Every End is a Beginning

by TheGirlWhoRemembers

Summary

Murdoc warned Mac it wasn’t over. He wasn’t just referring to the attack on the Phoenix.

Join Mac, Jack, Bozer and Riley as they deal with shocks, twists and turns, team up with old friends, and make some new ones.

Or, my take on Season 2, written in the break between Seasons 1 and 2.

Notes

I really, really loved Cigar Cutter! It wasn’t exactly the season finale I was hoping for, but it was definitely close and very, very, very good! It fills me with hope for season 2! (My bet as to why there are only 21 episodes this season is that the original Episode 22, which I presume they wrote/filmed before they knew they’d be renewed, tied up all the loose ends and would have left them with nowhere to go for next season.)

Anyway, this is the first episode/chapter (22 episodes/chapters in total are planned) of my take on Season 2 of MacGyver. I already have the other 21 episodes planned out in a fair amount of detail (though I’m still coming up with missions for the team – suggestions are...
welcomed, no promises they'll be used, but of course if they are, I'll give full credit), but 'airdates'/publishing dates are a bit up in the air right now. (I'm currently on my one-week Easter break, so had some time to do this.) I will keep chipping away at this, and I am very determined to continue and finish the entire season I have planned out, and the absolute, absolute latest 'airdate' of Episode 2 will be June 29th.

This is completely canon-compliant with the first season with three exceptions: 1. How old Mac is - I'm contradicting Flashlight, which implies that his most recent birthday is his 27th, and running with his earlier statement about being born after the disbanding of the KGB, and making him 25 instead. 2. When Mac’s dad left – I’m going with when he was 12, instead of when he was 10 (running with what was said in Awl by Jack rather than what Bozer said in Flashlight). 3. The actual timeline of the show – I’m playing fast and loose with the number of months it has been since Lake Como – they all said it was 8 months, but I’m pretty sure Mac took 3 months off work after he got shot, which means that pretty much the entire run of the show has taken place in 5 months, which I think is just ridiculous, particularly since Riley says she’s been working with Mac for a ‘couple of months’ in Pliers, and it’s already been a ‘few months’ since Thornton was revealed as Chrysalis. I’m just not really going to be all that concrete with the timeline.

See the end of the work for more notes.
2.01, The Falling. Murdoc warned Mac that it wasn’t over. He also warned Mac that people believe what they want to believe. Murdoc is a liar, but sometimes he tells the truth.

JACK’S CAR

OUTSKIRTS OF LA

‘…Riley’s tough as nails. She’s gonna be okay. First time’s the hardest…’

Jack, though he sounded resolute, also somehow managed to sound like he was convincing himself.

Mac glanced at the road for a moment, then back at his partner.

‘Every time’s hard.’

*I am not a killer. I hate killing. I do everything I can to avoid it. But with the line of work I'm in… sometimes…it happens.*

*Not often, but more often than I’d like.*

*Far more often.*

Jack nodded.

‘Amen to that, brother.’ The older man looked very lost in thought for a moment. ‘I don’t know if she’s got it in her.’

Only some people had it in them to kill, and to varying degrees. Jack strove to never shoot to kill bad guys, but he could do it and still sleep at night. Mac would never shoot anyone, and would stay (and had stayed) up all night the handful of times he’d taken life. Jack wasn’t sure yet where Riley would fall on that spectrum, but he suspected closer to Mac than him, given how shaken she’d been when she’d shot Horn, and she’d been fighting desperately for her life then.

That suited him just fine. He’d rather he bear these burdens than Riley, or Mac, or Bozer.

Mac just nodded at him in response, and swallowed.

‘Thornton taught her well.’

The *despite being a traitor* was implicit.

Jack shook his head with a sigh.

‘You know, given they managed to turn her, the Organization did a surprisingly terrible job of using her and what she knew. She knew the Phoenix like the back of her hand; they sure didn’t act like
they did.’

Mac took a paperclip out of his pocket, and quickly, a maze took shape.

‘They knew enough. More than enough.’

_We all thought the Phoenix was safe. But yet again, enemies snuck in right under our noses._

_Of course, we’ve made it safe again…but it’s going to take time for it to feel safe again._

Jack nodded, rubbing his chin for a moment with his left hand.

‘I know, brother.’ The brunette shrugged. ‘Still, my Spidey-senses are tingling. Doesn’t feel like it’s all over.’

‘You don’t have Spidey-senses.’

‘That you know of! Maybe I got bitten by a radioactive spider in that dodgy motel! And we need to talk about your set choices when you’re undercover, Mac. You seriously couldn’t have picked a more stereotypical setting…’

_Murdoc warned me._

_Or maybe threatened me._

_He said it wasn’t over._

_Maybe he was referring to Horn and the attack on the Phoenix._

_Or maybe…_

Mac shook his head, trying to clear those thoughts. He grabbed another paperclip from his pocket and started unwinding it.

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**BOZER’S HOSPITAL ROOM**

**SECURE MEDICAL FACILITY**

**SOMEWHERE IN LA**

‘You know, Dr Farnham has terrible timing. Going on vacation the day I got stabbed? _Seriously, man?_ I’m totally filing a complaint with HR.’

Riley, wrapped in Jack’s football snuggie, shook her head and laughed.

The Phoenix’s on-site doctor really _did_ have terrible timing. Mac was a seriously good field medic, but he was no doctor. Dr Farnham would have been very, very helpful to have around.

‘Yeah, don’t think you can file a complaint based off bad timing, Bozer. Besides, he rushed back as soon as heard.’

Dr Farnham hadn’t taken a vacation of any sort for well over a year; he was very dedicated, and he had, indeed, rushed back the moment Matty had managed to get word out to him, and worked with the medics (all Phoenix agents had some medical training, and several were former Pararescue and
the like) to patch up the agents with minor injuries, Mac and Jack among them.

The young man snorted.

‘Yeah, well, then I’m going to get Mac onto a time machine, so future-Bozer can tell current-Bozer what’s going to go down, so I can be prepared and all. You know, wear a bullet-proof vest today, someone’s going to sneak in to your super-secret workplace and stab you and try and kill all your friends.’ His brow furrowed. ‘Or would that be future-Bozer telling past-Bozer? Or current-Bozer telling past-Bozer?’

Bozer trailed off when he realized that Riley had gone very silent and very still, and was staring at the floor.

‘Riley? You there?’ Very hesitantly, he reached out for her hand. ‘You okay?’

The young woman took a deep breath and looked up at him.

‘It’s…it’s nothing like in a FPS.’

Just a couple of weeks ago, they’d been happily shooting Molded in Resident Evil 7.

Now, Riley wasn’t sure if she ever wanted to do that again.

Bozer squeezed her hand gently.

‘I’m pretty sure that nothing in the spy life is anything like I thought it’d be.’

Riley just swallowed and nodded.

‘Yeah. You can say that again.’ She paused as Bozer opened his mouth. ‘Don’t actually say it again.’

He nodded, then paused, silent for a moment as he thought before speaking.

‘Way I see it, you’ve got two options. Well, three, technically, but I really don’t think you’re going to give up field work, so you’ve kinda got two. You can go down the Jack path, or the Mac path.’

Riley considered for a moment.

‘Does Mac actually know how to shoot?’

Bozer shrugged, then winced. He shook his head at Riley when the young woman shot him a concerned look.

‘I’m fine.’ He paused for a moment. ‘I actually don’t know. Like, I assume he does, since he was in the Army and all, and he’s Mac and he can do pretty much everything, but…’

Riley nodded slowly, letting herself get lost in her thoughts for a few beats.

‘Maybe…I don’t want to carry, but…maybe I’ll get Jack to teach me how to shoot properly. Just in case.’ She paused and sounded uncharacteristically hesitant. Shaken and unsure. ‘Do…do you think that’s a good idea?’

Bozer squeezed her hand comfortingly again.

‘Hey, you don’t need to decide right away.’ He squeezed her hand again. ‘And me and Jack and
Mac? We’re in your corner, whatever you decide.’

Riley gave him a small smile, squeezing his hand again, before letting go and wrapping the snuggie around her shoulders a little tighter.

‘Thanks, Bozer.’

He smiled back at her.

‘Anytime, Riley, anytime.’

PHOENIX FOUNDATION CAR

ON-ROUTE BACK TO HEADQUARTERS

Matty’s phone rang.

With a sense of unease that she’d held ever since she’d discovered the pages torn out of the middle of *Paradise Lost*, Matty answered.

The voice on the other side of the line confirmed her worst fears.

She hung up, then immediately placed another call.

JACK’S CAR

GAS STATION JUST OUTSIDE LA

‘Hey, boss. Is this about stealing Sparky? ‘Cause I swear I didn’t steal him, I’m just babysitting him for Bozer…yeah, of course I’m with him…okay, I’ll put you on speaker…’

Mac leaned closer, brow furrowed, as Jack put the pump back into the bowser.

‘Mac, Jack, Murdoc’s escaped.’

Mac didn’t hear a single word that his boss said after that.

*He warned me.*

*He threatened me.*

*He said it wasn’t over.*

*He threatened my dad.*

*He’s going to-

Mac immediately reached out and grabbed Jack’s arm as the older man hung up, face grim.

‘Jack, we’ve got to find my dad before Murdoc does. He’s going to-’

Jack reached out and put his hands on Mac’s shoulders.
'Woah, take a deep breath, brother!' After Mac had taken a breath, shooting Jack a look as he did so, the older man continued. 'I know. We all know he's going to go after your dad. But we're heading back to the Phoenix, and we're going to check in with Matty and pick up Riley and get all the intel that the Phoenix techs are scrubbing his cell for right now.' Mac looked like he was going to open his mouth and argue that they had to go now, but Jack continued before he could say anything. 'Mac, we can find him faster and protect him better with help.' He paused for a moment. 'Yeah, he’s your dad, and your responsibility, but we’re family, man. Any problem of yours is a problem of ours.'

After a moment, Mac nodded, and sat back down, putting on his seatbelt as Sparky started reminding him yet again. Jack got into the driver’s seat, and as he did, his partner spoke.

‘You stole my line.’

Despite the grimness of the situation, Jack cracked a very small smile.

Sometimes, Mac really did sound like a snarky teen.

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**BOZER’S HOSPITAL ROOM**

**SECURE MEDICAL FACILITY**

**SOMEWHERE IN LA**

As Matty hung up, Bozer and Riley exchanged a shocked, horrified glance. Without a word, Riley discarded Jack’s snuggie, hanging it on the back of the chair that she’d more or less been living in for the last few days, and picked up her bag to head for the Phoenix.

As she stood, she locked eyes with Bozer, biting her lip.

‘You gonna be okay?’

Bozer just nodded.

‘I’m in a secure government medical facility; I’m in good hands.’ He gestured with his head towards the door. ‘Go do your magic and help Mac.’

Riley nodded, reached down and squeezed his hand one last time, and hurried out.

Bozer, after his goofy little smile faded (Riley was worried about him! She’d taken his hand again!), slumped back onto his pillows with a groan.

He totally understood why Mac hated being sick or injured now, and was so resistant to medical care.

Being hurt, and being unable to help his team, his friends, being stuck on the side-lines, was the worst.

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**PHOENIX FOUNDATION HEADQUARTERS**

**SOMEWHERE IN LA**

When Mac and Jack arrived at the war room, Matty and Riley were already waiting for them.
Matty turned to them with a rather exasperated look in her eyes.

‘Mac, why does your personal business always become Phoenix business?’

Mac didn’t even start some kind of response about the reasons why that might be the case, he just seized a couple of paperclips from the bowl and started playing with them.

Matty, Jack and Riley exchanged a concerned look, and then Matty tapped the screen to start briefing them.

Jack and Riley exchanged another concerned look as they and Mac piled into one of the Phoenix’s Jeeps.

Mac had, as usual, spoken during the briefing, shared all the information he had, and conducted his usual analysis.

But they knew him well enough to know that he was still off.

Worried. Concerned. Lost in that great mind of his.

Jack and Riley exchanged a resolute nod as Jack started up the car and Riley started up her laptop, plugging in the mobile Wi-Fi modem she used from time to time.

They had to help Mac keep his dad safe.

Sitting in the back, Mac stared down at the paperclips he’d reshaped. They had taken the shape of a fish and a fishing rod.

MAXIMUM SECURITY PRISON

SOMEBWHERE IN LA

Matty nodded in acknowledgement as the guard opened the door for her.

The Organization’s foot soldiers were just that: foot soldiers. They knew nothing useful. Murdoc’s former neighbour had been played and used by the assassin and really didn’t know anything useful either.

So, without any useful intel and with her team, her friends, heading into a very dangerous situation, Matty had only one option left available to her.

Inside the cell, shackled to a table, was Patricia Thornton.

The tall, slender woman somehow managed to make a prison jumpsuit look elegant.

She just stared at Matty, face impassive and eyes hard and distant.

Thornton had been in prison for months. She had refused to talk, no matter how they’d tried to break her.

Even Matty admitted to some level of grudging admiration for her predecessor.

But now, she had an idea. An idea as to how to get Thornton to talk, at last.
As calm and tough as ever, Matty walked over to the other woman, took a seat opposite her.

‘I’d like to say it’s lovely to meet your acquaintance, but that’d be lying.’ Thornton didn’t react.
‘Now, I know you haven’t said anything. If you believe the gossip in the intelligence community, you’re never going to talk. You’re never going to break.’ Matty leaned a little closer. ‘But I think I know how to break you.’ She leaned a little closer. ‘I had all the cameras and recording devices switched off. It’s just us.’ That was true. Matty was prepared to resort to absolutely anything, if necessary, to break Thornton and get the intel that would stop her team from getting killed. She wouldn’t start with that, of course, but she was prepared to go to her last resort if necessary. Thornton didn’t flinch, didn’t make any moves. Of course, she wasn’t scared. The two women watched each other for a moment, neither blinking, neither flinching, before Matty smirked. ‘You see, I think I’ve found your weakness.’ She pulled a file out from her bag. ‘You cared about your agents. You cared about your team. They were the closest thing you had to friends. Maybe they were even family.’

Matty started pulling photos out of the bag, stills that had been pulled from various security cameras.

Bozer, lying on Mac’s makeshift gurney in the war room, almost bleeding out.

Riley covered in blood and in shock after shooting Horn.

Mac cutting the coolant line, then desperately trying to escape the flames as he tried to stop the theft of the bioweapon.

Mac returning to the Phoenix after going undercover as Murdoc, looking not quite right, Jack’s arm around his shoulders and concern on the older man’s face.

Bozer and Jack held at gun-point in Amsterdam.

‘Stop.’ Matty looked up, seeing emotion, seeing a reaction, on Thornton’s face for the first time. As she watched, the other woman closed her eyes for a moment with a slight shake of her head, then opened them again. Thornton was the best spy in the business, supposedly, but Matty was quite sure there was genuine horror in her dark eyes. ‘Stop, please.’

Matty nodded, face growing set and firm.

‘So you do care about them.’ She leaned closer. ‘Then why the hell did you betray them?’

There was a moment of silence, of stillness. Thornton breathed in, then out, then looked Matty square in the eye, an almost-imploring look in her eyes. A desperate look.

‘I didn’t.’

Matty had to draw on years of experience to keep her face passive, as Thornton continued, resting her head in her hands for a moment, before making eye contact with Matty again.

‘I’m not Chrysalis. I was set up.’

Matty snorted.

‘And why should I believe you? You haven’t said anything for months. You didn’t say anything to your team when you were arrested. Why should I believe you now?’

Thornton swallowed and nodded.
'You shouldn’t.’ She swallowed again. ‘I wouldn’t, but this is the truth.’

Matty suspected, lifelong master spy that she was, that telling the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth, was a very hard thing for Thornton to do. The other woman had put a lot of weight on that one word in particular.

The two woman stared at each other, eyes searching one another’s, for a long, long moment, before Matty broke the silence.

‘Say I believe you. Say that you’re innocent. Then who is Chrysalis?’

Thornton shook her head.

‘I don’t know. It has to be someone with connections to oversight, or someone in oversight, to be able to pull off setting me up like that. But I don’t know, and I have no idea how far this stretches.’

Matty considered her for another long moment. That would explain why she’d never said anything to all the people oversight had sent to interrogate her. That would explain why it was only now that she was talking, to Matty, who hadn’t been sent by oversight, when the cameras were all off. That would explain why she’d not said a word when she’d been arrested, not tried to alert her team in any way, shape or form, to her claim of innocence. That would explain why the team that had attacked the Phoenix had seemed just a little underprepared, for a team that had been sent by an organization that had turned the Phoenix’s own Director. That would explain why a woman who’d spent her whole life in service of her country, in the service of good, had supposedly turned, and why a woman who so clearly seemed to care for her agents had apparently betrayed the very agents that she really had considered friends.

Without a word, without giving anything away, Matty packed up the photos, and left the room.

DINER
OUTSKIRTS OF LA

As Mac and Riley pored over Riley’s laptop, Jack felt his phone vibrate, and pulled it out.

There was a text message from an unknown number.

Longhorn – take your packages from Lima to Sao Paulo.

The number was unknown, but the message was something that only one person could have possibly sent him.

The combination of his old CIA codename, and the reference to Lima (where he’d had to protect the two children, a boy and a girl, of a local drug lord turned CIA asset) and Sao Paulo (where he’d once gone dark and earned himself a blistering reprimand from her) meant that the message had to be from Matty.

And she was telling him to go dark with Mac and Riley.

‘Riley, get off the Phoenix network now.’ As he spoke, Jack slipped his phone into the seat of the diner, and gestured for Mac and Riley to do the same. ‘Matty’s ordering us to go dark.’ The three agents shared a look, Riley biting her lip, Mac’s face set, Jack without a trace of his usual humour. ‘We’re on our own.’
As they pulled away from the diner in a car that they had ‘borrowed’, Jack muttered under his breath.

‘Forget Cairo Day, this entire week’s got to be cursed.’

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**MATTY’S RESIDENCE**

**LA**

Matty, as soon as she’d sent that text to Jack on a burner that she kept specifically in case of a situation like this, punched in another number that she had memorized long ago.

She had to get to the bottom of the question of Thornton’s innocence. The question of whether she was really Chrysalis. Whether that part, at least, of this Organization’s plot was *really* over.

Luckily, she did have a few contacts, a few friends that she knew she could trust.

‘Oh, Miss Webber! Long time, no speak.’

‘Hello, Hetty. This isn’t a social call, I’m afraid.’

‘Oh, it never is in our line of work…’

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**TRUCKSTOP**

**OFF I-5**

‘It’s…it’s like he disappeared completely off the face of the Earth. Like someone deleted him off the internet.’

Jack’s brow furrowed.

‘I thought that was impossible? You know, once it’s online, it’s online forever, and you can’t get rid of it…’

Riley shook her head in frustration.

‘Well, yeah, he can’t have been *completely* deleted, but I can’t find *anything.*’ She glanced over at Mac, who was staring at his letter to his dad, which had literally travelled halfway around the world (it had somehow made it to Perth, Australia at one point), as if he was hoping to find a clue that he’d somehow missed earlier. ‘This didn’t happen by accident, and unless your dad went completely, completely off the grid and has some serious tech skills…’

Mac seemed to come back to himself and shook his head.

‘No, that’s very unlikely.’

Riley nodded.

‘Then someone *really* didn’t want him to get your letter, and *really* doesn’t want you to find him.’

Mac ran a hand through his hair, frustrated.
He’d told Jack to drive towards Tahoe after they’d gone dark, based solely off the fact that Murdoc had mentioned that his dad had a fishing day, and when he was a kid, he, his dad and his grandfather had sometimes gone up there to fish.

It was a ridiculous long shot at best.

You could go fishing just about anywhere, and he knew Murdoc was a liar. The assassin may well have just made it up to provoke him.

‘Excuse me, you’re Mr MacGyver, right?’ The waitress, a girl who couldn’t be much older than sixteen, walked up to their table and addressed Mac, holding out a burner phone, which Mac took warily. ‘Your friend left it for you.’

As the waitress walked away, Mac turned the phone on.

There was a single text message on it, which he opened.

**Last night I dreamed that I was a child out where the pines grow wild and tall. I was trying to make it home through the forest before the darkness falls.**

He turned to Jack and Riley.

‘Or, someone wants to me to have to play his game to find him.’

Jack had a hand on Riley’s laptop, which the hacker had wrapped her arms around protectively.

‘Riley, he knows we’re here, he’s got to be tracking us-‘

‘-I’m the only one who gets to destroy my rig!’

Mac shook his head.

‘He’s not tracking us. He knew we’d come here.’ He sighed. ‘He played me. He got me to send us towards Tahoe, and this is the only place for a hundred miles with free Wi-Fi.’ He shook his head again. ‘And he’s playing his usual games.’

He held out the phone so that Jack and Riley could read the message. Both of them looked up at Mac with furrowed brows.

The blonde agent gave a very wry little smile.

‘They’re song lyrics. *My Father’s House*, Bruce Springsteen. It seems Murdoc’s a fan of music.’

Jack snorted.

‘So he’s telling you how to find your dad and presumably him using lyrics?’ He read the text again. ‘So your dad’s living somewhere next to a pine forest.’

Mac, who had returned to a state of being lost in thought, simply got up and started walking out towards the car again, Jack and Riley following behind him with a concerned glance at one another.

Jack got in and turned the key in the ignition.

‘So, where to, brother?’

Mac snapped out of it momentarily, and looked up at his partner.
'Tahoe. Might not be a long shot after all.’ He turned to Riley. ‘If I give you an address, can you do some digging on who lives there?’

The young woman nodded.

‘Child’s play if I can get Wi-Fi on my laptop, it’s gonna be a pain if I have to use data on a burner though.’

Mac nodded.

‘Give me five minutes, and I can get you Wi-Fi on your laptop.’

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‘BORROWED’ CAR

ON-ROUTE TO TAHOE

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Mac stared at Murdoc’s latest message, which he was sure was nothing more than a taunt.

_I awoke and I imagined the hard things that pulled us apart, will never again, sir, tear us from each other’s hearts._

He leaned forwards and showed the message to Jack and Riley. The hacker’s typing grew more frantic, while Jack pushed his foot down on the gas a little harder.

‘Okay, you were right, Mac. Took a lot of digging, but there’s a James MacGyver living at that address.’

Mac just nodded, and Jack glanced back at him in the rear-view mirror.

‘Look, I know that brain of yours doesn’t work like anyone else’s and you know the whole contents of Encyclopaedia Britannica and all, but how’d you know that, brother?’

Mac stared out the window for a moment, silent, then turned back, sighed and replied.

‘When I was twelve, my grandfather told me about this promise that my dad made my mom when they got engaged. My grandfather used to own this little house in Tahoe, which had been in the family for three generations, but he sold it to send my mom to college. Now, my mom had really good memories there from when she was a kid, and she really wanted my grandfather to get his beloved house back, so my dad promised that one day, he’d buy it back for her.’ Mac’s voice grew softer, quieter. ‘He…he never got to fulfil that promise…but I guess he did go and buy the house.’

From the front, Riley reached out to bump fists with Mac in the best gesture of comfort she could offer, given their respective positions in the car. Jack shook his head, shot Mac a look of sympathy, and then muttered something about MacGyver men being sentimental romantics, which at least earned an eye-roll from the blonde.

_Murdoc, and the Organization, could have set this all up with some very thorough research and a couple of lucky guesses._

_But it’s not exactly common knowledge that my dad and my grandfather and me used to go fishing up at Tahoe. And it’s not at all common knowledge exactly how much those trips meant._

_Maybe he made a lucky guess…_
Or maybe…

The list of people who knew the whole story about his father and the fishing trips and the little house in Tahoe was a very, very short list.

Mac toyed with a paperclip that was taking the shape of a key. A very particular key.

He warned me.

Or maybe he threatened me.

People believe what they want to believe.

MATTY’S RESIDENCE

LA

Matty’s burner phone rang, and she picked up.

‘Tell me you got something, Lil.’

She’d diverted all the work regarding Murdoc to Phoenix agents and analysts that she was sure could be trusted.

Lil was on that list.

‘I’ve been analysing Murdoc’s copy of Paradise Lost, and I’m not Miss Davis, I’d really love to get her opinion on it, or MacGyver’s…’ Matty shook her head. Bozer could not have picked a worse woman to try and ask out in an attempt to take the whole move-on-from-Riley thing to heart (which he was clearly doing a terrible job of), since Matty knew quite well Lil was not interested in him and was also very intimidated by Riley, for reasons unknown. ‘But there’s a code in it. Certain letters have been marked, very lightly, in certain ways, and I’m still trying to break it, but so far, I’ve got: the pawns are moving into place, the Queen will fall.’

Matty nodded. It made sense, now, why Murdoc had been so, so specific in his demand for a copy of Paradise Lost.

He’d needed that particular copy to get a message from the Organization, and they’d known that Bozer and Riley would not have many options on such a short timescale, not for such a rare book.

‘Thanks, Lil. Keep at it, contact me as soon as you have more.’

‘Will do, Director Webber.’

‘Matty, please. Call me Matty.’

There was a pause for a moment.

‘Oh, sorry, of course Director…Matty.’

As she hung up, there was the beep of a text message coming in.

Matty nodded grimly as Hetty confirmed her suspicions. Someone in oversight, or with access to what oversight did, had indeed tampered with the orders that Thornton supposedly gave when she’d supposedly betrayed the Phoenix. (She and Hetty had once worked together in Phnom Penh, taking down some very corrupt Internal Affairs people. Taking down corrupt oversight. Cocktails had been involved.)

Thornton, it seemed, really had been telling the truth.

Though, Matty wasn’t quite ready to believe her. Not yet.

If it turned out that Thornton really was innocent (honestly, even if she wasn’t, and this was all a set-up upon a set-up upon a set-up), she wouldn’t sleep well tonight (probably wouldn’t for quite a few nights), but she had to be sure.

She sent Jack another message.

**Longhorn – you’re heading to Chechnya next.**

Chechnya had been a trap.

Jack would know what it meant.

She got a reply a moment later.

**We know.**

Of course they did, but it at least made her feel a little better to have clear confirmation that they were very aware of what they were getting into.

With a sigh, Matty got up.

She had yet another trip to the prison to make.

MAXIMUM SECURITY PRISON

SOMEWHERE IN LA

Patricia Thornton’s ears perked as she heard footsteps outside her cell, then the quiet whispers of the guards.

Once a spy, always a spy.

Even in prison.

‘…Murdoc killed another three…’

‘…That blonde kid who was here about a week and a half ago, that older guy with the ridiculous haircut who came with him, and the young lady with the book from when Thornton got found out…’

The former Director of the Phoenix Foundation’s face turned very, very pale. She closed her eyes, and opened them again, repeating the action twice, glanced around at the cameras in her cell, as if hoping someone would tell her that this was all some very cruel trick, or maybe even a nightmare. Then, her shoulders started to shake and tears started to roll down her cheeks, as if the truth of it all
had finally hit her.

In the control room, Matty turned to the tech controlling the cameras.

‘I’ve seen enough. Turn off the cameras.’

She got up and left the room.

Thornton had been the world’s most successful covert operative.

She could probably fake such grief, but from everything that Matty knew of her, and everything Matty knew about spying (which was not exactly just a couple of trifles), Thornton had never been the kind of spy who faked any and all emotions. In fact, she’d been just the opposite; she was the kind of operative who preferred to largely keep all emotions hidden.

Matty believed her grief was real, and combined with the verifications of Thornton’s claim of innocence that she’d gotten so far…well, she wouldn’t be sleeping tonight, and she was going to abuse her power to get a woman who’d been declared a traitor to their country released from prison.

Matty believed her.

Matty, followed by the two guards who’d been outside Thornton’s cell (again, people she definitely trusted, had handpicked for this particular shift and that particular task herself), entered the cell.

She walked up to Thornton, who’d looked up as soon as she’d entered.

Matty gave the other woman a very small, somewhat apologetic smile (somewhat, because she thought Thornton would probably have done the same thing in her place).

Thornton hadn’t lost her touch, because the grief vanished from her face, replaced by an inscrutable, confusing look; part-hope, part-understanding, a little anger, and gratefulness, Matty thought.

‘You believe me. They’re not dead.’

It was really more a statement than question.

‘I’m sorry.’

Thornton eyed her for a moment, and an understanding passed between them.

‘You did what you had to do.’

Matty nodded.

‘It’s past time you got out of here. We’ve got a job to do.’

The *or they might really die* was something that neither woman had to say out loud, or wanted to.

THE BELLAGIO

LAS VEGAS

Nikki, a week into her first vacation since her and Mac’s interrupted trip to Rome, answered her
phone as she put down a pair of very expensive high heels.

She smiled and laughed as she listened to the voice on the other end of the line, as if the caller was a friend, or a boyfriend, perhaps.

Then, after browsing another two pairs of shoes and smiling at the shop assistant, she left calmly.

Ten minutes later, a small fire broke out on the roof of The Bellagio.

Twelve minutes later, at the behest of Sarah Adler, one of her co-workers on the CIA taskforce assigned to take down Chrysalis’ mysterious organization (which honestly had been struggling these last few months to get anywhere), Agent Matthews, tried to call her. Four times.

She didn’t answer.

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**BOZER’S HOSPITAL ROOM**

**SECURE MEDICAL FACILITY**

**SOMEWHERE IN LA**

The moment that Thornton and Matty stepped into Bozer’s hospital room, the young man pointed at his former boss in shock. His heart-rate monitor showed an immense spike in heart-rate.

‘What…what’s she doing here? She’s evil! She got us disavowed, and tried to kill Mac and Riley and Jack and me!’

Thornton actually winced. Matty shot her a quick sympathetic look, then turned to Bozer.

‘Would I really have brought her into your hospital room, personally vouching for her, if she was evil, Bozer?’

Bozer seemed to return to his senses, because he paused in his freaking-out and his heart-rate slowed.

Thornton, looking more and more uncomfortable by the minute, glanced over at the chair that Riley had occupied, which still had the snuggie on it. A look, soft and not unlike the one she’d worn at Christmas, just before their world had been turned upside down, passed across her face.

After a moment, she sat down in a second chair on Bozer’s other side.

‘I was set up, Bozer.’

Bozer looked very much like he wanted to believe her. He glanced at Matty, who just nodded at him, and then he, too, nodded.

‘Who set you up? I mean, Chrysalis is real, right? Someone who’s in the know-how had to have…I mean, I know what I saw in those files. I didn’t go to Stanford, but I know my accounting-’

Matty interrupted him.

‘Bozer, we know you know your accounting.’ She pulled out a large file. ‘That’s why I brought this. I…we…need you to go over the files again, see if you or the Phoenix or CIA or Homeland analysts missed something, because we have no idea who set her up.’ She held the file out to Bozer, who immediately started poring over them. ‘We think, however, that it might have been someone in
oversight, or with influence on or connections to oversight.’

Thornton sat in her chair, while Matty paced in front of the door.

Bozer looked up from the file.

‘I can practically feel the tense, hurry-up vibes coming from you, boss…uh, bosses…seriously, you can’t rush this, it’s an art!’

Matty looked disbelievingly at him.

‘It’s accounting, Bozer.’

He looked affronted.

‘And accounting is an art.’

Thornton just quirked an eyebrow at him, though, Bozer swore he could detect a very slight hint of amusement on her face, maybe with a tiny little bit of sadness. Perhaps he was projecting.

‘Bozer…’

‘Right, right, focus. Got it, boss.’ He looked back down, shaking his head. ‘Nobody ever appreciates the lackeys and the little people…’ He trailed off and looked up again, an I’ve got an idea look on his face.

Matty and Thornton exchanged a look of their own. Apparently, Mac’s I’ve got an idea face was contagious.

