

Chapter Twelve

December 16th, 2020

A few hours with Mama Rook had put everyone a little more back at ease, although Ash had immediately commented on how Andy had gone straight for getting a drink, when he was known to dabble with drinking alcohol only occasionally. He'd asked for a Coke with a heavy splash of rum and had even needed a refill. During the time at the hotel, he'd been twitchy, jumpy and almost inconsolably nervous.

His mother had reminded him that it hadn't been his fault, and within the first hour of their waiting, news had come in that they hadn't even been shooting at *him*. The shooting had happened between the two groups of protesters, and a woman had died, and another woman had been arrested. He hadn't recognized the name of either woman involved in the matter but was at least a little relieved not to see Marie's name there in either case, nor anyone else he might've known. They did call out that it was outside of his book signing, though. Andy was certain his name was going to be mentioned again in the news stories about the matter tonight, but he hoped it was more of just in a foot note capacity, so that the news could focus on the real conflict between the two sides and just how heightened that tension truly was. It wasn't something he wanted the news to blink and look away from.

All was *not* well across the country.

When Lexi came back to the hotel, Andy had calmed down a little bit, but not entirely. His hands had stopped shaking at least, but he was still more than a little hyperaware of his surroundings, all his senses cranked up to 150% against his own will. He felt like he could hear things halfway across the hotel, and the sound of a suitcase tumbling over made him jump much more openly than he'd like. It wasn't a gunshot, but it sure as fuck *felt* like one in his ears. He spent much longer than he wanted reminding himself it wasn't.

Once Lexi had given them the all-clear, they'd all loaded back up into the SUVs and headed straight to the airport, Ash on one side of him, Sarah on the other, Niko in the front passenger seat, Lexi behind the wheel. He was wagging his leg impatiently until he felt Sarah put her hand on his knee, smiling over at him, understanding his nervousness.

"Sorry," he said, looking outside of the window, unable to focus on much of anything for very long. "I keep hearing the gunshot replaying over and over in my mind. It felt like it was right in front of me. In front of me, or, or behind me or..."

"Andy," Sarah said, taking his hand in hers, holding it firmly. "You heard the report. It wasn't you they were shooting at."

"I don't think that really matters, Sarah," Andy said quietly. His voice had a defeated tone to it that even *he* didn't care for, but he couldn't find a way to shake himself loose from the sense of impending doom that was crowding in on his soul. "It could've been. All the guns, all the talk about how dangerous it is... Niko's told me. Lexi's told me. Melody's told me. Fucking *Phil* has been telling me non-fucking-stop. The danger is fucking real, it's all around me, and I need to stop wearing fucking *blind*ers. How could I be so fucking stupid?"

"You're not fucking stupid, Andy," Sarah said, putting one of her arms around him, trying to provide some comfort. "You're human. There's nothing wrong with being human. It's a good thing, having faith that the world around you isn't all doom and gloom. There's enough of that in the world. *You* can do better. You usually do, and we love you for that. You've always been trying to see the best in everyone and everything. The best in people, the best in the world, the best in those around you." She tensed up a little bit. "Please don't lose that. Please? We're all relying on you, Andy."

Ash was holding onto his other hand, interlacing her fingers with his. “You know what people are capable of, love. You know the human condition better than anyone I’ve ever met. You’ve written stories about the good and the bad, about the heroes and the villains and how that line isn’t always as clearcut as we as people would like it to be. Because in the end, nobody sees themselves as a villain, and anyone who sees themselves as a hero is a goddamn narcissist. There’s... at the end of the day, there’s just people. People, for better or worse, don’t always do what’s best for them, or think about what’s going to happen more than thirty seconds in the future. It’s a different world out there now, but it’s not *that* different. People are still just *people*. They’re still running in fear, struggling against the darkness, trying to make sense out of the madness that’s everywhere we look. I know this whole thing is going to change you, baby,” she said, placing her head on his shoulder, trying to be close enough to practically climb inside his heart and help bolster up the defenses. “You’d be a fool for it *not* to. But you can’t let it *define* you. You can’t be that person who got shot at once and spent the rest of his life wondering why he didn’t get killed. Especially when they weren’t even shooting *at* you,” she teased. “We’re fine. We’re together. It’s okay to *not* be okay about this, but I refuse to let you throw the hat in and abandon who you are fundamentally just because some idiot decided to shoot some other idiot while you just happened to be around, okay?”

