of us knew in advance was that she had a previous relationship with one of us already. Taylor had been delivered, and it turned out she had figured out where Lauren had gone and specifically requested to be put with that Team, something which didn’t surprise me too much when I learned it.

My first glance at Taylor, I knew she was here for reasons primarily *other* than Andy. Which, don’t get me wrong, is *fine*. I knew Andy wasn’t going to be everyone’s dream boat, at least not on sight. I also knew that Taylor wasn’t exactly the kind of woman Andy would immediately be drawn to. Again, careful how much of this you put into print, but as gorgeous as Taylor is, she’s a little too Instagram pop princess for his tastes, you know? I mean, a knockout’s still a knockout, but Andy likes his women with some rough edges on them, and my first impression of Taylor was that she’d lived a life without any actual hardship or challenge.

Taylor had shown up in a white tanktop that didn’t come all the way down to her waist, showing off the gold belly ring she had, and the tanktop was pulled *tight* on her generous breasts. She was wearing jeans with ripped holes in the knees. She looked a lot like that girl from the “Jessie’s Girl 2” video, if I’m honest.

Niko had told me that Taylor had seemed very quiet and nervous, and I remember wondering if that had been because of the ostentatiousness of the house, and maybe she thought we were a bunch of rich, snooty people, but as it turned out, that wasn’t it at all. She was just waiting for Lauren to appear.

Fuck did *that* not go well.

As came out over the next few hours, Taylor was Lauren’s ex-girlfriend. Most *recent* ex-girlfriend, as a matter of fact. Lauren and Taylor had been dating until January of 2020, when



Lauren had come home early one night and found Taylor getting deep dicked by some guy. The fallout had been *epic*. Lauren had thrown Taylor out, avoiding talking to her on any level, just getting all of Taylor's shit out of the house and changing the locks.

Andy, the saint that he is, talked Lauren down from her immediate anger, which had been at like twelve out of ten, and worked to figure out how she wanted him to handle it. God bless Andy, but he would've sent Taylor back to the base to be reassigned to someone else if Lauren had asked him to. But Andy gave that choice to Lauren, and explained to her that whatever she chose, it was going to be what she'd have to live with for the rest of the foreseeable future.

By the time I got to the room, Andy'd at least calmed her down so that she wasn't shouting. I remember offering to do this thing that Eric's partner, Lily, had joked she was going to do at one point... 'cuntpunt' I think it was. It made Lauren laugh, which helped break the tension a little bit further.

I could see what Andy was getting at when he was explaining how he saw the rift between Lauren and Taylor, and he knew right away that whatever was between them, it wasn't settled yet. Lauren and he talked it out, but the decision they reached was that Taylor would be allowed in the house in a provisional basis, which was that for the first month, she wasn't going to be allowed to wear clothes, and only speak when spoken to. She wouldn't be allowed to stand on two feet unless told otherwise. She'd be forced to wear a dog collar, and at the end of the month, everything would be *forgiven*, but nothing would be *forgotten*, and Taylor would always sort of have to deal with the stigma of having been unfaithful hanging around her neck.

Andy was uncomfortable about how far Lauren wanted to take it, naturally, but he also understood that in some ways as weird as it sounds, the high punishment was for Taylor's own safety. When she'd stepped out before, the worst consequences she'd had to face was Lauren dumping her after her heart was broken. If Taylor stepped out with a different man post imprinting? She'd be signing her own death certificate within seconds, but Taylor, God bless her, seemed like she'd been so intent on getting back with Lauren that she might have avoided hearing about everything else surrounding that decision, and Andy couldn't afford to let her ignorance about what she was signing up for be on his conscience.

It was also the first time we learned people could request who they wanted to pair with. Taylor, as it turned out, had been playing detective for a while, and it had taken her a few months to figure out who Andy was.

I love social media, but Lauren's never been much of a big fan of it. Taylor, however, took it to the next level. She hired someone to code an image search for Lauren's face across any new images being posted on Instagram from the Bay Area, and so she showed up in some of the pictures I'd taken documenting our move from San Jose up to New Eden. From that, she was basically able to figure out that I was partnered with Andy, and that Lauren was probably paired up with both of us. It was a clever bit of work. That's why she requested to be paired up with Andy, and at that point, Andy had an open dance card and anyone requesting to be paired with him would just get delivered to the house.

We fixed *that* within a week or so for reasons I'll get into later.

Anyway, once it was decided that we were going to let Taylor in, but that she was going to be punished, Lauren made her strip down to nothing and apologize to all of us, saving Lauren for last. And then Lauren slapped her, and I do mean *hard*. I think it's the most violent anyone's ever really gotten in our family, because the anger in Lauren's eyes was one hundred percent genuine, and Taylor started to cry.

My heart was breaking for that girl, because I knew it was finally settling in just how badly she'd fucked up, and she was focusing only on that, and not the rest of it, y'know, the part where she could *recover* from said fuck up. After Lauren slapped Taylor, she then told the rest of us to get ready, because we were going to go out and see New Eden.

While everyone was doing their final preparations, I pulled Taylor aside, made sure she stopped crying and talked to her like a regular person for just a couple of minutes, hoping it would put her at ease. Taylor had moved her things into one of the smaller bedrooms but was clearly still incredibly nervous about walking around the house with nothing more than a leather collar around her neck.

I met her in her bedroom, closed the door behind us and had her sit down on the bed next to me. "Not the cheery welcome you expected, huh?" I asked her.

"No ma'am," Taylor said, looking down at her hands.

"Okay, Taylor, I'm only going to say this once, so I want you to listen to me. I know this hurts – mentally, physically and emotionally, but you've been given a second chance here. Lauren could've turned you away, and she'd have had every right to, but she's left the door open for you. The path from there to here isn't easy, and you're gonna probably be miserable for the whole time, but this is penance. Penance for being unfaithful to Lauren. Penance for deciding something *for* her instead of *talking* to her. Penance for putting your needs ahead of your partner's. And you were with Lauren longer than I've been, so you should know this better than me, but just in case you need reminding – she can be vindictive as all hell, but she's also a woman of her word, and above all else, she's *fair*. She's promised to give you a second chance if you're willing to *earn* it. You said you were willing to do anything to get her back, and while she's mad as fuck right now, and *she* may not believe you mean it, *I* think I see a hard resolve there that says you *do*. And maybe the punishment won't last a whole month but assume that it will and that you're going to have to make sure you don't show Lauren an inch of regret the entire time you're here doing penance. She'll come around eventually, I'm sure of it."

Taylor started to cry again, but she wrapped her arms around me and gave me a big hug, a smile on her face, like she'd needed *some* reassurance that the light she thought she'd glanced at the end of the tunnel was really down there.

Over the next few weeks, we went through quite a lot of shit, which we'll get into a little later. Taylor's imprinting was particularly rough, because Lauren thought it would be funny to try and push Andy past Taylor's comfort point and decided to try and get Andy so cranked up that he'd be willing to spit into Taylor's mouth. Taylor pretended that she was freaking out, used her safeword and Andy immediately stopped and backed down, and Lauren, bless her heart, did the *dumbest* possible thing she could do at that point.

She laughed and told Andy it had just been a game to see how far she could push him.

Now, you've known him longer than I have, Fi, but I have never, *ever* seen Andy so mad, before or since. He was *furious* that Lauren, this woman he'd invited into his house and heart, had been trying to get him to take a woman against her *will*. And we'd just been joking around, but I felt deeply *ashamed* that I'd been part of it, that we'd been betting on it hours earlier. We'd both known that Taylor hadn't given Andy her real safeword, and that in some ways this was just to show Taylor that Andy could be trusted, and wouldn't ever overstep boundaries, but he was right – it was a shitty thing for us to do.

I offered myself up for punishment, but it was clear that Lauren had been the ringleader, so he paddled her bare ass until it was as red as my hair. What came as a real surprise to *all* of us, though, was that it turned out Lauren *liked* a good amount of pain with her pleasure. She hadn't

told any of us, simply because she'd been nervous about it, worried that we might think she was a little bit freaky, something that sort of made us all laugh, because we were a million miles past judging each other at that point.

Still, now that Andy had learned Lauren *enjoyed* getting her ass paddled, it hadn't really landed well as a punishment. But as a testament to how smart our future husband is, he pivoted to a replacement solution almost immediately. Getting her ass spanked had turned her on, so he told her he *wasn't* going to fuck her for at least a few days. He'd gotten her engine cranked and turned her on so much that being left in that worked-up state was its own form of torture.

I sort of knew at the time when Lauren set her 'one month' punishment that she wasn't going to go through with it for the whole month, and, as expected, on November 15<sup>th</sup>, technically the day after you and Moira arrived, Lauren told Andy to let Taylor off the hook, giving her full freedom to be a regular member of the house.

All of this is sort of important so that you can understand how a lot of us knew that Lauren and Taylor were going to be a couple unto themselves within the whole Team, and that we were all okay with that. It was, in some ways, sort of a test run for us for you and Moira, although we'd already sort of had that with Sarah and Emily.

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"I remember being a little worried when you brought Taylor in completely naked to the game we played with Andy when he was blindfolded that morning. She was wearing only that collar, but she was smiling, so I'd guessed she was into it or that there was some back story I hadn't heard about in advance," Fiona said to Aisling. "I never really followed up on it because I wasn't sure that I wanted to get into it, or that it was any of my business."

"Oh, I'm sure they'd both talk to you about it, but I don't know if it's of any use to you and your book," Ash said. "The house is full of all sorts of little squabbles like that, and mostly, they're not much but a lot of talk. How's he looking?"

"It looks like there's hair growing where his bald spot used to be, but knowing Andy, he'll probably just keep shaving his entire head anyway," Fiona said. "Based on the amount of fluid that's dripped out of his eyes over the night, I'm betting he won't need his glasses when he wakes up either. He still get that random charlie horse in the middle of the night sometimes?"

Back when Andy and Fiona had been sleeping together in college, the first time Andy had gotten a leg cramp in his sleep, it had nearly scared the shit out of Fi. Andy had suddenly woken up from total slumber to hard awake and was doing his best to extend his leg as much as he could, claiming he felt an intense pain along the back of his knee, like the tendon of his calf had gotten stuck on something and was suddenly pulling as tightly as he could. The sudden motion had woken Fi right up with him, and she'd almost had a panic attack about the situation, when Andy had explained to her it was just something that happened to him a few times a year. Andy had talked to a doctor about it, and they'd said it was nothing to worry about.

