

Chapter 8 – Not Just a Boys club

It was already late in the evening when they finished planning their break into the seven's tower. Annie and Hughie were still sitting on the couch at the living room. Butcher and Mallory were working on the finer details of the plan somewhere outside the house, while Frenchie and Kimiko were in the basement preparing all the weapons they could find, just in case. MM went to play with his daughter and wife in one of the guest rooms, and their parents were in the kitchen, helping each other prepare dinner for a large group. So both of them have privacy for the first time since this morning.

Annie had her head on Hughie's chest, eyes closed while Hughie was hugging her close to his warm body. *"That's nice. It's been one hell of the day. I felt like I was on a roller coaster for the entire time."*

Hughie chuckled and said a bit sadly *"I feel like I caused most of it. I will be honest with you, I really didn't imagine we will be here."*

Annie smirked and asked *"A mansion in the middle of a forest, hiding from pretty much all of the US? Seems about right to me considering everything you told me."*

Hughie out right laughed at that *"You know that not what I meant. I mean look at us now, cuddling at a stranger's house, planning how to bring down your ex-employer. Today morning you almost blasted me with your power and handed me over to said employer."*

Annie winced and mumbled into his chest *"Sorry about that it was real..."*

Hughie cut it off by rubbing her back softly and saying *"Hey I get it. I deserved it. That's why I'm surprised you forgive me to this degree so fast."*

Annie sighed but didn't move from her position when she responded *"After everything that happened today Hughie that's the only thing that make sense. This day was horrible, but no matter what you didn't give up on me. When I was angry with you, you were patient and gave me all the time I need to process things. When Vought came after me and my mom, you came to help us and made sure we get to a safe place. When I was angry at mom and ready to just move on, you opened yourself to me so I could learn from your mistakes. And when there wasn't any hope, you come up with a plan that can change everything for everyone."*

Hughie sighed and looked down at the blond hair covering his chest area *"Of course I will do all of this for you Annie, I love you. I didn't expect any shortcut for our relationship."*

Annie raised her head to look at his blue eyes, her own shining with happiness despite everything she went through today *"I know Hughie. And that's why it's mean so much to me. Because I was wrong before, you aren't the best thing to happen to me in this city..."* Hughie frowned at that but said nothing, so she finished her thought *"You are the best thing that ever happened to me."*

Hughie had happy tears filling his eyes, so Annie decided to change the subject *"Hey, why Butcher hate supes so much?"*

Hughie stared at the large windows that provided a view of the now completely dark forest, he almost expected Butcher to jump at the question and gave a sarcastic response. As he didn't Hughie told Annie *"He was married. Homelander tricked her into a private meeting... then he raped her."* Annie reared back in shock, probably the situation hitting a little too close to home. Hughie released a sad breath before saying *"That's not the worst. A little while later she went to central park, sat on a bench for hours before walking away and nobody saw her again. Either Vought killed her, or she killed herself. Anyway, Butcher blames Homelander and as result supes at large."*

Annie shook her head *"That's so sad and explain so much. I just wish he will give me a chance, he seemed to be fine with Kimiko and she a supe too."*

Hughie gave her a soft smile *"It took him a while to get there. And he will see you for who you really are too in time. But don't expect too much of an attitude change, he is an asshole to everybody, all the time."*

Annie frowned, missing the joke that brought a smile to his handsome face *"So why do you care about him so much?"*

Hughie shrugged *"He doesn't show it well, but he cares too."* When all she did was raise a skeptical eyebrow, he explained *"He could have driven off believing he got everything he could from me, but he stayed to made sure I will be fine. He got into a fight he knew he had no hope winning to give me a chance to get away. He took me somewhere safe from Vought when he could leave me to burn. And that was just our first day together. He might usually show it in the most crappy way, but he does care."*

Annie nodded slowly *"I suppose so."*

Hughie shoved her playfully *"Am I not enough for you miss?"*

Annie just smirked back while replying in a snobby voice *"Oh you know me... Always have to be the lovable center of..."*