Andy had to laugh a little bit at that, drawing a bit of strength into himself from the beautiful women on either side of him who were clearly terrified of him falling apart. And they were right – he’d been teetering dangerously to wallowing in misery, and that was something he didn’t want to find himself ever doing. Regroup, pull yourself together and push forward, he told himself. You don’t take shit off nobody. “Right. Right. I’ll shake it off. It’s... it’s just gonna be a hot minute.”

“Absolutely, baby,” Ash told him, snuggling hard against one side of him while Sarah did the other, basically smothering him in soft, pliant, lovely smelling girlflesh. “We just want you to be okay, to remain *you*.”

“I’ll get there. Just gonna take time.”

They were almost deathly quiet when they were getting loaded up on the plane, nobody talking to anyone else, everything being done with utter precision and in total silence. Ash and Sarah basically hauled Andy straight back to the couch in the back of the plane and kept snuggling him, hoping to soak up some of the despair and replace it with their hope.

Once they were airborne, Ash pulled out her little Bluetooth speaker and set it down next to the couch, turning it on as she set her phone to shuffle on The Afghan Whigs catalog, that slinky little intro of “John The Baptist” kicking in as she and Sarah moved onto the couch on either side of him, wicked little smiles on each of their faces. “You didn’t think you were getting out of starting the Red Run just because of some stupid gunshot, did you?” Ash said, purring at him. “You know how this song goes... ‘Take me, taste me, erase me, I’m yours, let’s get it on’...”

Normally Andy had gotten a bit adept at being able to resist the girls when they were trying to turn up the charm, but the look in Ash and Sarah’s eyes was *intense*, like they were going to eat him alive, or, more accurately, they were going to remind him what it was like to *feel alive*.

The two of them were naked so fast, he’d barely had time to process it happening, as Sarah slid up alongside of him, her hand smoothing along his chest, tugging up on his t-shirt. He vehemently loved the fact that both Ash and Sarah kept small patches of red pubic hair, taking pride in their ginger nature. The music was turned up loud enough that he couldn’t hear the

conversations on the other part of the plane, and that added a bit of intimacy for the moment, as Sarah's tongue lashed along the shell of his ear, while Ash turned and started to sway her ass before him, bringing it down to rub against his crotch like he was getting his own private lapdance, her hands reaching up along the back of her neck to pull up those red curls of hers, looking back over her shoulder at him with such intense lust, Andy had to wonder if maybe she'd gone a bit longer between doses than she should've.

"I got the devil in me," Ash growled at him with such wanton seduction that no matter what foul or foreboding mood Andy had been in before, it was quickly abandoned and replaced with heady lust, his cock throbbing beneath his jeans.

"Not yet you don't," Sarah teased, "but you will fucking soon. Go on, Ash. Show me why you're the boss bitch around here."

Andy shivered a little bit when Ash let her hair fall down along her back before spinning around, reaching forward to grab Andy's jeans, yanking them down only as far as mid-thigh, letting her fish out his cock, before slowly climbing onto the bench seat, moving to straddle him, reaching down to get his shaft perfectly lined up and then sinking right down on it at the exact moment she locked lips with him, so her moan was gifted to him, her breath mixing with his as he felt her enveloping him, their bodies locking together, her pussy clenching hard onto his dick like she couldn't bear to let him go.

The two of them remained like that, for a good moment or so, listening to the horn section of the song slowly faded down before "I Keep Coming Back" started to slink its way into their ears, the kiss breaking as Ash giggled a little bit. "Am I laying it on too thick?"

"Ash, you always know exactly what I need and when I need it," he chuckled.

