

## **Chapter Three**

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

It was almost a full day after Tom woke up that he heard Meg and Mel waking up, so when he heard them starting to stir, he sprinted into the bedroom, closing the door behind him so that he could fill them in when they gained consciousness.

The first few hours he'd been awake had been frustrating as all hell, because he'd attempted to get dressed only to discover that no matter which of his clothes he put on, his skin itched incessantly. As it turned out, the variant of the serum they'd been exposed to came with a temporary cloth allergy, something the Doctors Meyer had known about, having put them on a bed with rubber sheets while they were unconscious and stripping them completely bare, leaving them some paper hospital gowns to wear until the allergy passed. Tom had been told when he'd awoken that the allergy would pass in a few days, but a day later, even trying to put socks on had been uncomfortable right from the moment he picked them up.

Tom's body had gone through a regeneration, as the Meyers had expected it would, but not really a whole lot had changed. There had been a few scars that had healed up, and he no longer needed to wear contacts to correct his vision, but he'd been in pretty great shape to begin with, so if there were other changes that had been made to his body, they'd all been beneath the surface, and he hadn't been made aware of them yet. He certainly *felt* better, but he figured that was just part of the process.

When he'd woken, he'd noticed there were patches of thicker skin over parts of the girls, along their legs and arms, bits on their torsos and shoulders, and fluid leaking from their eyes and mouths. This, the Meyers told him, was also normal and to be expected as part of a regeneration.

What he *hadn't* expected was to watch the color of their hair slowly changing, each having started at a different point in the spectrum of red – Meg's strawberry blonde darkening just a little bit and Mel's auburn red lightening some, until both girls had hair like spun copper, more red than blonde or brown. It was the prettiest of the shades, although thankfully they seemed to remain in their general styling, Meg's a bit straighter, Mel's more luscious curls and large rings.

Even *stranger* was the fact that Mel's hair had lengthened a little, and Meg's had shortened some, until they were basically the same, except for the styling. Despite that, the color and length were almost uniform, or at the very least *wildly* similar.

Tom found it funny that they were both waking up at the same time, something the Meyers had told him was statistically unlikely, usually a time differential of ten to thirty minutes between two women who were imprinted close to the same moment, but both Mel and Meg had essentially woken up as close to each other as to be indistinguishable.

"Are you watching us sleep, weirdo?" Mel asked, stretching her arms out, letting out a long, powerful yawn as she did. "How long have we been out?"

"Two days," Tom said to them. "I only slept for a day, but it seemed like the two of you had more rework to go through. I didn't think you'd have needed much in the way of regeneration, since you both seemed like you were in great shape."

"We are," Meg replied. "Good lord, what are we covered in?"

"Dead skin cells, physiological waste from the regeneration process mostly, or so the Doctors told me," Tom said.

“And the rubber sheets?” Mel asked. “Were you worried we’d wet ourselves?”

“Well, two reasons, actually,” Tom said, sitting on the edge of the bed next to them as they were starting to push their mental way towards complete consciousness, shaking off the extra heavy layer of regeneration-induced sleep. “The first is to make it easier to clean up the sloughed off excess from the regeneration process, but the second is that apparently this version of the serum leaves its recipients allergic to cloth for 2-3 days. That explains this lovely paper gown I’m rockin’.”

“I was wondering why the strange fashion choice,” Meg asked him, “No cloth of any kind?”

“It’ll itch like hell right away and you’ll have a rash within a couple of minutes,” Tom explained, “but if you want to try and push through...”

“No no, fuck that,” Mel said. “I already feel weird enough. Like, I don’t *hurt* but everything feels... slightly off. Girl, what *have* they done to your hair? Holy shit, what have they done to *my* hair?!”

“That seemed like it happened with the regeneration process,” Tom said. “I’ve been slowly watching your hair colors change, and your hair lengths adjust, by checking in once an hour since I noticed it when I got up yesterday morning, and the Meyers have been using those photographs for their research. They say it’s nothing to worry about. You two want to get up and try on your paper gowns of your own?”