"Starlight!" Before Annie could finish her teasing, a young voice ran into the living room calling her. Janine stopped before the couch they were sitting on, giving them both an odd look before smiling back at Annie *"Do you have time to see my Starlight toys now?"*

Annie giggled. Gave Hughie a kiss on the cheek and stood up looking at the kid with wide smile *"Sure sweetie, lead the way. And by the way, you can call me Annie, all my friends do."*

Janine squealed in delight before leading Annie deeper into the house. The last thing Hughie heard from the two of them was Janine's stage whisper to Annie *"Psst. Do you like him, like mommy like daddy?"*

Hughie wasn't sure what was Annie's reaction as at that moment they left his view and earshot, but he could feel his face burning.

Hughie walked into the Kitchen seeing his dad and Donna getting the table ready while finishing the food. *"Can I help somehow?"*

His dad turned to him with a smile pointing at the counter not too far from him and saying *"You can set all those plates, forks and cups son. But try and be careful, we are guests here, it will be a shame if you dropped one and break it."* Hughie sent his dad an offended look, even though he knew his dad has good reason for concern.

After the table was ready Hughie took a step back to admire his work when he heard someone clearing their throat behind him. He turned to see Annie's mom looking at him with a smile *"Mind talking with me for a moment Hughie?"*

Confused, Hughie nodded and said *"Sure Mrs. J... I mean Donna."*

Donna gave him another smile. And suddenly Hughie could see the striking resemblance between the mother and daughter. Donna's smile reminded him so much of Annie's that his heart melted, his entire body relaxing.

Donna took one of his hands and led him back toward the table, where they both sat down. *"I wanted to thank you Hughie."* All Hughie could do was giving her a blank look *"For advocating for me with Annie. I was ready to lose my daughter forever, but you talked to her and changed her mind. I never seen anyone do it."* She finished with a small laugh.

Hughie just gave her a small smile *"I didn't really change her mind. Just showed her she had more to gain by giving you a fair chance to explain yourself than lose."*

Donna just shook her head and gently spoke *"It's still more than I feel I deserve. Speaking about it, I was wondering why you spoke for me? I didn't exactly make a good impression in our one meeting."*

Hughie just shrugged as if it was normal behavior for him *"It just like I told Annie, I know the hole a mom can leave in your heart if she is not there. One day her anger could disappear and all she will have is the regret of sending you away without a chance. I never want that for her."* Donna took one of his hands in her, squeezing it.

Hughie relaxed even more before adding *"And this morning I was in the position you are. Annie was so angry with me she was a single breath from blasting me with her powers and was about to arrest me. And look at us now. By giving me an opportunity to explain, we found our way to a point she still willing to accept me. I will be a hypocrite not making sure she gives you the same chance."*

Donna smiled gratefully at him *"Can I ask what you did that caused Annie to be so angry?"*

Hughie shifted uncomfortably, noticing his dad stopped chopping whatever he was working on, obviously trying to listen in. *"I did a lot of terrible things. Remember, the two Vought men? That kind of things. And I didn't tell Annie, but today morning I felt like I couldn't hold it anymore. She... Didn't like it very much."*

Donna patted the hand she held a moment ago in comfort saying *"It seems like there is more to that story, and Annie seem to understand that and forgive you. Which means that I can trust you with her, because I know that you will tell her the truth even if it won't be easy."* Another moment of thought later she added *"By the way, it is another thing I need to thank*

you for. Not many will help a woman that treated them as if they weren't there like that, with a risk for their own life. I can see why Annie loves you. You have the same ideals, even if you go about them in different ways sometimes."