‘Lackeys. Nobody ever appreciates the lackeys. Nobody ever pays much attention to them either, but I swear, they know everything. Like, my manager was embezzling money and thought I didn’t know, and one of the partners at my aunt’s accounting firm…’. Bozer caught himself, shaking his head. ‘You said you thought it was someone in oversight. What if it isn’t? I mean, if you’re the big boss and have spent your whole life serving your country and all, why’d you want to betray it? But if you’re some downtrodden minion…’

Matty and Thornton exchanged another glance.

Bozer was right.

People rarely gave him enough credit.

Similar feelings would be easy to twist in, say, one of the secretaries to someone in oversight, and they did have the necessary access, and it was a lot easier to get away with selling secrets and the like when you were just a lowly secretary or assistant…

Matty pulled out her phone, and started typing out a new message. They only had a very limited amount of time; it was time to take a gamble and focus their search.

JAMES MACGYVER’S RESIDENCE

TAHOE
The moment the pulled into view of Mac’s dad’s house, the burner Murdoc had given Mac rang. Riley immediately started trying to trace the call.

‘Murdoc.’

‘MacGyver, you took your time. I was beginning to think that I’d out-witted you, and you know how I hate it when you disappoint me.’

‘Cut to the chase, Murdoc.’

‘Oh, how impatient the young are. Don’t you appreciate artistry and drama, MacGyver?’

Jack, his eyes focused on Mac’s father’s house, tapped the blonde on the shoulder, pointing out the tell-tale red dot that had appeared on one of the front window panes. As they watched, the figure of a man came into view of the window, and sat down on the couch, still in view, completely and utterly oblivious.

Mac swallowed.

‘What do you want, Murdoc? What’s your game here?’

The assassin laughed.

‘Oh, you are so adorable, MacGyver. Sticking to a lovely little script, so I can go ahead and play the bad guy to the hilt. We both know what I want, MacGyver.’ He paused, almost certainly for dramatic effect. The red light on Mac’s father’s window disappeared, then reappeared. ‘He left you, MacGyver. Walked out and vanished from your life. You haven’t spoken to him in thirteen years. How much do you love daddy dearest? Enough to take a hike and make a trade? I have to warn you, no take-backs.’ Murdoc’s voice grew more business-like. ‘You’ll receive your first set of directions in a moment. Come alone, and tell your friends no funny business, or you know the consequences. For daddy and for them.’ His voice grew creepier again. ‘I’ll be expecting you.’

He promptly hung up, and Mac glanced over at Riley, who shook her head.

‘He’s jamming me.’

Mac nodded, having expected that, as they all had. He glanced over at the figure in the window for a long moment, then back at Jack and Riley. The phone chimed. His first set of instructions from Murdoc.

With a resolute nod, Mac pocketed the phone, then walked over to the open door of the car, grabbing the reel of fishing line and packet of chips that they’d found in it, concealing the items from view as best as he could. Murdoc was certainly watching.

As he straightened up again, Jack reached out and clasped his arm. When he spoke after a moment, his voice was hoarse and rough.

‘Brother, if you go—

‘I know, Jack.’ Mac glanced into the window again. The red dot had reappeared. ‘I don’t have a choice.’

He and Jack stood there for a couple of beats, staring into each other’s eyes, before Jack looked away for a moment and nodded, squeezing Mac’s arm.
'You owe me beers for a month and a steak dinner for all the grey hairs I’m going to get because of this stunt, Mac.'

Riley, too, locked eyes with him.

‘That goes for me too, Mac.’

Jack glanced at her, trying for incredulity and failing as he glanced back at the blonde. There was only the barest hint of a joke in his voice when he spoke.

‘You’re too young for grey hairs, kiddo.’

Mac gave the two of them a very, very wan little smile.

‘I’ll buy you both eye fillets and a six-pack a week for the next month, no more, no less.’ He paused for a moment. ‘Can you tell Bozer I’m sorry? I forgot to buy the Honey-Nut Cheerios again.’ Jack and Riley nodded, and Mac glanced at his father one last time. ‘And…and make sure my dad finally gets my letter?’ Another nod. Mac nodded too, and started walking north, as Murdoc had told him to. After about ten steps, he turned back again. ‘I love you guys.’

Both Jack and Riley stared at him for a breath, and in the end, it was Riley who spoke, because Jack’s voice had deserted him.

‘We love you too, Mac.’

With another little smile, the blonde turned away and started walking again.

Jack and Riley watched him go up the road, until they couldn’t see him anymore. Then, they turned to one another, and without a sound, Riley reached out and threw her arms around Jack, both giving and seeking comfort.

Jack hugged her back just as tightly, rubbing her back in soothing circles.

‘He’s Angus MacGyver. Impossible isn’t in his vocabulary. He’ll be fine.’

Jack had absolute faith in his partner. He wished he could have absolute faith in his words.

BOZER’S HOSPITAL ROOM
SECURE MEDICAL FACILITY
SOMEWHERE IN LA

Matty’s phone rang, and she immediately answered.

‘Matty…’ She instantly recognized Sarah Adler’s voice. Jack’s former partner was one of her trusted CIA contacts. ‘Nikki Carpenter went on vacation to Vegas a week ago. Her taskforce can’t reach her; there was a fire at The Bellagio, where she was staying, and there’s a lot of chaos in the area right now, she might have just not heard her phone…but they’ve called five times now, and they can’t find her or track her phone. She’s disappeared.’

Matty turned instantly back to Bozer and Thornton and gave them a very short summary.

‘Nikki Carpenter’s disappeared, her last known location was Vegas.’
They all knew that Mac and Jack and Riley were in Tahoe, which wasn’t far from Vegas at all. They all knew how fishy this looked, especially from a woman who’d lied to and deceived quite literally everyone (both good and bad guys, supposedly) for months, and was very, very tied up in everything that had happened.

Both Bozer and Thornton’s eyes hardened.

Matty turned her attention back to Sarah.

‘I’m going to have to put you on hold, I have a call to make.’ She paused for a moment. ‘Don’t you dare desert your post, Adler.’

Matty wouldn’t put it past Sarah to leave New Mexico, where she currently was, probably stealing some kind of government transport along the way (she would not put it past Sarah to ‘borrow’ a plane) to try and help her friends.

Matty hung up before the other woman could respond, and immediately punched in Jack’s number.

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CLEARING NEAR A WATERFALL

TAHOE

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The glint of the last vestiges of sunlight reflecting off a shiny surface caught Murdoc’s eye, and he moved towards it, gun in hand.

As he reached the edge of the woods, he laughed when he saw the empty chip packet.

‘Oh, cute, MacGyver. But you’ll have to do better than that-‘

He was cut off by Mac jumping down from a nearby tree (no-one ever looked up), pulling a makeshift constrictor knot, tied from fishing line, around the assassin’s neck.

Murdoc went limp, recognizing the knot for what it was, and laughed again.

‘Oh, this is much better.’ He gestured to the waterfall. ‘Welcome to our own personal Reichenbach, MacGyver. Isn’t it-‘

Without warning, he stopped speaking and drove his heel hard into Mac’s knee.

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JAMES MACGYVER’S RESIDENCE

TAHOE

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As soon as they’d shaken themselves out of their shock as Matty told them the latest news, Jack and Riley exchanged a glance, and made for the car, Jack muttering under his breath as they did so.

‘I knew she was kryptonite. Kryptonite always brings trouble for Superman!’

At the moment, neither of them were touching the fact that Thornton wasn’t actually a traitor (though they’d believed she was) with a ten-foot pole. They didn’t have the time or the brainpower to get into that mess right now.
As they reached the doors, they both suddenly stopped, and glanced towards the window. The red dot was gone, had been for a couple of minutes now, but if Murdoc saw them leave (if Mac wasn’t succeeding), then…

‘James MacGyver is about to get a phone call from his power company telling him that they’ve got some weird readings and asking him to go into the basement and check the fuse box. I’ve got some people I trust on their way, ETA fifteen minutes, to keep him safe. Go!’

At Matty’s reassurance, and with faith that Mac was keeping the assassin occupied, Jack and Riley practically leapt into the car, and Jack started breaking just about every traffic law in the book, as Riley frantically did her best to track down Mac.

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**CLEARING NEAR A WATERFALL**

**TAHOE**

Murdoc had managed to wrench the ends of the fishing line out of Mac’s hands, though the constrictor knot was still firmly affixed around his neck.

Mac had, in turn, managed to knock Murdoc’s gun out of his hands, and it was now lying several feet away from them in the grass.

The assassin just smirked at the agent, then lunged for the gun as Mac lunged for him.

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**‘BORROWED’ CAR**

**TAHOE**

Jack and Riley reached the spot where they’d last seen Mac, which also happened to be a fork in the road. Even assuming that Mac had followed a road, which might well be wrong, they had, at best, a 50/50 chance, if they couldn’t better the odds.

Jack glanced over at the young hacker, who shook her head.

‘Nothing.’

Jack got out of the car.

‘We’re doing this the old-school way, then.’

He never expected to be tracking Mac through the woods like how you’d track a hostile, but you really never knew what to expect in this job, as the events of even the last ten minutes indicated.

Fortunately, either Mac had hedged his bets and assumed that they might have to follow him, or he saw no need to try and conceal his tracks, because they weren’t hard to locate at all.

He got back into the car, and took the left fork.

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**CLEARING NEAR A WATERFALL**

**TAHOE**
Pinned against a tree, a gun pointed at his head, Murdoc smirking darkly at him, Mac struggled frantically, scrabbling at the tree trunk with his left hand, trying to find something, anything (his Swiss Army knife was several feet away, far out of his reach) to get him out of this situation, while he just-as-hurriedly tried to make a paperclip into a serviceable weapon using just his right hand, which was trapped in his pocket.

Murdoc seemed to find his struggles amusing, because he just smirked wider (and hadn’t shot him yet).

‘Give up, MacGyver?’

‘Never!’

His response was punctuated with a particularly spirited bout of struggling.

Murdoc’s eyes darkened, and he put the gun to Mac’s forehead.

A shot rang out.

Murdoc dropped to the ground, clutching his knee, dropping his gun, looking around to see just who had shot him, wincing in pain.

Mac had the sense to kick the gun away, as he looked around for his saviour.

(It had grown dark as he struggled with Murdoc, and visibility had decreased significantly.)

Footsteps sounded out.

Mac was instantly on alert.

There were many sets of footsteps, and Jack would have made some kind of joke by now.

Instead, it was a woman’s figure that emerged from the darkness.

A figure that he was intimately familiar with.

Who was pointing a gun at him, and flanked by six men dressed just like the Organization agents who’d attacked the Phoenix just days ago.

‘Sorry, Murdoc, but we need him alive.’

Murdoc started laughing.

‘Oh, I must commend your taste in women, MacGyver. I like her!’

Mac could only stare at Nikki in shock, as two of the Organization agents grabbed Murdoc and dragged him away, one of them delivering a sharp blow to the assassin’s head with the butt of his gun.

A niggling doubt had been growing in the back of his mind since he’d realized that his dad had moved to his grandfather’s old house in Tahoe, and that Murdoc had tracked him there before he could.

Since he’d realized that the list of living people who’d known all about that house, who’d known all about that promise, was a very, very, very short list indeed.
And that his ex-girlfriend happened to be one of those people.

*Still, this is a shock.*

Nikki just smirked at him.

‘Hi, Mac. It’s been a while. Why haven’t you called?’

She stepped closer to him as a couple of the men with her cuffed the still-shocked Phoenix agent’s hands behind the tree. Mac gritted his teeth a little as his shoulders wrenched, because the tree’s girth was just slightly too large for his arm span. Two of the agents remained behind the tree, presumably to keep an eye on his hands, while the other four stood before him, each pointing a gun at his head.

*I seriously have terrible luck with women.*

After a moment, he regained his wits and opened his mouth.

‘*You* were Chrysalis, not Thornton.’ His eyes widened. ‘*You* set her up to take the fall. *You* had her sent to prison, you made us all believe…’ Mac looked like he might be sick. ‘*You* made me think that you…we…that night…’

Nikki just smirked a little wider, holstering her gun.

‘Oh, Mac. It’s so flattering to know that I really can switch off that big brain of yours. And it’s so flattering that you think I pulled that all off on my own. You always were so much better with women than everyone gave you credit for being.’ She leaned a little closer to him. ‘As for that night? Well, I recall you enjoying it very, very much. Worth it, right?’

Mac turned his head as far away from her as he could.

‘Absolutely not.’

Her eyes flashed hard for a moment. She stepped away from him again, and they stared at each other for a moment.

‘*Why*?’

There was hurt and bewilderment and confusion and sadness and just that tiny hint of genuine curiosity in his voice.

‘*We weren’t* on the right side, Mac.’ He scoffed. He’d heard this argument before. ‘*Think about it, Mac.* Everything we did, everything *you* did, to supposedly save the world…and yet, we never got a word of thanks. *You* never got a word of thanks. The world never knew you were there, even though you’d have given them *everything.*’ She paused for a moment. ‘*Nearly did* give them everything.’ He opened his mouth to protest, to say that that was the nature of the job, and that was the way he liked it. He didn’t *need* thanks to save the world, just saving it was plenty, but Nikki cut him off with a shake of her head. ‘Oh, no, *listen,* Mac. We worked for people who’d send us into danger, laud us as brave and good and heroes, and then *toss us aside* without a thought a moment later. And they justified all of this, by saying it was for the greater good, that we were protecting the world and saving innocent lives…and those same people are responsible for *just as many atrocities* as those they call the bad guys. At least the bad guys are *honest.* And at least *they* give proper compensation.’

*So, she wasn’t completely lying when she said she did it for the money.*

Mac shook his head.
'Nikki…I know it’s not perfect. I know the world’s not black and white. But what we did, who we worked for…they’re still better than the Organization.'

As he spoke, something sparked in his mind, and he started speaking even as the thoughts joined together in his head.

‘Cairo. This all started in Cairo. You made a mistake, didn’t jam our signal well enough, and then it all went south, and…’

They’d almost been disavowed. If Thornton hadn’t stuck her neck out to protect them, hadn’t pulled in every favour she could, they almost certainly would have been.

Internally, Mac cursed himself for ever believing that Thornton could have been a traitor.

Nikki smiled at him.

‘You really are the smartest man I’ve ever known.’ Her face turned a little darker. ‘It started with doubts. Guilt. If I’d not messed up, if I’d just been that little bit better…and then, I was shown the truth. It wasn’t my fault. It was the fault of those who put us into that situation in the first place, where just a tiny little mistake would get us all killed.’

‘And you think that your Organization is any better? They’ll abandon you. The moment you screw up, they’ll toss you aside-’

Nikki stepped closer to him again.

‘But at least they offer proper acknowledgement and compensation. At least they don’t hide behind some noble greater-good façade.’

She stepped closer to him again, put her left hand on his chest, and her right pointer finger on his lips as he opened his mouth to retort.

‘Come with me, Mac. Join us. Join me.’ She smirked. ‘We’re very, very good together.’

He pulled away from her as best as he could, ignoring the wrenching pain in his shoulders, eyes hard.

‘No, we’d be very, very bad together.’ Nikki recoiled as if he’d slapped her, and stepped away from him. ‘I’ll join you when hell freezes over.’

She took another step away, pulled out her gun and pointed it at him.

‘You know how I feel about puns, Mac.’

A shot rang out.

Nikki dropped to the ground, clutching her right shoulder. Mac kicked at the soil around him, sending dirt into the faces of the two Organization agents closest to him, as they frantically tried to pinpoint where the gunshot had come from.

The two Organization agents who’d been behind him dropped too, as another two gunshots rang out, and then, as the remaining four agents moved away, chasing a figure who took another shot at one of them as he ran, someone came up behind Mac and started picking the cuffs.

‘It’s me.’
Mac couldn’t help but give a small smile as Riley freed him, sagging with relief against the tree for a moment. The hacker’s face had that same relief written across it.

‘You owe us two steak dinners now.’

‘I will happily buy you and Jack a week’s worth of steak dinners.’

As he spoke, Mac quickly field-dressed Nikki’s shoulder, pointedly refusing to look at her face, and then pulled out his belt, using it to secure her wrists behind a thinner tree than the one he’d been bound to, so as not to hurt her any more than she already was (he was not taking any chances; she’d escaped FBI custody once before, but he was also a better person than she was and determined to show it), while Riley cuffed one of the fallen Organization agents, using the cuffs they’d used on Mac, and tied a strip of his pants around his bleeding calf. As he finished securing Nikki, he turned to Riley, nodded approvingly at her field dressing, and gestured with his head to her shoes.

‘Can I borrow your shoelaces?’

Riley rolled her eyes, but the relief that he was alive and sounding like himself was quite clear on her face.

‘I’m not going to get them back, am I?’

‘Uh, probably not. Sorry.’

Mac tied the last Organization agent’s wrists together with the shoelaces, then tore a strip off the man’s shirt to bandage his wound.

Then, he and Riley glanced at one another.

There were still four Organization agents unaccounted for, as well as Murdoc. Jack was also out there, drawing their fire.

They were both unarmed, and neither had any inclination to use any of the guns they’d confiscated off Nikki and the fallen Organization agents.

*Well, not for their intended use anyway.*

Mac grabbed the guns, took out the bullets (dumping the guns), and, his Swiss Army knife in hand, took off in the vague general direction that Jack had run off in, with a nod at Riley.

Riley nodded back and turned to watch the prisoners.

Ducking behind a tree in an attempt to evade the two Organization agents pursuing him (he’d taken down one, and one had run off towards the still-unconscious Murdoc; Jack hadn’t been able to do anything about that before he’d been forced to run himself by the man’s three colleagues), Jack took a moment to catch his breath and check how much ammo he had left.

The answer was only two bullets.

Well, he’d have to make them count.

There was a loud bang that sounded an awful lot like a gunshot. Then another. Then another.

From the sound of their footsteps, Jack’s pursuers stopped and changed direction instantly, searching for the people whom they thought were shooting at them.
Jack, still hidden behind his tree, grinned.

Mac did have impeccable timing.

He ducked out from behind the tree, and followed the two as quietly as he could.

About thirty seconds later, Jack jumped out from behind cover and grabbed one of the men around the neck, cutting off his air supply until he dropped, unconscious, to the ground. His colleague barely had time to react before he was knocked to the ground by Mac, who’d quite literally come swinging down from a tree, holding onto a branch, and kicked the man firmly with both feet, sending him flying at least a yard and a half.

As they each secured one of the agents, using Jack’s belt and his leather wristband, Jack quirked an eyebrow at his partner.

‘So, the Renaissance Man’s also George of the Jungle, now?’

Mac shook his head, his usual exasperated expression on his face.

‘No-one ever looks up. I thought I’d use that to my advantage.’

Jack nodded, then jabbed a finger at him.

‘You take up wearing a loincloth, and we’re no longer friends.’

‘I take up wearing a loincloth and you better get whoever’s impersonating me.’

They let themselves get lost in their familiar, comforting banter for another moment more, then each hefted one of their prisoners to their feet, and started half-carrying the very dazed, half-conscious men back towards the clearing they’d been in.

‘Now we just got one more.’

‘And Murdoc.’

Back in the clearing, they were greeted by a very welcome sight.

Nikki, the other four Organization agents and Murdoc were being properly cuffed and put into two secure-looking vans, supervised by Thornton, Matty and Riley.

‘Matty, Patty, you couldn’t get here like twenty minutes ago?’

Thornton and Matty just exchanged a look. Jack gulped, and then Matty turned to him.

‘Well, traffic was murder. And thank you would have done just fine, Jack.’

Thornton just regarded him with one of her stares.

Jack had the good sense not to retort.

Mac and Riley exchanged a smirk at the look on the older man’s face.

MACGYVER’S RESIDENCE
Mac and Jack watched from the couch as Riley handed Bozer a cup of hot chocolate with a rather proud grin (Riley was a terrible cook, but she’d managed to make the drink without setting off the fire alarm, unlike the last time she’d tried to make something more complicated than a boiled egg). Bozer, who had just been discharged from hospital, grinned back at her, and took a large sip as Riley turned away to deal with the slightly-smoking pot on the stove. Bozer made a face of disgust (apparently, Riley’s hot chocolate was absolutely nowhere near as good as his), but grinned at Riley and shot her a thumbs up when she turned back to him.

As Bozer drank the rest of the hot chocolate, Mac and Jack exchanged a look, both making a mental note to refuse the hot chocolate (since it’d been specially made for Bozer and all) if the young woman offered them any.

Mac noted the soft look in Jack’s eyes as he watched the two.

‘I thought you told Bozer if he didn’t start taking no for an answer, you’d go all Wookie on him? And you did say she was off-limits…’

Jack shook his head.

‘That ain’t up to me, Mac. It’s up to her. Always been up to her, and just her.’ He shrugged. ‘Bozer was crossing a line, I had to call him out. He apologized, he’s backed off, and I know he understands that even being friends with Riley’s a gift.’ Jack shrugged again. ‘She needed some time and space to make up her mind about him, I just tried to get it for her.’

Mac glanced back at his friends for a moment, as Bozer made his way through a second mug of Riley’s hot chocolate.

‘Looks like she might have made up her mind.’

Jack nodded, that same soft look returning to his eyes.

‘Yeah, I think she has.’ He was silent, then his brow furrowed. ‘Reckon he’s playing it up a bit for some Florence Nightingale treatment?’

Mac snorted.

‘A, I dare you to mention the Florence Nightingale comparison to Riley.’ Jack winced. ‘B, probably.’

Jack shrugged, and clinked his beer bottle to Mac’s.

‘He probably deserves a little fussing, given how well he’s held up and what he’s done these last few days.’

Mac just nodded absent-mindedly.

Jack sighed internally. Mac had, understandably, been lost in his own mind pretty much since they’d started their trip back from Tahoe, apart from a moment or two like the one just then or when he’d greeted Bozer. He reached out and jogged Mac lightly with his elbow.

‘What’s eating you, brother?’
The blonde sighed.

‘I…I’m still shocked, and confused, and I don’t know what to think…’

Jack dropped his nonchalance for a moment.

‘You and me both, Mac. All of us. Like, this plot twist was the mother of all plot twists, man.’

Mac snorted with a very tiny little smile.

‘You sound like Bozer.’

That had been Jack’s intention, and he was very glad that it had elicited even the tiniest of positive reactions from his partner.

Mac’s face grew more serious again, and he pulled out a paperclip from his pocket. The letters TBC started to take shape.

‘Murdoc warned me that it wasn’t over. I don’t think he was just referring to the attack on the Phoenix, or even his escape. Nikki told me that she didn’t do it alone. Jack, I don’t think this is over.’

At that moment, there was a knock on the door, then the door opened, to reveal Matty (who had a key) and Thornton.

It was Matty who spoke first.

‘That’s because it isn’t, Mac.’

Wordlessly and seriously, Riley, Bozer, Jack, Mac, Matty and Thornton all gathered around the kitchen bench.

Thornton pulled out a file. Mac reached out and opened it, to reveal a profile on a thirty-something man who’d been the assistant to someone very high up in oversight until just a couple of hours ago, when he’d been revealed to be a mole for the Organization.

He’d helped set up Thornton, setting up the orders to go after Mac, Jack, Sarah and Nikki and those faked encrypted transmissions, and making them look like they’d come from Thornton.

As they finished reading the file, Mac, then Riley, then Bozer and Jack, looked up at Thornton and Matty, and this time, it was Thornton who spoke, a hardness, a finely-restrained anger, in her dark eyes.

‘Nikki was Chrysalis. So was this man. We know there’s more than two out there. Chrysalis isn’t one person, but many.’

Jack, Riley, Mac and Bozer exchanged worried, horrified looks.

The various intelligence and covert operations agencies of the USA were infested with moles.

And they had no idea who they were.

Matty nodded with a grim smirk.

‘I’m going mole-hunting, with a hand-picked team of people I trust completely.’ She sighed. ‘Nikki was on the CIA taskforce chasing the Organization. We have to assume that they’re completely compromised and start again.’ Matty glanced at Jack. ‘I’m tapping Sarah to be my second in
Mac, Riley and Bozer shot their friend a concerned look, but Jack just nodded, seemingly unfazed.

‘She’s a damn good agent, and we all trust her.’

Matty nodded with a small smile.

‘And I’m borrowing Lil from the Phoenix, and there’s a couple of other people I’ve got my eye on.’ She turned to Mac. ‘I think it’s best to have an EOD specialist, since we know the Organization really did want to set off that bioweapon. Unfortunately, I’m thin on the ground on EODs that I trust, so if you’ve got a recommendation, Mac?’

Mac nodded.

‘Charlie Robinson, FBI in New York.’

Matty smiled at him.

‘I’ll get in touch with him.’

Mac, Riley, Jack and Bozer slowly turned to Thornton, and it was Bozer who articulated what they were all thinking.

‘So, if current-boss is going off mole-hunting, does that mean you’re coming back, old-boss?’

Looking, uncharacteristically, a little uncomfortable, Thornton nodded.

‘Formally clearing my name and sorting out the mess we’ve been left with and handling the change-over will take a couple of weeks, but yes. I’m returning to the role of Director of Operations at the Phoenix.’

Mac, Jack, Riley and Bozer all exchanged another look, and Matty stood and gave a very exaggerated yawn.

‘Well, it’s been a long, long day, and I really need my beauty sleep, so goodnight to all of you.’

And she walked straight out the door.

The rest of them watched her go. It was Jack who broke the silence.

‘Matty the Hun’s a lot of things, but subtle sure ain’t one of them.’

Bozer actually let out a slightly-looney-sounding giggle (he was still on some pain meds), while Riley snorted and Mac shook his head with a grin. Even Thornton cracked a tiny smile.

Then, she looked up and made eye contact with each of them in turn, looking distinctly uncomfortable and awkward.

‘I’m sorry.’ She paused, again rather awkwardly. ‘I know…I know it’ll take a long time for you to trust me like you used to again, but I will do everything I can to earn it back.’ There was no hesitation, only resolve, in her voice, before she looked down for a moment, then back up at them, something that could only be described as openness in her eyes. ‘And…and from now on, no more secrets if I can help it. I will always have to keep secrets, including from all of you. That’s part of my job. But no more unnecessary secrets, no more keeping secrets for longer than they have to be kept.’
It didn’t have to be said that maybe, just maybe, if she hadn’t always held so much back, if she hadn’t always kept some kind of distance, if she’d really, truly let them in like friends (like family, real family) did, maybe they’d have trusted her like they did each other. Maybe, just maybe, then they’d have never, ever believed that she could truly have betrayed them.

It was a big maybe. They’d believed Nikki’s betrayal (and rightly so, it turned out) after all. But it was still a maybe.

Maybe then they’d have believed her, like they’d believed Nikki, if she’d protested her innocence.

We’ll never really know.

**Contrary to what Bozer believes, I can’t actually build a machine to let us visit alternate dimensions.**

In the end, it was Jack who broke the heavy silence.

‘I’m sorry we never even considered you being innocent, Patty. Friends…friends shouldn’t believe one another to be traitors, not that easily.’

Thornton shook her head, but there was a grateful look in her eyes as she locked eyes with Jack.

‘You had what looked like irrevocable proof, proof that you found yourself.’ She shrugged and looked a little uncomfortable again. ‘I’d have done the same thing, in your place.’

Jack gave a little smirk.

‘Well, guess even you have to make mistakes sometimes.’

Thornton just quirked an eyebrow at him, and the heaviness of the moment passed.

‘Is there a socially acceptable way to tell your boss that you’re happy she’s not evil and all?’

Jack, Mac and Riley all snorted at Bozer’s remark. Thornton just looked around at them all again, and took a deep breath.

‘Patricia. Outside of work, call me Patricia.’

They all stared at her for a moment. Patricia paid particular attention to Mac, who’d suffered through the most betrayal of all, and honestly, had the greatest reason to be wary and distrustful. There was more reserve in his eyes than Bozer’s and Jack’s and Riley’s, but Patricia’s heavy heart lightened a little when the blonde gave her a little smile and a nod.

After a moment, Riley reached out and pulled the older woman into a hug. Patricia froze for a moment in shock, then hesitantly, uncomfortably and awkwardly returned the hug.

‘Thank you, for teaching me how to fight.’

Over Riley’s shoulder, Patricia made eye contact with Jack, and the two of them shared a sad look, quietly grieving what the young hacker had lost.

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Much, much later that night (or maybe, more accurately, very early the next morning), Mac and Jack sat out on the deck, beers in hand.

Patricia had gone back to her home (which had been confiscated as evidence), to make a start on rebuilding her life.
Riley and Bozer were parked in front of the television playing *Mario Kart* and doing their best to beat one another around Rainbow Road.

Mac broke their comfortable silence.

‘I should have listened to you, Jack. About Nikki.’ He shook his head. ‘You were right. About her, about her playing us, about her playing me, about her being my kryptonite, about her turning my brain to mush. I…I should have listened to you, and then none of this would have ever happened—’

‘You should *always* listen to me, man. Didn’t your grandfather ever tell you to listen to your elders?’ Mac quirked an eyebrow at Jack half-heartedly, who then turned serious. ‘Brother, if you’re waiting for me to say *I told you so*, you’re going to be waiting till you’re old and grey.’ Jack reached out and clasped the younger man’s shoulder. ‘She played us all, Mac. Played *us all*. We all drank the Kool-Aid, man. Maybe she got you first, but hey, you loved her. We’re all a little blind when it comes to those we love, and you know, I reckon that might be a good thing, because when you stop thinking the best of the people who really matter…then you’ve really got a problem, man.’

After a moment of consideration, Mac nodded, and reached out to tap his beer bottle with Jack’s, then to pull the older man into a side hug.

‘Thanks, Jack. Thanks.’

Jack just smiled back at him.

‘That’s what family’s for, Mac.’ He took a swig of his beer. ‘And speaking of family, how’s that letter coming?’

Mac shook his head with a smile.

‘Nice segue, very subtle.’ He pulled out an envelope from his jacket pocket, clean, white and with one neatly-printed address in Tahoe on it. ‘New envelope, new stamp, new address. I’ll post it in the morning.’

Jack smiled at him.

‘I’m real proud of you, Mac.’ He gestured to the letter with his beer bottle. ‘And even if your old man can’t know about the whole walking-off-to-near-certain-death-to-save-him-despite-the-fact-you-haven’t-talked-for-thirteen-years-because-he-walked-out-on-you thing, I reckon he’s going to be too. You grew into a man any father would be proud to have as a son, Mac.’

Mac just smiled back at him.

James MacGyver could never, ever know about his brush with death.

He could never, ever know about Murdoc and Nikki’s betrayal and Thornton being set up and what his son really did for a living.

But he would get Mac’s letter.

And he had the chance to get to know the man his little boy had grown into.

And, Jack truly believed, he would be proud of his son.

(Jack was.)
Murdoc is a liar.

But I think he sometimes tells the truth.

Like when he said people believe what they want to believe.

I now know that for sure, empirically.

Right now, as my grandfather would put it, my compass is on the fritz and I haven’t got a clue which way is North.

Honestly, I’m a little lost.

I don’t know if I can or should trust my judgement anymore. I mean, it’s gotten me this far, and I’m still alive and healthy, which is honestly saying something, given what I do for a living.

But, look, I’ve been very, very wrong at very, very important moments.

There are, however, still a few things that I know for sure.

A few things that aren’t the Second Law of Thermodynamics or the twenty-eighth element of the Periodic Table or the square root of 256.

I trust Jack.

I trust Bozer.

I trust Riley.

I trust Matty.

And, with time, with cold, hard evidence, experience, I think I’ll trust Thornton again too.

Maybe that’s enough of a North point for my compass.

