

Chapter Five

“Harder, you motherfucker!” Linda shouted at him as he drilled her from behind, his hands on her hips, jerking her back onto his cock as he did his best to ram her, bent over his desk, the walls of his office thankfully thick enough to dampen the sound so that no one could hear, although Linda was doing her best to make it loud enough for someone to get a hint of what was going on. “Pound me like you want to fucking break me!”

“Jesus, Linda,” Audrey said with a giggle from her seat on his couch, “take it easy on the poor guy. He's only got so much energy.”

“He's fucking got more than that,” the blonde officer hissed back. “C'mon you pussy, punch it! Slap my ass! Yank my hair! Fucking give it to me!”

Phil had been a little surprised by how much Linda loved rough sex, but he'd been doing his best to amp it up so that he could keep her, if not satiated, at least somewhat satisfied. His comfort level had started low, but he'd slowly been pushing it a little more each time, and each time, instead of freaking out, Linda had asked him to go harder, to be rougher, to really rail into her.

His hand lifted up and slapped her toned ass with a loud crack, and she let out a whorish, enthusiastic moan as soon as he did. “Yeeeeeeesssss....” she exhaled. “That's it. Spank that ass! Paddle it until it's so fucking red, I can't even sit down!”

Again, he brought his hand down with an even harder clap, and he felt her cunt squeeze on his cock affectionately in approval, her back arching like a cat in heat as she tried to thrust her hips back more onto his dick. He could feel the flesh started to warm underneath the palm of his hand, and he hooked his fingertips into claws and dragged them hard against the skin, feeling her shiver in delight so hard, he thought she might have even tried to sneak an orgasm past him.

He glanced over at Audrey, and his plump Hispanic partner had her hand down the front of her unzipped pants, clearly fingering herself while she enjoyed the show, although he knew she had to still be tingling, having gotten her turn only a few hours ago, but it seemed like she didn't mind giving herself a second release as Phil did his best to savage into his other partner, his balls thwacking against her clit each time his cock pummeled hilt deep inside of her.

“C'mon c'mon c'mon motherfucker you know you wanna do it you wanna fill this tight cunt up with that hot fucking spunk so much fucking jizz in those balls and I gotta have it so give it to me gimme that load gimme that fucking load I fucking earned! Do it motherfucker! Cum in my cunt!”

Phil's hand slapped down on her ass, and he felt her quiver once more, but then he decided to surprise her, and pushed his thumb right against that exposed pucker of her asshole, hooking it up and in just to the first knuckle as he felt her clamp down on his cock while she started to cum all over again, and those milking spasms made sure she was getting what she wanted, as he poured several squirts of his cum up against the back of her snatch. Her head thumped down against her forearm atop of his desk, her blonde hair covering her face in all directions, having come loose from its tied up bun somewhere in the middle of their steamy tryst.

Half a minute or so later, he pulled his thumb out as he felt his cock softening inside of her. “Too much?” he asked with a playful laugh.

“Are you fucking kidding?” she laughed back beneath her hair. “I mean, if you'd tried to shove that dick in my ass without any real lube, *that* would've been too much, but your thumb? That was fucking *hot*.” Linda giggled a little bit, tossing her head back like Rita Hayworth to fling her hair back and out of her face. “But if you wanna try the back door, you just gotta bring the lube, and then I'm game if you are.”

“Doesn't it hurt?” Audrey asked, sliding her hand out from her panties, wiping her fingers clean with a paper towel. “I've never done anal. Always been too scared.”

Phil slid back, letting his cock drop out of Linda's snatch, as she grabbed her panties suddenly, yanking them up, as if she wanted to make sure that anything that dripped out of her didn't go too far. "I've done it a couple of times before, but only when my partner asked me to. My last ex wanted to try it, but the one time we did, she said it hurt too much."

"I *like* that it hurts a little, but it doesn't hurt *that* much, as long as you work up to it," she said, as he grabbed a paper towel and wiped himself off a little. "Did she try and work up to it, or did she think she could just go straight in with your cock?"

"Dunno," he said, tugging up his boxers and his jeans. He'd learned that when Audrey and Linda wanted their fixes, there was no arguing with them, and he just needed to make sure they were happy. It was a common enough thing on the base, and they'd even developed a shorthand for it. People were calling it their 'catch-22 time,' and it excused up to half an hour of tardiness once or twice a week. "Just straight in with me, I think."

