

Quaranteam: Piper's Prelude

A 5-part Quaranteam Story

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Part One

As the sound of Vanilla Ice's "Ice Ice Baby" barked out of a little portable speaker, Piper Brown found herself wondering if it came right down to it, who had more endurance, her or Sheridan. They were two entirely different types of athletes, but Sheridan's endurance was not to be underestimated.

Sheridan was currently leading most of the girls in a workout, but she had also definitely tailored it so that everyone could keep up and break a decent sweat without anyone being overly taxed, although it wasn't remotely close to the sort of high-intensity stuff the two of them did most days after the general class.

The November air was crisp by California standards, but it wasn't so cold that any of them were freezing their asses off, despite the tight workout clothes. Most of the girls were definitely aiming to get a solid workout in, but more than a few of them were also intent on looking cute while they did it, something Piper didn't really understand. Andy generally wasn't a morning person, and even if he did come and check them out, the man loved all of his partners unflinchingly. He wasn't going to judge them if their hair was a mess while they were out doing aerobics and cardio. Hell, she thought to herself, he'd probably find it adorable.

The sky was overcast and the app on her phone said there was a 40% chance of rain later in the afternoon, but that the morning should be fine.

This particular morning, Sheridan and Piper had gotten their power workout done first and then gathered the girls up for a general calisthenics and fitness class, something they tried to do at least three times a week for multiple reasons. It made sure none of the girls were neglecting their workouts, first and foremost, but it was also a chance for the girls to get together and gossip a bit afterwards. Lord were they a chatty bunch post workout, sitting around the dining room table, talking about the past few days, their schedules for the upcoming day, who'd had fun time with Andy (or each other) and making sure the Needs board had been updated accordingly. It was like a thrice weekly brunch party.

When Piper had first seen the Needs board, she'd thought it was ridiculous, a tablet-like LCD screen designed just to have a single application on it. All the women's names were there, and the last day they'd gotten their fix from Andy, as well as a "do by" date, as in "he'd better do me by this day or else I'm going to lose my goddamn mind."

The expression wasn't figurative, as she knew all too well from personal experience.

Piper had come around once she'd realized the sheer monstrosity of scheduling it took to keep track of this many people, let alone keep straight the last time they'd connected with the man of the house. Whitney was even in the process of coding an app for their phones so they could all update it remotely, and that Andy could check it from wherever whenever he wanted to.

She hadn't updated the Needs board last night after she and Sarah had taken Andy for a very solid thrill ride, so she made a mental note that she'd have to do so after brunch. It had been a fun night, and had eased off a little of the tension she'd felt around Sarah, although she still felt a little starstruck by Emily. The woman was a goddamn international movie star, even if her star was a little bit on the wane. Em needed to stop picking such dumb arthouse flicks, Piper thought to herself.

It was a little remarkable to her that, despite all the big and varied personalities in the house, there weren't many actual splits or disagreements, something Piper attributed to Ash and Niko's stern guidance. If the House of Rook had been a volleyball team, while Andy would have definitely been the coach, Niko and Ash would've been co-captains. (Beach volleyball teams were only two people, so there wasn't really a need for a captain there.)

The connection she'd built with some of the women here over the past few weeks had made up for the fact that she hadn't been able to see her actual squad, the rest of the volleyball team, in a few

months, although she had talked to all of them either via Zoom, FaceTime or good old fashioned phone calls, since her arrival at Andy's house on November 3rd.

She was stirred from her memories and reflexive workout motions by the scent of Andy, and she knew he was out on the balcony behind them. Being able to track him by sense of smell had been fundamentally *unnerving* at first, but now she sort of drew comfort from it, as it meant she knew where her rock was, and how to find him.

When the girls bent down to touch their hands at the ground beneath their feet, Piper made sure to give her ass a little wiggle, since she knew Andy was looking on, and wanted to give him a cheeky little show. He didn't seem to favor boobs or butts, but just generally liked the female form, and good on him, she thought.

The song mercifully came to an end, and as it did, Sheridan pointed over their heads behind them, drawing all the girls' attention to Andy standing on the balcony. All the girls looked over their shoulders then, once they'd realized it was Andy, they all turned to look and wave at him.

"Good morning, angels," he shouted to them.

"Good morning Andy!" they cheered back in his direction.

"You know, you really ought to join us some mornings, Andrew," Emily teased politely, placing her hand on her bared pale hip.

"Mmmm," he replied to them noncommittally. "I'd be worried about making a fool of myself." He wasn't in *great* shape, but he wasn't in terrible shape either, although in the months since he'd gone from no partners to many partners, he'd apparently lost quite a bit of weight from all the constant sex he'd been having. In fact, just a few days ago Piper had seen a picture of Andy and Aisling when she'd first joined up with Andy in May, and he looked many pounds heavier. There were worse ways to shed excess weight.

"I can make sure we don't overwhelm you on your first work out, dude," Sheridan said to him with a wink and a grin. Piper knew that she meant it, too. Sheridan had the perfect demeanor of a fitness instructor, just the right amount of encouragement while still pressuring to push onward. "Let's give it a go tomorrow, 'kay?'"

Andy groaned a little bit, but raised his hands in surrender. "God help me. Okay, I'll give it a try, but no making fun of me!" She was glad to see him caving in. Within a few year's time, the house was likely to be flooded with children, and that meant he needed to be ready to handle it, even if he was going to have plenty of hands around to help him when he staggered.

All the girls made various catty comments and gestures as he rolled his eyes and headed back into the house, knowing they were only teasing. He'd gotten good at recognizing when the girls were giving him shit, which was essential, since the girls *loved* to give him shit whenever they could.

'Stay humble,' Emily always said, and Andy certainly did that in spades.

"Hey Piper," Fiona said, walking over to her. "I was wondering if maybe you and I could break off from the group brunch this morning. I've got something I want to talk to you about."

Piper had liked Fiona and Moira right from the start, especially since Fi had a certain level of cheekiness to her that made Piper feel like she was back with her volleyball squad. It also helped that Fi and Andy had been in a relationship for a long while back in college, so even if he'd changed a bit over the years, she still probably knew him better than most of the people in the house, and she'd always been willing to have a conversation about how he might take something, or what he might be thinking.

Fiona had even been one of the two people Piper had gone to when she'd been worried that Andy hadn't taken her request to bring Brooke in seriously, the other being Aisling, naturally. But Fi had stressed to Piper that Andy rarely did anything without thinking, rethinking and overthinking, so if he had passed on Brooke, there were likely very good reasons for it, even if they weren't immediately evident. After Piper had explained all about who Brooke was and what she was like, before Piper could continue, Fiona had asked if he'd suggested she get paired up with Xander. Piper had been shocked, but said, yes, that was what had happened, and then Fi had suggested Piper just wait until she saw Brooke

and saw if she was happy with Xander, and to her astonishment, Brooke had been exuberant with Xander. They'd turned out to be a far better match than Brooke and Andy would've been.

“Hey, you were great council for me, Fi,” Piper said as she rolled up her yoga mat. “What's shaking?”

“C'mon, let's get breakfast and we can go sit on one of the balconies,” Fiona said, tucking her own yoga mat under her arm, heading back towards the house. “So Brooke was happy with Xander?”

“Happy is the understatement of the century,” Piper laughed. “That girl is *lovestruck*, and just from meeting him. They're gonna be rebuilding cars together in no time. I guess you're right – she and Andy probably would've been too different to make it work, and she's in New Eden now, so I've got a friend I can go over and see on the reg. I love Andy to death, but we need to start getting out of this house more.”

“I'm still in the honeymoon phase,” Fiona said, “but I get you.” Despite the fact that Fiona was twelve years her senior, the woman wore her age remarkably, barely looking a day over thirty, and yet, there was a confident grace about her that Piper hoped she might one day gain herself. She was almost as tall as Piper was, which was also nice, considering so many of the girls were half a foot to a foot shorter than she was.

The gaggle of women filed into the house, and each of them put their yoga mat into an individually marked little cubbyhole in a massive cabinet just inside the patio door, inside the room they'd converted into a gym. They were having exercise equipment brought in a bit at a time, but they'd also put in some very non-typical things to start with, such as a couple of stripper poles, a high hanging scarf and a pair of aerial rings, mostly things that Sheridan used as an acrobat (although she'd also insisted that she was going to teach each and every girl in the house to pole dance eventually).

Sheridan headed over towards Piper and Fiona, a smile on her lips. “You going to be free this afternoon to spot me, Pipes, or should I make other plans?”

“Why don't you take today to help Tala with getting her workspace set up?” Piper said. “I know she and Jade have made a bunch of progress, but it'll give you a chance to spend some time with her and maybe you can break the ice with Jade a little bit. We both remember what it's like to have new girl syndrome.”

Sheridan rolled her eyes and flipped her frizzy blonde hair back over her shoulder. “Yeah, okay. Maybe I can get her to loosen up a bit, while I'm at it. She seems so damn uptight.”

Piper grinned, as she realized clearly Sheridan hadn't heard. “Oh, you should ask her about her experience getting imprinted to Andy, then. And if she won't tell you, ask Ems. Better yet, ask her over brunch and Em will probably just volunteer it.”

The blonde acrobat giggled a little bit. “No ways it's totes all that.”

“All that *and* the bag of chips, Sher.”

“Well hot damn! Then I guess I gots me a story to get.”

Before they could get breakfast in, the girls needed to get their showers done first, and the pool house, which was going to be Tala's workspace soon, also had a large communal shower attached to it, so the girls headed into that, which let most of them chat while they showered. Piper asked Fi when they first got in what she wanted to talk to her about, but she'd insisted it would keep until breakfast, and at that point, everyone sort of diverted the attention to Sarah, who was playfully complaining about how wonderfully her ass hurt after their encounter with Andy last night, but also remarking on how much fun it was to play with Piper lending a hand.

One of the things that had surprised Piper about all the girls in the house was how they were so playfully competitive about what they had and hadn't done with Andy, and in particular the game between Emily and Sarah seemed especially intense. It also gave the girls chances to gossip about what they were planning on springing on him next, and what she heard while she scoured the sweat from her skin about what Hannah, Taylor and Asha had planned for him made her wonder how long it would take for Andy's jaw to lift off the floor.

Despite the fact that more than half of the girls were bi, nobody ever seemed to get up to much other than showering when they were in the group shower. Piper wasn't really into women, but she wasn't against them being around when she and Andy were playing. She didn't mind touching or caressing the other girls, or having them caress her, but as she'd heard the comedian Jackie Kashian say, "I'm gonna need the pointy bit." Besides, having some of the girls around when she was involved with Andy gave her someone to bounce off of, and it wasn't like they hadn't all seen each other naked plenty of times. She supposed that her resolution was going to get the ultimate test when Emily tried to convince her to have a go at her. Piper knew she was, like, 90-95% straight, but when it came to Emily Stevens, she was only human, and Emily could tempt even the most fiercely hetero woman.

After the shower, they all headed towards the dining room, but Fiona and Piper detoured directly into the kitchen. Jenny was just finishing up preparations for breakfast, and Nicolette was starting to relay food out into the dining room. If the girls had special requests, they were always invited to make them, but on group workout days, Jenny had just taken to making family-style buffet lunches, and the girls were encouraged to just grab whatever.

Andy had clearly been through the kitchen recently, because there was a plate with hot sauce on it sitting on the kitchen island from his morning breakfast burrito, and both Jenny and Katie had a healthy glow to them, meaning they'd likely gotten their fix just a few short minutes ago. She hadn't noticed it at first, but now after having spent a few weeks in the house, there was no denying that a woman just after having had an encounter with Andy had a certain sense of being energized to them.

"Hey Jen," Piper said, "me and Fi are going to sit up on the back center balcony. You think Nic could bring us up a couple of plates and a couple of coffees?"

"Absolutely positively not, you crazy, crazy bitches," Nicolette teased. "Yeah, sure, no problem. Mind if I get the group served first?"

"Sure sure," Piper replied. "No rush."

Nicolette shot her a thumbs up as Piper and Fiona exited the room, heading towards the stairs. While group brunch was a tradition, it also was the sort of thing people had been known to dip out on from time to time. Sarah and Emily had video conferences with agents and directors, Hannah and Asha sometimes had virtual classes, and while it was nice to get lots of the girls around one table, sometimes people just had other things to do.

"So what's up, Fi?" Piper asked as they started to make their way up the stairs.

"You know I'm a journalist, right?" Fiona said. "Forgive me for not remembering if I've told you or not, but it's a lot of people here and sometimes it's easy to slip on who you've told what."

"Yes, Fi, I know you're a journalist," Piper replied with a soft smile. "Both you and Andy have mentioned it." They reached the top of the stairs and started walking down one of the hallways, towards the large French windows that opened onto a nice deck balcony overlooking the back yard that held a half a dozen chairs or so. "You want to talk to me about the Olympics? Because I'm pretty sure they're going to be delayed for a good long while, considering how many people are dead in the world. Or maybe you wanted to talk to me about the 2016 Olympics."

"Well, I wanted to talk to you about the Olympics, but only indirectly," Fiona said as she opened the doors, letting the two of them move out onto the patio, not bothering to close the doors behind them, knowing that Nicolette would be up with brunch in not too long. "I've decided to write a book about the entire plague, a sort of oral history if you will, a collection of survivor's stories about their experiences with the plague, with being moved across country, with the imprinting process, with all of it. And I wanted to see if it was okay to get your story, and to use that in my book."

Piper frowned for a moment, considering it. Her journey to the House of Rook had been anything but idyllic, and for much of it, it would be her word against other people's. She hadn't even told *Andy* the entire story yet, simply because parts of it still made her skin crawl even just thinking about what she'd endured. And yet, it also struck her that it would be an important story to reclaim, that in talking it out she could try and move past the survivor's guilt and would be able to get some of the

weight off of her shoulders. “Parts of it are pretty fucking rank, Fi,” Piper said. “I don't just mean dark; I mean fucking midnight pitch black. You sure you want to get into this?”

“It's your story to tell or not, Piper,” Fiona said, “but based on just the little bits I've gotten from the other girls, I think it's an important perspective to hear. Besides, don't you want to talk to someone about the experiences you went through? Andy said even *he* hasn't heard the whole story, and I think you've *got* to talk to someone about it, so why not me? Also, don't you want me to write about what Covington did to you for everyone to know about? It's one way you can definitely stick it to him.”

She inhaled a deep breath and then sighed it out, considering her options. “Everyone in that fucking house is going to say I made it all up.”

“Except that Andy and Niko can corroborate the state they found you in, so it's not going to be so cut and dry,” Fiona chided. “Plus, you never know what I can get people to tell me. I'm *damn* good at my job, Piper, so if anyone in Covington's house is going to talk, I'll find them and get them to talk.”

“Here's your breakfast, ladies,” Nicolette said, laying the tray down on the little table between them. Piper was convinced Andy was right – the girl secretly *was* a ninja and just hadn't told anyone. Whenever she wanted to, the maid had an uncanny ability to appear or disappear, to arrive or leave without anyone noticing. “Pineapple juice for Piper, and coffee with cream and two sugars for Fiona.”

“How the hell did you know how I like my coffee, Nicolette?” Fiona said, tilting her head to smile at her.

“You made a reference to it in a story you wrote eight years ago, and I found it when I was doing my research,” Nicolette said matter-of-factly. Fiona was agog at that, and Nicolette tried to hold her composure for as long as she could, but after a few seconds devolved into a fit of giggles, letting Fiona off the hook. “Oh my *fucking* God, you really will believe *anything* about me. I asked Moira, you dummy, and she told me.”

Fiona let out a breath and then laughed herself. “I cannot *believe* the balls on you.”

“And you bought it,” Piper teased. “She's good, but she's not a fucking wizard, Fi.”

“You say that *now*...”

Piper turned away to pick up her glass of pineapple juice. “Anyway, thanks for this, Nicolette. If we—” She looked back over her shoulder and Nicolette was already gone, having even closed the door behind her without either of the two women noticing. “Okay, so that *is* impressive.”

“I'm telling you,” Fiona said, lifting her coffee to her lips. “She's *absolutely* a wizard or a ninja or a ninja-wizard.”

“That's not a thing.”

“Mark my words. Ninja. Wizard.”

“I'm telling you, that's *not* a thing.”

“I'm not so sure.” Fi took a sip from her coffee then blew across the top of it. “So anyway, tell me how you got here.”

“How far back do you want me to go?” Piper asked her.

“As far as you think you need to.”

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I could tell you all about my early life and childhood, but I don't know if that's at all relevant to your book, or to this story, so let me just blast through the early details first. I grew up in Gainesville, Florida and spent most of my life there, with two major exceptions. The first was college, where I went to University of Nebraska-Lincoln for four years, majoring in sports medicine and physiotherapy. The plan was that after I was done with my athletic career, I was going to either become a personal trainer for other athletes or I was going to work with veterans or other people going through physical therapy after traumatic experiences. I sort of knew I had plenty of time to think about that after my sports career, because I was very heavily recruited my sophomore year of college.

Before I was old enough to drink, I knew I was going to be going to the Olympics. I'd considered trying for the beach volleyball team, but I've always preferred the camaraderie of having a full team of twelve, so I stayed in the traditional volleyball program.

I graduated in 2015, and was part of the Olympic team that won the gold medal in 2016 in Rio, although all of that went by so fast, it barely even registered. The medal meant I got plenty of endorsement deals, which meant I could make volleyball a full-time thing for at least five to ten more years. I stayed with the National team and started playing with them regularly, training several hours a day, and in 2017, I relocated to Colorado Springs, to begin training around the clock with the rest of the team, who were also living there.

They say volleyball is a sport where you have to learn to trust everyone around you, and that can be hard for some people I guess, but it didn't take me long to develop a family relationship with the rest of my teammates. There are twelve people on a traditional volleyball team, and my position was outside hitter, which is sort of the lead person when you're on the offense. That meant I needed to have a very good jump and a very good spike, and I'm damn fine at both.

We were the defending champions at the World Championship in 2018, but the team had seen a lot of turnover and we weren't gelling as well as we needed to at that point, so we finished fifth. The coach was happy, though, considering he'd told us not to expect anything before we left.

Also, the World Championship in 2018 was where I suddenly became an internet sensation. Ever since I was in high school, I've had a little warm-up dance that I do before a match, but I'd always done it in the locker room where no one could see. For one of those games, though, we didn't have time to head into the locker room, so I did it on the side of the court, and one of the television cameras was pointed at me the whole time. Before I knew it, I was Internet Famous.

For the next month or so, that little animated GIF of me doing my shimmy and shake was *everywhere*, and it turned me into a flash-in-the-pan sensation. Shit, I even went on Jimmy Kimmel to talk about the whole thing, although I tried to spend as much time as I could hyping up the volleyball team itself, instead of what it was like to be a meme. Every so often, I still get one of those "Got me feelin' like..." meme gifs from my friends when they're getting excited for something, but the whole thing was really over as quick as it started. I got invited to a photoshoot for the Sports Illustrated Swimsuit edition, which I did, and then like a few weeks after, the fame basically disappeared and I went back to being myself again.