At least for now.

A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step.
Chapter Summary

2.02, Knitting Needle. Mac and Jack take on a very important and very urgent mission for Mac and Bozer’s elderly neighbour, Mrs Patel, while Riley plays chauffeur for Bozer.

Chapter Notes

Thank you so very much for your amazing responses to the first chapter/episode! I’m really glad you liked it, and thanks so much for all the reviews/kudos/subscriptions/bookmarks/favourites/follows!

Quick note regarding episode names – I’m not clever enough to use Swiss Army knife components for each and every episode, and frankly, I don’t really want to (I want to try and avoid any of my Season 2 having the same titles as the real Season 2 by accident), but each episode after The Falling will be named after some kind of ‘object’. Tentative episode titles for some coming episodes include Lipstick, Jack (as in the things used to lift up cars/house foundations etc., not the person) and Defibrillator.

MACGYVER’S RESIDENCE

LA

Two six-packs of beer in hand for Jack and Riley, Mac opened the door to his house, and stepped inside.

He was greeted by blaring pop music.

‘...You made my heart break and that made me who I am. Here’s to my ex, hey, look at me now. Well, I’m all the way up, I swear you’ll never bring me down…’

With a smile and a shake of his head, Mac made his way into the kitchen to drop off the beer in the fridge, and then to the living room, where, as he’d suspected, Bozer and Jack were on the couch. Bozer was playing the pop music on his laptop, while Jack made a face as he unpacked take-out containers.

‘Seriously, man? What’s with the girl-power pop?’

Bozer just shot Jack a look.

‘Firstly, I dare you to say that to Riley, ‘cause this is from her Spotify playlist. She’s got good taste, man. You should follow her account!’ Bozer jabbed a finger at Jack. ‘And secondly, a man’s
allowed his guilty pleasures, bro.’

Jack just raised his hands in supplication, then mouthed *crazy* at Mac over Bozer’s head, and picked up a container of the Chinese take-out (General Tso’s chicken) and passed it to Bozer, before handing Mac some beef lo mein.

‘Now that you’re back, we can finally eat!’ Jack pointed at Mac with his fork. ‘Oh, and you’re out of hot sauce, brother. And Honey-Nut Cheerios.’

Mac adopted a rather incredulous expression, and he paused with his fork halfway to his mouth.

‘I bought three boxes two weeks ago!’

Jack flexed his biceps in response.

‘Takes a lot to keep this well-oiled machine running, man.’

Mac and Bozer just exchanged a glance that involved a lot of head-shaking and raised eyebrows.

Their whole team was on three weeks of mandatory leave from the Phoenix, while Matty’s team vetted the entire Phoenix Foundation, very, very thoroughly, checking to see if Nikki had been the only mole within the Phoenix/DXS. They all hoped she was; they weren’t sure if they could deal with another betrayal.

They were currently two and a half weeks in, and all starting to go a little stir-crazy.

*It’s been good to have some time off, some time to wrap our heads around everything that’s happened…and vacations are very rare things in our line of work, and my grandfather always did say to never look a gift-horse in the mouth, but this is the longest period of time I’ve gone without a mission…well, ever since Italy.*

Jack had taken to spending a lot of time at Mac and Bozer’s. A *lot* of time.

*I’m grateful, I really am. He knows that.*

*Still, he’s also eating all my food, and look, when have I ever passed up the opportunity to tease Jack?*

‘Last time I checked, you have your own house with *your own food.*’

Jack just shook his head with a small grin.

‘You got a comfier couch, man.’

Bozer made a face.

‘Then what in the world is wrong with yours? Ours has got terrible lumbar support, as *I keep telling you, bro.*’

Mac’s roommate looked very pointedly at him as he spoke.

Mac had a habit of sleeping on the couch from time to time, usually due to not being able to sleep, coming out into the living room to watch TV or work on a project of his, then, eventually, falling asleep, sometimes with bits of his project still in his hands. (Getting that spring from the toaster out of his hair had been a *pain.*)
Obviously, he’d been sleeping on the couch a lot more lately.

Bozer suspected that part of the reason why Jack had taken to sleeping on their couch in the last week and a half was to try and encourage Mac to return to his own bed.

He also suspected that there were middle-of-the-night conversations that he wasn’t privy to going on, which did seem to be helping Mac.

Jack was actually quite wise, despite appearances, and he was a very, very good friend.

They were all very lucky to have him, Bozer thought. Mac especially.

Mac took a seat in the armchair, mouth full of beef lo mein, as Jack tossed a fortune cookie at him. Literally. Mac caught it with a roll of his eyes, and Jack just adopted an overly-innocent expression.

‘Hey, we were pathetic against the NSA Listening Post #27 Panthers, again, we need to train, man!’

Mac just shook his head, as Jack’s expression turned more serious. ‘How’d it go with Nate?’

Matty had somehow (she wasn’t telling how, exactly, beyond that he’d come highly recommended by a very trusted contact and friend) found a shrink with high enough clearance and who could definitely be trusted to treat the whole team.

They’d all been asked by Thornton (though, it was half an order; she was their boss, and their psychological states were pertinent to their work, and it was kind of her personality anyway) to attend a couple of sessions with him. Mac and Riley were seeing Nate on a more regular basis, as the hacker worked through her issues surrounding Horn’s death, and Mac worked through his Nikki issues.

Mac shrugged, chewing slowly, swallowing and then responding, sounding a little lost in thought.

‘He’s good at what he does.’

Jack and Bozer exchanged a glance, and then Bozer spoke, reaching out and clasping his best friend’s shoulder.

‘Well, we’re no pros, man, but we’re here for you, anytime.’

Mac smiled back at the two of them, somewhat wanly.

‘I know, Boze.’

His best friend shrugged.

‘Doesn’t hurt to say it.’

Mac smiled a little wider around his mouthful of noodles, then sat, silent and eating slowly, for a few minutes, before putting down his half-eaten food and picking up a paperclip from the coffee table.

He stared at the paperclip he was unwinding as he spoke.

‘Nikki lied about a lot of things.’ There were snorts and a muttered understatement of the century in response. ‘But…but I think she was telling the truth, at the airport, when she said that we weren’t a lie. She might have even been telling the truth about…about how she felt about me…’ He glanced up at Jack, then back down again. ‘…that…that night at the hotel.’

The paperclip had taken the shape of a broken heart. Jack sighed internally.
Mac put the paperclip heart down on the coffee table, and when he spoke again, his voice was very small and very soft.

‘I…I don’t know if that makes it better or worse.’

Jack and Bozer exchanged another glance, and then the older man got up, perched on the arm of Mac’s armchair, and put an arm around the blonde’s shoulders. Bozer reached out and patted his knee.

‘You’ve got the biggest brain of anyone I’ve ever met, brother. I reckon you can work it out.’ Jack squeezed his shoulders a little tighter. ‘And as my man Bozer said, we’re here for you while you do.’

Bozer nodded.

‘And any time after that.’

Mac reached up and put his own arm around Jack’s shoulders, pulling him into a side-hug for a moment, and then smiled wanly at both of them.

‘Thanks, guys. I really appreciate it.’

After a quiet moment, Bozer made to get up to heat up their now-cold food, but Jack just shook his head at him, and scooped up the take-out containers before Bozer could even get off the couch. (He was still recovering from being stabbed, and wasn’t moving around all that well.)

As Jack made his way to the kitchen, juggling the three take-out containers, Mac and Bozer shared a smile.

*Jack is a deadly ex-Delta Force, ex-CIA secret agent.*

*He is, as Bozer would put it, seriously bad-ass.*

*He is, however, also a bit of a mother hen.*

After lunch, Jack cleaned out the take-out containers for recycling, while Bozer worked on one of his movies on his laptop (General Wang was about to be eaten by the green monster), and Mac started taking apart the old gumball machine that Bozer had picked up for a steal a few months’ back.

While he waited for inspiration as to what, exactly, to do with the gumball machine, Mac started stacking the gumballs, and as the tower grew higher and higher, Bozer looked up, grinned when he saw it, and took a photo of his best friend and the tower and sent it to Riley.

He got a response a couple of minutes later, chuckled, and then held it out for Mac and Jack to read. Jack snorted.

‘Oh, come on, Riles! Have a little faith in my man Mac!’

Riley was insisting on proof that Mac hadn’t licked the gumballs or anything to make them sticky and hence hold together better. Diane, who was with her daughter (they were having brunch), had more faith in him, apparently.

Bozer glanced at the gumballs.

‘Besides, seriously, *lick* those things? I’m pretty sure they’re older than me!’
Mac had picked one up and was examining it with a very curious look.

Bozer might be right about the gumballs being older than him.

But, given the preservatives they contain, while they might taste terrible, they really should still be safe to eat.

I have always wondered if gumballs go stale in gumball machines, and precisely how they are affected if they do…

I do a lot of dangerous things on a regular basis, honestly, this doesn’t even rate…

Jack reached out and seized the gumball from Mac’s hand, shooting him a very pointed look. After a moment of staring at his partner with a somewhat-affronted expression, Mac just shook his head with a little smile, then turned his attention back to the disassembled gumball machine in front of him.

He’d just gotten an idea.

‘Hey, Boze, you need a lift to PT?’

Jack had popped back to his place to pick up some more clothes, and had promised to stop by the supermarket and pick up some more Honey-Nut Cheerios and hot sauce while he was out. Since Bozer wasn’t really up to driving, they’d all be taking turns driving him to PT as necessary.

Mac’s roommate shook his head.

‘Nah, Riley’s coming to pick me up after her session with Nate.’

The soft, slightly goofy look on Bozer’s face made Mac smile as he turned back to his gumball machine.

Now, where did I put those ping-pong balls?

The doorbell rang. Mac looked up from where he was attaching his and Bozer’s vacuum cleaner (he’d already made a note to buy a new one; Bozer was never happy when he used their household appliances for his projects but forgot to replace them) to the gumball machine. Jack looked up from his book. They shared a glance, both instantly on alert, and silently made their way over to the door.

Jack looked out the peephole, while Mac tapped a very specific location on the wall, behind the scarecrow, in a very specific pattern, causing a panel in the wall to open and reveal a small screen and a series of controls.

Jack looked out the peephole, while Mac tapped a very specific location on the wall, behind the scarecrow, in a very specific pattern, causing a panel in the wall to open and reveal a small screen and a series of controls.

Jack, having looked away from the peephole, just shot his partner an incredulous look.

‘How long have you had that thing there, brother?’

‘This particular screen? A couple of years.’ Mac shrugged a little uncomfortably. ‘I’ve updated the security system a couple of times since.’

Let’s just say that certain events in the last year have given me very, very good reason to improve my home security system.

Drastically improve my home security system.
The screen showed an elderly South Asian woman with a walking stick.

Jack’s brow furrowed.

‘She looks a little familiar…’

Mac nodded.

‘That’s Mrs Patel, she lives two doors down. Bozer and I mow her lawn and weed her garden sometimes.’

Mac paused for a moment, scrutinizing the old lady on the screen, while Jack picked up his train of thought.

‘Or it’s someone who looks like Mrs Patel.’

He and Mac stared at one another for a moment, before both shook their heads.

‘We’re being paranoid, man.’ Jack made a face. ‘Like crazy paranoid.’

Mac nodded, a wry expression on his face.

‘Yeah, well, I don’t think anyone can blame us for that.’

As he spoke, he closed the hidden door concealing his security system controls, and opened the door.

Mrs Patel smiled at him.

‘Good afternoon, MacGyver. How are you, dear? And who is your friend?’

Mac smiled back at her.

‘Hello, Mrs Patel. I’m well, thanks.’ He gestured at Jack. ‘This is Jack, we work together.’

Jack held out his hand, and he and Mac’s neighbour shook hands.

‘Lovely to meet you, dear.’ She turned back to Mac with a rather assessing eye. ‘You’re still too thin, dear. I keep telling Bozer he has to make sure you eat more!’

Jack grinned.

‘I keep telling him that too, ma’am. But he never listens to me.’

She shook her head, muttering for a moment about too-thin boys who never listened, then shot Jack a rather firm look.

‘You keep reminding him, then, dear. It’ll get through eventually. And don’t call me ma’am, Mrs Patel will do just fine.’

Jack’s grin grew even wider, and more like a smirk, and Mac sighed internally.

‘Do you need help with something, Mrs Patel?’

She sighed, mood instantly deflating.

‘Yes, dear. Desperately. My son and his wife and children are on vacation, and I’m watching their dog…and after a little nap after lunch, I woke up to find that Rocky’s disappeared!’ She wrung her
hands. ‘They get home tomorrow, and my grandkids love that dog, if I don’t find him…have you seen him?’ She pulled out a photo of a mostly-brown mutt who looked like he had a decent bit of German shepherd in him, and possibly some poodle and probably a good portion of terrier or the like as well, since he wasn’t all that big. ‘I’ve been asking around, but the Hortons haven’t seen him, and the Dawsons aren’t home, and…’

Mac and Jack exchanged a glance as Mrs Patel listed off a good number of Mac and Bozer’s neighbours, none of whom had apparently seen Rocky.

*Well, lost dog is a pretty different mission from our usual...*but A, we’re bored, B, it’s a worthy cause, and C, my grandfather would have my hide if I didn’t help out a damsel in distress.*

*Mission accepted.*

Mac reached out and put a hand on the elderly woman’s shoulder.

‘It’s okay, Mrs Patel. Jack and I will help you find Rocky.’

Jack nodded resolutely with his most reassuring smile when Mrs Patel glanced over at him.

‘Where did you last see him?’

Mrs Patel gave them both a very grateful smile.

‘Thanks so much, dears.’ She pocketed the photo. ‘He was in the backyard when I fell asleep, the gate was shut, but I think he opened it, somehow…’

Mac nodded thoughtfully.

‘Can you show us?’

As they made their way towards Mrs Patel’s house, Jack leaned over and jogged Mac with his elbow.

‘Somehow opening a latched gate? So this Rocky’s like you in dog form?’

Mac snorted and shook his head, rolling his eyes.

**MRS PATEL’S BACKYARD**

LA

Mac straightened up from where he was examining the latch on the gate.

‘Opening the gate was definitely how Rocky got out.’

Jack, who was holding the picture of Rocky that Mrs Patel had handed to them, insisting they take it to help with their search, and peering under the deck, checking if Rocky was hiding there (it seemed very unlikely; he was nowhere in sight, and the under-deck was very small and there was no way under the foundations of the house from it either), looked over at him.

‘How’d you know that?’
‘A, there are no holes or signs of digging around the entire perimeter of the fence. B, the fence is too high for Rocky to have been able to jump or climb it. C, this.’

He held up the tweezers of his Swiss Army knife, which held a few strands of slightly-curly brown fur that had been caught in the latch.

Jack nodded.

‘Okay, so we know how he got out. But where did he go?’

Mac smiled wryly at him.

‘That’s where you come in.’

Jack just stared right back at him, expression slightly incredulous, and Mac tilted his head to the side somewhat and raised an eyebrow. Jack opened and closed his mouth like a goldfish.

‘You want me to use my AMOS skills to track a lost dog?’

Mac nodded.

‘Yes, Jack, I want you to use your AMOS skills to track Rocky.’

Jack just shook his head, as he made his way out of Mrs Patel’s backyard and started searching for clues.

‘Man, my instructor would be spewing if he knew what I was putting his lessons to.’

Mac shook his head as he followed.

‘Finding a lost dog for a little old lady and her grandkids is a perfectly worthy cause that pretty much anyone would support.’

Jack snorted.

‘Anyone with a heart. And trust me, man, he didn’t have a heart.’ He paused for a moment. ‘And I didn’t mean that literally, in case your scientist brain didn’t get that. You know, he was alive and all. But I meant figuratively-‘

Mac shook his head in exasperation as he followed Jack down the street.

‘Jack, I got it.’ He paused again. ‘And you know, technically speaking, you could replace a human heart with machines to perform its functions-‘

Jack just shook his head in response, cutting Mac off.

‘Stop right there, brother. I don’t want to hear about being Darth Vader-ized-‘

‘Darth Vader’s torso was still largely intact, the majority of the prostheses were to replace his limbs, his heart was fine-‘

Jack shook his head again.

‘You take movies way too seriously, man.’

Mac glanced over at his partner, who was crouching down on the sidewalk, examining a shrub, with
a very incredulous expression.

‘A, I live with Bozer and we’ve been best friends since I was nine. B, you’re the one who listed Terminator as evidence for why we shouldn’t have made Sparky!’

‘I warmed up to him! He’s got a lot of charm, for an AI!’

WAITING ROOM

SECURE MEDICAL FACILITY

LA

Bozer grinned as he walked out of his physio’s office, then winced. He’d been pushed particularly hard today, and his muscles were feeling it.

His grin widened again as he came up to Riley, who was sitting in a chair in the waiting room, playing with her phone. She looked up and smiled at him, then made a sympathetic face at him when he winced again.

Bozer rubbed his left side and made a face.

‘You remember that time Jack made us do his supposedly-classified work-out?’ Riley just nodded. That had not been a fun day. ‘Yeah, well, I feel even worse than that time. Like way worse.’

Riley cocked an eyebrow at him in disbelief. Bozer nodded, a really look on his face.

‘Yeah, I know, I didn’t think that was possible either. But, you know, empirical evidence and all.’

Riley snorted.

‘Mac’s rubbed off on you.’

Bozer grinned.

‘Hey, we’ve been BFFs for sixteen years! It’d be weirder if he hadn’t!’

Riley shook her head with a smile, then seemed to consider for a moment before speaking.

‘I’ve finished rigging up that new gaming system I was telling you about. Wanna come over and test it out?’

Bozer’s grin broadened, and he rubbed his hands together.

‘Hell, yeah! I can’t wait to kick your ass in Super Smash Brothers!’

Riley crossed her arms and raised an eyebrow.

‘Oh, you wish. I’m awesome at Super Smash Brothers. I’m going to kick your ass!’

Bozer smirked.

‘Oh, bring it on!’
Mac and Jack made their way up a small hill, both keeping an eye out for Rocky.

‘Oh, just ask already. Best get it over with.’

Jack turned to Mac (who’d sounded very resigned) with an expression of rather-deliberate nonchalant confusion on his face.

‘Ask what? I think you’re losing your marbles, brother.’

Mac just shot him a look and flung his arms out in frustration.

‘Am I still in love with Nikki? I know you’ve been wanting to ask that ever since Tahoe!’

Jack paused in his steps, and pulled Mac aside and sat down on a rock, patting the patch of rock beside him. After a moment, Mac sat down next to him.

‘Mac, look, can’t say I didn’t want to ask. Can’t say I didn’t think I’d need to at some point. But since she’s put away, and you’re not obsessing over catching her or something…’ The this time didn’t have to be said. ‘I figured I could give you some time if you need it. If you ain’t ready…’

Mac sighed and shook his head.

‘As I said, best get it over with.’ He paused for a moment. ‘I lied to you in Portugal. I’m sorry, but I did.’

Jack snorted and socked him lightly in the arm.

‘Yeah, that was obvious, brother. You kinda told me with all your actions. It’s all water under the bridge.’

Mac gave him a very wan smile, then dropped the smile as he continued.

‘I…I was still in love with Nikki then. And then…I…I really thought I was moving on, getting over her. I mean, I tried dating again…and…and I thought I really wasn’t in love with her anymore.’ He gave a bitter snort of laughter. ‘I thought really, really wrong.’ He glanced over at Jack, then looked away. ‘Then the whole Chrysalis thing happened, and that night at the hotel…she…she told me she still loved me, and…and…well, I realized how wrong I’d been.’

Jack reached out and put an arm around his shoulders.

‘Mac, man, loving someone ain’t something you can turn on and off like a light switch. Believe me, I know. And sometimes it’s buried so deep or so far in the past, you don’t even know it’s there…and then, she comes back into your life, and boom. It’s back.’

Mac nodded slowly with a sigh. Jack definitely knew that from experience. He glanced at the older man, and then away again, at the treeline.

‘That night at the hotel…I did still love her then. But after…after the shock of it all faded…well, you heard what I told Kono.’ He glanced back at Jack. ‘I’m not quite sure if I was still in love with Nikki before Tahoe, but I definitely wasn’t like I was that night. Not after everything that’d happened between us.’ His eyes hardened a little and there was a very resolute look in them. ‘But after
Tahoe…I am not still in love with Nikki.’

*And this time, that is the truth.*

Jack nodded slowly, then gave a wan smile.

‘Glad you’ve broken her spell on you, man.’

Mac just shook his head with an answering wan little smile.

‘No such thing as magic, Jack.’

Jack shot him a look of disbelief.

‘You ever been to New Orleans, man? Trust me, in the bayou…you’d believe.’

Jack heard whining. And whimpering.

Quickly, he traced the source of the noise to a cluster of rocks, and crouched down beside them. There was a hole under the rocks, a rather deep, fairly narrow hole (neither he nor Mac would fit through the opening, certainly).

‘Mac! Over here!’

The blonde jogged over, and when Jack gestured with his head towards the hole, Mac pulled out his Swiss Army knife and shone the flashlight down it.

The partners peered into it.

Stuck at the bottom, whining and pawing at the walls, but seemingly unhurt, was Rocky.

Jack turned to the younger man.

‘Well, we found him.’ He glanced back down the hole. Rocky seemed to have tried to climb out, if the loose dirt and small stones and gouged-out bits of the walls were any indication, but it seemed the soil was too loose and the walls too steep for the dog to climb. ‘How are we going to get him out? I reckon it’s just a little too deep for us to reach down and grab him…’

Mac had his thinking face on, and as Jack watched, it became his *I’ve got an idea* face.

‘We’re going to put more rocks in the hole.’ Mac started grabbing medium-sized rocks from around them, all about the size of his fist, or a little bigger. ‘You ever heard the story about the thirsty crow? This is kinda like that.’

He started placing the rocks in the hole as best as he could, being careful not to hit Rocky, who was clever enough to back away, seemingly understanding what Mac was trying to do.

‘So we gonna save Rocky with rocks? ‘Cause I see a-‘

‘*No puns,* Jack. Please. *I hate* your puns.’ He gestured at the general vicinity. ‘Go find some more rocks!’

As Jack scrambled off to find more rocks, Mac kept working on his makeshift miniature stairs.
Bozer slapped his hand down on the couch as Samus knocked out Link.

‘Not again!’ He turned to Riley. ‘Best of ten?’

Riley smirked at him.

‘Just gonna keep losing, Bozer.’

He smirked right back.

‘Wait and see, Riley, wait and see.’

She snorted, but navigated to the home screen so they could start another brawl.

As Bozer dawdled over his character choice, Riley picked hers quickly, then hesitated for a moment before speaking.

‘I…I know my hot chocolate was disgusting.’ Bozer’s eyes widened almost comically as he turned to face her, slowly. ‘I…err…tasted some myself when you were in the bathroom.’ She shifted a little uncomfortably, and turned her head to meet his eyes for a moment, before looking down again. ‘It was really nice of you to drink two mugs of it…’ She looked up at him again, a more wry look on her face. ‘But seriously, next time? Just tell me.’

Bozer nodded, with a rather sheepish smile that gradually grew a little softer, a little gentler.

‘Well, friends should be encouraging of each other’s culinary attempts. You guys are always encouraging of mine.’

Riley snorted.

‘Yeah, that’s different, Bozer. ‘Cause yours are always delicious.’

Bozer grinned broadly at the compliment, then shrugged.

‘Yeah, that’s not always the case. Mac could tell you some stories about my molecular gastronomy phase…’ Riley looked incredulously at him. ‘Yeah, that was a pretty crazy few months.’ Riley gave a snort of laughter and muttered *I bet it was* under her breath, then Bozer continued. ‘Anyway, well, then maybe a better analogy’s like how you were encouraging of my CGI skills. Like, I know they were terrible, but you helped me improve them, and helped me get a better rig and all.’

Riley nodded with a soft little grin that slowly grew wider. She reached out and put a hand on his arm for a moment.

‘Thanks, Bozer.’ They were silent for a moment, her hand still resting on his arm, and then she withdrew it and cocked an eyebrow at him. ‘Anyway, how is that movie with General Wang and that green monster from outer space, who still kinda looks like Mac covered in ping-pong balls, going?’

Bozer pointed at her, affecting a mock-affronted expression.

‘Hey, I did some work on that! He seriously doesn’t look like Mac anymore!’ Riley quirked an
eyebrow at him. ‘Well, not much anyway…’ She shook her head with a smile, and Bozer grinned back. ‘And it’s almost done, I reckon I’ll be able to premiere the director’s cut in a couple of days!’ He turned a little more serious. ‘I haven’t exactly had all that much time to work on it, with all the crazy stuff that’s been going down lately…’

Riley just nodded.

‘Yeah, hopefully everything goes back to normal now.’ She shrugged and gave a wry smile. ‘Well, as normal as it can be when you work for the Phoenix and are friends with Mac, anyway.’

Bozer chuckled.

‘Yeah, my life stopped being normal the day I punched Donnie Sandoz in the nose when I was eleven…’ He turned to Riley, a slightly more serious look on his face. ‘And…and if you want, I’d be happy to teach you my hot chocolate recipe?’

Riley smiled and nodded.

‘I’d like that.’ She held up her controller. ‘But first, we’ve got a score to settle!’

‘Bring it on!’

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NEAR MAC’S FAVOURITE RUNNING TRACK

LA

‘Shh, it’s okay, little guy. It’s okay, we got you, you’re safe now…’

Jack gently held Rocky, stroking the fur on the top of his head as Mac inspected the dog for any signs of injury.

‘Well, he could really do with a bath, but I’m pretty sure he’s not really worse for wear after his little adventure.’

Jack grinned.

‘Another mission accomplished!’

He sounded very proud of the two of them. Mac grinned with a shake of his head, and then reached out and scratched between Rocky’s ears.

‘You know, buddy, you kind of remind me of the dog I had when I was a kid. His name was Archimedes…’ Jack handed Rocky to Mac, and then shook his head with a smile as they made their way back to Mrs Patel’s house, and Mac continued telling Rocky a story involving Archimedes, who was apparently an escape artist of some kind, and how much time Mac spent running around the neighbourhood chasing his dog.

He had a very funny feeling that he was getting a glimpse into the future…or maybe the past.

Harry Jackson had been rather keen on telling his grandson stories and giving him advice and life-lessons, based on what Mac had told them about the man.

Mac looked an awful lot like his grandfather, if the handful of photos he’d shown them of him were any indication.
Maybe he acted like him too.

MRS PATEL’S BACKYARD

LA

‘Oh, you found him, dears! Thank you so, so much!’ Mrs Patel smiled at them as Mac handed her Rocky, and she immediately began stroking the dog’s ears, and scolding him. ‘Now, you’ve not been a very good boy, Rocky. No treats for you tonight! You had me worried sick, and these nice young men running around the neighbourhood looking for you!’ Jack smirked at Mac as Mrs Patel described him as young (sometimes, Mac, Riley and Bozer liked to tease him for being old), and Mac just rolled his eyes at him in response. ‘Don’t you dare do that again!’

Suddenly, Mac’s I’ve got an idea face was back.

‘Actually, Mrs Patel, I think I know how I can stop him from ever unlatching the gate again. Do you still have a child-proofing lock from when your grandkids were younger?’

The woman nodded, somewhat confused, and led them inside.

‘Yes, dear, just give me a moment…’

She handed Rocky back to Jack, and started rummaging around one of her kitchen drawers. After a minute of searching, she made a noise of triumph and held out a child-proofing lock designed for kitchen cabinets to Mac. The blonde took it, and inspected it for a moment, then his eyes fell on Mrs Patel’s knitting basket.

‘And can I borrow a knitting needle for a couple of minutes? I won’t damage it or anything, I promise, I just need it to…’

He trailed off, suspecting that neither Jack nor Mrs Patel would be interested in the nitty-gritty details. She nodded, even more bemused.

‘Go ahead, dear.’

Mac grabbed a knitting needle, and child-proofing lock in hand, made his way out to the backyard and over to the troublesome gate.

Mrs Patel and Jack watched as Mac did his thing, Mrs Patel looking far more confused than Jack.

‘How…how does he know how to do that?’

Jack shrugged.

‘He won like twelve science fairs when he was a kid. This is literally child’s play to him.’

Facing away from Jack and Mrs Patel, Mac rolled his eyes.

Jack’s puns were terrible.

After another minute of work, he tested the newly-modified latch, and nodded, satisfied, then turned back to Jack and Mrs Patel with a smile.
‘The gate is now child-proof, and dog-proof. You won’t have to worry about Rocky escaping again, Mrs Patel.’

The elderly woman smiled at him.

‘Thank you very much, dear.’ She turned to Jack. ‘And thank you very much to you too, dear.’ She started walking back into her house. ‘Now, come in and have some snacks, dears, you’ve been working very hard all afternoon…’

Jack put down Rocky, and he and Mac followed Mrs Patel inside.

‘Oh, trust me, compared to what we usually do? This was a walk in the park. Literally.’

Mac groaned internally as he put Mrs Patel’s knitting needle back where it belonged.

Great. More puns.

He knows I can’t stand them. I’m pretty sure he does it just to annoy me.

Well, turnabout’s fair play.

MRS PATEL’S DINING ROOM

LA

‘Umph…this is amazing!’

Jack swallowed his mouthful of parotha and dal, and smiled up at Mrs Patel, who responded by dumping another two of the flatbreads on his plate. She turned to Mac, who was steadily making his way through a heaped plate of pulao, and placed another three large spoonfuls of the rice dish on his plate, as well as another two samosas, and then looked back over at Jack.

‘Thank you very much, dear.’ She turned back to the blonde. ‘Eat up, dear, you need it, you’re far too thin.’

Jack just smirked as Mac nodded and smiled politely at the old lady, then turned back to his food with his eyes a little wide, as if he was trying to work out how to make it disappear (without eating it) so as not to hurt her feelings. He’d already eaten a whole bowl of dal, and three parothas, and four samosas, and half a large plate of pulao…

Mrs Patel sat back down, and ate her own samosa. After a few minutes, Jack took pity on Mac and picked up one of the samosas off his plate when Mrs Patel wasn’t looking. She did, however, catch him stuffing it into his mouth in two bites, and as Jack’s eyes widened, simply smiled indulgently. Jack swallowed, and looked up at her sheepishly.

‘They’re just that amazing, sorry…’

Her smile widened.

‘They were my husband’s favourite, too.’ She gestured towards a framed photograph of a man who looked to be in his seventies, hanging on the wall with pictures of her children and grandchildren, then looked a little saddened for a moment. ‘He passed almost eight years ago. We were married for fifty-eight years.’ She shook her head, a soft, fond little smile on her face. ‘We argued like cats
and dogs…’ She paused for a moment, and shook her head. ‘No, you don’t speak ill of the dead.’ She turned to the photo of her husband. ‘I’m sorry, love.’ Then, after a moment of silence, she turned back to Mac and Jack with a smile. ‘He’d forgive me. He always did.’

Then, after a moment, she got up again.

‘Let me give you some food to take home with you, MacGyver. Bozer always loves my cooking, and I can’t let you go without some proper food, whatever he’s feeding you is obviously not enough…’

She got up and headed into the kitchen before Mac could even protest. The blonde turned to his partner, obviously expecting Jack to be smirkning and about to make a snarky comment, only to find Jack very lost in thought.

He didn’t, however, have time to ask why, exactly. He had to wrap some of his pulao in parothas, and tuck that into his jacket pockets before Mrs Patel got back.