Linda rolled her eyes with a grin. "That's her own fucking fault then," she laughed. "She should have started with a little plug or something, let her body do a little slow training before she worked her way up to assfucking. If you wanna experiment a bit, Audrey, we can get you a little plug and let you work your way up."

"Lemme think about it, but that sounds like it might be fun."

"And as for you, Mister," Linda said, pointing a finger at him. "If you get a hankering for it, the lube's in the back of your bottom drawer." She winked at him, sliding back into the rest of her jumpsuit.

"You have some already prepared?" he laughed. "How did you know I might be into that kind of thing?"

"You're a dude. All dudes have at least thought about it a little. Besides, I'm into it. Why shouldn't you be?"

He grinned. "Yeah, okay."

"Oh, you wanted to take that quick tour of a bit of New Eden?" Linda said. "How's the schedule today?"

Phil looked at his calendar. "Nothing they can't do without me. You want to come, Audrey?"

She nodded. "I gotta get off this base for a while, so let's make a day of it."

Half an hour later, they were standing inside one of the larger manors of New Eden, as the three of them walked down the hallways. "So I was thinking this one for your friend," Linda told him. "There's another open one just down the street a bit for his roommate, and you said you wanted to keep your friends safe, so I figured this wouldn't be too bad, even if it's got a couple of shitty neighbors not too far away."

"Who's the shitty ones?" Phil said.

Linda pointed to the east. "About a mile east, you have Arthur Covington the 4th's compound, although it's actually about three miles worth of driving, because of all the switchbacks and trees. Then about a mile to the south you have Nathaniel Watkins and his family, although I guess Watkins isn't really that bad."

"You know, I'm starting to think Andy and Eric can actually serve a higher purpose here in New Eden," Phil told her.

"How so?"

"I don't trust any of the fuckers involved in the New Eden project, but I don't have time to keep eyes on it safely. Andy's a good guy, but he's also sharp as a tack. Plus, people have a tendency to underestimate him all the time. He'll be good to have boots on the ground, local eyes to keep tabs on what's going on inside of the community when I don't have time to watch it myself," Phil sighed. "There's just too much fucking going on anymore that if I don't farm some of it out, I'm going to miss out on some important shit."

"How much are you going to tell him?" Linda asked.

"Fuck all if I can help it," he replied. "The last thing I want him coming in here with is

prejudiced eyes. Let him make his own decisions about things and people.”

“I want to size this friend of yours up, Phil,” Linda told him. “I’ve heard him talking on Discord, and read his file, but I haven’t had a chance to meet him yet. You’re going to be asking a lot of him, so let’s go check him out.”

“Tell you what,” Phil said. “Let’s ‘stumble’ into him. He was saying on Discord yesterday how they were going to try and make a Safeway run this afternoon, so we can just accidentally bump into him there. You can stay hidden, Linda, and watch him from a distance, as Audrey and I pretend for the whole thing to be a random encounter. I haven’t told anyone on the Discord about me having partners yet, so I can spin it however I want to.”

“Good,” she said. “I like the idea of getting to see him long before he sees me. Oh, speaking of that kind of thing, I wanted to show you one thing about this mansion that I wish ours had. I’m a little jealous of it, actually.” She pressed the palm of her hand against one bookcase and pushed a little and the bookcase gave just a bit before popped back, swinging out a little bit.

“Hidden room?” Audrey said. “Very cool.”

Linda led them into the room, a nice little study with a desk, two chairs and a couch. There was a balcony just outside of a door, she showed them, but it was nestled back, recessed within the roof and obscured by a couple of trees, so that if you didn’t know it was there, the balcony would be almost invisible from most angles, a nice view looking out over into the valley of New Eden from the perch.

They stood out on the balcony, taking a moment to savor the vista before Linda broke the silence. “How long you think before he fucks somebody up here? A week? A day?”

Phil shook his head a little. “Knowing Andy, he’ll probably keep this room a secret for at least a month or two, just to give him some place to go and think if he needs to get away from it all. Eventually, he’ll tell everyone about it, but it’ll be a gradual thing.”

The trio stepped back into the room, and Phil noticed there was a bottle of whiskey sitting on the desk, between two crystal glasses. He glanced over at the bottle then looked back at Linda, a question in his eyes. “Look,” she said, “I figured if he was your friend and you were throwing him into the lion’s den like this, he deserved at least a little thank you, even if he doesn’t know it came from you.”

“From *us*, you mean,” he said, picking up the bottle. “*Jesus!* This is McCallan 25 year Sherry Oak Single Malt. Isn’t this, like, a thousand dollars a bottle?”

