

## Chapter 24

As it turned out, the news that Andy had some control in who he was paired up with had completely upended the house, much to his annoyance. He couldn't be that mad at the girls, but it was still messing with the tranquil energy he'd been trying to cultivate to get through the pandemic and all of its complications.

When Hannah had asked if she could have some time to think about it, she had mentioned that Andy could request people to the rest of the girls, and suddenly there had been a rush on coming to him, asking if he would consider inviting someone they thought he might like to join the household.

Andy had immediately made sure not to make any promises to anyone, which was the best possible decision he could have made for himself. Within 24 hours, Andy had been forced to come up with a system to try and manage it all.

There were five more slots at the dinner table, and Andy had decided that was some kind of sign, so he would only take five more girls into the family. Ash told him straight away that she didn't have any real friends or family she wanted to bring in, so she volunteered to help manage the process a bit, not doing any of the decision making, but more of guiding the girls to get their pitches in order, and weed out anyone who would be an obvious mismatch for the family. It was lucky for him that she was from Ireland, because Ash turned out to be the \*only\* one who didn't have ideas on who should fill those last slots. Every other member of the house had at least one girl they wanted to suggest to him. Some wanted to pitch him several people, so with Ash's help, he set down some guidelines on how to go about the process of filling out the remaining spaces in the house.

One of Ash's first things to insist upon, however, was that Andy only take a total of four girls from the family's suggestions, not five, and that one girl, one \*single\* girl out of the entire family, should be completely and totally his idea, without any outside suggestion or influence.

He'd originally laughed at that, pointing out that none of the girls so far had been anything less than magnificent and he really hadn't lifted a finger in deciding who they were, but Ash was adamant that Andy make one solitary selection of his own choosing to add to the family. After going back and forth about it in his head, Ash (with the help of both Niko and Emily, who both reinforced the idea to him multiple times over the course of the day) had convinced him that he would carve one slot out for himself. He still wasn't sure who that would be, but it was swirling around in his mind. He would make that decision after he'd done all of his selections from the girls' candidates.

The second thing Ash had asked Andy to check on was if the house staff had anyone they thought they wanted to bring on, not to join the family, but as additional house staff. Andy had suspected it would be more of a formality, and that none of the three members of the staff would want to bring anyone else into Andy's service, but as it turned out, each of the staff had multiple ideas about who might be excellent additions to the Rook household staff team without being good additions to the family, so Andy had agreed to let each of the staff members make a pitch for one person as well, but only in staff positions, which meant they needed to offer some skill or trade that the house could use. Because they wouldn't count towards his total, he also agreed there wouldn't be a minimum or maximum number of girls he would take from the staff's pitch, but stressed that each staff member, like each of the girls from the family, could only pitch one person, no more, so they should make them count. That meant another zero to three women in the house.

The third and final thing that Ash stressed, which Andy absolutely agreed with, was that it needed to be done quickly. Chaos loomed large on the near horizon, and the longer he waited, the more complicated it was going to get. Phil had called Andy to let him know that the announcement was now scheduled for Nov. 20<sup>th</sup>, and that from that day onward, nothing would be reliable for anyone anywhere. The system might well crack, so it would be best if he had all his ducks in a row beforehand, Phil

stressed, and when Phil took the time to repeat himself, Andy made damn sure to listen twice as hard.

It took about a week to get someone from request to arrival, Phil had also explained to Andy, which meant that the absolute latest he could get his requests in by was Nov. 12<sup>th</sup>, but he also stressed the earlier the better, and so Andy had personally set the 10<sup>th</sup> as the deadline for his decision, which meant that Monday, November 9<sup>th</sup>, would be the day all the girls could make their pitches.

That gave all the girls just 48 hours to organize their thoughts and make a good pitch, first to Ash, then to Andy himself. Pitches were allowed to be no longer than ten minutes, and should cover not only the reasons that the girl wanted him to bring her in, but also why she thought that the girl would be compatible with both Andy and the rest of the family. Ash also wanted to make sure that the pitches also included any possible problems or complications that might come with the person's addition to the house. Ash stressed to each of the girls that they should do their homework before their pitches. Nobody wanted a repeat of the stress Erin had temporarily brought to the house.

Above all, Aisling stressed to the girls that nobody should be upset or angry with Andy's ultimate decisions. Nine girls, four slots. That was going to mean a lot of disappointed people, so Ash wanted to set all their expectations properly. Decisions were going to be hard, but Andy had also made his mind up to not consider any decisions final until he'd heard all twelve pitches.

He'd give himself the night to sleep on the pitches before making any final decisions.

And Andy also insisted that those he did choose would be extended invitations, not just blindly brought in, so the girls were told to prepare a letter to their friends, extolling the virtues of being part of the Rook household, as they say fit.

Andy fully expected many of the people they eventually invited to say no, but that was the pessimist in him.

Saturday and Sunday, he'd mostly gotten to work on the next Druid Guslinger novel undisturbed, as the girls had mostly spent their time developing their pitches. Every so often, he would poke his head out and check on everyone, making sure that nobody was getting angry with one another, but to his delight, not only were the girls not fighting, they were actually working together in some cases, trying to help each other polish up their pitches. The process was bringing them together, not pushing them apart, and that let Andy relax just a little more.

Saturday night at dinner, none of the girls had talked about their pitches, thankfully, which let everyone spend some time getting to know each other a bit better. Andy had noticed that the girls had sort of gravitated into groups: Ash, Niko, Emily and Sarah; Lauren, Taylor, Piper and Sheridan; Asha and Hannah.

The two younger girls got along like a house on fire, and once Hannah had gotten past her initial starstruck impressions with Emily and Sarah, she and Asha had mostly stuck to each other, although they'd drifted in and out of all of the rest of the conversations.

Piper and Lauren both had high end athletic experience, so they'd immediately connected, and Sheridan, while of a different stripe of athleticism, had piggy backed on that. Taylor's punishment was still in effect, but Lauren was allowing the girl to talk with the others so that she was establishing friendships. Taylor mostly kept with Lauren, but also seemed to get along very well with the other two younger girls, as she was closer to their ages than the others. Andy suspected that once Taylor's punishment was over that she would divvy her time evenly between Lauren, Asha and Hannah.

Ash, Niko, Emily and Sarah had formed some sort of group hive mind, and did their best to keep Andy's attention off both the upcoming decisions and the loss of his brother. Sarah had finished the most recent Druid Gunslinger book before coming to bed Friday night, and when she'd finally gotten into bed, her first and only question had been "How long before the next one?" Andy's response of "when it's ready" had made her whine a little, but she'd also agreed to be patient and wait until he had a draft he was happy with.

Andy's one break from writing had been to call his contact over at Working Title, to discuss how they wanted to handle the first draft of the screenplay of "Neon Stonehenge," the first Druid Gunslinger

novel. As much as Andy wanted to take a crack at it, he was forced to admit he wasn't a screenwriter, so the decision was made to let another writer do the lion's share of the work and Andy would simply provide notes.

With Sarah Washington attached as Layla Heartseye, the Elven barbarian queen, and Emily Stevens attached as Charlotte Sexton, the titular Gunslinger's sister, meant that they weren't just greenlighting the project, they were fast tracking it. Talks were already underway with Christian Kane to take on the lead role.

At dinner, the minute Sarah had started to try and prod him for details about the next one, Emily and Niko had steered her away from it, telling her it would be much better to let him finish the book before she knew a thing about it, which definitely relieved Andy. Eric had usually asked to read the manuscript in quarters, but Andy was still not yet at the 3/4ths mark to show his friend, something Eric had been alright with as he had been a little overwhelmed with all the women moving into his own house.

Some part of Andy had wondered if it was even worth the effort to finish the next book, knowing so many of his readers had probably died in the plague, but the minute he'd been mulling on that, Eric had reminded Andy that he'd once claimed that as long as there were any readers asking for sequels, he'd keep writing them. Eric had called Sunday night after Andy had finished for the day, just to touch base. He'd told Andy he would've come over, but that he'd had a few too many drinks to drive himself over.

Eric's house now stood with seven women in it, and Andy had agreed that he would try to learn all of their names eventually, just as Eric did for Andy's household, although both of them agreed that the task would definitely take some time. The two men and Phil had all planned to meet up for dinner on Thursday, as they usually did. It was good to keep a routine.

Also on that Sunday, Ash had commandeered the pool house, giving each girl the chance to pitch to her twice, once in the midday and then again in the evening, allowing them to improve and refine upon their pitch.

That had kept the entire house occupied, and allowed Andy to spend all of his time writing, although he did make an exception for lunch, when he'd tended to Jenny and Katie's needs. In a move that had surprised him, Jenny had insisted Katie ride his cock until he came inside of her, then sucked her share out of her partner's pussy afterwards. It had proven an excellent test, and Katie had still gotten her fix out of the experience. She'd described it to Andy as "filthy in the best possible way."

Other than that, Andy went two days without engaging in any sex, a sort of chance to recharge his batteries. He suspected he might have a bit on Monday, but also acknowledged to himself that he was going to be booked wall to wall with the meetings, hearing the girls pitches, so it might even be a third day off from sex.

Monday morning he awoke in bed alone, an absence he definitely noted, but it let him get his morning workout in, followed by a shower. After he got out of the shower, when he went to get dressed, he found a printed schedule of his day on top of his dresser.

10-11: Asha, Emily, Hannah, Jenny

11-12: Katie, Lauren, Nicolette, Niko

12-1: Lunch

1-2: Piper, Sarah, Sheridan, Taylor

2-3: debrief with Aisling

Ash had decided to just organize the girl's pitches in alphabetical order, so that Andy wouldn't see any prejudice on her part. On the schedule, there was also a map of the house's lower level, a room marked with an X and a note from Ash that read simply "See you there!"

The house was the quietest it had ever been, even his two cats seeming a little perplexed at the lack of people moving around. Andy wandered down to the marked room at about fifteen minutes to 10, finding Aisling already in the room, which had been set up as a little conference room, a large

television on the wall doubling as a computer monitor. On the screen was a black screen with the words "Project Pair Up" in friendly white lettering.

"Hey love," she said to him with a smile. She was dressed in professional looking attire, the most dressed up he'd ever seen her. With the quarantine, everyone had been completely casual, and Andy suddenly felt wildly underdressed, wearing just a pair of jeans and an old, faded Jesus Jones t-shirt. She saw his look and immediately grabbed his arm. "Relax. You're the one everyone's pitching to, so you're allowed to dress however you like. It's good to be the king," she giggled.

"You've heard all the pitches already, Ash," he said to her, as she led him to the head of the table, making him sit down. "Anything truly shocking?"

"I told you I wasn't going to make decisions for you, babe, so you'll just have to wait and see."

"I wasn't asking you to make a decision, Ash," Andy laughed, "simply whether or not you thought this was a good idea or not."

"Oh, aye," she nodded. "There's some truly remarkable women up on offer for you today, and I'm certain there will be some hard decisions in your future, in more ways than one. A few dodgy ones too, by my reckoning, but I'm not the final say in the matter, am I?" She moved to sit down next to him, at his right hand spot, the television screen on the wall opposite him. "There are pros and cons to all of them. But all the girls have agreed nobody will be upset at you, no matter what you decide."

"And you think they're all going to hold to that?"

"I told them if they couldn't then they shouldn't bother pitching anyone at all. That sort of got them in line."

Andy nodded sagely. "Where are they?"

"Everyone's hanging out in the pool house right now, and they'll come up when we text them, one at a time, so if anyone runs short, or needs to run long, nobody will get interrupted."

"Okay then, let's get to it, I suppose."

Ash nodded, and then picked up her iPhone from the table, sending Asha a text to come to the room. A few minutes later, the half Indian half French girl strolled into the room in a powder blue power suit, her hair done up in a bun, wearing bright red 1950s librarian glasses. "Thanks for letting us pitch to ye, Andy," she said, moving to sit down on the chair at the opposite end of the table from him. "Going first is a bit of a pisser, but I s'pose I'll set the bar high for the lot of'em."

She picked up the little remote from the table and clicked it, as the monitor behind her sprung to life, an image of a bright, bubbly blonde girl appearing on it. "This is Olivia Shoemaker, my bestie from me London days. Now I know what you're thinkin', that she's young, and you're nervous or whateva about bringin' too many young birds into the house. But Livvy's a doll. She's a student down at UCSD, so she could just transfer up here and go to UCSF or Berkeley or Stanford or whateva." Asha clicked the button and the screen advanced, showing Olivia in a colorful yellow sundress, standing on the Santa Monica pier. "She's also a right big social media influencer, with half a million followers on Insta and about as many on TikTok. They were tryin' to get her to appear on Love Island back home, but she said she wanted to wait until she was a bit older for that. She's 19, she's fit and she's a babe. We've been friends since we was toddlers, an' I know she'd likely fall for you like I have."

"What's she going to school for?" Andy asked.

"She's undecided right now, but she's thinking she might get into international finance. Banking, stocks, that lot. She changes her mind about that all the time, though, so who knows where she'll end up. Girl's got a mind that goes a kilometer a minute, you ask me."

"You think I'd be her type?" Andy asked, a touch of doubt in his voice. "I have trouble imagining someone like her being satisfied with someone older like me. I'm not particularly social media savvy, and she looks like the kind of girl who would take one look at me and think 'old man.' And that's no judgment on her – I'm just saying, you want to make sure this is someone who you think is going to be happy here, and with me. Simply because I \*can\* request anyone I want to doesn't mean that I necessarily \*should\*."

“She and I have been friends since we were wee high, so if I tell her she'll like you, she'll trust me on tha', and once she gets to know you, she'll fall for you like e'eryone does, Daddy.”

He still wasn't entirely comfortable with her calling him that, but he'd learned that telling Asha no just made her do the thing twice as much, so he was hoping she'd get it out of her system eventually.

“And part of the pitch process was also you identifying what the challenges might be if I were to extend her an invite to our family. So what do you think those would be?”

“Um,” Asha said, looking down at the table a moment. “I'm not gonna lie ta ye, Andy. She can be a mite tad possessive. Her last relationship imploded because her boyfriend gave another girl a ride home after a party, and she thought he'd cheated on her.”

