

Quaranteam: Book 2

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Chapter Three

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It was incredibly uncommon for Andy to get up before dawn, but this particular morning his body just would not let him sleep, and he knew exactly why. He was going to have to have one of the more difficult conversations he'd ever had to have in his life. Skipping it, however, would've been endlessly worse.

The morning sun was just threatening to peek over the hills and nobody was awake inside of the house, not even the normal early morning risers like Lauren and Piper. He'd extricated himself from Jade's bed without rousing her, and nobody so far had been woken by his wandering the halls, not even the cats, who would normally come and investigate anytime someone was awake when they shouldn't be, especially Andy.

He was tempted to go and have a think up on the balcony, but he'd been relying on that spot too much lately. He decided to walk out into the back yard and wander the big expanse of green. He stopped to crouch down and examine the lawn itself, wondering if there were sprinklers or if it would turn into a large field of withered tan when there's no rain. There was something so strange about having a giant lawn when he'd spent over the last decade in a tiny little condo without any grass to his name. It had been raining lately, thankfully, but if the drought sprung up again, he might have to talk to Katie about transitioning to something less water intensive.

When Andy stood up, he glanced around the backyard slowly and chuckled as he spotted Lauren on a yoga mat over by the edge of the pool, doing slow stretches, the kind he'd seen Sheridan teaching her, although it didn't seem like any of the other girls were anywhere to be seen. It looked like she'd *just* gotten there, so maybe she'd walked out and just not seen him, not like he was ever up this early ever anyway.

Since the decision had been made that next year there would be an all-female NFL season and Lauren had been convinced to join the new female 49ers team playing fullback, she'd been taking her own workout almost religiously. Lauren had told the family she wasn't sure she wanted to commit to playing for years and years, but taking a turn for at least a year was an opportunity she simply couldn't pass up.

"The hell, Andy?" Lauren said as she spotted him, a broad smile on her face. "What the bugger are you doing up this early?"

"Shit on my mind, Lauren," he sighed, strolling over towards her, each footstep a little heavier than the one before it. "Shit. On. My. Mind."

The tall blonde Aussie nodded as she walked over and wrapped her arms around him to give him a firm hug, her hand on his back as she leaned down and gave him a tender kiss. "Whatever it is, Niko's got that same weight about her. Is it going to be with us for a long while?"

"Nah," he said with a cheeky grin. "By the end of the day, I'll at least have clarity on it, and once we're there, then at least I'll know what I'm dealing with. It's the not knowing that's getting me wound up. How's training going?"

"We're talking about you, boyo."

"Mmmm," Andy said. "I'm deflecting. I'm good at that. I'd rather talk about you."

"It's a bit daft, having a bunch of sheilas in pads and helmets trying to play football, considering they're teaching us the rules of the game as much as they are how to play it. But I suppose we'll make it work in the end, one way or another. To me, it feels like everyone's just clutching for some feeling of normality in this new and crazy world."

"That they are, Laur, that they are." He pulled away from the hug and let out another sigh. "You good? You need a top off or anything?"

“Strewth, Andy, you *are* having a tough time with whatever it is you’re thinking about, aren’tcha? You, me and Taylor had a go ‘round just a couple of days ago. I thought it was pretty memorable, I did, so I’m a little worried if you’ve forgotten it already.”

“Right. Sorry, sorry. Let’s just say I have an incredibly big ask for one of the fiancées and I’m worried how she’s going to take it,” he said, folding his fingertips together before stretching his arms above his head.

“Is the ask for Niko or Piper?” Lauren asked him.

“Yeah, why?”

“They’re both walking this way now.”

Andy glanced over his shoulder to see the two women making their way over towards him. Instantly from Niko’s expression, he could tell she’d been true to her word and hadn’t told Piper anything, and that it was clearly eating her up inside. “Morning ladies,” Andy said to them with his best optimistic smile. “How are you both this fine morning?”

Piper and Niko were both dressed in workout gear, thick leggings and baggy t-shirts, each of them with their hair put up, the tall white brunette from Florida a sharp contrast to the short mixed race girl from the reservation in South Dakota. “Morning babe,” Piper said to him, as Niko shot him a sympathetic look. “Neeks says we need to have a chat?”