“Tom, where’d my tattoo go?” Mel asked.

“I’m guessing it got removed as part of the regeneration process,” Tom said. “I saw there was a patch of scabbed over flesh on top of it, but I hadn’t noticed the scab had come off or that the skin underneath it was missing the pigmentation.”

“Ah well,” Mel said. “I got it one night in a bit of a drunken haze after a particularly important victory, but it wasn’t like it was anything all that planned, so I guess I don’t mind that it’s gone. Still, the least they could’ve done was asked.”

“That’s not the only thing you’ve done when drunk,” Meg teased.

“So, uh, look Tom,” Mel said. “We’ve been friends a long time, and other than the time she and I both got totally shitfaced and made out on Meg’s 21<sup>st</sup> birthday—”

“And last night,” Meg added.

“And last night,” Mel continued, “we’ve never really fooled around with each other that much, so we’d appreciate it if we can take it a little bit slow, and not rush right into anything.”

“Hey, I’m happy to run, walk or crawl at whatever speed you two want to, whether that’s together, apart or tagging in and out,” Tom said, sliding off the bed, making his way over to the dresser, grabbing a couple of the paper gowns so the two could get dressed.

“Whoa!” Meg said, looking over at Mel. “Your eyes changed color!”

“Oh balls,” Mel replied. “So did yours. Tom?”

“Same brown-eyed devil I’ve always been,” he said. “Lemme look.”

Sure enough, as he got closer, he could see that while one of them had originally had emerald green eyes and the other had had sapphire blue eyes, it was as if both colors were now mixed up together.

For Meg, it was as though she had blue rings around a more greenish center, and for Mel it almost looked like the two colors were swirls of paint mixed in the same bucket. Regardless of how different they were, the two were nothing like they'd been when they'd gone to sleep a few days ago.

Both women also noticed they didn't seem to have *any* hair beneath the neckline. After a few days of sleeping, both Mel and Meg had expected to want to shave their legs and underneath their arms, but found not only was all that flesh completely smooth, as were their genitals, the hair that had been there part of the sloughed off excess in the sheets.

On the way to meet with the Doctors Meyer, the two girls also noticed a few other changes. Most notably, they'd both grown a little, each of them measuring just shy of 5'11", meaning they had gained one or two inches of height each, making them basically the same height as Tom. Mel was also sure she was a little bit bustier than she'd been when she'd gone to sleep. They'd put on slip-on shoes so they could walk out of the building and over to the Doctors Meyer main lab, where the two doctors were glad to see them.

"Look who's up and about!" the female Meyer said with a slight smile. "How did the regeneration go for you two?"

"We've gone through some changes that very much weren't what I would call 'regenerations,' Doctors," Meg said. "Our hair and eye colors both changed. We're both taller."

"And I've got bigger tits," Mel added.

"I think it's gone a little bit further than that," the male Doctor Meyer said, looking them both over carefully. "Meg, Mel, if you could both come over here for a moment." The two women walked over to the other side of the room. "Tom, turn around for a moment would you?" Tom turned his back to them, and he could hear the sound of both women removing their paper gowns. "Alright, turn around again now and tell me what differences you can find between the two women."

When Tom turned around again, he saw that the two women were standing there with their heads blocked from view, both of them holding their hair up above the screen that was preventing him from seeing their faces. It was remarkable, but without being able to see their faces, the two looked remarkably similar. Tom approached to get a little closer, figuring he would be able to spot unique blemishes, freckles, spots, birthmarks or any of the hundreds of individual little characteristics that would clearly set the two women apart.

Five minutes later, he was still standing there, and he hadn't found *any*.

"They're... identical?" Tom finally heard himself saying in disbelief.

"Are you fucking kidding me?" Meg said in annoyance, the form on the left.