“Two and a half,” Linda grinned. “Of course, I lifted it from Haunton’s stuff when we were moving his stuff into his mansion. He had like two dozen of them. He’ll never a couple of them missing.”

“A couple?”

“Sure, I kept one for us,” she said. “You think I was going to go through all that work and not enjoy it some myself?”

“You should leave Andy a note or something. He loves mysteries and shit.”

Linda opened the desk, taking out a good pen and a piece of card stationary, and then wrote “*good luck*” on the card, taking as much time as she could to make her handwriting look formal and elegant, a far cry from her normal chicken scratch.

As they headed to the car, Phil pointed out to Audrey that they were going to need to be in full protective gear, even though they didn’t need to be. At this point, Phil was pretty sure that he was basically immune to DuoHalo, but he couldn’t let on that he was to the public at large. Both he and Audrey needed to look like they were in full paranoia mode, so they had goggles and masks they could wear whenever they went out. Linda also had her own personal gear, but the camo tended to discourage from anyone talking to her anyway.

When they got to the Safeway, Phil opened the back of the Tesla and pulled out his jacket, sliding it over Audrey’s shoulders. “Why am I wearing your jacket, Phil?” she asked him.

“It’ll help Andy recognize me,” he told her.

“Then why aren't you wearing it?”

“Because you wearing it means you're *important* to me,” he said, kissing her softly.

“Oh,” she said, blushing a little bit.

“How soon should we expect them?” Linda asked him.

“He's already here,” he told her. “That's his Mazda 3 over there, the one with the 'Ph33r My L33t N3kkId Skillz' license plate holder.”

“How charming,” she said.

“It was a gift from me,” he countered.

“Ah, well then it's cute.”

“Remember, try not to get seen by them,” he told her.

“You won't even know I'm there,” she said, heading into the Safeway first, Phil and Audrey going in just a minute or so later.

He didn't want to go straight for him, but he also didn't want to let Andy slip out of the Safeway without 'accidentally' bumping into him, so they moved a little bit quickly, and sure enough, there was Andy standing in the frozen aisles, looking at ice cream, flanked by two women, one taller than him and blonde, the other shorter and redhead.

Of course, Phil knew exactly who Aisling Blake and Lauren White were. While he couldn't do much to influence the way the Oracle worked, he could do some basic reviews on the people scheduled to be paired with his friends, and do some quality control. In Andy's case, it hadn't been at all necessary, and in fact, it had almost put him into a sense of false complacency. Aisling wasn't just *sort* of Andy's type; she was practically tailor-made to be a *perfect* fit for him. And when Aisling had been chosen as Andy's first partner, Phil had done everything he could to understand how the Oracle system worked.

The giant questionnaire certainly made up a *lot* of the data the Oracle system used, but not all of it, and it wasn't all weighted the same. The man's preferences were much more heavily weighted than the woman's, something Phil wasn't too pleased by, but supposed was going to be necessary considering how fewer men there were to be safely entered into the system.

Aisling's questionnaire had focused in on a number of things – she wanted a smart partner, she wanted a kind partner, she wanted a partner with an excellent sense of humor and she wanted a sexually adventurous partner, something Phil thought might have been the sticking point, until he looked at Andy's questionnaire answers.

The first thing that had surprised him was that Andy had put down “no preference” when it had come to the monogamy/polygamy question, which had immediately opened Andy's options immensely. Eric had put down monogamy, which had meant he would get a slower drip of partners, but was still going to get saddled with multiple partners eventually.

The women's questionnaire didn't even have that question included in it.

For the first handful of women that had come in, they had been shown a series of 20 pictures, each with their compatibility score beneath the picture, and each and every one of them had gone with the person with the highest compatibility score, even if there were better looking men in the pool. Phil suspected this sort of generous pairing was going to fall by the wayside quickly, simply because they didn't have the time, but for the first few thousand people being matched by the Oracle system, there was a second level of cautionary testing.

Lauren hadn't been quite the obvious match, but the system said they were still an excellent pairing, and Lauren, like Aisling before her, had simply gone with the science, and so far, they'd all seemed quite happy.

Andy, bless his heart, was a bit of a blabbermouth, and had talked about things in their group Discord so that Phil could actually use his friend as a control case, seeing how things were developing for people who he didn't have constant surveillance on.

As he and Audrey approached Andy, Aisling and Lauren, he could see his friend giving him a suspicious look, not recognizing him at all, so Phil decided to break the ice. “Andy, that you under all

that mess?"

