

Chapter Eleven

December 16th, 2020

Andy hadn't had the heart to tell any of the girls when they'd crashed the night before that they weren't *technically* sleeping in his home state of Ohio. In her effort to avoid them staying at a place with Covington in the name, Niko had missed that the Embassy Suites RiverCenter by Hilton Cincinnati wasn't actually *in* Cincinnati. *Or* Ohio. Oh, sure, it was in the greater Cincinnati area, but it was across the Ohio River. In Kentucky. In a town called, sadly, Covington. Thankfully, his partners had all sort of laughed it off in the morning while they were getting ready.

Melody had tried sending Andy a text when she first woke up, thanking him for taking her in, and when he opened his eyes, generally the last one to get out of bed, he saw her grinning, standing over him. "You're a big-dicked bastard, you know that?" she said, and then turned to high five Piper. "Fuck yeah, that worked!" Andy hadn't *seen* the text when she said that, so he was momentarily confused until Piper showed him his phone.

"Melody sent you a text message as soon as she got up, babe, but we had your phone in silent mode so it wouldn't wake you," Piper told him. "So, as long as she sends you a message while you're asleep, it's pretty easy sailing for everyone in dealing with that. We just wanted to test it without causing too much of a fuss."

"Hey, anything that makes your lives easier, you know I'm all for," Andy said, as Lexi and Niko wheeled in a few carts from the hallway that contained plenty of breakfast options for them to all have, Andy delighted to see an entire decanter full of pineapple juice. Sometimes the girls made special requests, and Andy's *only* request was that he always wanted to have either pineapple juice or orange juice for breakfast, never *ever* grapefruit juice, or, as he described it, squint in a glass.

As breakfast was starting to wind down, Andy asked Piper to phone up her sister, so that he could talk to Declan. He hadn't liked how they'd left things the day before. "Dec? Hey, it's Andy. Look man, I feel like we sort of got off on the wrong foot yesterday, and I'm afraid I probably came across looking like a bit of an asshole, which was never my intention."

"Yeah, well, me too, Andy," Dec sighed on the other end of the line. "You know how it is. Politics flare up and tempers kick up and suddenly we're at each other's throats for no real reason. I did a bit of reading while you were gone, and you're right, we aren't tackling white collar crime as much as we probably oughta be. I voted for Trump 'cause he promised to drain the swamp, but you know, it's swampier in DC now than its ever been. Nothing got done the whole time he was there and that fucker *still* raised my taxes and spit in my eye. Fool me once and all that. Wouldn't have voted for him a second time, even if he'd lived. Wouldn't have voted for Biden neither, but I mean, Trump fucking stared into an eclipse and decided he knew more about hurricanes than the weather people, so he just changed a map with a sharpie and though nobody would notice. Fuck *that* guy. I'm glad he's dead. He's not one of us. He was fucking *rich*. That's the problem. I sort of realized, we gotta be looking at rich and poor before *anything* else. I'm tryin' not to think about it in terms of race, but in terms of economic status, and, hoo boy, does that turn a bunch'a shit on its head."

"And I'm sorry I bit at the racist comment," Andy sighed. "I should've known better, because I really *don't* think you're racist – I just think systemic problems get ignored a lot by people who *think* they're looking at one set of data and think they have the whole picture. It tends to make people *look* racist when they just occasionally *act* racist, and most of the time, they don't even realize they're doing it, otherwise they'd stop and think about it some. We

question each other and suddenly we're both shouting like a bunch of drunken idiots." He laughed a little. "We *gotta* find some better way to get past these entrenched habits of ours to get our hackles up the minute we're questioned, y'know?"

"You find a way to do it," Declan laughed in response, "you let me know and I'm pretty sure we can make a fortune off of teaching it to people. Anyway, you're not a vegetarian, and you weren't bitching about my Garth Brooks t-shirt, so I'm certain we can find somewhere in the middle to make it work, even if we don't see eye-to-eye on a bunch of stuff."

Andy grinned. "They can have my cheesesteak when they pry it from my cold dead hands, Declan. Glad we were able to talk through it and not end on a bad note. You decide if you're coming up for the wedding yet?"