Andy winced a little bit. That struck him as more than a challenge. “So you think that's not going to be a problem here, where she has to share me with all of these other women?”

“She'll get over it!” Asha pouted. “She just needs to be shown that not all men are lads, and that she doesn't have to have someone's complete attention all the time to get by in the world.”

“Do you know what she likes and dislikes sexually?” Ash asked her, cutting straight to the point. “Are you sure she's compatible with Andy?”

“She's a bit more reserved than I am,” Asha sighed. “More reserved than she oughta be, you ask me, but I don't like the idea of her just fallin' in with some bloke who won't do right by her. She deserves better'n that. The prude walls hafta come down sooner or later.”

“But do you think she and I would make each other happy?” Andy asked.

“I'd like to think so, Andy,” Asha said, “but I'm no' sure one way or the other. I'm just tryin' to look out for her.”

“Okay, Asha. You're the first one we've talked to today, so obviously we have a lot more pitches to hear, so we'll keep your friend in mind.”

Asha nodded, standing up again. “An' if you decide she's not for you, Andy, I'd understand, but, y'know, maybe pass her on to one of your friends around the town as a thought? It'd just be nice to have one of me mates around here.”

Andy smiled. “I'll see what I can do.”

Asha walked over, leaned down and gave Andy a soft kiss. “Thanks, Da. I'll see you at dinner, yeah?” Before Andy could answer, Asha was already heading out the door, closing it behind her. Aisling pushed the button and the screen moved to a simple black background with “next: Emily” in white letters on it in a classy font.

He turned to look at Aisling, not entirely sure what to say, which made Ash giggle. “They're all very different, Andy, so you'll just have to decide for yourself.” She sent a text message on her phone to Emily, letting her know to start heading to the conference room.

“An influencer, though?” Andy said, rolling his eyes. “I still don't get how anyone can think that's a real job.” He sighed, seeing the smirk on Ash's face. “I think it's more likely that I'll recommend her over to Eric or Phil, but I'll try to keep an open mind.”

“That's all anyone's asking, love.”

“Emily's pitch isn't also for a social media influencer, is it?” he asked, caution plain on his face.

“Olivia was the only one, silly, so you can relax.” He nodded, hearing a knock at the door. “C'mon in, Ems!”

Emily entered the room, and it seemed as though all the girls were going to be in their best professional wear today. She had a modest dress than hung nearly to her ankles and a bright red silk blouse that was almost entirely buttoned up. She looked like was planning to meet the head of some movie studio more than simply talking to Andy and Aisling. She gave a warm, impish little smile and wave, then pulled the door closed behind her. “Hey love. Ash. This is so exciting!” she giggled. “How did Asha do?”

Andy was about to say something when Ash put her hand on his wrist to quiet him. “He's not going to talk about any of the pitches to anyone other than me until he's heard them all, Ems, so I don't

know why you're asking.”

The blonde Brit giggled again, flashing a little wink. “I asked because I almost got him to spill the goss.” Emily moved to sit down in the pitcher's chair, and picked up the remote. “But it's fine, it's fine. Andy darling, let me present to you Summer Steele.”

She clicked on the remote and the screen behind her flickered and turned into an image of a woman in her late 30s sitting behind a camera, clearly on a set somewhere. Summer was fit, although not overly muscular, with hair a deep dark brown, like a freshly cut walnut tree. Her nose was slightly crooked, like it had been broken and reset at least once. Her skin had a natural tan to it. Andy suspected her heritage was either Jewish or Palestinian. She looked focused on whatever she was working on. She was certainly lovely, but also had a tough, street fighter kind of vibe to her. She was dressed in leather pants and a leather jacket over some kind of t-shirt, as she peered at the camera's monitor.

“Her real first name is Maya, but professionally she's been Summer Steele for nearly a decade now. I think you can call her either.”

Click. The image turned to show the woman on set of one of the Daggerfall Academy movies with Emily, one of the later ones clearly, judging by Emily's age in the picture. It looked as though Maya was teaching Emily some moves for an upcoming scene.

“We first met when she was the stunt coordinator and 2<sup>nd</sup> AD for 'Power Taken: Daggerfall Academy IV.' We've been friends since then, but she's gone on to direct episodes of all sorts of shows: 'The Last Garrison,' 'Everyone Dies At Midnight,' 'Uprising From Below,' and even a couple for Disney+, although she obviously can't tell me about any of those.”

Click. The image shifted and was replaced by an image of current Hollywood it guy Scotty Jansen with his arm around her, as she sipped from a beer, probably at some afterparty in the Hollywood hills. “She was with Scott Jansen up until January of this year when they split after Scotty got drunk and put his foot in his mouth one too many times. There were lots of reasons they were never going to work out, but this was the final straw.”

Click. A new image appeared, with Maya in between Sarah and Emily, the three women clearly out for a night on the town, although based on the buildings behind them, Andy would've guessed they were somewhere in central Europe. “So, she knows Sarah and I rather well, and we can both vouch that under her occasionally crass veneer, she's a sweetheart with a kind spirit. Many of the things some lesser men would find turnoffs – her tendency to drink and swear, her sometimes lacking sense of tact, her habit of acting first and thinking later – those are all things you like in a woman, so that's delightful.”

“Well, as long as she isn't sloshingly drunk all the time, Emily,” Andy said. “I don't want to bring in a dangerous alcoholic we're going to need to check into rehab all the time.”

Emily flapped a hand dismissively in his direction. “Nothing so coarse, my love. While she can attack a bottle with a gusto I've yet to see rivaled, she does keep those benders to a manageable number, and never lets them affect the rest of her life.”

“Alright, carry on.”

“She likes the same kind of sex you do, Andy – she's a talker, and she enjoys both the softer and harder sides of it. She's very professional and you've made a point to tell all of us that if we want to continue working and chasing our dreams, we should do it, something she would very much appreciate, as she's certainly making headway. She directed her first film last year, 'The Secret In The Shadows,' and while it didn't win any awards, it came in under budget and over-performed expectations by a sizable amount, so she's in talks to do another movie after the pandemic has passed.”

“Where's she from?” Ash asked her.

Click. Andy suspected this was the most recent photo of the woman, and she'd undergone a drastic haircut. The left side of her head was shorn down to almost a buzz, while the front had a large flop of hair dyed bright green hanging over one eye, a look Andy had been told was called an undercut. She was wearing a white tanktop and he could see the woman had tattoos on each of her shoulders,

epaulets of ink depicting fighting fish in a lake, done in a Japanese style. “Upstate New York. Her father was a rabbi and a jeweler, her mother ran a deli. Dad passed away last year from a heart attack, so her mom's running both businesses now. No brothers or sisters. Maya's got a few friends in the LA area, but for the most part, she's on the go so much that she really never settled anywhere. I'd like for her to settle with us.”

“What sort of challenges do you anticipate?” Andy questioned. He had a yellow legal pad of paper in front of him, and he'd been keeping small notes during the presentations, mostly so he could keep everything straight in his head at the end.

“Two, but both I think aren't dealbreakers. First, she's going to want to continue working so there may come a time when Andy might need to do a bit of travel to accommodate Maya's schedule, or Maya will simply need to ensure that most of her work as a director is done relatively local to here. I know that there have been some sound stages built in Oakland for the purpose of doing more film work here, so we will simply need to remind her of that.”

“And the other?”

“The other is a little more of a challenge, but mostly just for you, love,” Emily said to Andy, her coy smile widening a little. “Maya isn't at *\*all\** bi-curious. She is absolutely, positively, 100% heterosexual, meaning that you would need to tend to her needs without anyone else as company. I know this because both Sarah and I have made passes at her, only to be told that she's very much 'men only.' She would be completely aware of the rest of us, but simply wouldn't want to partake in any group activities. That also might mean you would need to share a bed with just her every once in a while, so she feels like she has as much a stake in you as everyone else, but you're clever, so I think you would do fine. Like you told me, constraints are simply gifts to creativity.”

“Do you think I would make her happy? Do you think she would make me happy?”

Emily nodded. “It wouldn't be without minor complications, naturally, but I think you two would get along like a house on fire, and she would fit into the house much like Lauren does – present and eager with you when she's spending time with you, and self-reliant and capable when she isn't. She started as a stuntwoman before she got into directing, so she has always had an uphill climb in her life. We aren't best mates, but she'd thrive here, she'd adore you and I think she'd make you happy as well.”

The tiny Brit clicked the button and the screen advanced to black once more, with white letters reading “next: Hannah” in the center of it.

“No matter what you decide, love,” Emily said, getting up from her chair, making her way over to Andy, “I just want to say that all of the girls are thrilled you're asking us for our opinions on this, and it means the world to the lot of us that you're letting us have a say in who we want to join the family. You didn't *\*have\** to ask anyone for their opinion, so the fact that you *\*are\**, well, it shows even further that you're quite the good man, Andy Rook.” Emily leaned in and kissed him, soft and tender, but backed with a lot of love, before she finally pulled away and gave him and Ash a little wave goodbye, slipping out of the room, closing the door behind her.

Ash smirked as he looked over in her direction. “They're all probably going to say something like that, just so you know, love,” she told him. “They've all been getting stories from Niko about how things are on the base, or from the girls involved in the poker game, and so they know what a weird place the world is in right now, and everyone's delighted how you're handling this.”

“Hell, if I was handling it my way, I'd probably just have stopped here, Ash, and not added anyone else to the family, but based on what Phil's told me, I'm going to spend the next five years hearing that I need to help usher in a new generation to save this one.”

The Irish girl giggled and offered him a little shrug. “It's such a hard life, isn't it, having beautiful women constantly throwing themselves at you, begging for sex.”

Andy scowled, although the expression was done with amusement. “Agreed, Alcatraz it ain't, but it's still quite the change from my life six months ago.”

“Which reminds me, you have to be sure and call Xander tomorrow and fill him on all the

changes that have happened here in the last week. He texted you yesterday offering his condolences about Matty, but hell, he doesn't know about how quickly your house has exploded. Maybe we should send him a picture of you in bed, surrounded by all your women, like a modern day Hugh Hefner.”

Andy started laughing at that, shaking his head. “Oh god, he's gonna fucking kill me. He had quite the crush on Emily a few years back, although I think he grew out of that. Lord, I'm never going to hear the end of it.”

“Well, it'll be something you two can use to keep your spirits up when you talk. Are you ready for Hannah to make her pitch?”

He nodded. “Sure, she's the one who got this all started. Let's see who she thinks we should bring into the house.”

A few minutes later, Hannah strolled into the room confidently, although Andy was surprised to see her in her cheerleading outfit again, the first time she'd worn it again since she'd shown up to the house a few days ago. Andy found the outfit choice odd, but decided not to remark on it.

“Two days enough time for you to think it over, Hannah?” he asked the Asian cheerleader, who smiled and nodded.

“Totes, but I didn't know I was gonna have hella competition at the end of it!” Over the past few days, the one thing Andy had determined first and foremost about Hannah was that she was always operating at 110% energy. That's simply who she was. “It's all good, though. I think you'll vibe with my candidate, even if she's not immediately your type.”

Hannah picked up the remote from the table and clicked it, as a picture sprung to life behind her. The minute the image popped onto the screen, Andy was taken back a bit.

“I'm fairly certain that taking on an entire cheerleading team would be well over the limit of you suggesting one person, Hannah,” he laughed.

The image behind her must have been from the spring of this year, as it was Hannah and her entire cheerleading team over at Woodside High, where she'd graduated from in May. There were fourteen girls in the photo, in addition to the coach, and they were completely varied in terms of size, shape and race, although he couldn't deny, they all seemed lovely. It took him half a second to find Hannah as her hair lacked the blonde highlights in the photo.

“Not the team, sir,” she said, clicking the button again, as the screen shifted, this time the only person on the screen being the cheerleading coach. “Just the woman running it. Tabitha Jefferson.”

Without all the other people on the screen, Andy could focus on the woman being suggested. She was an African-American woman with milk chocolate colored skin around Andy's age, although she was in far better shape than he was. In the picture, she was in black gym shorts with an orange stripe and a large orange t-shirt with the word “WILDCATS” in highly stylized lettering across the front of it. She had straightened hair drawn back in a short ponytail that hung to the nape of her neck, and a friendly face, although her expression was one of shouting.

“Coach Jefferson has been the cheerleading coach and P.E. Teacher for Woodside High for the last five years. She's whip-smart, funny and really cares about us girls. When I was kinda a troublemaker, she'd pull me aside and give me a good talking to, tell me that she thought I was super smart, and that I was capable of anything if I'd stop fucking around and quit self-sabotaging my own life. And she never gave up on me, and never let me focus just on cheerleading or the petty drama and shit a bunch of wound up girls get into with each other.”

Hannah pushed the button and the image changed again, showing a slightly younger Tabitha with her arm around a good looking African-American man with much darker skin in military fatigues. “Just before she moved to Woodside, she was an Army wife, until her husband, Nicky, was killed in action in the Middle East. They'd only been married for about two years, and only together about four, but it still broke her heart. She moved across the country to live out here, closer to her mother, only for her moms to die last year due to lung cancer.”

Hannah pushed the button again. The new image also had to have been taken in the spring, just



before the pandemic had set in. Tabitha had her arm around Hannah, and both of them were smiling, both of them in formal wear, this time with the blonde highlight in Hannah's hair. "She was one of the chaperons for senior Prom, and when she found out I didn't have anyone to go with, she made me go on my own, and I still had a great time. She drove by my parents house to drop off my diploma and told me to call her Tabby from now on, since I wasn't a student of hers any more, and that she hoped school would start back up soon, because she was feeling a little lost."

The Asian girl sighed a little, her face contracting in sadness. "She's had a really rough go of it, Andy, between losing Nicky then her mom and now her ability to teach and be around people. I don't know a thing about what she likes sexually, so I dunno what to say about any of that, but she's a good person, the \*best\* person I know, and if I can give her just one little bit of happiness, then I fucking owe that to her."

Hannah looked like she was about to cry, so Aisling reached over and took the girl's hand in her own, giving it a little squeeze.