“Yeah, that’s certainly one way of putting it,” he agreed. “You mind skipping your morning workout so you and I can have a private chat?”

Piper’s face looked a little crestfallen as she immediately braced for bad news. “Did my dad die or something?” With the number of men that had been killed in the past year by DuoHalo, it was an entirely reasonable assumption that someone had died, even if it felt like the world at large was starting to get a handle on the pandemic.

“Nothing that bad,” he said with a smile. “Nobody’s dead, but by the end of the conversation, I might find myself wishing that *I* was. C’mon, let’s walk and talk so we can figure this out.”

As soon as Piper was standing next to him, she kissed his forehead, something he regularly did to her when she was worked up or stressed out. “Chin up, Andy. Whatever it is, we’ll get through it.”

“Oh, I know. It’s just going to suck when you hear what I’ve got to tell you.”

“Don’t forget, you’ve got to go meet Mali this afternoon as well,” Niko said.

“Right. Right. The woman who doesn’t want to talk to me until she’s imprinted on me. How could I forget?”

“It’ll be fine, Andy, relax,” Piper said. “Now what’s up and why do you need to talk to me about it first before the whole family?”

The two of them walked into the house and headed into Andy’s upstairs office. With the discovery of the hidden basement, Andy now had two separate offices he could work in, but the upstairs one was a little homier and easier for them to sit and chat. Andy moved to sit down on one end of the couch against the side of the room and Piper sat on the other end.

“So we’ve been mandated that we have to add another member to the house,” he said, reaching over to take one of Piper’s hands, holding it within his own. “And it has to be a member of the New Daughters of the Revolution.”

“Under no circumstances is Hope coming into this fucking house, Andy,” Piper snarled. “Nor that bitch Rachel.”

“No no, we’ve talked about your time over at Covington’s enough that I wouldn’t dare suggest that kind of thing. We can pick any one of the people from the three houses, but we have had one person express personal interest in joining the house.”

Piper’s eyes narrowed a little. “Who?”

“Melody Park, Covington’s former bodyguard.”

Andy braced himself for a shout that never came, because instead Piper simply offered a nonjudgmental, “Huh.”

He looked at her face, trying to find that expression of rage or anger that he thought he'd find there and instead saw a rather quizzical look instead. That left him a little off-balance. "Huh? That's it? You're not going to scream and shout about her asking to join us?"

Piper offered him a tender smile, squeezing his fingertips in her own. "You were worried about me flipping out, weren't you?"

"Well, not as much as I would've been if I had to pitch Hope or Rachel to you."

The athlete nodded. "God help whoever gets stuck with one of the two of them."

Andy's eyebrows bounced in amusement. "Phil's getting stuck with Rachel, actually, so I'll tell him you send them your prayers."

Piper blanched with an embarrassed sort of derpy smile. "Better him than us, I guess."

"So tell me about your experience with Melody Park," Andy said to her.

"Well, she was there during my time over at Covington's house, but she sort of really wasn't *there* if you know what I mean."

"I don't, actually," Andy told her. "Give me a good picture of who this woman is and what you thought of her during your time over there."

"So the thing about Melody is that she wasn't really much of an active hand in what they did to me under Covington's watch, but she was around for a lot of it. I mean, she caught me and hauled me back to the room the one time I tried to escape, but even as rough as she was with me that whole time, she was also working to make sure she didn't do any real damage. I didn't feel like Covington had ordered her to do that and it was just something she'd chosen to do. And there was once where we had a conversation and she told me that Covington was going to win out in the end, and if I'd just go along with it, I wouldn't be suffering as much as I was. And it wasn't a spiteful tone, more... sad. I think that before me, she genuinely thought it wasn't possible to resist Covington and what he'd done to all of them. She... she looked at me like I was someone getting mad at the weather. Or the seasons."

"Knowing what she did about DuoHalo and the Quaranteam serum, she might have believed in that so badly that seeing you resist felt like you were only making things worse for yourself," he said. "I know a lot of the NDR felt like they simply didn't have any recourse other than the one they eventually took. They were pushed into a corner where they couldn't take being with their assigned partner anymore but didn't want to murder anyone to get out from under it."

"Did she send a message?"