"Yep, about once every couple of months or so," Ash said. "Scared the hell out of us the first time it happened."

"Yeah, me too. That'll probably be gone too, and if he's *really* lucky, all this excess earwax draining out of his ears means his tinnitus is likely healed as well."

"Looks like a handful of moles he had have fallen off his skin as well," Ash said, turning him over a little bit. "Still got a hairy back, though, which is good. I'd have missed that if it was

gone. His huge amount of body hair always reminded me a bit of Robin Williams. And all his tattoos are still there, which will make him feel better. I know Niko was worried his body might reject the tattoo ink as scarring rather than intentional modifications. According to Phil, tattoos have about 20-30% disappearance rate during regeneration, so I guess the odds were always in Andy's favor. They think the inks get recognized by the body as part of it."

"Odd trying to see what's changed and what hasn't," Fi sighed. "But it's good that some of the oddities about him that we loved haven't been regenerated away.

"I wouldn't have minded if he hadn't regenerated at all, although I'll bet he'll be especially thankful not to have that ringing in his ears all the time."

"We should get a selfie with him like this," Fi said, hopping up onto bed on one side of him as Ash hopped up on the other.

"I really want to write 'blackout' on his forehead in sharpie," Ash giggled.

"No! Bad fiancée!" Fi scolded.

That made taking the picture a *lot* harder...

## **Part Seven – “The surface of the sun”**

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

When Fiona woke in the morning, most of the other women had gotten out of bed already, everyone sleeping *around* Andy without sleeping *touching* him. That had been a lot harder for some of them than others, and several of them had wrapped themselves up in each other’s arms, so Moira had wrapped herself around both Fi and Aisling for much of the night, but Mo was an early riser, and by the time Fi was rousing from her slumber, she and Aisling were the only two people left, along with a note telling them that whenever they were going to leave, to call one of the other fiancées, so that they weren’t leaving Andy alone without someone keeping tabs on him.

It was odd, seeing him in the midst of regeneration. As soon as he woke up, they were going to have to wash the sheets and maybe even all the bedding, including possibly replacing the pillows. His body was sloughing off excess defective flesh and fluids in order to replace it with new and improved aspects. That meant there was a lot of discarded aqueous humor from his eyes and drained earwax and other fluids from his ears, all of which had sort of smeared into the pillowcase, rather disgustingly. There was also quite a bit of shed skin on the pillowcase as well, probably where Andy’d been bald before his scalp had been retraining itself to grow hair. The bed itself was filled with dead skin flakes, both small and large, as his body had shuffled off things like moles and skin tags, as well as a long scar that Andy had gotten as a child than had run along the length of his left calf.

To most of the women of the house’s satisfaction, though, his body hair hadn’t thinned or fallen out. Andy was a hairy man – not quite Robin Williams hairy, but his chest had always had a thick thatch of dark brown curls over it, and even the bits of hair on his back made him more appealing, not less. While a couple of the younger girls thought maybe Andy should shave his back, or even go so far as to shave his chest, the older, more experienced women had told them that they would come to love the sense of a mature and more primal man. Even if the hair on his head had regrown, he’d probably just keep shaving it, as it was as much tradition as anything else at this point.

“And we’re *sure* this is totes normal?” Hannah asked Fiona, as she moved into the room, coming to sit on the edge of the bed, looking on at Andy with great concern. The Asian teenager had been more than a little nervous about Andy’s regeneration, having been one of the people who had made it the biggest point to talk to Alexis after she’d come through hers. Hannah was doing her best to become an expert on the Quaranteam serum as she could, because she felt like *somebody* in the house should have as much knowledge on the thing that had brought them together as possible. As such, she’d been spending any of her free time reading up on it, talking to Phil about it or studying whatever paperwork Andy had been allowed to bring home detailing the effects, side effects and any other details she could get about it. But information on the regeneration side effect was still somewhat inconclusive and vaguely apocryphal, so Hannah had been in Andy’s room every couple of hours, taking pictures and making notes.

“Niko assures us this sort of thing happens all the time, Hannah,” Ash said. “And you saw it when it was happening with Alexis.”

“With Alexis, it was a *lot* bigger, Ash,” Hannah sighed. “Like, I could see all the heavy scabbing over her arm and chest, but with Andy, it’s all happening in such a small amount in so many places all at once.”

“Lexi had a couple of major injuries, and as such, all the healing was concentrated in one centralized place,” Ash said. “Andy’s got a handful of minor injuries and nothing like all the burns that Lexi had. So it’s harder to look and see specifically where the changes are coming at him, but you can see it all adding up.”

“What’s with all the liquid?” Hannah asked. The Asian teenager was easily the busiest member of the household, and as such, always filled out any of Andy’s borrowed t-shirts better than anyone else. Andy had one of the largest collections of band T-shirts Fiona suspected existed anywhere on the planet, and as such, all his partners loved borrowing them, because it let them carry a bit of Andy’s smell with them throughout the whole day. Hannah currently had on a T-shirt that said, “The Mighty Lemon Drops” from an album called “World Without End” and it would’ve hung down to her knees if her massive tits weren’t pushing it out a sizable amount.

“According to Phil, it’s the building block that the serum uses to repair and replace damaged cells, muscles, organs, etc. It consumes spare water and fat and converts that into whatever it needs, but a lot of the ‘bad’ genetic material gets pushed out with water, because that’s the easiest way to get rid of the waste – sweat it out, shed it out,” Ash told her. “You want to keep tabs on him for a few hours before somebody else takes over?”

“Sure, I can do that,” Hannah said. “What should I do if he wakes up?”

“Come get one of the STBW’s and we’ll gather everyone who needs to be around while he’s coming to,” Ash said. “But I wouldn’t bank on him being up for several more hours. Sarah’s going to come around eleven and is on watch until four when it’s Em’s shift.”

“Okay! I’ll just be studying up in here anyway.”

Fiona tilted her head to one side as she threw on some clothes, stealing one of Andy’s shirts as well, but this one was for an Australian band named Powderfinger. “I thought all the universities were still closed?”

“I just got word yesterday that Stanford’s going to open back up for classes in January, so Asha and I are both going to be in that first class that goes to on-site classes again. Apparently, they’re going to be sending a bunch of people who wouldn’t normally have gone to college to take some college classes, helping them prep to take over industries that are in need of educated people. It’s not gonna be *full* student bodies like they used to be, but it’ll be a start.”

“So if you haven’t got classes yet, what are you studying?”

“This is more like figuring out how to build what I want for the first couple of years.”

“You going to take all this study and apply it later?”

“I think I’m finally settled that I’m gonna specialize in pediatrics, but I think that’s going to require a very good understanding of the Quaranteam serum, so I’ve been doing as much studying into it as I can on my own,” Hannah said. “I had Phil clear me to be able to read all the paperwork Andy’s been bringing home about the serum, the virus and, y’know, like, everything, so I’m reading all of that stuff any chance I can. But we got, like, all the class options a week ago, and now we’re all figuring out the classes we want to apply for. So, like, I should’ve been done with this yesterday, but I’m still tweaking and twisting, since I’ve got a few days before it’s gotta be in.”

“A’ight, well, we’ll leave you to him,” Ash said, as she left with Fiona, walking out into the hallway, closing the door to the master bedroom behind them. Ash turned to look at Fi with a smile, rolling her eyes. “I know they must be murder on the back, but I would *kill* to have her tits, even for just a few days. I think each one’s the size of my bloody head.”

“She *really* stuffs Andy’s shirts, doesn’t she?” Fiona said as they headed down the stairs. “But yeah, I wouldn’t want those boulders strapped to my chest twenty-four-seven. Bet they really make a bunch of noise when Andy goes to town on her, though, don’t they?”

“She’s a wildcat chasing a laser pointer,” Ash said with a nod. “But it’s good for Andy to have someone that young and energetic to keep up with, who’s so eager and happy all the time. Girl’s like a cocktail of ADHD, camaraderie, incredibly sharp intellect and a desperate FOMO, just happy to see everyone, full of excitement and enthusiasm, wanting to be part of everything any chance she can get. No matter how much shit we’re all collectively in, Hannah’s a love bomb full of optimism, and it’s nice to have someone that unflappable around, ‘cause that sure ain’t me.”

“Let’s get back down to your painting and my story,” Fiona said, as they continued down to the lower floor. The two women continued down to Ash’s studio, and Fi stripped back down before getting into her pose once more.

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Everything started to get really crazy for us as a family starting with the Halloween party that Andy and Phil decided to throw. As far as I know, Andy’s not a big party thrower, but he wanted to celebrate us all being safe and sound behind the walls of New Eden, and the fact that we could walk around and see other people and places. Honestly, I knew we were all going a little stir crazy, and when we went to see the tiny ‘downtown’ of New Eden, we were ecstatic.

We were still dealing with the addition of Taylor to the family, but the house had felt massively empty, because the place is *huge*, as you well know. But imagine what it was like when it was just five of us, plus Nicolette, Katie and Jenny. It felt... well, it was almost creepy, this giant fucking house with nobody really in it. I know how silly it sounds saying that eight people is empty, but even before we’d found the basement, you’re still talking about a house that was clearly designed to support at least a family of ten, plus a staff of half a dozen. With just eight people, you could wander into portions of the house and be out of shouting distance of everyone else in the mansion.

All of this meant that having a party would give the house some real sense of purpose. Everyone got dressed in their costumes, and we were all trying to put on a fun show. I was dressed up as Lois Lane, y’know, the Amy Adams one – I hated those movies, but I did like seeing a ginger as more than just a damsel in distress, like they always were in the Spider-Man films, with Mary Jane practically being one step away above a housewife on a chair bitching about a mouse on the floor. Lauren joined in geek solidarity with me, getting dressed like Black Canary from the Birds of Prey and Green Arrow comics. I know Andy loved seeing her in fishnets, and you should’ve felt how hard he was when he first saw her.

The star of the show, however, was Niko, who came down dressed as one of his characters, the coroner for SFPD, Dr. Erika Shirow. She’d become much more of a fan of the books since joining the family, and wanted to display that devotion to Andy. I thought it was sweet, actually, seeing her putting her affection for our man on display like that, and it showed off to Andy’s friends that she was making the effort to learn as much about him.

It seems weird saying this now, but I think all of us were looking at it as an opportunity to establish our importance within Andy’s family to Andy’s friends. We all sort of knew Phil, but the rest of Andy’s gang, this was the first time we’d gotten a chance to meet most of them, and there was something still... unsettled about our positions.