"Thanks Ash, I'm okay," she said, smiling a bit as if it might help her make it more true. "The person you most reminded me of when we were first met, Andy, was Tabby. You could've just fucked my brains out and not given a fuck about my feelings, but you didn't. You talked to me first, made sure I knew what I was getting myself into, when you so didn't have to, hell, I wasn't even expecting you to. I wanted to get back at that little shit Benny so fuckin' badly, but you wouldn't let me just charge into it without us talking it out first. That's the kind of thing Tabby did for me all the time, not letting me just leap into the first idea that popped into my head, but really making me think it all out. So I want to give something back to her, and I think that something could be her hooking up with you."

"This whole polyamory thing isn't for everyone, Hannah," Ash said. "You think she'll be up for sharing Andy with all of us?"

Hannah laughed a little, rolling her eyes. "Her last relationship was part of a throuple, so I totally wouldn't worry about it, Ash, although this one would be a little different."

"Oh yeah?" Andy asked. "How so?"

"Well, she was in a relationship with two bi-guys, so she was used to having dick on tap." The busty cheerleader giggled a little bit. "But I know she's into girls too, because she refused to come into the locker room when we were changing. Said it was only respectful, but I saw that glimmer in her eyes that said she desperately wanted to peek, but wasn't going to, because that's what us girls deserved."

"What ended their relationship?"

"The two guys decided to move to Portland, and Tabby's mother hadn't passed yet, so she refused to leave her. They were all kinda in different headspaces anyway, I think, since Tabby never said another word about them after they left, so maybe she was kinda okay with it? Maybe it was just an easier way to end it than ending it? I dunno. It was all spring of my junior year."

"Challenges you foresee?" Aisling asked.

"Well, I dunno how she likes to fuck, so I dunno if you two can make that work for you or not, but I think you'd be okay. And I don't know if you're her type, so I don't even know that she'll say yes. You're a little less..." Hannah trailed off, trying to find a way to phrase what she wanted to say.

"Less what?" Andy asked.

"Less butch, I guess," Hannah giggled. "Dom and Mike were ultra cut, and Nicky was pretty buff himself, so I guess her type is a bit more ripped than you are, but it's not like I know everything about what kinda dudes she likes to bone. But without her being able to teach until, like, at least a year from now, I wanted to make sure she's not getting stuck inside her own head too much."

Hannah clicked the button and the screen behind her changed to say "next: Jenny" on it. "Anyway, if I was you, I'd totally wanna fuck Tabby. Hell, I kinda wanna fuck her myself, if she's down for that. And she's a good person, and good people deserve to have good things happen to them in the world, so that's why I think you should invite her here. Thanks for letting me tell you all this, Andy. I didn't know how much I needed to tell someone this whole story about this amazing woman who

changed my life, and I'm glad it's to the man who did the same thing.”

She stood up, came over and gave Ash a hug, then one to Andy as well followed by a sloppy kiss, before pulling back and heading out of the room, almost skipping in her step, making the skirt flutter a little each time.

“So I know I said I wasn't going to offer you any opinions on all of this, love,” Aisling said, “but I do want to make two exceptions. First, I think you should invite Tabby here. It means a lot to Hannah, maybe more to her than to any of the other girls involved, and I think Tabby seems like a fine match for you, based on what Hannah's told me.”

Andy nodded. “She was speaking very strongly from the heart, so I don't blame you. I won't commit to 100% saying yes right now, but I'll mark her down as a very strong likely, if that's okay.”

“Natch love,” she said, squeezing his arm. “The other exception I want to make is to set you up for Jenny's pitch, and to tell you to tread lightly. Her pitch is for a staff person, but I suspect the person being pitched might want something more than that from you, and I think you should probably give it to her, but at her own pace. Jenny's got quite the tale to tell, and her friend has had a very rough life. I think even Jenny knows that if you bring this girl on, she's going to grow from staff to family member eventually, but that's okay with me, and all the rest of the girls, so keep all that in mind when she's talking, that we all know it's unsteady waters, and we're all okay with it, awright love?”

He wasn't entirely sure what to make of that, so he simply nodded, giving himself a second to get his words in order. “She's the first staff pitch I'm hearing, but if you're telling me in advance that it's going to be different than all the rest, then that's good to know, and I'll keep it in mind.”

Ash smiled, kissing him on the cheek. “I think you'll like who she's pitching anyway. Has a completely different tone than anyone else you're gonna hear about today, and if I'm honest, I'd love to meet her myself.”

Just as she was saying that, Jenny opened the door and made her way into the conference room, moving to sit down opposite them, her warm comforting smile well set on her face. Jenny hadn't chosen to dress up more than her usual attire, looking like a plump Martha Stewart, as she folded her hands on the table, just over the remote.

“Thanks for letting us do this, sir. None of us had even thought about this until you and Ash told us about it, and the fact that you're letting the staff pitch as well, gosh, that's just the sweetest thing. My story's gonna be a little bit of a rollercoaster, so I hope you don't mind, sir.”

Andy chuckled, leaning back in his chair a little bit. “Fire away, Jenny.”

Jenny picked up the remote and clicked on it, as the image behind her changed to a much younger one of her and another woman, really more of a girl at that point, what had to be at least a decade ago. Jenny was thinner then, wearing an oversize P!nk t-shirt, with her arm around a Latin girl, a little less thin, with massively blown out hair, wearing a red tanktop with a sheer mesh black shirt over it. The two girls were laughing in the picture, each holding up a red Solo cup that Andy suspected held alcohol that neither was old enough to be drinking at the time of the photo.

“This is me with my college roommate, Alexis Coleman, better known as Lexi. We were both freshman at UCLA when we were randomly paired together to share a dorm room together at Hendrick Hall.” The image changed again, and showed the two girls playing beer pong at some Greek event. “I'd just moved out here from Cleveland, and she'd just moved here from D.C., and so we became best friends.”

“You didn't go to culinary school?” Andy asked. “You're such an excellent cook, I find that impossible to believe.”

Jenny blushed a little. “Thank you, sir, but I did, after I got my Bachelor's degree in art history. I had wanted to become an art custodian, but couldn't seem to make it work, so I went to culinary school in SF after giving up on the art world.”

“And Lexi?” Ash asked. “What was she majoring in?”

“Criminal justice,” Jenny said, clicking the button again to show an image of Lexi, a little older,

in a bikini out on the Santa Monica boardwalk, on roller skates that she looked a little unsteady on. “I know she looks like a Victoria's Secret model, but she was determined to get into law enforcement during college. She also minored in political science and theory, as well as picking up several languages along the way. I know she speaks Spanish, French, German, Russian and Portuguese, and knowing her, she's probably picked up a few more since then.”

“All of this has to be a while ago, though, Jenny,” Andy said. “What year did you two graduate?”

Jenny pushed the button again to show a graduation of the two of them together, holding up their diplomas with big smiles. “2007 sir, and I realize I'm giving you a bunch of background, but I think it's very important that I do, so you understand who Lexi is, and how she's a sweet, adorable person, despite the rest of what I'm about to tell you.”

Andy leaned forward a little bit. “As a professional storyteller, Jenny, let me tell you that's a hell of a way to perk your audience's interest. Go on.”

“Yes sir,” she said, clicking the button to advance the image again. This time, Lexi was a few years older, dressed in more of jungle wear – thick pants, a heavy shirt with a vest on, and her hair pulled back tightly. The background was thick trees and dirt, with sunlight peeking through. Of more note, however, was the AK-47 slung over her shoulder. “In her last year of college, Lexi was recruited to join the CIA. My details about this period of her life are very unreliable, but I think she was training with the agency for another year or two, and then served as a combination of analyst and field agent for most of the next decade, primarily in South and Central America, until 2017.”

The next image took Andy a little aback, although Ash had clearly seen it before. It was relatively recent, Jenny and Lexi together, in the kitchen of some restaurant or hotel. Both of the women were older than they were in the earlier photos, and most notably, Lexi had some significant scarring along part of her neck and the bottom left part of her chin line, although it looked as though the scarring was at least a few years old.

“I don't know what happened to Lexi in 2017, but it must've been particularly gruesome. She couldn't tell me how she got the scars, only that she got them in the service of her country, and that she regretted how they were keeping her out of field work, because they were too identifiable. She'd been saddled with desk duty, and in 2018, she finally quit the CIA.”

The image jumped again, and this time Lexi was in a dark suit with sunglasses, opening a door for some Middle Eastern shiek. “She tried her hand at personal protection for a while, but eventually gave up on that and just became a mercenary, drifting through private security firms, independent contractors who go where the money and the work is. Just before the virus set in, she'd returned to her place in Los Angeles from a six month tour as part of a PMC in Afghanistan, and she was \*shaken\*. She said she felt like her life was a mess, she didn't know what she was doing with it, and felt like she was just a giant burden on her friends and family.”

With another click of the button, a new image of Lexi popped on the screen, her at a gun range, the whole image practically the still from an action movie. “What I'm suggesting is this, sir. I think you should bring Lexi into the house to be your driver and personal security.” Andy was about to say something when Jenny raised her hand to silence him. “I know what you're about to say, sir, and frankly it's \*bullcrap\*, pardon my French. With the small population of men remaining left in the United States, every single one of you has suddenly become a VIP, and you need to think not just of your own health, but the health of all the women who are dependent on your health for their \*own\* health. If something happens to you, you have over a dozen women right now alone who suddenly run the very real risk of dying. Being that my health is fundamentally based on yours for the time being, I know \*I\* would feel safer having Lexi watch out for you.”

Andy scratched his goatee for a long moment, realizing that every single thing Jenny had said to him was true, making him a little ashamed of how cavalierly he'd been treating his own health, the ramifications of it not having fully sunken in until this very moment. “You are completely justified in

that thought, Jenny, and you are right, I had not been giving it the diligence it deserved.”

“Lexi has some heavy scars from whatever accident sidelined her at the CIA. They cover just a bit of her face, but almost a third of her neck and down to her collarbone. In spite of that, I think she's still a stunning woman, and I still wish she was bisexual, because I would do her in a heartbeat, but she only likes men. I know, because we fooled around together freshmen year, and the next morning, we woke up with very different perspectives on it. It's never gotten in the way of our friendship, though, so you don't have to worry there.”

“Scars only add character, they never remove it,” Andy said, quoting a line from one of his books. “They're a point in her favor, not against it.”

Jenny's smile widened a bit more at that, as if she was proud of Andy for saying it. “That's how I feel too. She was pretty adventurous sexually in college, so I don't think there would be any dealbreakers between the two of you there. The two red flags I feel obligated to bring up are these. First, she has a bit of PTSD, so she can tend to be a little jumpy from time to time, and likes to keep as much of her life as she can to routine, because it helps her feel organized about all of it. I don't worry about her having a full breakdown, but she gets stressed by firecrackers on the fourth of July, so there's clearly some strain still going on there.”

“I think New Eden is about as far from a warzone as you can get, Jenny.”

“Sure, but we won't be locked in here forever, sir. And your family already includes two women who are actresses known to love doing action films, so if you go to visit them on sets, you'll need to be aware of Lexi's elevated stress levels when you do.”

“That's entirely manageable,” Andy said. “What's the other red flag?”

Jenny frowned a little bit, looked to Ash, who nodded, then looked back to Andy. “The other red flag is that I suspect she's going to want more than a staff relationship with you at some point. I don't know that for certain, but Lexi is a diehard romantic, and when she finds out that so many men have died, it's going to hit her *very* hard, because she's always dreamed of having her own prince charming, someone who will love her for her, through thick and thin. I think she'll be able to get past the idea of sharing you with lots of other women, I think she'll be okay with you dividing your time or having multiple people in your bed, but I think she's going to want to forge that emotional connection with you like your partners do, and that's more than what you asked us for in terms of suggesting staff. She will absolutely be the best bodyguard you could ask for, and I don't think there's a better driver I know. But the terms Ash laid down were pretty clear – staff should only recommend staff, not partners, and I think Lexi might well end up being both, so I'm hoping that's okay.”

“As I told ya when you pitched her t' me, Jenny,” Ash said, “sometimes exceptions have to be made for exceptional people, and Lexi seems like a hell of an accomplished and talented woman. If Andy's okay with it, the rest of the house will be okay with it.”

Andy smirked a little bit. “No pressure or anything, but it's fine. And you're right, I hadn't been thinking about how much my health impacted so many people until right now, so it's important that I give that consideration. She seems like a lovely woman, and you speak of her very fondly, so while I'm not making any final decisions until I've heard from everyone, I think you wouldn't be wasting your time if you wanted to start crafting a video invite for Lexi.”

Jenny jumped up and ran around the table to hug Andy tightly, crying a little bit. “Thank you *so* much, sir. When I talked to her on the phone last week, she told me how much she wished she could meet a nice man just like you, so I just *know* she'll say yes. I already know she thinks you're cute.”

“Don't tell anyone else about this, though,” Ash said. “All the staff decisions are being made independently from the family member ones, and while I know all the girls were rooting for Lexi to be brought here in some regard, not a word to anyone, not even Katie, until it's final, yeah?”

Jenny pulled back and wiped the tears from her face, nodding so quickly Andy was afraid her head would roll off. “Yes. Got it. Very clear. Understood, ma'am. Sir. And thanks again.”

The portly girl made her way out of the room without even remembering to push the button to advance the screen to the next person, leaving Andy and Ash alone in the room.

“Okay, Mr. Rook,” Ash said to him, “five minute break. Stand up, walk around, stretch a bit. I’d ask if you wanted to squeeze in a quick shag, but I had me turn yesterday, so I’m good to wait a few more days. Wouldn’t want to deprive some of the other girls of getting their itches scratched.”

Andy stood up, pulling one arm behind his head, then the other, stretching out. “Four presentations down, eight to go...”

## Chapter 25

After a handful of minutes stretching, Ash sent a text message for the next girl to make her way up. Andy had turned his notes over so that Aisling couldn’t look at them, and he smirked a little, noticing her frowning at the back of the legal pad.

“You said you didn’t want to influence my decision, so I don’t know why you should want to look at my notes, Ash.” They had built a wonderfully natural teasing rapport with each other over the past few months, so Aisling knew he was joking with her, but was willing to roll with him.