"She did. It's a video file, but I haven't watched it yet, simply because if you wanted to shut it down entirely sight unseen, I didn't want you to feel bad about it."

"Alright, let's take a look at it."

Andy turned on the television in his office and connected to it from his phone before pulling up the video message from Melody that the General had sent over. It was filmed, hilariously enough, in the same room in Covington's house where he'd played poker a little more than a month ago. Melody was sat in the dealer's seat at the very poker table that had turned everything in his life upside down. The look on the woman's face could only be described as some combination of exhaustion and shame. She was dressed in a loose-fitting black silk blouse which she had the top few buttons undone of. Andy imagined several of the women of the NDR had recorded similar videos, pitches to convince those households they felt most comfortable with that they wouldn't be harmful to those people already in them. He'd have to ask Phil to show him the one that Rachel had sent them. Andy lifted his phone up and clicked on the play button as the video file sprung to life.

"So, this message is for Piper Brown and her fiancé Andy Rook. I'm sure I'm not a face you expected to see again, Piper, but I wanted to reach out to you because, well, this revolution wouldn't have happened without you, and I... I wanted to find some way to make up for my transgressions."

Piper reached over and touched the button to pause the message on Andy's phone. "This... this isn't at all what I expected it to be."

"Let's watch the whole thing first," Andy suggested, "and then we can watch it again multiple

times if we need clarification.”

“Okay,” Piper said, tapping the play button once more.

“Before you came to Covington’s house, we’d... we’d all forgotten what it was like to resist. I’d tried, like you did, to not get sucked into Covington’s gravity, to not bend to his will, but in the end, I’m afraid I just wasn’t as strong as you were. I made it to day eight and then I cracked, beaten down by the pain and suffering and betrayal of my own body. I gave in. To my great and almighty shame, I gave in. I fucking hated myself for it, but I didn’t see any other option. And I somehow convinced myself if I couldn’t do it, it couldn’t be done. And on day eight, *your* day eight, I stood behind Covington as he came to you, and I was ready to watch you fail, to prove that I hadn’t been weak, and instead, you reached out and slapped him.”

On the screen, Melody looked down at her hands for a long moment, wringing them together atop the table, before looking back up at the camera, almost willing herself to carry on talking.

“I don’t know if that means you were stronger or I was weaker or maybe I just didn’t have the degree of self-faith that you did. But regardless of how, you got out. And at that point, I think all of us, the women Covington had forced to be subjugated to his will, we just wanted that. We wanted *out*. We were prepared to go the hard route, too. By any means necessary. With all of us, to a woman, willing to end Covington’s life if it meant we could get free of him. Rachel knew the science behind the only possible way to get reassigned, or, at least we *thought* she did. She told us the only way we were going to be free of Arthur was to kill him, at which point we could be bonded to someone else. We were getting close to doing that thing that but then a rumor started circulating around the base, that there might be some other way to reassign people. One that didn’t involve killing anyone. It was just plausible enough to give us pause.”

Melody inhaled a deep breath and then let it out. She seemed like she was uncomfortable talking this much all at once, but that she realized this was her one shot to make a case for herself.

“Now I’m the kind of person who’s gotten blood on her hands more than a few times over the years. I was a Ranger. There were times where the jobs that needed doing weren’t the kind of jobs anyone liked having done, where you had to blur the line between civilian and enemy combatant, between right and wrong, until all that remained was a narrow path, a tightrope you found yourself laser focused on because to glance to your left or right would spell out immediate death or damnation.”

Andy could see the woman was tired, and wondered how far in to their last stand the video had been recorded. He’d wager that the video was less than 24 hours old, and had probably been filmed yesterday morning. The Air Force had sent in food and water during the negotiations, but they’d still been tense as hell, and Andy had heard multiple times from Phil that even the simple exchange of basic resources had nearly resulted in gunfights, as the Air Force was eager to have the whole matter wrapped up quietly and neatly, and the New Daughters of the Revolution refused to relent on nearly any of their demands.