"Yeah, I think it'll just be me and June coming up for it while the kids and the rest of the partners stay home. We're filling out the RSVP card right now and we'll have it off to you in the mail, so maybe it'll even be waiting for you by the time you get back home."

"Sounds great, Dec. We'll look forward to seeing you in January then."

"Cover your ass out there, Andy," Declan said. "We got unreasonable folks on both sides of the aisle, your camp *and* mine. Never take your eye off the ball."

"You got it, man." Andy ended the call, handing the phone back to Piper. He looked over at Alexis, who was basically playing schedule keeper for the whole trip, which was good, because Andy was pretty sure he'd have gotten lost down the rabbit hole for logistical planning. "What's our schedule for the next few days look like?"

"We're going to meet up with your mom and your nephew early in the afternoon at the house you grew up in, the book signing in the afternoon, then we're flying up to Chicago to meet Fiona's family. Crash the night there, then the next day we fly up to Pierre, South Dakota, driving down to the Rosebud Reservation to meet Niko's mom for lunch, then driving back up to Pierre, and flying from Pierre to Denver, where we're crashing for the night," Alexis told him. "Going to be a very busy few days for us, but tomorrow's got lots of travel time you can write during, and the day after's pretty lax as well with just the book signing and then the flight up to Seattle, but that's a three-hour flight, whereas everything we've got today is just a couple hours here and there. Plus you can sleep in again."

"How far from the Rosebud Reservation is Pierre?" Andy asked, gathering up his things, making sure all his various little electronics were tucked into his satchel bag.

"A couple of hours each way."

"Can't we fly straight there?"

Alexis sighed. "Yeah, we can, I suppose. Rosebud does have its own airport – Rosebud Sioux Tribal Airport – but it's not exactly what I would call a security-rich environment."

"How big is Rosebud as a city?" Andy asked, a smile on his face.

"Like, barely a thousand people?"

"Think we can afford to be a *little* laxer and just fly straight there instead?" he laughed. "We didn't tell anyone we were going there, it's not on the public schedule and it's remote enough that you should be able to see any threats coming a mile away. Besides, Niko'll be on her home turf."

Alexis chuckled, nodding. "Yeah, okay. I'll get the flight plan updated, but either me or Melody stays with the plane the whole time."

"Why not both of us?" Melody asked.

"Because Niko's going to be home again, so she won't be as critically sharp as she normally is, and that means either you or me's gonna be on full security detail," Alexis said. "No

offense, Neeks.”

“None taken,” Niko replied, doing one final sweep of the hotel room, making sure nobody had left anything behind. “It’s totally fair to say I won’t be on my A game back on the rez. Place is going to bring up a lot of old memories, even as tiny as it is. But anything out of the ordinary there will stand out like a sore thumb.”

“You mean us,” Moira joked.

“I do, indeed, mean us.”

“Any reason we’re not doing a bookstore signing tomorrow in Chicago?” Ash asked Andy.

He sighed, having been hoping to dodge this particular bit of conversation. “You’re gonna make me get into it, aren’t you?”

Suddenly, all the women turned to look at Andy. “Oooooo! There’s gossip!” Sarah cackled. “Andy’s got an unkind word to say about somebody!”

He shook his head, rolling his eyes a little bit. “I did a book signing at Myopic Books a couple of years ago, but they’ve got a hard-and-fast total no-cell-phone policy for the whole store, and I had my cell on me there and it rang during the Q&A, which got me a *major* talking down to by the manager of the store, despite the fact that it was actually important and time-sensitive business information I needed at that moment in time. They told me they were going to put me on their blacklist and I would be persona non grata from the store, now and forever more,” he scoffed. “The whole thing just put me off the idea of doing a signing in Chicago, even if we’d gone somewhere else like the Sandmeyer’s or Open Books instead. And I figured I know the Smiths are going to want to have some serious time grilling me again, so I suspected having a couple of days off to meet family and travel in the middle would give everyone time to decompress a little bit. I don’t want Fi’s parents or Niko’s mom to feel rushed. I was a little worried that we hadn’t allotted enough time for Piper’s family, but—”

“But I insisted we not give them more than a couple of hours otherwise I figured Andy and Declan might be at each other’s throats,” Piper said with a laugh. “I’m not deluding myself about who my sister married. Dec’s a good guy, but he’s also definitely a bit of a Florida redneck.”