She grinned up as she reached across the table to push the button and advance the slide. “Next: Katie.” The redhead moved to sit back in her chair, and shrugged in his direction. “I’m mostly just curious how you’re reacting to what you’ve heard so far, and how your opinions differ from mine, which I’m sure they will, here and there. I’ve heard all these pitches a couple of times, so it’ll be interesting to see how many predictions I get right.”

“Did you write them down?”

“Well, no,” Ash said.

Andy grabbed his yellow legal pad and ripped out a single sheet from the bottom of it, sliding it and his pen across to her. “Alright, predictions then. Write them down now. Don’t show them to me, but fold up the paper when you’re done. We can have whoever’s after Katie bring us an envelope to seal it up.

Just around the time that Aisling was folding up the sheet of paper, Katie walked into the room, confident in her stride. Andy cocked his head to one side as she walked in the room. The Hispanic woman was, as it seemed she always was, wearing a button up shirt underneath jean overalls. “Do you own other clothes besides overalls, Katie?” he asked her.

She stuck her tongue out at him, which made Ash giggle again. “I *can* be girly and shit, sir, but I mostly keep that for Jenny. How’re the presentations going so far?”

“You know the rules, Katie,” Aisling politely scolded, “no talking about anyone else’s pitch until the very end.”

Katie winked at her, shrugging a little. After Andy had settled her nerves about keeping a level of removal between him and her and her wife, Katie had relaxed massively and grown into a more comfortable relationship with the rest of the house. “Had to try. Anyway, let’s get this fucking show on the road!” She grabbed the remote in her calloused hand and clicked the button as the screen behind her changed to an image of a slightly matronly looking woman in her early 40s, dark chocolate hair up in a bun, skin just slightly olive, some mix of European heritage that surely had to include either Italian or Spanish. The woman on screen wasn’t overweight, but was certainly the most bulky woman that had been on the screen thus far, not fat, simply hefty.

“This is Doctor Morgan Fitch. She’s a general practitioner in Los Altos who also dabbles in pediatrics. In talking with everyone in the house, it’s clear at some point, you are going to be in dire need of a nanny around this place, and having one who’s also a damn doctor just seems like smart thinking to me. By this time in a couple of years, this house is practically gonna be a little city, so you need to make sure all the major staples are taken care of. Some of the girls will wanna be full time mommies, no doubt, but for the rest, you’re going to want to have child care. If you need that anyway, why not have that person be a doctor?”

“How do you know Dr. Fitch?” Andy asked.

Katie blanched a little bit. “She's kinda an ex of mine.” She raised her hand immediately, a sheepish smile on her face. “We didn't part on bad terms, promise! At the end of the day, she was into the whole polyamory thing, and I wasn't, so we split, but remained good friends. That was five years ago, just before I met Jenny, so it all worked out okay in the end. She's had relationships on and off since then, but nothing's stuck. She's mostly a lesbian, but doesn't mind the occasional bit of dick here and there, so I think she might be a good fit for a staff member. She once told me that she likes to \*fuck\* men, but never gets emotionally \*attached\* to them the way she does to women, and what with her being staff, she'd be okay to pursue a female partner to take care of her emotional needs.”

“What makes you think she'll want to join the household?” Ash queried.

“Morgan loves constantly shifting problems, and this house is like nothing I've ever seen before. Even before you start spawning, you're gonna need a doctor to make sure your family is in the best condition possible. Until you're having kids, she can staff a clinic in town on a volunteer basis, so she's getting settled here in the mean time. She's bored with the people in Los Altos, and we've always been good friends, so I think knowing I'm here would make her more likely to come aboard.”

“Challenges you anticipate?” he said.

“She'd be the oldest person in the house at 46, but I think it gives her wisdom. Also, you might find her a bit... blunt, until you get used to her.”

“How blunt?”

Katie tried to hide a little smile, shrugging, as she pushed the button to advance the slide to a screen reading “Next: Lauren” in friendly white letters. “Subtle she ain't, sir. I have never met anyone more direct in my life. I've always been a little thankful that she wasn't my doctor, because her bedside manner is more than a bit lacking. But sometimes you need someone to just slap you upside the head. Sir. We all do. Morgan would fill that role. And if she ever gets too blunt for your liking, you can tell her, and maybe she'll dial it down a little bit, or realize that she might've once gone too far. She's direct, but she's never intentionally mean. And even if you don't think Morgan's a good fit for here, and I can completely respect that if that's what you decide, I still want to stress that you're going to be in dire need of a nanny here at some point soon, so to keep that in mind moving forward.”

“Point taken and noted, Katie. Anything else you wanna say?”

Katie brought her finger to her lips, considering for a moment, then slowly stood up. “Just one thing. I know Jenny brought you her old roommate Lexi as a candidate, and I want to throw my weight behind that, even if it's at the cost of my own candidate. I would've not pitched someone else if I could've pitched Lexi twice, y'know what I mean? Lexi's had a shitty go of it and I desperately want her to be happy, and I \*really\* think she can be here.”

Andy chuckled a little. “Unorthodox, but sure, I'll keep it under advisement. Alexis did seem like an excellent candidate, so we'll see how it goes.”

“Thanks sir! Enjoy the rest of the pussy parade!” she laughed, heading out of the room.

Ash shook her head at him with a smile. “I have no idea how you can be such a good poker player with a poker face like that.”

He grinned, giving her a saucy wink. “It's easier when you don't give a shit about your opponents. This is family, so I don't have to stay so stoic. Besides, I know Jenny and Katie are close, so it's okay to let them share a little secret on my behalf.”

“Oh we've all got our little secrets, Andy. If you're nice, maybe I'll even let you in on one eventually.”

He tsked her in jest, wagging a finger in her direction. “My girls are keeping secrets from me? Heaven forbid, what next?”

“What's next is Lauren, and frankly, I will probably be spending this entire presentation with my hand over my mouth, desperately trying to stay quiet, and likely failing miserably.” Aisling had a strange grin on her face that told Andy this next one might be a little unusual.

He didn't have long to consider it, though, as the door opened and the statuesque Lauren strode into the room decked out in a workout track suit with the 49ers logo on it. "Hey Andy, Ash. Thanks for letting all of us do this. I can't tell ya if I'm presenting my candidate to you on a lark, because I think she's actually a good idea or because of the girl herself. Maybe some combination of all three. So let me just get right down to brass tacks," the Aussie said, as she moved to sit down across from them. She picked up the remote and clicked the button as the screen sprung to life.

On the screen was an image of a 49ers cheerleader, a fit woman with a large blonde mane of hair like sun-dried grass, bubblegum pink lipstick and a smile that was so wide Andy wondered if it hurt when she finally let her face relax. She was pretty in a sort of pageant kind of way, although he suspected she didn't look quite so forced in regular photos that weren't taken from the 49ers website.

"This is Jade Dillon. She's been a cheerleader for the 49ers for about three years now, and is literally \*the\* most optimistic person I have ever met in my entire life. She is bubbly and chipper and all smiles even at the worst of times. When the pandemic set in, she sent the entire 49ers organization an email reminding them that adversity is simply opportunity in disguise. No lie, Andy, she is completely unflappable in every way possible. She's... she's like a golden retriever in a person! Peppy and enthusiastic and always full of confidence."

Andy looked over and saw that Ash had, indeed, both of her hands over her mouth, trying to hold in her desire to laugh, but he could still hear tiny giggles threatening to escape. He looked back to Lauren, a slightly quizzical expression on his face. "I can't tell if you admire her for that or if it drives you crazy."

"Both!" Lauren said, throwing up her hands, laughing at herself. "It's infuriating! Even when she was kneeling in protest alongside Colin Kaepernick, she was still smiling about it. I don't know what to do with her! I mean, I get it. She's a kindergarten teacher as her day job, so pennies on the dollar that's what helps her keep all that energy up, but strewth, I just don't know how she does it! I mean, she comes from money, so I imagine that's gotta help."

"Oh yeah?"

The tall blonde tanned Aussie nodded, pushing the button to show Jade in a more normal setting, in an evening dress standing next to an older gentleman who Andy knew he'd seen somewhere before. "Her daddy is Cormack Dillon, one of the cofounders of Bindr, that teleconferencing tool everyone's using these days, but she's sort of tried to distance herself from 'er daddy over the last few years. An', in a 'ain't it a small world' moment, Cormack Dillon was the guy Katie used to work for before she came here, so she and Jade know one another already."

"I could've asked Katie about her then," Andy lamented. "Shame she was just here." Jade looked much more lovely without the pancake makeup, her blonde hair a waterfall of curls, although Andy was also taken aback for a moment, reflexively trying to estimate how much that necklace she was wearing must have cost. After a second, Andy recognized where the photo was taken – at the prestigious Palace of Fine Arts, where every year the Silicon Valley elite held their own private high end gala.

Lauren pushed the button again and the image changed to Jade in more casual clothes, sitting with a handful of other girls in some sidewalk cafe overlooking the Pacific ocean. She had to be under thirty. There was no denying she was fit and lovely, although Andy did wonder if growing up steeped in money had warped her in some way. "Well, you kin ask her before make your mind up. She might have some things to say to sway your mind one way or another, but I simply gotta tell you this one thing, because it is first and foremost the reason I want to bring her to you..."

Aisling looked like she was ready to turn blue, trying to hold in her breath and her laughter, her face scrunched up, actual tears rolling down her cheeks, all to Andy's confusion.

Lauren pushed the button again and the photo zoomed in, showing just Jade now, laughing and smiling. "Jade Dillion..." She pushed the button again and the image of Jade suddenly had a very large cartoon cherry resting on top of her head. "...is an honest-to-god twenty-six year old virgin."

At that, Aisling couldn't help herself, and started laughing furiously, which only made Lauren grin even wider as Andy kept looking between the two of them, wondering desperately if they were putting him on.

"It's \*not\* for religious reasons, an' it's not something she goes out of her way ta advertise... hell, I doubt very many people even know that she's cherry. But I went out drinking with her and the rest of the Gold Rush girls one night after an away game, and Jade got pretty hammered so I had to help her back to her hotel room. And when I was holding her hair back while she chundered in the dunny, she told me that she'd never lost her virginity, and that boys suck, and she was so damn tired of giving blowies to stall boys out until she was sure they were the one. She's always suspected they weren't after her so much as they were her daddy's money, and so, she's never done the deed."

Andy reached over and patted Aisling's back, as the redhead was still doubled over with fits of uncontrollable laughter. He felt like he should go through the same questions he had with all the others, but knew the first one would only set Ash off again. "Do you... think she and I would be compatible?" Ash, indeed, giggled twice as hard, waving her hand in the air, trying to stall Lauren from talking long enough for her to catch her breath.

"Sexually, this girl doesn't know the difference between her fanny and a hole in the ground, so it's all to play for, mate," Lauren said, giving a little shrug. "But you wouldn't give a tosser about her Daddy's money, now that Watkins done set you up for life, so maybe you could work the rest out? I mean, when was the last time you popped a girl's cherry?"

Andy chuckled softly, giving the giant blonde a slight shrug. "Never. I've never been a girl's first. I didn't lose my virginity until my early 20s, and the girl I lost it to had been with a couple of guys before me."

"Then that's awlright, son," Lauren said, grinning at him. "Then you owe it to yourself to treat yourself at least once."

"I don't know if I could handle quite that sunny of a disposition, though. I mean, I rely on cynicism, sarcasm and negativity just to get \*through\* some days," Andy joked. "Deprived of all of that, how would I manage?"

"Oh, I think you'd do alright, Andy. You're more capable than you know. And even if you're not into her crackin' bod, she's a kindergarten teacher, and you might need that sometime soon. I bet she'd be happy to take over as a nanny for the house, if you wanted her to."

Aisling looked like she was finally started to regain her composure, the laughing fits having mostly died down, although she was still wiping tears from her eyes. "Any concerns?" she finally was able to say, though not without considerable effort.

"Her Daddy might not approve of you, but then again, I don't know if her daddy's even alive right now, and even if he is, she's likely not t' give a damn. I think the biggest concern is..." Lauren's face bunched up somewhere between amusement and annoyance. "Hell. The biggest concern is you'd have is that ye'd have ta break her of the fake cussing and get to her swear like a proper sheila, an' she might have some resistance to that. Dunno fer certain."

"Fake cussing?"

"Y'know, 'gosh golly gee whillickers I stubbed my heekin' toe!' kinda nonsense," Lauren sighed. "I know she works around kids all day, but when you're out with grownups, talk like one. Crikey. Drives me 'round the bleedin' bend."

Andy's eyes widened a little bit. "Yeah, that might be a dealbreaker, Lauren. People who can't cuss creep me out a bit."

Lauren waved a hand in his direction. "Buggerall. You get her wound up enough, tell'er it's what you like an' you're not gonna give 'er a lay until she does, betcha she'd suddenly make sailors blush so quick your head'll spin. She'd get over it without much fuss. My guess is she's just spent too much time around the anklebiters. Anyway, that's my go at it. She and I are kinda friends, but it's no skin off my back either way you wanna call it." She pushed the button and the screen advanced again, to a black



screen with the words “Next: Nicolette” in white at the center of it.

The tall blonde stood up, smiling at him. “Besides, what kinda partner would I be if I knew I had a virgin sacrifice in my back pocket to make to our dark god and I didn't at least try? See ya!” And as she walked out of the room, Aisling started giggling again.

“You need a minute, Ash?” Andy smirked.

“I have no idea what you're going to do with... all of *that*, Andy, but believe me, getting to hear that pitch *three times* has made all of this absolutely worth it for me,” she said in between laughs and gasps for breath, gesturing with her left hand in the direction of the door, as she sent the text message to tell Nicolette it was time for her presentation with her right..

“I just worry that a girl like that, who's been saving her virginity for Mr. Right, would utterly balk at the idea of having to share that Mr. Right with a wide spectrum of other girls.” Andy sighed. “I wouldn't want to disrespect her, and frankly, Lauren doesn't even know what Jade's looking for.”