You've known Andy, so you know how important his friendships are to him. We'd talked to a bunch of them on Discord or through FaceTime, but this was our chance to show off to the local friends that even if a solution was found tomorrow that would unpair us, we weren't going to go anywhere. Andy had been a little hesitant to talk about it, but his last previous relationship – well, we didn't know much about her, other than all of Andy's friends basically hated her, that she was a spoiled brat who thought she was better than everyone else. I don't want to get ahead of the story, but we sort of knew that whatever relationship Andy had had before all of us entered into his life, it had done some serious damage, and left him more than a little embittered. He *really* didn't want to get into it, but we were well aware that the scars ran very deep, and that whoever she was, she'd hurt him so bad that he'd basically given up on dating on the whole. We'd changed that, taught him that he was worthy of love, but, beneath the surface, we all knew the damage was still there, and that his friends were all going to be on high alert of anyone they thought was taking advantage of him.

None of Andy's local friends were anywhere near as intense as Xander was, but we at least had the advantage that Xander was halfway across the country, so if we *really* fucked up, he wasn't nearby to yell at us. Still, we'd definitely gotten the third-degree from Eric, and this was the first time most of us had gotten to spend more than a little bit with Phil, Andy's friend who it seemed like knew something about everything. There were plans to have another party later where we'd meet the rest of Andy's local friends, but this was sort of a test run, and a chance for Andy, Phil and Eric to sit and play poker again, which had been one of their favorite past times before the plague had cut everyone off from each other.

The other advantage was that it let us see children again, something we'd all been lacking for a while since we'd been put into quarantine. We didn't know the exact stats of what was happening outside, but we did know that kids under the age of ten seemed to be immune from DuoHalo, and that meant they could go out trick or treating.

It also meant we were sort of dressed in our sexiest costumes to show off for all the local moms and dads, so they would know we were a houseful of hotties, and that Andy was a very lucky man. We didn't really know much about the people who lived in New Eden yet – we hadn't really gone door-to-door or anything, at first because we were told not to, but now just because we hadn't really gotten around to it – so we wanted to make sure we were leaving the best first impressions on them that we could get away with.

During the time the trick or treating was going on, I started to notice a very distinct pattern of the people coming by with children. It was inevitably the same mix of people – a man in his fifties or sixties, a woman in her early forties, a couple of women in their early to late twenties, and then a few kids between the ages of three and nine. The population of New Eden, it became apparent, was comprised entirely of vaccinated people, and they were using the Halloween holiday as an excuse to wander around and check out the neighbors.

It was a pretty sharp idea, honestly, but we didn't have any kids to use to let us scope out who lived around us. I'd idly wondered if there was a rent-a-kid service where we could borrow a tike who wanted a second pass at gathering candy.

It had also been something of a weird day, as Niko had come back from a shift at the base with a certain sense of nervousness to her, and she didn't really want to talk about it, which was strange, because I'd thought she and I were getting along pretty well at that point. Something had really rattled her, though, and it was wearing her down like I'd never seen. I tried pressing her about it, and she said I'd know soon enough, so I just needed to wait a few hours, and then the whole sordid thing would come out.



When I saw Andy, Phil and Eric were playing poker, I decided to go check with Andy about something. I waited until they were between hands and then slipped down onto his lap. “Hey sexy,” I whispered to him. “Got a question I wanted to ask you.”

“What’s that, love?”

“I know we can’t fool around with other men...”

“Phil made that *abundantly* clear, love.”

“Aye, he did,” I purred into his ear quiet enough so only he could hear me. “But he didn’t say there was anything about us not being able to fool around with other *women*, did he?”

“Am I not enough for you, Ash?” he teased me.

“More than plenty, love,” I whispered into his ear. “But I figure it doesn’t hurt to have a friend and a playmate in someone else’s House, just to establish some better alliances. And you know I wouldn’t do anything that would hurt you, or without asking you first.”

“Who did you have in mind?”

“Phil’s girl Linda,” I teased him. “She’s quite the stunner, and she seems like she’s pretty much in the know around here, so I figure getting into her good graces couldn’t hurt. And I like playing with girls now and then.” He looked at me a little dubiously. “I won’t try and *keep* her,” I giggled. “I just figure I can offer a laurel, and hearty handshake to a fellow teamer.”

“Don’t you try and using *Blazing Saddles* to get your way with me, missy,” he said, which made me giggle even further. “Alright, but make sure you don’t get hurt, and try and keep it out of sight of everyone else. The last thing I want you to do is make a scene about it.”

“Where should I keep it out of sight?”

“You know the secret private library I found hidden behind the bookcase that I didn’t tell you about, the one that I know you know about anyway?” he said to me.

I knew exactly what he was talking about. He’d been exploring on his own not long after we’d moved into the place and found a bookcase that opened to reveal a concealed stairwell, leading up to a third story library with a deck overlooking the front of the house, concealed within a nestled nook, so it was nearly impossible to see from the ground level. He hadn’t told any of us about it, but I’d *also* stumbled across it when I was exploring the house. It was a neat little surprise, and I guess it should’ve been a sign for us to search the place far more thoroughly than we did, as you know we’d find out later when one of the cats stumbled onto the entirely hidden basement *level* we’d missed. There’s not much on the third story – there’s the hidden library on one side, and there’s a guest suite on the other, with an attached bathroom, but nobody’s decided to move into that particular room yet. Andy’s sort of big on keeping that one open, so that if people need to stay over, we’re not booting them to a hotel. It’s only the one big bedroom and the bathroom, but it had a double queen in it when we moved in, so we suspect it was meant to be a ‘backup’ master suite.

“I might know *of* it,” I whispered with a mischievous grin. “You think that’ll be an okay place for a tryst with a specimen of Linda’s caliber?”

“I think if you need somewhere better and more secluded than that, I can’t help you.”

“And you’re *sure* you’re okay with it?”

“As long as you’re not catching feelings or trying to move away from me or the rest of our family here.”

“I assure you, baby,” I whispered in between kisses on his cheek, his lips and his neck. “You couldn’t get rid of me if you fucking tried.”

I slid off Andy’s lap and headed out of the poker room and into the main dining room, where all the various ladies of the three Houses were mingling or trying to anyway. Niko and

Lauren were chatting with Lily and Jenny (Eric's Jenny), but Phil's partners were mostly keeping to themselves, at least until Ari and his family showed up, at which point, I watched Niko make a concerted effort to try and push the groups to mix between them, especially as Andy's friend Jenna stopped by, with her partner, an FBI agent named Dale Wilson who looked so bulky he stood out, considering most of the men were playing poker, but apparently he didn't have any interest in gambling, so while Jenna was sitting at the table, Dale was trying to make friends among the other houses, but after a few minutes, even with me trying to chat him up a little, he went to go spend time at the poker table with his soon-to-be wife. That was the point where I decided to make my move onto Linda.

Linda was dressed as Cammy from Street Fighter, and I can tell by the look on your face that that means as much to you as it did to me, so I'll describe the outfit. She had her long blonde hair down into two braided tails than hung down to the small of her back, and the main feature of the costume was a one-piece green leotard that left her arms and legs almost completely bare, except for black leather boots on her feet and red leather gloves on her forearms. She also had on a red beret atop her head, and her legs had some green camo paint on them. I didn't know the character, but she looked pretty damn hot, there was no denying that.

"Hey Linda," I said to her as I approached her. "Can I borrow you for a bit?"

Linda sort of looked around the room a bit, as if sizing things up slightly before nodding to one of the other girls from her family to keep an eye on Phil, then turned her attention back to me. "Sure, you wanna go somewhere more quiet, I take it?"

I nodded at her. "C'mon, follow me." I lead her upstairs to the second floor and into the library before moving over to the bookcase, pressing on it to let the latch unhook so it could swing out and open.

"I see you found the hidden library," Linda said as she walked past me and started heading up the narrow staircase into the concealed area on the third floor.

"We did," I told her. "And I recognized your handwriting on the note, so I'm guessing you wrote it on Phil's behalf, so that Andy wouldn't recognize it?"

"I'm surprised you recognized my handwriting," Linda said to me with a grin. "But good on you. And yeah, Phil didn't want Andy to know it was him, at least for a little while, who helped pick the house you all were moving into. Phil said it used to belong to some other author, but I never saw it, at least not until he showed me the hidden staircase behind the bookshelf. That seemed pretty nifty." She strolled over to the small couch in the library, sat down and looked up at me. "So why am I here?"

"Two reasons," I said to her. "First and foremost, I want to make something perfectly clear – I know that Niko works for you, and that's fine, because I don't think you're ever going to ask her to do anything that goes against the family's interests, but just in case you are, remember she's biologically *bound* to Andy Rook, which means her allegiance to this family is a higher priority than her allegiance to her country. And I bet when you first hooked up with Phil, you did a deep dive into all of his friends, so you know Andy's not the kind of guy who's ever going to act contrary to the interests of his country. And I bet along with that, you did your homework on *me*, making sure I'm exactly who I said I am, and clearly you didn't find anything to concern you. All of this is me saying that you can trust me, and that you should consider me your ally and friend inside of Team Rook. If you want to slip us some information and you don't want to make it look like it's *always* coming from Niko, you can give it to me. Likewise, I'm happy to keep you abreast of everything going on with our family, as long as you promise to keep me in the loop for shit that's going to come down the pipe at us."

The look Linda gave me was like I was kitten with my back arched in front of an elephant, not a threat but amusing, nevertheless. “I can respect that. You don’t have full clearance, but I can make sure if there’s shit coming down the pipeline you should know about it that you do. Phil was already pretty much doing that anyway.”

“I suspect you and Phil have different lists about what qualified as a priority. So I’m asking you, woman to woman, to make sure we’re on the same page, that you and I start trying to grow as close as Andy and Phil, maybe even closer.”

“How do you aim we get to that?”

“I like girls as well as guys,” I said to her as I started to close the distance. “And I’ve got Andy’s consent to play outside of the house, as long as I’m safe about it. It’s been two days since Andy and I have gotten it on.” My hand moved to rub along the top of Linda’s exposed, lovely thigh. “You and Phil?”

“Three days,” Linda said, licking her lips. “You think I’m hot?”

“Like the surface of the sun,” I said, my hand moving up to rub against her pussy through the small bit of the leotard covering that tender flesh of hers. “What about me?”

“I’ve never had a ginger before,” Linda said, reaching forward to unbutton my shirt, sliding her heavily calloused fingertips inside of my black lacey bra to tease one of my nipples. “So I’m game if you are.”