“We’ve mostly got it worked out, him and me,” Andy said. “Although it did take a couple of tries to get there. But yeah, Piper told me to keep it quick to a nice in and out visit with only a few hours there.”

“You probably could’ve done the same with me and mom,” Niko said. “The reservation’s so damn tiny, you’ll have seen the whole thing by the time we land the plane.”

“It can’t be *that* small, Niko,” Andy said, sliding his arm around her waist. “Your mom’s a teacher there, so they’ve got a school, and that means they’ve g—”

“Like a thousand people *tops* Andy,” Niko shot back. “It’s going to feel like the tiniest little town you’ve ever been in in your entire life. It’s utterly boring, I promise you. I’m glad you want to see where I grew up, but don’t set those expectations high, because you will be disappointed no matter how low they are. If after an hour or so chatting with my mom, you all want us to take off and head to Denver, I’m with you all the way.”

“It’s where *you* grew up, Niko, so that makes it important to *me*,” he said, kissing her cheek, feeling her blush under the sudden focus and attention. “Besides, you’re all getting to see where *I* grew up today, and I dunno how comfortable about that *I* am.”

“Well, *part* of where you grew up,” Fiona corrected. “Unless we’re swinging by and seeing both houses?”

Andy shook his head. “Nah, just the one where I was from ages eight to eighteen. The house my folks lived in before that I don’t even remember. That was more of where Matty grew up than where I did.” He winced a little, mentioning his late brother, but did his best to hold it together. So much had happened over the last few months, it was almost easier trying *not* to think about all the people they’d lost, but the death of Andy’s brother in early November still stung hard. “Sorry, it’s going to be hard today not crying.”

“Nothing’s wrong with crying, Andrew,” Emily said, moving close to join in a group hug around Andy, all of them closing around him. “Come. Let’s get going and see your house.”

It wasn’t too much of a drive, back across the river then just on the east side of Hyde Park, not too far from Mt. Lookout, and when they drove up to the house in their SUVs, it felt to Andy almost like nothing had changed. It was a two-story house that had to have been built sometime around 1930 or so, with a white stucco exterior and stacked stone accents, a couple of chairs on the porch, with his mom, Virginia, sitting in one and his sister-in-law, Samantha, sitting in the other. Conner, Andy’s nephew, was sitting on the stairs playing with his Nintendo Switch.

“Conner! Your uncle’s here!” Samantha said as they all started to get out of the vehicles. Sam was in her early forties, but was still quite the attractive woman, with long, blonde hair that she typically kept up in a bun. Andy had almost expected to see her in a suit, but she was in casual attire today, clearly not showing any houses to anyone.

Conner pushed pause on his game, set the Switch down, then took off like a bolt towards Andy, rushing straight at him before giving him a massive hug. He looked so much like a younger version of Andy’s late brother Matt, it was hard for Andy not to cry seeing him. The boy was only about four feet tall, with a massive flop of blonde curly hair that hung down past his shoulders. He still had Matty’s eyes, though. Conner wore a giant Billibong t-shirt that Andy was absolutely sure was from Matty’s collection, considering it hung down nearly to Conner’s knees. He’d just eeked in under the fatal range for DuoHalo and had caught the disease off the back of his father, but now that he’d recovered from it, he was essentially immune to the virus. Even though he could still be a carrier of the virus, he would never suffer the same fate of collapsing lungs that DuoHalo normally killed people with, the way an entire generation had gone. Andy didn’t even want to think about how many of Conner’s friends had probably suddenly died over the summer.

“It’s good to see you’re okay, Uncle Andy,” Conner said, clinging tightly, not even looking up at him yet. “Dad hasn’t been gone that long and already Mom’s got a new boyfriend. I hate it.”