“Look at the world today, love,” Aisling said with a shrug. “It's not a speck like it was this time last year. Men are a scarce resource these days, so those of us who've latched onto a good bloke want to make sure that any girls we've ever been friends with is taken care of. Despite what she said, despite all her warnings, Lauren still brought her to you, and that should say the most important thing.” She giggled a little bit. “Besides, who else is going to offer you a fucking *virgin sacrifice*?!”

Andy waved his hand with a laugh. “Yeah, there's no disputing that! It'll have to be something to keep in mind. I'm not entirely sure how Nicolette's gonna follow that,” he said, as the door opened again.

“Oh, don't you worry, Master,” the busty blonde French maid said to him as she entered the room. “I have brought you a staff member that you would be completely mad to pass up.” Nicolette was, as it seemed like she always was, dressed in a French maid's outfit, although this particular one looked more like an actual maid's outfit and less like a porn star's *idea* of a maid's outfit than some of them had been. “This is both a role you need to fill in the house and a woman unlike any other you have here.”

“Don't oversell her too much, Nic,” Aisling said with a smirk.

“Oh, madame, but I simply must do so,” Nicolette teased, picking up the remote, clicking the button. On the screen, an image of woman in her early-to-mid twenties appeared. The first thing Andy noticed was the sharp contrast of colors – the woman had pale, almost marble-colored skin, and long jet black hair the color of midnight, mostly swept back but with cute bangs in front. She had slender cheekbones, and wore a dark red lipstick the color of a ripe apple. She had deep blue eyes behind heavy black rimmed glasses, and her face held a sort of quirky, shy smile. She was startlingly beautiful, if in a rather fragile sort of way. “This is my friend Whitney Wells. She's 23, grew up in Chicago and moved out to California for college, and she is going to be the Rook family household IT engineer.”

Andy's eyebrow arched, wondering just why Nicolette thought Andy would need Informational Technology, basically his own personal tech support, in house, on call at all times, but decided to let Nicolette continue.

“One of the things you haven't realized yet is that this house is very much a *smart house*. I know you haven't realized it, Master, because you haven't even done most of the basic setup yet. Now I figured it was simply because you hadn't a spare moment to sit down and take care of all of it, but I also now think it's because you just don't realize it's even *there!* This whole house is completely wired for technology, and you need someone to not only set it up for you, but also to maintain it all. For example, did you know that if you wanted to, you could set up a direct and secure pipeline to the movie company talking about doing the movies based on your books, and you could actually see dailies as they worked on them? Of course you didn't! Hell, I didn't know that either until I was giving my friend Whitney a tour of the place through FaceTime, and she pointed out that you have a designated trunk line coming into the house with multiple links to the nearest backbone.” Nicolette giggled. “I don't even know what that means *either*, Master, but I'm 100% certain it's important!”

“To be fair, you really do need a new laptop, love,” Aisling said to him, “because if we have to hear you swearing any more at that old thing you've been using since we got here, we're going to throw it into the pool ourselves.”

“How much do I not know about my own house, Nicolette?”

“Loads, Master!” she laughed. “Loads and loads and loads and loads! I'm sure if you're going to bring in Jenny's friend Lexi into the house, she'll want to be involved in all the security stuff, but there's plenty of things this house can do that you have barely even scratched the surface of. And when I was talking to Whitney, she pointed out how much data must be coming in and out of this house with this many people in it, so you need to get firewalls set up, make sure nobody's being phished... let me frank, Master. You needed tech support weeks ago, and when you do finally bring Whitney here, she's going to be doing catch up for a while.”

“How did you meet her?”

Nicolette blushed a little bit, something Andy wasn't sure he'd ever seen her do before. “At a sex club in the city. We were both submissives that had been brought to a party by our partners, and while I was getting around a bit, Whitney was mostly kept on a leash, made to sit and watch the whole time. I'm sort of a tumble-toss submissive, in that I like to be pushed and pulled around some, to act a little bratty but also to get a good amount of force. Whitney, she likes to be completely under someone's control, to not have to say or ask for anything, just, well... just to be used.”

She pushed the button and the image changed to show her and Whitney out at a bar, on what had to be girl's night, the two of them making quite the stark contrast. Whitney was smiling and laughing, her fingernails as brightly painted red as her lips, heavy, smoky makeup around her eyes, a black leather shirt, a semi-transparent white blouse and the hints of a black bra on beneath, making her almost look like a 1940s femme fatale.

“She's insanely smart, probably the smartest woman I've ever known, but her emotional and social skills can be... a little lacking. She's bounced around a number of places here in the Bay, and the resume might make your head spin a bit.”

“Like what?” Andy asked.

“WeWork, Lyft, Ubisoft, Uber... basically, if there's a company here in the Bay that's treated people badly, she's probably done a short stint there, unfortunately.”

He winced, shaking his head. “Yeah, that sounds like a rough haul. You said you met at a sex club with your partners. First, I didn't know you had a partner and second, does she still have a partner?”

Nicolette smiled, shaking her head a bit. “I split from Josh the week after the party, because, well, it's not important, beyond the fact that he was a fucking asshole and I was sick of dealing with it. I haven't seen him in years now, and it's actually better that way. If he's dead, good, good riddance, fuck him, he deserved it. As for her partner, well, Bill wasn't a bad guy, although I never really talked much to him, or should I say I wasn't much permitted to talk to him, because he was from the old school of domination, with the leather whip and the iron fist, and he didn't like submissives giving him any back talk. Whitney was mostly happy with him, although she'd admitted to me a couple of times that she could've done without Bill's sadistic streak of inflicting pain on her. Pain wasn't really her thing. She didn't mind it from time to time, but it wasn't something she got off on. Bill did. But Bill died from the virus in April, leaving Whitney sort of lost and directionless.”

“I'm certainly *\*not\** into inflicting pain on people, Nicolette, but I don't know that even on my best or worst days I could be fairly described as a dom.”

Nicolette giggled and wagged a finger in his direction. “You might have the other girls fooled, Master, but not me, and frankly, I don't think Ash buys it either. When I was pitching this to her yesterday, I pointed out to her that sexuality is... well, it's sort of like a menu at a Cheesecake Factory – there are so many options that you are bound to find things you like just every once in a while, instead of every day. And you are a good and kind man, but I've also seen that sometimes you just want to take

something, to *\*claim\** something. There is a beast in you raging to get out, and I've tried to make sure I'm around to fill that need for you. We all heard it when you were having your first go at Taylor, and even Niko told me afterwards she thought you were holding back a little, like you were worried we might judge you for it, but your household loves you and trusts you, Master.”

The maid pushed the button and the image changed again, showing a head on almost portfolio picture of Whitney, her wrists bound together in rope, a collar around her neck, still wearing a bra, her hair pulled back into a ponytail, a very lustful look in her icy blue eyes drilling straight into the camera. “She took this photo just for you, Master. Nobody other than the three of us has seen it. Not only does she want to join the staff, she wants you to collar her. Hell, she said if you wanted to, she would even get tattooed or branded for you.”

“Branded?” Andy gasped suddenly. “I would never!”

“Oh, I told her that, and she said that just made you sound even more dreamy, but wanted you to have that option on the table. She doesn't want to be one of your wives, because she says that would put her on equal level with you. She wants to *\*belong\** to you. She's always going to be submissive, but do you have any idea how hard it's going to be for a single submissive woman to find a sexual partner right now, much less one who isn't a complete asshole? The biggest problem with the BDSM scene, in my eyes anyway, is that too many people don't respect boundaries, that they aren't respectful of one another. Whitney's never going to feel bad about not getting to sleep in your bed, but if you tell her to one night, she will, gladly, as long as it doesn't become a habit. When it comes to the house, she will be the kind of control freak you need running your digital life, but all that desperate need for control, that's why she likes to be completely *\*out\** of control when it comes to her sexuality. Wearing a collar from you isn't a mark of shame; it's a thing of pride and beauty for her. And all of the women you have in this house, Master, they're all such wonderful and warm women, friendly and inviting, and even though we've told them time and time and time again that we're merely the staff, they're still treating us as friends, because we *\*are\** their friends, even if we still work for you.”

Andy had been listening to all of this very intently, because the expression on Nicolette's face wasn't one of concern, but one of excitement, of enthusiasm, of pride. “Why'd she take a picture just for me?”

“Because after Bill died half a year ago, she was aimless, and I got, well, to be blunt, I got *\*very\** worried about her. I couldn't go and check up on her because of the quarantine, but we FaceTimed every day. We still do. And I've told her all about this house, about you, Master, and all your amazing partners, and about a month ago, Whitney started saying something I've been hearing a lot from her lately. 'I wish *\*I\** had what *\*you\** have.' She was waking up from her fugue state over the loss of Bill, and she *\*wanted\** something again, for the first time in months. She wasn't just thinking about what her next meal was, or how to solve some routing problem at work. She had a genuine desire to introduce something, some *\*one\** into her life again. You. This. All of this,” the maid said, gesturing around her.

“You two sound very close,” Ash said. “I don't know that you made it clear to me just how close when you were presenting to me for practice.”

Nicolette nodded. “She's... well, she's probably my best friend, the person I can be myself with the most, and I'm worried about her. You have to understand, she's like an old watch that's been wound up too tightly. When I say she's a control freak, I might be understating the case, but before now she's always had that release valve of having Bill to take over for at least a few hours every week, where she wasn't allowed to have any control, and through that, all that pressure got released. You *\*can\** give that to her again, Master.”

“Do you really think I'm a good match for her sexually?” Andy said. “I'd hate to bring her here and disappoint her.”

The French girl's face spread into a mischievous grin. “Like I said, Master, Whitney's going to be like me, not an everyday food, but definitely a delicious treat that you simply must indulge in now

and then. And I'm a very good judge of character, so I want you to try and look me in the eyes and tell me that the idea of having a woman who literally will not lift a finger until you tell her to do so doesn't turn you on at least a *\*little\** bit, to have such total control over a woman that she is waiting with baited breath for you to give her a command. I'll bet everything I own that you can't."

Andy smirked and blushed a little bit. "I'm not sure there's many men who could say that. I certainly wouldn't want that if *\*she\** didn't want that but..."

Nicolette nodded vigorously. "But she does, she absolutely, positively, definitively *\*does\** want that. From you. I think the biggest challenge you'd have with her is the feelings you'd have when you put the collar on her, because I can tell you, her one and only demand is that you collar her when she arrives, and that she only ever takes the collar off to bathe. I know you're going to have reservations about it, which is why I'm spending so much time reassuring you that this is ultimately what she wants. It's an odd thing for a man who describes himself as a feminist to do, collaring a woman, but realize, you are giving her what *\*she\** wants – the ability to not have to think for a bit."

Ash grinned a little bit. "You forgot to tell him the final thing."

Nicolette held her fingers to her mouth, trying to stifle a giggle once more, as she nodded. She then picked up the remote and clicked the button again, as the image advanced one more time. At first, Andy thought the image was the same, but then he saw it, resting atop of her bound wrists. A first edition of "The Demon Dies At Midnight," a small press book he'd done for himself before he'd started writing the Druid Gunslinger books, in many ways the precursor to the whole series.

It was a short novel, more of a novella really, that Andy had written just to sort of test the idea of writing long form fiction, and while it shared some similarities with the Druid Gunslinger books, it was a stand alone tale about a freelance demon hunter who traveled the world, trying to find the demon that had laid a curse on him when he was a child.

Andy had used a print-on-demand service for the book, and only 2000 copies had been sold before he had found a publisher for *\*all\** his work, starting with the Druid Gunslinger books. His publisher had scooped up the rights to his first book along with the Druid Gunslinger books. Once they did, Andy had stopped the print on demand version of it, so those 2000 were all that was ever going to be printed with that cover, a touch more erotic than the publisher was comfortable with. He'd looked and the first editions were worth several hundred dollars on the secondary market now, even though copies of the second edition, the one done by his current publisher with its less racy cover, were available for ten bucks.

"She's a fan of yours, Master, going back to the beginning. You can't see it, but that copy of your book is signed, by you, when you were doing signings in Santa Cruz."

"She would've been living in Chicago when that book came out!" Andy laughed. "So you can't me she's been a fan of mine since then."

"Oh, she bought it on the secondary market a couple of years ago, when she first started getting into your writing, long before I met you. She said it was worth it to have the original rather than a second edition. She reads loads and loads of sci-fi and fantasy, but says you're an excellent writer, one of her favorites. When she found out you were my Master, she begged and pleaded with me to find some way for her to be able to join me. I told her I would keep my eye open for an opportunity, but that I didn't want to be disrespectful and ask you on my own."

Andy clicked his tongue, shaking his head. "I told you that you could come to me with anything, Nicolette."

"I know you did, Master, and thank you for that, but you have been wall-to-wall busy since you first arrived here a month or so ago, and there just never seemed to be an opportune moment until Hannah started talking to us about you being able to request people, which brings us all up to speed, here and now," she said, gesturing to the image behind her. "I don't just think she's an obvious yes, Master, I think she's *\*the\** most obvious yes. And if you need a little help stoking the fires of the shades of a controlling bastard that hide inside that warm soul, you know I'm always willing to lend a hand or

whatever you might need. Whitney and I have played together sexually before, and if she comes here, I have no doubt that she and I will be play partners again. You have a lot of amazing women on offer for you here, but this one \*has\* to be a slam dunk. Thanks for giving me the chance to introduce you to my best friend, and I can't wait to hear you tell me to invite her over.”

The maid pressed the button and the image of Whitney disappeared to be replaced by “Next: Niko” in white letters on a black background as she stood up and made her way to the door.

Andy leaned over to Aisling. “Give me 5-10 minutes, okay?”

Aisling grinned and nodded. “You're the boss, boss.”

He stood up quickly and made his way out into the hallway, closing the door behind him, as he moved quickly to catch up to Nicolette, just as she was about to reach the stairwell leading upstairs. “One sec, Nicolette,” Andy said, “I have one more question for you.”