"Well, yes and no," the female Doctor Meyer said. "It's a side effect we've seen before, one we're calling 'molding,' where a sort of general template is established, based on the male that all the women are being imprinted onto. The central heterochromia was our first sign that the ladies here had triggered a molded reaction, as you see our protectors, Vaughan and Guerrero, went through a similar process. Their bodies, below the waist, are virtually identical, and they also share the blue-green central heterochromia you two do."

Airman Vaughan removed her sunglasses and revealed her eyes, showing off a similar blue-green color meld inside of them. “Took a little getting used to seein’ this in the mirror,” she said to them, “but it ain’t so bad after you give it a little bit of time.”

“But they don’t both have red hair,” Mel pointed out.

“No, they don’t,” the male Meyer said. “But you will notice they are exactly the same height, the same waist size...”

“The same cup size,” Airman Guerrero said with a smirk. “Didn’t used to be that way. But at the end of the day, it’s just a body, and as long as it’s in good shape, an’ this one’s in better shape than the one I came in here with, having two full flesh’n’bone legs and all, I’d say I’m okay with the changes that happened along the way.”

“Yeah, not having to shave my legs any more’s a nice little bonus,” Airman Vaughan giggled. “Certainly makes the wakeup maintenance a lot quicker in the mornings.”

“We imprinted both airmen using the same variant serum at the same time, and since they’re both imprinted on me,” the male Meyer said, “we’re starting to suspect that anyone imprinting on me using our variant would get a form identical to those of Guerrero and Vaughan here.”

“Just *how* identical are they, Doctor?” Tom asked as Mel and Meg began to put their paper robes back on.

“They’ve still got unique fingerprints, unique DNA, unique gaits, but short of comparing fingerprints, from the neck down, they’re as close to identical as we have been able to determine,” the female Meyer said.

“My pussy’s still tighter,” Vaughan joked, as Guerrero rolled her similarly colored eyes.

“Keep telling yourself that, babe,” Guerrero replied. “I haven’t gotten any complains, even when you’re not around.”

“He knows better than to step onto that minefield.”

The male Meyer cleared his throaty loudly, and both Airmen suddenly quieted up, as if remembering that the man they were talking about was right there. “Sorry, Doc,” Vaughan said, putting her sunglasses back on.

“Yeah, sorry, babe,” Guerrero added, blowing him a kiss.

“So does this mean that anyone else who imprints on me is likely to end up the same way?” Tom asked. “That’s a whole lot to have to ask of someone.”

“We’re still not entirely sure, Mr. Holt-Hodge, but yes, that is what we believe may end up happening,” the female Meyer said. “That said, it is guaranteeing regeneration, and curing any known or unknown health conditions.”

“The list of fixes is mighty impressive,” Guerrero volunteered. “And you’re basically immune to this whole DuoHalo/Covid nonsense that’s wreaking havoc out there right now.”

“We do also want to put IUDs into you two women while you’re here,” the female Meyer said. “We’re afraid that normal birth control may have some... odd effects when mixed with this strain of

regeneration. It shouldn't take that long, and we can have you both back over to meet up with Tom in time for lunch."

"Yeah, okay," Mel said. "I'm not ready to be a mother yet, so let's get that done."

"Just head on back, Tom," Meg said to him, "and we can all have lunch as soon as we get back from getting this done. Because I don't know about Mel, but I'm fucking *starving* right now."

"Fucking *hell*, I'm glad it's not just me!"

Tom left the two girls in the care of the doctors and headed back to the main barracks, where Joe had just gotten back from his run, having missed the girls' getting up entirely, so Tom took the time while they were waiting for the girls to return to fill him in on all the changes, odds and ends that had come with the serum's regeneration effects, how the variant seemed to be establishing all of a person's partners to a single template or mold and how the level of physical recovery was quite astonishing, pointing out that one of their security detail had been missing most of a leg before she'd arrived,

"Recovered a whole leg, you're saying?" Joe asked. "I mean, yeah, all the other shit sounds wild, but it can guarantee stuff like that?"