Andy turned and glanced over at them, looking at the two figures covered basically from head to toe, but then he saw the one-of-a-kind letterman jacket on Audrey, and realized who he was talking to. "How did you recognize me, Phil?" he asked.

"I was taking a wild guess, but I don't know anyone else here in the States who would be wearing a Nautilus Pompilus t-shirt," Phil said to his friend. "Russian alternative rock band t-shirts aren't exactly a dime a dozen."

He wasn't surprised to see Aisling wearing it, and was genuinely happy for his friend. One of Andy's unspoken turn ons was seeing women wearing his shirts. He wasn't sure, but he thought he could detect Andy smiling behind the mask.

"Fair enough," Andy said to him. "We can't exactly talk here, but let's meet up at the base of Mount Diablo, in the park. We can stand far apart enough to talk and still be safe. We've got to drop groceries off, so let's say we meet up in a couple of hours?"

Of course, Andy didn't know that they could be standing right next to each other, breathing in each others' faces and they'd still be impervious to DuoHalo, but it was best to keep up the ruse. He glanced down at his watch. It was longer than he wanted to wait, but to be honest, with the amount of groceries Andy had gotten, they were going to need a bit of time to get everything into their fridge. He suspected it would be the last time they would buy groceries here, since by this time next month, they would be moved into the mansion within New Eden.

About ninety minutes later, Phil pulled his Tesla into the parking lot at the base of Mount Diablo, basically the only car in the lot. People as of late had gotten so paranoid that they didn't even want to be in public parks near each other, afraid of both Covid and DuoHalo now.

"Andy'll park over there," he told Linda. "If you want to, you can lay down in the back of the Tesla and I can just leave the windows rolled down, or you can try and conceal yourself over closer to where he's going to park."

"I'll lay down in the back, Phil," she told him. "I want to be sure you're covered and taken care of, although this is a nice spot for a meeting – sight lines in every direction, but lots of trees, so it wouldn't be easy for a sniper to get into a good position, especially with the sunlight complicating things. I like it. Maybe we'll make a spy out of you yet."

"God no," he said, lowering the back windows of the Tesla down to half mast as he and Audrey shed the masks and the goggles, both of them moving to sit on the hood of his car, more leaning on it than sitting on it.

About twenty minutes later, Andy's Mazda-3 rolled into the parking lot, placing the car on the opposite side of the space before he and his two partners hopped out, walking up towards the wooden fencing, beyond which laid the park. "So Phil, where the hell ya been?" Andy laughed at him.

It was a fair point. Phil had sort of dropped off the radar to his friends for the last few month, working through all his responsibilities with the pandemic, and a couple of the members of the poker group had even accused him of ghosting them. Phil just hoped he didn't look half as tired as he felt.

"So, Andy, this is my partner Audrey," he said, squeezing her shoulder.

'Also, my other partner is laying down in the back seat of my car with a Desert Eagle in her hand in case she thinks you're a threat,' Phil thought, but didn't say out loud.

"Hi Andy!" Audrey said, brightly, waving one hand at him. "Sorry I've kept him off the group Discord, but I didn't want to share him until I felt like we were established."

"Oh, love," Aisling giggled. "We're all doing that."

'No kidding,' Phil thought to himself. Andy looked at least ten pounds lighter, and his goatee was more meticulously trimmed than he'd ever seen it before. He'd made a point not to be around when Aisling or Lauren were getting their injections, and he was pleased to see it looked as though neither of them had any recognition of him. He'd been careful, but there was always a chance someone could spot him wandering around when they were under observation.

“Phil, this is Aisling, Ash for short, and this is Lauren,” Andy said, rubbing the back of his own neck sheepishly. “Frankly, I’m a little embarrassed they’re stuck with me, but they both seem happy enough, so maybe I’m doing okay by them.”

‘Typical Andy,’ Phil thought to himself. ‘The wind blows in his favor, and he’s immediately apologizing. But that’s good. It means he’s staying humble and not getting an inflated head over all of this.’

Lauren nudged Andy in the ribs with her elbow. “Andy’s the most humble feller I’ve met. I think me an’ Ash are just a couple’a lucky gals.”

Phil wasn’t sure where to start with this, so he decided he would let Andy set the stakes of what they were talking about and how. If his friend needed a few nudges along the way, he’d help out, but for the most part, he was just trusting Andy to navigate the waters himself.

After a minute or so of silence, Andy spoke again. “So Phil... what do you know?”