“With a path out that didn’t involve bloodshed, I wanted to take that if at all possible. Not just for me, but for all of us. I’m not close with any of the other women here in Covington’s house, but I don’t want anyone to have unnecessary blood on their hands, friend or no. So, we decided to give the Air Force a chance to make things right. All that said, none of us women fully trust the Air Force to do the right thing. That’s why you’re getting involved, Mr. Rook – because you’ve sort of been mixed up in this whole mess since the beginning, and for the most part, you’ve seemed to stumble into doing generally right and noble things. I’d... I’d like to be a part of that. And I’d like the chance to spend part of my life learning from Piper, learning how to be better and believe in myself more.”

It was odd, Andy thought, but as much as Melody spent her time looking at the camera, when it came to talking about Piper, she would often avert her gaze a bit, as if she still bore some shame with her about her inability to stop Covington.

“I’m sure you will have terms and conditions to which you’ll allow me within your house, and just know as long as they won’t harm anyone else, I’ll agree to them. Want me to wear a ball gag for

the first month? You got it. Want me to revise that tattoo on my back to have Andy's name on it? I'll do it. I don't care what it takes. I'm not going to fail again, so whatever obstacles you put in my way, I assure you, I will overcome them and will triumph in the face of adversity. When we saw that piece on you all on 60 Minutes, you all looked... *fuck* you looked so fucking *happy*. Katie Couric gave you every chance to call out Andy for misbehaving, and instead you just made it clear that things were going fantastically. Like, I know what a fake fucking smile looks like, and you were genuine, Piper. All I'm asking is for a chance to get in on that. I feel like I've got a lot to offer the Rook family – I'm an excellent soldier and bodyguard, and if it comes down to my life or Andy's, well, I'm going to put myself in the line of fire each and every time."

A single tear formed beneath one of Melody's eyes, and she reached up to swipe it away, as if being caught in a moment of weakness physically hurt her.

"Look, I haven't got shit left in my life, okay? My mom died of cancer about six years ago, and my father and my two brothers were early casualties to DuoHalo, so I've got survivor's guilt, complicated even more by the fact that I was one of the goddamn *bad guys* for a while, oppressing my fellow women when I should've been helping them to stand strong. We didn't form a bond with each other here. We were all too angry and scared to relate to each other as human beings. I gotta get past that, and I'm hoping you two will teach me how to do that. If you tell me 'no,' I'll understand, and I'll probably just let myself die off once we turn Covington in. They tell me they haven't really tested to see what happens if a woman goes without getting semen from their man for too long, because no woman's been able to keep it together. I mean, I'm fucking *feeling* it bad right now already, and it's only been a week. We jacked him off last week and split the dose among all of us, but I swore to myself that would be the last time I'd ever take *shit* from that asshole, and I just don't know who to trust any more... But Piper, *I trust you*. And if you trust Andy, I guess that means I trust him too. So I suppose it's up to you whether or not I deserve to live or die, and whatever you two decide, I'll respect that decision. I'd like to think that I'd let you in if the situations were reversed, but I don't know, considering our history, that I could get past that mess. But fuck do I want to try. And you've seemed to always be better than me at anything, Piper, so I'm hoping you're better than me at giving second chances. I want to spend the rest of my life learning to be better, following your example, Piper. I want us to stop being enemies and learn to be friends. Anyway, I should probably end the message here. Either I've convinced you, and I'll see you soon, or I haven't, and you won't have to worry about ever seeing me again. Nobody will. I think I'm at peace with either of those options right now, so you should just follow your heart and do whatever you think is right. Thanks for at least listening and hearing me out." Melody looked like she was about to say one final thing, pausing for a long moment before just reaching forward and turning off the recording, that last thing going unspoken.

Andy and Piper sat in silence, looking at that freeze frame still of Melody turning off the recording, neither of them quite sure where to start the conversation. Andy knew how he felt about it, but had decided that he wasn't going to say anything until Piper had voiced her opinion without possible contamination of his.

"What a fucking thing to lay on us," Pipe finally said to break the calm. "I've heard about people having to make life and death decisions, but usually that's in a split second, not something where you can stop and fucking *think* about it for a while." She sat up straight and leaned back, shaking her head. "What do you think, Andy?"

"I think I want to hear what *you're* thinking before I say *anything*, Piper."

She offered him a bitter grin, rolling her eyes a little bit. "That's diplomatic of you."