Over the next twenty minutes, the two of us explored every inch of each other’s bodies, and I found out that Linda is *exactly* as fit as she looks, but also that she’s also used to being in the driver’s seat when it came to experiences with women, because she seemed surprised at how much I was willing to set the tempo, make the initiations. I wanted to show her she didn’t have to be the boss all the time, and that seemed to catch her a little off guard, although she certainly seemed to enjoy it. I undressed her first, and my tongue in her cunt made her cum so hard she shoved a pillow over her face to keep the squeal from filling the whole house.

She returned the favor, naturally. Good times were had by all and after having been missing for about forty minutes, we cleaned ourselves up and headed back downstairs, only to find Andy looking crestfallen and Niko looking scared. They’d both tell me about the poker game a few minutes later, and I knew the next few days were going to *utterly* suck.

But I also realized I had the first piece of information I needed to give to Linda.

\* \* \* \* \*

“This leads into the whole poker game, doesn’t it?” Fiona asked Ash.

“It does,” Ash sighed, “but if you want the story of what happened *at* the game, I’m not the person to talk to. I can fill in what happened before and after, but the actual game itself, you should talk to Andy, since he’s the only one of us who was actually there.”

“I can’t believe that this man, Covington, was gambling with human lives,” Fi sighed as Ash gave her the signal that she could move again. “It’s fucking horrific.”

“You won’t hear me arguing with you, but that’s the sort of weirdo some of the people who live in this area are,” Aisling sighed. “They see human beings as a resource to be bought, sold, traded and used for whatever odd desires they currently feel. I can tell you Andy was a mental mess in the days before and the first day or two after, just because he felt like he was caught in between a rock and a hard place in the worst possible way. He didn’t want to subject anyone to living with any of those other men, but he also didn’t like the idea of Covington having Asha and her mom together, especially having seen how the bastard treated my friend,

Lisa. You didn't meet Lisa, but she ended up joining the New Daughters of the Revolution because Covington didn't allow her to *speak in public*. I know Andy had looked into whether or not she wanted to join our family, because of *course* Andy did, but she told Phil that she didn't want to stay anywhere *near* California, and I can't say that I blame her on that one." There was a knock on the door, and both Ash and Fiona grabbed their robes. "C'mon in," Ash said as she turned the canvas so that it wouldn't be visible from the doorway.

Emily poked her head in. "Both Melody and Mali are awake," she said to them, "so I figured you two might want to come and introduce yourselves to them. Hannah's traded out for Sarah, and Sarah seems to think Andrew will be up within a few hours."

"What makes her think that?" Fiona asked.

"He's twitching a little, which Alexis was doing before she woke up, according to Jenny," the small British woman said. "About before, Ash..."

"Hey," Ash said, raising her hand to stop her. "Don't be sorry; just do better, okay? I'm not mad, I'm just disappointed."

Emily smiled with a touch of sadness. "I understand. I will do better, I promise." She was about to pull back out through the doorway, when Ash motioned for her to come over.

"Hey," Ash said. "C'mere." Emily walked into the room, her head still a little hung apologetically, but Ash reached over and lifted Emily's chin up, then wrapped her arms around her and gave her a big hug. "I said I'm not mad, and that means I'm not mad, okay?"

Emily teared up a little. "I know. I know you said that, but I still feel like I fucked up..."

"You did, Em," Ash laughed. "But I can't remove that feeling from you. That's guilt. That's the price you pay for being human."

"Well I don't care for it!" Emily said with a sound halfway between a laugh and a sob. "Thank you for the hug, Ash. It helps."

"Oh, well if it helps..." Fiona said, moving to wrap her arms around both of them, which made Emily smile a little bit more.

"You're both quite remarkable women," Emily said.

"Shhhhh," Ash said. "We're hugging..."

## **Part Eight – “It Didn’t Take?”**

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

When they got back from their trip to the city, both Fiona and Aisling found themselves buzzing. Neither had realized quite how much they’d needed to get out of the walls of New Eden, and San Francisco had been quite the experience.

They’d stopped at City Lights Bookstore, and Andy had agreed to do a book signing for them in mid-January as way to draw people out of their houses and to get them back interacting with other people again. Fiona had been surprised that the woman running the store, Brittany, had actually paid attention to the dedications in Andy’s books, but it was mostly just nice to see Andy interacting with a fan of his work.

It wasn’t like Andy was a fame chaser, but he’d been removed from most of an audience for so long that he’d sort of been spinning in neutral, and Fiona had been a little bit worried about him. The reviews of “High Noon At Stonehenge” had been extremely positive (barring a few outliers including one that had bitched that he’d been too sparse with details from the same critic who literally binged on about it reviewing *every one* of Andy’s books) and that had helped him some, but Fiona could tell Andy was being interviewed as much for who he *was* (which was to say the face of pandemic survivors) as much as he was for what he’d *written*. That hadn’t set especially well with him, not that she could blame him.

Fi had spent enough time to know how Andy felt about his books being successful – he didn’t care if they were profitable, particularly, so much as he did care that they were inspiring people to *think*. Talking to someone who’d read and enjoyed his work who wasn’t friend or family certainly helped stoke his spirits up a bit.

It had also been a nice chance to spend a little bit of time with Sarah without the shadow of Emily lingering around, and the more time Fi spent talking to her while Andy talked shop with Brittany, the more Fi understood where Andy’s crush had come from. She was incredibly positive, but also somehow constantly self-effacing and snarky. She was well-educated and well-read, but didn’t ever want to be seen as rubbing anyone’s nose in her education. Sarah also liked to stay close to Andy, even when she was having conversations with others, sometimes just sliding her arm around his waist or hooking her thumb in one of the belt loops of his jeans.

What was more impressive, though, was that she was making a point of spending time talking with both her and Aisling when Andy was deep into a discussion about the store’s recently passed owner, asking for book recommendations while offering some of her own, and despite the image she could sometimes present as being a little flighty, Fiona was delighted to find that she was *remarkably* well-read when it came to both literature and film, and the three of them spent at least ten minutes discussing Kurosawa’s “Ran” and how it compared to Shakespeare’s “King Lear,” which it had been derived from.

Fiona had turned Andy onto Kurosawa in college, and it had resulted in a lifelong love for their man, so much so that one of only two posters that Andy had framed around the house that wasn’t for one of his or his partner’s works was an old “Seven Samurai” poster that hung proudly in one of the living rooms. (The other was for John Woo’s film “Hard Boiled” and featured Chow Yun Fat sliding down a banister with a gun in each hand. Woo and his leading man had been the thing Andy had turned *her* onto in exchange.)

After the group had spent some time talking about books, they’d excused themselves and headed over to Buster’s, a cheesesteak shop that Andy could not stop talking about. It had gotten mention in Andy’s stories in a number of different places, and in such glorious detail, so Fi had

assumed it had to have been a fictional place of Andy's creation, but instead it was a legitimate, real place, not far at all from City Lights, a little corner joint with almost no seating on the inside. In fact, if Andy had brought just all his fiancées to the location, half of them would've ended up seated in tables just outside of the place. But with just the five of them, they were an absolute perfect fit for the inside of the location.

To say that the food was remarkable would be to do a disservice to the food, which was some of the best Fiona had ever had in her lifetime. After her first bite, she knew this would be a lifelong habit not only for her but for the rest of the girls of the house as well. The steak had a sear to it that could only come from a grill that had baked millions of cheesesteaks, a sort of lived-in flavor that gave an incredible depth to the taste.

It seemed like Andy also knew the guy behind the grill at least a little, and that Andy had been coming in quite regularly for over a decade. The man was a tiny little fireplug of a Latino, short and squat, like a Mexican Patton Oswalt. And yet the man had an infectious laugh. It was the group of women working there, one behind the counter and two more out doing deliveries, that seemed like a surprise to Fiona. All of three of the women were stacked with some of the largest fake tits Fi had ever seen, dressed in white zip-up tracksuits that they left the top of unzipped enough to show off the goods. They all seemed vaguely Eastern European or maybe Slavic, with dyed platinum blonde hair and a ton of heavy gold chains, their lips painted bubblegum pink.

During the ride back, Fiona had asked Andy if he thought all of partners of the cook, whose name was Carlos, were ex-strippers, something that had made Andy laugh before nodding. He then went on to explain that because Buster's Cheesesteaks was located where it was, it often had strippers or ex-strippers manning the cash register. Buster's had a long-standing tradition of being open until "2:30ish" specifically so that when the bars and strip clubs closed for the night, all those patrons who needed a little bit of time to sober up before climbing in a cab to go home would stagger into Buster's, get some food in them, tip a ridiculous amount, *then* head home. So he suspected that a lot of those girls simply found out Carlos was alive and available, and they all jumped onto the first life raft they could get.

Once he'd explained it to her, she'd laughed quite a bit of the rest of the ride, which was good, because it helped keep her mind off of how utterly desolate and empty San Francisco had felt. She'd been to the city before, when the pandemic wasn't on, and it had been vibrant, full of life, chock full of people, almost any time day or night.

That wasn't how it had felt today.

No, it had almost seemed like a ghost town. Yes, there had been a handful of cars on the streets, and a few people walking on sidewalks, but overall, downtown San Francisco had felt one step away from being a zombie apocalypse film during the daytime, when all the zombies were asleep or in hiding. Many of the buildings had caution tape in front of their entrances, and she saw a variety of flags and sweep and clear signals left by doorways. Windows on upper floors were sometimes broken, sometimes painted black, although she had also seen signs of the cluster towers they'd seen the stories about on 60 Minutes last month.

It was hard to think about how many dead bodies had been pulled from these very buildings, although there was some relief in realizing much of the space they'd been past had been commercial buildings, with no real bodies to clear out. Everyone had just gone home from work one day... and never really come back.

There were a lot of reports how many of the businesses in San Francisco had moved to virtual or work-from-home business models, and how the idea of a traditional 'office' was going

to go the way of the dinosaur, but Fiona knew capitalism was a dog with the sharpest teeth ever, and once it had sunk those teeth in a bone, they weren't ever going to let go. The idea of businesses not being able to watch over people while they worked was something any boss would be losing their shit over in rage. Trust? *Workers?* Ha! Might as well just say there weren't set office hours, or that people could be trusted with unlimited time off. There wasn't a middle manager alive who wasn't champing at the bit to get people back into cubicles where he could keep his beady little eyes on them.