‘Way to throw the ball into my court, Andy,’ Phil thought. He clicked his tongue, gauging how much information to toss out in the first volley. “Okay, here’s what I know. What I can tell you without either of us getting our kiesters thrown in the hooscow, anyway...”

“That sounds best,” Andy said.

“It’s bad, Andy,” Phil sighed, deciding to fairly set the stage for his old friend. “It’s very bad. They’re downplaying the body count for the media, but truth be told we’re looking at over a million so far, probably a lot more. And it’s only going to get worse. The internal projections are that we’re looking at five million dead Americans before all of this is done.” Of course, Phil was softballing it, because the *actual* projections were *far* worse than that, but there was only so much he wanted to dump on Andy up front. Best to ease him into the downward slide.

“Jesus,” Andy muttered, clearly shellshocked by the news. “One million people dead? Seriously? How are they keeping all this quiet?”

“Lots and lots of work,” Phil replied, being completely candid for a moment. The cover up had its own team within the operation, and they were growing larger every day. It was entirely possible they were going to relocation to Washington and manage the media response out of there soon. “It’s not as bad outside of the US, but that’s because other countries started taking it serious long before we did.” In actuality, the numbers of countries outside of the US were starting to see rising casualties as well, but the last thing Phil wanted was Andy getting overwhelmed even more than he already was.

“Are the rules true?”

“I wouldn’t be talking to you like this if I didn’t think it was safe, Andy.” It wasn’t entirely true, but Phil didn’t have an easy way to explain how things worked to him right now. “But it’s going to get worse. A whole lot worse. People here still aren’t taking it seriously. You see the news the other day?”

Andy nodded, sadness on his face. “People crowded into churches, shoulder to shoulder, demanding their faith will keep them safe. Idiots in city hall meetings, claiming the right to not wear a mask if they don’t want to.”

Phil nodded back to him. They didn’t know it, but there was a good chance all of those people on television were going to be dead within a few months, but he needed to dial it down a little for Andy, at least for the time being. “It’s madness. Half of those people will be dead before year’s end, and I don’t think we’re going to have a lid on this until next year. We’re living through Spanish Flu Part 2: Electric Bugaloo.”

“Five million dead? That’s like one percent of the country. How the hell are they going to keep it all quiet?”

“As much smoke as possible,” Phil grumbled in complete honesty. The bullshit machine wasn’t just in full effect, it was running on overdrive. “Keep the cover going until it’s untenable. People are going to notice eventually, but the lockdowns are going to keep things contained for a while. But guys like you and me, we need to stay as safe as possible. Because we’re high risk.” He didn’t *exactly* mean that, because he and Andy were probably two of the safest men in America right now, but people *like*

them were, in fact, those most targeted by DuoHalo.

Aisling scowled at him, and for half a second, Phil wondered if she was going to call him on it, because maybe she'd heard people talking at the base or something. "How so? I thought the elderly and immuno compromised were the most at risk."

"They are," Phil said, nodding again, glad to see she didn't know any more than the average public, "but beyond that, it's men between the ages of thirty and forty-five. That's where the majority of casualties have been so far. Thankfully, you and me, we're buffered pretty well."

"What do you mean, buffered?"

Phil smirked, giving a tiny shrug. It wouldn't hurt to let Andy feel a little safer about his position in life, because his friend looked like he was about to drop dead from stress shock, and that would undo all the hard work he'd put in so far. "Let's just say we've been doing some vaccine testing in rather unusual and unorthodox ways. Did your libido used to be this high all the time, Ash?"

She blanched for a moment. "I thought it was just the cabin fever, but now you mention it, I've had a slight buzzing of sexual need since they gave me those shots. What the hell did they do to me?"

He raised a hand to calm her down. "Relax, it'll even out eventually. But it's designed so that you're protecting your partner, swapping fluids, giving him regular dosages of the natural antibodies you're building up inside." They were going to have to start directly educating women about what they were signing up for with the treatments, and Phil made a mental note to get to work on that when he got back to the office.

"Why not just give men the shots directly?" Lauren asked.

"Because when we've tried it, it's been fatal." He took out his vape pen and inhaled a drag off of it before blowing the THC vapor back out. It helped him destress some, but he tried not to over use it. "But if a woman with the vaccine is having regular sexual activity with a man, he's getting a non-toxic dose, and both parties have about 70% resistance to the virus. I wouldn't have put Andy down as polyamorous, but it's going to strengthen your armor even more, my man."