"Whatever you want to do, Piper, I'm going to back you on," Andy said. "I've got some thoughts and feelings of my own on the matter, but I didn't go through what you went through over at Covington's house, and no matter how much detail you relay the story to me with, that's not going to change. I can *understand* what you went through without really *getting* it, you know?"

"Right. Right right. I hear what you're saying, Andy, and if this were Hope, this would be an

easy decision, but what I told you earlier was completely true – Melody mostly just enabled through inaction rather than doing anything directly harmful to me. And yeah, that fucking *sucks* and I'm fucking mad as hell about it, but mad enough to condemn someone to *death*? I mean, fuck *me*."

"She might be bluffing," Andy suggested, even though he very much didn't feel like that was the case.

"Look at her face, Andy," Piper said, gesturing to the frozen image of Melody on the television across the room. "That's not a woman who's bluffing. That's the face of a woman who's nearly given up and is looking for someone to throw her a lifeline, who needs someone to give her a hand and pull her out of the mess that she's found herself in. That's not a bluff, that's a... that's a... that's a fucking *cry for help* if ever I've seen one."

"It doesn't have to be you that helps her, though, Piper."

She turned to look at him with a kind smile. "Did you back down when Niko asked you to save Charlotte and Asha? No. You rolled up your sleeves and got the job done, and saved me, Emily and Sarah in the process. Oh! And Hannah! Indirectly. That's six lives you helped with one crazy action!"

"And if I'd lost, I could've committed Sheridan to a life of horror, Piper," Andy said. "Let's not forget about that, okay?"

"Sometimes risks have to be taken, Andy. That's all I'm saying. There's a reason you came to me on this first, isn't there? You wanted to see if I was going to just straight out say no, because you want to help her, don't you?"

Andy sighed, looking away from Piper and down at his hands. "I want to help everybody. It's one of my major failings, I know."

She reached over and nudged her fingertip along the underside of his chin, nestled somewhere in his goatee, lifting his face up to make him look at her. "It's not a failing, Andy. It's one of the things we all love about you. One of the things we love *most* actually. You're more optimistic than anyone any of us have ever met. You're our own personal Don Quixote, jousting at windmills and sometimes, just sometimes, taking the windmills down."

"Damn things had it coming," he chuckled with a laugh as she leaned in and kissed him affectionately, her other hand sliding across his smooth head.

"Damn straight they did. Anyway, I want to live up to that expectation. I want to follow your example and to look for the best in people, even if I don't entirely trust her." She glanced back at the screen and chuckled. "Besides, she's pretty hot, don't you think?"

"I think I have hot women all fucking *over* me, Piper," Andy laughed. "But you're right, if it was just up to me, I'd give her a second chance, because that's who I am. But it's not up to me. Not this one. No, this is your personal call to make."

"You think I can't handle having her around?"

"I think you're going to have to find a way past seeing her as Covington's bodyguard, and that's going to be a hell of a challenge after what she helped put you through."

"*Helped* put me through. 'Helped' doing all the heavy lifting in that sentence. You saw her video. She's willing to do *anything* to get her second chance."

Andy laughed softly, raising a hand. "Okay, here's where I lay down at least a *little* bit of the law, in saying I won't have you marching her around naked like Lauren did with Taylor for the better part of a month. If you want to punish her, sure, I get that, but we're going to have to find a way to do that which doesn't involve hiding somebody every time we have friends over at the house."

Piper giggled mischievously. "Oh, I can get *way* more creative than that. But I mostly just want to make sure she's going to be dedicated to the house, not just to me or to you, but to the whole family. Especially if we're going to eventually be trusting her with a bodyguard role in your life."

"So, what are you thinking?"

"I'm going to have to think about it, but I think we should do it if you do," she told him.

"I said right at the start I was going to bow to whatever decision you made."

Piper shook her head, taking his hands in hers. “Nuh uh. This is a decision we make together, Andy. I appreciate you wanting to put me first in all this, what with my history with Melody and everything, but you can’t just bow out of a decision this big. It’s got to be something we’re in alignment on.”

“Then yes Piper, I agree and think we should give her a second chance. If you and the rest of the girls want to haze her a bit, I get that, but it’s also going to be important that you all make her feel like part of the family. That’s going to be a lot on me as well, making sure it’s clear from the very moment she arrives that we’re nothing like that fucker.”