Being a professional athlete is a strange life. You spend almost all day either training or playing, and the outside world sort of fades into the background. Colorado Springs is a city of about half a million people, but the Olympic Training Grounds sort of looms large over the whole region, and the future Olympians sort of try to avoid mixing with the civilians too much. At least, that's what I tell myself to excuse the fact that I never had a boyfriend after college, that I just didn't have time for it. I would occasionally go trawling for dick now and again, but I always went to their places straight from the bar and then left before they woke up and never called them again. Hell, after I'd picked up a one night stand somewhere, I wrote off that entire *bar* off and never went back again.

Most of the girls on the team were like that, although a few of them had boyfriends or husbands, and the ones who did, well, they had the benefit of having someone to go home to at the end of the night. Anyone who had a boyfriend or a husband, however, had picked them up *before* they'd joined the Olympic team, simply because there wasn't time. Hell, I even attended one of my teammate's wedding, although they had to keep their honeymoon to just four days, because she couldn't afford to give up that much training.

You could have a sex life, as long as it didn't get in the way of staying on top of your game.

(There was also the orgiastic two days after we won the gold medal in Rio back in 2016, but honestly, the whole thing is mostly a blur at this point. I have a very distinct but hazy memory of being in a wobbly H with two men from some part of the diving competition while a couple of my teammates were riding on top of guys they'd just met a few hours earlier, like, three feet away from me. Their

names, their countries? Shit, I dunno. Please don't write about that in the book, though. It's embarrassing enough just thinking about it now. I even told Andy and Ash once that I didn't do anything back then, mostly because I didn't want Andy to think less of me, although now I think he probably wouldn't have even cared, since it was before he met me, and he seems pretty chill about us having lived real lives that had sex with other people in them.)

In March, we were given lockdown orders like a week before the rest of the country was. We weren't even entirely certain what lockdown meant, since none of us generally went many places other than to the training center anyway. A few weeks later, we got clarification. We were to keep on individual training, but to do so at home, and to avoid contact with anyone else. Don't go out. Don't go to see friends. Don't go anywhere you don't have to.

I didn't really have much of a home, so to speak, at that point. Sure, I had a house that I'd bought where I lived, but it was so under decorated that even the Spartans would've looked at my place and gone “Damn girl, get some furniture. Hang some pictures. Make the place feel lived in.” This meant that “stay at home” was especially brutal on me.

By May, things had gotten even weirder, what with reports of two competing plagues starting to kill what sounded like a decent number of people. Covid was bad, DuoHalo was worse, and both were getting very much out of hand.

In the middle of June, the members of my team had reached a consensus – we would “bubble” together, coming to the training facility to practice, but we wouldn't interact with anyone else, so we would be doing the best we could to stay safe. We knew it was slightly risky behavior, but those of us without partners were starting to go a little bit stir crazy, so it seemed like the only option. We'd even heard rumors the men's team was doing the same on the other side of campus.

It wasn't ideal, but it worked for a time. The girls with partners were told their partners couldn't go out at all, and for a while, we thought about just basically locking ourselves in the training camp until it was all over, but the sleeping accommodations there weren't great, so everyone kept commuting back and forth from their own homes.

One day in mid July, it seemed like the whole world fell apart. The president fell into a coma and then when they went to swear in the vice president, *he* collapsed at the swearing in ceremony, which made the Speaker of the House go from President Pro Tempore to actual President. Trump and Pence both died a few days later, President Pelosi became the first woman President of the United States, and at that point, we knew shit was getting bad, because people had stopped talking about how soon we could get out and started talking about what the world was going to look like *if* we got out.

Nobody wanted to say it, but at that point, survival no longer felt like it was guaranteed.

It got even worse a week later when our coach, Coach Barry Parker, didn't show up for practice. We found out he'd been hospitalized with DuoHalo, and he died a few days later. We couldn't even have a funeral for him. We also stopped getting messages from the men's team around then, and knowing what I know now, I think most of them must've died around the same time. One man probably got sick and infected much of the rest of the training facility.

Coming to practice every day was a lot harder after that, but I think somehow, we all just decided we needed each other to get through the storm.

There was a very strange change in how the news was reported around then, and while it seemed like every major broadcaster was talking about the importance of staying home and staying masked (except for Fox News, naturally, who was claiming it was *unproven science* or some other nonsense), very few people were talking about the death toll, other than to say it was “sizable.”

The whole country really doesn't know what that means yet, but in a couple of days they're going to find out that it means “catastrophic” and that most of the men in America are dead. I think a lot of us have had that sense that the news was going to be insanely bad for a while now, but it's one thing to feel that way and another thing entirely to have it confirmed in facts.

I'm not too proud to admit that there were a couple of nights where a handful of us girls slept in

one bed holding onto each other, just to not feel so alone in the middle of the giant mess. For once in my life, I'd found myself desperately wishing I'd gotten a pet, just to keep me company.

It felt like the whole damn world might've been coming to an end. I tell you this, because I think it's important to stress what kind of state of mind I was in, and how desperate I was to connect with someone, *anyone*.

In the second week of September, a woman from the Air Force came to the training camp. I'll never forget it, because she was dressed in a goddamn hazmat suit, and that scared me right down to the bone. I remember thinking, "This is it. One of us has DuoHalo and they've infected all the rest of us, and we're all now dead, we just don't know it, but they sent this woman here to tell us that we're all gonna die any minute now."

That isn't what happened, though.

She said the Air Force had a stop gap solution that they were going to be employing, but it was very unconventional, it was experimental, it was very slowly getting rolled out and would involve pairing us up with a man, whom we'd need to be sexually active with regularly.

You can imagine after having been cooped up for so long, as ridiculous as it all sounded, if it meant it would get us out of there, we were all for it. I remember thinking that I'd fuck a bridge troll if it meant I could go somewhere new, talk to someone new. We were each tested for both Covid and DuoHalo, and when the tests came back negative, we were given a website link to something called The Oracle, which would help us get paired up with a good match for us.

I know you didn't have to take The Oracle Test, but you should get Niko to give you a copy of it, just so you can see how, uh, *thorough* it is. I'm a Florida girl, born and raised, so I'm no shrinking violet, but I don't think I've ever had to be that explicit about my sexual tastes with anyone or anything before or since.

Some of it is just your basic kinda stuff – do you like men, women or both? Do you like your partners taller than you, shorter than you or do you not care? Do you like soft sex, aggressive sex, both or neither? But then it drilled down into *all* sorts of fetishes and philiias that I'd never heard of, so many that I had to keep up a second tab on the browser to look up what a lot of things I was being asked about even *were*. Also, I don't want to judge what other people are into, but *ick ick ick ick!*

The test took about two hours to fill out, and I'd never felt so utterly scrutinized in my entire life. When we were given the links, we were also told to stay at our homes and not to come back to the training center until we'd been given the serum, or until the plague had passed, although the woman didn't seem to have any idea when that would be.

Because we weren't allowed to see anyone else in person anymore, the team started having day long Zoom calls where we would all sit around the house and talk with one another, but after a while, even that started getting difficult to maintain, since it felt like we didn't have any new stories to tell each other.

Nothing was happening.

Then, on October 18th – Jesus, was it really just a month or so ago? – Anyway, on October 18th, there was a knock on the front door of my house, and it was the woman from the Air Force again. She told me a match for me had been found, and she was taking me across the country to get injected with the serum and introduced to my new partner.

* * * * *

"Covington?" Fiona asked.

"Covington," Piper sighed. "But let's not jump ahead. If I'm going to tell this story, I need to tell you all about the trip, and the imprinting process, even if it's similar to your own. Let's start with the plane..."

Part Two

Fiona had been scribbling on her yellow pad the entire time that Piper had been talking, something that had just faded into the background as Piper told her story, but for a moment she paused, giving the journalist a chance to catch up with her notes. Piper had glanced over a few times while she'd been relaying the earliest parts of her tale, but decided that Fiona's notes were clearly in code or that she used a shorthand that Piper couldn't decipher.

(It was also possible that Fiona's handwriting was simply so sloppy that no one else could read it, but Piper felt it impolite to point that option out.)

“Did you have any clue that Covington had requested you personally?” Fiona asked her.

“They didn't tell me anything about my planned partner,” Piper replied, “unlike they did when Andy requested you.”

“Well, I called the base who put me in touch with Andy himself to talk over the request, so I knew they were coming. That's not how it works for everyone, though, I bet.”

“Actually,” Piper said, sipping from her pineapple juice, “you should probably talk to *all* of the girls about their experiences showing up to get the serum, because I would wager that each of them is unique in what happened. There's probably several similarities, but I think there will be lots of little differences that add up.”

“Because of how they're being transported?”

“Not *just* that,” Piper said. “Remember, we've all shown up at different points in the whole process of them building this system. I bet Aisling's story would be a lot more ramshackle than what you went through, considering she showed up to Andy's doorstep in what, May?”

“June, I think, but the timeline's still a little fuzzy for me,” Fiona admitted. “I think Andy jokingly referred to Ash showing up in the fifteenth week of March.”

“Yeah, time's gotten a little less precise during the isolation,” Piper agreed. “But Ash has got to be one of the first women through the system, before they'd refined any of it. She told me she didn't even know about the dangers of other men's semen until Niko showed up a month or two after she met Andy, so that's probably something worth writing about in your book. Anyway, where was I?”

“You were talking about getting picked up from the Olympic Training Camp.”

“Right, right...”

* * * * *

So on October 18th, a woman from the Air Force showed up on my door. She was dressed in biohazard gear from head to toe, which was a little creepy, but that's what most of the soldiers were wearing up until I got to the actual base. I was given two hours to pack up everything I wanted to take with me into a single large suitcase and a single carry on. The woman told me she'd be back after those two hours with a troop transport, and that I'd better be ready to go by then, because once the truck showed up, they were loading me onto it with or without bags of stuff.

I'm not really a material girl, so I didn't have all that much to pack up. I was told either the Air Force would move the rest later, or I could come back and get it when we were on the other side of the pandemic. They weren't sure which would happen first. I loaded up a big suitcase with a bunch of cute outfits, a handful of personal things and my gold medal, because no fucking way was I leaving that in an empty house for what might be years. I threw in other things like my laptop, my make up, my toothbrush and toothpaste, my vitamins – that kind of stuff all went into the carry on. Still, two hours is not a lot of time, so I was still worried that I'd forgotten things even when I heard the truck pulling up outside.

It wasn't just me who was getting picked up either, as most of the volleyball team was on the truck with me. We weren't given masks or hazmat suits or anything, just loaded up onto the back of a troop transport, our suitcases sitting in front of us, although we were given these little bags we had to

lock our cellphones into. We were told that when we got to the place where we were going to be injected with the serum, they would unlock the bags and return our phones to us, but until then, they needed to be off and contained for “operational security.”

(That turned out not to be true – we weren't given our phones back until we met up with our partners, not at the place where we were injected. I didn't even *get* my phone back until after Andy took me away from Covington. That bastard withheld it from me.)

It was good to see a few of my friends again on the truck, and we hugged one another, as a few of the girls were struggling not to cry. One of them, Kari, wondered if we were being marched off to death camps, but we tried to put her at ease, pointing out that we'd been allowed to pack our things, which they certainly wouldn't have done if we were all going off to die. That calmed her down a little.

I did ask the woman who was organizing things why none of us had been given masks, and she informed me that we would all be receiving the serum tomorrow and meeting up with our partners shortly after that. At that point, she said, we would all be mostly immunized from DuoHalo, so if we caught it along the way, it would be flushed out of our system by the process. I asked if she could give me more detail than that, but she said not to worry about it.

I probably *should* have worried about it.

I counted about two-thirds of the volleyball team on the truck, as well as a number of other athletes that I'd met at social functions in the before times – gymnasts, sprinters, some swimmers although my friend Brooke wasn't among them. (I found out later she hadn't been picked by anyone in that wave, and Andy got her connected to Xander a few waves later.)

We were one truck in a convoy of six.

I also noticed that there weren't *any* men on our truck, something else I asked the woman from the Air Force about. She told me that only the first truck in the convoy had men in it, and that they *were* all buttoned up to the max in hazmat suits with their own oxygen supplies attached to them.

This was where it started to become abundantly clear to me that DuoHalo didn't affect men and women identically. The woman from the Air Force confirmed to me as much, specifying that it had a much higher and faster fatality rate among men, and that the incubation period wasn't anywhere near as long for males either, so they were taking extra care with the men because otherwise there was a chance they could be dead before they received the treatment.

I asked her, Colonel Fairchild was her name, she didn't give me her first name, anyway I asked her how bad it was out there, and she sort of gave me a tight-lipped smile and said she wasn't really at liberty to divulge that sort of information, but not to worry, because I was one of the lucky ones.

At that point, I knew we were pretty badly fucked.

That was her answer for a lot of my questions, and after a few minutes, she told me to stop talking because she needed to do headcount and focus on the last few people we needed to pick up. The last stop our truck made was in a pretty prestigious neighborhood, and I found out why when Colonel Fairchild brought our last pickup onto the truck.

The final person we picked up was Carolyn Fortiss, you know, the five-time gold medal winning gymnast, the one who's been on the Wheaties box and the cover of Time? I don't really know her, but she's basically one of the most recognizable athletes on the planet, and she'd clearly been given more notice than the rest of us, or she was an insanely fast packer, because she had two suitcases and a carry-on bag with her, which had two little dogs in it.

(I *really* wanted to ask why the 'one suitcase only' rule didn't apply to her when it applied to everyone else on the truck, but I decided I didn't want to be *that bitch* for the rest of the trip.)

At that point, Colonel Fairchild began to walk the length of the transport, and slap stickers with barcodes on our chests and our suitcases. The sticker, which I glanced at, had my basic vitals on it. Name, age, blood type, point of origin, point of destination, a “travel code” which in my case read CRQL5 but mostly said OMUL3 or OMUL2 or OMUL4 for the rest of the truck although Carolyn also had CRQL5 on her travel code.

The Colonel told us that once we were dropped off, we would be scanned, sorted and then sent off to our correct plane. Once on the plane, we should be patient and understanding with the one or two members of the Air Force who were tending to the plane, she told us, because everyone was stretched ultra thin and tempers were flaring due to exhaustion.

That didn't make a lot of sense to me until I peeked out the back of the truck and realized we were heading into Denver. "All roads lead to the Denver Airport," I remember thinking at the time.

Pretty soon, I found out just how true that was.

The Air Force had temporarily commandeered Denver International Airport, and was using it as a staging ground. I've been in and out of that airport loads of times, but this was the first time that it felt like it had been *invaded*. There were lots of soldiers stationed around – mostly Air Force, but some Army as well – and I found myself excited to do something I'd always hated.

Queuing.

We were advised to try and keep six feet between us and the person both in front of and behind us in line, but that rule was being followed pretty loosely. Bags were being passed through the X-ray machines, and I still had to go stand inside that body scanner, but they were moving very quickly through the whole process, like the security was just sort of making sure no one was doing anything especially stupid.

I think the automatic weapons everywhere did more than enough discouragement of that.

Once we were past the security screener, we had our barcodes scanned and were directed to where our plane was waiting for us. Terminal A seemed to be heading to the West Coast, Terminal B around the Midwest and Terminal C heading to the East Coast, although that's just something I remember somebody saying. No idea if it was true or not, but I did get taken over to Terminal A. The last I saw Carolyn, she was heading off towards Terminal C.

There were a *lot* of women passing through Denver Airport on the day I was there, and not a whole lot of men, although I did find out later that was because men were being directly loaded onto planes and not being made to sit around waiting, or if they did have to wait, it was somewhere else entirely, and not with loads of other people.

Most of the women soldiers weren't very chatty, but I did manage to glean a few bits of information from some of them. Men mostly weren't being relocated, because it was generally considered riskier than moving the women to them, but that didn't mean all men were staying put. In some cases, relocation was deemed essential, especially as many of the uninfected men had gotten that way by being remote. Isolating forever, the soldier told me, wasn't going to be an option, so these men were being "brought in from the cold." She laughed when she told me that a few of them had even been by force, but that when they saw what the future held for them, they would be thankful.

She didn't elaborate on that for me.

If it hadn't been for the troops with automatic weapons and the almost complete lack of men, it could've been just another day of flying through Denver.

I headed over to Gate A37, and saw there were about twenty other women there for departure. It was also around this point that I started to notice that the women were mostly good looking women in their twenties and thirties. Sure, there were varying shades of height, weight, hair color and skin tone, but there was beauty basically all around me. That was the moment when I started to get a very bad feeling in the pit of my stomach.

The flight I was scheduled for was to Oakland Airport, and the plane itself was a United plane. The soldier at the check in told us all that there weren't assigned seats, *however* we were going to be boarded in groups, so the first class stuff was first come, first serve.

Wouldn't you know it, there were only two CRQL5s on our flight, and we were both seated first, so we each took a first class seat. The other one was Stacey Razi, the downhill skier and Onvon Cosmetics model.

The plane didn't have any flight attendants on it, but there was one soldier from the Air Force,

who was also seated in first class, and there was one soldier at the door of the aircraft who had taken our luggage from us, sending it down to the belly of the aircraft. I'd half expected them to just let us bring it on board with us and have it on an empty seat, but apparently some rules were still being followed, although I was allowed to bring my smaller carry on with me.

Once they had everyone loaded onto the plane, they did a role call again, checking to make sure every person scheduled to be on the plane was, although I don't know what they would've done if we weren't all there.

As it turns out, on a two-thirds empty plane, having a whole row to yourself is just as good as first class, so basically everyone took an area to themselves. Some of the girls were gossiping with one another, but most of us were still in a sort of daze and kept to ourselves. I was reading a Sue Grafton novel, so I didn't socialize that much, but I did spend maybe half an hour talking with Stacey, seeing if she knew anything about where we were going or what was going on. She really didn't know anything more than I did.

When the pilot's voice came over the air just before takeoff, I realized it might have been the first man's voice I'd heard all day long. He assured us that he would get us across the country safely and quickly, and that he hoped to avoid as much turbulence as possible. There wasn't going to be any food or drinks served over the flight, and he was sorry for that, but at this point, he just wanted to help keep as many people alive as possible.

He stressed the word *alive*, even if he didn't know that he did it.

I could tell that rattled some of the women in the cabin.

It's odd how much you notice little things being off when you're doing something you've done a bunch. I've flown dozens of times, maybe hundreds, I'm sure you have too, but it was very strange that nobody was going through the safety announcement, nobody was walking through the cabin to check that the seats were up or that seatbelts were fastened, there wasn't a scolding voice telling us that tampering with smoke detectors was a federal offense. The captain told us when we were taxiing, told us when to prepare for take off, when to prepare for landing and when we could get off the plane, but the rest of the time, we were basically alone together. Some of the girls clapped when the plane landed, maybe just as a release valve for some of the nervous tension.

I'd been through the Bay Area a couple of times before, but each time I'd come in through SFO instead of Oakland Airport, so I'm not entirely certain how the airport was supposed to look, but I'm pretty sure it didn't normally look like it did on that day. We didn't actually go *into* the airport, as they pulled up rolling staircases to the planes away from the main terminal. We walked down onto the tarmac, early in the evening, and were scanned as soon as we had our suitcases again.

Once that was done, they began sorting us.

A lot of the girls were being sent to a place called Valhalla Shores. Some of them were being sent to something called San Jose Heights. A handful of them were going to Palo Alto, a place they called the Pallisades. A few were headed towards the Presidio in San Francisco proper.