“I know, Conner, and it sucks, but you know your Dad would’ve wanted your mom and you to be safe, and your mom having a new boyfriend’s part of that,” Andy said as Conner pulled back so he could look up at him. “That’s a weird part about how they’re treating this disease, but it is how they’re doing it. I heard you were hospitalized with DuoHalo for a few weeks. I’m glad you came out okay.”

Conner looked to his left and to his right at all the women surrounding Andy before the boy’s eyes turned back to him, his gaze a little wider. “Is this *all* your girlfriends, Uncle Andy?”

Ash laughed a little bit and moved over to get a bit closer to Conner. “No, your uncle’s quite the important man, so they made sure he has a *lot* of girlfriends to help keep him safe. Most of us are his fiancées though, which means we’re all getting married soon, although Alexis and Melody over there are just dedicated bodyguards, although they’re his girlfriends too. They’re specifically here to keep him safe. Hi! I’m Aisling, but you can call me Ash if you like.”

“Like the boy from Pokémon?”

“Pronounced the same, but spelled different,” she said with a smile.

Conner’s innate shyness came to the forefront a little, and he smiled nervously. “You talk funny.”

“I’m originally from Ireland, all the way on the other side of the planet.”

“How come you want to marry Uncle Andy?” Conner said, almost trying to hide himself behind Andy for safety. He kept looking over to one side, but Andy couldn’t figure out which of his partners Conner seemed to be repeatedly glancing at before returning his gaze back to Ash.

“Because I think he’s the neatest guy I’ve ever met,” she said with a big smile. “He’s my *favorite* person in the *whole world*. We met back in June and since then, I haven’t let him be away from me for more than a *day*. I like him *that much!* But you know what’s *crazy?* I like him enough that I think he’s *so* special that he needs *lots* of us girls to marry him, and I’m gonna share him with all the girls here. Can I introduce you to them? Would that be okay?”

“Okay,” Conner said shyly, starting to come out from behind Andy.

“So this is Niko, Piper, Sarah, Emily, Fiona and Moira,” Ash said.

Fiona laughed, taking her phone out of her pocket, as she moved in close to Conner. “Can I show you something, Conner? Take a look at this...” She leaned down and showed Conner a picture of her and Andy together, back in college, with Xander, back when they were all roommates. “Your uncle and I used to be special friends before you were born, but after we finished school, we went different directions, so I didn’t get a chance to see you when you came into this world. But now I’m back together with him, and it’s a pleasure to meet you.”

Before they did anything else, Virginia moved forward to take Andy’s phone from him and get a picture of him and Conner sitting on the steps, surrounded by all of Andy’s partners, and Conner seemed to be grinning like he’d won the lottery at that. “Can you send me that picture, Uncle Andy?” Conner said. “I want to show it to some of my friends.”

“Course I can, Conner.”

They all started walking up towards the house, a soft smile on Andy’s face, as he moved to give his mom a big hug. “Hey Mom, hey Sam,” he said. “Should we all go inside? I know Lexi and Melody would feel much safer indoors.”

“Sure,” Virginia said, leading them all into the house.

Andy’s mom was in her late sixties, and there was still a tiny hint of a Brooklyn accent to her voice. She was about five and a half feet with curly brown hair. She had on a loose shirt and a pair of classic mom jeans. She looked tired, more than anything, but was clearly trying to put on a brave face. She brought them all into the living room, where the wall behind her couch was covered with pictures of the family, many of whom were now dead. Andy’s father, who’d died several years ago, Matty, who’d died last month, both of Virginia’s brothers (Andy’s uncles), neither of whom had survived DuoHalo, but also included pictures with Samantha, Conner, and even a printed version of the photo Fiona had shown Matty earlier.

“I don’t feel like I’ve got time enough to learn everything about all these wonderful women you’re going to marry, Andy,” Virginia said to them. “So if you don’t mind, Fi, I’m going to go kind of quick and gloss over you a bit, since I feel like out of all you ladies, I at least know you the best already, although we definitely have to catch up at some point about what you were up to while you were out of my son’s life.”

Fiona chuckled a bit and nodded. “I get that, Virginia, and I don’t mind.”

