

Quaranteam: Book Two

by Devin McTaggart

Chapter One

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

trial defense services,” the General responded.

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

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

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

“And you are?” Andy asked.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Once Andy's story moved past talking about his arrival in the new manor, as soon as Covington

entered his story, a whole new tension filled the air, with each of the three suddenly paying much more attention to their notes, asking far more questions than they had been previously.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“And the other?”

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

“And where did Miss Donegal end up?”

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

“Why is that?” Senator Giancola asked.

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

“And that was?”

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

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

Andy shrugged a little. “What can I say? Despite their astute powers of business, it turns out they're all pretty shitty poker players. And I suspect Covington kept holding the game at his home because he was using an unscrupulous dealer, guaranteeing he would generally end up on top.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Sarah Washington, Emily Stevens and Hannah Nakamura.”

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

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

“Oh?” Senator Giancola asked. “Elaborate, please.”

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

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

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

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

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

“Why do you say that, Mister Rook?”

“Because of how women were being presented to men in the early days... we had the

impression that the survey we'd taken was shaping those decisions, but we certainly didn't have any real insight into how they were being selected, or how they were being redirected to us," Andy said. "We were told the conditions were favorable to us, but beyond that, we were basically told nothing about how or why women were paired with us men. Everything that I learned about the selection process was basically passed on as second-hand information from the women who joined the Team. We were never formally *told* any of this, beyond the survey we took at the onset."

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

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

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

"Recommendations from other members of the Team, generally."

"Generally?" Rep. Engle asked.

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

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

"That's correct."

"And you and this Fiona had a prior relationship?"

"We were college sweethearts," Andy replied.

"But you had not been in contact since college?"

"Her career took her one way and mine took me another."

"And you and Miss MacLeod were familiar with each other?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Why not?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Ever had days where you simply didn't *want* to have sex, Mister Rook?” the General asked him rather bluntly. “No one would blame you.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Considering what your day has been like, Mister Rook,” the Senator said, an amused tone to

her voice as she leaned back in her chair a little. "I'm a little surprised to see you giving any kind of a damn about any member of the Air Force."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

But it's our job to implore you *not* to do that, and to find some sort of counterbalancing agent that will make their demand more palatable to you.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

would call an insider.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Oh fuck you too, Caroline. Uptight bitch.”

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

“I would say the decision will be entirely in the hands of Piper,” Andy admitted. “If she's okay

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"One more thing, Mister Rook," the General said, while the Representative and the Senator

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

“How is it looking across the country, General?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Let me figure out *who* it's going to be before we figure out the *when*,” Andy chuckled. “I know that at this point, you're thinking what's one more to add to the man's tally, but it's still a bit of a logistics problem to be taken care of.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Chapter Two

December 10th, 2020

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The look was nothing short of breathtaking.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Jinx, you owe me a Coke," Andy said first.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“In your own time, obviously.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

"We'd need music for—"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Whatever you need, Jade.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

to th—”

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

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

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

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

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

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

“How was—”

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

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

“Ash?”

He exhaled, shaking his head. “Piper.”

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

“Whenever and wherever you want.”

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

“Yeah?”

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

That made him laugh too.

Chapter Three

December 11th, 2020

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"We're talking about you, boyo."

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Yeah, why?”

“They’re both walking this way now.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Melody Park, Covington’s former bodyguard.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Did she send a message?”

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

“Alright, let’s take a look at it.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“So, what are you thinking?”

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

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

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

alignment on.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“A bridge too far?”

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

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

“Who else knows about Melody’s request?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Think anyone else is up yet?"

"You aren't suggesting..."

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

"Yes ma'am."

Chapter Four

December 11th, 2020

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Why would something go wrong?" Andy asked.

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

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

"You seen a cocoon yet?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Thanks, Rook. See you then."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Two-ish.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“That sounds... a little risky.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

She was chasing the rush.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Chapter Five

December 11th, 2020

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

“Is it that obvious?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

know how to look.”

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

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

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

“And I’m here to make sure he’s safe,” Niko added.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Checkup?” Andy asked.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Melody pulled the crop top off, tossing it aside, revealing a modest pair of breasts with no

adornments or piercings on her dark brown nipples, then shimmied down out of her panties, revealing a stripe of black hair above her pussy. She'd turned sideways when she did, so Andy could see the tattoo on Melody's back, wincing a little at the size of it, a large square plaque that read "Property of Arthur Covington the 4th, Bitch #4, MELODY" in very thick ink. It was the only tattoo on the woman's body.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Hey now," Andy scolded. "Knock that shit off right now. Whatever the hell Covington did to you, I'm not going to do that. I'm going to care about what you do and don't like, what turns you off

and what turns you on. I'm gonna do everything I can to make all our time together something you look forward to and not regret. But you gotta work with me on this one. Fight to reclaim whatever humanity you lost when you were in his service, and while we can help you out with that, it's a battle that'll be won or lost in your own heart."

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

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

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

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

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

Then the oddest thing happened.

Melody started to *talk*.

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

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

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

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

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

"Mmmpphhh... I'm glad I'm positioned this way... Covington never liked to look anyone in the eyes when he was fucking them, but you're a *real man* aren't you, Andy? You like to know your women are *enjoying* feeling you *plow* their tight little pussies... I certainly fucking am... I'm loving it and I'm *your* woman now... but I want my load, baby... I wanna feel you fucking explode inside my cunt... I wanna feel you creaming my brains out... I wanna feel your hot sticky love... gimme that load, Andy... gimme that creampie... paint my guts with your love... love me, baby... let me be worthy of your fucking love... show me I'm a good little slut who deserves to be loved... show me I

can be better than what that tiny dick Covington called me when he was kicking me in the stomach... show me I can be loved... love my cunt, Andy... love me, Andy... please... I beg of you... I can't stop cumming until you blast me full... empty those fat fucking balls and unload inside me... make me your woman... Oh fuck I can feel you twitching... you're gonna do it, so do it do it do it cum in me cum in me cum cum cum ohfuckwe'recumming!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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