And there were seven of us headed for New Eden.

There wasn't any one commonality to the seven of us, other than I guess beauty, but that seemed to be a common thing for all the women being transported around. I did see, however, that all of us had that same code on our stickers, CRQL5. I remember at the time thinking maybe that was some sort of code for New Eden, but Stacey headed over towards the group headed for the Presidio, so I ruled that out. Based on what I know now, I think the L5 part of the code refers to Level 5, as in the person who they're being brought to. I don't know what the rest of it stands for. You should probably ask Niko about that, since I'm sure she'd know.

We were loaded into the back of a troop transport truck, and they started driving us east along 580, as the sun was starting to set. The truck was covered, but the back was open, and looking out, it was surreal how empty the freeway was, even in what had to be what was usually around rush hour.

I tried to talk to one of the other girls heading for New Eden, but the soldier sitting in the truck

shushed us then told me we shouldn't talk with anyone until we were through screening protocols and getting ready for our injections. Once we were on base, we could talk to people there, but for now, it would be best if we all just stayed quiet, the soldier said to me, and who wants to argue with someone holding a machine gun, right?

We headed east then north, which made me sad, because I'd hoped to at least get a glimmer of the Pacific Ocean, now that I seemingly lived on the West Coast, but I decided not to make too much of a fuss, because there would be time for that later. The years in Colorado had made me miss the ocean waters from back home in Florida. Whenever I traveled home to see my family, I always made it a point to spend a day out on a boat in the ocean, just to get some of those vibes back in me.

Geez, I'm starting to sound like Sheridan, and her surfer talk.

She's gonna teach me how to surf eventually, though. Apparently her and Tala go all the time.

Whatever. I'm getting off topic.

The rest of the ride was entirely silent, so that I didn't piss off the woman with the Uzi or whatever. We eventually arrived at a checkpoint, where whoever was manning the gate hopped into the vehicle and scanned us all again. He was dressed in full hazmat gear, and each person was checked individually before he hopped off the truck and sent us through into the base or research center or whatever the hell it was.

They'd erected a large metal barn-like structure next to their main research building, and that was where the local processing was happening. Inside the barn was a sea of sealed chambers, clear plastic sheets forming containment tents. There was also a section that was curtained off, so we couldn't see what was going on behind there, but that's where we were led.

At the entrance to the curtained area, a soldier took our bags from us, telling us we'd get them back in our observation/orientation pod. Then we were taken one at a time into a long partitioned hallway, where we were told to strip down, as they were going to hose us down and decontaminate us. I was a little annoyed, as we were told that whatever we'd been wearing on our way to the base was being destroyed, for our own safety. Thankfully I wasn't wearing anything especially unique, but I still didn't like losing an outfit, especially since I had so few with me.

I couldn't see any of the other women, nor could I even see who was speaking. I was standing on a conveyor belt with a partition in front me and behind me. I dropped my clothes into a little chute then flipped the switch on the nondescript wall from "not ready" to "ready." I guess I had to wait until everyone had done so, because I stood there, naked and alone, for several minutes before the conveyor belt started to move.

After a few feet, the belt stopped and warm soapy water gushed down on me from above, not like a light shower, almost like someone just dumped several buckets on top of me, as I clung on to two handrails on either side of the pod. The water drained below my feet, somewhere off to the side of the conveyor belts, and then the pod started to move again.

The second time it stopped, more water crushed down onto me, cooler this time, and with no soap in it, letting me get the soap off my skin.

When the belt stopped again, this time high pressure warm air blasted down onto me, like standing beneath a giant hair dryer, and I did my best to wring out my hair so that I could get it as dry as possible, but the hot air only lasted long enough to get me mostly dry before the belt moved again.

At the next stop, a small hatch opened several inches below my shoulders. Another disembodied voice said to me, "Put your right arm through the hatch."

I crouched down a little and slid my right arm through the hatch, feeling a soft table for me to rest it on. There was a very bright light on the other side of the hatch, so I couldn't see anything, especially at the poor angle. A moment or so later, I realized that this was the injection part, as I felt a needle shoved into my vein, some liquid being shot up into me. I could hear three little puff sounds, and I think what happened was they put some kind of multiple injection system into my arm and then injected me with a combination of things, one after the other, but because I couldn't see, I really don't

know for certain. Maybe it was just one shot. I'd ask Niko about that too.

I felt a cotton ball being placed against my skin and then a bandage being strapped to it, a large towel put in my hand, before the voice said, "Pull your arm back in."

Going against instructions just felt like it would slow everything down, so I pulled my arm back in, the big towel coming along with it. As soon as the towel was through, the hatch closed again.

"Wrap the towel around you and prepare to exit the chamber."

It was a very large white beach towel, so I wrapped it around my midsection like I was a housewife on an old 80s sitcom, and then the belt moved again before stopping and the door in front of me opened, a woman standing on the other side.

She was in her mid to late 20s, with dark brown hair and a pair of arresting hazel eyes that felt like they were going to look right down into my soul. She had her hair up in a bun, dressed in operating room scrubs with a lab coat on over them, and thick black rimmed glasses on her face. She was Jewish, I think, although maybe part Italian? There was a sort of weird beaded bracelet around one of her wrists and this collection of like four or five necklaces around her neck, one of which had a Star of David on it. She had a very confident aura about her, like she knew exactly what her place was in this new world and she wasn't going to take any stick from anyone over it. She held in one hand an iPad and in the other a stylus, looking up at me impatiently. She was a good looking woman, but very unprimed, as if she didn't take time to apply much makeup or style her hair. "Name?" she said.

"Uh, Brown," I said to her. "Piper Brown."

"Oh *you're* Piper Brown," she said to me, her demeanor softening a little bit. "Yeah, he's right, I do recognize you. That meme *was* inescapable a while back." She scribbled a few things onto the iPad, tapping at a few buttons with her stylus, the tablet beeping in recognition of her actions, or maybe just to let her know that the keypresses had been received. "Okay, there you are. Had to find you in the list. You're in Pod 37. That's where you'll find your things, and where you'll sit and watch the orientation videos while we keep you under observation until morning or midday tomorrow, when you'll be taken to meet the man you're being partnered with."

"When do I find out who that is?" I asked her.

"Typically you wouldn't until you actually get there, but I can tell you his name is Arthur Covington the 4th because he's *my* partner as well." She started walking away from the belt, leading me down a corridor with opaque plastic on either side of us. I remember thinking how strange it was that I had to walk down this hallway barefoot, but I figured I had just stepped out of a shower.

"Wait, we're... we're going to *share* this man? The two of us?"

She laughed, as if I'd made some kind of a joke. "Not *just* the two of us, but a whole mess of women. It'll make more sense after you watch the orientation videos."

"Sorry," I said to her, "I didn't catch your name."

"Oh," she said, stopping to turn and smile at me, as if she genuinely hadn't realized she hadn't introduced herself. "Sorry about that. Nice to meet you, Piper. I'm Doctor Rachel DeMarco." She shook my hand and I remember thinking that she had very soft hands for the sort of punk rock demeanor she had about her. "Let's get you into your orientation, where you can start learning all the rules about your new existence."

She started leading me back down the corridor again, as I asked her the only question I could think of. "So how *many* women are partnered up with your Mister Covington?"

"You'll be number ten," she said. "I think he's expecting to stop receiving additional partners after he hits twenty or so."

"*Twenty?*" I asked in shock. I didn't know *then* what I know *now*, obviously. "That's insane!"

"You'll see all of this in one of the orientation videos, but the casualty rate for men is extremely high, so those few men that are still alive are being very highly protected," she sighed. "It stinks, but it is what it is. The only working solution to the DuoHalo virus we have right now is this. Life sucks; wear a hat."

“What do you mean by 'extremely high?'”

“Look, Piper, I get that you have a lot of questions, but right now you should probably just sit down and watch the orientation videos. They'll answer most of the questions you've got rattling around in that pretty little head of yours right now, and you'll have plenty of time to ask me more later,” Rachel said to me, as we walked up to one of the many zippered pods that lined the hallway.

“But—”

“Here we are now. Pod 37,” she said, pointing to the large number to the right of the open zipper flap. “There's an iPad in here with a series of videos preloaded on it. After you've watched all the videos, it'll unlock and give you basic internet access, as well as logged in Netflix and Amazon Prime Video accounts, so you can watch whatever you want to. No outside communication, though. That'll happen after you're delivered to your partner, not before. That's also when your phone will be returned to you. There's a cot in the room, a cooler with a few bottles of water and some sodas in it, and a couple of protein bars. Eat and drink as much or as little as you want, but do make sure you're drinking some water, because you may be dehydrated from the trip. The iPad also has a 'call for assistance' button on it that you should *only* use if you need to use the restroom, or if there is a serious emergency. You are only allotted a single bathroom break while you're in the pod, so don't use it unless you *really* need to go. You *must* watch all the videos before you can turn off the light in your pod to sleep, and if you try to fall asleep without watching them, there will be an alarm that starts going off every ten seconds until you start watching them. It's only about thirty minutes of videos, so let me stress to you again, you *must* watch them. I'll be by again in the morning and we can talk a little bit more then if you want. But for now, go, watch the videos, and they'll answer all your questions, okay?”

She didn't even wait for me to answer before pushing me into the pod, zipping it closed behind me before sliding a ziptie through the zipper points and a fastener on the other side, a cheap lock that would still no doubt do its job until the morning.

And then she walked off.

The pod was pretty much as she described it. There was a cot with a pillow and a blanket on it, and my suitcase was off to one side, another sticker on it next to the one they'd put with my identifying information on it. This one was massive and green and said 'DECONTAMINATED' in large intimidating capital letters. I could see there was a camera pointed down from above directly at the cot, the observation camera I expected.

The first thing I did was open up my suitcase and a strong whiff of citrus blasted into the air. Whatever decontaminating agent they used smelled like fresh oranges and limes. All my clothes were in there, so despite the fact that there was a camera pointed on me, I dropped the towel and got dressed in comfortable clothes, because I was clearly going to be in the pod for a day or so.

Once dressed, I noticed that on top of the pillow was an iPad mini with a pair of headphones plugged into it, presumably so I didn't bother anyone else around me. When I'd been getting dressed, I could vaguely hear people nearby, but the plastic was opaque enough that I couldn't tell how close or far away they were, nor could I be certain I would do anything but bother them by talking. Trying to see through the plastic just let me see shadows and shapes, no real details of any kind.

Rachel had been thorough in explaining how miserable I was going to be if I didn't watch the videos, so I sat down on the cot, folded my legs beneath me, shoved the earbuds into my ears and turned the iPad on, deciding just to get it over with.

There was a little app called “Orientation” on the screen, along with a bunch of other things that were grayed out, clearly restricted until I watched the damn videos. I know lots of people have had different experiences in how they were given briefings, but this is what happened to me, so I'll just tell you my story and assume yours is different.

The first video was entitled “DuoHalo and You” and it featured Doctor Charlotte Varma talking in her soft French accent about the DuoHalo virus, and how absolutely toxic it was to human physiology. She did her best to explain how high the casualty rates were going to be, and that it was far

more lethal to men than it was to women. She also explained that they had developed a way to inoculate men against it, but that it was an indirect solution, and it was to make the vaccine sexually transmitted. Men, she explained, couldn't take the vaccine directly, because it was lethal to them, but when filtered through a woman's body, it could be passed on to the man through sexual contact. The more immunized women a man was having sexual contact with, the better buffered against the virus he would be. She warned the viewer that it was coming, but the last minute was still filled with stark images of dead and dying men in hospitals all across the country, just to drive home how real this problem was, and how lucky we were to be escaping it.

I took a little bit of time to let that settle in my brain, and walked around the cot some, wondering how many of the guys I'd grown up with, how many of the men I'd known over the years, how many of them were still alive? Dr. Varma didn't say specifically *how* high the fatalities were, but the grim look on her face and the fact that the images they'd shown featured, in one shot, a trailer truck stacked full of corpses in body bags, was enough to make me *very* nervous. I wanted to call my dad more badly in that moment than I ever had in my entire life.

In looking back at it, I think all this isolation behavior is partially there to make women more accepting and eager to bond with their assigned partners, to make us mentally more receptive to the person we're delivered to, having been devoid of almost any human contact for a couple of days, disoriented and constantly shuffled from one place to another but not allowed to talk to anyone.

The second video was entitled "The New You" and covered what was going to happen once we were imprinted to our partner. For at least the foreseeable future, we would be 'bonded' to the man in question, and we would need his semen about once every ten days, give or take three or four days on either side, varying from woman to woman. In *getting* that semen, we would also be *giving* a booster to our man's immunity. In fact, we were told that if we were ever worried that we or our partner had been exposed to DuoHalo, we should have sex as soon as possible, to reinforce the serum's effect in our partner, to ensure his safety.

The video then went on to explain that when we had our first sexual encounter with our partner, we would be 'primed' and then 'imprinted.' The first contact of any man's semen to us would begin the priming process, and would give us one of the most intense orgasms of our lives, the video said, and then when we received a sufficient amount of it (usually through the male orgasm), we would go into the 'imprinting' process, where we would fall into a coma like state, and our body would begin generating the antibodies we would constantly be feeding back to our male partners moving forward.

I think the video knew (and rightfully so) that nobody was going to believe this, so they brought a man and a woman on screen to demonstrate. I still don't know who that man and woman are, but I *am* certain that there hasn't been a couple that more people have seen fuck since the Pam & Tommy video leaked back in the 90s, because I think almost every woman in America who's gone through the imprinting process has watched this same video of that man and woman fucking.

You know this, I'm sure, but he looked like he was a white guy in his mid 40s, balding with a scruffy beard, and she was a hot young Asian woman in her early 20s, fit and busty, with a streak of green in her black hair with blonde ends.

It starts a little clinical, with both of them disrobing. The first thing you see is the woman drop to her knees, and when her lips touch to the head of his cock, and she gets her first hit of his precum, the look of sheer ecstasy on her face *cannot* be faked. Nobody is that good of an actress. It is clear that she is being gifted with one of the hardest orgasms she's ever endured.

I think a lot of us women must get aggressive after that initial priming orgasm, because next she pushes him down onto the floor roughly and moves to climb on top of him, kissing him and grinding against him, moaning and squealing the whole time. She thrusts herself down onto his cock and begins fucking that man like he's just a toy for her pleasure.

They dialed down the sound for most of it, so that we could hear Dr. Varma talking, but I'm pretty sure that woman was swearing up a storm at her partner as she fucked him. Dr. Varma talked

over the incredibly graphic footage, telling us that as soon as we were 'primed,' we should complete the imprinting process as quickly as possible, because prolonging the experience could lead to complications. We were also told not to wait too long after meeting our partner to start the process, because the serum would cause problems in our systems if we did not get imprinted to someone.

Little did I know I was going to be the poster girl for those problems.

After a couple of minutes of some of the most carnal fucking I'd ever seen put to film, the man clearly ejaculated inside of his partner and she slumped down on top of him like she'd passed out. They then showed how she was limp, completely unconscious, and the sound turned up so we could hear the woman saying "imprinting" over and over again for just a few seconds, but that was long enough to rattle me.

The third and final video was about the post imprinting life we would be living soon. Dr. Varma explained to us that this was going to be our reality for a while, and that while it wasn't an ideal solution, it was what they had that worked. She reiterated that we would need to get semen from our partner about every ten days or so, and that for every day we went past that, the more we risked going into a mindless state, where we would just attempt to rape our partner until we got it. If we were *separated* from our partner for longer than that, in our mindless state we might just go after the first available male we found.

That, the video said, would probably be the last mistake we ever made.

As part of the imprinting process, we were now bio-coded to that one partner, and the semen of any *other* partner would be toxic to us. Like all things, they knew we wouldn't believe this, so we were again shown the couple from the previous video, although obviously this was some time later, as she was conscious again. They took a bit of precum from her partner and smeared it on her arm, to no effect. Then, they had another man standing there, and took some of his precum and smeared it onto her arm just a little further down.

It took maybe a minute or so, but it became evident that the second man's precum was beginning to eat through the woman's skin, burning it like it was acidic. They then washed it off her arm, as the woman visibly relaxed. The damage was still there, but having cleaned it off her skin had caused the burning to stop. The voice asked us to imagine what it would've been like if that second man had ejaculated inside of her.

Infidelity wasn't just frowned upon – it was likely *fatal*.

They didn't have conclusive proof of that yet, but it was considered such risky behavior that they didn't want us to even entertain the idea. Scientists were working on ways to be able to unbind two people and to enable them to rebind them to others, but until that had been developed and tested, *this* was the reality we had to live with.

We were also told that if we got pregnant, and we were going to be *heavily* encouraged to get pregnant, that the child would be completely *immune* to DuoHalo, regardless of gender, and wouldn't need to go through an imprinting and pairing process, nor would their body be toxic to us at any point during the pregnancy. Sadly, that immunity wouldn't kick back upwards to us. We'd be having sexual encounters right up until giving birth, and then right back to it within a week afterwards, although the video also pointed out that ingesting semen orally would have the same impact as vaginally or anally, and that this would be something to keep in mind if one part of our body got too tender.

Dr. Varma had just a little parting advice to women, to look at the intense orgasms as the carrot to the stick of being stuck with this. We would continually know a sexual satisfaction that no woman in our generation had ever known before, and we would get those releases *every ten days*, so there would be a biological and chemical rush to compensate for what we'd lost.

She also said that they had done the best they possibly could with such short notice to get us paired up with, if not someone we were attracted to, at least someone we would get along with. What a fucking *lie* that turned out to be, at least in my case.

After that last video, the rest of the iPad unlocked, although I was quick to discover just how

limited it really was. There was no web browser, no camera access, no FaceTime, no phone app, no ability to install new apps, nothing to allow me to communicate with the outside world. I could watch television or movies, but other than that, I was simply alone in my plastic jail cell, so I watched a little TV then crawled into bed in the cot and hoped that the next day wouldn't be so detached from the rest of humanity.

As I drifted off, I could hear a few girls crying themselves to sleep in the distance. I didn't know that I would be doing the same the very next evening...

* * * * *

“Jesus Fucking Christ,” Fiona said. “That's... that's *way* different than my experience. I mean, yeah, I saw those videos just like you did, although they've updated the one about infidelity. They show a pretty gruesome picture of that woman who died, Veronica.”

“Oh hell,” Piper said, “I actually *met* her, you know? She was part of Covington's house.”

“God, I'm *so* sorry.”

“It's weird, too, because she *clearly* knew better, so I'm wondering what drove her to it. If she even did it voluntarily,” Piper said. “She may not have, based on what Andy's told me. You don't know Covington like I do.”

“He's that bad?”

“Worse,” she insisted, “but we're getting there...”

Part Three

The look on Fiona's face made it clear she understood what sort of territory they were starting to venture into, and while it was the beginning of the parts Fiona wanted to know about the most, they were also the parts that Piper wanted to relive the least. Still, the athlete had decided if she told her story and got it out there, once it was down on paper, she wouldn't be forced to focus on the details themselves, and could instead simply accept and address how appalling Covington's behavior had been, and maybe spot how to fix the flaws in the system.

“Do you think Covington was able to procure you because of his donor status? I've heard he used much of his wealth to help set up and fund New Eden and the serum, so do you think that's what let him have so much control over the pairing system?” Fiona asked her.