“You’ve barely aged a day since you were in college, my dear; I’m so jealous. Three different famous women, hm?” Virginia asked, putting on her glasses, as she smiled, looking over at Piper, Em and Sarah. “Two actresses and an athlete. Quite a lot of celebrity for one

household. There aren't jealousy problems between the three of you, are there?"

Sarah giggled, taking Emily's hand in her own. "Well, Em and I sort of came as a prepacked deal, so there's never any fucking jealousy between the two of us, well, no *serious* jealousy," the tall redhead laughed. "And we've all bonded with Piper super fucking well."

"You're not bothered by my son being a bit out of shape, Piper?" Virginia asked the volleyball player, who had opted not to sit down, but was looking at all the pictures of Andy when he was younger on the wall. "You're *very* fit and he's, well, he's my son and he's always preferred writing to exercise."

"Not at all, ma'am," Piper said. "I couldn't really talk about it during the television interview, but Andy pulled me out of the toughest situation of my life, and the first thing he did afterwards was *apologize for not being able to do more*." She was starting to tear up a little bit, thinking about it. "I still have the letter he wrote me, and I'm going to carry that with me every day for the rest of my days. I don't say this lightly, Mrs. Rook, but I'd *kill* someone to keep your son safe. He saved me. *SAVED ME*. Maybe I'll try and get him to lose a few pounds around the mid-section, but even if he doesn't, I am going to love him with all my heart until the last breath leaves either my dying lungs or his." She placed her hand on Andy's shoulder and gave it a firm squeeze, so he reached up to hold her hand for a moment. "I'm sort of hoping we'll go together."

Virginia smiled softly, nodding. "That certainly *sounds* like my son. Well, let's get to know one another then as best we can in our short time together, shall we?"

For the next few hours, Andy's mom grilled all the girls, sometimes one at a time, sometimes in pairs or even as a whole, and while they tried to get to ask some questions about Andy growing up, or about Virginia herself, Andy's mom, much like her son, had an uncanny ability to deflect questions around herself and back towards the people asking.

There was even a point in the conversation where Virginia asked about if Ash had felt bad, considering she'd shown up first and yet Andy seemed insistent on keeping all his fiancées on even ground, to which Ash said she'd always thought Andy seemed larger than life, and having extra sets of hands around to keep him from getting idle was for the best. But Ash also pointed out that even in the house, she was sort of First Among Equals, although she rarely went out of her way to use that power. And the fact that *all* the other women laughed implied tacit agreement on their parts.

Andy excused himself from the conversation for a while to check in on Conner and Samantha. It was true, Sam had been assigned a new partner, a man named Steve who had politely asked not to intrude on the family moment, something Andy found himself a little thankful for, as it let Conner sort of come out of his shell more.

It turned out part of the reason Conner had been so shy was because he'd recognized Emily from the Daggerfall Academy movies, and while he knew she was an actress *playing* that part, he also knew that meeting her was a little bit special, and he'd been at a loss for words. Andy hadn't realized that Conner was a fan of the books, otherwise he might have seen that coming, especially since he found out that Matty had read Conner the books before bedtime for the last few years, which meant his brother's ghost was all over the boy's feelings.

Andy did his best to try and keep Conner's spirits up, and told him that any time he wanted to, he could always reach out to Andy, and that Andy would do his best to help Conner feel connected to his late father. "I miss him too, buddy," Andy said, giving Conner a hug as the boy cried for a little bit. "Each and every single day."

When Andy, Conner and Samantha came back to the living room, he found that his mother had, as he expected, busted out the photo album, and was showing off pictures of Andy

as a child, usually in the most embarrassing attire or poses she could. They'd already taken a quick tour of the house, but the room that had been Andy's growing up had been converted into a guest bedroom and there were very few signs of him from his youth, which was why she'd reverted to the photo album.

Because he knew it would make his day, Andy situated Conner in a photo with Emily, Sarah and Piper, the three women surrounding him, each of them with an arm around him, as Conner had the biggest smile possible on his face when Andy snapped the picture. Conner shyly asked if he could get one of just him and Emily together, and Em had happily obliged, all of which brightened Conner's mood considerably. Andy was sure that his nephew would be showing that photo to all of his friends for months to come, telling them how his uncle was marrying Dahlia Hairtrigger (or the actress who'd played her, anyway).