Even the Bay Bridge, something Fiona had been over once in the middle of rush hour, hadn't had more than two or three cars on it, and they were leaving San Francisco right in what should've been the busiest time on the bridge. The whole thing was unnerving, and had given Fi a sense of unease, and by the time they were back to New Eden, Fi was just glad to see a multitude of other people again. She wasn't even ready to really look at all the pictures she'd taken during their excursion. She was afraid it would leave her feeling empty and distressed.

She looked over and Ash sort of had that same drained look to her, then looked to Sarah, who immediately moved over and hugged both Ash and Fi with one arm each. "Don't worry, bitches," she giggled into each of their ears. "It can't rain all the time. We'll see brighter days again sooner or later."

That set both Fi and Ash laughing, as if the tension had popped like a soap bubble, and somehow dissipated the heaviness that had been clinging to them since their return. Both of them kissed Sarah's cheeks, and when Sarah was walking into the house, Ash turned to Fi and said, "Want to get a bit of work done while Andy's mulling over the trip?"

"God yes," Fi said. "I'll get the wine, you set up your easel and my tape recorder."

"Meet you down there."

\* \* \* \* \*

So, the day before the poker game, they brought Andy two more women who were meant to be additions to the house. You *know* one of them – Sheridan – but the other was presenting herself as Teresa. I guess she thought that maybe a list of names was being sent on to people beforehand, and she wanted to throw Andy off, but Andy didn't know she was coming any more than anyone else did.

Where do I start in talking about Erin Teresa Donegal? I'd quickly learn she was Andy's ex-girlfriend, and she treated him mean in just about every sense of the word. I sort of saw why Andy was at least physically attracted to her? Imagine Hannah's tits on Sheridan's body and you're not too far off. She's certainly beautiful but in sort of an ice princess kind of way. Andy told me she was a lot friendlier when they first met, but the longer the two of them were together, the clearer it became that she was just using the friendly approach to get Andy to do the things she wanted him to do.

They'd broken up something like a decade ago, and Andy had been basically single ever since, having gone on a handful of dates, but mostly still too messed up from the damage that Erin had done to him. When it came to women, he didn't trust his judgment, but he didn't want anyone who wouldn't accept him as he was either, which meant he'd done twenty or thirty first dates that never made it to a second.

Now that Erin was told she needed a man to latch onto to stay alive, she thought she'd try and get back with Andy, and see if the years without her had made him more pliant, which they

certainly hadn't. If anything, she found that between me and Niko, we'd instilled him with a sense of confidence that proved he didn't need her ass, amazing tits or no, and he basically told her to go and pound sand.

They argued.

Not a lot, but just enough for Andy to get his point across.

Erin seemed convinced that Andy was going to change his mind, but he didn't.

Anyway, I don't like talking about her. She's a bitch, she's self-centered, she thought she could come in and be queen bee of the house and instead, Andy gave her the boot. In fact, he'd told us that even if the poker game hadn't come up, he would've sent her back to the Air Force, refusing to take delivery of her, and would've explained to the Air Force that she'd shown up under false pretenses. Knowing Phil like I do, I'm sure it would've all gotten ironed out anyway.

But I remember the utter tension in Andy's shoulders right before he left for the poker game. He'd explained the whole thing to me and Lauren, and so I knew he was marching into the lion's den. He asked me in advance whether or not I thought he was doing the right thing, and I told him that I did, even as weird as it all seemed. Niko had explained about Charlotte and Asha and what kind of man Covington was... well, I knew all about what a bastard Covington was on my own, so that wasn't really any of a shocker to me.

The hardest part about that night was not knowing what was going on. I threw on "Love Actually" and watched that before loading up "Seven Samurai," which Andy and I had watched together but always put me at least a little bit at ease. By the end of it, it was just about time for Andy to be showing back up at the house, so I went out to sit on the porch in my pajamas, bringing a thick blanket and a cup of hot cocoa to wait.

I wasn't out there too long, because about five minutes after I went out, I got a text from Niko saying, "Andy victorious. Heading home."

I wasn't entirely sure what that meant for us as a family, but I knew Andy would be in at least a decent mood when he got back. About five minutes after *that*, the car pulled up and stopped right in front of the porch, Niko hopping out to rush over and give me a hug.

"Did the good guys win?" I asked them, knowing a little bit of the answer, but not the whole story.

"Andy got them out safely. Charlotte's not going to stay with us, though."

"Oh no!" I remember saying. "Why not?"

"She's not into me," Andy joked as he got out of the car. "Had to happen sooner or later," he chuckled, "and frankly, I'm surprised it took this long."

"Her loss then," I giggled, as I looked into the back seat. "Looks like you got two hot young things to add anyway. Why do I know her?" I sort of recognized Piper, but didn't entirely, right, not at the start. She looked familiar without being someone I could place.

"Imagine her doing a little wiggle dance before she goes to play volleyball."

That, however, told me *exactly* who she was. I think nearly everyone on the planet had seen that meme at some point or another. "Shut up! What is even happening!" I remember at that point figuring that the two of them – Piper and Asha – were the only women he'd won. (Plus Charlotte, obviously.) Boy, was I going to get a surprise in just a few minutes.

Andy popped the trunk and pulled out two suitcases, one still in the trunk space. He carried them up the stairs and into the house, as I mouthed to Niko, "is this it?"

'You wish,' Niko mouthed back, trying not to giggle.

"I'm gonna need a hand hauling them into the house, though," Andy told me.

I nodded, because he certainly *looked* tired. "Where are we going to put them? In the master



bedroom?"

Andy shook his head. "We've got plenty of extra bedrooms upstairs, and Piper was nearly catatonic before I imprinted her, so the last thing I want is her waking up surrounded by tons of unfamiliar people. We'll let her have a bedroom to herself, although I think you should probably give her a shower quick before you put her into a bed."

Niko nodded as I helped her pick Piper up. "Good idea. She really is quite ripe right now. C'mon Ash, let's go hose her down." I couldn't have agreed more with Niko – Piper absolutely *reeked* of piss, shit and sweat, so we hauled her into the house and put her in the shower, then hosed her down. We took a good amount of time about it, too, because we wanted Piper to wake up with a good impression of Andy and the rest of us, and not thinking about that shithead Covington he'd obviously rescued her from. I wasn't sure how bad it had been, but holy shit, it looked like she'd been homeless for about a year. The smell alone was awful, and there was all sorts of shit in her hair, including a couple of leaves and twigs, which we'd find out later were from when she'd tried to escape. She had plenty of cuts and scrapes all over her body, all of which looked self-inflicted, but they were already starting to heal up. I didn't know it at the time, but she was in the starting phase of a regeneration cycle, so the wounds were already beginning to close. We still put bandages on her arms and legs anyway, in addition to washing her hair and drying it best as we could. We used some of my body wash and shampoo, so she ended up smelling a bit like me when we tucked her into bed, but at least she didn't smell like any of the filth we'd washed off her.

Just as we were sliding her into a bed in one of the spare bedrooms, Andy came to check on us, and when I say that, I mean it. He trusted us to get Piper taken care of, but he also knew that the very sight of her was going to make *us* feel uncomfortable in a lot of ways. Niko spent part of the time we were hosing Piper down telling me about how the woman had basically tackled Andy, and that he'd been completely overwhelmed by the experience. God help me, Fi, I'm glad she did, because the comedy of that image made our work go a lot faster, especially imagining Andy trying to comfort this cavewoman covered in her own shit that was basically having her way with him.

"Everything go okay?" he asked us as we walked to the door. By this point, we all knew enough about the imprinting process that nobody was whispering, because there wasn't any point. Nothing was going to disturb Piper from her slumber before her body was ready.

"Sure, no problem, but she definitely needed to be hosed off," Niko said. "I'll bring her bag up here so she can get dressed in the morning."

"Thanks," Andy said, leaning down to give her a soft kiss. "I'm glad I didn't let you down."

"You couldn't have, even if you'd lost," she said, heading towards the stairs.

"So how many more people are we expecting, and did you find a way to get that bitchy ex of yours out of our family?" I asked him, as they both stepped out of the bedroom, closing the door behind them. I knew he was going to send her back, but the idea of her going and living with someone who none of us liked? Well, I'm not so mean as to say that I hoped she'd go to Covington, but I'm also not going to lie and say I would've shed a tear if she had.

"Someone'll be coming by to pick up Erin tomorrow," Andy said, "and in addition to Sheridan staying here, there'll be another three getting dropped off tomorrow."

"Oh good," I told him as we headed downstairs. "I like Sheridan. She's feisty, but in a good way. She was showing me how to stretch out and be more limber. Are you going to imprint her tonight?"

Andy shook his head. "God no. Piper was in such a state when we found her that my first load didn't start her imprinting process. It just didn't take first time, so we had to go again."

I stopped walking. “Wait, what? You mean it didn't *take*?” Niko had forgotten to mention that when we were hosing Piper down, and I was actually a bit concerned, worried that maybe they should've taken Piper over to the base instead of bringing her back home.

“I mean I came in her mouth, and she pushed me onto the floor and crawled on top of me and fucked me like I hadn't even given her a drop. After I pumped a load into her pussy, though, she slumped on top of me, and it seemed to take that time.”

“Well, we can't let the girls go too long before getting imprinted then, if it's going to come to that,” I told him, feeling a little guilty about having thought about sending Erin to that bastard's house earlier. “Covington's a real prick, isn't he?”

“More than you can even imagine.” Andy rubbed his eyes. “I have to go tell Erin she's leaving in the morning, don't I?”

“It's late, Andy. You can wait until morning, ya git. Hopefully both she and Sheridan are already asleep in the pool house. Lauren's already completely passed out in bed. She's got to go in tomorrow to work with the team. Apparently, they're going to try and hold a football game in a month, which means she needs to be sure the players are all in tip top shape.”

The next morning, after Andy explained to Sheridan that she was welcome to stay, the hostage trades began. I don't mean that literally, but it sort of felt that way. Trucks came by and brought women over one at a time, Sarah first then Emily. Watkins was supposed to be bringing over another woman named Deborah Barnes, but as it turned out, his son had already imprinted her, which Nathaniel Watkins was *furious* about. In order to punish his son, he was going to send a woman that they'd requested specifically *for* him over to *Andy* instead. That woman would turn out to be Hannah. I haven't met Deb yet, but I assume based on what Nathaniel's said, she'd have been a good fit here as well.