“Well, not the *very* moment,” Piper chuckled. “She’ll be unconscious for like most of the first day, getting reprinted. Speaking of which, how soon do they want you to do this?”

“The sooner the better,” he told her. “I got the distinct impression that if I told them we were okay with it this afternoon, they’d have her in front of me either tonight or tomorrow morning.”

“You’ve got to meet with Mali this afternoon. I think the plane’s scheduled to be landing around one or so, and she was *very* specific about how she wanted her first time to go, and how quickly she wanted it to be. If you can agree to those kinds of strange circumstances, then I don’t know how getting Melody taken care of soon would be any weirder.”

“I’m going to want to get the signoff of all the rest of the fiancées first before we agree to it.”

“If *I*’m okay with it and *you*’re okay with it, baby, then *they*’re going to be okay with it. Sure, there’ll be some griping and bitching and moaning, but the fact that I’m willing to go along with it should be enough to get everybody else to relax about the whole thing.”

“Lexi’s not going to trust her with a gun for a while, I’d bet.”

“I mean, that’s *fair*. We want to make sure this chick understands it’s family first before we arm her up, even if harming you would be the stupidest possible thing she could do.” Piper pointed at the screen. “But look at her. That’s not the face of a woman who wants to harm you *or* me. That’s a woman looking for someone to throw her a lifeline. She wants *help*, Andy. We gotta help her.”

“How does it feel to know you’re basically responsible for the NDR?” he asked Piper as she rolled her eyes a little bit.

“On one hand, I’m glad to have encouraged them to stand up for themselves and not get walked over by that asshole, but on the other, chopping Covington’s hand off?”

“A bridge too far?”

“No, I just kind of wish I’d have been the one who got to *do* it,” Piper said, and based on her tone, Andy couldn’t tell if she was joking or not. “You going to be okay *reimprinting* someone to you? I know you said you’re okay with it, but are you *okay* with it?”

“Hell, if anyone’s prepared for the experience, it’s pretty much me,” he laughed. “When you were first imprinted, you were basically in a similar state to what Dr. Merriweather was when we saw the demonstration of the reprogramming process.”

“Who else knows about Melody’s request?”

“Here at the house? Just you, me and Niko. They told us at the base yesterday.”

“Were they pushing Melody, or just that we take on *somebody*?”

“Just that we take on somebody. They told us about Melody’s request, but they didn’t seem to give a shit if it was her or if it was somebody else instead, just that we got it done and got it done quickly and quietly.”

“Instead of adding one more to the house before closing it off, it’s just going to be two, and we’ll manage. It’s not like we don’t have room for them here at the house.”

“Not that I’m going to be *imprinting* either of them at the house,” he said with a touch of amused annoyance.

“Let’s go over it with everyone at breakfast, just to make sure nobody’s going to throw too much of a shitfit, but after that, call the General and tell them you’ll take Melody this evening, but that they need to let me be there at the reprogramming.”

“She won’t be thinking too clearly, Piper, so if you don’t want to be there, you don’t have to.”

“Oh, I *want* to be there. I want to look into Melody’s eyes and make sure she understands this is her *last* chance, and that if she fucks up, it’s game over. And that she better not once disrespect my man, otherwise we’ll beat her with soap bars wrapped in towels while she’s sleeping.”

“Maybe lead with the kindness and not with the threats.”

“One hand open and extended in welcome, the other balled up in a fist in case I gotta beat some ass.”

Andy rolled his eyes, pulling Piper over to slide into his lap. “She’s an ex-Army Ranger. You know that, right? She can probably kill you with your volleyball without too much effort.”

“Just gotta make sure she knows who she’s fucking with,” Piper purred as she started to lock lips with Andy. “Thanks for coming to me first. I’m glad you trusted me with it.”

“I’m *marrying* you next month, Piper,” he chuckled. “I trust you with my everything.”

“Think anyone else is up yet?”

“You aren’t suggesting...”

“I think just about all my fellow wives-to-be have had a go at you in this office, so now it’s my turn,” she said, reaching her arm over Andy’s shoulder to shove the door closed quietly. “Get to it.”

“Yes ma’am.”