*The human stomach has an absolute maximum capacity of about four litres.*

*That’s a little over a gallon.*

*I’m pretty sure I’m already pushing that.*

**MACGYVER’S RESIDENCE**

**LA**

That night, Mac, Jack, Riley and Bozer sat around the fire pit, eating the food Mrs Patel had given them (she’d given Mac enough to feed at least six people), and drinking the beer that Mac had bought earlier. (It was technically for Riley and Jack, but they were happy to share.)

They’d barely started their meal (Mac was noticeably not eating much; he was just nibbling on a samosa), when there was a perfunctory knock on the front door, before it opened, and Matty and Patricia joined them on the deck a moment later.

Patricia was holding a six-pack of beer, which she placed inside Mac’s self-opening Esky. Jack turned to Matty with a smirk.

‘Did you bring anything, Matty? It’s only polite to bring something when you’re visiting someone’s house.’

She just put her hands on her hips and sassed him right back.

‘Oh, yeah, Jack? People in glass houses shouldn’t throw stones. A little birdie told me you’ve been eating all of Mac and Bozer’s food.’ Jack shot Bozer a look of betrayal. Bozer just raised his hands innocently, just innocently enough to be genuine. Meanwhile, Riley’s expression was far too innocent…Jack shot her a glare, and she just smirked back at him. Matty rolled her eyes at their antics, and continued. ‘And I did bring something. Good news.’ She turned and smiled at the whole team. ‘The Phoenix is clean.’

Jack, Riley, Bozer and Mac let out a breath they didn’t quite know they’d been holding.

*We’re all pretty tough people.*
We’ve made it through a lot together.

But I am so, so glad that we don’t have to make it through another betrayal.

We’re still dealing with the fall-out from the last one, after all.

I’m still dealing with the fall-out from the last one.

Bozer grinned.

‘That calls for a celebration! I’m cracking out that super-dark Belgian chocolate I’ve been saving for a special occasion, and we’re having my super-special hot chocolate tonight!’

Jack reached out and clinked his beer bottle with Bozer’s.

‘Amen to that, brother!’

Riley handed Patricia and Matty a plate each, while Mac held the bowl of samosas out to them.

‘They’re seriously amazing.’

The two women each took one with a smile (Matty’s much broader than Patricia’s), and then each took a bite.

‘Oh my God, this is amazing. Like that shrimp amazing!’

As Matty waxed lyrical over the samosas, Mac glanced up at the Phoenix’s restored Director.

Seeing emotion on her face was a rare thing. He didn’t think he’d ever seen such a look of pure, unadulterated joy on her face before.

They are seriously incredible samosas.

A little later, when they’d all eaten their fill, they all sat around the fire pit, staring out into the distance, beers in hand.

It was Jack who broke the silence.

‘You know, I’m pretty sure you’ve all been thinking it, and we’re a team and friends and all, so I’m just gonna come out and say it.’ He paused for a moment. ‘It’d have been a lot better if Nikki had actually died on Lake Como.’

Matty slapped him on the arm.

‘Jack Dalton, have you no tact?’

Still, she did sound like she agreed with him.

Bozer made a face that showed he agreed with Jack, but wasn’t exactly happy with the fact that he did (Jack himself hadn’t sounded all that happy to feel that way when he’d spoken), while Riley nodded slowly, rubbing her arm uncomfortably. Patricia looked down at the label on her beer bottle, while Mac put down his and pulled out a paperclip from his pocket, staring out into the distance.

I don’t like the fact that I feel this way…but I think Jack is right.

Obviously, the whole Chrysalis mess and Thornton being set up and Murdoc trying to kill us all
might not have occurred.

More selfishly…

I mourned her for three months. I wasn’t anywhere near finished mourning, anywhere near letting her go when, well, everything started, but…

I’d have been able to finish grieving. I’d have been able to let her go. I’d have been able to move on, eventually.

I’ve have been able to remember her as the woman I loved, the woman who’d have been the right one, if she hadn’t passed away far too soon.

Now…well, now it’s a lot more complicated.

To everyone’s surprise, it was Patricia who broke the long, slightly uncomfortable silence that followed.

‘The death of a loved one brings its own set of demons. Especially the sudden death of someone in the prime of their life, right in front of your eyes, and being powerless to save them.’ She locked eyes with Mac, who simply nodded, swallowing. She looked away for a moment, then back up at him. ‘That…that brings with it its own set of demons, some of which don’t hit you for a long, long time.’ She shrugged uncomfortably. ‘It’s not quite betrayal, but at least in my experience, it really, really hurts.’

They all sat there, silent again for a moment, before Jack broke it.

‘What…what happened, Patty?’

Patricia stared at him for a long moment, dark eyes inscrutable, then knocked back the rest of her beer, shifted a little awkwardly in her seat, and took a deep breath before speaking.

‘When I was twenty-nine years old, I got engaged. To a co-worker.’ She paused for a moment, lost in a memory, then continued. ‘Four months later, an op went south. I…I couldn’t do anything, I couldn’t save him….’ She paused again, and there was a distinct quiver in her voice when she spoke. ‘It was going to be a fall wedding, in D.C.’

The other five all exchanged a glance.

There’s a reason why people who want to play us manipulate and use our emotions.

It works.

It makes us want to trust them.

It does make us trust them.

I have learned that lesson the hard way.

Or maybe I haven’t, not really, because, foolish though it might be, it’s kind of working. Again.

Well, I guess I might have learned my lesson.

She’s not playing us, even benignly. She’s not telling us this story with any kind of motive, even just to get us to trust her again, to make her job and our jobs easier, without any other agenda. I just know she isn’t.
It was Jack who reached out and clasped Patricia’s shoulder.

‘I’m sorry, Patty.’

Bozer, Riley, Matty and Mac all nodded to echo that sentiment.

Patricia smiled wanly, but gratefully, back at them.

‘Thank you.’

They all looked at one another for a long moment, and then Bozer stood up.

‘Now we really need some of my special hot chocolate.’

He made for the kitchen, and Riley got up and followed him.

Jack turned to Matty as they left.

‘Fifty bucks that they’ll get together within the next six months?’

Matty turned to give Bozer and Riley an assessing look. She pursed her lips, then turned back to Jack, and held out a hand for him to shake.

‘They’re going to be dancing around each other for ages…You’re on, Dalton.’

Jack then turned to Mac and Patricia expectantly.

Mac shook his head with a raised eyebrow.

‘No, Jack. I’m not betting on my best friend’s love life.’

Jack shook his head right back at him, pointing at Mac with his beer bottle.

‘You, man, are no fun.’ He turned to Patricia. ‘Patty?’

She just raised an eyebrow at him as if to say really?

A little later, as Matty was in the bathroom and after Mac had been called inside by Bozer (apparently there was something wrong with their stick blender – why Bozer needed a stick blender to make hot chocolate, Jack didn’t know, but Bozer’s hot chocolate was amazing, so he wasn’t going to complain – and he needed Mac to fix it), Jack and Patricia stood on the edge of the deck, beers in hand and looking inside.

As they watched, Riley and Bozer burst into fits of giggles as Mac’s seemingly-repaired stick blender went slightly rogue, splashing some of the hot chocolate mixture all over the blonde. He tried to wipe the mix off his face, and just wound up making it worse, leading to Bozer and Riley’s laughter getting even more vigorous and Mac shooting the stick blender a betrayed look. After a moment, Riley took pity on him and handed him a couple of paper towels, still clutching her stomach.

Jack and Patricia just watched the scene, Jack with a smile on his face, Patricia with softness in her eyes.

Jack broke the silence between them.

‘I was real worried about them.’ Bozer had been stabbed, Riley had killed Horn, Mac had that mess
with Nikki, and that wasn’t even considering the attack on the Phoenix and the revelations about Patricia and The Organization they’d been rocked by. ‘Still kinda am.’ He nodded slowly, raising his beer bottle to the three young agents in a silent, one-sided toast. ‘But I think they’re going to be okay.’

His boss nodded.

‘They will be. They’re strong. And they have each other. And you.’

Jack glanced over at her, staring for a beat.

‘They’ve got you too.’

She, too, stared back at him for a moment, then smiled a small, grateful smile. Jack smiled back, and then Patricia turned away, looking down at the floor, before speaking softly, a little hesitantly.

‘And Nate does very good work.’

Jack’s brow furrowed a little. She didn’t sound like she was speaking based off what she’d read in a file or heard as a recommendation, but rather from personal experience.

‘You seeing him too, Patty?’

She nodded slowly, and Jack, after a beat, nodded back, then reached out and clinked his beer bottle to hers.

‘Good. You shouldn’t have to put your life back together alone, Patty.’

He made sure to leave a little invitation in his voice, a suggestion. In case she needed help moving furniture or clearing her garden or wanted to talk to someone who wasn’t a shrink.

She got the message loud and clear, because that small, grateful smile widened just a fraction, and she clinked her beer bottle to his in return.

The next morning, Mac walked out to the mailbox to check his mail.

There was only one letter today.

Addressed to him in handwriting that looked familiar (even if it had been years since he’d seen it; he had a near-perfect memory, after all), with a return address listed in Tahoe.

He walked back inside, slipped into his room, carefully opened the letter and started reading.

_Some say that once trust is broken, it can never be repaired. Some say that once a relationship is damaged in that way, it can never be fixed._

_In some cases, I think that’s true._

_Frankly, I know that’s true. Empirically._

_But in other cases, while I don’t think things can ever be exactly the same as they were, I think trust can be repaired, and relationships can be fixed._

_I’ve never been a believer in the concept of impossible, and I always have been good at fixing things,
Mac finished reading the letter, then sat there for a while, lost in thought, a little teary-eyed, and staring at the piece of paper in his hands.

After a while, he nodded slowly, a smile appearing on his face, a smile that grew progressively wider, and then he reached out picked up a notepad and a pen from his desk.

*Dear Dad…*

Chapter End Notes

They would never, ever make an episode like this, I know…but hey, it’s a virtual, fan-made season for a reason! I promise that we’ll go back to the usual missions in the next episode; I really thought that they needed an episode to sort out some things, and that the Phoenix mess has to be cleaned up a little.

The headcanon about Patricia having a deceased fiancé is helloyesimhere’s. The details about him and their relationship are based off the ones I used in Fall Sunshine in *Two Paperclips and a Stick of Gum*.

Nate is mentioned because I strongly believe that everyone, in particular, Mac, Riley and Patricia, needs therapy after what happened. They are all, obviously, very good friends, they do support one another, and Jack is really quite a good stop-gap therapist, but I think it’s kind of like how Mac’s a really good field medic, but is definitely no substitute for an actual doctor.

It is my personal headcanon that Mac bears a strong resemblance to his grandfather and will one day be telling his grandkids crazy stories, with life lessons included. Meanwhile, his grandkids will be taking apart the holo-phone to see how it works and playing with Sparky, the antique and outdated (but much beloved) AI that Grandpa Mac and (Great) Uncle Bozer made when they were young.

So, what did you all think? Did this live up to expectations?

Episode 2.03 is titled Lipstick and will involve an undercover mission for Mac, Jack, Riley and Bozer. It’s currently half-written but fully planned out, and I’m hoping to get it up on May 1st, a week from now, but we’ll see…
Lipstick

Chapter Summary

2.03, Lipstick. When intel suggests that an attack on Fashion Week Cleveland is planned, Jack gets to dust off his Bryce persona, while Riley and Bozer, as the most stylish of the team, pose as fashion bloggers. Meanwhile, ‘twisted steel and sex appeal’ has to deal with some unwanted attention.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Mac regained consciousness slowly, and as his awareness grew, he found that he was seated in a chair in the middle of a very bare room.

In fact, he was shackled, duct-taped and tied with rope at the wrists, ankles and around his chest to the chair.

The chair itself was bolted to the floor, and concreted into it as well. The legs, which were completely and utterly fused to the rest of the chair (it was made out of only one piece of very thick, sturdy steel), actually disappeared into the floor.

There was absolutely nothing in the room, save the chair and Mac and all his restraints. The door, which seemed very, very far away, had no fewer than three separate locking mechanisms on it.

Quite suddenly, Nikki sauntered into the room, the door crashing shut immediately behind her. Or had it even opened? He wasn’t quite sure, so distracted he was by her unwelcome presence, but it must have, or she’d never have gotten in…

Nikki smirked at him, getting very, very close, and leaning down so her face was mere inches from his.

‘You’re so smart, Mac.’ Her smirk widened, growing into something that reminded him of a predatory cat of some kind. ‘Why did you ever think you could escape me?’

MACGYVER’S RESIDENCE

LA

Mac sat bolt upright in bed, panting and sweating as if he’d just run five miles, hot and clammy and cold all at the same time.

Still breathing hard, he wiped the sweat from his brow as he tried to calm himself.

It was just a nightmare.
It wasn’t real, even if it felt like it was…

It was just a nightmare.

She’s in prison.

She can’t hurt me, and she can’t hurt my friends, not anymore.

I’ve escaped her. Physically, at least

And I’ve escaped that hold she had over me, or, as Jack put it, that spell she had on me.

I will escape her completely.

I will.

No-one’s ever been able to keep me locked up…or locked out.

I will escape her.

It was just a nightmare.

Breathing returning more or less to normal, Mac sighed, and glanced over at the clock on his bedside table. It was 5:24 am. With another sigh, running a hand through his sleep-mussed hair, he got up and threw on an old MIT T-Shirt and a pair of basketball shorts, then headed out of his room, and out the front door.

Going for a run always helped.

________________________________________________________

MEXICAN RESTAURANT

LA

Riley made a disgusted face as Jack and Bozer competed to see who could eat a taco in fewer bites (Bozer was the previous undisputed champion, but Jack had apparently been practicing), then turned to Mac, who just shrugged with a wry and somewhat amused smile as he ate his own taco in a more dignified fashion.

Riley rolled her eyes at his lack of objection, and shot both Jack and Bozer (who both had puffed-out cheeks like chipmunks and were shooting each other competitive, resolute looks) a very sharp look, complete with a raised eyebrow.

‘Seriously, guys? We’re eating in public and you are grown men!’ Jack and Bozer at least had the manners (and the sense) to not try and respond with their mouths full, and looked a little chastised. That apparently wasn’t enough for Riley, who shot them another look, rolled her eyes again, and returned to her own food, muttering to herself. ‘Drowning in testosterone here.’

At least the food was delicious.

________________________________________________________

When their pretty, twenty-something Latina waitress handed Mac the receipt after he had paid the bill (they took turns, because splitting the bill four ways just got too complicated), they found that she’d left a little something extra on the receipt.
Her phone number.

Mac’s eyes widened as he stared at the digits, his expression not altogether all that different from the look he got when he found a bomb on a mission. Immediately, he glanced around the restaurant, and caught sight of the waitress, who smiled, waved and winked at him. His eyes widened a little, and there was wariness and a touch of fear in them as he stared at the woman, seeming to assess if she was a threat.

As the scene played out, Jack, Riley and Bozer exchanged a very, very concerned look. Riley glanced over at Mac with worry in her eyes, while Bozer sighed and frowned and muttered something about years of progress being lost just like that. Jack shook his head, looked down at the table for a moment, then up at his partner, who seemed to have come back to himself, and had put the receipt back down on the table. Mac met Jack’s eyes for just a millisecond, and then looked away again, not quite able to hold Jack’s gaze, seemingly ashamed, and instead looked out the window and started playing with a paperclip.

Jack suspected that the younger man was feeling ashamed for considering the waitress, a civilian who’d given him no reason to think she was a threat (no reasonable reason anyway, in Mac’s mind, though Jack thought it was a reasonable enough reaction given what Mac had been through), as a threat, both for the waitress’s sake and because Mac thought he should be braver and more reasonable, with a better hold on himself, than this.

Jack sighed internally, and glanced over at Riley and Bozer again, silently promising them that he’d make sure Mac talked to him about this. Riley gave a little nod, and Bozer a small, grateful smile, showing that they both got the message, loud and clear.

Then, the three of them got up, and wordlessly, Mac followed, paperclip still in his hands, hands still in motion.

The receipt with the waitress’s phone number was left lying on the table.

PHOENIX FOUNDATION HEADQUARTERS

SOMEWHERE IN LA

Thornton reached out and tapped the screen to start their mission briefing.

‘Fashion Week Cleveland is under threat. The NSA has intel that a lone wolf attacker is targeting the show.’ Jack, Mac, Riley and Thornton exchanged a look. They knew the challenge that lone wolf terrorists posed. ‘Unfortunately, they haven’t been able to determine what kind of attack he or she is planning, or find any information pertaining to their identity.’

Mac, who’d picked up a paperclip from the bowl before Thornton had come in, put it down, and stood.

‘Are we sure that it’s a lone wolf? No ties to any organization?’

The way he said it implied that he was more asking if the suspected wannabe terrorist had any ties to The Organization.

The Organization had hidden behind another name once, and that had almost gotten Mac and an innocent man killed.
Thornton gave him a nod of acknowledgement.

‘As far as the NSA and the Phoenix’s analysts can determine, no.’ She paused for a moment. ‘But be on alert.’ She tapped the screen again. ‘The four of you are going undercover.’ Their cover identities appeared on the screen. ‘You are to identify the terrorist and stop the attack.’

They all nodded seriously, then Jack grinned as he took note of who his cover identity was.

‘Oh, yeah, Bryce is back, baby!’

Mac, Bozer and Riley all exchanged a look. Riley crossed her arms, and quirked an eyebrow at Jack.

‘Any more model exes of Bryce’s we might run into?’

Jack put his hands up in supplication.

‘Hey, Bryce was more of an international fashion scene kinda guy. And he really was smitten with Jenaveev.’

Bozer leaned closer to Mac and stage-whispered in his ear.

‘Damn. That was the best thing about Amsterdam.’

Mac snorted.

‘Yeah, wasn’t a high bar, Boze.’

Thornton cleared her throat, and the four agents looked up at her. They all swore there was the tiniest hint of amusement in her eyes, but she just gestured with her head towards the door.

Jack stood up.

‘Right, sorry, Patty. Gotta go stop a terrorist, save the day, usual Tuesday stuff.’ He started heading for the door. ‘Come on, guys. Daylight’s burning!’

Shaking their heads, Mac, Riley and Bozer followed.

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**JET**

**ON-ROUTE TO CLEVELAND**

‘Remember, I don’t like oysters, I’m from Miami, and I’ve mostly been covering the European fashion scene, but then a relationship ended, and I got homesick, so I’m back stateside this season. I love the spotlight, and I can’t work without at least three cups of coffee a day, and you’re not just my assistant, you’re my occasional model and muse, too, and you’re also my best friend, but I’m in denial about that. I hate cats, and I’m indifferent towards dogs, and my favourite breakfast’s Eggs Benedict…’

Mac sighed internally as Jack briefed him on *absolutely everything* about his Bryce Villanova persona.

From the other side of the jet, Bozer and Riley (who were going over what the Phoenix techs had backstopped for them, and adding their own content – they were going in as up-and-coming fashion bloggers) smirked a little at him, amused at his expense and Jack’s extreme attention to detail.
I know I’m usually an optimist, and I’m really not superstitious…but this is not going to be a good mission.

I just know it.

Bozer was wearing his three-piece purple-check suit, with a grey hat and a matching tie, and very dapper brown leather shoes. Riley had on a black shoelace choker, dark grey tight-fitting jeans, and a burgundy shirt that left her shoulders exposed. There was a black blazer slung over the back of her seat. They were fashion bloggers, they had to dress the part.

Jack had, for once, ditched his usual black shirt, and had on a smart grey one with artfully torn jeans. He did, actually, look like a fashion photographer, or, at least, what Mac expected one to look like.

As Bryce’s assistant, he also had to look the part. That apparently entailed him having to wear skinny jeans and a light blue T-Shirt that apparently brought out his eyes, with a black leather jacket. That also meant he apparently had to muss up his hair ‘stylishly’ and fix it in place with more hair products than he’d ever used before in his life.

No mission that required both hair gel and skinny jeans could be a good one.

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FASHION WEEK CLEVELAND

CLEVELAND

‘Bozer, Riley, all set up?’

Bozer and Riley’s task was to profile attendees of the event out front, while Mac and Jack focused their attentions on backstage and behind-the-scenes. Of course, they were all keeping an eye out for suspicious behaviour.

Bozer’s voice replied over their comms.

‘Yeah, we’ve got good seats, bro.’

Riley continued.

‘How’s it going with you and Jack?’

‘Jack’s in his element, Bryce is subtly asking around to see if anyone’s seen anything or if there’s been any threats against specific people and the like.’

Mac, meanwhile, had done a general search of backstage, pretending to find the best places for Bryce to do a photoshoot he wanted to do, which he really wanted to do backstage instead of on the runway, because he was an innovative artist.

Today’s event was a women’s fashion show. That meant, according to Jack, who’d said this to him when he’d complained about his outfit (Jack complained all the time about this and that; Mac figured that Jack could listen to him complain for once), that at least he wouldn’t be mistaken for a model.

Me, a model?

I’m honestly surprised that Jenaveev bought that when we were in Amsterdam.

Though, Jack is very persuasive.
Some of the models had ignored him as he searched. Some had given him a nod of acknowledgement, or a small, friendly smile.

A couple, however, had smiled at him in a way that made his heart-rate spike. And not in a good way.

Hence, he’d slipped into the bathroom for a moment, ostensibly to check in with Bozer and Riley. Locked in a cubicle, Mac took a deep breath, in and out. Then another.

Then, he unlocked the door.

He had a job to do.

*Besides, exposure therapy has been shown to be highly effective.*

‘You come here often?’ Mac looked up from where he was examining a door to one of the dressing rooms that he’d thought *might* have been tampered with (it hadn’t, the wood was just a bit swollen from moisture), pretending to check out ‘angles’ for Bryce’s photoshoot, and at the tall, slender, very beautiful blonde woman with rather startling green eyes who was smiling a very winning smile at him (or, at least, it would have been a winning smile, if it wasn’t causing his adrenaline levels to spike irrationally). ‘I’ve never seen you around before, and I’d remember a face like yours.’ The smile widened.

Mac willed himself to *act normal*, or he’d blow his cover.

He smiled back, and stood.

‘No, this is my first time here in Cleveland. My boss has been covering the European scene for the last few years, but, well, his girlfriend broke up with him, and he decided that he needed a change, so now we’re back in the USA.’

The woman took a step closer to him, still smiling that smile. Mac had the irrational urge to turn tail and run, which he pushed down immediately.

‘And you? Bet you left a string of broken hearts behind…’

At her tone, the urge to run reared its ugly head again, and Mac fought hard to keep himself in place and his face and voice normal. He spotted Jack just exiting one of the dressing rooms on the far side of the large central room he was in, and fumbled for an excuse.

He gestured with his head to Jack and adopted the best apologetic expression he could.

‘Sorry, that’s my boss; I have to go get him a coffee. He gets really grumpy when he doesn’t have at least three a day…’

He started rushing off, doing his absolute best to not run, barely paying any attention to the woman, whose face fell a little, but quickly recovered as she called out after him.

‘Well, if you want a tour of Cleveland, I’d be happy to show you around!’

He managed to raise a hand in acknowledgement, feeling guilty for his rudeness, but just having to get out of that situation.
Jack noticed his partner almost literally run away from the very beautiful model who was talking to him in the corner of his eye, and sighed internally as he kept making small talk with the designer he was talking to.

He tapped his comm in a pre-arranged signal, and then got a pre-arranged series of taps back.

Bozer and Riley exchanged a glance as Bozer finished tapping out a reply to Jack, and then Bozer got up and headed for the coffee shop that had been set up in the building itself.

He quickly sought out his best friend and walked over to him.

‘Hey, man, you okay? You seem kinda shaken.’

Bozer did his best to make it sound like he was just a concerned stranger.

Mac smiled back at him.

The smile was definitely mostly fake. Mac was a pretty good actor, at least when he was on missions, but Bozer had known him since they were eleven and nine respectively, and he could tell.

(It was pretty wondrous, actually, that Mac had managed to keep his secret life from his best friend for so long, but people always saw what they wanted to see, and Bozer had really wanted to believe that his best friend had finally left bombs and warzones and the high likelihood of being blown up on a daily basis behind, and instead sat in a lab, relatively safe, all day long.)

‘Yeah, I’m okay. Just a little overwhelmed. My last fashion week was a bit of a disaster, so this is kinda…full-on.’ Mac shrugged. ‘I haven’t felt quite this shaken since I took a girl on a date to a movie in a cemetery.’

Bozer just nodded, going for polite sympathy with a hint of a smirk, as he tried to confirm his suspicions, which he knew Jack and Riley definitely shared.

‘Kept thinking that the ghost of a girlfriend past would pop out from behind a tombstone?’

Mac nodded, looking away into the distance.

‘Yeah, something like that.’ Then, he looked back at Bozer, and there was a more real, teasing little smile on his face when he spoke. ‘And seriously, purple plaid, man?’

Bozer just pointed at him, affecting an affronted expression.

‘You know it’s in this season.’

Mac just shook his head, now definitely Mac, and Bozer headed off, muttering under his breath about his best friend’s terrible dress sense and serious lack of appreciation for fashion.

It helped to distract him, at least temporarily, from his worry.

Bozer slipped back into his seat beside Riley, and after glancing around to make sure that nobody was paying them any attention (nobody was, they blended in pretty well with all the other fashion bloggers around, and they’d managed to snag a spot that backed right onto a wall, so that no-one could stand behind them and see what they were actually doing on their computers), brought up the messaging program she’d custom-written (it was heavily encrypted) for them to use to communicate.
He’s not okay, but he’s still good for the mission.

He knew Riley would probably know that, having heard the entire conversation between him and Mac on the comms, and knowing Mac, as would Jack, but it helped to say, or, at least, type, it. However, he also knew that Riley wouldn’t get all the double-meanings in that conversation, so he started explaining.

**Mac had a nightmare the night before his first date with Cindy. Obviously, he couldn’t tell me the real reason, so he spun me this story about being worried that Nikki’s ghost would crash the date and be all resentful about him starting to date again. After I found out, he told me the truth, and well, his story turned out to be pretty close to the truth anyway…ghost of your evil ex-girlfriend casting a shadow over your date and all.**

The pattern in Riley’s typing changed subtly, the clickity-clacks changing ever-so-slightly, indicating that she’d changed tasks.

Bozer had to remind himself not to look over at her, because while their covers were friends, they were also sort-of competitors or rivals, and they were meant to be working on their fashion blogs. He got a reply over the messaging program a moment later.

**I really hate her. For EVERYTHING she’s done.**

Another message came through a second later.

**I never knew Nikki, but you did…**

Bozer did glance over at her at that. Riley, too, looked over at him, making a little gesture with her head, and half-shrugging her left shoulder as their eyes met. Bozer swallowed, and nodded, then turned back to his laptop.

**Her whole betrayal-times-two thing seriously hurts, because I did really like her, and she made Mac really, really happy and he really, really loved her. Like crazy, romance-novel loved her. But I’m okay, promise. I was so removed from it the first time, and the second time, well, Mac’s a lot worse off, so…**

There was something he couldn’t quite describe in her eyes when they looked over at each other again. Something soft and deep and full of meaning.

**You’re a really great guy and a really good friend, Bozer. Just don’t neglect your own wellbeing for Mac, okay?**

Not exactly sure how to respond to the first sentence, and quite sure that he shouldn’t make a big deal about it, Bozer chose to ignore it, pretend it was just a normal little thing for her to say, and just keep that little piece of happiness inside him.

**Okay. I promise.**

Riley sent back a reply almost immediately.

**And we need to check on Jack too. I don’t think the Couch Intervention did anything except get the stubborn idiot off your couch.**

Four days after Jack and Mac’s mission to help Mrs Patel and Rocky, Bozer and Riley had staged a
mini-intervention to get Jack to stop sleeping on Mac and Bozer’s couch.

The couch had terrible lumbar support, and Jack was getting far too old to be sleeping on it regularly. Two weeks had been enough.

Besides, Bozer was getting sick of waking up in the morning to find that Jack had eaten all their Honey-Nut Cheerios.

‘No, wait, it’s a false alarm, guys.’

‘Lady’s having an affair.’

Backstage, in the tiny little room that Bryce Villanova had claimed, Mac and Jack exchanged a glance.

That was the fourth false alarm.

With literally hundreds of people around, it was very easy for someone to hide and escape notice, and there were also a relatively large number of people acting suspiciously.

*I can think of seven ways to find a needle in a haystack, literally. It wouldn’t be that difficult, or that time-consuming.*

*But in this case, I think the spirit of the saying applies.*

‘Any ideas, brother?’

Mac glanced around the little room, his thinking face on.

Jack quirked an eyebrow at him when Mac didn’t come up with anything within thirty seconds.

‘Wait…are you stumped, man?’ Despite the graveness of their situation, Jack looked a little bit like a kid on Christmas morning. ‘You actually don’t have anything?’ Jack smirked and shot Mac a teasing look. ‘Those jeans must be constricting blood flow to your brain or something!’

Mac rolled his eyes and opened his mouth to retort, because he did have an idea or two, just half-formed ones that weren’t all that good, yet, and the jeans were really uncomfortable, and there were actually a couple of cases of skinny jeans causing health problems by constricting blood flow…

Bozer’s voice rang out over their comms.

‘Mac, Jack, we’ve got something.’

Riley chipped in.

‘Somebody’s posting on social media that their storage and set-up room was broken into. Might be a false alarm…’

Mac nodded, and glanced at Jack.

‘But we’ve got to check it out.’

‘Which room is it, Riles?’

‘Marco Bellucci’s, take a left straight outside, then a right the next corridor, last door on the left-hand
Inside Marco Bellucci’s room, Mac crouched down in front of the door, examining the locking mechanism.

‘The lock wasn’t picked; it was forced open.’

Jack nodded, holding up a strange glass orb-like thing (it was made of very thick glass and it somewhat resembled an old-school diver’s helmet and appeared to be some kind of headpiece) with his hands wrapped in fabric. There was a web of cracks in the orb which he was pretty sure weren’t supposed to be there.

‘Someone’s been in here alright, and they did some serious property damage, man.’

Jack’s brow furrowed as he looked around the definitely-trashed room. Some dresses looked like they’d been ripped, and someone had splashed nail polish all over the clothes like they were a canvas for a Jackson Pollock.

Mac, too, looked up, lips pursed in thought.

‘Not exactly standard terrorist MO…but maybe they were looking for something. Or scouting for a location to either hide or carry out their attack.’

‘And they went all bull in a china shop?’

Mac turned back to the door, and then glanced over at the dresser covered in make-up.

‘Bulls don’t actually cause large-scale destruction in china shops; they’re actually very nimble, the Mythbusters…’ He shook his head and cut himself off as Jack put down the glass orb, looking incredulous. Mac reached out and grabbed a compact of powdered foundation and a make-up brush from the dresser.

Jack came a little closer to see what Mac was up to. The blonde dusted the door handle with the foundation, then smiled and nodded with satisfaction as several fingerprints appeared. Jack pulled out his phone and sent pictures of the prints to Riley.

‘Run those, Riles?’

‘Already ahead of you, Jack. Just started running.’

Mac and Jack kept inspecting the room as they waited for Riley to get back to them. Mac was inspecting the pattern of cracks in the glass orb, trying to work out what exactly had caused the cracking, while Jack examined the torn clothes.

A couple of minutes later, the hacker replied.

‘Okay, prints belong to Marco Bellucci, his assistant, and a guy called Tim Ventura.’

Bozer chipped in.

‘And this Marco and Tim have serious beef, man. Like serious beef.’

‘Multiple arrests for incidents relating to one another; disturbing the peace by having an argument in a hotel after New York Fashion Week, assault for getting into a bar-fight after LA Fashion Week, accusations of sabotage…’
Sharing a look, Mac and Jack both sighed.

‘Neither of them is our terrorist.’