Hughie looked away awkwardly *"Yhea, I am not sure about the loving me part. We fixed most of our issues from this morning, but Annie did have a point. So far she only knew about half of my life, and now that she knows about the other she doesn't condemn it very much. But I love her, and I am willing to wait as long as it takes for her to find a way to love me. And if she decides she can't, well I can't really blame her."*

Hughie felt a little too overwhelmed after his last confession and stood up to leave the kitchen. But Donna caught his hand and told him firmly *"I made a lot of mistakes with Annie; I will not deny it. But I always could see in her eyes what she felt, because she has her dad's eyes. She loves you Hughie. Maybe she is still too confused to admit it even to herself, but please Hughie don't give up on her."*

Hughie smiled at her, unsure of what to think about her take on Annie's love, but her last statement... well he knew what to say to that *"Never."*

With a smile Donna let go of his hand, but just before he could leave she again stopped him *"Your dad is a good man, Hughie, and we are becoming good friends. I know yours and Annie's relationship has a great future. All I am trying to say is, I know I will never be able to fill the hole you mom left. And I know I wasn't a good mom even to the child I do have, but I want to be better for both Annie and you."*

Hughie was shocked and lost for words. He gave the older woman a watery smile before vanishing from the kitchen. He wasn't sure where he was going to, but he needed to be alone right now.

Annie was shocked by Janine's question. She thought about Hughie, about his handsome face, his blue eyes, his soft, sheepish smile and a warmth she never felt before washed over her. She smiled down and the child holding her hand and whispered secretly *"I think I do."*

Janine half giggled and half gagged at the idea, which caused Annie to release a giggle of her own.

About half an hour later she was introduced to all Janine's super-hero collection toys. It was hard to resist tearing the legs off the A-train toy after all the pain he caused Hughie. But Annie was used to keep her smile in any situation, so she kept indulging the kid until Monique came and say it was bedtime. And now Janine is asleep, after a lullaby from Starlight herself, and surrounded by her super-hero toys.

Once they were alone in the corridor MM spoke *"Thank you for doing it for her, she is a big fan. And you have a great voice."*

Annie chuckled *"Thanks. And it's really not a problem. I enjoyed spending time with her, though I could have done without all the supes."*

MM released a heavy sigh *"Yhea I hear you. I really hate she like them so much as well."*

Annie tilted her head, and asked curiously *"Why won't you say something to her? Explain that things are not always as shiny as they seem?"*

MM looked at the wall opposite to the one they were leaning on *"When I was young a supe fight in our neighborhood caused the death of my dad's family, he vowed to bring them to justice. He would sit and write in this old school typing machine, articles after articles trying to expose them for the damage, they are doing without paying the price for them. Each night I would fall asleep to the sound of his typing and every morning I woke up to them."* He paused, seemed to be lost in another world before saying sadly *"Until the morning I didn't hear him. When I came to his office, I found him lying dead on top of his typing machine. They said he died from over taxing himself, but I knew better. There was no paper at the machine, and I couldn't find any of his latest article. The one he said will make people finally stir to the truth. I knew a supe killed my Pa."*

When he turned his head toward her Annie noticed he wasn't looking at her. He was looking over her shoulder at the door to where his daughter was sleeping and said *"He passed his vow to me. It killed him, and looking at our situation it's getting more and more likely it will kill me too. I don't want to pass it on to her, I don't want it to kill her too."*

Annie reached to rub the man's arm in attempt to comfort him *"It has to count for something that he was right. That he fought for something worthy, and you do the same."* Then she looked him at the eyes with resolve and said *"And if I was Janine, I would want to know the truth of my family. She is already involved in this, I think you better explain to her why. I can't tell you want to do with you kid. But my mom lied to me about my nature, and it*

made me make a lot of wrong decision that at the time seemed as the only ones. The truth is not always nice, but it can save a lot of trouble and pain in the long run.” Then she smiled and winked at him before saying *“take a lesson from Hughie. He is crushing it in this department today.”*

MM laughed quietly at that before replying *“I told him once that he is the rain-man of fucking people over. Apparently, that includes himself.”*