"Hey," Sarah joked. "I'm here too." Ash turned her head and slid her hand against the back of Sarah's neck, pulling her in close as the two women began to kiss directly in front of him, his cock giving an excited pulse throb for a moment before Ash turned them, making room as she maneuvered them into bringing Andy into the kiss, a slow and sloppy tangle of lips and tongues, Sarah whimpering excitedly. "That's more fucking like it."

"You get your turn on the ride next, Sarah," Ash said to her, "so I need you to be cranking that shit this whole time. I need you to help me respark Andy, to reignite that fire inside of him. You need to bring your best, but I want you to keep it *very* quiet, just for the three of us. You think you can do that?"

Sarah nodded licking her lips. "Gonna be quite the contrast between the start of the Red Run and the *end* of the Red Run," she giggled mischievously.

"Why's that?" Ash asked.

"Moira seems like she's a quiet, delicate little sunflower, you know?"

Ash smirked, shaking her head a little. "I think she's gonna surprise the *fuck* out of you, Sares. You two haven't spent too much time together yet, so it'll be good for you. You can dial your tongue up to fifty and I bet you Mo will want it even higher. But this is my moment, so get your game face on."

Sarah lifted her right hand up to her temple and offered a mock salute as Ash turned back to lock lips with Andy once more as the cymbal crashes marked the opening of the song "I'm A Soldier." The taller redhead leaned in and purred into Andy's ear. "You know she fucking loves it when you're willing to be a little more rough'n'tumble with her, right? Go on, slap her ass and feel how much the little slut'll moan for you."

Andy thought this was going to be the perfect time to see if the two reds were on the same wavelength or out of synch with each other, so he lifted his right hand from Ash's back and

brought it down to spank Ash's buttock, feeling her indeed clench down on his shaft and burble a throaty moan into his mouth. He could swear he also felt Ash's nipples get even stiffer than they already were, like two firm points pressed against his chest.

One of Sarah's hands reached in between them and moved to play with one of Ash's nipples, which induced a sudden squeak followed by another hungry whorish sound into his mouth, as Ash started trying to rock her hips along his lap, doing her best to lift up and off him before pushing back down to swallow him entirely within.

"You feel that?" Sarah said quietly to him. "She *loves* when you fuck her hard, just as much as she does when you're soft and tender. You're her *everything*, dude, just like you're *mine*. Give her the ol' giddyup. I'm so fucking jealous right now. I wanna get fucked too..." She had that tone of an impatient child being told to wait their turn before opening a present on Christmas.

Andy's hand slapped down on Ash's ass again, but this time he dragged his fingernails along the reddening flesh, feeling her trying to squirm herself down even further into his lap. Ash's hand pulled on the back of his neck, keeping his face attached to hers, as the heat started to burn even hotter between the two of them.

"I fucking love you, Andy," Ash said, parting the kiss just long enough to gaze lovingly into his eyes, holding that eye contact for as long as she could. "And I love you that you trust me enough to share me with all these other amazing fucking women. And I will love you until the fucking day I die, but whenever you go, I'm going with you, you lovable bastard. That means you and I are lifebound, you fucking hear me?"

Andy smiled softly, leaning his forehead against hers, feeling her snapping her hips back and forth, lifting up and dropping down. "Yes, my love," Andy said to her. "Butch and Sundance, to the very last."

"Good boy," she giggled. "Now are you gonna fuck your fiancé for real or you just gonna pretend and make her do all the work?"

He laughed a bit with her, as he felt Sarah nibbling on his ear. The two women were hitting all his soft spots, Sarah talking dirty to him while Ash plied on his nerves. The tempo increased and built upwards, and before he felt that familiar telltale squeeze of Ash's pussy around the base of his dick, and as soon as she was in the throes of her orgasm, he matched her and released a load inside of her, which set Sarah off giggling ferociously in his ear.

"She's always easier to deal with when she's gotten her fucking rocks off," the taller redhead said to him, giving Ash's clit a little spank before pulling back and away.

"You're just annoyed you have to wait until tomorrow for your turn," Ash joked.