“I think that prick is so used to buying people all the time that he figures whatever he wants is always available, once you know the price and how to pay it,” Piper sighed. “I fucking hate him, more than any human being I've ever known.”

“I keep meaning to ask – do you know if the serum has a name? I can't imagine they're just calling it the DuoHalo vaccine around the office.”

Piper let a slightly bitter laugh slip from her lips. “I heard Rachel call it the Quaranteam serum offhandedly one point, but who knows if that's what they're actually calling it, or if it's just a joke among some of the staff. Niko would probably know. Phil *definitely* would know.”

“Like Phil's going to tell me *anything*,” Fiona sighed. “He's probably going to want to disown Andy when he finds out I'm writing a book about this whole experience.”

“Mmmm...” Piper said. “You might not know Phil quite as well as you think you do. I think when the pandemic started, Phil thought he was doing the right thing under the worst possible circumstances, but Andy said he's been different since everybody arrived in New Eden. Less sure of himself, and to hear Andy tell it, there's never been a time when Phil hasn't seemed completely confident about *everything*. So it wouldn't hurt to talk to him.”

Fiona nodded, flipping the page of her yellow legal pad over to the next sheet of paper, clearly taking copious notes the entire time they were talking. Piper also noticed that Fi's phone was recording the conversation as well, to catch whatever she couldn't get written down fast enough. “I know these

next few bits aren't going to be any fun for you, Piper, but I feel like once you have them out of you, once you've *told* someone about what you went through, you'll feel a bit better.”

“I don't know if that's true, but I suppose I can try.”

“Have you told anyone about your time with Covington?” the older woman asked.

“I think I've told Andy about half of it, and he's the one I've told the most about it,” Piper sighed. “I wanted to tell my mom and dad about it, but...”

“You didn't want them getting into Covington's crosshairs, I imagine.”

“Well, yes, but...” Piper said. “I didn't want them to think less of me, and before you start in on telling me it wasn't my fault, that I was caught up in the system... I *know* all of that. I rationally know that I'm the victim in this story, but nobody likes feeling helpless, even when they were. *Especially* when they were. My dad would drive up here and try and kill Covington himself if he found out.”

“He's *going* to find out from my story, Piper...” Fiona warned her.

“Oh I know, but hopefully by then, there'll be some justice taking place,” Piper answered. “Just the fact that you're *writing* this book is going to shine a spotlight on some of the atrocities that have been taking place here. We've all been *very* lucky, considering how scrupulous and kind Andy is. It's very important we show that not everybody is Andy Rook. In fact, I think most people *aren't* Andy Rook. You definitely want to investigate what sort of challenges and problems people like, say, the level 1 and 2 men are going through.”

Fiona clicked her tongue a little bit. “That's just it, Piper... there *aren't* any.”

Piper stopped mid sip of her juice, lowering the glass down from her lips. “What are you talking about, Fiona?”

“So I can't tell you who I heard this from, but I have a source who's told me that any man who was rated a level 1 or a level 2 and is still *alive* at this point has been elevated to level 3,” Fiona said, leaning back in her chair a little. “In fact, the whole system is going through a very dramatic reworking right now, ahead of the President's speech tomorrow. Because the casualties are even higher than people know. I think maybe even Phil and his team have been kept in the dark, mostly to try and keep morale up.”

“Jesus Fucking Christ, Fi, how bad *is* it, I mean, really?”

“As of 2019, the male population of the US was about 160 million. Nobody seems to have a definite account of what it is right now, but the estimates in the upper echelons of Washington are that we have somewhere between five and nine million men alive in the USA. Some of the more optimistic estimations are putting it as high as twelve million, but my source seems to think that's rose-tinted goggles, and shouldn't be given any credibility.”

“Eight million is *five percent* of what we used to have,” Piper hissed quietly. “What's the female population looking like?”

“It was 166 million in 2019, and now I think my source in Washington thinks it's about 140 million these days, give or take twenty mil,” Fiona said. “It's very dangerous to us, no doubt about it, but DuoHalo is infinitely more dangerous to men. To us, sure, there's some fatalities, but mostly it's long term lung damage, immune system compromises and a whole litany of muscle, bone and organ damage. But men? Shit. They're dead within a *day*. Knowing you could be gone just like that?” Fiona let out a soft whistle. “That's going to do a number on all the men who are still alive.”

“How are they keeping all this secret?” Piper said. “Shit, I mean the local *Target* is still open...”

“Sure, but at what cost?” Fiona laughed. “I mean, haven't you figured out *how* it's still open? It's entirely staffed by women, partners of all the support staff for people living around, but not in, New Eden. Dos Eden, Little Eden, all the weird little feeder communities that staff up everything here. The men are kept in their little bubbles, and those of us with the high end men stay and keep them warm and cosy, but the ladies in the lower tiers, they've still gotta pay bills somehow. I'm more amazed the shipping lines haven't completely broken down myself.”

“People panic if things don't feel at least a little normal, so maybe that's their top priority,” Piper

said. "People need to feel protected..."

"Exactly. The people who *are* protected, they're probably still scared that something could go sideways. And the men who aren't protected yet? They've got to be scared out of their fucking minds, hunkered down, knowing just how vulnerable they are. We're all going to have PTSD by the end of this, but the men who survive? They're going to have some weird combination of survivor's guilt and hyperactive fight-or-flight responses. So the government is doing literally *anything* it can think of to try and keep men alive. No level 1s, no level 2s... they just want to make sure any living man in the US *stays* alive. In every sense of the word, every American man is some level of a VIP. Because they have to be. And god knows, it's just as bad, if not worse, abroad."

"When are we going to hear more?"

"I think once President Pelosi comes clean about our losses, so will most of the rest of the countries," Fiona said. "I think a few of them are going to try and project strength, but in the end, it's going to be pretty easy for those illusions to get shattered, so we'll see."

"Most of the men of the world are dead, and the politicians of the world are still engaged in dick measuring contests," Piper sighed. "It's maddening. We should be in a new world. With the numbers you're talking, it's over ten-to-one ratio of women to men."

"If it's the worst-case scenario for men's fatalities and best-case scenario for women's fatalities, it's nearly thirty-to-one."

"Suddenly, Andy having twenty partners doesn't seem so silly, does it?" Piper laughed.

"Whatever it takes to keep men alive, that's what we have to do."

"All men?" Fiona said. "Tell me about your first meeting with Covington."

Piper groaned, shaking her head. "Not *all* men. If Covington fries, I wouldn't mind one bit. Hated that prick right from the start..."

* * * * *

When the escort came to collect me the next morning, I felt like shit. I'm told that's sort of a side effect of the serum, that the day after, until you get paired, your body feels almost incomplete, like it's lacking something, like you don't have the energy you feel like you should. Rachel said it was normal, and that as soon as I'd been imprinted on Covington, the sensations would pass, and she urged me to get it over with as quickly as possible. Her words, not mine. I remember, because it made me nervous in advance, especially since she wouldn't explain in any detail.

I wasn't alone in the pickup either.

There were two of us being delivered to Covington that day. Rachel was escorting us, along with our handlers. I know a lot of people seem to have gotten nice rides to and from the base, but for us, we were signed, sealed and delivered by the Air Force Security Services, with Rachel DeMarco leading us down the highway to hell.

Along with me was a woman named Layla Greene. You might actually know her, or at least know *of* her, considering you have slightly similar backgrounds, although only partially I guess. She was a reporter and analyst for Fox News. She's like the majority of women there – white, blonde hair, blue eyes, busty figure, superiority complex a mile wide and yet, still willing to be subordinate to any man she thinks can help her make progress up the food chain. They must print them out like Barbie dolls in Kansas or something.

Layla had on a short black skirt that barely reached past mid thigh, with dark stockings on underneath it, and a loose, expensive looking red blouse, with a large Donna Karan purse that probably cost more than everything in my little wheelee suitcase combined. I didn't even want to imagine what was in hers.

She recognized me from the GIF because of *course* she did, and as annoyed as I was about *that*, I think she was equally annoyed that I didn't recognize *her* from Fox, because no way in hell am I

watching that garbage network. That pissed her off, but she tried very hard to hide it from me, because she thought we were going to living together for the rest of our lives, so getting off on the wrong foot would mean too long to clean up.

I'd put on track pants, a sports top and a track jacket, hoping to look as shabby and unappealing as possible. I'd been getting nothing but bad vibes up until this point, so I remember thinking that maybe if I looked slovenly enough, maybe this Covington person would turn me away.

We were encouraged not to talk too much on the way over, thankfully, so after some brief introductions and a little idle chit chat, we rode silently most of the rest of the way over to Covington Manor, which, I have to tell you, is a goddamn fortress.

Andy's seen it, but I know you haven't, so let me tell you, there is an Aryan poster child of a woman with a machine gun manning the gate, and I think he's got at least two to three others patrolling the grounds, not to mention the cadre of dogs. I think it might have only been two or three guards in total when I arrived, but around the time, well, that I started to lose myself, the day before Andy rescued me, I'd counted at least five, so I suspected he was getting them delivered during the point between my arrival and my departure. By now, I imagine his home is practically goddamn Fort Knox, maybe even better and more secure.

I'll come back to that in a lot more detail later...

The plot of land that Covington Manor lays on is massive. Maybe that's why it lays on the corner of the New Eden area. It means that technically, he has an exit from the campus that he has total control over, even if a lot of it is on a goddamn hill. He doesn't just have one house – he has three. The main manor is where Covington and his inner circle of bitches live and play. That's got to be where they held the poker game, and where I imagine Andy found me. Apparently the cook, Veronica, also doubled as the card dealer for their little game.

I know Rachel, as one of Covington's favorites, lives in the main house, as well as Alicia, the mother of Covington's children, although she divides her time with the children in one of the other houses.

Alicia's a weird force at the house, almost kind of like a ghost, rarely seen but often spoken of, and her presence is felt *everywhere*. I think she doesn't like the idea of having the children seeing all the weird shit Covington gets up to, so the kids don't come into the main house. In fact, during the entire nine days I was there, I only saw Alicia the once.

We'll get to it, I promise.

Sorry, I know I'm getting shit all jumbled up. I'm trying to focus, but this is a lot of shit I'd much rather forget about. No no, I'll get through it. I just have to keep on talking.

When we arrived at the building, Layla and I were given our little suitcases and taken into a large living room, where we were told to wait. We weren't given our cellphones back, despite both of us complaining that we had people we needed to call to inform where we were.

The thing about Covington's house is that no matter where you go, the fucker is *always* showing off his wealth. The living room we were left in wasn't the biggest one in the house, we would later find out, but that didn't mean he wasn't above hanging a Renoir to show off that he could spare one. Three couches, no television, bookshelves on the walls all filled with first editions of books over a hundred years old – Dickens, Swift, you know the type.

Rachel sat down in one couch, with Layla on a second and me on the third. “So, ladies, Mister Covington will be in in just a little bit, but I thought I might give you a little briefing about what your life's going to be like here. You just mostly need to keep your head down and stay out of his way and then you can enjoy a life of luxury, but anytime you're around Mister Covington, you have to realize that he is the Master of House, and that whatever he says is what goes. He owns this house, he owns the land it's on and, frankly, he's probably the most powerful man in all of New Eden, maybe even in Northern California. He has a way he wants things done, and a way he wants people to do and act. It might seem a little old fashioned, but whenever he's not around you, you can do whatever you want

around the house.”

“What do you mean 'old fashioned?’” I asked Rachel.

“He's in his 60s and he was born with a silver spoon in his mouth, Piper,” Rachel sighed at me. “If you're expecting a modern man, you're going to be very disappointed. He's about as conservative as they come, and that includes believing women should take a back seat to whatever the man thinks. That means you should agree with him on just about everything. When he's not around, you can do whatever you want, but when his attention's on you, it had better be 'Yes sir,' 'I understand, sir' and 'of course you're correct, sir,' otherwise there'll be hell to pay.”

I remember being very angry at that, as you can imagine. “What the hell happened to 'giving you your ideal match' and all the other nonsense they fed us when they came to pick us up?” I said to her, fuming, unable to sit down, pacing around the room like a caged lion.

“Don't be naive, Piper,” Rachel sighed, exasperatedly. “You live in the same country I do, and the rich make all the fucking rules, so when Arthur Covington the 4th decides he wants you as one of his brides, that's just what's going to happen, no matter what you want.”

“This isn't the fucking Handmaid's Tale, Rachel!” I shouted at her. “I'm not a piece of property or cattle to be traded away for some parcels of land and a better title! Covington doesn't just get to *decide* that I belong to him, no matter how fucked up the world is right now!”

“He does and he *has*, Piper,” Rachel said. “And that means you are, you do. You do belong to him now and forever more. And you may *think* all of this sounds terrible, but any time he's not around, you live in a fucking *mansion*, with servants catering to your needs. There's a full pool, and a gym, and you can continue with your Olympic training and do whatever else is you want to do with your day-to-day life, but for a few hours a week, you get to pretend you're a docile little girl back in the 1500s, because that's how Arthur likes his women. If you really don't like him that much, then just be as boring as possible, and he'll lose interest in you, and you'll only have to service him during your spot in the rotation, but other than that, he'll barely even know you're around.” She looked at me with a very stern expression on her face. “But if you try and struggle, if you fight back or try and do something awful to him, he can utterly make your life a living hell.”

“And what if I just get up and leave?! What about that, Rachel?”

“How, Piper? There's dogs and sentries guarding the perimeter, and they're all completely loyal to Arthur. They're going to chase you down and bring you back here, and you won't have gained anything, will you? All you'll have done is piss Arthur off, and then he's only going to make it that much worse on you.”

“Worse? How the fuck could it be worse?”

“You *really* don't want to know,” Rachel sighed. “I've been with Arthur since the whole program formed New Eden here in June, and if you want to cause trouble, he will take great delight in breaking you, like a stubborn horse that needs to be trained.” She laughed a little. “Oh yeah, there's a stable here, so you can go horse riding any time you want. If you're especially nice to him, maybe he'll buy you a pony.”

“I'm not some twelve year old girl he can buy off with a goddamn *pony*, Rachel. I'm not going to put on a pretty little dress and parade around for him like I'm happy in a life of slavery. I'm going to get the fuck out of here.”

“You're not, Piper,” Rachel told me. “I know it sounds like it sucks, but there's like a 95% chance he's going to fuck you and then forget about you, and as long as you stay out of his way, he won't even think about you when it isn't your time to service him. Your best option is to just make yourself *forgettable*, if you really don't want to cozy up to him. There *are* benefits to being on his good side. Artie's got enough money that if he likes you, he can buy you whatever or whoever you want. He could bring one of your friends here to join you, so you've got someone to spend time with. They'll have to tend to Artie's needs as well, but you can do that together, which generally makes it easier.”

“I'm not bi-sexual,” I said to her.

“Neither am I,” Layla said, reminding us both of her presence for the first time in minutes.

“You will be,” Rachel laughed. “He'll turn you into one, force you to learn to like it. Or you'll at least learn to fake it. But it'll be better to come around. Your biophysiology is changing right now, in ways you can't even begin to understand, making your mind more pliant, more open to suggestion, to doing new things, to losing societal taboos. Every woman thinks she's not going to change or be changed by the serum, but every woman learns that *nobody* beats science. That's why it's science. Science always wins. You're going to learn to crave Artie, to yearn for the sweet release of the orgasms he can give you, to feel that rush of endorphins flooding your system over and over again. Shit, you'll go into it thinking you only want to do the bare minimum you need to survive, but eventually you'll start craving the orgasms more and more, and you'll find you have less and less morals in your way to getting them, especially if he decides to hold out on you and make you wait, because the frustration, the pain and the suffering from *not* getting them? I watched my sister deep in the throes of heroin withdrawal, and that didn't hold a fucking *candle* to what women in need of their orgasms are like.”

The way she was talking scared me, especially since she was a doctor over at the base, which meant she had a *lot* of experience with the serum and its effects. It wasn't like Rachel was threatening me; it was like she was explaining what would happen if I didn't get along and go along, and the sort of 'this is already settled' tone she had about her didn't make me feel any better. Everything about her words and demeanor said 'resistance is useless,' like that fucking robot invasion from that one show.

“There are fifteen women here, including you two. Two maids, three guards, the cook, the gardener, the stable master, Artie's personal physician, his lawyer, his assistant, and, of course, his wife. More still on the way over the coming weeks.”

“Yesterday you said I would be his tenth partner,” I said to her. I was angry, but I also knew that details were important, and that if I was going to make a break for it, I should know how many people could possibly be following me.

“Sure, he doesn't consider the maids or the guards *'partners'* per se, just staff he also happens to fuck,” she sighed. “It's a whole thing, depending on the prestige of the work you do, I guess. Layla, you're going to end up being his communications manager, and Piper, I suspect you'll end up being his personal trainer. Everybody gets some kind of job here.”

“What's yours?” Layla asked her.

“I'm the Inside Man,” Rachel said with a soft laugh. “I'm his liaison with the base, so I keep him abreast of all the ongoing developments with the serum, and with the development and expansion of New Eden. As part of his terms in cofounding New Eden, he wanted a seat at the table, and someone loyal to him on the inside. So the General managing the base asked around, and found me, willing to trade a little bit of comfort and liberty for a whole lot of power and money. I mostly stay at the base, so Artie really only thinks about me when he needs me, or when it's my turn on the rotation. So, I'll go and get Artie and he can come in here and imprint you both. Before I go, any questions?”

“Yeah,” I told her, steel behind my eyes. “What if I refuse to be imprinted?”

Rachel turned her eyes back to me and shook her head again. “Like I said, then he's going to break you. He'll wait until you're *begging* him to be imprinted, and then he'll probably make you wait even longer, because you dared to tell him no.” She seemed frustrated that I wouldn't just get in line and get along, and was willing to stir up shit.

“It's not going to break me,” I said, trying to convince both her and myself with my words.

“Shut the fuck up, bitch,” Layla said to me. “You're gonna fuck it up for the rest of us, you selfish cunt.”

I turned over to look at her with fire in my eyes. “I will straight up knock you the fuck out, you little bimbo ass kisser. Don't fuck with me.”

“Like I even need to,” Layla said, rolling her eyes. “I hope he fucking hurts you.”

“And I hope he treats you like shit, even after I'm gone,” I replied. Not my finest hour, I know, but I was fucking *pissed*.

“Well, you're welcome to try, Piper,” Rachel said, standing up, “but you won't make it, and, honestly, I say this as your friend, you're only making it worse for yourself.”

“Friend? You're no fucking friend of mine. How's it going to be worse, anyway? Is he going to force me to get imprinting?” I sneered at her.

“Oh no,” she said, shaking her head. The look on her face was sad and patronizing, like I was a small child having a temper tantrum instead of being a woman fighting for her free will. “He won't have to. Like I said, you'll be begging for it before you know it.”

“We'll see who's right, you fucking Benedict Arnold,” I spat at her. “I ought to kick your ass for even going along with this shit.”

“I'll see you on the other side, Piper. Once you're an actual person again.” Rachel moved to the door, knocked on it three times and then it opened, letting her slip out before it closed again, the door locking once more.