Nicolette smiled as she turned back to him, standing at the edge of the stairs. “Of course, Master, what can I—“

As soon as he was within reach of her, he grabbed her by the waist and spun her around, bending her forward until her back was nearly perpendicular with the wall, lifting her dress up and tugging her panties aside with one hand, unbuttoning his jeans with another. Before it even dawned on her what was happening, he lined the head of his cock up against her snatch and just shoved forward with one rough, penetrating thrust, sinking hilt deep as a groan was ripped from her throat, deep and sultry.

“Was \*this\* what you wanted?”

“\*FUCK\* yes, Master!” she whined, as he drew back and then thrust forward again with a harsh shove, forcing her cunt to swallow up his dick. Her hands reached before her, trying to brace herself, as he reached forward and grabbed her by the throat, making her stand upright, even while scooting forward as best she can, until her tits were mashed against the wall, her face tilted towards the ceiling, when he drew back and then punched forward again. “Is it wrong of me that your filthy little fuckmaid has been fingering her sloppy pussy thinking of her Master slamfucking her best friend?”

Andy couldn't help but laugh about that, as he drew back again. “Is that the only thing you've been thinking about?”

“Fuck!” she whimpered as he railed her again, lifting one of her legs to allow him to penetrate a little bit deeper. “You know that it isn't, Master. Your bratty little slut thinks about you all the time, imagining her Master doing so many dirty things to her.”

He shifted his hips a little bit, making sure he was good and slick, before he pulled her away from the wall and then moved her over to a table, forcing her forward, yanking her panties down to her ankles before tugging it off of her entirely. He grabbed the lacy underthing in his hand and then bent her over the table, pushing her knees to make her get a little bit lower, and before it could even register what he was doing, the head of his thick dick pressed against the rosebud of her asshole and just sunk through, greasing its way deep inside of her ass, lubed up with the drippy juices from her pussy.

“Fuck oh fuck oh fuck you're fucking thick, Master, that's such a big fucking dick you've shoved up my tight young ass!” Nicolette whimpered, her voice squealing upward in pitch until it was a shrill shriek, more like a siren than a person. “I've been dreaming about being your stuffed little buttslut, Master, so just fucking hammer me already!”

Andy had a weird notion, and he decided to follow through on it, as he reached around and stuffed Nicolette's panties into her mouth, and he could swear she clamped down even more tightly in excitement. Her hands were free, so if she wanted to, she could've pulled them out any moment.

And yet, she didn't.

Instead, the moans burbling from her throat grew more intense, her hips trying to push her ass back into his firm thrusts as much as she could. She was throwing her body back at him any which way she was able, but for the most part, she was simply getting railed, keeping as much of his dick buried inside of her ass for as much of the time as she could.

After a minute or so, she started spasming and clamping down on his cock, and he couldn't resist, so he unloaded a heavy load of cum into her asshole, sweat dripping from his forehead against the back of her neck, until he softened enough to slip out of that tight pucker.

When he leaned back, he tucked his cock away and pulled up his boxers and jeans, zipping them up, a wry smile on his lips as Nicolette turned around, an incredibly satisfied look upon her face. She pulled her panties from her mouth and that wild grin was the happiest he'd ever seen on Nicolette's face before.

"Now *\*that\** is how you fucking *\*use\** me, Master," she purred with as much sensuality as she could. "And you have fucking *\*earned\** keeping these for a bit." She leaned forward and tucked her panties into the front pocket of his jeans. "And don't worry, I'll fish them out of the laundry later." She tipped her head up and kissed him for a moment. "Thanks *\*so\** much for that! Jesus! Au revoir!"

Andy took his hand and wiped sweat from his forehead and grinned a bit to himself as he watched her head up the stairs. "Well then. Job done."

When Andy headed back into the room, he found Aisling waiting with a shit-eating smirk on her face. "Got your release valve off with the hired help?" she teased. Andy blushed a little bit, realizing that the door wasn't all that thick, and that he had taken Nicolette not all that far from the room, but then he decided he had nothing to be embarrassed about.

"Look, she made it abundantly clear what she wanted from me, and so I damn well gave it to her," he said with a laugh, as he moved to sit down in his chair. "It had been over a week for her anyway, so she was due. You can tell Niko we're ready for her now."

Niko was practically coming through the door when he said it. "She already knows. She was enjoying listening in on you giving Nicolette exactly what's she's been waiting for for a week now," she giggled. "And she, uh, I, I'm here now. How's presentations been so far?"

Andy was about to answer out of reflex when he felt Aisling's hand on his arm, and heard her say, "No dirty snooker from you, missy. He's not tellin' you nuffin'."

"He was about to, though," she winked at the redhead. Niko was in her uniform, something Andy had rarely seen her in, even though she wore it nearly every day. When she headed to the base, she always left before he got up, and she changed out of the uniform before she came home, so it was a little surprising to see her decked out in the formal wear. Her hair was up and pinned back, and she even had the chest candy on her uniform, as she'd been known to call it.

"Going to present someone from the base?" Andy asked, suspecting it was the reason for the uniform.

"You got it," she said, picking up the remote as she pushed a button as the image changed to a rather stern looking blonde woman in her mid forties with a hawkish nose. "I want to introduce you to Captain Tracy Bells, sir. She's a... y'know, we could do the whole thing, Ash, or we could just..."

"It's *\*your\** call, Niko," the Irish redhead said to her, a conspiratorial grin on her face.

Niko nodded, then motioned for Ash to come and join her, which she did, throwing Andy completely off guard. "Look, I'm not pitching Captain Bells to you, Andy," Niko said with a smile. "Because frankly, she's got a giant stick up her ass. I don't really have anyone to pitch you at all, to be frank. That's not why I'm here. It's a pretense."

Andy tilted his head to one side. "Then why are you taking up a pitch slot?"

"Well, it seemed like the best time that Ash and I could get you all to ourselves. For this," she said, pushing the button, as the image changed. In its place was a selfie that clearly Niko had taken just a day or two earlier, of her and Aisling. They each seemed to be holding something in their free hands, and just as it was dawning on Andy what they were, both girls spoke at the same time.

**\*"WE'RE PREGNANT!"\***

Andy pointed a finger at Aisling, who nodded, then over at Niko, who nodded as well, then kept jumping his fingertip back and forth between the two of them as they both kept nodding, wild smiles on their faces. "What, both of you?"

“Yep!” Niko said, giggling, as both her and Aisling started walking around the table, one on each side of it, closing in on him like a planned maneuver, leaning against the table, pinning him in his spot.

“Most of your girls have synched up their time clocks, love,” Aisling said, “So it was bound to happen to a couple of us at the same time. Niko and I are just glad it's us first.”

“Well, we sort of \*made sure\* that we were,” Niko giggled.

“I thought you were both on birth control still!” he said, although the smile on his face made it clear he wasn't upset. “Did everyone stop taking their birth control?”

Aisling shook her head. “So far, I think we're the only ones who have.”

“We both stopped taking them a few months ago,” Niko said. “When I started seeing and hearing the horror stories about the hospitals while I was working on base, I knew that this was going to happen, this or something like it, so I told Aisling and we just stopped taking our birth control pills, and well, here we are!”

“I ran into town for the tests Saturday morning, and wouldn't you know it, two buns in two ovens, all from one chef!” Aisling said, as Andy wrapped his arms around both of them, hugging them intensely tight.

“And you're both happy? I know you both did this intentionally, but sometimes people get second thoughts. I'm not! Getting second thoughts that is. I mean, I'm happy, I promise you I'm happy, but I want to be sure you're both happy.”

“We're ecstatic, hon,” Niko said to him, nuzzling her face against his cheek. “We weren't sure when the best time to tell you would be, but when the whole pitching process started, we wanted to be sure you understood that maybe getting a nanny into the house wasn't such a wild idea.”

“Who knows?” Andy asked.

“Just us and you,” Aisling said. “We haven't told anyone yet.”

Andy kissed Niko, then Aisling, then Niko again, then Aisling again. “It's damn nice to have to some good news for once. So, should we go get lunch and tell the rest of the household?”

“Sounds good to me,” Andy said. “Niko?”

“Absolutely,” Niko said. As they headed towards the door, she leaned over and pushed the button on the remote, changing the slide so it was a black screen again with the words “Next: Piper.”

(Part 2 of 3 of the pitching process. Also there was an update this week that is my last and final edit of the poker scene. Who the hell knew writing a card game would be that damn difficult? If there's anything remaining that's wrong with it, fuck it, I'm done trying to revise it. Feedback always welcome – [corruptingpower@aol.com](mailto:corruptingpower@aol.com) )

## Chapter 26

Lunch had been great fun. Once Aisling and Niko had told Andy, they'd wanted to tell everyone as soon as possible, so the moment they'd sat down for lunch, they'd told everyone straight out, which had led into a small celebration, and sort of let Andy slip into the background with his thoughts.

Sure, the girls all congratulated him, but they were all much more interested in how Niko and Ash were feeling about everything, so Andy could do a little bit of his own research. When he had half a minute, he asked Katie for both more about Lexi, and what she thought of Jade Dillon. He also did a little bit of talking with Sarah about Maya Steele, since clearly they ran in similar circles. When he had a moment, he also pinged Hannah to see if she'd heard anything about Olivia Shoemaker, Asha's “influencer” friend. Finally, he asked Jenny about Katie's ex, Dr. Morgan Fitch.

By the end of lunch, he almost wished he'd brought his yellow notepad with him. It was a lot of names, a lot of opinions and thoughts to keep from getting scrambled around in his brain. But his own opinions were starting to bake in, to settle and coalesce into something more solid.

His mind was so wrapped up in his thoughts, he almost overlooked how lunch was, as it always

was, amazing. He made sure to tell Jenny just how excellent it was, and she said he could thank her by making sure to bring Alexis into the family. He didn't answer her, but his smile probably gave him away. He didn't mind.

When they were walking back towards the meeting room, Aisling slipped her arm around his waist, leaned in and kissed his cheek. "You're happy Niko and I are expectin', right, love?" She had a smile on her face, so she was simply reinforcing what she already knew. "Sometimes you can bit understated 'bout these kinds of things."

Andy chuckled a little, leaning down to kiss her forehead. "You know that I am, Ash. I'm sorry if I seemed a little distant at lunch. This is just a lot of information to take in all at once, lots of people to consider, lots of decisions to make. Shit, people's lives and livelihoods hang in the balance of my stupid judgment. The decisions I'm going to make tomorrow have real, genuine consequences, things I gotta live with for the rest of my life, and I don't want to let anyone down. Turning anyone down feels like—"

"Stop," Ash said, holding him from walking any further. "I told you up front that nobody was going to hold anything against you, and we're all going to honor that. You didn't have to let anyone have a say, and you're letting \*everyone\* have a say. That's all anyone has the right to ask of you." She sighed, then laughed for a second. "Jaysis, if it was me, I'd have thrown the towel in and just taken nobody, but you're not doing that, despite the fact that nobody would've blamed you if you did. Instead, you set down what your reasonable capabilities are, and everyone agreed to them. So stop getting in your own damn way and just get on with it already."

He had to laugh with her at that point, nodding in agreement. "Okay, okay, I get it. No more moping about this, and no more overthinking it. Just listen to the pitches, make my decisions and move forward with our lives. I'll hold you to nobody being mad, though."

"Everybody knows what's coming down the pipeline, Andy," Ash said. "It'll be alright. I promise you, it'll all be alright. Now let's get these last four underway. There's still a few surprises left to spring on you, and it's always fun to watch your expression when you're caught off guard."

"What kind of crazy surprises do you have lined up for me?" he said, as Piper strode through the door confidently, dressed in her Team USA gear, some sort of warm-up suit. He was certain she wasn't wearing the full Olympian gear underneath it, but the very presence of the outfit seemed designed to send a message.

"You should know she doesn't have anything planned for you, Andy," Piper said, smirking at him. "This is all us."

"How are you feeling, Piper? Head starting to clear up? Starting to feel more like yourself again?" Andy asked.

"A lot better, yeah. The first few days, it was like, I dunno, like I was walking through fog, like every inch of my body was coated in maple syrup," the brunette volleyball player said, looking around the room a bit before looking back at Andy. "I was living in quicksand, but over the last couple of days, all of that's been lifting and I've felt mostly like myself again. I've been trying to get back on my work out regimen, so that's helped some. But I think the further I get away from that state, the better off I'll be." She looked better, there was no denying. Her eyes didn't have the dark, heavy bags underneath them that they had when they first met. She'd also put a little bit of weight back on, but Andy suspected that was because she had been massively dehydrated when they'd first met. He was glad to see her coming back into being her full self. "A couple more weeks and I'll be right as rain again. But that's not why I'm here today."

"Yeah, well, it doesn't hurt for me to ask about you first."

"Yeah yeah," Piper said, as she picked up the remote, pressing the button as a Nordic looking blonde appeared on the screen. "I don't know how much you follow the Olympics, but if you do, you might recognize my friend Brooke Maloney here. She's being hyped as the next big thing for the woman's swim team. She's going to enter a number of various swim competitions – breast stroke,



freestyle, relay – but obviously there aren't any games this year, and she's going out of her mind swimming laps in the compound's pool.”

The blonde, much like Piper, looked fit, although she looked much shorter in comparison, with broader shoulders and a wide smile on her face, sitting at a table full of athletes. Piper pushed the button again and the screen advanced to a new image, one of Piper and Brooke sitting on a blanket at some outdoor concert.

“What do you mean 'compound?’” Andy asked.

“A lot of the soon-to-be Olympians were at the US Training Camp, putting in a hard six months before the Olympics,” Piper said. “Me and the rest of the volleyball team were going to be diverted there when the lockdown had been going for a few months, but it was deemed 'too risky' for any of us to be moved. Well, up until our dear Mister Covington decided to scoop me up and tried to make me into his own personal plaything. Thanks again for rescuing me from that, by the by.”

“I'm just glad you're not mad it's me you're bound to.”

“We've been over this, Andy,” she sighed, a polite smile on her face. “I'm happy it was someone as nice as you. Let's move things forward. Now, one of the dirty little secrets you may not have heard about the Olympics is that after an athlete competes in their particular event, they go back to the Olympic village and they let off all that pent up steam that's been building in them for years. I haven't had a chance to experience myself personally, but our trainers and coaches have been telling us about it for as long as we've been old enough to hear the stories. I don't need that pressure valve any more because, well, I have you. But my friend Brooke, well, she doesn't have that.”