"We've got to get going, Mom, but I hope you'll come out to California a few days early for the wedding," Andy told her. "If you can't, I understand, but it would be nice to give you a bit of uninterrupted time seeing the new place and getting to know all my partners as much as you wanted to. Like I said, if you can."

Virginia nodded, a bittersweet smile on her lips. "I'll make the time, honey. Niko, I hope you, Lexi and Melody will do whatever you can to keep him alive, okay? Losing Matty... it nearly broke me. I don't know what I'd do if I lost Andrew as well."

Niko smiled a little bit sadly herself, moving to give Virginia a big hug. "Well, we're going to do everything we can to keep him safe, especially since he's going to be a *father* next year." His mom gasped a little at that, as Andy smiled. He was fine with them telling his mother whenever they wanted to, and while they were still in the early days where risk was high, they'd clearly wanted to reinforce her spirits a bit. "It's still early and we're not really telling anyone yet, but both Ash and I are pregnant, so you're going to be Grandma to a lot more kids in the next few years, so you hang on as well, okay? We think we're due sometime early August, but we'll know more for sure next year."

Andy's mom started to tear up, motioning for Ash and Andy to join her, as the four of them had a big hug, Virginia moving to kiss Andy's cheek. "You're going to be a good father, Andy," she told him. "I've always said that. I'm glad you'll have a chance to prove me right. Your late father, God bless his soul, thought so, too, and he'd have been proud of all you've done this year."

Everyone was a little teary-eyed as they climbed back into the SUVs and headed back towards downtown, driving the seven or so miles to get to the Ohio Book Store. A four-story building that had been in use since 1961, the Ohio Book Store was something of a Cincinnati institution, one that Andy had spent countless hours in his youth walking the various stacks, in search for the next great story that would lead him down a rabbit hole in the way only truly fantastic fiction could.

What nobody in Andy's crew had expected was the sizable number of protesters outside of the building, somewhere between forty and eighty people. The protesters were divided into two camps, one who seemed to be "anti-new government" and one side that seemed to be just generally "anti-men." The signs each side carried made it pretty clear who was on which side.

'Why did you live and my husband die?'

'The matriarchy oppresses us!'

'Not my government!'

'DuoHalo is hoax!'

And on the other side...

‘Men deserved to die!’

‘God hates men!’

‘Burn in hell, sinner!’

‘Men, stay at home and let women handle things!’

It was enough to make Andy more than a little bit nervous, especially since the two sides, which had been yelling at *each other* long before Andy showed up, turned all their attention to *him* when he did, as if both sides hated the other, but they hated Andy *more*.

Lexi had been in contact with the members of the local police who’d been stationed outside to keep the peace, and so she knew what they were rolling into. There were a few officers stationed inside the bookstore as well. They made it a point to bring Andy in through a back entrance, but once he was inside and they started letting people who’d shown up for the signing (and had passed through a metal detector/quick search) into the building, and that was when tempers flared up out front.

Andy did his best to get through the reading portion of the signing even while there was conflicting chanting outside. He was aided by the fact that the bookstore had set up a microphone and speaker to amplify his voice a bit indoors. And he was pleased to see that the fans he had who’d come out for his book were all eager to hear a bit from the next one.

After that, he’d agreed to do a short bit of Q&A, against the advice of Lexi and Niko, because it had been tradition. He’d made it through four questions before the audience had asked anything about something other than what was in his books. The fifth question was from a young man in his early thirties who looked exactly like Andy envisioned a lot of his readers looked like – a bit overweight, a bit shy but well-educated if a touch socially stunted. “Mr. Conrad,” the young man said, “what are your thoughts about the Male Protection Act it sounds like Congress is trying to push through into law?”