I immediately started to checking all the doors for the room, but all of them were locked, and they were all made of very sturdy wood. I was debating how much trouble it would be to knock one down when the doors opened again, and I saw Covington for the first time.

You haven't met him, so I suppose let me give you a brief description of him. He's in his 60s, slender with gray, thinning hair, and a very sharp, angular nose. When you first meet him, he's going to scream rich pompous asshole to you, and you should trust that first impression. He came walking into the room we were in dressed in a silk robe, fuzzy slippers and nothing else, like he thought he was Hugh Fucking Hefner or something.

For his age, he's in excellent shape, although some of that may be a side effect of the Quaranteam serum, because I know that it's indirectly having a bunch of changes on the physiology of everyone exposed to it. I'd sort of hoped he would be old and frail looking, but my first impression of him was that he was going to live to be at least a hundred, and I knew there was no way in hell I was going to be able to stomach forty years of not being a person.

Also there was his personal bodyguard. Her name is Melody Park. She's of Korean descent and is incredibly good at just disappearing into the background, despite the fact that she's utterly beautiful. It's where she stands, where she sits, how she occupies a room, so that she can conceal all of that and that no one will look at her until she wants them to. Hell, I bet she's been in a room with Andy a bunch of times, and he's just never seen her, because she was doing her best to blend in. She's got at least a couple of weapons on her, but I noticed she was also carrying a stun gun that day, so I'm guessing he'd had problems with women awaiting imprinting before.

His assistant was there as well, a sort of mousy little woman named Lisa, who was easily the most broken woman I'd ever seen. She never once spoke to any of the women while I was there, and when she spoke to Covington, she always did so very quietly, as if her words were for his ears only. Wherever Covington went, Lisa was always there was well, just a couple of steps behind him.

“Ah, Miss Brown, Miss Greene, thank you for accepting my invitation to join the Covington family,” he said, his voice high, nasal and reedy, condescension dripping from his words. “Let us see about getting you both imprinted, shall we?”

“No,” I said to him. “I would rather not. In fact, I'd much rather you simply let me go, and I'll go find someone else, *anyone* else, to get imprinted to, instead of living here in this prison camp you mistakenly call a home.”

He turned his gaze over to look at me as I was talking, and he smiled. I remember him smiling, because it was a creepy fucking smile, like a serial killer sizing up his prey, or a parent getting ready to tell their child what a stupid thing they'd just said. Any little lingering doubt I'd had about trying to fight what he was planning on doing to me died with that smile, because, based on that look *alone*, I decided, yeah, fuck this guy.

“I will make you a compact, Miss Brown,” he said smugly. “If you survive not asking me for my cum for two weeks, I will happily let you walk out that door with no repercussions and no

retribution. But when you fail, and make no mistake about the matter, you *will* fail, *when* you fail, you will follow the rules of my house. You do not speak to other people in public without my permission. You do not disagree with me. You do not refuse me. You will eventually bear my children, and while those children will be part of the family, they will not be direct heirs to my fortune, as it is reserved for the children I have had with my wife.”

“I'm *not* going to fail, so as long as you honor your part of the agreement, that's fine. One way or another, I'm getting the fuck out of this freakshow.”

“And you, Miss Greene? You are willing to become my spokeswoman and communications manager, in addition to being one of my playthings?”

I saw Layla blanch just a little bit. “I'll fuck you, but do you—”

“You can critique my communications *after* you're imprinted, not before,” he told her. “Why don't you strip down and we will show Miss Brown what she'll be missing for the next week or so while she deprives herself of it?”

Layla looked over at me, then back at Covington, like she hadn't even considered there would be an audience for her first time with him. “Right here?”

“If you're unwilling, I can let you wai—” He didn't even get the chance to finish the word 'wait' before Layla started kicking off her high heels and unbuttoning her puffy blouse, exposing a very high end black lace bra beneath it, keeping in check two tits that had clearly seen a surgeon's touch. She kept going without Covington saying anything, unbuttoning her skirt, reaching down to her side to unzip it, then pushing it down and stepping out of it, wearing black lace panties and a garter belt that was holding up those stockings. She started to reach for the clips between the belt and the stockings when Covington cleared his throat. “You can leave the stockings and the garter on,” he added with amusement.

“Yes sir,” Layla said, reaching up to pull down her panties, exposing that she had obviously shaved her pussy clean in the past few days, although I wondered how she'd squeezed it in, but clearly she'd taken the instructions about sexual pairings to mean she should put her best bits forward, and those certainly weren't between her ears.

“Get down on your knees,” he told her, as he untied the robe belt around his waist, opening the robe and sliding it off. He wasn't as soft and flabby as I expected he would be, with a smattering of silver curls on his chest and his cock had a rat's nest of white hair around it.

As much as I would love to tell you that the man has a tiny dick, covered in warts and with a hook in the middle, I'm pretty sure the Quaranteam serum makes some improvements and alterations to mens' physiology over the first few months, because he had a sizable cock, covered in faint blue veins, massive and swollen, not quite as thick as Andy's, but not far from it either, and probably an inch or so longer than Andy's. It was certainly paler, though, as most of Covington's flesh looked like it had never seen the sunlight in his life. I'm guessing that Ash convinces Andy to actually *use* the pool attached to the house, but I doubt Covington's ever done anything but lounge around his, and even that he probably does from the safety of an umbrella.

“Taste of my body and experience a gift from your god,” Covington said to Layla as she moved down onto her knees on the cold wood floor in front of him. His arms were spread wide, like he was a priest making an offering. She looked up at him, a last glimmer of trepidation on her face, as he smiled down at her. “I know, you think me arrogant and pompous, but you will learn the gift of my seed is as close to touching a god as you will ever come. We men are the modern day pharaohs.” She looked down at his cock and then back up at him again. “Suck it and see. Allow me to change your world.”

Layla seemed like she held her breath but there was a bubble of precum on the end of Covington's cock, so she leaned forward and ran her tongue against it, sending her body into a series of shocks like I'd never seen. I'd have been worried about the girl's health if it hadn't been clear that she was in the throes of a serious orgasm, the kind I'd only seen in that video I'd watched the day before. The video had not been lying, and that was worrisome.

As soon as she'd come down from the release, she shoved her face hard and fast onto Covington's cock, whatever hesitation she'd had gone and replaced with a sort of carnal need that terrified me. The reserved, conservative news analyst had been swapped out, and in her place was a feral bitch in heat, a primitive cave woman, bobbing her head up and down on his cock like she was auditioning for a job as a porn star.

The hardest part about the entire thing was that while it was happening, Covington wasn't watching Layla – he was watching me. His eyes never left me the whole time, despite Layla's attempts to please. It was infuriating.

I think he was trying to last a long while, as if he wanted to show me how strong and powerful he was, but Layla was voracious, and after a minute or two, he let loose a load into her mouth. She slumped forward against him, and he just pushed her back and away until she fell onto her back on the very expensive rug covering up the wooden floor. I'm sure she probably had a bump on her head when she woke up, but I saw my first person saying “imprinting” over and over again.

Covington and his bodyguard walked out of the room without saying anything else, a single guard entering the room to keep tabs on me for the rest of the night. Her name was Hope, ironically enough, and she was taking no shit from me. Over the next few days, as she guarded me each and every night, I'd find out that she used to be in the military, but once the pandemic had set in, she'd been brought to New Eden right when it was being set up, one of the first people given to Covington.

“You just going to sit there all night and watch me?” I asked her.

“Yep,” she replied.

“How did you get roped into all this?”

“Came in with my half-sister, Rachel,” she said to me. “Mister Covington brought us in around the same time. When he found out Rachel had a big sister who was in the military, he thought I'd be a good guard for the house, and here I am.”

I remember being shook, because I sort of knew what she was implying, but I thought she couldn't possibly be talking about what it *sounded* like she was talking about. “Wait... both.. both you *and* your sister have to fuck that bastard?”

“Whatever he wants,” she said, her voice almost flat and emotionless, as if she was somewhat dead inside at this point, maybe as some form of mental self-preservation.

“But... never together, right? Never at the same time, right?”

Hope blinked slowly, as if the question I was asking her didn't make any sense. “Whatever Mister Covington wants.”

“She's your *sister!*” I shouted at her.

“We're both property of Mister Covington, you ungrateful bitch,” Hope sneered at me. “Odds are we'd both be dead if he hadn't rescued us, given us a home, given us safety. If we weren't dead, we'd certainly be struggling to get a partner to protect us. Get fucking *over* yourself. If that means I have to go down on my sister now and then, it won't fucking kill me.”

“You're fucking family!”

“The gardener's the mother of one of the maids,” Hope spat. “And Mister Covington *only* fucks the two of them together, at the same time, and they've gotten over it. Because they're fucking *survivors*. Take your fucking hangups and leave them in the fucking past, because sooner or later, the need to get fucked like a good little slut is going to fucking eat you up inside. And you're going to spend weeks, no, *months*, paying for being a bitch up front. I'm going to enjoy watching you whimper and cry, rubbing your cunt, trying to get off, but being unable to, letting it drive you fucking mad.”

“And what if I decide to go kick down that door?”

“Then I'll tackle you, taser you if I have to, handcuff you and leave you like that until morning,” she said, confidently. “I encourage you to try it and see if I'm bluffing.”

Now, as athletic as I am, I don't have any real combat training, and Hope looked like she was itching for a bar fight. I was taller than she was, but she was much more muscular than I am, and I

could see she had a taser on her belt, as well as a pair of handcuffs. They were at least a little worried about me on that first day, because later, every time I saw them they also had either a pistol on their hip or a rifle in their hands. So I nixed the idea of a quick escape for the time being, and hoped she'd get bored enough to just leave me alone, or drift off to sleep, so I could get away.

No such luck.

A few hours in, I tried to go and put my track jacket over Layla's body as a sort of makeshift blanket, but Hope yanked it off of her as soon as I did, shooting me a dirty look. I wanted to try and take her in a fight right then and there, but I knew I didn't have any fucking clue what laid beyond those doors and where I'd go even if I got past them.

The two of us were locked in with Layla's slumbering form until morning, when they came to take her away and to her own room, with Melody asking me if I had changed my mind.

When I said that I hadn't, she looked right into my face and said, "You will."

I didn't, but it wasn't for lack of them trying...

* * * * *

"Fuck, Piper, I'm almost scared to ask about the rest of your time there."

Piper sighed, closing her eyes and nodded. "You should be, but I need to get through it. Believe me, this was only the start of the shit that asshole put me through. It gets *a lot* worse..."

Fiona reached over and squeezed Piper's hand with one of her own. "Tell me how..."

"Strap in, bitch, because here's where shit gets *super* fucked up..."

Part Four

It was plain as day that Piper had tensed up, and Fiona was doing her best to keep her even keeled. They'd taken a few minutes to walk around a bit, the two of them both needing a breather before they got down to the roughest part of Piper's story.

Piper had insisted that they not shy away from the dark heart of what had happened to her, but agreed that taking a few minutes to recover and rebuild her energies before getting into the ugliest period of her life would be helpful.

Fiona had found a lot to admire about the brunette, which was good, because Piper had made it very clear that she wasn't going to let go of Andy for any reason. She had known exactly what a good man Andy was before she'd arrived, because she and Andy had shared a long, deep history before she'd agreed to move here, but it was good to see Piper felt the same way.

Andy and Fiona had been friends before they'd been lovers, lovers before they'd been roommates, and every step of the way, Andy had always put her needs above his own, to the point where she'd had to actively make sure he wasn't causing himself too much trouble for her benefit. He was selfless, often to a fault and his own detriment.

That had been quite some time ago, though, and time had a way of changing people, and not often for the better. Some of the people they'd went to college with had gone on to become the sort of folks that Andy and Fi wouldn't want to consider friends anymore – they'd been unfaithful to partners, committed crimes, exploited employees, and just generally turned into awful shits. In fact, Fiona's best friend in college, a woman named Emily Emmanuel, had gone on to become a CEO of one of the most abusive and awful companies around. She'd told Fi that she'd felt abandoned when Fi moved to Washington, and their friendship had basically died around the same time that her and Andy's relationship had broken off.

Andy, in stark contrast Fi realized, had just gotten, well, more *Andy*. There was something kind about the core of the man, like he was constantly trying to see the best in people, and to help them up to live up to that ideal as much as they could on a day-to-day basis. It hadn't gotten him far in terms of business, but he'd done well with friends and even better with women, as he hadn't fallen in with

anyone who would take advantage of his trusting nature.

From what Ash had told her, Andy's last relationship in the Bay before the pandemic was with the kind of woman who'd nearly broken that kindhearted spirit out of him. But instead of taking the wrong lesson from it – that people were often out to hurt him – he'd taken the *right* one from it instead, which was that sometimes the best thing you could do with a problematic partner was to let them go, or even push them away if they just weren't the right fit for you.

She wasn't entirely certain that all of Andy's partners would be good fits for him in the long term, but Fi supposed that was why there were so many of them, so that the ones who didn't see Andy as more than a solution to their physical needs could minimize their time with him. While many of his partners seemed to have genuine affection for him, at least a couple of them hadn't really built deep and meaningful connections with him. At least not as deep as others.

For the younger girls, it just made sense. Both Hannah and Asha weren't old enough to know what they wanted to do with their lives, so how could they be expected to know what they truly wanted out of a partner? They'd show Andy a good time, certainly, and keep his libido stoked, but she wouldn't be surprised if they didn't want children with him when all the dust settled.

All of the fiancés were definitely in it for the long haul, though. They'd all seemed like they were excellent matches for him, even if some of them Fi would've considered slightly out of Andy's league, despite loving him as much as she did. But good on him for capturing the hearts of such highly regarded actresses as Emily Stevens and Sarah Washington. The heart wants what the heart wants, and if they wanted him, she would respect that.

Lauren and Taylor, by contrast, were definitely emotionally invested in Andy, but not nearly as much as they were each other. Fiona also suspected that maybe Sheridan and Tala might be the same way, but hadn't had enough time to get a good enough read on the two of them yet to make a conclusive decision. The same was true for the newest additions, all of whom probably didn't even know which season Andy was born in, much less how they felt about him. It was too early for them to have established deep feelings one way or another about Andy.

Piper? Piper had made it clear that she'd rather die than be parted from Andy, and Fiona was still coming to understand why that was, as she'd really only known Andy a few weeks now. She felt like the solution to that particular puzzle would lay in the last part of the story, but to get to that part, they'd need to get through the darkest part first.

During the walk, Piper spent most of the time in their break asking questions about Fiona's past, focusing mostly on her time between graduating from college and her arrival in New Eden. Fiona understood how Piper wanted to spend the interval getting to know a little bit about her instead of talking more about herself. It was a chance to reclaim a bit of power in the conversation, and a chance to listen instead of talking.

For her part, Fiona did everything she could to tell Piper about herself, being generous with the details and honesty, sparing none of the gory details she might have left out otherwise. While her story didn't have as many abductions, there *were* more gunfights and that seemed to make Piper laugh and giggle in glee.

Piper had made it clear she was as straight as the day was long, so Fiona wouldn't pressure her, but she would've been lying if she didn't admit to herself that she would've loved to have a bit of fun with her in the sack at some point.

She was easy to like, easier still to get along with, and she seemed genuinely intent on learning as much as she could about Fiona. She also made an attempt to keep Fiona's spirits up, even though it was Piper's spirit that Fiona felt they should *both* be worried about. It was a miracle that the woman had come through it all with her spirit unbroken.

They completed their lap around the yard and headed back towards the house. They'd been talking much of the day, barring a half an hour break during which Piper had squeezed in a quick workout while Fiona had taken Moira into Andy's office for a chat, but now the sun was starting to set

and the story was taking its turn into the nightmare portion Piper had clearly been avoiding.

“Alright, can't dodge it forever,” Piper sighed as her and Fiona made their way back up towards one of the front facing balconies this time, just for a change of pace. “Time to get down to the scariest few days of my life. The important thing, the *most* important thing, before I get into this, the most important thing is to remember that I came through *okay*, and I'm here, now, happy, with a great man and wonderful girlfriends. So keep that in mind when we're talking about this.”

“I don't want to push you, Piper,” Fiona said to her. “If you're not ready to talk about this—”

“I'm never going to be *ready* to talk about it, but it's still something I've got to do, so let's just get on with it, shall we?”

“It's your story, Piper,” Fiona sighed. “I'm just here to write it all down for you.”

“Strap in, then. Here comes the shitstorm...”

* * * * *

With Layla removed from the room, they lightened security just a little bit, which was their first mistake, and one they'd quickly rectify. I wasn't going to stay locked up in some gilded cage like I was Rapunzel waiting for her prince to arrive. I'm the kind of woman who's willing to get her hands dirty to get shit done, so, naturally, I tried to break out.

Getting out of the room itself was relatively easy. I think they'd considered my will mostly broken, and hoped I would just roll over and play nice, so they hadn't really established all that much security around the room I was kept in beyond keeping it locked, and I learned how to pick a lock when I was like twelve, so that wasn't much of a fucking problem.

Once I was out of the room, however, I was in Covington's mansion, and let me tell you that place is one big fucking maze. I was trying to be sneaky and keep hidden, but even still, it took me much longer than I want to admit to find the edge of the building. Even when I found it, they were windows that I knew if I broke would only draw attention to me. So instead I moved along the wall and tried to keep out of sight.

A couple of minutes later, I found an external door and was surprised to find it unlocked, which let me out of the manor and onto the estate. At that point, I thought I was basically home free, which, in retrospect, was totally fucking *stupid* of me.

I headed out from the manor and sprinted towards the trees as fast as I could, not looking back. I didn't know where I was beyond “an hour or so away from Oakland,” I didn't have my phone and I wasn't able to see any people anywhere around me. I didn't even know which way was west. I certainly didn't have a plan. I just wanted to get out and away.

I never even saw the fence.

A minute or two into the trees, I started to hear dogs barking, and they were chasing after me. I wanted to run, but I could tell they were going to be on me long before I could get anywhere, so I made the decision to climb up into a tree, because I thought if I didn't, I was going to have a Doberman tearing out chunks from my leg.

I got high enough that the dogs couldn't get me, but the trees were far enough apart that I couldn't just jump from one to another in an attempt to get away from them. The dogs were out for blood and I was so focused on them that I didn't even notice that Hope had drawn a bead on me with a shotgun and fired a beanbag round into my side, knocking me out of the tree and onto my ass. It hurt like a motherfucker and kicked the wind out of me, but I didn't get much more than a bruise. I think I got lucky, though, because it just as easily could've broken one of my ribs, or I could've taken much more severe damage from the fall itself.

While I was trying to catch my breath, Melody sprinted over, flipped me onto my stomach, yanked my wrists behind my back and handcuffed me. “Okay, bitch,” she hissed at me. “We were going easy on you before, but no more of that now.”

They dragged me back to the house, and I do mean dragged, in that I was in a bit of shock. Melody just grabbed my ankles and hauled me towards the house, my track pants getting loads of tiny rips and tears in them from the ground. Melody obviously didn't care what shape they were in, and when we were back at the mansion itself, her and Hope lifted me up as Hope slapped ankle shackles onto me as well.

“Didn't have faith you could hold out, huh?” Hope laughed at me dismissively.

Right then and there, I vowed to wipe that fucking smug look off her face if it was the last fucking thing I ever did.