"Sounds like it."

"Cool," Joe said, almost absentmindedly. "Cool cool cool."

The girls walked back in with a chuckle, shaking their head as they glanced over at Joe. "It's not fair, him not having to wear these goddamn paper outfits and us walking around like we're the extras in a local production of 'One Flew Over The Cuckoo's Nest' or something," Mel said.

"Regenerated a whole leg. Tom said that happened. That true?" Joe asked them as they walked in, for reasons that Tom could absolutely understand.

"That's what they told us," Meg answered. "So I assume it's got to be true."

"Then I'll be in one of those paper outfits before you know it," he said, wiggling one of his legs impatiently. "They said Olivia would be here sometime today along with some other people for me to pair up with, and as soon as that happens, I'm not waiting."

"Joe," Tom said. "You heard what I was telling you about how the imprinting process can change things like height, figure and eye color?"

Joe sighed, looking down before looking up at Tom with a sort of sad certainty in his eyes. "I don't want to die, Tom," Joe said quietly. "And every day I'm not protected from this DuoHalo is a day that I risk just randomly catching it. I figured out why they're keeping us cut off from the news – they don't want us to know just how bad it really is out there. Liv's going to be our first real insight to who we know is alive and who's dead, because she hasn't been allowed to talk to me about any of that until she's on base and in quarantine with us. And I realize that's selfish of me, but I want to live, Tom. Right now, you're protected... and I'm not. And I'm fucking *scared*, okay?"

Tom hadn't realized how hard his friend had been affected by his separation from his girlfriend until that moment. His best friend had been carrying around a deep sadness with him for a while now, but the magnitude and scale of that had obviously been building and bubbling beneath the surface. He got up and walked over to put his hand on Joe's shoulder. "I wouldn't worry, Joe. They'll be here soon enough."

“Actually, I think they’re here now,” Mel said. “I saw there was a bus at the gates when we were walking back over.”

“You should’ve led with that,” Joe said, hopping to his feet, running towards the door, just as it was starting to open. The first person through the door was a very familiar face, as Joe and his girlfriend Olivia wrapped their arms around each other, clinging to one another. “Thank god you’re okay, baby.”

She kissed him like they hadn’t seen each other in years, not months, holding onto him like she never wanted to let him go, not in a million years. Her hands clung onto him, and Tom couldn’t help but smile, seeing both of them crying a little bit, which almost set off his own crying, although he felt eased off a little as Mel grabbed one of his hands and Meg grabbed the other, each of them stepping a little closer to him.

Olivia Choi was half-Korean and half-Irish, and nearly a foot shorter than Joe, so he was basically holding her up. She’d been his girlfriend for most of their college career since Tom had introduced them after Liv had been his partner in one of his freshman classes, and she’d been bitching about how all the nice guys on campus were taken. Less than a day later, he’d made the introduction. A week after that, they were officially dating. A month later, they were exclusive, and Joe began referring to her as his girlfriend. In the last year or so, they’d danced dangerously close around the subject of marriage, and Tom had been expecting Joe to propose to her any day now. “You took your sweet ass time in getting me here, hon,” Liv said with a slightly bitter laugh, making it clear that she knew it wasn’t Joe’s fault, but still wanted to razz him over it anyway. “I got Clar, like you asked, and I brought Tori with me as well, since Blaine died a couple of months back.”

Tom remembered Blaine – the guy had been the sort of self-absorbed pompous know-it-all who seemed genuinely disappointed he couldn’t start a sentence with the words, “Well, actually...” He and Tori had been together since high school, and none of them had much understood why he and Tori were a couple other than maybe she was clinging on to some memory of who she remembered him being, as opposed to who he was these days, or had been anyway. Blaine had been a vehement denier of the both the two plagues, insisting that he wasn’t going to be forced into a prison of his own apartment.