She pushed the button and the image advanced to another picture of Brooke, this time in Daisy Duke cutoff jean shorts, a white tied up shirt and a wide brimmed stetson hat, somewhere at a country bar, a Corona in hand with a lime. Her blonde hair was done up in short pigtailed, which looked odd on her by Andy's reckoning.

“Brooke and I have been friends for a couple of years now, and believe me, the Olympics is literally all she thinks about,” Piper said. “She wants to win gold medals so much it, it's eating her up inside. Now with the 2020 games being pushed back until at least 2021, she's going out of her mind, like a predator able to see its prey under glass but not being allowed to hunt it.”

Piper pushed the button and the picture changed to an image of Brooke leaning against a Shelby Cobra, dressed in overalls, covered in grease, a wrench in her hand. “Her only other real passion is classic cars. She's something of a gearhead, and any time she's not training, she's working on cars. She's done more than a couple frame off restorations and more than a handful of heavy mods. She's had a couple of boyfriends over the years, but they never last all that long.”

“So what's she like in the sack, Pipes?” Ash asked her.

“She's about as vanilla as they come,” Piper answered. “She likes things slow and steady, smooth and soft. But she'll be a good lover, and a good friend.”

“Complications you anticipate?” Andy asked.

“You're from pretty different worlds, but I've often been told that opposites attract, so maybe that won't be as big an issue as I think it might be,” she shrugged. “You're pretty rock'n'roll, and she's a country girl at heart. You're a big city guy and she's a small town girl. She's at church every Sunday and I'm pretty sure you're an aesthet. So maybe that's all too much to scale, but then again maybe it isn't. I'm sure whatever you decide, it'll be the right decision.”

Piper pushed the button and the screen advanced again, back to a black screen, with the words “Next: Sarah” in a cartoonish white lettering.

“Any reason you didn't suggest any of the other girls from your volleyball team, just out of curiosity?” Andy asked. “I would've figured they would've been some of your best friends.”

The brunette smirked, flashing him a little wink. “Oh they are, but there's no way in hell I'm sharing \*my\* man with the likes of them. Let'em find their own hunk and they can keep their sticky fingers off of mine.”

With that, Piper headed out of the room, leaving the door open behind her, striding confidently down the hallway.

“So, just to warn you about the next one, Andy, we do know in advance that you have met her a couple of times, but in the pictures we've seen, you always looked friendly, so we're going off that,” Aisling said to him, as she texted Sarah to head to the conference room. “If we're wrong in those assumptions, ye can tell us and we'll let the matter drop then and there.”

“Oh yeah?” Andy said, suddenly wondering what familiar face was going to grace the screen in moments. “Where do I know her from?”

The Irish redhead waggled a finger in his direction. “Just be patient, love. She'll up and in front o' ya in just a minute or two.”

Andy rolled his eyes with a grin. “Then what's the harm in telling me early?”

“The harm is Sarah will have my tits in a wringer if I spill the goss before she's here.”

“Good lord, you girls and your secrets,” he muttered in amusement.

The statuesque redhead arrived moments later, and she immediately came over to hug Aisling, a giggle slipping from Sarah's mouth. “Congrats again, Ash,” Sarah said to her. “I didn't want to say it in front of the others, but I am totally fucking jealous of you right now, you wouldn't even fucking believe me how jealous I am. Today is obviously the day I stop taking my birth control, because, damn, my clock is ticking, girlfriend.”

Ash shook her head with a mischievous grin. “You don't want to wait until you're a little more settled in first, Sarah? Or until you're married?”

Sarah pulled back from the hug, looking over at Andy, licking her lips with a wild smile. “Shit, if I thought I could get him to do it, I'd beg him to fuck me until I was knocked up right here on this table, right here and now. But I've only got ten minutes, so maybe I should just get to the presentation.”

Andy gestured to the remote with a smile. “Maybe.”

“One thing first, though.” Sarah had come into the meeting in a dress skirt and a dark red silk blouse, but she turned around, did something, then turned back, bringing a glistening finger to Andy's lips before the actress slipped it into his mouth, and he could taste her pussy on it. “Just so you know how much the idea of you breeding me turns me on.” She winked at him as she pulled her fingertip from his lips and walked back to the other side of the table.

“On with the show, Sares,” Aisling poked.

“Yeah, totes, Ash, I'm getting' there.” Sarah picked up the remote and clicked the button, as the screen behind her flickered to life. “Oh look! It's you! And you're with one of my \*other\* total favorite writers, Larissa Cotton!”

Andy immediately recognized the shot. It was taken about five years ago, at DragonCon. Andy hadn't wanted to go, but he'd been nominated for a Hugo, an award he'd ended up winning, for “Behind The Darkest Sky,” the most successful of the Druid Gunslinger novels, partially because it was the most risky of the books. When Andy had written it, he'd almost thought it might be the end of the series if it didn't work, if the audience didn't trust him to stick around long enough to see the story continue in the next one. He'd left the Gunslinger in a hell of a mess at the end of the book, and while he was over half way through writing the next one when “Behind The Darkest Sky” had come out, he'd still been in a very nervous place about going to a convention.

At the Hugo awards for the night, he'd found himself sat with a handful of authors he hadn't met before that night, including Larissa Cotton, a Hispanic woman from Portland who'd written an amazing book called “Ions At Dawn,” a technothriller about a woman who finds herself grappling with an archaeological find that threatens to rewrite the basic underpinnings of science. Andy had read all the nominees and found her book fascinating, although maybe a bit too heady for the average reader.

Larissa was nothing like any writer he'd ever met before. She was brash, confident, boisterous and outspoken, the loudest presence in any room, and yet, never in a harsh way. She was a plus-sized woman, thick but not in an unappealing way. The silver hoop in her nose had been a little off putting,

and Andy had found the overwhelming number of tattoos more than a little distracting, almost perhaps no more than the goth Lolita look meets skater punk she'd been rocking at the party.

They'd gotten along reasonably well, although Larissa had gotten rip roaringly drunk by the end of the night. Andy and a couple of others had needed to help her back to her hotel room, since she was nearing blackout stages by the end of the night.

Andy and Larissa had reminded occasionally in contact since then, but they certainly weren't what Andy would describe as close. They'd met up a couple of times in the years since, but generally it had just been if they'd been in the same town, and then only within a group of people.

"Larissa lives up in Portland," Andy said.

"Sure, but that can change," Sarah said. "I mean, Emily and I both lived in LA until we moved here. Asha's lived most of her life in London and Piper spent most of her life in Florida. People move, Andy. That can't be an excuse."

"Well, no," Andy laughed, "but she was also engaged last I heard."

"Wait, what?" Sarah asked. "I talked to her like three months ago, and she didn't mention it, and I didn't see any engagement ring."

He shrugged. "Maybe I misheard, or maybe they called it off. It was a couple of years ago, when a bunch of us were getting drunk after our ComicCon panels. She said she'd just sold the film adaptation rights to 'Ions At Dawn' to somebody and we all went out to celebrate."

Aisling nodded. "She sold the rights to Sarah, as a matter of fact."

The taller redhead pushed the button on the remote and the screen advanced to an image of Sarah and Larissa at a conference table shaking hands. "My production company, Awkward & Dorky Films, to be more specific. We agreed to let her give us a first draft if she agreed to go through the notes and revisions process without too many complaints."

"Heh," Andy smirked. "And 'Ris agreed to that? Talk about being prickly to editors. She damn near took my head off when she had me read a first draft of her third book, 'Castle of Yesterdays,' and I gave her notes on it."

"It totally couldn't have been as bad as you're making it out to be, Andy," Sarah teased. "Don't be such a baby. Suck it up."

"I believe she told me that I could roll up my notes and shove them into my dick until I was crapping them out," he said.

"Fuck," Sarah muttered. "You must've been really hard in those notes."

"Not really?" He shrugged a little. "I mean, I offered some opinions and I told her that a couple of the chapters went on too long with nothing happening, and that the climax felt overly weak but that it was a great first draft. I mean, I liked the book a lot. But that's what you do with first drafts – show them to someone, figure out what works and what doesn't, then make a real book out of it."

"I liked 'Castle of Yesterdays,' though, Andy!" Sarah whined.

"Sure!" he said, wagging a finger at her. "You just read the final version, which went through about six revisions. And, for what it's worth, she ended up using most of my notes. I mean, I didn't hold it against her that she didn't like getting notes. Every author can be a little bit of a prima donna sometimes."

"Well, as of July, I don't think she was married or engaged or whatever, and she's completely rad. Also, you two get along, because you've obviously gone out for dinner and drinks before, and she trusted you enough to let you read her first draft of a new book, so that seems good enough to me, don't you think?"

"I mean, we weren't close friends, but we were, er, are friendly acquaintances. I don't know that either of us thought the other was their type, though. She seemed to be into people who were way more of the 80s skateboard punk ethos than me."

"You saw her with a man at some point?"

"Oh yeah," Andy said, "Well, no. I mean, not directly, but she showed me a picture of her and

'her man,' she called him. He was big, fit fellow. Broad shoulders, six pack. About as far from me as any man can possibly get. He looked like he could've bench pressed me for hours without breaking a sweat, and she, well, she looked happy."

Sarah shrugged a little bit. "Whoever he was, Andy, he completely didn't last, because when she and I were meeting to discuss our notes for the screenplay, she was sniping about how she hadn't had a proper lay in months. So big and hunky didn't work for her, so maybe you could. I know she thinks you're cute. I told her I had a crush on you and she said 'Well, who could blame you?' so I think she does too."

"How well do you know her, Sarah?"

The taller redhead shrugged. "Not all that well, but she's been nice to me, and she's someone you know, so maybe that could be something that would work for you."

"Do you have any idea whether or not we'd be sexually compatible?"

Sarah shrugged with a smile. "It's never come up, so I don't have any idea."

"Possible challenges?"

"Two writers in the same room might always want to be editing one another?" she giggled. "I genuinely don't know, Andy. But I thought it was a good idea so I wanted to suggest it."

"Fair enough then."

"One last thing before I go," Sarah said, pushing the button to advance the screen to an image that read "next: Sheridan" on it in a frilly cursive font. "I was telling you at lunch that I think bringing Maya Steele into the family is a great idea, so I wanted to stress that while I haven't changed my mind on that, I \*did\* forget to tell you not to ever get into a drinking contest with her. Your head will hurt and your liver will be punching you for days."

"And yet, you still think I should bring her in?"

Sarah nodded emphatically. "Maya's a bad ass, and you need someone as direct as her in your life. I mean, Neeks handles most of that, but really, Maya's got her beat hands down."

"Are you trying to convince me \*not\* to bring her in? Someone more direct than Niko?"

"It'll be fine, Andy," Sarah said, flipping her hair with one hand. "I already know you're going to pick her, so trust me when I tell you that is the correct decision to make."

"And if that isn't the decision I'm making?"

"Then you're being a fucking idiot and you'd better come to your senses before your \*final\* decision, because no man should be allowed to be that fucking stupid. Obvs. But I know you're totally not and you're really just fucking with me, and that's cool," she said as she walked around the table before leaning down and kissing him firmly, pressing her lips against his for a long moment. "Have fun with the rest of the pitches!"

As Sarah walked out of the room, Aisling shook her head while sending the message to Sheridan for her to make her way up to the pitch room. "It can be very hard to remember she's been nominated for an Oscar when she acts like that," the smaller redhead said. "But I guess it's part of her 'girl next door' charm. Anyway, what did you think? You're not mad about Sarah pitching Larissa?"

"Why would I be mad?" he laughed. "I just don't know that it'd work. But it's something I'll definitely consider when I'm doing my deliberations, especially since Sarah seems to think Larissa might be into me. I never got that vibe, but—"

"But it's well established you barely know a woman's into you even when she's sitting in your lap and whispering into your ear that she wants you to fuck her brains out."

Andy gave her a disapproving smirk. "I'm not \*that\* bad."

"You're not far from it, anyway."

Sheridan came strolling into the room, wearing what she had at lunch, far less dressed up than most of the girls, wearing jean shorts over a leotard or a swimsuit, her frizzy blonde hair mostly tucked back, damp but not soaked. Andy half wondered if she'd been swimming in the pool while she'd been waiting. Sheridan had been known to enjoy swimming, even though the weather was dipping into the

cooler side. Since her job as a performer was on hold until the pandemic was under control, she'd done her best to find ways to occupy her time.

"Heya stud," she said with a wink as she wandered over to sit down in the chair. "I'm not gonna ask you if you've made decisions yet, but I am gonna ask how you're feeling about the process so far. It's hella cool that you're giving us input into that, and it's a big deal, so thanks for that. Anyway, I think you're gonna find my friend a wild ride."

"Let's get to it then," Andy said.

Sheridan picked up the remote and pushed the button as the screen popped to life, a image of Sheridan sitting with a young woman in her late 20s or early 30s, with jet black hair and skin the color of desert sand. She was a little more on the plump side, with a mischievous smile. They were sitting at a wood table on the patio of some local bar.

"This is my friend Tala Jordan," the blonde said. "Her parents immigrated here from Iran in 1970. We met in high school and became besties. She's the one who talked me into quitting smoking. We were roommates in college down at Santa Cruz and we've been roomies on and off again since we both graduated in 2012."

"Why do I feel like I've seen her somewhere before?" Andy said, the woman's face looking vaguely familiar in a way he simply couldn't place.

"You go to a lot of concerts, Andy?"

"Some."

"Well, then she's probably been singing with an opening band you've seen at a concert." Sheridan pushed the button and the image advanced, showing Tala playing an electronic keyboard on a stand, and singing into a microphone. He recognized the stage as The Independent, a small but influential club in San Francisco that also tended to get some big name acts. "Boom Goes The Dynamite, Castle Idea, The Grendelles, Lowball Skyscrapers, Girls Gone Danger... hell, probably at least half a dozen more that I can't remember. Every time I talk to her, it seems like she's got some new band she's playing with."