Instead of the library, they dragged me down into a parlor room with nothing much of value in it, just two big arm chairs and a knee-high footrest or padded bench or something that looked strong enough to hold three or four people standing on it. The door was heavy oak, and locked from the outside, and the ceiling was high vaulted with covered recessed lighting. I know all of this, because multiple times over the following days, I thought about self-harm, and never saw any real viable way to do it. There was also a bucket for me to shit and piss into. I wasn't even given the dignity of access to a bathroom.

Once we were in the parlor room, Melody fished out a Leatherman from her pocket, snapped it open to the blade, and literally *cut* my clothes off me. I'd never gotten my track top back from when I tried to cover Layla with it, which meant I was just in a sports top, a sports bra, track pants and the grungiest pair of faded green panties I owned, all of which they just stripped away from me, leaving me completely naked, except for the handcuffs and their connected shackles. Then they attached the chain of the shackles to a ring I hadn't initially noticed coming out of the floor. That was when I understood this was Covington's sex dungeon.

Melody inspected me a little, checking that when I'd fallen I hadn't broken or sprained anything, and that the beanbag round hadn't done any severe damage. When she was satisfied with that, she nodded to Hope, and the two of them headed for the door.

After Melody had walked out, Hope looked back at me and sneered. “He's gonna fucking break you, bitch, and when he does, every single fucking one of us is going to spend the rest of our lives reminding you how fucking proud and stubborn you were, all for fucking nothing.” She spat on the floor, then stepped out and closed the door.

A few hours later, Hope reappeared with two dog bowls, one filled with what looked like fried rice and the other looked like water. “How do I know those aren't drugged?” I said to her. “Or that you didn't slip some of Covington's cum into them?”

“You don't,” Hope laughed. “But Master Covington has made it clear he's not going to give you any of his precious jism until you beg him for it. So he's not going to do something sneaky like that. He's going to take way too much joy in hearing you desperate to get it. But if you don't want to believe me, then go on and starve yourself. See if I give a fuck.”

I debated for at least half an hour, but eventually hunger won out and I just needed to eat and drink. Of course, I didn't have access to my hands, and so I had to eat from them like I was a fucking dog, but I learned long ago that pride isn't worth anything. Neither the food or water *was* drugged, but the minute I heard the door opening, I backed away from it again. I would eat their food and drink their water, but I wouldn't give them the satisfaction of *watching* me like that.

Covington came in with Melody, Hope and Lisa in tow, and he was wearing that damn robe again, like he was too good to put on real clothes, or that maybe he didn't *have* to put on real clothes. I remember him strolling in, all cock of the walk, like he couldn't wait to see me broken, because the minute he saw the look of raw resistance on my face, I could see his confidence waiver. He tried to dispel it as quick as he could, but I saw it, and I think the son of a bitch *knew* I saw it.

“Ready to give in yet, Piper?” he said to me, his hands resting on his hips, like he couldn't wait to untie his robe and have a go at me.

“I thought I made it perfectly clear,” I said to him. “I'd rather die first.”

“You feel it, though, don't you?” he said, walking closer towards me. “That painful need in the pit of your stomach, or, more accurately, in the center of your cunt. You don't *want* to worship at my cock, and yet you feel like you *need* to, don't you?”

“No,” I said, trying to be as blustery as I could. “Whatever it is you think I'm feeling right now, I can endure it. I can outlast it. You aren't going to break me, motherfucker.”

“I don't understand why you're trying to resist this, Piper,” he told me, sighing as if he was bored with the very act of having a conversation with me. “This isn't about morals or ethics or any of that other nonsense. This is biology. This is chemistry. This is inevitable. You will have to give in. Eventually. *Everyone breaks.*”

“I don't have to do anything but die sooner or later, you asshole, and that isn't happening any time soon,” I growled. “Once I'm out of here, I'm going to fucking making it my life mission to ruin you, and make sure you never pull this shit on anyone else ever again.”

“You have spirit, I will grant you that,” he said. “Hope, why don't you strip down and we can remind her what she's missing?”

“Yes sir,” Hope said, although the look on her face made it clear she wasn't pleased to be doing this in front of me. She was kind of a giant Valkyrie of a woman, Germanic and blonde with intense blue eyes, and when she stripped off the workman-like clothes she had on, I could see she was absolutely jacked, one of the most muscular woman I'd ever seen before. She reminded me of the sort of women bodybuilders I'd seen pumping iron with guys on the Florida beaches growing up. I think that may have been why Covington added her to his house – for the intimidation factor. She didn't have very big tits, and I could tell she was a little self conscious about it.

Her right arm had a tattoo of barbed wire wrapped around the bicep. She was also completely shaved bare. That wasn't the only tattoo she had, however, as when she turned while undressing, I could see there was a large rectangular tattoo just above the crack of her ass on the small of her back, about the size of a mass market paperback book. It was detailed, designed to look like the sort of brass plaque you see on old historical buildings. It said “Property of Arthur Covington the 4th, Bitch #7, HOPE” in stacked large letters, easily readable from a good distance. The son of a bitch had given them tramp stamps with his fucking *name* on them, and *their* fucking name so he didn't have to bother to remember them. The inkwork was heavy, and having it removed would be a long and painful process. Shit, it probably would've been easier to just blackout the whole area into one giant spot of ink.

It was hard to think of her and Rachel as sisters, purely for how visually different they were, but as I'd find out over the next few days, they were only *half*-sisters, sharing the same father but different mothers. Hope mentioned it in passing one day, as if it somehow excused Covington's behavior.

“How do you want me, sir?”

He grabbed the footrest and pulled it over before gesturing to it. “On your hands and knees, obviously, but let's be sure to keep our distance from Piper,” he said, his voice dripping with smug. “We wouldn't want a fleck of my cum to accidentally get into her mouth. She hasn't earned it yet.”

“Of course, Master,” she said, moving down onto her knees before placing her hands before her. The height was perfect so that he didn't have to crouch down or shove her down much to get his cock aligned up with her snatch.

“You see this, Piper?” he said. “This is what good little bitches get.”

For the next few minutes, he fucked her brains out in front of me, as she moaned and pleaded with him, a marked change of how she'd been acting before. Before she'd been proud and defiant, but the minute he got his cock inside of her, she turned into a spineless simp, begging for him to use her harder, faster, to fill her up.

That scared me more than anything else I'd gone through so far, because she seemed so broken, like a drug addict pleading for her fix. I'd seen addicts before. One of my girlfriends growing up had picked up a cocaine habit in college and when I was back in town for the Christmas holidays, me and a group of her other friends basically kidnapped her and checked her into a rehab facility, forcing her to

get clean, even as she begged and pleaded with us that she could quit any time she wanted. Hope reminded me of her, willing to do or say anything to get her next fix.

I think he thought seeing Hope in the throes of orgasm was going to make me want him more, but all it did was convince me that I needed to hold out.

When he came inside of her, I saw that controlled demeanor of hers shatter, and that orgasm that overwhelmed her nervous system was clearly no less intense than the one I'd seen Layla go through just the night before. So much for thinking the story about increased potency of orgasms was bullshit.

A few minutes later, however, she recovered enough to get up, get dressed and head out, along with Covington and Melody, and this time, they turned off the lights, leaving me alone in the dark. It wasn't great, but I'm a big girl, and being left in darkness wasn't that big a deal.

To me, over the next week, it felt like they were trying to think of new ways to get me to break, to try and torture me, to try and get me to accept my situation, but it never worked. He brought Hope in with her half-sister, and had them together, making them make out with each other while he fucked one then the other, much to my disgust. He brought Layla back around. He shoved Veronica's face into the floor when he drilled her, just to show me how much control he felt like he had. He fucked Rachel in the ass in front of me, and she looked about as bored as she possibly could, as if she was trying to convince me it would be something I could just casually ignore.

They all had tattoos with numbers similar to Hope's, even Layla, whose tattoo was still raw, fresh and agitated, the flesh around it red and sore. Her number was 13. My number, Covington told me, would be 14. I suspected he hadn't made his wife get tattooed, which accounts for the difference in the headcount.

'You can get used to anything, eventually,' Rachel's expression seemed to say to me, as he tore open her asshole with a complete lack of care or grace, his cock just hammering into her for his own perverse enjoyment. Covington even made Hope suck some of the cum out of her half-sister's ass. Rachel looked unbothered and Hope looked eager to please. 'You can even get used to this.'

But fuck *that*.

After three days, they took the handcuffs and shackles off me and took them out of the room, leaving me mostly alone in the study that had become my cell. I'll be honest with you. Around day four, I tried to get myself off, but it was almost like my body had locked out my ability to have an orgasm, to my intense frustration. I'm a grown ass woman, and I've been jilling off since I was, like, twelve, but all my usual tricks and sensitive spots, all of it was like scratching at an itch but not getting any fucking relief from it. I jilled until I was sore from all the rubbing, at which point I abandoned it in frustration.

Melody remarked on it the next time she came into the room, telling me that if I just fucked Covington, all the pain and aching would go away. She told me that she pitied me, because I was fighting for nothing. That all my struggles wouldn't make a tiny bit of fucking difference in the end. They seemed to think it was going to break me, but all it did was fuel the resistance. There was a sort of sad resignation to Melody that I hadn't noticed before that.

After day four, they started sending Lisa in to deliver the food, partially because my energy levels were down. They could tell that sprinting through the doorway wasn't really an option for me any more. I'd been trying to work out as I could, but by this point there was an unbearable sense of lethargy running through my veins, like my body was going to refuse to work like it should until it got what it wanted, and it was trying to tell me that struggling against it was wrong.

No pain, no gain, though, right?

I tried asking Lisa for help, tried to convince her to smuggle me out and get me away, that what Covington was doing to me was cruel and inhumane, but she never once spoke a single word to me, a sort of skittish deer-in-the-headlights look in her eyes at all times. Whatever Covington had done to her had been enough to crush whatever spirit had been in her when she'd arrived at his doorstep.

Also on day four, they shackled me back up and dragged me out into the back yard, where they had opened my suitcase next to a fire pit, and slowly, item by item, they burned all my clothes in front

of me. Each time they took something out, they put in a matching new item. If they burned a shirt, they put in a shirt. If they burned lingerie, they put in either a bra or panties. Everything they put into the suitcase, however, was plain white, with large black lettering on it that read "Covington's Bad Dog." I didn't flinch an inch. They were only clothes. After they'd finished burning all the clothes I had, they closed the suitcase and marched me back into my room.

He never damaged my phone, for reasons I wasn't quite sure of until recently. Niko told me a few days ago that if my phone had been damaged or destroyed before I checked in with my family, it would've triggered an immediate investigation that even Covington couldn't stop. So that's why he didn't fuck with my phone, and kept it charging all the time I was there.

Day five, Covington had a bunch of the women from the house come into the room one at a time to spit on me and yell obscenities at me, telling me how he was punishing *them* now for *my* obstinate behavior. Rachel showed me her bruised ribs from where he'd punched her. Hope came in with a black eye. Lisa still wouldn't even talk to me, but it looked and smelled like she'd soiled her pants and hadn't been allowed to take them off. She simply stood there and cried at me quietly. Layla had pleaded and begged with me to give in, telling me that Covington had threatened to break one of her legs or arms if I didn't give in. I told her that I wasn't going to give in, and that she should tell Covington I thought he was a coward for not trying to hit me instead of all the others. I told her that while she'd given in, I wasn't going to.

She had made her choice and I was going to stand by mine.

After that, he didn't try and hurt the girls any more to get me to cave. He'd learned it wasn't leverage over me. It hurt. Jesus, Fi, I fucking hated it, knowing these women were getting beaten up and abused because *I* wouldn't give in, but they had chosen to accept this man for what he was, and there was no fucking way I was going to do that.

I used to wonder how abused woman could stay with asshole men who would beat and shout at them, but I got an object lesson in watching how the women of Covington's house acted. He kept them in check in various ways – fear, anger, addiction...

Did I mention this yet? Around day six or seven – the timeline of what happened when gets a lot more fuzzy towards the end of the run – anyway, Melody came storming into the room and punched me right in the gut, harder than I've ever been hit in my life. She shouted at me that Covington was refusing to fuck her until I was broken and gave in. Not getting her fix was starting to drive her crazy, she shouted at me, tears of frustration rolling down her cheeks. I told her that beating me up wasn't going to get her anywhere.

"You chose this fucker," I spat at her from my position balled up on the floor, doubled over in pain. "That doesn't mean I have to."

She stomped out again without saying anything else.

Not too long after that, I had my one singular encounter with Alicia, Covington's wife. She came into the room by herself, having to discourage her own bodyguard, a woman I didn't meet, from coming in. I caught a glimpse of the bodyguard at the doorway, but she stayed outside as per her orders when Alicia Covington came into the room to look at me.

She winced a little as the reek of the room hit her nose and clearly offended her sensibilities. I don't know if you've seen or heard about Alicia. She and Covington's relationship clearly predates the whole DuoHalo mess by a lot, since they have a handful of kids together. She's in her mid forties, stunningly beautiful, I think maybe a former model or dancer or maybe both. There's a subtle shadow of an Eastern European accent of some kind when she speaks, but she's worked very hard to make sure it's just a trace. Pale skinned, dark hair, with green eyes the shade of dusty emeralds. Her tits struck me as too big to be real, but she certainly moved like she was used to them.

There was something hard and harsh about her from the very start. Like I said, I'd been told the kids were kept in a second house on the property and Alicia spent most of her time over there with them. Arthur had tried to make it sound like it was his idea when he'd told me about her, but there was

something in the tone of his voice that made me think it was *her* decision, not his. That was only reinforced when I met her, because I didn't even want to imagine what it would be like when the two of them fought. She seemed like one mean bitch who wouldn't give him an inch unless she thought she would immediately get back twice as much. She also seemed coldly calculating, like someone who knew which battles to fight and which were just lost causes.

She was dressed to the nines in modern fashion and she knew exactly how to make it work for her, completely comfortable in her outfit, unlike most of the other people I'd seen around the house. Her shoes alone probably cost more than all the clothes I'd brought with me that they burned. She was dressed in a respectable long black skirt and a puffy navy blue silk blouse with an exposed red corset on underneath it, the top portion of her shirt open to her sternum, like she enjoyed showing off. She had on simple diamond stud earrings, a golden pendant and a wedding ring, in addition to her engagement ring, the cluster of diamonds on which was terrifying in size.

“So,” she said to me, not bothering to introduce herself. “You're this stubborn filly the whole house is talking about.”

By then, even standing up was difficult, but my pride just wouldn't let me go silent, so I stood up and affected a mock curtsy, bowing my head a little.

“I have to admit,” Alicia said, moving over towards the two chairs, sitting down in the one opposite of the one I slumped back down into. “When Arthur told me he'd brought in a woman who intended to try and fight off the imprinting process, I thought you wouldn't last two days. Oh, I understand you are meant to be some hot shit athlete that the world is oh so very impressed by, but this isn't the sort of thing you've spent your life training for, now, is it? I've been willful with Arthur before, and it rarely ends well, at least not without a very good long term plan in play.” She looked me over, shaking her head. “None of that matters to you, though, does it? You are just going to carry on with your jousting at windmills...”

My voice was hoarse from having spent hours and hours shouting and screaming at the walls, but I summoned what strength I had left to put together two words. “Fuck. Off.”

Alicia smirked a little bit. “God, you're practically going insane with lust right now and yet somehow you're still putting up a fight. I admire that. Honestly, I do. I knew what kind of monster I was marrying all those years ago, but most of the girls who come through those doors, well, they are so desperate to survive this plague that they will take any lifeline they're offered. And that's how he gets them, you see.” She nodded mostly to herself, as if considering her options in her head. “You're really going to fight this to the very end, aren't you?”

My lips hurt and so rather than trying to summon another word, I just nodded.

She nodded at me again, this time in agreement. “I thought as much. Fine. I know my husband better than any woman alive, and I refuse to let him push you completely to the brink of death without any chance of survival. The deck can be stacked, but there always must be an outside chance of winning,” she sighed, seeming to consider her options for the moment. “It's not a *game* if it's impossible to *win*.”

Breathing hurt. I was mostly held up by the back of the chair, my fingers too worn to even hold onto the arms of the chair. I wasn't sure what Alicia was thinking about, but she was deep in thought for what could've been minutes or hours. At that point, I was starting to fall into delirium and madness, the lust chewing me up from the inside out.

Eventually she spoke again. “Yes. Alright. Well then, Piper Brown, here is the end of the marathon, one way or the other for you,” she said, standing up, tugging on her silk shirt, making sure it pulled tight. “Tomorrow my husband is going to come and offer you his cock. He won't be cruel or debasing – he will simply be nude and ready for you. If you can resist him then, that one final time, I will convince him to find a different man for you, someone away from here, unaffiliated with our house. You will be taken from this property and you will never again have to set foot on it if you don't wish to. It is, as they say, your *out*.”

I remember my sense of resistance, which had been on its last few embers, sparked back to life at those words. I took that single scrap of daylight and stoked it into a supernova of resistance.

“Now. I cannot guarantee that whatever man he pawns you off on won't be just as bad as him, but that's just the risk you are going to have to take. You know what *this* devil is capable of. The unknown man is unlikely to be *as* bad, but I cannot promise you that he will be what one might call *good*,” she said. “I'll convince Arthur to throw you into the pot of the poker game he's got going in a couple of nights. If you're lucky, you'll end up with Morrison or Gregor or Watkins. If not, well, at least you'll be able to take comfort in the fact that you will not be here, with him.”

She reached down and with one fingertip pushing my ratty hair out of my face and behind my ear, so she could look me directly in the eyes.

“In exchange I ask only one thing of you,” Alicia said to me. “It's a trifle and something I think you should be able to stomach. If you manage to find a new home, away from here, I want you to say nothing publicly about my husband for the next three months. The new president is going to be giving a speech within a month or so, announcing to the world exactly how high our death tolls are, and if you're going to document... all of this...” she said, gesturing at me, “then I want it to have a chance to be heard publicly. Fairly. *Loudly*. If you try and bring all this up immediately, it will get lost in the noise of the new reality. Also, I want to prepare myself and my children for the accompanying fallout, and to do that, I am going to need a few months. I feel like three will suffice. Agree to that, and resist him again tomorrow, and in two days time, you will wake up in a new home. He's got a mother-daughter combo platter coming in tomorrow, and the only reason he won't have them both immediately is that he needs to offer them as collateral so he can try and win some movie star off of Nathaniel, simply to lord the starlet over them. Three months. Are we agreed?”

She offered her hand to me, offered a way *out* to me, and I grabbed it and shook her hand, smearing some of my filth onto her immaculate skin, sealing our deal. I felt it important enough to verbalize it, and even though it hurt my throat, I croaked out the word, “Agreed.”

Alicia smiled. “I admire your refusal to go lightly into that dark night, my dear,” she said to me. “Good luck to you.” Then she headed out of the room, and I haven't seen her since.

With no windows and no clocks, there was no way to tell what time it was Alicia came to visit me on day seven, but it must have been early. Either that or the long waiting was just driving me insane. My entire body felt like it was on fire, like my blood wanted to leap out of my body and escape me. It was taking every bit of willpower I had not to be scratching at my own veins.