They were all rather grim for a moment, then Jack, as he often did to lighten the mood, broke the silence and shot Mac an *I told you so* look.

‘See, brother, I told you fashion people were *nuts*. Bryce is *normal* compared to everyone around him!’

Mac gave a little snort, making a face that clearly said he thought his partner was crazy.

‘He refuses to work on Friday the 13th! Every shoot of his has to begin with a photo taken *upside down!* He is addicted to Brazilian telenovelas!’

Jack pointed at Mac with a sage nod.

‘It’s little things like that, man, that make him seem like a real person and sell the persona.’ Jack raised his voice a little. ‘Remember that, kids, for next time we’re undercover.’

Mac snorted. Over the comms, Bozer and Riley made similar noises.

Then, the blonde turned to his partner with a little teasing smirk.

‘*Kids, Jack?’*

When Riley continued, they could all hear the smirk in her voice.

‘Getting old, *old* man.’

Jack held his hands up in protest.

‘Hey, I’m no spring chicken like the three of you, but I’m not *old!* It was a slip of the tongue!’

Bozer, too, had a clear smirk in his voice.

‘It’s called a Freudian slip, man.’

Jack looked confused.

‘A Freddian slip? What in the world is that?’

Mac shook his head.

‘A *Freudian* slip, Jack. Sigmund Freud, founder of psychoanalysis? Inventor of the talking cure? The guy who came up with the ego, the superego and the id?’ Jack just looked more and more lost, and Mac just shook his head again. ‘It’s not important.’

Jack made a face.

‘This isn’t going to be like the time when you used the non-normal meaning of normal when we nearly got turned into trash pancakes, right?’

Mac reached out and patted Jack’s shoulder, a gesture with a little hint of apology in it.

‘*No*, Jack. This is really not important; I *don’t* use psychoanalysis. I *do* use physics.’
Bozer stage-whispered to them through the comms.

‘Mac thinks physics is like the best thing ever. He thinks psychoanalysis is a load of…well, you know.’ Bozer’s fond grin and head-shake could be clearly heard in his voice. ‘You should have seen the fight he got into with our English teacher in the ninth grade…’

‘Guys, one of those fancy-schmancy waiters is wearing a really ill-fitting uniform. Like really, really ill-fitting. It’s too tight across the shoulders, and the sleeves are too long, and his gloves are too small…’

Bozer trailed off.

All the other waiters wore uniforms that looked like they’d been tailored to them, and they probably had been.

So of course, this was fishy.

Maybe this guy wasn’t the man that the uniform had been tailored to.

Maybe he was an imposter.

Maybe he was their terrorist.

In fact, all things considering, he probably was. This was definitely the best lead they’d gotten so far.

Still backstage in Marco Bellucci’s room, Mac and Jack exchanged a glance.

‘Keep eyes on him.’

About a minute later, Riley’s voice rang out over their comms.

‘Mac, Jack, he’s making for a service corridor.’ The partners exchanged another glance. They’d seen a map of the service corridors, and labyrinth was not an inaccurate description. ‘Through them is probably the best escape route…’

Jack and Mac exchanged yet another look, then Jack made for the door, calling over his shoulder as he went.

‘I’ll herd, you catch!’ He slipped out the door, talking to Riley over the comms as he did. ‘Riles, which way?’

The hacker replied back immediately. They could hear her nails clacking on her keyboard as she did.

‘Jack, you want to head left, then right, past the dressing rooms, and into that door at the end of the corridor. Then you need a left, then a right, then another right…’

Mac, meanwhile, grabbed some nail polish-ruined fabric from the corner, another three bottles of nail polish, an aerosol can of hairspray and a bottle of liquid foundation. After a moment’s consideration, he also grabbed the cracked, large glass orb.

‘Riley?’

He spoke as he left the room, and got an almost-instant reply.

‘Mac, you want to head right, then left, and into the first door on your right. Probably two hundred
feet down the left corridor or so is the best place to set your trap; that leads to an exit to an alleyway outside, and there’s at least three routes Jack can herd the guy through to get there.’

‘Thanks, Riley.’

He followed her directions, and found the spot, then dropped his load of materials, and started smearing nail polish on the walls.

Ten minutes later, a rather puffed-out Jack jogged up to his partner and the unconscious fake waiter lying next to a bundle of fabric that looked like it was full of shattered glass, whom Mac was moving into the recovery position.

‘Aww, come on, man, did you really have to knock him out cold? How’re we supposed to find out his Nefereti plan now?’

Mac looked up at the older man with an exasperated and long-suffering expression on his face.

‘A, you mean nefarious. Nefereti was a female Pharoah in Ancient Egypt.’

Jack just shrugged.

‘You say tom-ah-to, I say tom-ay-to.’

Mac just stared at him for a moment and then seemed to decide that the best thing to do was just ignore that statement, and continued.

‘B, I didn’t mean to knock him out, the timing’s not perfect on this thing…’ He gestured to the remnants of his trap. ‘…and that orb’s a lot tougher than I thought it was. C, you’re the one who knocked out the bad guy in Monte Video. And Minsk. And Port Moresby. And Portland.’

At that moment, Riley and Bozer, laptops in hand, jogged up to them.

‘Aww, man, you guys got to go to Portland?’

Bozer sounded rather jealous.

Mac and Jack exchanged a look and a little smile, as Mac worked the unconscious man’s gloves off. They really were too small for him.

‘Portland, Maine.’

Jack pursed his lips.

‘Though, we had some good lobster rolls…’

Riley quirked an eyebrow at him.

‘Not helping, Jack.’

Mac was examining the bright orange-yellow stains on the man’s hands, a very serious expression on his face, tuning out the conversation around him.

‘Riley, can you pull up the map of this building again?’

The hacker nodded, opened up her laptop, made a few keystrokes and then held out the computer to
Mac.

He’s likely working alone, his way in was impersonating a waiter, his goal, as with most terrorists, is almost certainly to maximise casualties and attention, and he is definitely using a bomb, and it’s definitely TNT-based; TNT can irritate the skin and cause it to turn bright orange-yellow, just like this man’s hands…he was also on his way out before he knew we’d made him, so he must have already placed it…so where would he put it?

The blonde examined the screen for a moment, then got up and pointed out a storage room not too far from the catering area to the others.

‘He’s using a TNT bomb, and I’m pretty sure it’s there.’ He turned to Bozer and Riley. ‘Can you start evacuating people without it seeming like they’re being evacuated? Mass panic’s not going to help, and until we’re absolutely sure this guy’s a lone wolf, we can’t risk anyone catching on to the fact we’re on to him.’

Riley and Bozer exchanged a glance, then Bozer cracked his knuckles with a slightly-inappropriate-for-the-situation grin.

‘Time to use my mad social media skills to save the day!’

Riley snorted, but started bringing up her own cover’s social media accounts and typing furiously.

When she’d finished, as Mac and Jack ran off in pursuit of the bomb and as Bozer worked on his own posts, she undid her choker and tied the unconscious terrorist’s wrists with it, then started searching him for a phone. She didn’t find one, which supported the lone wolf theory.

Bozer glanced over at her with a grin as he finished making his posts.

‘My bro really does rub off on you.’

He was undoing his tie as he spoke, and handed it to Riley, who used it to secure the man’s ankles.

Bozer and Riley exchanged a smile and a fist-bump as they turned back to their now-trending posts.

The alleged spotting of a couple of very well-known fashion and reality television identities just a block away from Fashion Week Cleveland was going viral.

Jack followed his partner as Mac ran through the service corridors, heading for the location he’d pinpointed.

Mac was faster, always had been. With an internal sigh, Jack pushed himself a little harder to keep up.

A moment later, Mac skidded to a halt in front of a door, and after testing the handle and finding it to be locked, got to work picking the lock. Another moment later, he glanced at Jack and gestured with his head towards the door. Jack drew the gun he’d had hidden inside Bryce’s man-purse/camera case, and Mac mouthed one, two, three and then opened the door.

Jack, alert and poised to shoot if necessary, stepped inside first, followed a moment later by his partner.

Aside from various pallets of foodstuffs and coffee-making supplies, there were only two things of note in the room.
A barely-conscious young man clad only in his underpants, bound, gagged and struggling weakly. The real waiter’s struggles and umphs grew louder and his eyes widened when Mac and Jack appeared.

And a bomb. With a large countdown device attached, counting down in bright-red numerals.

3:21

3:20

3:19

Without even having to look at one another, Mac rushed over to the bomb and got to work, while Jack hurried over to the struggling waiter.

With a mouthed sorry, Jack pulled the duct-tape off the young man’s mouth, then got to work on the guy’s bonds.

As he worked, he realized that the waiter was looking rather concernedly over at Mac, and Jack shook his head, glad that Mac was too busy working on the bomb to notice.

Mac looked young, everyone knew that. He was young, but he looked even younger than he was, and the skinny jeans and ‘hip’ hairstyle were not helping.

Mac also hated it when people thought he was too young to be this good at his job. Or, most of the time, thought he was too young to be doing his job full stop.

He would not take it well from a guy who was probably even younger than him.

Jack didn’t blame other people, because they didn’t know Mac like he did (and Jack had had his doubts, too, when he’d first met Mac, doubts that the younger man had very quickly proved to him were very, very unnecessary), but he did like to try and nip this sort of thing in the bud as soon as possible, for Mac’s sake.

‘Trust me, kid, if there’s anyone you want disarming that thing, it’s him.’

The waiter still looked very sceptical, but Mac had excellent timing as always, because he made a noise of triumph as the red numbers stopped counting down, freezing at 2:25. He turned to Jack and the waiter, pocketing his Swiss Army knife as he did so.

The waiter, by now, was just very shocked. Jack just grinned, and helped the man up, putting the waiter’s arm around his shoulder, then smirking at him.

‘Told you so.’

Inwardly, Mac sighed as he realized what kind of conversation must have occurred between Jack and the other man, and why it had happened in the first place, and instead, addressed Riley and Bozer via his earpiece.

‘We got it, guys.’ There were a couple of noises of congratulations from the other two young agents, and what sounded like a high-five and a way to go, Mac! Oh, and Jack! ‘Riley-‘

‘Local police, FBI and the bomb squad are already on their way, Mac.’

Mac glanced over at Jack with a small grin and a nod. Jack just grinned right back at him.
‘Riley’s the best, man. She’s always with it.’

Mac’s grin widened, because sometimes, Jack really did sound like a proud father when he talked about the young hacker.

As they handed off the terrorist to local law enforcement, Jack grinned as he glanced at Bryce’s ornate-yet-stylish watch, and then held his wrist out to the three younger agents, tapping the watch face.

‘Saved the day, again, as usual…and just in time for the show, too!’ He held up both hands. ‘High-fives!’

Bozer slapped his hand against Jack’s left with enthusiasm, while Riley rolled her eyes, but high-fived his right hand anyway.

Jack then cocked an eyebrow at Mac, and waved his right hand.

‘Come on, brother!’

With a smile and an exasperated shake of his head, Mac high-fived Jack, then pointed at the older man, a firm look on his face.

‘I know what you’re about to suggest.’ Jack opened his mouth, but Mac cut him off. ‘Don’t say it. We’re not staying for the show.’

‘But—’

‘We’re here for work, we got our job done, and…’ Their phones all beeped at once, and they all took them out to glance at the text message they’d all received. Mac held up his phone with a wry, see? look. ‘…Thornton wants us to get back to LA ASAP.’ The blonde then made a face. ‘And I’ve got to get out of these jeans and wash my hair.’

He stubbornly ignored his friends’ laughter at that.

If pictures started circulating at the Phoenix…well, he did have a few good prank ideas that he’d been wanting to try out…

Orange hair might suit Jack.

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MACGYVER’S RESIDENCE

LA

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Jack and Mac leaned on the railing on the edge of the deck, looking inside the house.

Bozer and Riley were in the kitchen, making homemade fried chicken burgers. Bozer was explaining the importance of dredging and why buttermilk was the only acceptable dredging liquid, while Riley chopped cabbage for the coleslaw.

Bozer had rather unsubtly herded Mac and Jack out of the kitchen when they’d tried to help (or rather, when Mac had tried to help – Jack knew better than to try and violate Bozer’s only-one-terrible-cook-in-the-kitchen-at-once-and-only-when-supervised rule).
Clearly, he thought it was time for Jack to keep his promise, and Jack couldn’t agree more.

Hence, standing out on the deck next to his partner, in somewhat-awkward silence.

Eventually, Jack broke it.

‘Am I gonna have to say it, brother, or...?’

Mac sighed, running a hand through his still slightly-damp hair, turning to face the view. After a moment, Jack turned too, and they looked into the distance for a beat. Then, Mac took a deep breath and spoke, pulling a paperclip from his pocket as he did so.

‘Penny was my girlfriend for exactly 26 days when I was fifteen years old, until we worked out that our feelings for one another were entirely platonic.’ He sighed, and kept playing with the paperclip he had in his hands. It looked like a tube of lipstick. Mac glanced at Jack for a moment, then back out into the distance. ‘50% of my ex-girlfriends are crazy and evil and have tried to kill me and my family. The fact that I have….uh…women issues…shouldn’t be surprising.’

Jack wasn’t surprised. Bozer hadn’t really been exaggerating when he’d muttered about years of progress being lost.

According to Bozer, school-aged Mac had been skinny and awkward and shy and didn’t have much confidence in anything that wasn’t to do with schoolwork and his projects.

That did not surprise Jack in the slightest, given what could be inferred from what Mac was like now and from the stories he’d told during (and ever since) their trip to Mission City the year before.

Between his dad leaving and Donnie Sandoz and the rest of his childhood bullies and getting shot down cold by Darlene Martin and everything else…the fact that Mac had come out of it all without much confidence was practically a given.

But MIT had been very, very good for him. Friends like Smitty and Frankie and being around people like him had done wonders for Mac, Bozer said. Since their visit to MIT, Jack definitely understood how much his time there had shaped his partner.

And the Army had helped. Alfred Pena had helped a lot, Jack was certain.

Thus, by the time Jack had met the young EOD, Mac had grown into a rather confident young man.

Confident in just about every area of his life…except when it came to women.

Despite Jack’s best efforts (and Bozer’s and Penny’s and most of Mac’s brothers-in-arms), it’d taken a beautiful, brilliant, seemingly good and very, very confident woman three years his senior paying Mac very overt attention, and making it very, very clear just how attractive she found him, to change that.

It’d taken Nikki.

Nikki with her innuendos and flirtation and double-meanings.

Mac was a fast learner, and quickly, almost as if a switch had been flicked, he’d built confidence around her, with her, almost as fast as he built one of his crazy on-the-fly contraptions.

Jack really did wonder if Nikki had cast some magic spell on his partner, even if Mac was very insistent that magic wasn’t real.
Mac had had a confidence, a smoothness, around Nikki that Jack had never seen him have around any other woman.

He’d been there in Germany with Katarina. He’d pieced together a decent bit about Mac’s two dates with Cindy based on what his partner told him, both intentionally and unintentionally, and a couple of things Bozer had mentioned, when they’d been up late one night worrying about the blonde. He was quite sure that despite everything, part of Mac still believed that Frankie was out of his league.

It really was no small wonder that he’d developed some kind of issue with women.

It really was no small wonder that the first thing Mac’s big brain jumped to was threat assessment when a woman flirted with him, somehow believing on some very basic level, deep in his lizard-brain, that that had to be the most rational explanation for such behaviour, even if he did also believe that Nikki’s feelings for him hadn’t all been a lie.

It was complicated. It was a little contrary, a little contradictory. It was a unique issue, to say the least. It was also very saddening.

Unfortunately, that wasn’t altogether too unusual for Mac’s life.

As Jack ruminated, Mac stashed the lipstick paperclip in his pocket, and pulled out another one. Jack, after a moment, shook himself out of his thoughts and cuffed him gently on the shoulder, speaking with a nonchalance he didn’t really feel.

‘You only have two ex-girlfriends, man. Isn’t that one of them sampler issues?’

Mac huffed out a breath that might have been a very weak snort of laughter, as the paperclip in his hands started to resemble a brain.

‘Sampling issue, Jack.’ He looked over at his partner with a very small, very wry smile. ‘Though, you did get the concept right.’

Jack grinned right back at him.

‘Does that mean I pass Mr MacGyver’s science class?’

Mac actually did give a snort of laughter at that, tucking the brain paperclip back into his pocket.

‘We’ll see how you do on your next pop quiz.’

Jack chuckled, then his eyes widened and he looked a little horrified.

‘Wait…you’re not actually gonna give me a pop quiz, are you?’

Mac smirked at the older man.

‘Wouldn’t be a pop quiz if I gave you any warning, would it?’ He let Jack look very horrified and rather fearful for a moment, before his expression turned more serious again. ‘I’m…I’m working through it with Nate.’

Jack, face serious again, nodded slowly, and reached out and put an arm around Mac for a moment, squeezing his shoulders before letting go.

‘Real glad you are, brother. Life’s too short to skip dessert.’

Mac smiled wanly, shaking his head slightly as the smile grew wider and more wry.
Well, we do have a tub of vanilla ice-cream in the freezer, and Bozer bought the good kind of chocolate syrup the other day…’ He turned back around again, facing his house, and Jack followed a beat later. After a short silence, a comfortable one, Mac glanced over at the older man. ‘Are you okay, Jack?’

Jack just stared at him for a moment.

‘Did Bozer and Riley put you up to this?’

Mac shook his head immediately, and very genuinely.

‘No, I’m just…I’m just worried about you, because you’ve been so worried about me, and you slept on the couch for two weeks because of that…’ Mac ran a hand through his hair, seemingly struggling a little to articulate his thoughts. ‘I don’t want you to worry about me.’

There was a rather plaintive tone in his voice.

Jack smiled and shook his head fondly, pulling Mac into a side-hug. The blonde made a face of confusion at Jack’s actions, which quickly disappeared as the brunette started to speak.

‘Of course I’m worried about you, brother, ‘cause we’re family, and that’s what family does; worry about each other.’ He squeezed Mac’s shoulders a little tighter. ‘Bozer and Riley staged an intervention to get me off the couch, and clearly, you’re trying to do something of the like now, so I reckon that as long as we’ve got each other to keep all our worrying in check, we’re gonna be alright, man.’

Slowly, Mac nodded, and returned Jack’s side-hug with a small smile.

Mac and Jack headed back inside a moment later, to find Bozer quite literally pulling a carrot out of Riley’s hands, as the hacker stood there with her hands held out and shoulders half-shrugged, a what’s the big deal? expression on her face.

‘It’s just mini-golf!’

‘Just mini-golf? Just mini-golf? That is blasphemy!’ Jack and Mac just exchanged a grin, and walked up to the kitchen bench. Bozer turned to them as they walked up, stripping off his apron, then looking back at Riley, continuing this rant. ‘You have never played mini-golf! That is unacceptable and we are going to fix this right now!’ He turned to hang his apron back on the hook where it belonged, then held out a hand expectantly for Riley’s. ‘The fried chicken can wait until tomorrow; it’ll be even more delicious if I let it marinate overnight anyway.’ Riley, an eyebrow still quirked and shaking her head, nonetheless obediently handed over her apron, and Bozer turned to Mac and Jack. ‘We’re going to play mini-golf, and then we’ll all go out for dinner.’

It was said with very resolute determination. Riley, Mac and Jack exchanged a glance that involved a fair bit of head-shaking and exasperated fondness. None of them were going to argue with Bozer when he was in this kind of mood. This was his don’t you dare mess with my burgers or don’t you dare touch that pastrami before I say you can mood.

Then, Mac smirked, and jogged Riley with his elbow.

‘We can’t let this situation continue; mini-golf is awesome.’

Jack muttered under his breath.
‘You say that because you always win.’

Bozer leaned over and stage-whispered in Riley’s ear.

‘Yeah, Mac could play pro mini-golf if the whole super-spy thing didn’t work out.’ He leaned a tiny bit closer, tone changing to something that sounded as if he was imparting a big secret. ‘Don’t ever bet against him on mini-golf. That only leads to bad.’

Mac’s smirk just widened as Riley made a face.

‘Please don’t tell me there’s such thing as pro mini-golfers.’

To the best of my knowledge, there aren’t.

But they do say that necessity is the mother of all invention…and, well, if the super-spy thing doesn’t work out, I do have to pay the bills and the mortgage somehow…

BOZER’S FAVOURITE MINI-GOLF PLACE

LA

Mac grinned as he watched Riley, heavily encouraged by Jack and Bozer, attempt to make a shot that he estimated would have a 47% chance, plus or minus 5% as a margin of error, of course, of making it into the hole behind the windmill.

He, of course, was in the lead. By six shots. After making what the others called impossible shots.

They definitely weren’t impossible. I just proved that, empirically.

Besides, it’s all just physics: angles and force and friction, deflection and a tiny bit of air resistance…well, you get the picture.

He leaned a little on his mini-golf club, as Riley grinned and fist-bumped Bozer and high-fived Jack. Her shot had made it in.

‘This is seriously weird, and I’m pretty sure it’s for kids…but it’s actually pretty fun.’

The three younger agents watched as Jack lined up his shot…and promptly missed.

‘Aww, come on!’

I’ve finally realized something, after the last couple of months, working through things with Nate and Jack and Riley and Bozer. Even Patricia, once and very memorably, and Matty, last time she popped in to visit.

I know, I know, that’s pretty slow for me. In my defence, this isn’t some multivariate calculus problem or the partition function for a twenty-six level system.

It’s a lot more complicated than that.

In the end, I don’t think that my whole relationship with Nikki was built on a lie. I don’t think that she lied when she told me that we weren’t a lie at the airport, and I don’t even think she was completely lying that night at the hotel.
In some ways, that makes it better. In some ways, that makes it worse.

But, I’ve realized, at the end of the day, that doesn’t matter.

She brought some terrible things into my life, and that’s an understatement.

I’m still dealing with the fall-out. I don’t know how long it will be before that clears. Hopefully, it’s nowhere near the half-life of Uranium-238.

But I think she brought some good into my life, too. I mean, I’d never have met Riley, she’d never have reconciled with Jack or met Bozer either, and she’d still be in prison, if not for this whole mess.

And, for good or for ill, Nikki really did help shape me into who I am today.

And I do like who I am today.

Everything that has to do with her belongs in my past now. She belongs in my past now, just like that bioweapon.

Unfortunately, I can’t go and drop all the issues she’s given me into a crevasse in Siberia.

But I can do everything I can to let go of them.

And I firmly believe that one day, I’ll succeed.

Chapter End Notes

I think it’s quite natural for Mac to develop ‘women issues’ and have an irrational response to women flirting with him after everything with Nikki in this universe, plus the self-esteem and confidence issues he’s got to have in canon (his dad left when he was 12, he was bullied at school and shot down cold by Darlene Martin…) but rest assured that with his strength, and support from his friends and professional help, he will make it through, and he will manage to escape everything that Nikki’s left him with. I do hope it’s not a stretch for you guys to believe that he’s got these issues…

The mini-golf headcanon carries through from some of my other fics (Just Another Patriotic Guy, There’s Something About MacGyver and Trigonometry in Two Paperclips and a Stick of Gum, off the top of my head). The fact that Mac is making a tube of lipstick and a brain is a reference to the song Hey Soul Sister by Train; the first verse kind of reminded me of Mac’s situation, albeit in a very negative way…

I do hope I got the balance of humour, Team-as-Family, angst/hurt/comfort and action relatively right – in hindsight, I do wish there was a little bit more action, and unfortunately for action junkies, the next episode isn’t looking like it will be heavy on that, though 2.05 looks like it might be, from my plans…

Next episode, 2.04, Jack, is (as the title suggests – yes, it is a bad pun) a Jack-centric episode wherein decisions that 22-year-old Jack made come back to haunt him and the team delves into his past. It’s planned out in great detail, but I’ve only got the first 2000 words or so actually written, and it looks like it’s going to be a long, long episode/chapter. I’m going to be very busy for the next five to six weeks or so because exams are coming up, but hopefully, I’ll be able to get this chapter done within the next
month. After that, I have a little over a month off, during which I will get a lot of writing
done and hope to try and finish most of this story, so…
Jack

Chapter Summary

Twenty-two year old Jack’s decisions come back to haunt him, taking him back to the small town of Rising Star, Texas, that he left 23 years ago. Of course, Mac, Riley and Bozer refuse to let him face his past alone.

Chapter Notes

I’m so, so sorry that it’s been so long! I hope you guys haven’t lost interest for lack of updates! I really wanted to get this episode up before I started my exams, but unfortunately, two days after I posted Lipstick, my exam timetable was released, and let’s just say, it was terrible (I had two 80% examinations in the first four days of the exam period). I’ve now finished them, and still have one 30% exam for German left to do, but since it’s not for almost two weeks, I took a couple of days off and finished this chapter.

It is, however, a very, very long chapter (it’s over 13,000 words, which I’m pretty sure makes it even longer than The Falling), so I hope that at least makes up for it a little bit!

Disclaimer: I have never been to Texas. I’ve done some research, but obviously, my depiction of Jack’s home town of Rising Star is completely fictional. All events that have occurred in Rising Star are inspired by Wikipedia’s description of its history, however, are made up for the purposes of this story. No offence to Texans or the residents of Rising Star is intended.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

MACGYVER’S RESIDENCE

LA

‘...oh no she didn’t!‘

Bozer stared incredulously at Jack as the older man told him, Riley, Mac and Patricia, who were all sitting around the fire-pit and eating homemade Reuben sandwiches, a story about his older sister threatening his first girlfriend when he was fifteen.

Jack just nodded with a grin.

‘Oh, she did.’

Riley and Mac were both shaking their heads with a smile. They’d both heard this story before; Jack was rather fond of telling it, particularly when threatening of significant others was involved (Mac had heard the story after Jack had warned Nikki about breaking his heart – clearly she hadn’t listened...
While fifteen-year-old Riley had heard it after she’d stormed off to her room in a huff when Jack and Diane had made sure to have words with her then-boyfriend.) Patricia, too, gave a small, somewhat wry, smile.

‘Older sisters tend to be protective.’

They all turned to her like clockwork, and Jack broke the silence, brow furrowing.

‘You have a sister, Patty?’

Patricia nodded, with a slightly-awkward, slightly-apologetic shrug of her right shoulder.

She promised us no more unnecessary secrets. She’s kept it.

No more secrets doesn’t mean telling your whole life story all at once.

I don’t consider this a secret anyway, and even if it is…well, I’ve kept things like this hidden away too many times to judge her for it.

‘An older sister, and a brother-in-law. And a niece.’

They all blinked and stared a little, surprised and shocked for a moment. Jack looked particularly shocked; he’d known her the longest, after all.

Bozer broke the silence.

‘I’m totally adjusting my entire world view here.’

Mac and Riley gave snorts of laughter, and Patricia a small, amused smile, while Jack seemed to shake himself out of his shock.

‘Amen to that, brother.’ Jack’s phone rang suddenly, and his brow furrowed as he pulled it out, then glanced at the caller ID. ‘Well, speak of the Devil…’ He answered the phone. ‘Hey Jill...’ Jillian Croix, nee Dalton, was Jack’s sister. The former CIA agent got up, and made his way inside.

Bozer blinked twice, and then grinned slowly, and leaned closer to Mac and Riley.

‘Wait...Jack’s sister’s name is Jill. Jack and Jill. Their names are Jack and Jill-‘

Riley just shook her head, and socked him lightly in the arm.

‘Seriously late to the party, Boze. It took you that long to put that together?’

Bozer turned to his best friend, who just smirked a little sheepishly and shrugged. Bozer affected an affronted expression.

‘Bro, I thought we were BFFs! Why have you never pointed that out to me?’

A couple of minutes later, Jack came out again, his phone back in his pocket and looking very shocked and very pale.

Instantly, Bozer, Riley and Mac stopped bantering with one another, and Patricia put down her drink, concern in her dark eyes.

Jack reached down and grabbed his beer and sculled it. When he spoke, his voice was hoarse and
rough and still shell-shocked.

‘One of my best friends from high school just passed away.’ They all started saying their apologies immediately, and Mac got up and reached out as if to hug Jack, but the older man just cut them all off with a shake of his head. ‘Her son just showed up on Jill’s doorstep, and he says that his mom’s death wasn’t a suicide, like what the cops are saying.’ Jack paused for a moment, eyed the almost-full bottle of beer in Mac’s hand, and then reached out, took it, and downed it in a single gulp. ‘He also says that he thinks I’m his dad.’

Everyone, Patricia included, stared at Jack for a long, long moment, shocked completely into silence. Then, as Jack practically collapsed into a sitting position on the deck, Mac, Riley and Bozer exchanged a very wide-eyed look, while Jack locked eyes with Patricia across the fire-pit.

‘Patty-‘

‘You’ve got some vacation time saved up.’ That was true, their three-week mandatory leave hadn’t counted. ‘Go.’ Jack gave her a wan smile, and got up slowly. He had travel arrangements to make. Patricia turned to the three younger agents, who had all glanced at Jack, and then at her, all with the same resolute look in their eyes. ‘You’ve got vacation time saved up too, and I hear Texas is lovely this time of year…’

Jack glanced back at the group. With a quick glance at Bozer and Riley, Mac spoke for the three of them.

‘We’re family, Jack. Any problem of yours is ours too.’

Riley nodded firmly, her voice soft and gentle and emotional in a way they didn’t hear too often when she spoke.

‘We’re not letting you face this alone, Jack.’

Bozer, too, nodded, just as resolute, with a shrug and a wry little grin.

‘Hey, I’m always along for the ride, and I love a good backstory.’

Jack gave a wan smile at that, and nodded before speaking, voice still a little hoarse with emotion.

‘Thanks, guys.’

Mac, Riley and Bozer glanced at one another again, before Mac reached out and stole Jack’s keys right out of his pocket.

‘I’ll drive you home to pack a bag.’ Jack opened his mouth to protest, but Mac cut him off. ‘You’ve had three standard drinks in the last hour, and to throw your own words back at you, whatever’s going on in your brain has no business behind the wheel.’

Riley got up to head inside.

‘I’ll book us flights, and then I’ve got to head home and grab some things, but I’ll meet you guys at the airport. Mac, I’ll text you flight details.’

Bozer followed the hacker, as she and Mac herded Jack into the house.

‘Mac, anything in particular you need me to pack for you? ‘Cause if not, it’ll just be socks, jocks, shirts, pants, PJs, toothbrush-‘
Mac held up his Swiss Army knife, which had been in his pocket as usual, and reached out and grabbed a handful of paperclips from the bowl on the coffee table as he passed it.

‘Just clothes and toiletries will be plenty, Boze.’ He clasped his best friend’s shoulder for a moment. ‘Thanks.’

Bozer smiled at him as Mac bundled the still lost-in-thought and thoroughly-distracted Jack out the door, then turned to find that Patricia was standing right behind him. He jumped slightly in shock.

‘Sorry, Bozer.’ She took her coat off the scarecrow’s arm, and addressed both him and Riley. ‘You all have a week’s vacation time saved up. I can get Jack more time if need be, but you two and Mac have to be back at the Phoenix in a week.’

There was a hint of apology in her voice, but also that firmness that they were all accustomed to from their mostly-by-the-book boss.

Riley and Bozer nodded.

‘Understood, boss.’

‘See you in a week.’

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**JACK’S CAR**

**ON-ROUTE TO JACK’S HOUSE**

Mac glanced quickly at his partner as he drove. Jack was staring out the window, lost in thought.

‘What…what was your friend’s name?’

He knew that was a little awkward, but he didn’t really know what else to do; he certainly couldn’t let Jack be lost in his mind for the rest of the drive.

Jack glanced over at him, eyes a little grateful, but mostly sad and regretful and still shocked.