Andy smirked, looking at his feet sheepishly. "I actually put no preference, so it looks like I'm going to get a full slate."

"Nah, you'll probably stay where you are. Unless you got rated something ridiculous."

'Here comes the bit I really need to sell,' Phil thought to himself.

"Me and Eric got rated level 5s," Andy said, embarrassment in his voice

Phil nearly dropped his vape pen, his eyebrows raising, hoping it looked like genuine shock. The problem was that Andy was a *great* poker player, and so it was hard to lie to him. "Are you shitting me?"

Andy laughed and shrugged a little.

'Thank Christ,' Phil thought to himself. 'I think he bought it. Now don't let up.'

"How the fuck did that happen?" he asked Andy, knowing damn well how it had happened, because he'd basically *made* it happen.

"The guy coming to test us was a fan of the books, so I gave him an ARC of the new one that's been delayed a few months. As a way of saying thank you, he rated me and Eric as level 5s."

Phil chuckled quietly, shaking his head, hoping Andy wouldn't catch him in a whopper of a lie, but he needed to not let Andy in on too much too fast.. "You son of a bitch. I'm not even rated a level 5 and I work for the goddamn military on goddamn black ops shit."

"Allegedly," Andy added, grinning back.

Phil nodded. "Allegedly." He dragged the word out before he looked up then shook his head. "You're gonna get two more, huh? Good lord, I'm both jealous and terrified for you all at once. How are you going to keep all those personalities from conflicting?"

This was one of the things he'd actually been wanting to ask Andy for ages, since his friend had always had a way of managing people, preventing them from getting too angry with one another, keeping all the plates spinning without any of them falling down. The families were likely going to get

bigger, and keeping multiple people from killing each other was sort of Andy's specialty. Surely his friend would know exactly how to do it.

"I'm going to do my best to stay the hell out of their way, mostly."

'Great,' Phil thought to himself. 'You have failed me, friend. It's okay. I didn't expect miracles.'

"That's not going to work forever, luv," Aisling said to him. "It's not like we're going anywhere, even when this virus recedes."

"You say that now, but..."

"No, they're always going to say that. Isn't that part of the public facing info about the pairing system?" Phil said. He hadn't kept tabs on what the people being given the serum were told, but surely they had to at least have been told some of the fundamental rules, right? They had to know they were paired, that other men's semen would be toxic, and that they were going to have recurring sexual needs that needed regular fulfillment. It was, like, five to ten minutes of basic info tops. Jesus, did Andy and his girls really not know any of this shit?

It was Andy's turn to raise his eyebrows. "No, whatever you're implying, it isn't public knowledge. But you're already in for a penny.."

"Might as well be in for a pound, I guess," Phil answered, nodding in agreement. He was going to light up hellfire as soon as he got back to the office, because if they were sending out people with serum in their blood and not telling them the baseline rules, whoever was managing that team needed to get their head out of their ass before the bodies started piling up. "Alright, but keep this just between us, okay?"

"Well, I'll tell Eric, Eric's partner, and my other two partners when they show up, but other than that..."

"Yeah, well, that's what I meant by us, alright?" If he got his way, there would be a personalized phone call going out to every person with the serum in their blood before the end of the day, so it wouldn't matter anyway, and the last thing he wanted was for Andy to know how much he was involved with this project. "Okay, so here's the deal. Do you remember the first time they got a bit of you in them?"

"You mean..." Lauren started.

"I think you know what I mean."

Both Aisling and Lauren blushed and grinned widely. "Most intense thing that's ever happened to us," they both said.

"What do you remember right after though, Andy? Just you. They'll both have been passed out."

Andy stroked his goatee for a second then snapped his fingers. "They kept mumbling a word over and over, so quiet I could barely make it out... something like... imaging?"

The one time Andy *should* have been more curious and instead he's being respectful, Phil thought to himself. Wild. He shook his head and took another drag off his vape pen. "Not imaging, *imprinting*. You're bonded now. Mated for life, like walruses."

"You mean penguins," Andy corrected him, the know-it-all. "It's penguins that mate for life. And what does that mean here, mated for life?"