He’d died in April, from DuoHalo, the virus he’d insisted was a hoax up until the moment of his death.

“Hey Joe,” Tori said. “I appreciate you willing to let me in to your pod or team or harem or whatever it is we’re supposed to be calling this thing...”

Tori Chen looked somewhat similar to Liv, which made sense since they’d met freshman year at a Hapa (a nonderogatory term used in California for those of multiracial backgrounds comprised of East Asian, Southeast Asian and/or Pacific Islander mixed typically with Caucasian that had originated in Hawaii) Mixer at Berkeley, although Tori was half-Chinese and half-German, which meant her skin was a little lighter, and her jaw bone a bit more pronounced. While Liv was a mechanical engineering major, Tori had gone the other route and focused on Biochemistry. She and Blaine had been constantly fighting for the last year, and Tom had expected that inertia had been all that had been keeping them going. Both Liv and Tori were members of the women’s golf team at Berkeley, and while neither of them was as good at Tom, both were quite a bit better than Joe was, not that Joe minded.

“Just as long as you’re sure this is what you want to do, Tori,” Joe said. “I know the loss of Blaine’s still pretty fresh...”

“I lost Blaine a long time ago,” Tori said with a frown. “I just didn’t realize it until after I *physically* lost him. But whoever was inside that shell I’d been passing time with, it wasn’t the guy I fell in love with years and years ago. Besides, when I heard Clar’s story, I realized what kind of asshole I’d have to be to pass up getting connected with a guy who was willing to put so much aside to help his friend out, even if they weren’t still in love.”

Joe looked over at Clara and smiled weakly, like each of the words was a struggle to get to his lips. “Oh, I wouldn’t say that,” he said very quietly. “Just because we drifted apart doesn’t mean—”

He didn’t get to finish that sentence because Clara Lee just charged him and wrapped her arms him, clinging tightly to him while she was crying. “Tell me it’s true, Joe. Tell me it’s fucking true,” she said in between sobs.

“Total regeneration, Clar,” Joe replied to her. “There might be a few minor adjustments here and there but—”

“Will I be *whole* again?” she said, pulling back to look him dead square in the eyes.

“They’ll regenerate, yes, they assured us.”

Clara Lee had been Joe’s high school girlfriend and senior prom date who had drifted apart before breaking up during the summer between senior year and freshman year at Berkeley, despite the fact that they’d both gone to the same college. She was a second-generation Chinese-American who spent a lot of time playing soccer, and was on Berkeley’s soccer team. By sophomore year, whatever had soured between Joe and Clara had passed, but in their second incarnation they’d become more friends than lovers, especially since Joe had Liv at that point. But early junior year, Clara had gotten a prognosis that had scared everyone to death. She had breast cancer and the treatment had been an immediate double mastectomy, something that Clara had done her best to handle, but had been a particularly brutal experience, one that Joe had done his best to help her through.

“Then fuck it,” Clara said with a sniff and a sort of tossed off laugh, trying to put on a brave front. “I fucked you in high school plenty, and I can only assume you’ve only gotten better at it since then, so if that’s the price I have to pay... Yeah, I’ll pay that gladly.” She glanced over at Liv and Tori with a smile. “We’ve been talking about it on the ride here, and as weird as it is, we’re going to make it work.”

Joe smiled, glancing over at Liv, arching an eyebrow. “Really? You’re not gonna beat the shit out of me or call me a male pig or something?”

Liv rolled her eyes with a smirk. “I’m the one telling *you* to fuck my best friend, and Clara’s always been family anyway, so I don’t mind, Joe, I promise you, I don’t,” she said to him.

“I’m a little tripped out by this whole ‘regeneration’ concept, though,” Tori said, looking over at Meg and Mel. “You hooking up with sisters, Tom?”

“They weren’t *quite* this identical a few days ago,” Tom told them. “That’s part of the side effect of this particular serum.”