"You're fucking right I am," Sarah said, sliding her legs around Andy's waist, pulling him to lean back into her, wrapping her arms around him, one of her hands reaching forward to stroke Ash's face. "But it's okay. I'll keep. I'm like fine fucking wine, meant to be savored."

"Then you'll go well with Scotch," Ash said before both girls devolved in a fierce bout of giggles, kissing each other and Andy, holding together.

Half an hour later, they were landing in Chicago. Despite the fact that they were on a relatively tight schedule, Andy insisted they swing by the hotel first, dropping off all their stuff and hopping through a quick shower before they went to go meet the Smiths. Andy was preparing for quite the grilling, and he didn't intend to do it reeking of fresh sex, especially since it wasn't with their daughter.

The Smiths had always liked Andy, at least he *thought* they had, but the new world was throwing everyone off, and Andy hadn't had a chance to sit down and talk with them since the 60

Minutes story had aired, so he wanted to make a great first (re)impression. After the shower, Lexi even took the time to give him a fresh shave with a razor herself. He still tended to use the electric when he was in a hurry, but on important days (or days when he could afford the extra time), Niko and Lexi had traded off shaving him with a straight razor, almost like he was some sort of old school Mafioso.

He had to admit – it was *way* fucking better, even if it was time consuming.

All things worth doing, though, were worth doing right.

They were staying at the Cambria Hotel in the theatre district, and while it was a bit of a tight fit, the room had been configured to have the two queen beds pushed together to form one mega bed, although there was also a sofa sleeper, and an attached secondary suite with a queen-sized bed, mostly to provide a second bathroom. The hotels were doing their best to adapt to the new world, and everyone was doing their best to make it work.

As much as Andy wanted to take time to decompress and chill, he knew the Smiths were going to be eagerly awaiting their arrival for dinner. Andy had offered to bring the family to their house, but Seamus, Fiona's dad, had insisted they, as a group, were all going to meet up at a restaurant and have a nice meal prepared for them. He'd placed a reservation for one entire section at a place called Mastro's Steakhouse, with a reservation for 25, a number that made both Lexi and Melody a little nervous, although Niko seemed much more nervous about being Fi's parents.

The drive down felt strange – it had been quite some time since Andy had been in Chicago, but he'd never seen the streets quite so empty, only a couple of cars sharing the roads with them. It felt unearthly, unnatural, although Andy was starting to think nearly every major metropolitan city might be a little like this.

The entire drive, Fi was snapping pictures out the window, documenting all of it.

“You okay with this, love?” Andy asked her, his hand squeezing her thigh.

She turned to smile back at him, placing her hand over his. “I'm just more worried about how Dad and my brothers are getting on. I imagine Dad's head has got to be incredibly spinning.”

“I'm sure we'll manage them just fine.”

After parking and enjoying a short walk to the restaurant, Andy wasn't entirely surprised to find that the restaurant had just given them the second floor all to themselves. There were a lot more people than Andy had been expecting, although when he thought about it, it did make sense. Fiona's parents, Seamus and Ellen, were both there, but Seamus also had six new women partners to introduce to both Andy and Fiona herself, which helped set an easier tone than Andy had expected. Also in attendance were two of Fiona's three brothers, Julian and Paul. Rob wasn't present, something Andy immediately thought to make a mental note to ask after in case something had happened to him. Julian had his wife, Alana, with him, as well as seven other women whose names just flew in one of Andy's ears and out the other without even pausing to linger. But Andy had been at Julian and Alana's wedding so he knew them well enough. The rest of his partners, though, Andy retained basically nothing. The same was true for the nine women accompanying Paul. It was just too many names flying past for Andy to pick them up, so he decided to do the only reasonable thing he could think of – focus on Fi's parents, and let his partners divide and conquer the rest of the women.

Lexi and Melody were on full alert now, although they also made a point to get orders in for food, each of them sitting in carefully chosen strategic places, something Andy expected to get a little bit of guff about before the night was through. Melody was technically sitting at one

end of the table, with Lexi at the other, although they were there mostly for placement.