"You're intertwined on a chemical, biological and physiological level in a way we can't even begin to comprehend," Phil said, exhaling another cloud of THC mist. "If you go away from one another for more than a couple of days, you'll start to feel nervous, anxious, fidgety. After that, it'll be panic attacks, cold sweats. Past that, nervous breakdown. Unless, of course, the other person is dead, in which case that doesn't seem to happen." That was a lie, but the last thing he wanted was Andy and his family freaking out too much this early. He shrugged a little bit, trying to play it off as though he didn't know as much as he knew and more. "We're kids playing with the building blocks of life here, man. We don't even know what we don't know. But you, Lauren and Ash, you're a unit now. And anyone else you add into that will be as well. I mean, why do you think that questionnaire is so damn long? We don't want to screw up anybody's lives trying to help them. Besides, another of the side effects is that being

in each others' company will produce natural dopamine to keep things relatively smoothed out, helps you get past the small stuff, and let's face it, it's all small stuff at this point.”

“And this is happening all over the country?”

“Shit, no,” Phil sighed. “We've barely gotten this off the ground in the Bay Area, and all the tech for this shit is here. There are governors all across the country absolutely in arms against this plan, saying they'll fight it tooth and nail, keep people from getting the vaccine until it doesn't have any of these crazy side effects.”

They were lunatics, insisting everything would be fine, that they would pray away the disease, that their fearless leader had assured them it was all overblown hype, and that one day it would all just disappear. It was callous, but Phil found it just that those people would die in the highest numbers.

“I assume you're still working on that,” Andy asked him.

“Of course we're still working on that,” Phil said, rolling his eyes. The red tape had been infuriating, and he hadn't even been spearheading that portion of the project. “I'm just baffled by how many goddamn Republicans insist a semi-viable solution isn't a solution at all. Even if we were just hitting high risk areas, we could manufacture enough of this current formula to inoculate sixty or seventy million people in this country, all of whom would be 70% resistant to it.”

“They claiming it's a sin against god or something?”

“Worse. But, I guess, more honest.” Phil had a slightly bitter laugh filling the air. “They're angry they can't make a buck off of it.” Fucking vulture capitalists. “Now, of course, there are factions that are just going ahead and doing it anyway. Front line medical workers, emergency services, and a few branches of the armed forces, and their associated contractors. Of course, the whole Bay Area is taking part in it as well, so I guess I would've gotten treated either way.”

“So we're resistant but not immune?”

“Fuck, man,” Phil groaned, trying to avoid giving Andy any solid details for fear it would oust him as working on the serum, “I'm not promising you won't get the virus at all, but even if you do, it won't be life threatening. That said, you still shouldn't go out of your way to expose yourself to this shit. It's a mean as fuck virus under the best of conditions, and this ain't those.”

“You think they're going to start testing this vaccine in wider areas, Phil?” Aisling asked him.

He shook his head. “I wish to god they would, but the Moron In Chief is still calling it Kung Flu and the Chinese Virus, like he can spin blame onto other countries instead of admitted what a fucked up job he and his have done with this.” The idiot couldn't even differentiate that they were fighting *two* pandemics and not just one. Covid was certainly bad enough, but DuoHalo was a thousand times worse, and some of the Orange Goomba's advisers had told him it would just be a momentary blip. He'd refused to take the serum, even with the benefits explained to him, because he insisted he didn't want to have Melania imprinted onto him.

Andy felt his phone in his pocket vibrate at the same time as his Apple Watch buzzed at him. Phil was fishing out his phone as well, clearly having felt the buzz.

There on his wrist, Andy read a news blast from the Associated Press. “President contracts mystery virus, collapses in Oval Office. 25th Amendment being invoked.”

“Well, shit, looks like you report to somebody new now, Phil.”

At that point, everything got incredibly hectic. Phil promised he'd do a better job of keeping in touch, and that he'd do what he could to keep Andy in the loop, and Andy told Phil that it was good to see him, and that if there was anything he could do to help, Phil just needed to ask.

Despite the fact that his phone was blowing up, he and Audrey waited until Andy, Aisling and Lauren got back into Andy's car and drove off.

The news was actually ahead of what his own people had heard, but the report was now that Trump had DuoHalo, and didn't look likely to make it, and that they were going to be invoking the 25th Amendment to elevate Pence to President, but there were reports inside the military that Pence *also* had DuoHalo, and that they weren't sure he'd even make it through the swearing in ceremony.

After Andy's car drove off, Phil and Audrey got back in the car and Linda sat up. "So what do you think of him, babe?"

"He seems like a genuinely good guy, although I might be a little worried about him spilling the beans to the press or the masses," Linda said. "I don't know that you hit it home enough how he shouldn't be talking about it."

"Well, I can try and hit it home again later. Do we know what's going on in the Presidential chain of command right now?"