"What does she do when she's not playing in a band?" Aisling asked. Andy was certain she probably already knew the answer to the question and was simply asking for his benefit.

"She's a carpenter," Sheridan said, pushing a button to advance to a slide of Tala working on a desk. "More specifically, she's a cabinetmaker, most of the time, anyway. She and a couple of her friends opened their own custom furniture house about five years ago, and people really like their stuff, because that's kept her afloat while living in the Bay, although to be fair, she's also gotten a very specific kind of clientele as of late."

"What's that?" Andy asked.

Sheridan pushed the button again, and the new image showed Tala sitting on top of a desk with dozens of shelves, a hutch atop it that had a number of closed doors on it. "She's become a puzzle maker. Custom puzzle boxes, puzzle desks, that kind of thing. It's a weird little niche, but it pays incredibly well, and she's made stuff for people like Kris Angel, Neil Patrick Harris and Elon Musk. Those projects usually take a month or two's worth of work, but they pay for an entire year or two's worth of mortgage, so she's okay with it."

"Fascinating. What's she like as a person?"

"She's wicked smart and very funny." She pushed the button and the image advanced again, showing the two of them standing on the Golden Gate bridge, their backs to the Bay. It must have been extremely windy on the day the picture was taken, because both women were doing their best to keep their hair from flying all over the place. Both girls were clearly laughing hysterically. "Some people think she can come across as a bit mean, but they just don't recognize she's only busting their balls a bit. She always told me that the Persian sense of humor can go over the heads of people not smart enough to keep up with her, and that she doesn't mind. She's a lot like Niko, and considering how much you and she get along, I think you'll dig Tala loads."

Andy nodded. "Do you think she and I would be sexually compatible? What's she want out of a man?"

Sheridan grinned from ear-to-ear and Andy immediately wondered what he'd said to trigger such a reaction. "If you had asked me two weeks ago, I would've given you an entirely different answer than the one I can give you today, dude. So when I told her about the whole imprinting process, and all about the accident we had with me getting primed early, I expected to see Tala be hellra concerned about me, but instead, she got this freaky look on her face, and I realized about half way through my story that she was jilling off, while I told her about it. It turned her on so much she just couldn't help it," the blonde said, licking her lips with wolfish delight. "I'd never known before, but she's always had this pheromone fetish. Like, she gets turned on by the idea of being so turned on that she doesn't have control of her self, that she's turned into some carnal unstoppable beast who is going to fuck even if she has to move hell to get it."

Andy swallowed a mouthful of air awkwardly.

"When I told her about your first encounter with Piper, I swear to god, she fucking came just \*hearing\* about it. She wasn't even touching herself at that point, 'cause she was holding the phone with both hands. I asked her about it, and she said she was kinda embarrassed to talk about it, but admitted that it'd always been a fetish of hers. I found out all of this yesterday when I called to ask her if she'd be interested in me putting her forward for a chance to join you."

"And I take it that the tales of the imprinting process only enhanced her interest?"

"Totes. Obvs she wants to be here, but she also wants you to edge her all the time."

"What do you mean \*edge\* her?"

"She asked what happens when you try and stretch out the amount of time a girl needs to get her dose, and I told her your story about you and Lauren, and she wants to constantly be going towards that state. That turns her on like you wouldn't imagine. So seems to me like you get multiple ticks in the win column by bringing her here."

"Possible challenges?"

"Well, being quarantined in New Eden's gonna be rough on her, because she's big into spending time with her parents. She moved into their house when the pandemic started, and I know when people come into New Eden, they can't leave until the pandemic's over, so you'll need to make sure she understands that, but I'm betting the idea of getting to live out her number one sexual fantasy, like, all the fucking time might be enough to convince her that her folks will be okay on their own."

"How close are you two, Sheridan?"

"She's, like, one of my best friends, maybe my best friend, actually. I think you'd like her a lot. I know we haven't spent, like, loads of time together, but she really wants this, and you've got me, and you seem to like me well enough, so maybe you'd like her too, y'know?"

Andy nodded with a smile. "Okay then. Thanks for talking to me about her, and I'll be letting everyone know tomorrow what my decisions are."

"Yep, I got the spiel on the rules from Ash before we got started, so I know how it works," she said, pressing the button to advance the screen once more, bold white letters reading "next: Taylor" on the black background. "Just remember, while we all gotta live with'em, you're the one who's gonna have to fuck'em every couple of weeks, so don't take anyone you don't wanna dip your wick into on the regular, y'hear?"

With that, Sheridan headed out of the room, leaving Andy and Aisling alone in the room again. "I didn't even know there was a fetish for that kind of thing."

"You live near San Francisco, love," Aisling teased. "You more than anyone should know there's a fetish for every kind of thing. And nobody's judging. If it's not your thing, no problem. If it turns you on thinking about it, no problem. To thine own self be true, like Polonius said."

"You know it's meant to be bad advice when he says it in Hamlet, right?" Andy replied.

"Don't be such a geezer about it."

"I'm a writer, Ash. Being a geezer about the English language is right there in the job description."

Taylor knocked on the door, and had to be told twice to come in. She was actually dressed in clothing now, Lauren obviously having made an exception for the day, as the girl was still in her time of punishment. Andy wasn't sure that Lauren would make her go the whole month, but as of yet, the Aussie had shown no sign of suddenly doling out leniency. Taylor had on a pair of gym shorts and a white muscle t-shirt that did very little to mask her impressive bust, but her hair was drawn back into a modest ponytail, high on her head, done up in a scrunchy. "So I'm the last one, huh?" she said, as she came into the room, looking at the chair then looking at Andy expectantly.

"Sit, sit," Andy said. "If she's letting you get dressed to pitch, I'm sure she's fine with you sitting in a chair while you go through the whole process. And if she wasn't, I'm certain she would have said something."

"Yeah, I guess you're right," Taylor said, finally moving to sit down in the chair. "Uh, hi! I did want to be sure and say thank you for letting us all do this, sir. I know you've been a little overwhelmed by all the female attention you've been getting, but it's very kind of you to allow us to suggest our friends to you, to make this home a little more like home."

"Just as long as none of you get mad if I don't choose the people you pitch," Andy said.

Taylor's bright blue eyes widened and she shook her head. "Oh, no \*no\*, sir. Miss Aisling made it abundantly clear what she'd do to us if we did, and none of us want to incur her wrath!" The blonde giggled a little, as Andy saw Aisling shake her head out of the corner of her eye. "It's an honor just to be nominating, sir. Which brings us to my friend Natalie."

The blonde picked up the remote and pressed the button as the image changed before them from the black screen to an image of Taylor and another girl standing in front of the Leaning Tower of Pisa, doing that cliched stance that it seemed like every tourist was obliged to it. The two girls in the picture made rather a stark contrast to each other. While they were both blonde, Natalie was tall and thin compared to Taylor's short and curvy. Natalie was dressed in a summer dress that hung perhaps a bit too loosely on her. "Nat and I met in junior high and have been besties since then. After we graduated high school, we went and took a trip through Europe together, which my parents paid for, because Natalie doesn't come from money, where as my folks work for Bank of America in upper management."

"You said you were twenty-five, so that means you've known her, what, a dozen years or so?"

Taylor nodded. "Something like that. She was the first person I came out to as bisexual, and while Nat didn't feel the same way, she was super supportive of me. I didn't want to fuck her anyway; I just wanted someone to talk to about it, and Nat didn't judge me, just like I didn't judge her when she let me in on her big secret a few years ago."

"You don't have to share someone else's secret with me, Taylor. I wouldn't ask you to violate someone else's trust."

Taylor smiled at him warmly. "I know you wouldn't but it's okay for me to tell you, because she told me it's okay to tell you." She picked up the remote and clicked the button again, and suddenly the image changed in a startling and dramatic way. The tall, leggy blonde had traded the sundress for a silver bikini, six inch clear heels and a steel pole behind her. "Natalie has also been going by the name Mercedes four nights a week at Centerfolds in San Francisco. A lot of dancers insist you call them exotic dancers, but Nat's always been okay with being called a stripper."

Andy's eyebrow raised a bit. "Okay, I definitely didn't see this one coming."

"So I'm sure you've heard the stories before if you've ever been in a strip club, but Natalie really is stripping to pay her way through school. Medical school, to be exact," Taylor said with a giggle. "She's been told a bunch of times that she could make all that money faster if she got a boob job, but Natalie's happy with her body, so she's told those people to fuck off for years now. And besides, people say she kinda looks like Charlize Theron, and if she strapped a couple of grapefruit to her chest, she'd

lose that.”

The bubbly fireplug blonde pushed the button to show Natalie with her arms holding onto the pole, her legs raised into the air in a wide V, like she was about to clack the heels of those shoes together with a thunderous crack.

“She's in year one of med school now, having had to take a little time off to earn the money to pay for premed and med school. She'd love to just be able to focus on school and not have to be dancing at the club once the quarantine's done. But, shit, she's been hit hard by the fact that she can't dance to earn, and the bills just keep piling up.”

Taylor pushed the button once more, changing the image to show Natalie from behind, wearing a plaid mini skirt, looking over her shoulder at the camera, and on the small of her back, just above her waist, was a single line of script. On further investigation, it brought a grin to Andy's face.

“I take it the tattoo meets with your approval?”

“I mean, I can't tell you what it says, but I do recognize elvish script when I see it. So she's a member of the geek tribe then, I take it?”

“She is, but she did want me to tell you that she's never read your books before. She's heard of you, but her first love has always been Tolkien. The tattoo says 'Fire will only forge me stronger' in Elvish, or, well, she claims it does. I dunno. I can't read it, so I have to trust her. She and I talked about it, and she is going to make it a point to read your books, but she doesn't want you to think she's a superfan like Sarah is.”

Andy laughed a little at that. “I don't think I know \*anyone\* who's the level of superfan about my books that Sarah is, so that's fine. Sexually, do you think she and I would be compatible?”

“I don't really know, sir,” Taylor sighed. “She and I don't talk about sex that much. I know she makes sort of yipping chipmunk noises when she's really worked up, but that's just from being roommates for a while. She's straight, so she's unlikely to want to play with the other girls, but I think she deserves a chance at happiness.”

“Any other things you can think of that might be dealbreakers?”

“I mean, she's going to be studying all the time, because she very much wants to be a doctor, and I know doctors can keep some weird hours.”

He nodded, flipping his notepad face down, as he stood up. “Well, thanks for taking the time to share your friend with me, and for having the courage to do this.”

“Oh, it really didn't take that much courage, sir,” Taylor said, blushing a little.

“It did,” Andy corrected, “whether you know it or not. As someone whose gotten more than two hundred rejection letters in his life, it takes guts to put yourself out there. I'll have my decision tomorrow.”

Taylor stood up and moved over to hug him, her arms clinging to him firmly for a long moment before she pulled back. “You should know, sir, that we're all very lucky we found you, or that you found us. We could've been saddled with somebody like these assholes Lauren tells me parade around their trophy wives like chattel, but you're so much better than them. Thank you again for that.”

Andy rubbed his hand against Taylor's back. “You're very welcome. Do me a favor, would you? Round up all the girls and have them meet me in the big downstairs living room, okay?”

“You got it, sir.” Taylor leaned away, stopped, leaned back, grabbed Andy and pulled him down so she could kiss them, then giggled and scampered off.

“Why are you gathering everyone together? I thought you were going to sleep on it before you made any decisions,” Aisling asked, looking as Andy picked up his notepad, as well as the folded piece of paper with Ash's predictions on it.

“Oh, I am, but if I'm going to call Xander tomorrow and fill him in on everything, I figured we could take a group photo of the whole household and send it to him ahead of the chat.”

The Irish redhead stuck her tongue out at him. “You're a stinker, but I love it.”

A few minutes later, the living room in question was filled with people, and Andy decided to



give a few short words to everyone.

“Okay everyone, I want to thank you all for being so respectful in sharing your friends with me, trying to play matchmaker and to offer them for consideration in being invited to our home. I'm going to let myself think about it for a while, but sometime tomorrow, I will come down here and post a list of who's being invited to the house, the way the editor-in-chief of my college newspaper used to announce next semester's staff. Once the list is posted, those of you who know people who are going to be invited can put together a short video to send to your friend, telling them why you think they should come and join us here. Now, obviously, any of them can feel free to say no, so I will also have two names listed as alternate, and if you're friends with the alternates, you may want to put together a short video invite, just in case one of my initial selections says no.

“I'm not going to harbor any ill will if someone declines our invitation, and neither should you. This world, our world, it's a lot for anyone to take in, and if someone doesn't want to get on the rollercoaster with us, well, that's entirely up to them. But in closing, let me just say something from the movie 'Roxanne,' okay? 'I would rather be with the people of this house... than with the finest people in the world!' Viva la familia!”

There was a rousing cheer followed by applause, and afterwards, everyone started to gather up for the photo. Katie suggested she take the picture, since she expected that she, Jenny and Nicolette wouldn't be in it, but Andy refused, saying that while he fully respected they were the staff, they were still going to be in a photo showing his whole household, something Katie found herself unable to disagree with, so a tripod was set up, and everyone got into place.

In the center of the photo was Andy, sitting on the couch, with Niko immediately on one side of him, Aisling immediately on the other. Sitting on the floor directly in front of him, Emily leaned up against one of his legs, Sarah on the other, each of the two holding hands with Niko and Ash, arms criss crossing to almost lock Andy in. Lauren sat to the right of Niko, with Taylor on her leg, underneath her arm. Sheridan and Piper sat to the left of Aisling, squeezed in on the couch. On the floor, Hannah and Asha bookended the two actresses, while Katie and Jenny sat on one arm of the couch, and Nicolette perched on the other.

It took a handful of attempts to get the image framed right, to make sure nobody was blinking or frowning, but eventually, all fourteen of them were smiling and looking at the camera. After that, Katie insisted on getting lots of photos of different combinations of the girls, mostly with Andy, but sometimes without.

Andy wondered a little where the hell they were going to take the next one, when the house was finally filled out for good.

(Next time, the results are in and Andy's decisions are announced. Feedback always welcome – [corruptingpower@aol.com](mailto:corruptingpower@aol.com) )