‘Mary-Ellen. Mary-Ellen Cole.’

‘I’m sorry, Jack.’

Jack smiled a soft, wan smile.

‘Thanks, brother.’ He sighed and stared out the window for a moment, then continued. ‘She was one of my best friends all through junior high and high school. Me and her and Jason were inseparable.’

Mac had never heard Jack talk about Mary-Ellen or this Jason before; he supposed that that was something the two of them had in common, not talking about their pasts. Besides, Jack had started high school thirty years ago. Jack sighed again. ‘But then we graduated, and Mary-Ellen went to UT Dallas, and Jason stayed in Rising Star and went to community college a couple of towns over and became a local cop, just like his dad. And I left Texas for college and my parents moved out here to California, since my sister’d left home already…and…’ Jack shrugged. ‘There wasn’t really much of a reason for me to go back.’ He turned to the blonde, and the regret in his eyes was very clear. ‘I lost touch with the two of them.’

Mac nodded slowly, a touch of that same regret seeping into his own eyes.
‘Sometimes, life pulls you away from your loved ones. You choose different paths, and they diverge so wildly…’

Jack, too, nodded.

‘Yeah. Don’t we both know it.’ He glanced at Mac again. ‘Your grandfather tell you that?’

Mac nodded.

‘After I dropped out and enlisted and…well, took a path that took me away from Frankie and Smitty and all my MIT friends.’

There was a silence as they both ruminated on past choices and past regrets for a moment, before Mac broke it again.

‘Did…did you go back to Rising Star at some point? Or did you run into Mary-Ellen somewhere else? I mean, you must have…um…right, if her son thinks he’s your dad? Or did…um…it…um…happen…before you left for college?’

This was always going to be a slightly uncomfortable conversation. Jack did not look forward to having to have this conversation with Riley at some point. It was bad enough with Mac. He sighed, and rubbed his temple with his left hand.

‘I went back, once. After college, I stopped by before boot camp.’ Jack swallowed, and when he spoke, there was nothing but deep sadness and regret in his voice. ‘I got back to find that Jason had died in a car crash five weeks before.’

Mac glanced away from the road and at the older man for a moment.

‘I am so sorry, Jack.’

Jack sighed.

‘It was a long time ago, Mac. But thanks.’ He looked out the window for a moment. ‘And…well…Mary-Ellen had just finished college too, and we caught up, mourned and grieved and reminisced…and well, I don’t have to spell out for you what happened.’ Jack sighed again, closed his eyes for a moment, and glanced at Mac, then out the window. ‘Then…after three weeks…I left for boot camp and didn’t look back.’ He gave a snort of bitter laughter. ‘Didn’t even know she had a kid until about twenty minutes ago.’ More bitter laughter. ‘Didn’t even know I probably have a kid until about twenty minutes ago.’ Jack blinked twice and rubbed his forehead, breathing a little faster. ‘God, I…I probably have a kid.’

Really having no idea how to help Jack, Mac just blurted out the first thing that came into his head, ill-advised as it was. (The last time he’d done something like that, that time in China, he’d probably worsened Jack and Riley’s fight, if not triggered a whole new one.)

‘You’d be a great dad.’

Jack stared at him as Mac pulled into his driveway, and when he spoke, his eyes were soft and his voice even softer.

‘You…you really think so, brother?’

Mac turned off the ignition and nodded, locking eyes with the older man.
'I know so, Jack.'

RENTAL CAR

ON-ROUTE TO RISING STAR, JACK'S HOMETOWN

TEXAS

‘It’s nice here.’ Riley shrugged. ‘I’m a city girl, but I can see how the quiet, country life has its appeal.’

Riley took the left turn that Jack had indicated to her. She was driving, because none of them would let Jack behind the wheel, and no-one wanted Mac to drive either, and she’d beaten Bozer in rock-paper-scissors.

Jack sighed, looking out the window at the paddocks of longhorn cattle they were passing, on their way to Mary-Ellen’s house on the outskirts of Rising Star.

‘Yeah, well, small-town life is small-town life.’ He shrugged. ‘When I was eighteen, all I wanted to do was get out of here. Go somewhere where everyone’s not up in everyone’s business, where there’s more than a thousand people in town. See the world, have adventures, do something big, something important.’ He sighed again and was silent for a moment. ‘And I never really felt I belonged here. Never really felt like a local. My mom was from Dallas, and my dad was from Rising Star, but he left to serve in Vietnam, met my mom when he was stationed at Fort Worth, and they came back here to raise me and Jill. Don’t think any of us ever felt like this was home, though. Even my dad didn’t, not after going out into the great big world and all.’

Jack sighed again, and pulled up the information that his sister had sent him on the behalf of Mary-Ellen’s son, Eli Cole. Jack had read it before, twice, but somehow still wanted, or needed, to read it again.

Eli Cole was twenty-two, nearly twenty-three. He was studying a Masters of Education at UT Dallas. He wanted to be a high school Music and English Literature teacher.

In the back, Mac and Bozer exchanged a glance, with Riley joining in via the rear-view mirror. Jack had told Bozer and Riley about Mary-Ellen and Jason and his death and his brief visit after college on the plane, and now all three of them had a very awkward, very uncomfortable question that they felt they really did need to ask.

There was never going to be a good time to ask this question, so as Bozer raised his hand to rock-paper-scissors for who was going to have to do it, Mac just sighed and asked.

‘Jack, are you sure that Eli is your son?’

There was a silence for a moment, and Jack sighed, and passed his phone to Mac. Mac and Bozer looked at the photo of the young man, with dark skin and an Afro, on the screen.

‘Timing of his birthday just about fits, and babies often don’t come on time.’ He paused for a moment, before continuing. ‘And there isn’t anyone else who could be his dad. Mary-Ellen hadn’t had a boyfriend for ages, far as I know.’

Bozer and Mac glanced at each other again.
Man, I feel like I’ve gotta point out the obvious. He looks nothing like you, Jack.’

Jack looked back at the two younger men as Bozer spoke, looking a bit sheepish, while Mac shrugged awkwardly, clearly agreeing with his best friend.

‘He looks just like his mama. So much like her it’s like seeing a ghost.’

Jack’s voice was soft and sad and full of feeling and meaning.

Wordlessly, Mac handed Jack back his phone, as Riley pulled into the driveway of a well-kept house with wooden siding, painted blue, and a large front porch.

There was a young man standing on the porch, and he waved rather awkwardly as they pulled up.

Eli Cole.

Jack’s son.

Jack and Eli stood there, staring at one another, an awkward, uncomfortable silence around them. Bozer, Riley and Mac stood by the car, trying not to intrude in what should be a private moment, but also utterly unable to look away or stop listening.

Eventually, it was Jack who broke the silence.

‘Uh, hi.’ He hesitated for a moment, seemingly debating what to do (Jack was a hugger, an impulse he did half-heartedly try and suppress most of the time, but, as shown by the truth serum incident, that impulse control sometimes failed), before holding out a hand for the younger man to shake. ‘Uh, not sure if it’s appropriate to say nice to meet you, given the circumstances and all, but…’ He shrugged a little awkwardly and trailed off.

Eli smiled, partly out of relief that Jack had broken the silence, and reached out and shook Jack’s hand firmly, then also shrugged.

‘Sentiment’s what matters.’ His face turned more serious, sadder, reminiscent, for a moment. ‘That’s what Mama always said.’ He gestured with his head towards the house. ‘Thanks for coming.’

Jack smiled wanly as he let go of Eli’s hand, and also looked towards the house.

‘Your mama was family.’ He hesitated a moment, and when he spoke again, his voice was a little hesitant, a little unsure, a little uncomfortable. ‘You’re family.’ His voice grew much surer again. ‘Ain’t nothing you don’t do for family.’

Eli’s wan smile widened a little, and then, a bit awkwardly again, he nodded towards Mac and Riley and Bozer. As he did so, Bozer waved rather enthusiastically and also somewhat awkwardly, Mac waved very awkwardly, and Riley glanced between the two of them, face-palmed internally, and smiled and nodded at Eli.

‘I guess family follows you all the way to Rising Star, Texas?’

Jack glanced at Mac, Riley and Bozer, smile widening, then turned back to Eli.

‘Yeah, yeah they do.’ Eli nodded, examining Mac, Bozer and Riley for a moment, before glancing back at Jack, looking a little shocked, surprised and generally very uncomfortable. Jack’s eyes widened as he realized what the younger man was thinking, and shook his head and waved both his hands for good measure. ‘Oh, no, no, not what you’re thinking. They’re not my kids. I don’t have
any kids. Err, any other kids. Sorry. Uh…’ Jack ran a hand through his hair. ‘They’re my co-workers and friends, and we’re, uh, family. Of the figurative kind.’

By now, Bozer was actually whistling, hands in his pockets. Riley was literally face-palming. Mac was seemingly fascinated by the wind-chimes on Mary-Ellen’s porch tinkling in the wind, which might not have been pretending.

Jack and Eli watched them for a moment, both with looks of amusement on their faces, Jack’s more exasperatedly fond, Eli’s more confused and inquiring.

Jack leaned a little closer to the younger man.

‘Yeah, this is normal for them. You get used to it.’ He paused for a moment, made eye contact with Eli. ‘How ‘bout we forget about most of the last few minutes and start again?’

Eli gave a small chuckle and nodded, holding out a hand for Jack to shake.

‘Hi, I’m Eli Cole. It’s nice to meet you, despite the circumstances, and thanks for coming all the way out here.’

Jack, with a smile, shook Eli’s hand.

‘Hi, I’m Jack Dalton. Nice to meet you too, and of course I’d come. Thanks for letting me know.’ He gestured at Mac, Riley and Bozer, who were all still pretending, rather badly (they were supposed to be spies), to not be listening in, and spoke a little louder. ‘Come meet my friends, who have totally not been eavesdropping on this whole conversation.’

Mac, Bozer and Riley all had the good grace to look a little sheepish, and made their way over to shake hands with Eli.

‘This is Mac, he can do pretty much anything using pretty much anything.’ Eli looked rather confused, but smiled and shook hands with the blonde anyway as Jack continued the introductions. ‘And that’s Riley, she can do magic with computers, and that’s Bozer, he’s a kitchen wizard.’

Bozer pointed at Jack, mock-affronted.

‘And a movie one! Man, you can’t forget General Wang and Godzilla From Space! It’s gonna be a cult classic!’

With a noble attempt at an encouraging smile, Mac patted Bozer’s shoulder comfortingly. Riley rolled her eyes with exasperated affection, and Jack quirked an eyebrow as if to say err...if you say so, brother?

Eli stared at them, looking between all their faces, still very much confused and with an eyebrow quirked, but also very much amused. Eventually, he chuckled, shook his head, and leaned closer to Jack.

‘Guessing you get used to this too?’

Jack just nodded with a bit of a smirk. Eli shook his head again, smiling, then the smile faded somewhat as he gestured towards his mother’s house and started leading the Phoenix agents to the door.

MARY-ELLEN COLE’S RESIDENCE
RISING STAR
TEXAS

Eli led them into a very nicely furnished, slightly-opulent living room, with a meticulously-clean grand piano in the room’s centre. Above the brick fireplace on one wall there rested many photographs on the mantel.

Mac, Bozer and Riley gravitated towards the fireplace. Almost all of the photos were of Eli at varying ages, with the most recent seeming to show him at his college graduation. Some featured a very beautiful African-American woman, Mary-Ellen.

One, however, showed a much younger Mary-Ellen, no older than sixteen or seventeen, in a cheerleader’s outfit, grinning, sitting on the seat formed by the linked arms of two teenage boys in football gear, who were lifting her into the air and both grinning just as broadly. One of the boys was clearly a much younger Jack, while the other was blonde, blue-eyed and had a crookedly handsome grin. They knew that had to be Jason.

Meanwhile, Jack had made his way over to the grand piano, and after a long moment lost in the past, ran his fingers along the keys. The corresponding notes rang out, loud and clear, around the room. Then, he reached up and fingered the sheet music, Orange Coloured Sky, still sitting on the piano’s music stand.

‘Always used to wonder if she was secretly related to Nat King Cole.’

There was a wistfulness in Jack’s voice when he spoke.

Eli smiled wanly.

‘Mama did love her music.’

Jack nodded, that same soft, sad little smile growing on his face.

‘Yeah, yeah she did. And she passed it on to you.’ Eli, after a moment, nodded, somewhat proudly, reaching out to straighten the sheet music slightly. Jack turned to Mac, Riley and Bozer, who were still standing by the fireplace. ‘She was the best singer in all of Rising Star, and probably the whole county.’

Eli nodded, lost in a memory, like Jack, for a moment, before returning to the present as his expression hardened.

He turned to Jack.

‘Mama left her sheet music out. She baked a pie to welcome me back home from college for the weekend. She wouldn’t have…she wouldn’t have taken…taken her own life. She wouldn’t have.’

He looked into Jack’s eyes, a little imploring, yet firm and full of grief, with a hint of a question. ‘She…she’d been getting paranoid the last few weeks. She told me two weeks ago, that if something should happen to her, I should go find Jack Dalton, and that he’d help me.’

The implicit question was left hanging in the air.

Jack reached out and clasped the younger man’s shoulder, locking eyes with him.

‘We’re gonna help you, Eli, and we’re gonna find out who killed your mama and bring them to
It was said with as much conviction as Mac and Riley and Bozer had ever heard in the older man’s voice. They, too, made eye contact with Eli, and nodded firmly, echoing Jack’s promise.

Eli nodded at all of them in acknowledgement, holding Jack’s eyes the longest, with a small, grateful smile, before shaking his head.

‘Thank you…but don’t you all work at a think-tank? I know you were in the Army, but I don’t understand why Mama thought you’d be able to…’ His brow furrowed. ‘Actually, Mama told me, years ago, that you barely passed Chemistry and Biology and Physics in high school...how’d you wind up working for a think-tank?’

The four Phoenix agents exchanged a glance, before Mac stepped in.

‘Well, we all have different roles at the Phoenix. I’m an R&D, hardware guy, Riley works on software, and Bozer’s more on the aesthetic side of things.’ He glanced at Jack. ‘Jack’s...Jack’s a pretty wise guy, despite appearances.’ He smirked a little as Jack shot him a look. ‘He helps us look at things from a different angle, reminds us of what’s important, looks after us, that sort of thing.’

Eli nodded slowly, seemingly more convinced, then gave a rather wry smile.

‘So he keeps you lab people from blowing yourselves up or overdosing on caffeine or building Ultron?’

Mac, Jack, Riley and Bozer all exchanged looks, holding back laughter as best as they could. Fortunately, Eli did not find their amusement suspicious in the slightest.

Jack, eventually, smirked.

‘You just nailed my job description.’ He leaned a little closer and whispered conspiratorially to Eli. ‘I had to warn them about Skynet when they made an AI a while back.’

Eli smiled right back at Jack.

‘Arnie and Jarvis are the only two AIs I trust.’

Mac huffed out a sigh, clearly wanting to mention Asimov’s Three Laws of Robotics, but also recognizing that this was probably not the time. Bozer looked rather put-out on Sparky’s behalf, while Riley just patted his shoulder comfortingly, shaking her head in a long-suffering manner.

After a moment of lightness, Jack’s face turned more serious, and he reached out to clasp Eli’s shoulder.

‘You’re the one who…who found her, right?’

Wordlessly, Eli swallowed and nodded. Jack squeezed his shoulder gently.

‘I’m so sorry, kid, but...we’re gonna have to ask you to re-live it and tell us everything you remember.’

Eli just nodded, swallowed a lump in his throat again, and then drew himself up to his full height and squared his shoulders. He glanced at Jack for a moment, and then led them all back into the entrance hall.
Eli gestured at the exposed wires hanging from a hole in the ceiling, then pointed at a spot on the floor right below it.

‘I opened the door…’ He swallowed, and after a moment’s hesitation, Jack reached out and clasped his shoulder. ‘…and there she was. She was lying on the floor, scarf tied around her neck.’ He paused again. ‘Chandelier was broken next to her, and…’ He pointed at a spot by one of the walls, where scuff marks and slightly-scratched paint indicated that a table had once rested there. ‘Table was kicked aside and overturned.’

Mac was looking very, very thoughtful, examining the remnants of the light fixture. Riley pulled out her laptop, while Bozer photographed some of the scuff marks with his phone.

Jack turned to Eli, squeezing his shoulder in comfort again as he swallowed a lump in his own throat.

‘Police do-’

Eli’s expression hardened as he cut Jack off, shaking his head.

‘No. Said it was clear-cut from all the evidence, no need to bother the coroner for an autopsy, no need to even consider the possibility she was murdered, wouldn’t even let me look at any of the stuff they took away as evidence or the file…’ Eli’s voice grew increasingly angrier, before he cut himself off and huffed out a breath, trying to calm down. Being mad wasn’t going to help.

After a moment, during which Jack reigned his own temper in, the older man spoke, a note of something that was very hard to place (a little angry and sad and reminiscent, perhaps) in his voice.

‘Still lots of Agnews in the force?’

Eli nodded with a bitter snort.

‘Yeah. Colin Agnew’s Police Chief now.’

Jack sighed and ran a hand through his hair, then explained for Mac, Bozer and Riley’s benefit.

‘Agnews and Coles have hated each other for over a hundred years. Rumour has it, it was because Old Billy Agnew lost a card game and his whole ranch and all his longhorns to Charlie Cole.’ Jack shrugged. ‘Anyway, doesn’t really matter. The Coles have the biggest ranch in Rising Star, and the Agnews never got that wealth back, they’re all police or military, so ‘course they still hate each other.’ Mac, Riley and Bozer all exchanged somewhat wide-eyed looks. This sort of family feud sounded as if it’d come from a movie. Or Shakespeare. As Jack continued, their eyes widened further. ‘Jason was an Agnew. Colin Agnew’s son, actually.’

Eli nodded with a sigh.

‘Mama did everything she could to keep us out of all that. Said one of the best men she’d ever known was an Agnew, and his name didn’t matter an ounce. Moved out of the family ranch as soon as she could, raised me here.’ He gestured at the house in general. ‘Did everything she could, but this feud’s stuck over a hundred years. Ain’t gonna end anytime soon.’ He gave a bitter snort of laughter. ‘Didn’t make growing up here much fun, with all that and…’ He glanced at Jack a little apologetically. ‘All the whispers about me being the Dalton boy’s kid, and how he knocked up my Mama, then left and didn’t come back…’

Jack shook his head, rubbing his temple for a moment, then clasping Eli’s shoulder a little more tightly.
‘I’m so sorry, kid.’

Jack and Eli stared at one another for a long, heavy moment, before Eli reached out, clasped Jack’s shoulder for a moment, and gave a wan little smile.

‘Not your fault, but thanks.’

After another brief, comfortable moment, Jack rubbed his hands together and nodded at the three younger Phoenix agents.

‘Well, if the police won’t do it, then we’re gonna have to play CSI.’

Mac stepped down from the chair that he was standing on while he’d been examining the light fixture in the dining room. It was, according to Eli, identical to the one that’d been in the entrance hall and subsequently removed by the police. He glanced back down at the full-body picture of Mary-Ellen, standing next to her piano, that he was holding, then looked back up at the light fixture for a moment, and nodded firmly.

He turned to Jack and Eli, who were talking quietly in the doorway between the entrance hall and the dining room.

‘You were right. She couldn’t have committed suicide. She was murdered.’

Jack and Eli exchanged a glance, and both swallowed, then nodded. Mac glanced at Eli, shifting a little uncomfortably. Eli just nodded resolutely, and after a moment of eye contact, Mac gave a little nod, pulled out a paperclip, and started speaking as his hands worked unconsciously, unwinding the little piece of wire.

‘The chandelier wouldn’t have supported her weight for long enough to cause death by hanging.’ He glanced down at the paperclip, which had taken the shape of a noose, stared at it for a moment, appeared to kick himself mentally, and shoved it back in his pocket. ‘Eli…I’m sorry to ask, but… were there ligature marks around her neck?’

Eli closed his eyes for a moment, and Jack reached out and clasped his shoulder in comfort. After a moment, Eli opened his eyes again, and glanced up at Mac.

‘Yeah. Pretty obvious ones too.’

Mac nodded, as if he’d been expecting that answer, which Jack was absolutely sure was true. He looked down for a moment, then back up at Jack and Eli, a deep sadness and apology in his eyes.

‘She…She was strangled, almost certainly with the scarf, and then her body was staged to make it look like a suicide.’ He ran a hand through his hair, and looked down again. ‘At least, I’m pretty sure…’ He looked back up again. ‘If I’m going to be sure, and if we’re going to work out who killed Mary-Ellen, we need to get access to the police’s files.’

Eli and Jack both nodded, both men closing their eyes for a moment again, as it all sunk in. Then, Eli made a very confused face.

‘What in the world do you guys do at the think-tank?’

Mac and Jack exchanged a look, and then Mac shrugged and replied.

‘A little bit of this, a little bit of that.’
Jack continued.

‘The Phoenix doesn’t really fit into a box.’

Eli just shook his head, an eyebrow quirked in disbelief, but thankfully for their covers, dropped it and started making his way into the kitchen, where Riley was working on gaining access to the police’s files, while Bozer went over his home-made crime scene photos.

In the doorway, Mac paused and clasped Jack’s shoulder in a silent gesture of comfort, earning him a small, wan smile from the older man.

*If I could, I’d bring her back. For Eli, and for Jack.*

*And because no-one should ever die this way, least of all a very good woman.*

*But I can’t.*

*I can do unlikely. I can do improbable. I can do highly improbable. I can do nearly impossible.*

*But I can’t do impossible.*

*But what I can do, I always will.*

*Especially for family.*

*We’re going to bring Mary-Ellen’s killer to justice.*

*I promise.*

---

Mac, Jack and Eli arrived in the kitchen to find a rather frustrated, annoyed Riley ranting about the Rising Star Police being stuck in the past, Bozer rubbing her shoulders soothingly. As soon as he noticed the others, Bozer removed his hands from Riley’s shoulders, and the hacker huffed out a breath and turned to them.

‘They haven’t digitized the files; I can’t get hold of them.’ Riley’s eyes lingered on Eli and Jack’s for a moment. ‘I’m sorry.’

Jack sighed, shoulders drooping for just a moment (only Mac and Riley noticed), before he forcibly perked himself up again, cracking his knuckles.

‘Well, looks like we’re doing this the old-fashioned way.’ He glanced at Mac, Riley and Bozer with a smirk that they were pretty sure was at least partially faked. ‘I ever tell you guys about the time I went under as a criminal defence lawyer in Belgium?’

Riley quirked an eyebrow sceptically, and she and Bozer just shared a glance, the young man shrugging as he looked over at her.

Mac just reached out and put a staying hand on his partner’s shoulder.

‘Jack, you *can’t*. You *know* that. Someone might recognize you, and…’ Jack opened his mouth to protest, but Mac cut him off. ‘A, even if it’s been twenty-three years, you have at least sixteen different facial features that haven’t changed.’ Mac gestured at the photo of teenage Jack, Mary-Ellen and Jason that Bozer and Riley had shifted to the dining table. ‘B, we don’t have the time and resources for Bozer to make you a good-enough prosthesis, and C, it’s not necessary. Bozer, Riley and I can go to the police with Eli, pretend to be…’ Mac half-shrugged. ‘…law student friends of his
from college.’ The other three young people nodded in approval of Mac’s plan, and Jack sighed and opened his mouth to protest again, with Mac cutting him off yet again. ‘I’m sorry, Jack, but…’

The older man sighed yet again, running a hand through his hair, looking morose and helpless and vulnerable for a moment. A very non-Jack expression.

‘You’re right, brother.’ His expression turned more wry, more like the Jack they knew and loved. ‘As you always are. I guess I’m exceptionally handsome; don’t have a face that people forget easily.’

Mac snorted, Riley scoffed and Bozer just raised his eyebrows as if to say right, man, keep thinking that. Eli stared for a moment, then shook his head with a little smile. Jack just reached out and socked Mac in the arm. ‘Though, bet you look nothing like you did twenty-three years ago.’

Bozer and Eli chuckled, while Riley rolled her eyes, though she was smiling in amusement too. Mac just shot Jack a look.

\[\text{Twenty-three years ago, I was a toddler and had just taught myself how to read.}
\]

\[\text{Of course I look different.}
\]

\[\text{And of course Jack knows that, but he is…well, Jack.}
\]

Later, after they’d all eaten dinner and finalized their plan for getting what they needed from the police the next day, Jack turned to Eli, a deep, unfathomable look in his eyes.

‘Ole Bessie still around? If she is, I’d like to have a chat with her.’

Eli smiled as Mac, Riley and Bozer exchanged a curious look, and got up and led the four out into the backyard. Mac, Riley and Bozer’s expressions only grew more confused.

The yard was neatly kept, with a longhorn skull lashed to the fence on one side.

Jack smiled, a warm, genuine, nostalgic smile, as Eli gestured towards the skull, and made his way over to it, rubbing his hand between the horns, a gesture that he’d clearly done many times before, long ago, then sat down and started talking quietly to the skull.

The three younger Phoenix agents exchanged a look that said it all (Jack was talking to a cow skull…), and Eli, upon noticing their expressions, gave a chuckle and a wry little smile.

‘Ole Bessie’s a good listener, never judges, and Mama always said she’s very wise, always went to her for advice.’

Mac looked like he was very tempted to make some kind of science-based retort (Ole Bessie was inanimate and predominantly made of calcium carbonate, calcium phosphate and collagen), but swallowed it down (he did have some social skills, and Jack did talk to his father’s grave, and it did seem to help him…he’d come to realize that sometimes, you just needed to say things out loud, even if you didn’t get a response) and looked over at Jack with concern instead, which Riley was also doing. Bozer noticed where his friends’ eyes were looking with no small amount of concern himself, before he shrugged and reached for something to lighten the mood.

‘Hey, I’d be pretty shook and pulling an alas-poor-Yorrick-I-knew-him-well if I suddenly found out I had a kid too.’ Bozer glanced over at Riley, who had a rather interesting expression on her face, his eyes widened, and he raised his hands in supplication. ‘Not that that’d ever happen, of course!’

He looked rather terrified as Riley quirked an eyebrow at him, channelling Thornton exceptionally
well. Mac and Eli exchanged a smirk, then, after letting him stew for a long moment, Riley just grinned and laughed at the expression on Bozer’s face.

Bozer huffed out a breath of immense relief, then pointed at her with finger-guns and a very relieved, hesitantly-amused expression.

‘Oh, that…that…was a good one…’

Eli and Mac couldn’t suppress their laughter any longer.

Riley woke suddenly, for reasons that she wasn’t quite sure of, but she had a feeling that she’d had some kind of nightmare. She felt unsettled, in the way that one often did after a bad dream that they couldn’t quite recall.

With a quiet sigh, she picked up her phone from the bedside table, checking the time. It was 3:24 am.

She made a face, and pulled back the covers, padding towards the kitchen, intending to get a glass of water or maybe even a cup of warm milk, to help her get back to sleep.

The kitchen, however, was not deserted, like she’d expected it to be.

Instead, Jack sat there, staring at the photo of him and Jason and Mary-Ellen as teenagers, ruminating. Lost in the past.

He looked up at her, jumped slightly, even, when she entered the room, putting down the photo, and they stared at one another in silence for a moment.

Eventually, Jack broke it, his voice a little hoarse.

‘Couldn’t sleep either?’

Riley nodded.

‘Yeah.’ She walked past him and, after a quick moment of consideration, started rummaging in the pantry. She found what she was looking for and held it up for Jack to see. ‘Want some hot chocolate?’

Jack hesitated for a moment, and Riley shot him a look that had a little bit of an eye roll, a little bit of a smirk, and a good dollop of softness, gentleness, in it.

‘Bozer taught me his recipe, with all his tricks. Even the top-secret one.’

Jack gave a ghost of a smile at that.

‘He really likes you.’

Riley smiled, a small smile, but with soft, affectionate eyes, and gave a little nod.

‘Yeah.’ She waggled the block of chocolate in her hand. ‘So, what do you say?’

Jack got up and pulled a saucepan out of a cupboard.

‘You gonna share Bozer’s top-secret trick with me?’

Riley just shook her head.
‘Nope.’ She popped the p a little as she spoke. ‘I can’t.’ She held up her right pinky. ‘Pinky-swear I wouldn’t.’

Jack just shook his head with a fond little grin. Mac, Riley and Bozer were adults in their mid-twenties, but sometimes, they behaved like children, like when they insisted on playing Truth-or-Dare or still upheld pinky-promises. He turned on the stove.

‘Well, I’ll just have to get it out of Mac, then.’

Riley’s brow furrowed.

‘Mac knows?’

(Bozer was very sure that even his BFF/roommate didn’t know the top-secret secret.)

Jack shrugged.

‘He claims he worked it out three years ago.’

Riley smiled, and got to work heating up the milk with a little shake of her head.

Pretending to be unaware of Bozer’s top-secret hot chocolate trick, just so that Bozer could continue being amusingly, enthusiastically secretive about and ridiculously proud of his hot chocolate, was a very Mac thing to do.

Mac would go to great lengths for his loved ones, after all.

Jack and Riley sat in the kitchen in comfortable silence, sipping at their (delicious) hot chocolate. Eventually, Riley broke it, uncharacteristically hesitant, motioning with her head towards the picture of Jack, Mary-Ellen and Jason that sat on the countertop.

‘Did you love her?’

Jack snorted, a wry little smile on his face.

‘Did you lose rock-paper-scissors?’

Riley just shot him a look, and shook her head, sipping at her hot chocolate.

‘No.’ She shrugged, expression softening. ‘Just…well…’ She gestured in his general direction, indicating him and his situation and general mood.

Jack adopted that very same expression that he’d had whenever he’d ruffled her hair affectionately when she was a kid.

Thankfully, he didn’t actually ruffle her hair; she hated that, always had. (Well, not the meaning of the gesture, but definitely the actual hair-ruffling.)

He nodded, taking a sip of his own hot chocolate.

‘Yeah, but the way Mac and Bozer love Penny. Not…not…’ He hesitated for a moment. ‘Not the way I loved your mom.’

They locked eyes for just a second, then Riley simply nodded and drank some of her own hot chocolate, and they sat there, again in comfortable silence, for a few more minutes.
When he finished his hot chocolate, Jack stared at the chocolate stain left in his mug for a moment, before speaking.

‘You know, I didn’t want to be a dad....’ Riley put down her own mug, looked up at the man who was the closest thing she’d ever had to a father, something deep and unfathomable in her eyes. ‘... when I met your mom.’ Jack picked a little at his wristband. ‘Then...’ A soft smile grew on his face, one that Riley wasn’t sure he was conscious of. ‘Then I fell in love with both of you, and...’ He shrugged, and looked a little regretful for a moment. ‘The rest is history.’ He looked down for a moment, then back up again at her. ‘And then I met Mac and Bozer, and got a second chance with you, and...’ Jack just shook his head, the look on his face showing that he was still very much reeling from the revelations of the last twenty-four hours. ‘...and now I’m an actual dad. Flesh and blood and DNA.’ Jack shook his head again. ‘And...and...’ He shrugged yet again, searching for words, and Riley spoke up.

‘You’d be...you are a great dad, Jack.’ Riley looked down for a moment, huffed out a breath. ‘Yeah, you shouldn’t have walked out on us.’ That had caused a lot of hurt for everyone involved, given them something they’d had to sit down and have a chat about after The Collective Incident, after China, after the truth had come to light. The hacker looked down again for a moment, stared at her wrists, as if remembering. ‘But...we all make mistakes.’ She knew that very well, knew how sometimes, the best of intentions led to very bad outcomes. She looked up at Jack again, expression soft and serious. ‘You’re a great dad, Jack, best I’ve ever had.’