After Andy had imprinted both Sarah and Emily, he looked both delighted and exhausted. I'm not going to lie – we'd spent at least a little bit of the time standing outside of the door listening in, at least towards the end, but only because Emily was fucking *loud*, as if she wanted to make sure the whole house knew she was giving herself over to Andy. We showered with him afterwards, and he told us all about the whole intrigue Emily had done to ensure her and Sarah had ended up together, and how it had almost collided with the intrigue *Niko* had done to get Charlotte and Asha away from Covington.

That day went from great to horrible in a flash, though, because Phil came over after that, ostensibly to pick up Charlotte, who was already starting to feel a little bit edgy, just because of how long she'd been waiting for imprinting. She knew what to expect, but that didn't make it any easier for her to take.

And the look on Phil's face told me something truly horrible had happened, and that it was going to make Andy's heart break. A little less than an hour later, I found out, along with the rest of the house, that Andy's brother Matty had died. He'd gone to try and help a neighbor secure some storm shutters, and a week or so later, he was gone. Phil hadn't heard about it in time to dispatch an emergency set of doses to Matty's wife, and frankly, he was already so swamped with other things that even if it had crossed his desk, he probably would've missed it. Nobody blamed Phil – he was already stretched thinner than humanly possible, and there was just no way to ask more of him than he was already doing.

I feel like I'd only just begun to get to know Matty, even though I'd probably talked to him for a day or two over FaceTime, and the loss hit me almost as hard as it hit Andy. I'd been looking forward to meeting Matty in person, to introducing him to Dermot and watching the two go a couple of rounds of who could tell the worst joke. The next morning I sent my brothers Dermot

and Colin the angriest text messages I could, telling them not to break quarantine or that I would have their corpses drawn and quartered. Then I told them that Andy's brother had died, which resulted in both of them calling me immediately, and the three of us having a good old-fashioned cry in a high-tech way, the three of us on a single Zoom chat. But that was also tempered with good news as well.

The morning after we found out that Matty had died, Andy pulled me into the shower to have a long conversation about what the future, *our* future, was going to look like. And then he asked me to marry him, which I immediately said yes to, with two conditions.

\* \* \* \* \*

“What were the two conditions?” Fi asked.

“The first was that he had to ask both Niko and Lauren as well, because I didn't want to get singled out too much,” Ash told her. “I was here first, and I knew that was always going to carry with it a bit of weight, whether I wanted it to or not, so I wanted to help deflect a little bit of that and make sure that my two partners who'd been in this for months with me were afforded the same courtesy.”

“And the second?”

Ash smirked a little bit. “He had to promise not to feel bad when Lauren said ‘no,’ which I knew she was going to. Her and Taylor had reconnected fast and hard, and despite the fact that Lauren was still furious with her, she and Taylor were... *are* massively in love with each other. That meant they were going to want to get married at some point, and so Lauren was going to tell Andy ‘no,’ not because she didn't love him, but because she loved Taylor more, and what she and Taylor had would need to be made official sooner or later.”

“He asked Niko, though?”

“Well, he was *about* to ask Niko, and Niko being Niko just asked *him* because she was impatient, and she didn't want him thinking the rejection from Lauren was contagious. And she, like me, wanted to prep him because we both knew just from meeting them that Sarah was going to want to marry Andy, and because that's what Sarah wanted, it would be what Emily wanted as well, because those two are sort of joined at the hip.”

“Which is strange,” Fiona said. “They seem *wildly* different.”

“Sort of, I guess,” Ash sighed. “But not really, the more you dig. They'd both had to hide their bisexuality in Hollywood. They'd both had huge successes which had sort of established their careers, and in some ways, it had sort of limited the options for both in terms of parts they were getting offered and roles they were being considered for. That was partly why Sarah wanted to option Andy's book – she knew nobody would've considered her for the role of the barbarian queen unless *she* made it happen. And Em's fallen for Andy too. It's just taken her longer to realize it, I think, because she's trying not to crowd everyone else, when you sort of have to make sure you get your time with him in.”

“She's used to being mostly on her own,” Fi said. “I've known girls like her growing up, people who've been put on a pedestal only to suddenly find themselves surrounded by a bunch of other girls who don't believe in pedestals. It's just a change. By the time the wedding rolls around, I think she'll feel just like one of the gang, even if we have to rope her in on our own. You have to admit, it's a *lot* of people all piling in at once. We should make time to spend some one-on-one with Sarah, Em and Piper, to get them as comfortable as we can in having them among the group.

Today felt like a good start between us and Sarah. Maybe we need to organize an outing of our own, or take a trip, just the fiancées, so we can get comfortable being around one another all the time, as well as sharing time with Andy. He's a people pleaser, so he's going to do everything he can to make sure we're all as happy as can be."

"Yeah, that's something we can think about," Ash said. "Although did you see that look on Andy's face when we got back? Something's going through his mind, even if he's not ready to talk about it yet."

"We'll know soon enough, I'm sure," Fi replied. "One thing about Andy, when he gets an idea in his head, he's going to follow through on it and soon."

## **Part Nine – “Worse Than Mean”**

*December 14<sup>th</sup>, 2020*

Fiona looked out the window at the snow-covered streets of New York City, watching cars slowly slog their way between the skyscrapers. The streets had been plowed, but because the traffic wasn't constant, there was still some slush on the streets, and the sidewalks were only somewhat shoveled. Her watch said it was just past 9 a.m., and she was, as far as she could tell, the only one awake, everyone else still trying to sleep through their jetlag. They had gotten a connected suite, two large bedrooms with one centralized common area that Fiona was now hanging out in.

She'd never really liked New York City, but not for the reasons most people had. She didn't find it that much dirtier than any other major metropolitan area. She didn't find that its homeless population was any larger or more aggressive than they were elsewhere. No, she hated it because the streets were never, *ever* silent.

Any time, day or night, the streets of NYC were like a living, breathing organism, never quiet, always giving off some noise or another, a constant reminder that someone or something lurked around every corner, under every rock and bush. At least in D.C., for a few hours every night, the streets fell deathly still, and Fi could hear herself think without too much effort.

Unlike San Francisco, NYC at least had a little life on its streets, with a handful of cars traversing through streets that were normally backed end-to-end with iron denizens. If SF had been resisting coming out of its shell, New Yorkers were already completely *over* the idea of the pandemic, regardless of how many people it had killed.

She lifted her camera's viewfinder to her eyes, pointing the lens down towards the street before she pushed the button to make the camera's shutter snap closed, imprinting the image digitally for all eternity.

“Couldn't stay asleep either?” Ash's voice said to her, as the redhead slipped into the common area, pulling the door quietly closed behind her. “Lack of Andy next to you?”

“Well, I've got Moira with me, which helps,” Fi said, “but I'd be lying if I said I didn't miss Andy's warmth being within arm's reach. Things between him and Em even out a little?”

“I think he's forgiven her, but he's not going to forget, if you take my meaning,” Ash told her. “He understands why she did it, but understanding isn't acceptance, and he made it clear that if she keeps putting herself in front of the family, there's going to be problems long term. But I think it's mostly settled, and that she just is taking a little bit longer than most to prioritize thinking about the group as a whole.”

“Think she'll overcome it?”

“She will,” Ash said. “I think she's most of the way there right now, anyway. The next step is to just internalize it, to make it so it's natural and it hops into your brain without you having to consciously reach for it.”

“This trip'll help,” Fiona told her. “We were just talking about needing a fiancées' trip, and here we are, the lot of us on tour together with Andy. Was she this guarded when she arrived?”

Aisling nodded. “Guarded is a wise choice of words,” she said. “The two of them were sort of inseparable, and I think maybe Emily was a little taken aback about how strongly Sarah felt for Andy before she'd even met him.”

“Typically, it *does* take quite some time to fall in love.”

Ash grinned, giving a little shrug. “Not for me, but I suspect you'll try and tell me my love for Andy is at least a little chemical.”

Fiona smiled, trying to be as polite as possible. “I think it figured into it a bit at the start, but you’ve had more time with him than pretty much anyone else, so if it was *just* the chemicals, I think you’d have moved past that by now, don’t you?”

“I think I’d have moved past it within days if not weeks, but I can’t speak specifically to how the chemicals have affected me,” Ash admitted. “That’s a Phil question far more than it is one for me.” Fi lifted her camera up, focusing on Ash for a moment before snapping a shot. “What’s that for?”

“I wanted to capture the moment when I saw Aisling Blake admit she was wrong.”

Ash laughed, shaking her head. “Don’t be a cunt, Fi,” she teased back. “One of us has to be cautious on Andy’s behalf.”

“I’m just giving you shit, babe,” Fi giggled. “It’s the same thing for all of us. None of us know how much the drugs are affecting us, but it all feels pretty damn real to me.”

“It’s real for all of us,” Ash said. “Natural chemicals, added chemicals – it’s all real all the time, so who the hell cares about anything else?”

“I just worry that for Emily it’s all about hanging on to Sarah, and not thinking about Andy for the sake of Andy,” Fiona told the Irishwoman. “That sort of false enthusiasm is hard to maintain in the long haul.”

“It might’ve been, right at the start,” Ash agreed. “But Em came around quickly, especially as she found out more and more about Andy. The early days were pretty telling, and when Andy wasn’t around, I sort of did a bit of work with Emily, convincing her that I thought Sarah’s opinion of Andy was an accurate one, and that even if she didn’t feel an immediate connection, she’d come around.”

“You want me to get us some coffee, some breakfast, and we can keep talking on the record?” Fiona asked. “I know I’m not posing, but it’s just the two of us, and I want to get the rest of your thoughts down before we get sidetracked by Christmas and the wedding. I figure one or two more sessions should do it, because we’re not too far from me and Moira entering the picture, are we?”

“There’s a couple more key events we should probably talk about, yeah,” Ash said, glancing around. “Hmmm. Yeah, I suppose I’m okay with doing it here if you brought your tape recorder with you. If either of them wakes up, though, maybe we stop talking about them.”

“Are you going to say mean things about them?”

“*Mean?* No. But I’m going to be *honest* and sometimes that’s worse than mean,” Ash said as Fiona moved over to pick up the phone.

“Yeah, can you send up two pots of coffee, some orange juice, some pineapple juice, some milk, and three breakfast sampler plates? Right, toast, eggs and bacon,” Fiona told room service. “Yes, just add it to the room’s tab. Thank you.” She found her purse, grabbed her digital recorder, switched it on, set it on the table between them. “Shall we?”

