

Quaranteam: Aisling's Antics

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a 10-part commissioned spin off from Quaranteam

Part One – “Pogue Mahone”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Jesus, what a manipulative—” Sarah started.

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

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

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

speaking your peace.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“I envy you the same,” Fi countered.

“What do you mean?”

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

“Doubt that,” Ash said.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"How do you mean?"

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

"What would make you say that?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"What if I—"

"You won't."

"But I *could*."

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

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

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

"How about right now?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Start wherever you like."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

And surprisingly, it worked.

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

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

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

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

of 2020, my whole world changed.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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