“We’re all going to be redheads?” Liv asked.

“They don’t *think* so,” Tom said. “It seems like it’s based on the man who they’re paired with, so without anyone having been paired with Joe yet, we don’t know what they’ll... well, *you’ll* be when come

out the other side. The two guards who've been paired with the doctors both came out blonde, so who knows what you three will look like once we get through the binding."

"You'd probably love that, huh?" Tori teased. "Three zaftig blondes marching up and down alongside your bed?"

"Other than Clar getting healed up, I'd be fine with as few as changes as possible," Joe said. "Who's the tag along?"

"Oh, she's not here for you," Liv said with a smirk. "I'm just waiting to see if Tom remembers her."

The last person in the group was a redhead much shorter than Meg or Mel, and Tom looked at her struggling to connect the face he was looking at with a memory, but eventually, he started putting two and two together, excusing himself for not recognizing her being that it had been almost ten years since they'd seen each other. "Ainsley?" Tom said. "Ainsley Erickson? Is that you?"

Ainsley was the daughter of General Ashley Erickson, his dad's academy roommate, and one of his dad's oldest friends. They'd grown up being friends, but eventually they'd drifted apart, as their parents had been deployed to different locations, and so Tom hadn't seen her in nearly a decade. "Hey Tom," she said to him a little shyly. "You're looking well." She looked a little nervous and so Tom moved over and wrapped his arms around her, hearing her let out a sigh of relief as she in turn hugged him closely. "God, I fucking missed you."

"You wanted to get paired with me?" he asked her in surprise.

She giggled like it was the stupidest thing anyone had ever said. "Tom. TOM. I've had a crush on you since I was five," she said, looking up at him. "When my Dad asked me who I wanted to be paired up with, it wasn't even a hard choice. Then it was just *finding* you, which took a little bit of doing, because you're not in the system's standard locations right now." She glanced over at Mel and Meg. "So if I imprint onto you, I'm going to grow to be as tall as them?"

"Maybe," Mel said.

"Probably?" Meg added.

"Cooooool," Ainsley said. "I always wished I was taller than I am."

"Where were you going to school, Ainsley?" Tom asked her.

"Washington State University," she said. "I was studying economics but was still going to probably end up joining the Air Force after college. But now we'll just have to figure out what to do once the world opens up again."

"You know what you're signing up for?" Joe asked her. "Sorry, I'm Joe, Tom's best friend and college roommate."

"I know probably better than most people, Joe," Ainsley said. "Dad's been part of the oversight group keeping tabs on the deployment of this Quaranteam serum, so I've had a month or so to wrap my head around what was going to be expected of me. Once I got past the shock of what it was we were being asked to do to survive, I knew the only man I wanted to be in a Team with was Tom. If you'll have me, of course."



“Do I *look* like an idiot?” Tom joked. “Of course I’ll have you, Ainsley. I just wanted to make sure you had all the facts at hand.”

“Well then, let’s go get started,” Ainsley said, putting her small suitcase down next to the couch. “I don’t know about you three, but I don’t want to wait any longer to get into this.”

“That’s fucking right,” Clara said. “I want to feel whole again as soon as I can.”

“We’ll come with you,” Meg said. “Just to talk to you all while they’re doing the injecting. You’ll have to go back to get IUDs imprinted when you wake up.”

“They can’t do that beforehand?” Tori asked.

“The regeneration messes with it,” Mel replied. “That’s what they told us when they were putting them in earlier today.”

“Okay then,” Liv said. “Let’s go get to it then.”

All six women walked out the door, leaving Tom and Joe alone together in the common area with all the suitcases. “We’re fucked aren’t we?” Joe laughed.

“If you think anything *but* fucking is on your agenda for the rest of the day, you should update your schedule,” Tom chuckled in reply. “Let’s get these suitcases hauled to the proper rooms before they get back...”