Andy sighed, closing his iPad cover over the tablet. “I don’t want to get into a deep dive about politics, especially on such a complex issue, but I also feel like you’ve asked a genuine question and it deserves a genuine answer. In principle, I understand the desire and design to try and keep men safe, especially since there are so few of us left in the world right now, but I also think it’s *very* dangerous for anyone to start dictating how people are allowed to live their lives. Maybe there are some things we men are used to that we *should* put on hold for a while – smoking, extreme sports, extraplanetary travel – but I also don’t want them to think they can tell me I need to never leave my house again until I’ve fathered a few dozen children, because I’ve still got to *live my life*, you know? Human nature is often to overreact when course correcting, but we’ve still got plenty of time to make sure we can achieve their stated goal of protecting men without telling those men they aren’t allowed to enjoy a whiskey sour and a good bacon cheeseburger every now and then.”

The answer seemed to go over better than Andy had expected it to, with strong applause from both the few men and the many women in attendance for the signing. After that question, though, Andy was pretty sure it was going to devolve into more things along that way, so he told the audience it was time to get signing, as he cut the Q&A portion off.

The autograph line was long, and Andy did his best to keep it moving along, although, as expected, a number of people Andy had gone to grade school and/or high school had shown up, and many of them wanted to chat for at least a minute or two, which slowed the line down considerably. Andy could’ve brushed them along, but never wanted to come across as rude, and so did his best to straddle the line between friendly and professional and was willing to give everyone a few minutes of time before pointing out the line behind them.

Two thirds of the way through the line, though, came a rather drastic surprise, as a woman about Andy's age strolled up with a copy of his first book, a giant smile on her face, her top featuring as daringly plunging a neckline as she could get away with without being booked for indecent exposure. "Hey there stranger," she said as she walked up for her turn at signing.

"Marie?" Andy laughed. "Holy shit, I haven't seen you since college. How've you been?"

Marie Anderson had been the girl Andy had been dating right before Fiona, and it was him and Marie's breakup that had led to Andy and Fi exploring their feelings for each other in college. She looked good for her age, certainly very busty, and dressed like she was auditioning for a Bon Jovi video in the 1980s, with leather pants, her blonde hair hairsprayed up into a lion's mane. "Hey Andy," she purred at him. "How've you been? Miss me?"

Andy felt Fiona's hand squeezing his left leg beneath the table and he smiled a little bit, knowing this wasn't going to go at all how Marie had envisioned it to. "Haven't really thought about you much, Marie," Andy told her. "Not with how we left it at the time."

"Oh, come on, Andy," Marie said, trying to give him a gaze down her top. "We were just kids back then, and neither of us really knew what we were doing. But you've grown up into a hell of a man, one *hell* of a man, and it just so happens my husband died in August. I'm not paired up with anyone, so I was think—"

Fiona took that as her cue to jump in, cutting the woman off suddenly. "You were thinking you could go back to the guy you dated in college until you two split up because you were constantly making fun of his lack of sexual experience?" Fi said, not raising her voice at all. Fi was a professional at being cutting without being loud, a highly refined skill from her journalist days. "Why on *earth* would you think *that*, Marie? Because you saw him on television, saw he'd made a little money and you're still playing receptionist at your daddy's feed business?"

"I think Andy's capable of deciding these things for himself, don't you, Fiona?" Marie practically growled.

"He is," Andy said, shaking his head. "And his family is more than completely full, Marie. And even if it wasn't full up, when we split up, or, to be more accurate, when you *dumped* me, you made it clear that you didn't ever look back with regrets, so I couldn't *bear* it if I was the one responsible for you breaking your oath to yourself." He signed the book 'Good luck with the new direction, Blake Conrad,' then slid it back across the table to her. "I'm sure you'll find someone else sooner or later."

Marie picked up the copy of the book with a deeply offended look on her face before stomping away, moving to head out of the front door of the bookstore, as Andy felt Ash's hand on the back of his shoulder, reassuringly, as Fi merely quietly laughed. "I am *so* much better than that girl could ever *dream* of being," Fi said. "Aren't I?"

"Was the engagement ring not enough, Fi?" Andy teased.

"A girl likes to be reminded every now and then."