I think I laughed insanely for like an hour at some point towards the end of day seven, but it also might have been early on day eight. I know I didn't sleep between the time Alicia left me and when Covington came to see me the next day.

Sometime in the morning of day eight, Covington entered the room, wearing nothing at all, followed by Melody, who seemed to want to make sure nothing happened to him. Hope stood watch at the door. At that point, I don't blame them for being paranoid. I wasn't in my right mind. I wasn't thinking clearly. Shit, I might not have even been thinking *at all*. I'm sure I looked less like a woman and more like a rabid creature, feral and dangerous.

Covington didn't say anything, but walked over to the center of the room, standing proudly, looking down at me in my armchair, confidence and pity in his eyes. Standing was difficult, but I managed to get to my feet, even with my legs wobbling and unstable, like a newly born foal. Each step towards him was precarious at best, like I might fall ass end up if so much as a stiff breeze crossed my path. He lifted one hand up and sliced it in a gesture across his waist, like he was presenting a prize of a game show, his cock pointing my direction.

The look in his face made it clear he thought he'd won.

Right up until I slapped him.

I wasn't a hard slap. I was too weak for that, but I heard my hand smack on his flesh, and I saw that look of shock, embarrassment and raw fury cross his face. I wished I could've knocked his fucking

head off, but even this weak swat of my hand on his cheek was enough to make my point.

He wanted to hit me. I could see it in the fucker's eyes. But instead he reached forward, pushed his palm against my collarbone and shoved me back into the chair. "You ungrateful *whore*," he sneered at me. "Fine. I'll toss you to the fucking wolves then. I hope Jacobson takes you. Then you'll fucking learn what horror is."

It hurt like hell, but I laughed again when he and Melody stormed back out. I must have sounded like I'd gone fucking mad.

And it had wiped that smug grin off Hope's face and replaced it with one of fear.

Once they were gone, I leaned back in the chair and I passed out. I knew I'd passed the fucking test, and whatever else I thought about Alicia, I was certain she wouldn't break her word. If she had, I'd be stuck in the house with her, and she would treat every time she saw me as a horrible reminder that she'd lost to her husband, and that he'd gotten the better of her. That meant I could sleep, relax, try and regain a little bit of strength.

Of course, my dreams were far from restful. It was like a hundred years of pornography all being directly mainlined into my eyeballs, unstoppable, a firehose on full blast of erotic sights and sounds, beamed against my frontal lobe until it was occupying my every thought.

Everything was such a blur that I don't even really remember my first time with Andy. I have bits and flashes of memory, but nothing solid, nothing concrete. I think I blew him? I know Niko was there, because I remember her voice saying "She wants more," and "hit her again," which I somehow intuited meant to give me another dose of cum, and not to physically strike me. Niko told me later that the first blast of cum didn't start the imprinting process, and they've never seen that before, with anyone. I remember an intense overwhelming sensation of satisfaction and ecstasy with what I guess was my second orgasm from Andy, but it was all slightly removed, like I was apart from it, standing off to the side watching it happen to someone else.

I'm sure that there was some part of my reptile brain that evaluated to make sure Andy wasn't Covington, and as soon as it made that decision, it just decided it was go time and it wasn't going to wait, so I just took what I needed and got myself imprinted on Andy.

Niko said it was just after midnight on my tenth day at Covington manor that they pulled me out of there. I know I said nine days earlier, but what's a couple extra hours? She told me they loaded me into the car, along with Asha and her mom, and we all hauled ass, everyone wanting to get as far the fuck away from Covington as quickly as possible, not that I remember any of it. The last scrap of memory in that horrible house I have is the sensation of Andy creaming inside of me before completely succumbing to the infinite blackness of the imprinting process.

And that's the end of my time spent at Covington manor.

I survived.

What's more, my world had completely changed by the time I woke up some thirty hours later, and read the letter that changed my life. All of this happened before I even remember saying hello to Andy for the first time.

Jesus, I got *so* fucking lucky he isn't a prick.

* * * * *

Fiona rubbed her temple. "Fucking hell, death's too fucking good for Covington. Bean bag shotgun rounds? Dobermans? A bucket to piss in? Bitch tattoos? I wanna kill the bastard myself and I've never even *met* the prick. What a fucking asshole..."

"I figure there's plenty of time before your book would be done so I'll uphold my portion of the agreement with Alicia since you won't be putting this out until after then," Piper sighed. "But fuck, it feels good to have gotten it out there, to have talked about all the shit I went through in the span of just a week and change."

"I'm a little surprised he didn't just slip you some cum and imprint you on the sly," Fi said.

"To do so would've been admitting defeat," Piper laughed. "He knew I would have been able to justifiably call him a loser any time I wanted while I was there. And while you haven't met Covington yet, believe you me, there isn't anything that man hates more than losing. He's probably *still* pissed at Andy for beating him in poker."

"You want to take a break or finish up?"

"Let's take a short coffee break first and then we can finish and I can tell you about Andy's letter, the thing I haven't let be more than five feet away from me since I woke up..."

"That good, huh?"

"You know Andy better than anybody," Piper smiled. "What do you think?"

Part Five

It was starting to settle into evening while they took their coffee break. Jenny had gotten some exotic blends of coffee and the girls had learned that if they weren't specifically craving one of the things they'd already been introduced to, they should simply ask to be surprised, and would inevitably be introduced to a new thing they didn't know they already loved.

Dinner was just a few hours off, and Nicolette told them not to ruin their appetites by eating too much in advance, and both Piper and Fiona had rolled their eyes at her, assuring her that they would definitely be more than hungry enough to devour their share of dinner.

From their vantage point on the balcony, they could see Phil and his bodyguard Linda were dropping off Emily's friend, Maya, one of the final additions to the House of Rook. Fiona asked Piper if she wanted go down and introduce themselves to her, but Piper insisted they take the time to finish her story first.

"Maya's not going anywhere and we'd only be crowded her with too many faces and names all at once," Piper said. "Let her get situated in the house and spend some time talking with Emily. We'll get a chance to meet her at dinner. I want to tell you about this last part, simply to cleanse my palate from the horrible rest of it. If I leave it there, I'll only be grouchy throughout all of dinner."

"You're the storyteller, Piper," Fi said to her. "I'm just along for the ride. Where do you want to pick up? From the morning after leaving Covington's?"

* * * * *

So, yeah, like I said, my first two encounters before the imprinting process are mostly just scraps of memory, but nothing I can hold onto with any level of real detail. When I awoke the next morning, I felt sort of scrambled, but amazingly refreshed. It was the strangest thing, but I felt rejuvenated, like I'd gotten the best rest of my life. There was, like, a lingering level of bliss still hovering over my brain, almost... shit, almost like I was *high*. Like I'd been smoking pot. I don't do it very often, but the few times that I have, I've always felt massively relaxed, like all the stress just leaves my body.

It felt like that.

The room wasn't decorated at all, but I could tell I wasn't in Covington's house any more. I felt like I *should* be at least a little worried, but I wasn't, which I remember thinking was strange at the time. The haze and fog of the previous day was still too dense for me to even remember what the man I was imprinted to even *looked like*, much less what his name was.

I'd learn later that when we'd gotten back to the house a few days earlier, Niko and Ash had immediately taken me into the bathroom and hosed me down, washing me off and cleaning my hair before putting me to bed. They'd also gotten me dressed in a pair of Andy's boxers and one of his t-shirts, hoping that the scent of him nearby would put me a little more at ease.

My cellphone was plugged in, charging on top of the dresser, along with a note, addressed to me

that I decided to look at after checking in on my phone. As it turned out, I'd actually been imprinting for over a day, and woken up around as early as I normally did, the sun just starting to crest over the hill I had a great view of from my bedroom window.

My gold medal was resting on the dresser right next to the phone. I guess that Covington didn't want to fuck with it for fear of getting the IOC on his ass, or maybe Alicia had gone out of her way to keep it safe for me. I'm not really sure how it got there safely, but there it was.

The group chat the volleyball team's had going for years had blown up in my absence. Several of my teammates had been paired up with men, although a handful were still waiting for ideal matches to show up. That meant that those who'd been through the process were detailing it all to others who hadn't yet had the chance to get imprinted. Most of the girls had been allowed to keep their phones with them while they were waiting in redistribution facilities scattered across the country. A couple of them had gone radio silent while they were getting treated, but all of them had come back into the conversation a few days later, once they were at their new home.

I knew *I* was in my new home, but I didn't know where or with whom that was.

My absence in the group chat hadn't gone unnoticed, and several of my friends were worried that something had gone wrong with the imprinting process, or that I had contracted DuoHalo in transit and had died somewhere along the way. There wasn't a lot I could tell my girls yet, but I could at least assure them I was alive.

My phone told me it was 5:45 am on November 4th, which meant it had been more than two weeks since I'd left Colorado on the plane, so I completely understood why my teammates were nervous. Several of them were on the East Coast now, so when I sent a message saying that I was alive and had just landed at my new home, I immediately got several responses. I also sent a message to my parents, letting them know I was okay, and that I would give them a call later in the day, once I'd gotten my bearings a bit more. I didn't want to tell them what I'd been through. Shit, I didn't even want to think about it. I wasn't ready to actually *talk* to anyone. That's why I was looking for anything else to focus on.

The envelope with my name on it sitting next to my phone kept calling my name. The handwriting on it was messy but still legible. I didn't know it at the time, but Andy had taken quite a while writing it by hand, making sure he didn't rush, that each letter was unmistakable, the meaning and the intent impossible to read as anything other than he had intended. He told me later that he felt like seeing hand-written words would give more credibility to his message. He was right – it made it all feel that much more personal. He'd also been in quite the fragile mental state when he wrote it, although I didn't know that at the time.

I turned on a light next to the bed, picked up the envelope, tore it open, and pulled out a couple of sheets of paper, and started to read. I've been carrying the letter with me everywhere I went since I read it, so let me just take it out and read it to you word for word, although if I'm honest, I probably know the entire thing by heart at this point.

Piper,

My name is Andy Rook, and for better or worse, you and I are now bonded together. I can only hope that you will find me acceptable as a partner.

In my efforts to try and rescue some of one of my current partner's friends from the horrible bastard named Arthur Covington the 4th, I heard that you were unwillingly in his care. He described you as "more trouble than she's worth," which to my ears means you are a hell of a woman. Covington's plan was to give you as a "booby prize" to whichever man came in last in his demented little game, a consolation gift for whomever he expected was going to wash out, but I could sense that he intended that more as a punishment for you rather than trying to place you with someone whom you would find happiness with.

Covington and I do not care for one another, so through some cajoling, I convinced him to add

you to the prize pool of women who were being gambled for.

This part requires a bit of explanation, so let me try and do it simply – Covington and his friends have a regular card game, where they use women they are to be paired with as collateral to stake with for chips for the poker game.

Let me stress first and foremost that I find this sort of thing abhorrent, and wouldn't have willingly participated in such a game, but my partner Niko informed me that one of her friends was, along with her daughter, going to be sent to Covington, to be made members of his household. Before he would add them to his family, however, he was going to use them as a stake for his card game.

Niko pleaded with me to join the card game for a single night, just to rescue her friends. I was very hesitant to do this, because it meant I would be gambling with the lives of two women whom had entrusted me with their safety.

That said, I also knew exactly what kind of man Covington was, and Niko had told me that he had planned to use both her friend and her friend's daughter at the same time. Together. And would force them to engage with each other. Sexually. As troubling as it was, I knew that if I left those women to Covington's clutches, I would never forgive myself. The problem was that it meant risking the lives of two other women, each of whom had chosen me.

It was an impossible choice, but in the end, I realized that if I tried and failed, I would be losing four lives, but that this was only a possible outcome. If I did not go at all, that mother and daughter ending up with that horrible bastard Covington was a definitive outcome. Yes, it was possible that someone else could have won them, but Covington seemed to control that group like an iron fist, and I fully believe he would have manipulated the situation to get them back under his control. I would have been forced to live with my inaction, and knowing that I might have been able to do something would have haunted me my entire life. I had to try, even if it meant I lost even more than I had originally intended to. I simply chose to let that fuel my will to endure the trial before me.

I suspected that Covington might have had some additional help in his previous successes, so upon my arrival, I insisted upon two things. The first was that we rotate the dealer duty between all of the players involved, to ensure that no player was cheating. I was a little surprised that none of the other players had thought to do this, especially since the dealer was normally a member of Covington's house, and it sounded like he usually won. While Covington clearly seemed put off by the request, there was such support from the other players that he felt compelled to go along with it.

I don't know for a fact that he was cheating, but the fact that he lost and lost big on the first night where his designated dealer wasn't in play certainly implies that pretty heavily. Also, as someone who's been playing cards for a long time, he struck me as the kind of person whose tells would've been readily apparent to any decent card player after a handful of games.

The other thing I insisted upon was that you be added to the pool of women who could be selected by the winners, and not just relegated to the position of consolation prize. It wasn't met by much resistance from Covington, and I got the impression that he just wanted to be rid of you.

I'm afraid I don't really know that much about you. After we got home, I did a little bit of research on you once we got back to the house. I know you've won a gold medal, so congratulations on that. I know you were in Sports Illustrated's Swimsuit edition, after a video clip of you warming up went viral and was turned into a meme. The interview with you on Jimmy Kimmel made you seem very nice and kindhearted.

I'm not sure why Covington requested you, but Niko tells me that you were requested specifically, which implies intent. Knowing Covington, he probably heard about the meme and decided he wanted to have you in his house to rub in someone's face. He strikes me as exactly that brand of petty.

My original intent was just to get you out of Covington's house and to let you pick yourself someone to be bonded with, but the state you were in... it seemed medically dangerous to let you go any longer without being imprinted. Heh. Not that you really left me much of a choice, to be blunt. You

were very focused on getting out of the waiting room process your body had been stuck in, and you sort of overwhelmed me and forced yourself to be imprinted on me.

A little bit about myself – I'm originally from the Midwest, but moved out to California a decade and a half ago to pursue a career in the tech industry, where I'm still remote working for the time being. I also am an urban fantasy author who uses the pen name of Blake Conrad, and have written several books in a series called *The Druid Gunslinger*; which has a small but loyal following.

Before all of this, I had been single for several years, but since the pandemic started, I have been paired with several women, whom you'll meet soon enough, but let me provide the briefest of introductions to them.

Aisling Blake, commonly called Ash around the house, was the first to come into my life. She's the boisterous redhead you'll meet early on, originally from Dublin. She works as a contractor for Google doing graphic design for them. She's remarkable, about a million times outside of my league, but then again, all of my partners are. Honestly, since we were paired in June, I've been waiting for the other shoe to drop, but I only find myself falling deeper in love with her each and every day. I seem to make her happy, which is, I suppose, all I can ask

You won't be able to miss Lauren White, as she's tall enough to tower over everyone, even you. She's originally from Australia, and she's a personal trainer for the 49ers. She can be a little shy and reserved at first, but I think you and her will be able to bond over your time in professional sports. Covington destroyed all the clothes in your suitcase and left you with some, well, some unsuitable attire in the suitcase, which we've disposed of, so the clothes you'll find in your room are some of Lauren's spares, until we can get the rest of your things brought here from your home or buy you new things. He left your gold medal intact, out of fear or respect maybe, I don't know. I placed it next to your phone, and hopefully you already found it.

Lauren's ex-girlfriend Taylor showed up recently, and there's some friction between Lauren and Taylor at the moment, but I suspect the two will eventually fully patch things up and bond together closer than they have ever been. That said, Lauren's punishment for Taylor's previous infidelity (the reason they broke up) is a bit extreme by any definition of the word, and something I'm not entirely comfortable with, but Lauren insisted and Taylor agreed as a path to get back into Lauren's good graces, so who am I to tell these ladies they can't live their lives as they see fit?

My final current established partner is 2nd Lieutenant Niko Redwolf. She's half Lakota, one quarter Mexican and one quarter Japanese, and is part of the security forces for the local Air Force base that is managing the response to the DuoHalo pandemic. Ash and Niko have become best friends since they met several months ago, and the two of them take my well-being incredibly seriously, which is good, because I suppose someone should, and I've never been very good at that. Niko's a badass, and while I suspect she's keeping secrets from me, at this point I feel like the only reason she would do that is for my own good, and so I trust her with my life and my love.

Of the two women that Niko wanted me to rescue – Dr. Charlotte Varma and her daughter Asha – as it turned out Dr. Varma has never been particularly attracted to Caucasian men, so she is going to be paired with one of my oldest friends, Dr. Phil Marcos, who's Filipino. I don't want any woman to be with me simply because she feels obliged to, and we had time to find her an alternate partner. Because Charlotte felt strongly that a mother and daughter should not be imprinted on the same man, Asha is remaining with us, as one of my newest partners. As I write this, she is also in the midst of the imprinting process.

I'm a little uncomfortable about Asha, the age gap being a strong contributing factor, as I'm twenty years her senior, her being eighteen and me being thirty-eight, but Asha insisted that she wanted to be a part of this family, as she and Niko have spent time on the base discussing our household and Asha seemed quite smitten, not just with me but the household in general.

As I write this, I know that there are three more women scheduled to arrive before I anticipate you awakening from the imprinting process, but until they are here and imprinted on me, as the old

saying goes "Anything can happen," so I won't seed your mind with information about them in advance, as I simply don't know if they're actually going to show or not, or if they will be at all like they've seemed in interviews. (Two of them are quite well-known actresses.)

Of the two women I was required to "stake" as part of my entry into the poker game, one of them is going to remain in the house, and her name is Sheridan, although I know very little about her at this point, other than she used to work as an acrobat for Cirque Du Soleil, and that she chose to join our family deliberately and with relative understanding of what the household composition looked like. The other I staked was, as it turned out, my ex-girlfriend, whose name is Erin Donegal.

As antagonistic and difficult as Erin's and my split was several years ago, I do not hold enough animosity towards her to wish that she ended up with Covington, and so I was pleased to see that she went to another household instead. Regardless, even if I hadn't engaged in the poker game, I would have sent Erin back to the Air Force base and encouraged her to pair with someone else.

During the course of my relationship with her, it became readily apparent to me that Erin expected to have complete and total control over my life, and our relationship ended when she dictated to me one day that either all my friends went or she did. You can imagine how well that went over, and what my response might have been. (Spoiler: I hadn't seen her in many years since.)

I would also be remiss if I didn't mention the staff here at the house. Again, I'm compelled to tell you that the decision to have house staff wasn't mine, but I've been assured and reassured that this is entirely by their choice, and that each of them decided this was what they wanted. Nicolette is the maid (and I swear to you, I have told her again and again and again she doesn't have to wear that ridiculous outfit), Jenny is the cook and Jenny's wife Katie is the caretaker of the estate grounds.

I do have sexual relationships with all of these women, in order to reinforce my resistance to the DuoHalo virus as well as enhance theirs. This Hugh Hefner life I've been dictated to live according to the government's rules in order to ensure my survival... It's not just excessive; it's more than a little absurd. But this is what the government is mandating to us, in order to up the odds of our survival as a species, something that still very much isn't guaranteed at this point.

You may not have heard, but the fatalities of men here in the US is quite likely in the tens of millions. That's what my source told me a few hours ago anyway. The fatalities of women is maybe a tenth of that. For whatever reason, the DuoHalo virus aggressively targets the Y-chromosome and the government is basically grasping at straws to keep as many men as possible alive.