“It’s good to see you again, Andrew,” Seamus said, shaking his hand. The end of the table had Andy, Fi, Moira, Seamus and Ellen at it, although Ash and Piper were both next in line at the long table, so they could interject if they needed to. “It’s been some time since we saw you last. Obviously, we saw your time on 60 Minutes, which brought with it a few, ahem, surprises.” He was looking directly over at Moira when he said it, but he didn’t seem cross about it.

“Ach, well, we didnae know how to tell ye, Mr. Smith,” Moira said. “Fi and I have been in a relationship for years now, but Fi wasn’t sure how ye’d take it.”

“When the Pope sent out the papal decree not only permitting homosexuality but going so far as to *endorse* it,” Ellen, Fiona’s mom said. “Well, we had to reevaluate a lot of things. And all the additional women sleeping with your father now has obviously changed things as well, but that’s all very new. We’d seen the story with you on television, Fi, and naturally we recognized Moira, but in that moment, it became rather clear that our daughter had been hiding things from us.” The proclamation felt dangerously close to condemnation.

“To be honest, Ma,” Fiona said, “I wasn’t entirely sure how you’d react to finding out that I was in a relationship with a woman. But it wasn’t like this was the first time I’d sort of been hiding something you from and Dad.”

Ellen scowled, looking directly across the table at her daughter. “What does that mean? Fiona Abigail Smith, what have you been up to behind our backs?”

“Mother, you *had* to know that back when Andy and I were dating the first time, back in college, we were sharing a bed, and he *didn’t* have his own bedroom. Not *really*. I figured you weren’t comfortable with Andy and I sleeping together, so we sold you a fantasy. I always thought you’d probably known the truth, but maybe you were that much in denial. I also knew when I started getting involved with Moira that you’d have very complicated feelings about that, me in a long-term relationship with another woman.”

“It’s... very untraditional, Fiona.”

Fiona threw her hands up in frustration, scowling at her mother. “Look around you, mom! Nothing’s traditional anymore! And it never will be again! Do you know how much it angers me that you’re paranoid of all the people I’ve ever fallen in love with?”

Ellen’s face deepened even more, a complex conflicting set of emotions dueling inside of her. Some mix of shame, embarrassment, anger and frustration, directly not only at Fiona but herself as well. “I only ever wanted what’s best for you, Fiona.”

“I know, Mom! I get it! But back in college, I was in love with Andy, and all you could ever talk about how unfortunate it was that I couldn’t find a good Catholic boy to settle down with! And then when I was in Washington, you were always trying to convince me to marry a cop or a politician. So I couldn’t tell you about Moira when we moved in, because Heaven forbid that Ellen Smith’s only daughter turn out to be as queer as a three-dollar bill! But we were in love, Mom! We still are! I love her and I love Andy and I love all these other women here! You know what? Fuck it. Let’s just spill *all* the tea. Moira met Andy and I at Julian and Alana’s wedding in Scotland, Mom! We all slept in the same bed that night! Well, I *say* sleep, but we didn’t do much of that—”

“That is enough, Fiona!”

“It’s enough when you back *off*, Mom! When you finally just say ‘we’re happy for all of you’ and let *us* deal with everything else. I am as my Creator made me, mother, and if that means He condemned me to Hell for being as He intended, well, there’s very little I can do about that, now, is there? But I still believe in God, mom. I do! I just believe God wants me to be who and

what I am, and to value love when and where I find it. The flaws are in the teachings and the scripture, because sometimes when people are writing down the Word Of God, the message can get a bit jumbled in translation! So, either you can accept us, accept all of us, as a family, or we can all just get up and leave you to it, Mom!”

Ellen’s frustration was evident on her face, but it wasn’t until she spoke again that Andy realized it was directed inward. “I’m... I’m sorry if I ever made you feel anything but loved Fiona. You’re right; it’s not fair of me to judge you, or them, and if you’re happy, that should be enough for me. No, that isn’t good enough. It *is* enough for me. I’m... I’m very glad you’re happy, and that you reconnected with both Andy and Moira, since it seems like they hold the keys to your heart. I do hope they’ll be as careful with your spirit as we tried to be.”