"Yes, Fi, I was *always* happier with you than I was with Marie. Then *and* now. With her, back when she and I were dating in college, it felt like I was trapped in the same argument for a decision I made years and years ago that never got let go of, and no matter how many times she claimed to forgive me, it always came back to 'You went to Todd and Jenny's party without me, even though I told you to go, because I wanted you to decide not to go without me on your own' since she was explicitly not invited to the party. Her and Todd had been arguing about something, and somehow, I got caught in the middle of it. No matter what I said, whenever I disagreed with her on something, it always came back to that, or back to her usual defense mechanism of

complaining that I'm always telling her she's wrong. Seriously, there's only so much drama a guy needs in his daily life."

"And we comprise the entirety of that, Sarah and I," Em said, reaching over to rub her smooth fingertips against the back of his neck. "But I think we offer equal recompense."

"Oh, you most certainly do," Andy chuckled.

That was the moment when everything changed in Andy's life.

The moment he heard a gunshot outside of the building, and everything went mad.

Niko pulled him down to the ground as Alexis and Melody closed ranks around him, forming a triangular human shield around him, pinning him in a small ball before they started to pull Andy to his feet and evac him out the back way that they'd come in, Lexi taking point, Melody watching the rear and Niko practically glued to Andy. The rest of Andy's team were pulled in close, somewhere between Lexi and Niko or Melody and Niko, but it was clear everyone was basically bundled around Andy as the primary point of protection as they all began moving quickly and efficiently towards the back door.

Within moments, all ten of them were inside of the two SUVs, Lexi, Niko, Andy, Ash and Em in the front car with Melody, Sarah, Piper, Ash and Moira in the rear car. The two vehicles pulled out hard and fast from behind the bookstore just in time to see tear gas cannisters being launched into the protesters out front. Niko was on her phone immediately, trying to get answers. "What the hell happened out there?" she said, talking to someone with the local police or someone in the Air Force reserves who'd also been covertly keeping tabs on the gathered crowd outside. "Right. Okay. Just the one then? Any idea what started it? It related to us or just people being stupid? Sure, I get that. Alright, keep me posted. No, I don't care how unreliable the early information you're getting is – I want it as soon as you fucking *have it*. Am I making myself clear, or do I need to head down there and put a boot up your ass personally? Sorry. No, I get you're just trying to do your job. You're right, it was uncalled for. I'm still just amped up in combat mode with the adrenaline spike. I apologize. I just... let me know when you know more, yeah? Thanks."

"The *fuck* happened out there?" Lexi asked.

Ash was practically shivering, clinging to him, and Emily had reached back one of her hands, which Andy was holding, and he could feel her trembling a bit as well. While everyone else felt on edge and wound up, Andy felt the complete opposite, almost cold and dead inside, and he started to wonder if maybe he was in shock at what had just happened.

"Someone in the crowd shot someone *else* in the crowd," Niko said. "They were only screening for weapons for people going into the building, not standing outside. I told them they should've had the two factions further apart, but Cincinnati PD assured us they had everything under control."

"That was very much *not* under fucking control!" Lexi shouted before catching herself. "Sorry. Sorry, Niko. You know I'm not mad at you. You handled this like a pro."

"Hell of a fucking test run to see if the three of us can handle something like this, huh?" Niko said, trying to force a laugh that everyone inside the SUV could tell was unnatural.

"You holding it together, Andy?" Lexi asked.

"I'm kind of numb, Lexi, if I'm honest."

"You checked him for wounds when we got him into the SUV, right, Niko?"

"Complete sweep. Not a scratch on him," Niko said. "Always secure and verify the health of the asset first thing."

"You're probably just a bit shellshocked for the moment, Andy," Lexi said. "It's not

uncommon for someone to be that way their first time in a firefight. We're going to double back to the hotel for a bit, you all are going to hang out in the lobby while I go and do a quick security sweep of the jet before you all join us, and then we can get the hell out of this town."

"I'm going to call Mama Rook and let her know that we're all fine," Ash said. "It okay if she meets us at the hotel?"

"That's a good idea, Ash. Have her head over, and you all can spend a bit more time talking with her while I'm doing a sweep of the airport," Lexi said. "It'll give you all a chance to cool down, take a moment, clear your heads a bit and start to feel normal."

"I don't know that I'm ever going to feel normal *again*," Andy said.