\* \* \* \* \*

Emily and Sarah had barely been in the house a couple of days when I and Niko got engaged to Andy, and while Sarah was initially caught up in reading the advance reader copy of “High Noon at Stonehenge” that Andy had given to her, a few days later, basically everyone in the house was consumed with a new project – Project: Pitch Partners.

When Hannah had shown up, she’d asked if Andy could possibly request someone to join our family. It was brazen and bold, but that’s Hannah for you. As it turned out, it hadn’t even

occurred to any of us in the house that Andy could *request* partners until Hannah mentioned it, and as soon as she did, it was like it was open season, with everyone wanting to bring their friends into the fold.

Well, *almost* everyone.

I didn't really have anyone I wanted to pitch, and Niko and I had both found out that we were pregnant, so we decided to tell Andy about that during my pitch slot and have that be a little distraction to liven up his day. Niko didn't really have anyone she wanted to pitch anyway, and, well, the look on his face when we told him was better than anything we could've possibly imagined. He'd long ago abandoned the idea of being married, having kids, and now that all of that was coming true at lightspeed, he was a little caught off guard.

During the two days while the girls were preparing their pitches, however, I had plenty of time to get to know all the new faces in the house, of which we had a lot. Piper and I got along like we'd been old friends for years, which was good, because that girl needed an ear to talk off, and the fact that she'd been trying to figure out her place in the family just meant that she wanted to fit in, so I let her hang with me and Niko a bit during the earliest part of the pitch planning.

See, there were a handful of rules that I laid down for everyone who wanted to pitch Andy, but I didn't think any of them were particularly unreasonable. I told them all that Andy had the right to ask or not ask anyone he wanted to, no matter how we felt about it. Nobody should *expect* Andy to pick their suggestion – that was why we were having the pitch process in the first place. I knew Andy was going to have his reasons, and I knew that some of those reasons might seem silly to the rest of us.

Andy had decided since there were five remaining seats at the dinner table, he could take on an additional five women before he thought his balls would give way. Oh, how gloriously naïve he was back then, at the beginning of last month. He was going to let the girls all pitch their friends to him, and he would choose five from them, but when he told me that, I stepped in and made him change a little more.

I told him that he had to request one person, just *one person* entirely for himself. He didn't need to run it by me or anyone else in the family. He needed to think about this opportunity he had in front of him, and he needed to at least *ask* somebody he thought would be a good match, which, y'know, is what resulted in *you* getting an invite here. And, true to form, he didn't tell me about you in advance of sending me an invite, mostly because he knew I wouldn't object to whoever he wanted to bring in, whether it was someone from his own personal life or some celebrity he'd always had a longstanding crush on, although I felt like that one was sorted when Sarah showed up.

Which sort of leads into me going and talking with Emily and Sarah on their own, one on one, as they were each doing their planning for the group pitches. Sarah pitched Larissa Cotton, another of Sarah's favorite writers and one whom Andy knew at least socially, and Andy did put her on the list of people he would ask, simply because they did get along. It turned out she was already married, as Andy had thought she was. I suspect Andy put her on the list *specifically* because he was *certain* she was married, and it would mean he could keep the house a little bit smaller, although to be fair he did have one alternate on that list.

I suppose he probably should've had two or three, considering Larissa wasn't the only one to decline an invitation. The woman who had started it all, Hannah's pitch – her former cheerleading/gym teacher Tabitha Jefferson – had already hooked up with some people she'd already been in a relationship with prior, and they were all holed up in quarantine together. But Jade was the one person on that alternate list, and she's found a home here very quickly.

Emily's pitch was for Maya, who's obviously joined the family and you know for yourself, so I don't really need to tell you much about her, which is good, because that's not the focus for the story I want to tell you.

While everyone was developing their pitches, I spent a bit of time chatting with each of them, getting to know them better, helping them understand Andy better, and figuring out how I was going to prevent this gaggle of gorgeous women from all killing one another at some point.

It had helped that I'd already gotten a handle on a good number of them early on. I'd had months to iron out me, Niko and Lauren, which had been easy enough. Adding Taylor in had mostly just been making sure that Lauren and Taylor had enough time together to work through their grievances, and that nobody was going to remain pissed at anyone else longer than necessary.

I'd also got the staff's number very early on, not that they made it all that hard for either me or Andy to understand what their wants and needs were. Katie and Jenny were partners first, employees second and Andy's lovers third, and they didn't ever want to be with Andy without each other present. And Nicolette just liked stoking the more aggressive and dominant side of Andy's personality that he usually keeps quite well tucked away, so as long as she got her regular streak of Master Andrew, she'd be perfectly fine.

Piper was easy to suss out as well, since she and Andy clicked immediately. She had the advantage of having gotten that nice letter from him, which she still carries with her to this day, the one he'd written for her to find up when she awoke, so she'd understand what happened to her, and how, if she wanted him to, he would spend his entire life trying to fix it for her. We didn't know that we'd have a reassignment option available within just a month or so, but Piper's never said a single word about having an interest in being reassigned away from us. In fact, she was adamant that she be included in the group of us getting married in a way that surprised even me, but I guess she and Andy keep on growing closer every chance they get.

Hannah and Asha are the youngest members of the family, so I knew I wanted to save them for last, because, well, their opinions change faster than the weather. We'll get to them later, because I laid down the law for them on the day I also gave Katie Couric a warning she'll never forget.

But we're talking about Sarah and Emily here. Normally, you can find the two of them joined at the hip almost as much as Lauren and Taylor, but today, they were each doing their own personal homework for their presentations, which meant I could take them on separately, and I decided to go for Sarah first, because us gingers understand one another, and I knew she might take me making sure she and Andy were compatible as challenging her authenticity.

She was in one of the ground floor living rooms, and was working intently on her laptop, trying to make sure she was putting together a good pitch deck for Larissa, and she'd apparently tried reaching out to Larissa, but hadn't been able to get ahold of her.

"Hey Sarah," I said to her as I walked into the room. "How goes the prep?"

Sarah rolled her eyes as she pushed some of that amazing mane of red hair out of her face. (I swear to you, I'm gonna get her to give me the secret of how easily she gets it to have so much damn body.) "I'm still struggling to have a fucking answer to the argument that too many writers under one roof is going to result in a lot of damn arguing."

"How much arguing have you seen Andy really do since you got here?" I asked her.

"Well... not much," she agreed. "But I know creative people tend to get protective of their creations and can go a little crazy about it."



“Andy’s not like that,” I told her. “He’s gotten a lot done on the next Druid Gunslinger book, and he’s had me look at it and he’s taken constructive criticism very well.”

Sarah pouted at me, and I suddenly realized my mistake. “He’s got another one done and he’s not letting me read it?”

“He hasn’t got the ending yet,” I told her, “And he wants you to be the first to read it when he’s got the full thing in one solid draft. He doesn’t want to contaminate your first read through with an early draft, since he knows you’re such a big fan of his. Speaking of which, when did that start?”

“Can you believe it was all because of a boy?” she giggled. “I was playing Maria in a racially flipped version of West Side Story where the Jets were all Chinese actors and the Sharks were all Irish-looking actors in an off-Broadway production back in 2016, as a break in between films. I mean, it was pretty *close* to Broadway, but wasn’t right *on* Broadway, so I have to fucking say it—”

“Sarah, I don’t care,” I said with a grin.

“Right. Right. Anyway, I was the lead in this show, but it seemed like everyone else was having a lot more trouble picking up the choreography for the big dance numbers than I was. So the director told me to take a load off and the guy who I’d been crushing on had a library book atop his things. Since I was bored and I didn’t have anything else to do, I picked it up and started reading. It was a copy of ‘The Dragon’s Last Offer,’ which had only come out a month or so prior. When it came time for me to get back on stage, the director had to call my name *four times* before it pulled me away from the book. As soon as I left the rehearsal, I swung by a Barnes & Noble and bought every book by Blake Conrad they had, so I could start the series from the beginning. I’d forgotten all about the guy and had just gotten totally wrapped up in the books. He actually even tried asking me out towards the end of the musical’s run, but I’d moved on, and I wasn’t interested in him anymore.”

“Had your heart set on Andy, huh?”

“Not yet. Not entirely,” Sarah said. “I mean, at that point, I was still dating people in Hollywood, mostly. About a year or so later, I’d meet Dennis Jacobson and he’d cast me in the first ‘Badass Ballerina’ movie. We started dating mid-way through the shoot – I know, I know, it’s totally fucking unprofessional to date your boss, but we agreed to keep it on the downlow. Some fucking good *that* did. Before the movie was even out, the paparazzi had picked up on it, and by the time we came back to film the second and third ones back-to-back, I’d broken up with him and was stuck taking direction from my fucking asshole of an ex-boyfriend for a whole year. I was going out of my fucking mind that whole goddamn time.”

“Oof. That sounds rough,” I said to her. “When did you start thinking about Andy as someone you might have feelings for?”

“Shit, around the time I broke up with Dennis?” she sighed. “I read an interview with Andy – well, *Blake* – and he was talking about why Dale never seems to end up with any of the various women he hooks up with over the course of the books, and he said it was because none of the women Dale slept with were any good for him, and Dale knew that. Or, at least that’s how it had gone for the first few books. He said that Dale wanted a partner who valued him, who cared about his opinions and cared what he had to say and wasn’t just using him for her own personal gain. He said that maybe Dale would get there sooner or later, but it wouldn’t be any time soon, because learning by making mistakes was very much ‘the Druid Gunslinger way.’ It was such a weirdly refreshing philosophy, hearing that it was okay to fail, that it was *good* to fail, that failure was a *learning* experience, and that while it might have stung, it was doing what

it was supposed to, and improving you as a person. The interviewer asked if that was why *he*, y’know, Andy, was single, and he said maybe he’d learned from the lessons a little *too* well. I think *that* was when I started thinking I might be interested in learning a *lot* more about Blake Conrad, so I started doing my homework.”

“How much did you learn?”

“A ton, and yet, not that much at all?” she said with a giggle. “I found out he lived in the Bay Area, but he didn’t own the place he was living in, so I couldn’t get an address for him. His phone number was unlisted. And I wasn’t sure if calling up his agent to see if I could ask him out on a date would be a smart idea, or if it would come across as too stalkerish. But I told my agent to look into seeing if the rights for any of the books were up for optioning, and what it would take to get the rights to one of them.”

“When was this?”

“Lemme think,” Sarah told me, rolling her eyes back into her head to think. “That would’ve been fall of 2018, because I hooked up with Emily in February of last year.”

“How’d *that* happen?”