"Well, Speaker Pelosi and her husband have had the serum given to them, so if milquetoast drops dead, we have someone safe in the line of succession," Linda said, reading messages on her phone. "Needless to say, the shit is hitting the fan back at the base right now, so pedal to the metal."

"Going as fast as I can without getting the highway patrol on me, babe," he told her.

"I think they're probably all watching the news at this point, hun," she replied.

By the time they got back to the base, Vice President Pence had collapsed during his swearing in, and the machinery in Washington was doing its best to get Speaker Pelosi sworn in so there was someone calling the shots.

Phil's first stop was at the processing team, where he chewed them a new one, saying he'd heard that people being given the serum weren't being provided with a list of dos and don'ts, including vital things like the danger of exposure to semen from someone other than the person was imprinted to. The guy running the processing team apologized, and asked Phil to write a short list of guidelines that would start using immediately, but as it turned out, nobody had even told *him* what they could and couldn't do, and his wife was imprinted *to* him, so anything he needed to keep her safe, he wanted to know as soon as possible.

In fact, it was starting to look like everyone on the base *except* he and his direct team were doing the absolute minimum needed to get people resistant to DuoHalo. He was most of the way through an outline of what needed to be done, what people needed to be told and how to tell them, when Linda came rushing into the room. "Phil, I need you right now."

"Can it wait, Linda? I'm nearly done wi—"

"*Now*, Phil!"

He'd learned that Linda didn't raise her voice unless it was absolutely necessary, so he saved the document and got up, following her out of the room. "What's going on?"

"What happens if someone's injected with the serum and doesn't get paired up with their selected person?"

"They're supposed to be brought back here and paired up with another person, as soon as possible," Phil said as they walked and talked, heading towards the staging area. "The longer they go with the serum in their veins without being paired, the harder it's going to be for them to think straight. Why?"

"One of our own came back after the person she was going to be paired with died when she was en route to meet him," Linda sighed. "And I don't leave one of our own behind."

"Who is it?"

"Have a look," she said, as they entered the room.

There, sitting, well, fidgeting more of, was 2nd Lieutenant Niko Redwolf, dressed in fatigues. She was curling her fingers into fists, unable to sit still for even a moment, shifting and twisting in her seat, as she looked over at them when they walked in. "Hey Doctor, Captain. So, the guy I was supposed to be getting paired up with, when we knocked on his door, well, he was already dead. He'd been dead for a couple of days. I don't know what the hell to do now. Shit, I don't even know what's fucking happening to me. I can't think straight. I can't see straight. I'm going out of my fucking mind."

"I don't know what to do with her, Phil, but whatever it is we're going to do, we gotta do it quickly."

The idea hit on him quickly, but he wanted to make sure it would be okay with her first. "Niko,"

he said, snapping his fingers in front of her face. "I have someone I can pair you with, but you're going to need to, well, you're going to need to lie to him a bit, for his own good."

"Is he a good man?" she asked him, her eyes scrunched up, as if holding the conversation was taking everything she had from her.

"He's one of my best friends, and I need you to look after him, like Linda looks after me."

"If you say he's a good man, Doctor Marcos, that's good enough for me, but you gotta fucking hurry. I feel like I'm gonna have my hand up my own snatch if I have to wait any longer."

"Dave!" Phil said, spotting Doctor Straussman on the other side of the room. "I need you to run Lieutenant Redwolf over to Andy Rook's house. Pair her up with him, and do it quick."

"Doctor Marcos," Dave said to him, "that's very much out of protocol. The paperwork alone..."

"I'll *handle* it, Dave, but she was dosed almost three days ago, so she needs to go *now*."

"Okay, let me get the truck," he said, scurrying off.

Phil felt Niko clutching onto his wrist, so he looked back down to her. "What do I tell him?"

"Keep it as vague as possible," Phil said, trying to be direct and to the point, knowing that she was inches from slipping into a frenzy. "Go at him as soon as you can, and then when you wake up, go at him again, and a few hours later, your head will clear, and you can reach out to me on the phone, and I can walk you through your legend. Got it?"

"Affirmative, sir. Just get me there, and I'll do the rest."

"Don't you worry, Lieutenant. You'll feel right as rain by this time tomorrow," he said, as Doctor Straussman pulled the truck up next to her. Linda and Phil helped her into the truck, closing the door behind her as Phil gave the man the go signal.

"I'm not sure who you're doing the bigger favor, babe," Linda said to him, "Andy or Niko."

"I sure as fuck hope I'm doing the right thing," Phil muttered beneath his breath.

He'd been saying that a *lot* these days.