Finally, Fiona seemed to smile again, shaking her head. “Well, I’m *marrying* them, Mom, so I sure as hell *hope* so!”

The next few hours, it was like he was getting to meet Fiona’s parents all over again. The same with her brothers, although Rob not being present was strange, at least at first. Then Andy found out that Rob had moved to Spain with his girlfriend a few years ago, and they were still sheltering in place, not having gotten access to the serum yet.

Seamus, Fi’s dad, had always liked Andy, and the two men found an easy peace between them almost immediately. “I knew, of course,” Seamus told him quietly so only the two of them could hear. “Back then. That the spare bed was just that, and not your actual bedroom. I didn’t mind, and I didn’t want to cause too much of a fuss, so I went on letting Ellen believe what she wanted to believe and let Fiona convince herself that we didn’t know. It seemed better than kicking up too much dust.”

“I know that feeling,” Andy said with a soft laugh. “Sometimes I feel like the best thing we can do as men is to keep our head down and stay out of the way of the women who know better.”

“Now now, my boy. Don’t go sounding like those damn Male Protection Act people, Andy,” Seamus said. “We few men, we’re all that’s left, so we have to take care of each other, and look out for each other, make sure nobody’s trying to put us out to pasture.”

“Yeah, well, I understand their concerns about keeping us all safe, but I’m certainly not going to live the rest of my life in a padded room with no sharp edges or corners because someone tells me I can’t live my life the way I choose to,” Andy chuckled. “They can try if they want to, but I can make a *hell* of a stink, and they’ve given me a bit of a platform to do it, too. I’m going to look out for my family, and that includes looking out for myself, for better or worse, no matter what the government thinks of me.”

“I saw the news of the shooting,” Seamus said to him. “That sort of thing can do a real number on a fella’s psyche, but it sounds like it wasn’t aimed at you.”

“*Aimed*,” Andy scoffed, shaking his head in anger and annoyance. “They were two people fighting about whose idea of the end of the world was the *right* one. It was ridiculous. Nobody gets to decide how the world ends, or what the state of it is after people start picking up the pieces. And yet, one of them decided to shoot the other. I was freaking out about this a few hours ago, but now? Now I just feel sorry for *all* of them. They’re raging against the dying of the light, but it’s the *wrong* light.”

For the next hour or so, Andy, Fi and Moira entertained all the questions that Fiona’s parents had, although they had a certain amount of information about Moira already. It was just a matter of reincorporating what they’d already learned about Moira when they lived together. Fi’s mom had come around, at least mostly, and was now getting excited about the idea of the

wedding, although she was a little annoyed that it wasn't going to be a Catholic wedding, despite the fact that Fiona, Moira *and* Aisling were all Catholic. But, as Andy pointed out, Emily belonged to the Church of England, Piper was Methodist and both Sarah and Niko were atheists. Andy was as well, which apparently was the most scandalous thing he said all night. But with such religious diversity in the family, it was going to be a non-denominational ceremony, but there would be hints of the big G here and there, to help soothe everyone over. The vows would all be custom tailored, though, and each person would speak entirely for themselves.

The fact that it wouldn't be an entirely God-less ceremony seemed to calm down Ellen a bit and let her focus on the parts of the wedding she was most excited about – the music, the dresses and what Fiona was thinking about saying.

By the time dinner was being served, almost all the tension had entirely dissipated, and everyone at the table was laughing again, and it felt like just a normal (if abnormally large) family get together. Seamus was even calling Andy "son" which Andy knew would probably *always* feel weird. The meal was excellent, and the dessert was even better.

Andy felt nearly halfway normal again by the time everyone was saying their goodbyes and heading towards the hotel again. Most importantly, Fiona was smiling, radiant and exuberant, joyous and wondrous, she and Moira were joking and laughing like they didn't have a care in the world.

It was a great moment.

He hoped it would last.