Jack smiled softly at her, then slowly, the smile grew wider and wider.

‘Thanks, Riles.’

Riley smiled back at him, then got up, and, a little to Jack’s surprise, reached out and hugged him. Jack hugged her back tightly.

After they let go of each other, Jack picked up the mugs, and put them in the sink, then gave a long, probably slightly-exaggerated yawn.

‘Best get some shut-eye, we gotta be up early tomorrow.’

Riley made a face (Mac had never shaken the military hours, and after so long in the spy business, Jack was used to snatching sleep whenever he could, but even after her time in prison, or maybe because of her time in prison, Riley was not a morning person), but her expression perked up a little after a moment.

‘Bozer promised waffles for breakfast.’

Jack, despite the fact that he was probably only going to get about two hours of sleep, smiled a little too.

Bozer’s waffles were ridiculously delicious, after all.

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**RISING STAR POLICE STATION**

**RISING STAR**

**TEXAS**

Sitting in a conference room of sorts, Mac read over the files, committing them to memory. A
sympathetic police officer, a woman of about forty, had given them access to the files they needed, though she said they couldn’t make copies, take photos or take them with them.

Beside him, Eli, Bozer and Riley were reading over the files too, Eli seeming to do his best to compartmentalize.

This is better than what we had about half an hour ago, but honestly, we need copies of these crime scene photos…

A small smirk grew on Mac’s face as an idea hit him.

‘Boze, Riley?’

He motioned with his head to the glass wall that separated them from the rest of the station, where the officer who’d given them access to the files was watching them carefully.

Bozer, too, smirked, and cracked his knuckles.

‘It’s show time!’

Riley just nodded, and she and Bozer kept reading the files for another minute or two, before Bozer reached out and tried to take her hand, which Riley pulled away.

‘Babe-‘

‘Don’t call me that.’

‘But, babe-‘

‘Didn’t I just say-‘

Before Mac and Eli’s eyes, an ‘argument’ escalated between the two of them, and then Riley stormed out of the room, followed by Bozer, and they continued to yell at each other, drawing the attention of all the police officers.

Eli blinked himself out of his shock, as Mac nudged him, and started taking photos of the crime scene photos, following the blonde’s lead.

‘That…that was….‘

Mac gave a little chuckle as Eli trailed off, seemingly completely lost for words.

‘Yeah, I think some of the material is real-life-inspired…’ There was even more hubbub outside; it appeared Riley had slapped Bozer and they were now both being bodily removed from the precinct. ‘Huh…seems slapping is a Riley thing…’

Eli looked rather confused, but shrugged and continued to take photos. It wouldn’t do to waste Bozer and Riley’s distraction, after all.

Mac and Eli quickly finished their covert photography, before putting their phones away, and, after Mac read through the last file, they got up, profusely thanked the officer who’d let them see the files in the first place, apologised for Bozer and Riley, and headed outside.

Bozer and Riley were in the car, Bozer giggling like a schoolgirl, Riley slumped forward with uncontrollable laughter.
Mac and Eli chuckled too at the sight.

‘Great work, guys.’

Mac reached out and high-fived Bozer and fist-bumped Riley, as he and Eli got into the car and Eli started up the engine.

‘Got what we needed, bro?’

Mac nodded, tapping the side of his head and indicating his phone.

‘Yeah, thanks to you two.’

Riley smiled and Bozer grinned, rubbing his cheek absent-mindedly. Riley noticed, and turned to him immediately, apologetic and a little worried.

‘Bozer, did I-’

He cut her off with a deliberately-nonchalant wave of his hand.

‘I’m good, mission comes first, right?’ Riley just shot him a look, and Bozer quailed a little under it, looking rather sheepish and dropping the nonchalance. ‘Well…you’re stronger than you look, a lot stronger than you look…uh, maybe don’t do it again, please?’

Face surprisingly serious, Riley nodded, reached out and squeezed his hand for a moment.

‘I don’t plan to.’

In the front, Mac and Eli exchanged a glance, feeling like they’d intruded on a surprisingly private moment.

MARY-ELLEN COLE’S RESIDENCE

RISING STAR

TEXAS

With a sigh, Jack finished washing the dishes, and then headed outside to talk to Ole Bessie.

He rubbed the spot between her horns as always, then sat down, absent-mindedly sweeping his hands over the patch of sandy dirt in front of him as he talked, uncaring of the dust it left on his hands. It was an oddly therapeutic motion. Mac was on to something with his paperclips; keeping your hands busy really did seem to help.

After a while, his fingers touched something cold. Hard.

Metal.

Jack’s brow furrowed, and he stopped talking abruptly (Ole Bessie wouldn’t mind), and looked down.

There was, indeed, a piece of dulled, slightly battered, silvery metal under his fingers.

The furrow in his brow grew deeper, and with a sense of something that felt vaguely like foreboding,
Jack kept sweeping off the dirt.

A few minutes later, Jack sat back on his haunches.

There was some kind of container, some kind of box or chest, sunk into the ground, with a trapdoor-like opening in the top.

Jack ran his fingers over the latch, that sense of foreboding growing ever-stronger, then opened it.

The box was full of books.

Many, many books.

Or, more accurately, he thought, as he picked one up, thumbed through it, *diaries.*

Mary-Ellen’s diaries.

*Secret* diaries, clearly.

He hesitated a moment, and sent a quick apology skyward, hoping that maybe, just maybe, she’d hear it (and it was always the thought that counted, right?), before starting to read.

…I want to sing it from the rooftops, but of course, I can’t. The only one who knows is Ole Bessie, and of course, she’ll never tell. I think this is what love is like, what it means to love someone truly, madly, deeply…

*Romeo and Juliet* is not a good love story, but I firmly believe that ours can have a happy ending. I have hope.

…I can’t. I just can’t. I can’t even write it…

That particular page was covered with what looked very much like tear stains.

*Oh God, what have we done? What have I done?*

*Please, please forgive me, Jase. Please.*

Jack swallowed with a sigh.

…I thought it was, I don’t know, stress and grief and just…a reaction to everything that’s happened. I thought wrong.

I can’t believe I was so blind; I ignored all these signs, said it was all due to The Accident, and Jack coming back and just…well, it doesn’t really matter now, does it?

Jase, you’re going to be a dad.

I just wish you were here.

I don’t know what I’m going to do.
Jack slumped against the fence, beside Ole Bessie, looking more shell-shocked than he had for years, which was really, really saying something, considering the events of the last couple of days.

He blinked several times, took a few breaths, swallowed the lump in his throat, and wiped away a few tears. Then, he turned to Ole Bessie.

‘Why didn’t she tell me, Bess?’

He didn’t get a reply, but he suspected he knew why. Grief, raw grief and a still-bleeding heart that she’d had to hide. Maybe it was like opening the floodgates. Maybe she hadn’t wanted to share that with anyone, lest it all burst out.

Besides, he’d been gone. Out of their lives. Came back at twenty-two not quite a stranger, but definitely not the same eighteen-year-old he’d been either.

He sighed.

Another regret.

He was accumulating quite a lot of those.

Maybe it was a sign of getting old.

After another couple of minutes, collecting himself, Jack sighed again and continued reading.

…If I ever needed proof that Rising Star was a small town, I got it.

*Rumours are flying, of course, now that it's too obvious for me to hide.*

*Everyone's saying that the baby's Jack's.*

*Mrs Palmer even had the gall to ask me the other day if 'the Dalton boy ran because of the baby'*. 

Maybe I shouldn’t…but I’ve been letting everyone keep thinking that.

*It’s better this way. Better everyone thinks his dad's Jack Dalton, who left for college and never truly came back, instead of an Agnew when his mama's a Cole.*

*The rumours can’t hurt him now, not when he’s gone and not coming back.*

And…I’m not telling him. I know, I know, Jase, I can practically hear you telling me that is a Very Bad Idea. And I know why you’d think that.

But…if he knew, even if he knew about us, Jase…Jack’s a good man. One of the two best men I’ve ever known.

*He’d come back, marry me, to give my son a father, ‘legitimize’ him.*

And I don’t want that.

*I can’t betray you like that, not again, Jase. I’m still trying to forgive myself (because I know you’d forgive me) for last time.*

And…remember what we said to each other, the night he left Rising Star for college?
Jack Dalton was meant to fly. He was meant to do something big, and Rising Star was too small for him, and not just because he was Texas Junior Whip-Cracking Champion.

Neither of us could bear to ground him.

You know what they say; if you love someone, sometimes, you have to let them go.

Jack blinked, struggling to read through the tears that suddenly clouded his eyes, as some kind of weight he didn’t even know he was carrying lifted somewhat.

He’d left all those years ago, fresh-faced and eighteen, and, as Mary-Ellen had written, he’d never truly come back. Never truly returned to the small-town life of Rising Star. He’d never really regretted that (he had his regrets about leaving his two best friends behind and losing touch with them, but he had never, ever regretted leaving), but he realized now that there’d been a tiny, niggling little worm of guilt bothering him for years, guilt for how readily he’d left Rising Star behind.

And...he didn’t know what Mary-Ellen was giving him now; validation? Forgiveness? Her blessing? Her and Jason’s blessing?

He didn’t know, but he felt a little lighter.

His name is Eli, and he is perfect, Jase.

I wish with all my heart that you were here to see him.

When Mac, Riley, Bozer and Eli returned from the police station, they found Jack pacing around the dining table, which had a stack of old books on it.

Or, as Mac picked one up and examined it, more accurately, diaries. The only logical assumption was that they were Mary-Ellen’s diaries. Which must have been secret and hidden, as even Eli clearly didn’t know about them.

Jack stared at the four of them for a moment, eyes lingering on Eli for a long moment before he looked down and swallowed, then spoke, his voice rough and hoarse and full of too many emotions to even begin to analyse.

‘I was real stupid and real blind when I was young.’ He picked up one of the diaries, opened it, and held it out to Mac, whose eyes immediately widened. As Mac showed it to Bozer and Riley, Jack locked eyes with Eli. ‘After I left for college, your mama and Jason got together.’ Eli’s eyes looked like they were about to bulge out of his head, and looking slightly shaky, he sat down in one of the dining table chairs. ‘He’s your dad, Eli.’ Jack looked down for a moment, then back up, at all four young people. ‘And Mary-Ellen thought that his death wasn’t an accident. She went digging and...’

Mac, Bozer and Riley exchanged a glance.

‘...she got close to working it out.’

‘And whoever killed Jason...’

‘...killed her.’

Jack just nodded sadly, and then glanced back at Eli, who was still motionless and staring into the distance.
With a quick glance at Jack, Riley walked out of the room, grabbing Bozer by the hand and Mac by the sleeve of his jacket to pull them with her, leaving Jack and Eli alone.

Jack hesitated for a moment, not sure of what to do, then sat down opposite Eli, and waited.

Eventually, the younger man blinked twice and spoke, his voice soft and hoarse.

‘So…you aren’t my dad.’ Jack just nodded. ‘And…and my dad’s Jason Agnew.’ Jack nodded again. ‘And…and he was murdered, like my mama.’

Jack nodded a third time, very sadly, as Eli fell silent again.

After a long silence, Jack reached out, put a hand on Eli’s shoulder.

‘This…this doesn’t change anything, Eli. Your parents were my best friends. You’re family.’

Eli smiled a wan little smile at him that grew more wry as he slowly nodded.

‘Well, you’ve kinda got your hands full with your three kids-‘ That statement was punctuated with air-quotes. ‘-as it is.’

Jack gave an answering wry little smile.

Mary-Ellen, it turned out, had grown suspicious that her boyfriend’s death hadn’t been an accident when Eli was a toddler, but had been forced to put her suspicions aside as she raised him.

When Eli had gone to college, she’d started digging, and her secret box hadn’t only contained her diaries, but also everything she’d ever found.

That included a copy of Jason’s autopsy report that she’d somehow managed to obtain, and a selection of newspaper articles.

It also included her personal notes, outlining how she was quite sure that Jason had been killed because somebody had found out about their relationship, and strongly disapproved. There was, she believed, no other reason why someone would kill him.

The most recent notes, written in the couple of weeks leading up to her death, detailed her growing paranoia, the fear that someone had worked out what she was doing and was following her.

Her notes also detailed her belief that someone high up in the police was involved in Jason’s death, because only they could have pulled off such a cover-up, especially when Jason was an officer himself.

Jack sighed as he walked into the backyard. Bozer was going over the old newspaper clippings, while Riley worked her computer magic, trying to find suspects for both murders. Eli was trying to help out, but was mostly staring off into the distance. Jack didn’t blame him in the slightest; the poor young man had lost his mama, then thought he’d found his dad, only to find that he wasn’t actually his dad, and that his actual father had died, and was probably murdered, before his birth. He’d had a lot of shocks. Mac had been going over Jason’s autopsy report and the crime scene photos of Mary-Ellen’s body, attempting to find clues, but as smart as he was, Mac was no medical examiner or doctor and had decided to focus his mind on something else, citing lack of expertise. He was currently reading the section of the police report about Jason’s pick-up and occasionally looking things up on Eli’s laptop; Mac was never one to give up, after all.
That was why Jack was in the backyard; to make a call to Dr Farnham back at the Phoenix to ask for a favour.

‘Hey, Doc.’

It was a video call, and the doctor on the other side, sitting in his office in the infirmary, smiled back at him, a small smile, which wasn’t surprising. Dr Farnham was a fairly serious sort of man.

‘Jack. I assume this isn’t a social call?’

Jack gave a wan little smile.

‘No. I need a favour, Doc. I just sent you an email…’

The older man checked the laptop on his desk, and a moment later, turned back to Jack.

‘This isn’t Phoenix business, isn’t it?’

Jack just nodded.

‘It’s…personal. Hence favour.’

Dr Farnham just nodded.

‘I can look over it for you tonight, I’ll get back to you then.’

It was said firmly, resolutely and without apology. Doc was a very honest man, without an ounce of deception in him, and devoted to his job. He’d been Army before he’d joined the DXS, and he’d never quite let go of being rule-following and by-the-book, and made no apologies about that.

The fact that Doc was always honest and never pretended or tried to be anything or anyone else was something much appreciated by the Phoenix’s agents, especially in the wake of everything that had happened in the last year or so.

Jack nodded, his smile widening a little.

‘Thanks, Doc.’

The older man nodded back at him.

‘Always glad to help, Jack.’

He hung up, and Jack pocketed his phone and headed back inside.

Inside, Mac was staring at Eli’s laptop screen, rather lost in thought, before he gave a little nod and turned to Eli.

‘Mind if I borrow your truck?’

Eli drove a slightly-battered, second-hand pick-up truck. He just nodded, having gotten a little used to Mac and his somewhat strange ways, and got up and led Mac to the garage. Jack followed the two, and Mac explained as they walked.

‘I think there are some inconsistencies in the police report regarding Jason’s car; Eli’s has several key similarities that I can use to test some theories.’ As they entered the garage, Mac turned a little
sheepishly to Eli. ‘Err…I won’t damage your car, promise.’

Eli regarded him solemnly for a moment.

‘Mac, if it’ll help catch the person who killed both my parents, you can take the whole thing apart for all I care.’

Jack reached out and clasped his shoulder in comfort, and Mac nodded back, just as solemnly, then looked around the garage and grabbed the car jack leaning against the wall.

As Mac slid under Eli’s pick-up, Jack grasped Eli’s shoulder and steered him back towards the door to the house.

‘Let’s leave Mr Wizard alone with his new best friend to work his magic.’

From under the car, Mac gave a muffled reply.

‘It’s science, Jack, not magic!’

That brought small smiles to both Eli and Jack’s faces as they headed inside.

*I know sometimes it’s got to seem like we’re A, insane, or B, don’t take our job and its consequences seriously, but we do, I promise.*

*Jury’s probably still out on the insane bit, though.*

*Anyway, my point is, this is how we get through the darkness. Making jokes, teasing each other, on-point banter, as Bozer would say.*

*My grandfather always said that laughter is the opposite of fear. I didn’t understand that, not completely, before Afghanistan, but now…now I think it’s one of his best lessons.*

A couple of hours later, Mac came back in, with a smudge of grease on his cheek, wiping his hands off on an old towel he must have dug up from somewhere.

His timing was excellent (Mac always did have excellent timing; Jack still wasn’t sure if it was luck – given the misfortune he’d had in his life, his partner did deserve some luck – or if Mac’s ridiculous IQ had a hand in it), because Dr Farnham called back just as he walked in.

Jack answered the video call immediately, as Eli, Riley, Bozer and Mac gathered around him.

As the doctor appeared on the little screen, Jack was struck by how old he looked.

Dr Farnham was sixty-five, twenty years older than Jack. He’d always looked older, but he was strong and robust and lively…but now, he really did look old, for the first time. There was a tiredness, a weariness that Jack had never noticed in the older man before.

Jack shook himself out of his thoughts as Dr Farnham spoke.

‘Good evening, Jack, Mac, Bozer, Riley.’

He quirked an eyebrow at Eli, and Jack just gestured at the younger man.

‘That’s Eli. Eli Cole.’
Dr Farnham nodded seriously, and addressed Eli for a moment.

‘I’m sorry for your loss.’

Eli nodded back in acknowledgement.

‘Thanks.’

Dr Farnham picked up a couple of sheets of paper and straightened his glasses.

‘I’m not a medical examiner. I may be wrong.’ They all nodded, and satisfied that he’d impressed that upon them, Dr Farnham continued. ‘As best as I can determine, there are no inconsistencies in Jason Agnew’s autopsy report; all injuries are consistent with a car accident. Nothing to indicate he was in a fight before his death or forced into the car.’ Dr Farnham paused for a moment, then shuffled his papers and continued. ‘Mary-Ellen Cole’s case is less clear cut. It’s difficult to tell from the photographs, but I believe that her body was moved based on the lividity, and I think there are defensive wounds, and if I had to rule on a cause of death, I’d say strangulation was the most likely possibility.’

Mac’s brow furrowed as the others all nodded.

‘You’ve got visible livor mortis?’

Dr Farnham nodded.

‘Probably not visible to you, but to a trained eye…’

Mac nodded, his brow still furrowed.

‘So she was dead, what, two hours, maybe, before she was moved?’

Dr Farnham shrugged a little, but nodded just the same.

‘If I’m seeing what I think I’m seeing…’ He put down his papers. ‘That’s all I have for you, I’m afraid.’

Jack offered him a wan smile.

‘Thanks, Doc.’

He gave a little salute, which Dr Farnham returned with a smile, then hung up.

Mac was toying with a paperclip, which was taking the shape of a clock.

He gestured with his head at Jack’s phone as his partner put it back in his pocket.

‘Doc’s theory matches my own; I’m quite sure that Jason’s car was tampered with so that it would crash.’

They all nodded, and then Jack continued.

‘And the reason why there’s that liver mortified stuff –’

‘Livor mortis, Jack. It’s Latin for bluish colour of death, literally.’

‘- is because whoever did it needed time to stage everything?’ Jack’s brow furrowed. ‘Two hours is a
long time…they killed her ‘cause she was close to working it out…’ Realization dawned on his face. ‘They were looking for this.’ He indicated the notes and clippings that Mary-Ellen had accumulated over the years, spread out over the table.

Mac just nodded.

‘That’d be my hypothesis.’

It was Eli’s turn to look confused.

‘But…nothing was moved. Nothing was out of place…’

Jack and Mac just exchanged a glance that suggested that they’d seen something like this before (Bozer and Riley exchanged a glance of their own; they were going to get that story out of the partners later), and then Mac spoke.

‘A trained investigator would have both the knowledge and the skills to ensure that they replaced everything where it was meant to be, and would have also scoped out the situation and known that you weren’t going to be back from college for a few hours…’

Riley, who’d been typing away furiously on her laptop as they all spoke, working on the algorithm that she’d put together to identify suspects, spoke up.

‘Jack…’ There was a note of hesitation in her voice, and she held up her laptop. ‘According to my algorithm, this is our number one suspect.’

The photo on the screen was of Colin Agnew, Rising Star’s Chief of Police…and Jason’s father.

Mac paled, and shared a glance with Bozer, who had a rather horrified expression on his face. Eli looked like he might be sick, and Jack gripped the table so hard that Mac worried for a moment he might have to conduct some repairs.

Eventually, Jack spoke, letting go of the table and getting up to pace.

‘No. He couldn’t…he wouldn’t-’

Bozer, Mac and Riley exchanged a look.

‘Jack, he had easy access to Jason’s car.’

‘He was the first responder on the scene, so he was very well-placed to tamper with evidence and pull off this cover-up.’

‘And there’s the whole Capulet-Montague thing the Coles and Agnews have got going on.’

Mac reached out and clasped Jack’s shoulder.

‘He had means, motive and opportunity, Jack.’

His partner just shook his head firmly, insistently.

‘No. He wouldn’t have. He couldn’t have.’ Mac opened his mouth, a very sad, apologetic expression on his face, but Jack cut him off before he could speak. ‘Look, he was caught up deep in the whole family feud…but he loved his boy. As much as any dad I’ve ever seen.’ Jack paused in his pacing, turned back and faced them all. ‘My gut’s telling me it’s not him.’
The three younger Phoenix agents all shared a glance (Eli was still staring off into the distance), then nodded.

Riley rolled up her sleeves a little, and started typing again.

‘I’ll start over on the algorithm, see what other suspects it can turn up. Boze?’

Bozer flipped the notebook he was writing in back a few pages, and held it up for Riley to read as she typed without looking at her keyboard.

Mac disappeared into the bathroom, and came back thirty seconds later with a make-up brush and a compact of foundation that had evidently belonged to Mary-Ellen.

‘Killer probably wore gloves, and it’s probably been too long, but I’ll try dusting for prints.’

He took off in the direction of the entrance hall, as Jack shot the three of them a very grateful look, and Eli shook himself out of his thoughts.

‘I’ll…I’ll make us some dinner.’

Jack’s stomach growled at that very moment. (It was nearly 10 pm, and they hadn’t eaten, so caught up in catching the murderer.) Bozer gave a little grin and Riley shook her head with an amused expression, but Eli just walked towards the kitchen on autopilot.

Jack sighed, watching him go with worry in his eyes, then followed, leaving Bozer and Riley in the dining room, hard at work.

It was just past midnight when Riley made a noise of triumph and high-fived Bozer.

Jack, who’d been deep in a cup of coffee (he hadn’t really slept for the last couple of nights), looked up at her, and Riley nodded at him.

‘Your gut was right, Jack.’ She held out her laptop to him. Apparently, Colin Agnew had been called out to an incident involving some teenager being a public nuisance on the other side of town at the time of Mary-Ellen’s murder (she’d gotten into the police logs easily; the Rising Star Police Force’s cybersecurity was nowhere near being in her league), and a video taken by the teenager’s friend and posted on Facebook confirmed that he’d been there.

He hadn’t killed Mary-Ellen. Thus, almost-certainly hadn’t killed his own son either.

Jack let out a breath he hadn’t thought he was holding, as Mac burst back into the dining room from the kitchen (he’d found a few prints that didn’t belong to any of them or Mary-Ellen; they were in very poor condition so he’d been doing something to them in the kitchen – baking paper, crayons, and setting powder were involved; none of them really understood what he was doing, but judging from the look on his face, it’d worked), holding a small square of baking paper very carefully.

Bozer high-fived his best friend as the blonde put the piece of paper down on the table, and took a photo and immediately emailed it to Riley, who started running it through a series of databases.

A couple of minutes later, there was a ping and Riley, Mac and Bozer all zeroed in on her laptop screen.

Bozer shook his head.

‘Man, this whole family feud is totally Texas Romeo and Juliet.’
Riley punched him lightly in the arm, and held out her screen for Jack and Eli to see.

The man on the screen was Cody Agnew, senior police officer, and Colin Agnew’s cousin.

Jack nodded slowly, looking very resigned, and very, very sad. He picked up the photo of him and Jason and Mary-Ellen that still sat on the dining table.

‘He…he yelled at him, not five minutes after this was taken. About how he could possibly be friends with her.’ Jack shook his head and trailed off, not able to continue, and Mac and Eli each reached out and patted his shoulder, while Riley clasped his forearm.

‘We’ll get justice for them, Jack. In fact, we’ll do it right now!’ Bozer grabbed some of the sheets of paper lying on the table, packing up to go to the police right that second, before he seemed to remember that it was past midnight when he gave a huge yawn. ‘Err…maybe not immediately… maybe in the morning?’

Jack looked up and gave a very wan little smile, then yawned himself, feeling for the first time in the last couple of days like he might be able to sleep.

Fifteen minutes later, Bozer and Mac grumbled about Jack eating far too many Honey-Nut Cheerios as they carried the older man, still seated in a dining room chair, to bed.

They’d left him alone for five minutes, while they all cleaned up, and he’d fallen asleep right at the table, and none of them had the heart to wake him, not when he was finally sleeping properly.

Still, I’ve got to limit his Honey-Nut Cheerio intake.

RISING STAR POLICE STATION

RISING STAR

TEXAS

‘Jack Dalton?’

Colin Agnew stared at Jack as if he’d seen a ghost.

‘Long time, no see, Mr Agnew.’ Grim-faced, Jack held up the file that he’d woken to find that Mac, Riley and Bozer had prepared for him, clearly outlining all the evidence they’d found. ‘I…I’ve got something real important to show you.’

DINER

RISING STAR

TEXAS

Six hours later, Colin Agnew walked into the diner where Jack, Eli, Riley, Mac and Bozer were waiting, Mac, Bozer and Riley drinking copious amounts of coffee.

The Police Chief looked older, more deflated, and, for a man normally so full of pride, very, very
ashamed.

He addressed Jack and Eli as he came up to their table.

‘He confessed.’ His face twisted with disgust. ‘He sounded proud.’ He paused, hesitated for a moment, then held out a hand to Eli. ‘I…this…this bad blood’s cost me my son. Might’ve cost me a daughter-in-law. Cost me near twenty-three years of my grandson’s life. It’s gotta end. Should’ve ended years ago.’ He paused again, glanced up at Jack, then back at Eli. ‘I…I wanna head to the Cole Ranch, tell them all in person. Would…would you come with me?’ He looked up at Jack, clearly asking him as well as Eli.

Eli hesitated a moment, then gave the Police Chief a small, but genuine, smile, shaking the older man’s hand firmly, as his expression grew a little more wry.

‘Mama would have my hide if I didn’t.’

Colin Agnew returned that wry little smile, as Jack glanced over at Bozer, Riley and Mac.

It was Bozer who spoke.

‘We’ll just go grab some Texas barbecue; that place down the road smelled divine.’

Riley made a face.

‘You just ate!’

Bozer just pointed at her, shaking his head.

‘You can’t come all the way to Texas and not try Texas barbecue!’

Mac jogged the hacker lightly with his elbow.

‘He’s not wrong.’ The blonde shrugged. ‘And I could eat.’

Given the fact that he was on the lean side for an ex-soldier and secret agent, Mac had a pretty big appetite (though not big enough for Mrs Patel, apparently). It was possibly partially because the brain burned a lot of calories; Riley vaguely remembered learning something like that in school…

She just shook her head with some kind of fond exasperation, and then gestured at Jack.

‘Go, Jack.’

The older man shot his three young friends a grateful smile, trying to thank them for everything in that look, and followed Eli and Rising Star’s Police Chief out of the diner.

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**COLE RANCH**

**RISING STAR**

**TEXAS**

Jack watched with a small, sad smile as Colin Agnew and Old Man Cole, Mary-Ellen’s father, shook hands, thumping each other on the back in an almost-friendly manner.
Finally, finally, this feud as over.

He just wished so, so much it hadn’t been at this cost.

CEMETERY

RISING STAR

TEXAS

Jack sat down in front of a still-shiny, new gravestone, and paused, hesitated for a moment, before speaking.

‘Hey, Mary-Ellen. Long time, no see.’ He paused again, to swallow the lump in his throat, and wiped his eyes before continuing. ‘I…I’m sorry. Not for leaving, but…for not looking back. For not trying harder to, you know, keep in touch and all…’

‘…They’re kinda like us, actually. Well, Mac and Riley are smarter than any of us ever were, but you know, they got a little bit of the same dynamic.’ Jack shrugged. ‘Eh, maybe I’m projecting. Pretty sure Mary-Ellen thinks I’m projecting, but you got my back, right, buddy?’

Jack heard footsteps behind him, approaching Jason’s grave, and turned to find a slightly-sheepish, hesitant-looking Eli.

Jack gave the younger man a small smile, and patted the patch of grass beside him. Eli sat down, and they sat there in comfortable silence for a while.

Then, Jack broke it, reaching out and clasping Eli’s shoulder, looking into his eyes.

‘Remember, kid, you’re family. The trial…the trial might be tough. If you need me…if you ever need me, just call, okay?’

Eli smiled and nodded, then, slightly hesitantly, reached out and hugged Jack. Jack returned the hug with an answering smile.

‘Thanks, Jack.’

Jack’s smile just widened a little.

‘Ain’t nothing you don’t do for family.’

After a moment, they let go of each other, and then Eli gestured to his father’s grave with his head.

‘Can…can you tell me more about him? Mama always used to tell me stories about the two of you, but…’ He shrugged. ‘I…I didn’t listen enough then, I think. And…’ He looked rather sad for a moment. ‘…I just wanna hear more about him.’

Jack looked very sad for a moment, then nodded, the smile returning as he lost himself in his memories and started talking.

MARY-ELLEN COLE’S RESIDENCE
Jack just shook his head in surprise as Eli handed him an old, but well-kept, guitar.

‘She’d want you to have it.’

Jack smiled, soft and slow and a little sad, strumming his fingers over the strings experimentally, then looked up at Bozer, Mac and Riley, who were waiting expectantly for an explanation.

‘I bought this for her when we were seventeen, after she taught me to play.’ He strummed again, made a couple of adjustments to the pegs, tuning the instrument. All four young people looked expectantly at him, and Jack shook his head. ‘I’m years and years out of practice, guys.’

Mac shrugged.

‘And none of us will judge, Jack.’

The older man quirked an eyebrow at him with a wry grin in response, but started playing in earnest, strumming a few chords, jogging his memory.

‘Oh, you will, brother, you will. I’ve learnt not to trust those puppy-dog eyes of yours.’

Bozer and Riley snorted with laughter, as Eli smiled and Mac looked a little put-out. Bozer patted him on the shoulder in a way that would have been a lot more consoling if he wasn’t still chuckling.

After a couple of minutes, Jack started playing a very familiar song, a wistful, slightly-sad smile on his face.

As he played, Eli started singing along.

‘Well, I know that you’re in love with him, ‘cause I saw you dancing in the gym, you both kicked off your shoes, man, I dig those rhythm and blues…’

Mac and Bozer almost started in surprise when a second voice, a little softer and more hesitant, joined in.

They hadn’t had a clue that Riley could sing. She didn’t sound quite like a professional, but her voice was far nicer than just pleasant. Jack turned to Riley with a surprised grin; he hadn’t heard her sing for years.

Bozer shot her a look that was part-mock-betrayal and part-awestruck grin, and Riley shrugged and smiled back at him, a touch sheepishly, while Mac leaned back in his seat a little, just enjoying the music with a smile.

‘…Bye, bye, Miss American Pie, drove my Chevy to the levee, but the levee was dry, and them good ole boys were drinking whiskey and rye, singing this’ll be the day that I die…’

MACGYVER’S RESIDENCE

LA
Mac sat down in his desk chair and pulled up his contacts list and dialled.