“Hollywood mixer for singles on Valentine’s Day,” Sarah said. “It was a discreet event, held at the house of a rather big name celebrity who’s privately bisexual, and she said it was always hard for those of us who were outside of traditional sexuality to date, so she held a yearly mixer for everyone she knew who was bisexual on Valentine’s Day, and that way everyone in the house was fair game but everyone knew not to go talking about it out on the town.”

(Fiona interrupted the story to ask Ash if she felt comfortable identifying the woman in question, but the star was still alive, so Ash felt it prudent not to go outing anyone, saying that she could ask Sarah herself if she wanted the woman’s name.)

“How was it, you and Emily meeting?” I asked her.

“Oh, there were sparks almost immediately,” Sarah giggled. “She’d just seen ‘Ballerina Badasses’ and I, of course, had grown up watching *her* grow up in the Dagger Academy movies. She’d just dated Jeff DeHavelin, but she was completely honest about what a fucking prude he was, how he wouldn’t go down on her, how he wanted her to be the naïve innocent waif he’d seen in the first movie, when, in fact, Em’s much more like how Dahlia Hairtrigger was at the end of the *last* one that they’d filmed about six years prior. And let me tell you, I don’t think she would have been as open and honest if she hadn’t been three sheets to the wind, but our girl was druuuunk. She wanted to warn me that now that the Ballerina Badasses trilogy was done, I was going to be typecast in every audition I went to, everyone expecting me to do the same thing, the same way, and that if I wanted to, god-for-fucking-bid *act*, I was going to have a hell of an uphill climb to try and get my way out of.”

“Was it really that bad?”

“Jesus, that bad and worse,” Sarah sighs. “It wasn’t as bad for me, just because I had the advantage of getting nominated for an Oscar for ‘Airway Mishaps,’ so I guess Hollywood knew I wasn’t just going to ride on the coattails of a single popular franchise, but I wanted a fucking break from all the cookie cutter action films I got sent for a while. I mean, yeah, I can fucking handle my own in the action scenes, but I’m not just going to take every schlock action film that’s thrown at me. And when I *would* turn those fucking films down, I got accused of being a snob, or fucking hard to work with, or whatever other shit dumb fucking men say when a woman stands the fuck up for herself. But I knew Em had gotten it a hundred times worse than I had, so I drove her back to my place from the party, we hooked up, and then we decided to keep it quiet, but kept hooking up regularly.”

“How long after you’d been dating did you tell her about your crush on Andy?”

Sarah smiled, almost like she was embarrassed, and looked away from me. “Kinda quick. She’d been staying over every night for like a week, and then finally asked me about the stack of Andy’s books I had on my bookshelf. And I told her about how I’d been trying to think of a way to talk to Andy without, y’know, being *me*, and she said since she needed to be at OmegaCon *anyway* for a panel and a signing, we could sneak around the convention dressed in full cosplay, and nobody would know we were, well, *us*, because we’d be completely covered head to toe. I wasn’t a guest at the con, so I had to have my assistant go and get my badge for me. So nobody would spot us on the flights into Phoenix, we flew into Las Vegas, me and my assistant, rented a car and drove to Phoenix, we wanted to be *that* on the fucking down-low about it. We stayed in Emily’s suite, but I did everything I could to make sure nobody knew I was connected to her. And you know how the panel went. I went to Em’s panel too, still in my Chewbacca costume, so nobody would know it was me except her, and I asked her a question about if she thought it was hard getting people to take her seriously post-Dagger Academy. She was very happy about that.”

“What happened to your assistant? And hers?”

“Mine’s still in L.A., paired with her husband. She’s not my personal assistant anymore, but she’s overseeing what stuff I have in L.A. that still needs someone on the ground, so I guess *technically* she’s still my fucking personal assistant, but I don’t call her that anymore. She’s just Jean to me. And Em’s PA, Elliot... he died right at the beginning of the pandemic,” she said with a sigh. “I think that’s why me and Em took it so seriously, and just bundled up in her house and didn’t leave basically at all.”

“And you’re not worried that you’re rushing into marrying Andy too soon?” I asked her. “Maybe not you, personally, but Em?”

“You can ask Emily herself, but you saw me when I saw it was Andy who’d pulled me away from Gregor,” Sarah smiled softly. “From the moment we found out Andy lived in New Eden, I knew I wanted to be with him more than anything I’d ever wanted in my entire life. And Emily moved heaven and earth to help make that happen. I love Andy, Ash. And I love all of you, too. You and Niko are the kind of strong, brash, bold women I’ve idolized my entire life. Why the hell wouldn’t I want to be a part of that now and forever?”

I wrapped my arms around her neck and gave her a big hug. “I just had to check, babes, that’s all. Someone’s gotta look out for our boy, ‘cause Lord knows he doesn’t seem to be all that great at doing that for himself.”

She turned and kissed me on the cheek before I pulled back, and the look she shot me was tinged with mischief. “You and me, we’re gonna have fun together too, aren’t we?”

“Oh, I have no doubts we’re gonna know each other inside and out well before the wedding night, babes,” I said to her with a wink as I headed out of the room. I’d sort of expected Sarah would be easy enough to size up when it came to her intentions with Andy, but I’d known posh girls like Emily my entire life growing up, and they were incredible at keeping secrets and playing people, so I went to go track her down, finding her in one of the unoccupied bedrooms, sat at a desk, like she was Jane Fucking Austen. “Hey Emily, you got a moment?”

“Certainly Aisling,” she said to me, laying her stylus down next to her tablet. I can’t tell if she does it on purpose to make herself seem more formal or if it’s just second nature for her to default to calling people by their entire name. “How may I be of service?”

“It’s more of a question of how are *you* doing?” I said to her as I sat down in a chair on the other side of the desk. “I know Sarah’s insanely excited about getting married to Andy, but

how are *you* doing with all of it? Are you genuinely pleased to be engaged to him, or are you just going along with it to keep your girlfriend happy?"

Emily smiled at me in a mysterious, almost cryptic way that I knew was meant to take me off guard a little bit, but somehow it only seemed to raise it more. "My dear, I love Sarah deeply, madly, truly, but if I thought Andrew was anything less than an utter delight, I would not have asked to be included in the marriage ceremony."

This is the thing – I know Emily wasn't *trying* to be snide or mean, but there's something about her upper class, posh upbringing that just felt slightly demeaning to me, a working-class girl with working-class roots. "You just sort of limped in at the end, Em. I wouldn't have called it a full-throated endorsement of the idea. I mean, it's okay if you're reticent. Who wouldn't be? You've barely known the guy a few days, and you're already engaged to be one of four women marrying him? Lots of people would say that's a little crazy."

She looked at me as if she was sizing me up, much like I was her, and finally offered me a kinder smile. "You're looking out for Andrew, Aisling. I get that. I appreciate it. You want what's best for him, yourself and this entire family. And I know, I can come across as... well, bit of a prig, but I assure you, Andrew is a lovely man, and while I haven't had as much time to know him as you have, every instinct, every fiber of my body is telling me that this is the right thing to do, that I will be happy, and safe, and loved with him, by him. I'm not a spy. I'm not your enemy. Maybe I'm a little guarded still, just because I want to make sure that I fit in here."

"That's just it, Em!" I said to her. "If you're not sure you fit in, why take that leap? Why decide to get married to him?"

"It's a leap of faith, Aisling," she said, placing her hand on top of mine. Her fingertips were so damn soft and smooth, like she'd never really done much hard work in her life. But I was trying *very* hard not to hold that against her. "I have to decide for myself whether or not Andrew is the best option for me, knowing that Sarah's already decided, she's already all in, and I love Sarah. Whatever else of me that you may doubt, do not dare doubt *that* because she has picked me up more than a few times when I have been at odds with the price I paid for fame and fortune to happen upon me so young. So, at worst, Andrew will be someone who help me keep my beloved Sarah safe and sound. At best, he will be the love of my life, the way that she is, and the way that she thinks he is to her."

"And the idea of having to share him with multiple other women?"

"Look, if I were to tell you it didn't dampen my dreams of getting a princess fairytale wedding with a white knight all my own, I would be lying. But this world doesn't have room for knights to only have one princess anymore. So is it ideal? No, most assuredly not. But I think we've a solid cadre of smart women here, and I have no doubts that any conflict between us we will be able to root out quickly and effectively."

"I'm just saying, Em, you can be part of the house without being his wife."

"And I am just saying to you, Aisling, I do know what I'm doing, and I'm following my heart. That is all anyone may ask of me."

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"Good lord, I understand why you've been sort of keeping a watchful eye on her since then," Fiona told Ash. "That sounds almost confrontational."

Ash smiled and waved a finger in Fi's direction. "That's how I felt at first too, but the more time I've had to watch and spend with Em, I've just come to realize that she's sort of a leap then look person, and that we both know Andy's *just like that*. And when she crawled into bed with us last night, she made sure to apologize one more time to him, just so that it was clear to Andy that she understood hiding things from the family had been a monumentally bad idea, and that she needed to start thinking about us as the eight of us, and not just her and Sarah, or just her alone. That's the thing it's taken me a while to realize – Em's just been acting on self-preservation instincts, but like any wild creature, she's getting domesticated by having affection, establishing trust and learning as much as she can about the people she's with."

Fiona nodded. "Makes sense. Let's just hope that the lesson with Mali sinks in and doesn't get swept away."

"It won't, you guys," Sarah said from the doorway of the bedroom, closing the door behind her. "I was just as pissed as you all were, because she didn't just hide it from all of you. She hid it from *me too*. That means she *knew* it was wrong, but was so scared that Andy might say no, she decided to risk it, and while it's a dumb fucking thing to do, it's also a little bit brave, so I can't stay mad at her for too long, you know?" She moved over and kissed Fiona on the cheek, then moved to give Ash a bit more enthusiastic of a kiss before grabbing a bit of watermelon from the food that had been delivered in the middle of Ash's story. "And if you don't trust her, fucking trust *me*, okay? You're my girls, and Andy's... Andy's the best man I've ever known. We're not going to fuck that up, okay?"

"Okay, Sarah," Ash said with a sly smile as the taller redhead sat down on the couch, glancing out the window. "Hello again, Big Apple. Don't you dare crush any dreams of mine today," she said while glancing out the window.

"Hold a bit of a grudge against the city, Sarah?" Fiona asked.

"Mmm. I wanted to play Annie when I was fifteen but I was told at the audition I was 'too freakishly tall' for the part," she said with a frown. "This city'll break your fucking heart if you give it an inch."

"Ain't that the truth."