I can only apologize endlessly that you're now linked to me sexually, and will need to engage in sexual activity every ten days or so. You should have had a choice in who that was with, and it sucks that you didn't get that. As such, if you just want to avoid me entirely and have me come and drop off a bottle of semen each week, I would completely respect that. If instead you want to simply have an unemotional sexual encounter once a week and no other contact with me, that is of course your right, absolutely. And, should you want to be a regular member of the household and one of my partners, not only physically but emotionally and mentally, of course I would be more than honored by that as well. I don't want to impose the expectation on you that should choose that option, but I don't want you to feel unwanted, because you strike me as a very remarkable individual.

You gave Covington a hard time, a hard enough time that I could sense his frustration over you and used that to flare his temper even more and make him reckless with his gambling. You got under the man's skin, and I don't think he's used to women having such an impact on his self-image. For that reason alone, you must be an incredible woman, one that any man would be insanely lucky to have in his life. I don't know that you and I can make each other happy, but if you want to try, I would consider it a magnificent honor.

If you're unhappy here, however, I will make it my personal mission to keep tabs on all the research in regards to unassigning a woman to a man, or even reassigning them to another, and as soon as it's proven low-risk, I will make sure your name is at the top of the list for it. I fully believe in a woman's right to choose her own destiny, and refuse to be part of the long line of men who have

habitually tried to stamp out women's rights.

You didn't have a choice in this life, you didn't have any choice in any of this, and I can't tell you how angry that makes me on your behalf, and I want to do everything within my power to make it right, to set the scales back to even, to give you the happy ending your story so desperately deserves. I've only been around Covington a brief while, but even in that short expanse of time, he made my skin crawl, and I'm what he considers a peer. When I first met him, he wouldn't let the woman with him even speak in public. I can only imagine the horror he subjected you to, and for that, I am so sorry.

I'm not Covington. I promise you that. I know it's hard to believe me, especially after what I image you've been through. I could be anyone, and I can only imagine how frightening that is. So believe me when I tell you that if you find you don't like it here, we will do everything within our power to get you out of here and to someplace more to your liking as soon as we are physically able to do that.

Whatever you want, I won't just respect it, I will make it happen.

That also includes if you want to stay here. I like to say that I'm no catch, but I know my first partner Aisling would chide me for being unnecessarily self-effacing so I'll simply say that I strive to make sure everyone I'm partnered with is living their best life within the realm of my meager abilities. We haven't had many real arguments, and those we've had generally blow over quickly enough. I have been insanely lucky to be bonded with some of the most unforgettable women alive, and even more so that I make them at least nearly as happy as they do me.

As I've said multiple times over the course of this letter, you strike me as a very remarkable woman – intelligent, charming, gorgeous and in the best possible shape. If you want to remain here, I'd be honored to have you as my partner, and would do my best to enhance your life as much as you would feel comfortable letting me.

It's a very weird new world we find ourselves in, and while I can't promise I won't make mistakes, I can promise that I will spend my entire life trying to make sure everyone in it is as happy as I can make them, placing their needs above my own as much as I'm allowed to.

(It's probably important for me to stress that the physical health of all my partners is dependent on my own, a monumental responsibility that I cannot afford to take lightly, so I still need to make sure I'm not being so selfless that I'm accidentally putting everyone at risk.)

None of this is a decision you have to make right now, and whatever decision you make, you can obviously change your mind again at any time. Whatever you choose, I will back you 100% and will make sure the rest of the house does as well.

While you're thinking it all over, just be open about your needs and wants, and we'll make sure we're doing our best to accommodate them. If you want faceless detached sexual encounters just to ensure you're not biologically losing your self-control, we will do that. If you want romantic, intimate sexual encounters with an emotional connection, well, we can try and do that as well. I can't promise an immediate emotional bond, but I'd like the opportunity to try and make you happy, which is all anyone can ask of me.

Different partners have different sexual tastes, and I like to think of myself as at least somewhat adaptable to come close to satisfying those needs. Aisling loves dirty talk. Lauren loves intensity. Niko loves variety and novelty. Taylor loves being submissive and forced.

I like to think of myself as a man of all seasons, and pretty flexible sexually. (I suppose you could be into pegging or scatophilia, as unlikely as that is, both of which I'm going to take a hard pass on, on the off-chance that you are, but just about anything else we can probably make work.)

Take some time and consider your options. Call your family and friends and let them know where you are, and that you're okay. Do this immediately, if you haven't already done so. I just lost my only brother, so you never know how much time you have left. You will only regret not calling them the longer you wait. Think about what you want from here, from me. Whenever you're ready, explore the house. Meet the people here. See what you think.

I don't even recognize the world we live in anymore, so I'm just doing my best to survive and take care of my new, weird and wonderful family. Decide if and how you want to be a part of that, and we'll welcome you with open arms however you want us to.

The town you're in is called New Eden, and it's just west of San Ramon, up in the wooded hills. It probably won't be on any maps, because it literally didn't exist a year ago. Once you're comfortable and settled a little bit, I'll happily give you the grand tour, and we can reach out to the Air Force about getting the rest of your stuff delivered here.

I hope all of this helps. I probably didn't think of something, and for that, I'm sorry. I haven't been through what you've been through – I doubt almost anyone has – but whatever you need, I want to give that to you.

All I want to do is make you happy.

I hope I'll be able to do that.

*Your humble servant,
Andy Rook*

I didn't just read that letter once. I've read it pretty much two or three times a day since I got it, so that's, what, at least thirty or forty times over the last two weeks, since I got here. I had read it at least three or four times before Andy came into my room that morning.

It was strange, but I remember around the third time I was reading the letter that morning, a scent that had been lingering in the back of my nostrils. It was warm, like vanilla, but also a little bit rough, like worn leather. There was something marvelous about it, but I didn't know what it was, just that I sort of knew that I loved the smell of it, whatever it was. And I realized it was starting to get closer, and I think around that point, I knew it was a man.

I knew it was *my* man.

"I didn't want you just to awaken in a strange home without some idea of what was going on," Andy said to me, waiting in the doorway, like he didn't want to impose on me by walking into the room. "You were so out of it that—"

I remember charging at him, and I know I was crying, but I wasn't sad or angry. I was thankful that he'd saved me, taken me out of that nightmare I'd been trapped in for over a week. "Thank you for rescuing me from that bastard," I remember telling him. "I woke up a couple of hours ago and have mostly just been reading and rereading this letter you left me."

"I'm sorry we had to meet this way, but here we are," Andy told me. He looked so taken aback, so nervous that I was going to be angry at him. I realized, as he'd said in his letter, he didn't know what I was thinking or feeling, so I decided to put him at ease.

I leaned down and kissed him, holding his head in my hands so he'd know it wasn't being done out of pity, but out of affection. Just from his letter, I knew Andy was a good man. I mean, he'd even said in his letter that if I didn't want to be here, he'd do everything possible to get me to where I wanted to go. That was a whole lot to commit to for a person he'd never even spoken to. The weight of that was still hanging on me when I tried to speak again. "It's... it's all a lot to take in," I told him. "I don't have to make a decision now, do I?"

He was nothing but compassionate with me, and offered me a warm, comforting smile that quickly put me more at ease. "You've got plenty of time to figure out what you want to do here, and how you want to engage with me and the rest of the household. How are you feeling? People aren't supposed to wait that long to get imprinted, so we were a little worried there might be unforeseen complications."

"Not that I noticed?" I said quietly to him. "Although there's one thing..."

"If there's a problem, definitely let me know and I can call my friend at the base. We can have some of the doctors check you out."

“It's not a problem so much as just a weird thing...” I told him. He was right next to me now, and *he* was that weird intoxicating blend of vanilla and leather. It was him that had that luscious scent. “I could... I could smell you? Coming down the hall? Like, I knew it was you, because the smell made me feel warm and tingly inside. Like, a little buzzed, in a good way. But it kinda makes it hard to think clearly? Maybe it'll pass. But I feel a definite connection to you, like I'm safe around you? I don't even know you, but I feel safe. How weird is that?”

He shrugged a bit at me, I think trying to put my nerves at rest. I could smell that he was nervous and more than a little turned on. It was cute. “It might just be some part of the imprinting process that's functioning on a deeper level because of what you went through. I don't know. One of the doctors who's responsible for developing the process is now the partner of a friend of mine, so we'll have her check you out.”

“Is it okay if we wait a few days before we fuck again?” I asked. I wanted to do him right then and there, but I somehow felt like I needed to get my bearings, to get my feet firmly back on the ground. “I know I have to do it regularly, but I want a few days to clear my head, if that's cool.”

Andy reached up and tilted my head down so he could kiss me on the forehead. It was weird, but I think he meant it to be comforting and to show he wasn't going to push me to do anything, which was odd, considering I'd just kissed him on my own. “You have at least a week before you'll feel any real need for my cum, and if you're still not ready by then, you can just blow me, or have one of the girls jerk me off into your mouth. Whatever's easiest for you.”

“Oh, I'm ready to fuck you right now,” I told him. I needed him to know I wasn't thinking about leaving. I wanted to strip off those clothes and have a go at him right then and there, but I needed to make sure it wasn't something that would be fleeting. “Maybe it's just the process, but I was ready to fuck you the second I smelled you walking down the hallway, but I want a few more days so I'm not in so much of a daze the first time we fuck. Well, the first time that we fuck that I remember. Your letter makes me sound like I was quite a handful the night you rescued me.”

I swear to you, he turned bright red and couldn't look me in the eye. It was adorable, and that confirmed everything his letter had told me. This was a good man, and in the face of an impossible decision, he'd just rolled up his sleeves and did the best that he could to survive and prosper against staggering odds. “Yeah, you can ask Niko about it, but you basically just pinned me down, climbed on top of me and rode me like I was an oversized sex toy.”

I'm pretty sure I blushed myself when I giggled, trying to imagine it. He didn't make it sound like a bad thing, but I had to focus my head and not start imagining it, otherwise I wasn't going to let him out of the room. I'm telling you, Fi, I wanted to throw him over my shoulder, put him on his back on the bed, rip his clothes off him and just bounce on him like a pogo stick. “Well, I'm sorry about that, I guess, but, not gonna lie, it also sounds fucking hot. I'll talk to Niko about it. So is this my room for good then?”

“If you want it to be, or you can move into the master bedroom as well, if you want. And you don't have to do just one or the other. You can have this as your personal room, but sleep in the main bedroom any time you want.”

Even with Andy giving me the option, I sort of knew that I wasn't going to be in this room long. Whatever Covington had planned for me, it hadn't been me ending up with someone like Andy, someone who was doing everything in his power to give *me* all the power in the situation, to put me at ease. Andy wanted me to know how in control I was, as if he could sense how important it was for me to reclaim a sense of that in that moment. After a week where everything had gone wrong, Andy did *everything* right. “Okay, I'll sleep here for the next few days while I'm sorting my head out. I need to call my friends and family and explain what's happened and where I'm at. Is that okay?”

He hugged me again then pulled away, even though I didn't want him to. I think I could've just folded those arms around me and crawled into bed again, feeling safe and protected. “Absolutely. Do whatever you need to. The letter included a list of everyone who's in the house right now and a short

description of them. If you need help finding something, feel free to ask Nicolette. If you're hungry, just tell Jenny what you want and she'll whip something up for you."

I was torn because I could feel my stomach rumbling, but I also needed to call my Mom and Dad, let them know what had happened. I remember deciding that I would make up my mind once Andy had left the room, because his very presence made it a little hard to think about anything other than sex. "Thank you again, Andy. I have a feeling I'm going to be saying that a lot in my life moving forward."

"Call your family. We can talk more later."

As much as I wanted to get something to eat, I needed to tell my folks I was okay. The same with my teammates. So for the next couple of hours, I was on the phone, letting everyone in my life know where I'd landed, but after about two hours, I just had to eat, so I went and got some food from the kitchen, which Jenny prepared for me, despite me offering to just make stuff myself.

While she was cooking, I got a chance to talk to her without anyone else around, and asked her if Andy really was the kind of man he seemed to be. "How does he seem to be?" she asked me, a soft smile on her face while she was stirring the pasta in the water. She'd decided I needed carbs to recover some of my lost energy, so she was making me chicken fettuccine alfredo.

"He seems too good to be true," I told her, sitting on a stool. "You're not his partner, so give me the God's honest truth."

"Oh, he *is* too good to be true, but as far as I can tell, he's true as a man can get," she said with a knowing look. "Let me tell you this. When we got here, my partner Katie and I were both pretending to be bisexual, even though she's a strict lesbian. We both thought Andy was going to flip, but he was so relentlessly understanding that Katie and I kept waiting for the other shoe to drop, to find out what horrible dark secret this seemingly nice and kind man was hiding. It took a while, but we found it out eventually, what his weakness is."

I remember being a little nervous at that, but decided to follow up. "Which is?"

"He's *too nice*," Jenny laughed. "He's too trusting, too naive and maybe too optimistic about what people are capable of. He's always looking to find the best in people. I think that's why it's good he's got Niko in his life, making sure he doesn't get in over his head."

"He was really cool with Katie not being attracted to him?" I remember asking.

"He actually seemed bothered by the fact that he couldn't just let us be with each other exclusively, but he's done as much as humanly possible to make it work for us, all the while being respectful of our feelings. And despite the fact that we've tried to insist upon a level of removal, so that the household thinks of us as servants rather than family, he's made sure that we never get lost amid the shuffle, and that if something's going to affect the house, he checks with us," she said, an amused exasperation to her voice. "We're going to keep trying to make sure he doesn't get too emotionally attached to us, but I think it's a lost cause, and I suppose we'll just have to make peace with it. To be honest, I've never had a boss like him before ever in my life."

Just as she was putting the pasta on the plate, Niko walked into the room, a big grin on her face before she even noticed me, but once she did, she offered me a little wave. She reminded me immediately of one of my teammates in that she just exuded confidence and swagger. I knew I liked her on sight. "Hey Piper, I'm Niko," she said to me. "You probably don't remember us meeting, since you seemed pretty in the grip of the serum's siren call, but it's nice to see you up and about. Feeling more like yourself?"

I ran over and hugged her hard, and I remember her squeaking a little when I did, the whole gesture catching her off guard. "Thank you so much for getting me out of that bastard's house," I told her, trying not to cry again. "I know you didn't make Andy enter the game to get *me* out specifically, but if you hadn't done that, I would've probably been with some other asshole who didn't give a shit about me. That means I owe you, so you and me, we're going to be good friends, okay?"

"Okay?" Niko laughed. "If it means you'll stop crushing me?"

I started laughing a little bit, wiping moisture from my eyes as I let her go. “Just for now,” I told her. “Because you and me share a man now, so I want to be sure we're cool.”

“Relax,” Niko giggled. “We're cool. Welcome to the family!”

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“Since then, the last two weeks have been one rollercoaster ride after another,” Piper told Fiona, stretching her arms out over her head. “It's been wild. I hadn't even realized that just before he wrote me that letter, Andy had learned his brother had died. He mentioned that his brother had just died, but I had assumed he'd found out, like, weeks or months ago, not, literally, a few *hours* earlier. Even with all that grief overwhelming him, he still wanted to make sure I was okay first and foremost. He really does need us to look after him as much as he does us. Anyway, a couple of days after that, Andy went through a process where he let us all pitch women to bring into the house, and while he didn't add my friend Brooke to the house here, he still found a way to get her nearby, so I'm going to have my bestie just a few minutes drive away.”

“That's Andy for you,” Fiona replied, a knowing smile on her face. “Hopefully you've learned in that time that Andy really is who he seems to be – a good, if somewhat too trusting man with one of the most noble of hearts, willing to fight off the armies of Heaven and Hell to keep those he loves safe, no matter the cost to himself.”

“You think he loves me?” Piper asked her.

“I do,” Fiona said with a confidence that seemed unshakable. “I heard you and he and Sarah had a bit of fun last night.”

Piper giggled, suddenly holding her hands up to her face, blushing feverishly, shaking her head in embarrassment. “OhmyfuckingGAWD, who else knows in the house?”

“By this point? Considering how talkative Sarah is? Probably everyone,” Fiona laughed. “Not that there's anything wrong with that. Sarah said you told Andy you wanted to bear his child, though. That true?”

She tilted her head a little, looking carefully at Fiona, a question on her lips. “It is. That going to be a problem?”

“Nope,” Fi said with a smug grin, “I'm just trying to get a read on who's going to be in this big marriage ceremony we're going to have next year. Apparently Andy's already engaged to Aisling, Niko, Sarah *and* Emily, but he hadn't thought to ask me yet, nor you.”

“Well, of course I'm going to marry him,” Piper laughed, rolling her eyes. “Just like you and Moira are going to, obviously. I'm just waiting for him to ask.” She paused, narrowing her eyes a little. “Wait, do you think Andy *still* thinks he needs to find a way for me to get reassigned?” Her mouth was nearly hanging open. “Even after everything? He isn't concrete in how I feel for him?”

“Andy's one other weakness is his low self-esteem, Piper,” Fiona told her. “He's always going to think you can do better than him.”

“Good lord,” Piper sighed with a resigned smile. “I'll make sure I put that notion to bed quick at dinner tonight or tomorrow night, and I won't be subtle about it, so it sinks in, even though he really should know better already. My parents absolutely adore him. My dad talked to him on the phone for like half an hour, trying to get the lay of the land what his own life was going to look like, since my mom's apparently going to have to share Dad soon. It'll be weird having parents plus a handful of after market add on stepmoms, but that's the world we're in now, I guess. God, you think they're going to try and have kids again?” She shuddered, which made Fiona laugh.

“Based on your age, I'm guessing they're in their 50s or 60s?”

“Yeah, and I'm an only child.”

“Then it's mostly just for your Dad's survival at this point. Your dad liked him, though?”

“Said he seemed like a pretty remarkable man doing the best to keep his head above water in a

rather chaotic world,” Piper told her. “I mean, Dad's also a massive fan of the Daggerfall Academy movies, and Em in particular, so he said my life seems like it's turned pretty great since my escape, although I had to make him promise not to try and hurt Covington whenever he comes out here.”

“I've made no such promise myself,” Fiona said coldly. “So let's hope Convington steers clear of both you and me.” She glanced down at her watch. “We should get down to dinner, before they start without us. Thanks for sharing all this with me, and I'm sorry for what you had to go through to get here, but I'm really glad you're here.” The two women stood up and hugged each other closely. “And if you ever want to dabble with women, you know where to find me.”

Piper burst out laughing at that, shaking her head. “Emily's going to be the real test. I mean, I'm, like, *almost entirely* sure I'm straight, but if she blinks those blue eyes at me enough times...” She laughed. “I'm only fucking human, Fi.”

“Oh I hear you,” Fiona chuckled. “I can't wait to hear that British lilt moaning as I'm running my tongue on her clit, that oh so refined voice begging me to stop or keep going, completely lost as to what to do.” She winked. “I'll make you the same offer.”

“I'll keep it in mind,” Piper said. “Let's get moving.”

“For what it's worth,” Fiona said. “I fully suspect karma will come back and bite Covington hard in the ass sooner or later.”

“God I hope so.”

It turned out to be sooner, and sooner than either Piper or Fiona could've suspected.

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