Annie raised an eyebrow, smile still on her face *“I’m not sure it’s a compliment.”*

MM shook his head with a smile and said, *“He said the same.”* After a moment of silence, he spoke again *“For what is worth I think the kid is right about your mom.”*

Annie looked surprised *“How did you know about it?”*

MM snorted *“Butcher. He wouldn’t stop to complain about all the mushy stuff he had to endure during the ride.”*

Annie just shook her head with a small grin. But then MM said, *“My dad spent almost all of his week in his writing. But every Sunday after church he would take me to this ice-cream shop and we would stand there until we tasted every single flavor they had. My dad wasn’t perfect, but he spent hours with me every Sunday to show me how much he cared. Think about it. Think if you mom didn’t do the same for you.”*

Annie thought about all the pageants her mother took her own, about the story she told Hughie in the expo, that car. They could fly, but her mom always chose to drive with her. Was it really her way to show she cared? Hughie already proved her that people can show they care in shitty ways sometimes. Case and point Billy Butcher. She will need to talk to her mom and get her side before she could make any decision.

MM stood straight, said *“Don’t know about you kid, but I am starving. I’m in the kitchen, seeing what I can do to move things along.”* Before he was gone from the corridor.

Annie stayed in the corridor for a few minutes longer, processing everything MM said to her.

When she stepped into the living room she saw Butcher standing there just looking towards the kitchen, but don’t moving from his position leaning on the wall.

Deciding it was as good opportunity as any she took a few more steps until she stood next to him.

After another moment they just stood and watch as most of the house guests were preparing the final things for dinner, while joking and smiling together. Annie glanced sideways at Butcher before saying *“You know you can join them instead of creepily watching from here.”*

Butcher just shrugged and responded with *“Not my style love.”*

Annie considered the man for a moment *“I get why you try to keep yourself distant, but you know it won’t help right?”*

Butcher just snorted, before challenging *“What do you think you know? I may just be a professional arsehole.”*

Annie just shrugged and responded casually *“I know about your wife.”* His eyes widened slightly, and he finally turned his stare at her. Seeming to understand his unasked question she just said *“Hughie.”*

“The kid talks too much.” The Brit grumbled.

Annie smiled fondly *“Yhea, sometimes. But he never does it with bad intention.”*

The older man’s eyes seemed to scan her for a moment *“You really love the kid, aren’t you?”*

Annie shrugged a bit awkwardly now, saying *“I’m not sure. I mean I thought I knew Hughie just to learn I knew barely half of him.”*

Annie noticed Butcher seemed to struggle with something before forcing himself to speak *“Look the kid wanted to tell you the truth. He didn’t feel comfortable with everything we did. But I kept making sure he won’t get attached to you in any way I could.”* He paused to mumble under his breath *“lot of good it did me.”* Before continuing *“So don’t blame the kid, he had a fucking hard year.”*

Annie smirked at him and said in a sing song voice *"You do care."* Before returning to being serious *"But really I don't think your wife would want you to keep yourself from the people you care about."*

Butcher laughed without any humor and said *"You and the kid don't know as much as you think you do about me. I was a world class asshole before I met my wife, love."*

Annie looked at him with a frown, before softening her features *"Well if you want to talk about it I can always listen."*

Butcher snorted in return *"Don't hold your breath, shiny."* Then he pushed himself from the wall, towering over her before saying in a hard voice *"I ain't caring what you and the kid do. But if you hurt him, supe or not I will kill you."*

Annie gave him a small smile *"Again, creepy. But, caring."*

The Brit allowed a small smile to stretch the corner of his lips *"You ain't so bad Starlight. At least for a supe."*

Annie smirked at him *"And as assholes go, you are the most caring I met. I prefer Annie by the way."*

Butcher smiled turned to a full asshole smirk when he spoke *"Don't push it love."*

Their banter was ended when Frenchie called them to the table.

As they sat and ate together Annie felt she belonged with this group more than she ever felt with the seven.