‘Hi, Dad. How are you?...Good, I’m good, I just got back from a mini-vacation in Texas….yeah, Bozer, Riley and I went with Jack to pay a little visit to his hometown; he hadn’t been back there in twenty-three years…’

Chapter End Notes

Jack’s sister’s name (I don’t think it is mentioned in canon, and I have also made up that she’s older than him) comes from the name of Nick Stokes’ mother in CSI (Jillian) and the original surname for Jack Dalton’s sister’s character in the unaired pilot, according to Wikipedia. It is also because Jack and Jill are amusing names for siblings.

Riley’s ability to sing comes from the fact that, according to her Wikipedia page, Tristin Mays is a triple-threat who has been on Broadway.

This entire episode is heavily inspired by the song American Pie, as the little end scene implies.

I hope I wasn’t too heavy-handed with the whole Mac, Bozer and Riley as Jack’s pseudo-children thing; I know I tend to be a bit heavy-handed on the whole Team-as-Family thing, but to be honest, I adore Team-as-Family as a trope/genre so much, I can’t really help it! I also hope that Jack’s return home and his history is A, relatively believable, and B, sufficiently different from Mac’s! I think that the ending is a little bit choppy, with all the little scene changes, but I also really wanted to have all those little scenes in there, and honestly, it was getting too long, so…

The next episode is tentatively titled Dart, and the tentative summary is as follows: When Mac and Jack are both taken out of commission while on a mission to stop an imminent terrorist attack, Bozer and Riley must step up and save the day.

I have titles now for the next few episodes; 2.06 is probably going to be called Maple Syrup, 2.07 Sneaker and 2.08 Rubik’s Cube.

I’m hoping to get Dart up within the next two weeks, and after that, updates should become more frequent during my one-month winter break.
Chapter Summary

When Mac and Jack are both taken out of commission while on a mission to stop an imminent chemical attack, Bozer and Riley must step up and save the day.

Chapter Notes

I’m glad people enjoyed 2.04, Jack (it was a difficult one to write); again, apologies for the long hiatus, but this story shouldn’t go on hiatus again! I finished this last Tuesday, but I’m probably going to stick with a once-a-week posting schedule (a bit like the show, no?) unless I build up a really good buffer. Then it might be twice-a-week.

Something might have gone a bit weird with the last update; FFnet stats show it had a very low number of readers compared to the other three chapters, so I don’t know if some people missed this, or whether the lower readership is just due to the long hiatus… anyway, if you think you might have missed 2.04, maybe just check first. There’s a spoiler for 2.04 in this one, so…

See the end of the chapter for more notes

POLITICAL FUNDRAISER

WASHINGTON D.C.

Riley, wearing a slinky, jewel-green dress and the highest heels she could still run in, leaned closer to Mac (who was wearing a tuxedo that really clashed with the grease under his nails), some kind of smirk-smile on her face.

They were undercover as a secretive, young, but very wealthy investment banker and his girlfriend, and were currently dancing on the edge of the dance floor at the fundraiser.

Riley whispered in Mac’s ear, the one that didn’t have his comm in it.

‘We’re not going to convince anyone if you’re staying twelve inches away from me at all times. This isn’t Prom, Mac, no teachers are going to scold you!’ She paused for a moment. ‘Also, Bozer warned me, but you really can’t dance.’

Mac whispered back after letting out a laugh that Riley could tell was very much fake (it didn’t sound like him at all), though she was quite sure the people around them, who wouldn’t know Mac from Adam (in this case, quite literally – he was supposed to be a Mr Adam Browning), wouldn’t be able to tell.

‘A, I never even went to Prom. B, dancing was never high on my list of skills to acquire. And Bozer claims that you just have to be born with rhythm, which he also says I wasn’t.’ He paused for a
moment, and started whispering into her left ear, which had her comm in it, instead of her right. ‘And I can get us into Cheng’s room.’

The plan was for Mac to get Riley into the suspected blackmailer’s hotel room, so she could collect the proof they needed by hacking into his laptop.

That had been the plan in its entirety; as usual, Mac was improvising the rest.

He pulled Riley into a small, dark corridor that looked like some kind of service corridor, a (fake) smirk on his face, as she giggled (also fake), the two of them playing a young couple a little too caught up in each other to stay long at the party. He tugged her closer as a couple of waiters walked by, and Riley leaned up and whispered in his ear again, not paying attention to which ear it was.

‘Great, as long as this plan doesn’t involve me kissing you.’ Riley made a face, her expression hidden by the wall and her hair. ‘I’d sooner kiss Bozer any day.’

Mac laughed genuinely at that.

‘Ditto.’ He paused for a moment. ‘Well, I’d have to toss a coin-‘

Mac was interrupted by a loud thudding noise echoing over their comms, then Jack’s voice.

‘Riles, you know how to reboot a Bozer? ‘Cause I think you just broke him.’

PHOENIX FOUNDATION HEADQUARTERS

SOMEWHERE IN LA

Thornton gave the four of them a small smile as they entered the war room.

‘Excellent work in D.C.‘

Jack slapped Mac on the back as the blonde grabbed a couple of paperclips from the bowl on the table, and Riley made a face.

‘Please tell me this mission doesn’t involve a dress and heels.’

Thornton’s smile widened ever-so-slightly, as she tapped the screen in front of them to start their mission briefing.

‘This mission does not involve a dress and heels.’ She gestured to the screen, which showed a vet’s office in Philadelphia, according to the sign that featured prominently in front of the building. ‘Intel suggests that this office is a front for a group that is producing a chemical weapon.’ They all sucked in a breath, and Thornton gave a little nod in response. ‘Intel also suggests that they are planning on testing it to demonstrate it to potential buyers.’ Mac seized another paperclip from the bowl, as Jack’s expression hardened, Riley’s eyes blazed and Bozer crossed his arms in front of his chest. Thornton nodded again, a little hint of anger in her eyes. ‘Your mission is to gather more intel so that the Phoenix can strike, take down the ring and secure the weapon before the test occurs.’ She paused for a moment. ‘Matty suspects that The Organization is one of the potential buyers, and as Philadelphia FBI haven’t been cleared by her team yet…’

They all nodded.
It meant they were on their own. No back-up from local law enforcement; their only back-up would be each other, and Thornton and the Phoenix, almost 3000 miles away.

Jack reached out and clapped Thornton on the shoulder. She just quirked an eyebrow at him, and Jack quickly removed his hand, though his expression didn’t change.

‘Don’t worry ‘bout us, Patty, it’s just intel gathering! Get in, get the info, get out. Simple. We’ve done this a million times before, right, brother?’

He looked pointedly over at Mac, who just snorted.

‘Actually, we’ve done this twenty-nine times before.’

Jack’s brow furrowed as he and Mac followed Bozer and Riley out the door.

‘Only twenty-nine? I swear it feels like more. You sure you counted right? You counted Tampa, right? And Asuncion?’

‘Yes, Jack, I counted them, and Rotorua, before you ask.’

Thornton watched them go, still bickering, with a little shake of her head with something like affection in it, before tapping the screen to remove their mission briefing and to bring up Agent Lee.

‘Send in the Edwards team, please, Andi.’

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**VET’S OFFICE**

**SOMewhere IN PHILADELPHIA**

‘Aww, man, did they have to be brown? So not my colour, man…’

Jack complained as he and Mac got dressed into the courier’s uniforms that had been obtained for them. They, Riley and Bozer were in a fairly large van that was disguised as a courier’s van, but instead, had several monitors inside, as well as a whole host of spy gear.

Mac and Jack were going in, pretending to be making a couple of deliveries, to steal the intel, while Bozer and Riley monitored from the van. Riley had already prepared a USB with a program on it to get them into most systems; Mac would be able to handle it from there, and if he couldn’t, she could get access to any system he plugged the USB into from the van.

This was as straightforward a mission as any of theirs ever was.

They did a quick comm-check, and then Mac and Jack, parcels and clipboards in hand, got out of the van and headed inside.

Bozer and Riley sat in the back of the van, watching the screens in front of them (Riley had hacked into the cameras in the vet’s, and Mac was wearing glasses with a camera in them too). Mac and Jack were currently doing the boring part of their mission; actually making some of the deliveries. At that moment, Jack appeared to be flirting with the receptionist.

Bozer glanced over at Riley, eyes lingering for a moment, before looking back at the screens.

‘You know…back in high school, I was the one who had better game. I was the one who was
popular with girls.’ He looked a bit sheepish. ‘Well, relatively speaking…’

There was silence for a moment, then Riley glanced over at him, a wry smile on her face, but with something unfathomable, soft and hesitant and full of meaning all at once, in her eyes.

‘I can see that.’

Her voice matched her eyes, and Bozer continued, as she looked back at the screens, his eyes on her.

‘Mac was, well, still Mac. Got excited by weird things, did crazy experiments in the gym, won more science fairs than anyone else like ever. You know, Mac stuff.’ His voice was full of affection and a good amount of amusement, before it took a sadder sort of tone, though with no less affection. ‘But he was also shyer and more awkward and had like no confidence. And he was skinny and not all that tall either.’ Bozer gave a little smile that Riley suspected was probably unconscious, as she glanced over at him again. ‘He grew like crazy, physically and mentally, while he was at MIT and in the Army.’ Bozer grinned, shaking his head, as he turned to Riley again. ‘You know, when we finished high school, he could still wear his grandfather’s old leather jacket. By the time he finished boot camp, couldn’t get into it anymore. He’s still got it somewhere, it looks an awful lot like that one he’s always wearing…’ Bozer trailed off, as Riley looked at him with an expression that clearly told him he was getting off topic, though he swore up and down that there was some kind of fondness mixed in with her exasperation. He looked a little sheepish, and she gave a little smile in response, and he continued. ‘Then he was a soldier, and ladies love a man in uniform- ‘ Riley just shot him a look. Bozer shrugged a little helplessly (it was true), and Riley shook her head and rolled her eyes, definitely exasperatedly and fondly‘-and a war hero with Hollywood good looks, and he was Mac-‘ Bozer firmly believed that his best friend was the best man he’d ever met and probably the best man he’d ever meet. ‘-and he still didn’t have much confidence with women.’ Bozer snorted, but there was no true resentment or jealousy in his voice, as it turned sad yet again. ‘Then…then Nikki happened.’

Riley and Bozer both exchanged a very sober, still somewhat worried look, before Bozer continued again, his voice soft and a little unsure.

‘Did…did you mean it?’

Even though she hadn’t wanted to leave him when he’d been stabbed, even with those tiny steps they’d seemed to be making towards more-than-friends these last months since, he really, really wanted, or maybe needed, to hear it from her.

Riley locked eyes with him, hesitating a moment before she spoke.

She was tempted, partly, to respond that because it’s Mac, of course she’d rather kiss Bozer than Mac, but while that was true, she also wanted very much to be honest with Bozer (she could be, really could be, because he never judged and really cared and he really did know her). Riley hadn’t had a relationship of any kind since before prison. Since she’d been a very different person. Who she was now…well, a lot had changed. She didn’t really know what to do, but somehow, she thought, if she wasn’t completely honest now, whatever was growing between her and Bozer, whatever she’d been doing her best to show him she was inching towards, would likely be damaged, and she didn’t want that. She wanted the opposite. The exact opposite.

So she nodded, glancing down for a moment before looking back into Bozer’s eyes.

‘Yeah, I meant it. Not just because he’s Mac and…eww…’ Riley made a face, and Bozer gave a little chuckle in response. ‘But because you’re…because you’re you.’
Bozer grinned at her like she’d given him the world, grinned like a goofy idiot, which should really have made him *look* like a goofy idiot, but he was *cute* and that grin just warmed Riley’s heart. He reached out and squeezed her hand briefly, before turning back to the screens.

As they watched Mac pick the lock in the door of something that looked like a storeroom through his glasses-cam, Bozer fist-pumped internally. Repeatedly.

Mac opened the door to the supposed-storeroom, and carefully made his way inside, followed by his partner.

‘Well, this ain’t a storeroom.’

Jack stated the obvious, because the room was fairly bare, apart from a desk with a computer on it. Rolling his eyes, Mac made his way over to the computer, turned it on, and plugged in Riley’s USB.

The cybersecurity of the chemical weapons manufacturers was clearly no match for Riley’s skills, because the computer’s files immediately started copying onto the USB. (Phoenix techs had made it; it could hold terabytes of information.)

Riley’s voice came through their earpieces.

‘Guys, you’ve been made.’

Mac and Jack exchanged a glance, then looked at the computer, where a helpful box showed that the download was only 32% complete. Jack pulled his gun out of its concealed holster, and Mac pulled out a roll of gauze from his pocket that he’d ‘borrowed’ earlier, and started tying a fairly complicated-looking series of knots in it.

The second that the download completed, Mac seized the USB, and slipped it back into his pocket, shutting down the computer.

‘Mac, Jack, you’ve got incoming, six guys, about thirty seconds…’

Jack shook his head as he readied his gun and got into position.

‘I knew this was going to go wrong!’

Mac looked at him incredulously.

‘You’re the one who said this’d be simple!’

At that moment, the door burst open, and they moved in sync, Mac knocking two of the bad guys down using the desk, while Jack took out another by hitting him on the head with the butt of his gun. Jack kicked the man’s gun away, under some shelves, then punched another man in the jaw, while yet another bad guy fell to the ground, his legs tied together with impossible-looking knots of gauze.

‘Riley, you said there were six?’

‘Yeah, I’ve lost visual on the sixth, he must be in a blind-spot…’

With a glance at each other, Mac and Jack jumped over the desk, entering a long corridor.

Unfortunately, standing at the end of the corridor, in what Mac quickly recognized as a camera blind-spot as he looked up quickly (this entire section of the corridor was a blind-spot, actually), was the
sixth bad guy, holding a very strange-looking gun.

Which Mac also recognized.

‘Oh, great.’

*If I believed in jinxes, I’d say that Jack jinxed us when he said this’d be a simple mission.*

*I don’t believe in jinxes, so I’m not going to say that.*

*But let’s just say, this isn’t shaping up to be great day…*

He started running, Jack hot on his heels, as a very strange projectile flew past them.

Once Mac and Jack had been made, Bozer had gotten into the driver’s seat, ready to make a quick getaway. The bad guys hadn’t seemed to realize yet that Mac and Jack hadn’t been working alone, and nobody had come out to check the vehicle, to his and Riley’s relief. He doubted that anybody would pay attention to them, not with Mac and Jack causing a ruckus inside, but he kept his head down and as out of sight as he could anyway.

Riley was crouched in the back, a baseball bat in hand (she’d quite literally pulled it from a secret compartment in the floor – the Phoenix had let Mac at the van last week, and that was the result), ready to throw open the doors the moment Bozer got eyes on Mac and Jack.

A side door burst open, and out came Mac and Jack, the blonde mostly carrying his partner, who seemed nearly unconscious.

‘Riley!’

Bozer yelled, the worry in his voice very clear.

The hacker opened the van’s back doors, as a very angry-looking man holding a very odd gun burst out of the door. He was covered in what looked like kitty litter, which was almost certainly Mac’s doing.

A moment after she’d opened the doors, she helped Mac haul Jack into the van, and closed the doors as Mac rolled his now completely unconscious partner into the recovery position.

‘Bozer, we’re good!’

Bozer’s answer was to floor the accelerator, driving off quickly as the very angry man ineffectually gave chase.

As Bozer took a series of turns, driving a very convoluted route to lose any tail they might have picked up (it seemed unlikely, but best be careful), Riley looked at Jack with great concern, then turned back to Mac, who handed her the USB he’d had in his pocket. His hands were shaking.

‘Mac-’

The blonde gestured to the dart that was sticking out of Jack’s left calf.

‘I think it’s horse tranquilizer, he should be okay…’ Mac pulled an identical dart out of his own back as he spoke, and stared at the label for a moment, seeming like he was having trouble focusing.

‘Yup, it’s horse tranquilizer.’
And with that, his eyes rolled back into his head and he passed out.

‘Mac!’

Riley rolled him into the recovery position as well, and immediately pulled out her phone and called the Phoenix’s infirmary.

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PHOENIX VAN

PARKING GARAGE

SOMEWHERE IN PHILADELPHIA

‘…Okay, so keep an eye out for any signs of laboured breathing, but they should be alright?’ Bozer, who was talking to Dr Farnham on the phone, as Riley went over the USB of information that Mac and Jack had managed to obtain, sighed with relief and shot Riley a thumbs-up. The hacker gave her own little relieved smile, before she focused on breaking the encryption on a particular cluster of files again. ‘…six hours? *Minimum?* Really?...I guess that makes sense, I mean a horse is a lot heavier than either of them…wait, shouldn’t we expect Jack to wake up first then?...Well, yeah, Mac’s metabolism *is* crazy-fast…’

A moment later, Bozer put Riley’s phone on speaker-phone so she could hear, as Thornton, who’d hurried to the infirmary to join Dr Farnham the moment she’d caught word of what had befallen Mac and Jack, started speaking.

‘Bozer, Riley, the ex-fil team and I will be in Philadelphia in six hours. Stay hidden, keep the intel safe.’ She paused for a moment, and her voice was a tiny bit softer when she spoke again. ‘Look after Mac and Jack, if you or Doc judge they need it, take them to a hospital.’ Her voice turned a tiny bit wry. ‘I’m sure you can come up with a suitable cover story. I’ll see you in-‘

‘Boss, we’ve got a problem.’

Riley had managed to unencrypt the files, and she did not like what she saw. She continued, as Bozer, with a last glance at Mac and Jack (Jack was snoring, and Mac making little whiffling noises; they seemed like they were okay), slipped into the seat beside her.

‘That chemical weapon test we knew they were planning? They’re doing it *today.*’ She glanced at the clock on her laptop. ‘In a little under four hours.’

When Thornton replied, she wasn’t quite as calm as she usually was, and they could hear the rapid click of her shoes on the floor as she walked.

‘Target?’

Riley shook her head.

‘Office block, outskirts of the CBD.’ She swallowed and glanced at Bozer. ‘Boss, the casualties-‘

‘We’re not going to get there in time. You’re without back-up.’ It was, conspicuously, a *warning,* born out of some kind of worry, not *orders.* Bozer and Riley exchanged another glance, and then Thornton’s voice rang out through Riley’s phone one last time. ‘Good luck, be careful.’

Her tone remained rather business-like (she really always was, when they were on the clock, and
sometimes even when they weren’t), but Bozer and Riley understood those four words for what they really were regardless.

‘Yes, boss.’

They hung up, and glanced at one another, then at Riley’s laptop screen, then at the unconscious Mac and Jack, strapped into seats.

Jack gave a particularly loud snore, and Mac’s head lolled onto his partner’s shoulder.

Bozer wordlessly pulled out his phone and snapped a quick picture, before he and Riley looked at one another again.

‘How are we going to pull this off?’

The young woman looked back at him, a worried expression on her face.

‘I have absolutely no idea.’

Bozer cracked his knuckles, and looked back at Riley’s laptop.

‘Well, let’s get an idea.’ He shrugged. ‘Mac makes most stuff up on the fly; he’s gotta have rubbed off on us at least a little bit…’

Riley nodded, and they turned back to the unencrypted files.

They had to find a way to pull this off.

‘…According to this plan, they’re going to dissipate the weapon through the air-conditioning vents…’

Bozer and Riley were conferencing with a couple of analysts from the Phoenix, trying to come up with a plan.

It was, unfortunately, not going particularly well.

With a glance over at the still-very-much-unconscious Mac and Jack, Bozer bit his lip.

‘They got spooked; any chance they might cancel the whole thing?’

He didn’t sound terribly convinced, but there was a hint of hope in his voice.

The two analysts on screen shook their heads (Riley was currently engrossed in attempting to gain access to the group’s communications network – their security on that was a lot better than the computer at the vet’s), as the first analyst, Timothy, responded.

‘If anything, they might move the timeline up.’

The second analyst, Miriam, continued.

‘And they’ll be on alert, which unfortunately makes your job harder.’

Bozer made a face.

‘Okay, so we know they can’t change the delivery method.’ The plans had made that quite clear; it was the nature of the chemical weapon, and it’d take too long to make a new delivery method
anyway (at least, Bozer was pretty sure it’d take too long for anyone except Mac, who wouldn’t be making delivery methods for chemical weapons in the first place). ‘And ditto with the target.’ Similarly, changing a target would stretch the timeline out far too much; requiring scoping out a whole new place, and probably getting people on the inside, too, which both took time. ‘And they gotta be able to do a remote detonation.’ That was obvious, because the chemical weapon manufacturers would not want to be killed by their own creation; besides, their plans outlined a remote detonator.

Their first plan had been for Riley to hack into the weapon’s detonator to disable it, but they were too far away; even with Mac’s Bluetooth-signal-booster, she needed to get within fifty feet.

Behind him, Riley made a noise of triumph, and he automatically reached out to fist-bump her with a smile, despite the situation.

‘I’m in!’

Putting on her headphones, she listened carefully for a few minutes, as Miriam and Timothy watched through their screen. Bozer took the opportunity to check on Mac and Jack, who seemed perfectly fine, just still asleep.

Jack gave a loud snore as if to punctuate that.

Bozer rearranged his best friend’s head again; it’d slipped onto Jack’s shoulder for the fourth time, and Mac was going to wake up with a really sore neck if that kept happening. He looked around, and grabbed his discarded cardigan (the adrenaline was really warming him up), and started tying a knot in it, recalling his advanced first aid training.

Riley took off her headphones again, and turned to Miriam, Timothy and Bozer.

‘They’re proceeding with their plan as we’ve got here. Apparently, they don’t know that we’ve got it –’ Riley’s program was written so that it didn’t leave a trace, and Mac had had time to turn off the computer, and thankfully, there weren’t any cameras inside that not-storeroom, and the blind-spot outside had prevented them from knowing exactly how long Mac and Jack had been inside. ‘– and Mac and Jack did enough damage to a couple of their guys so that they’re a bit short-handed.’ She gestured to her headphones. ‘They’re currently arguing about trying to bring in a few more people in, but seems like they’re going to decide against it.’ She checked her laptop screen, where a transcribing program she’d written ages ago when bored was transcribing their conversations. ‘Yup, they decided against it.’

Bozer reached out and high-fived her (what Riley had just pulled off deserved both a high-five and a fist-bump), as Timothy and Miriam nodded.

‘So if we pull a Cleveland, and you use those ninja-super-spy skills you’ve learned from Thornton and channel Mac and Jack, and if I pull off a reverse Alan-Rickman-in-Die-Hard…’

Timothy and Miriam looked absolutely baffled, but Riley actually understood what Bozer was saying, which might have been slightly concerning, but right now, she didn’t care.

‘Evacuate the building as much as we can without making it seem like an evacuation, then I get in there and disarm and/or steal the weapon, avoiding being seen, while you…cause some chaos and confusion by impersonating a couple of them on this?’ Riley held up one of the spare burners they kept in the van.

Bozer nodded, pointing at her with a finger-gun.
You got it!

Timothy and Miriam shook their heads, and spoke simultaneously.

You’ve started talking like field agents.

You’ve officially become field agents.

The two analysts then turned more serious.

If the evacuation works, at the very least, you’ll get some people out and buy some time for Thornton and back-up to get there; you’ll likely cause them to delay the attack.

But they have to buy that the evacuation isn’t an evacuation.

If they don’t…

They all knew what would happen if they didn’t; chances are, the device would be set off early.

Bozer and Riley exchanged a glance, and despite the situation, Bozer gave a little smirk. (Getting to play the big hero wasn’t exactly like he’d dreamed, but it was pretty awesome…)

We’ve got a couple of cards up our sleeves.

Jack gave another very loud snore, seemingly in agreement, and Mac’s head slipped onto Jack’s shoulder yet again (Bozer had propped his best friend’s head up in some kind of makeshift sling made from his cardigan, but apparently, even unconscious Mac was an escape artist).

Neither Riley nor Bozer could hold in their laughter.

A small real estate firm in an office building on the outskirts of Philadelphia’s CBD suddenly made a very big sale, the biggest sale they’d ever made, and all its employees decided to go out for lunch to celebrate.

Adam Browning had just purchased a brand-new mansion in Philadelphia.

The Phoenix had had to funnel a lot of their money into a series of accounts in Adam Browning’s name to backstop Mac’s cover for their mission in D.C., and they hadn’t had time to move it back yet (it’d been a busy couple of days for all the employees, with each and every field agent out on a mission), so Bozer and Riley ‘borrowed’ it.

Thornton wasn’t going to be happy, but if it got the job done, she did tend to look the other way.

Besides, the real estate market in Philadelphia was really heating up right now.

Adam Browning could hold onto it; maybe the Phoenix would get a good return on their investment.

The employees of the food magazine that rented the second floor of the very same office building all rushed out of their office.

A food truck famous for its amazing Philly cheesesteaks and even more famous for its ludicrous secrecy over its location (they tended to park under bridges and the like, without telling anyone save a very select group of very loyal fans – this was, unexpectedly, very good for business because of all the hype they generated; there were people who devoted all their time to stalking the truck) had been
spotted a couple of blocks away, according to an anonymous commenter called movie-magician-n-waffle-wizard on a very famous food blog.

Riley finished sending off the entirely fudged pest control report to the tenants on the ground floor (an accountancy firm). They’d been concerned about a rat problem, but since pest control had come back with an all-clear, somebody was probably just stealing someone else’s food and not owning up to it.

However, Riley had intercepted the real pest control report (that’d been child’s play for her – literally, since she’d actually done something like this when she was eleven), and altered it a little.

The accountants were now all leaving their office because they’d been informed of a severe cockroach infestation.

Apparently, a lot of them were germaphobes.

She picked up her headphones again, listening in on the conversations between the members of the ring (as far as she and Bozer could tell, there were five men who hadn’t been taken out by Mac and Jack, and two women).

She smiled and shot Bozer, and Miriam and Timothy, back at the Phoenix, and Thornton and Agent Gonzales, the head of one of the Phoenix’s ex-fil teams, on the jet on-route to Philadelphia, a thumbs-up, and slipped off the headphones.

‘They bought it. They’re delaying the test; new planned set-off time is 2:45, they’re expecting everyone to be back from lunch by then.’

That wouldn’t, hopefully, be the case. The cheesesteak food truck was, actually, at that location two blocks away (Bozer apparently had contacts) and the queue was crazy-long, and Riley had fiddled with the credit cards of the real estate agents (this was a matter of national security and the lives of these people were at stake) so that they’d be held up at the restaurant, and the accountants weren’t likely to be coming back, with the cockroach infestation and all.

Having said that, there were still people in the building, people they hadn’t managed to evacuate, couldn’t, really, without alerting the would-be attackers.

Thornton nodded slowly, her face even more serious than usual.

‘That’s still thirty minutes before our ETA, Riley.’

The hacker just nodded, holding the older woman’s eyes for a moment.

‘Yeah.’ She paused for a second, glanced at Bozer. ‘We’re gonna have to use our plan.’

Thornton looked at both Riley and Bozer for a long moment, dark and inscrutable eyes lingering on theirs.

Bozer spoke up, breaking the silence.

‘It’s a pretty good plan, boss, even if I say so myself, and hey, it’s more of plan than we usually have, with Mac around and all…’

Bozer jabbed his thumb at his best friend, who made some kind of snore-snort sound, as if for emphasis.
Thornton quirked an eyebrow in an expression that was probably amusement (Bozer still found it hard to read her), then looked dead serious again, and nodded slowly.

‘This is far from ideal…but we don’t have a choice.’ Her expression softened ever-so-slightly, a little less Thornton and more Patricia. ‘Be careful.’

She seemed to be addressing Riley in particular.

The young woman nodded.

‘I will, boss.’

With one last nod, Thornton cut off the call from her end, and Timothy and Miriam signed off as well.

Riley and Bozer looked at each other for a long moment, before Bozer broke that solemn, slightly fearful, silence.

‘This is so not James Bond.’ He gestured with his head at Jack. ‘It’s way more Die Hard.’

Riley gave a chuckle that was a little forced, but one nonetheless.

‘Hey, I’d take John McClane over 007 any day.’

Bozer grinned right back at her, then picked up her headphones, listening to the various members of the ring as they spoke, mouthing words to himself as he did so.

Riley busied herself patching a burner into the communications system; Bozer’s uncanny knack for mimicry and accents wasn’t going to be of any help if he couldn’t actually get into the system, after all.

She tried very hard not to think about what this plan might force her to do.

She was definitely going to have another chat with Nate after this.

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**OFFICE BUILDING**

**OUTSKIRTS OF PHILADELPHIA’S CBD**

Riley put her laptop into a satchel of sorts, less bulky than her usual backpack, which was sitting in a corner of the van. Mac and Bozer had recently teamed up to make the satchel for her (Mac had done a lot of the design, while Bozer had done the actual sewing – he was much better at it than his roommate; he made entire costumes himself, after all); it had a single strap that went across her torso, which could be easily unbuckled by her hip. The buckle was designed to be easily undone by her, but not someone attacking her, and the satchel was light and just fit her laptop perfectly. It also didn’t limit her movement; she knew she could fight almost unencumbered with it.

According to Mac, it was also relatively bulletproof.

She had no desire to test that, but figured that worse comes to worse, it’d come in handy.

She slipped Mac’s Swiss Army knife and his Bluetooth-signal-booster into her pockets, and put in her earpiece, which connected her to one of the Phoenix’s techs, who’d help her manually disarm the chemical weapon after she’d disabled it electronically. She put on Mac’s black-framed camera-
glasses, so that the tech could see what she was seeing.

Then, after a moment of hesitation, she picked up Jack’s gun, checked the safety, checked it was properly loaded, all the little things Jack had taught her when she’d asked him to teach her how to shoot properly, in case she ever needed to again.

She hadn’t thought it’d be so soon.

She didn’t mind shooting at paper targets in the Phoenix’s firing range.

About a month ago, she’d actually started to enjoy it. It was kind of like a video game come to life, in a way.

And it was therapeutic, in a way. Required a lot of concentration, helped her to focus her busy, buzzing mind.

But this…this was a whole other ball game, which she didn’t think she’d ever more than grudgingly tolerate, because it was a necessity.

She tucked the gun into Jack’s holster, which she’d also borrowed.

She looked up. Bozer was watching her with a look in his eyes that was sadness and worry and softness and a tiny bit of pride all at once.

‘You gonna be okay, Riley?’

He indicated Jack’s gun with a nod of his head, his voice very soft and without a hint of his usual humour or bravado as he spoke.

Riley swallowed, then took a deep breath and focused herself, before nodding.

‘Yeah.’ Another deep breath. ‘I have to do this.’

Bozer nodded slowly, studying her with his eyes. Riley had managed to cope with killing Horn, because she was so, so strong, and, Bozer thought, because she’d had to do it, both for herself and for the rest of the Phoenix’s agents. She’d had to stop him, and while he was completely sure she’d had no intentions of killing him, she’d had to hurt him, had to fight for her life, and in that moment… Despite what Matty had initially thought, Riley had a strong sense of right and wrong (she’d hacked the Pentagon to see if she could, but hadn’t touched a thing, after all – sure, her sense of morality wasn’t quite as angelic as Mac’s, but, Bozer thought, there wasn’t anything wrong with that; the world needed its Captain Americas, but it also needed its Black Widows, and Riley was hardly morally grey, at least not anymore), she had a line in the sand, one that she’d cross, sometimes, but only if she had to, like to protect her mom…or to save almost a hundred office workers. (Most of them had returned from lunch; their non-evacuation-evacuation had bought them time, but little else.)

Bozer just hoped beyond hope that she wouldn’t have to cross that line again. For her sake.

He reached out and clasped her hand for a moment.

‘Come back safe.’

Riley squeezed his hand back for a moment, wrapping her fingers around his, then let go and held up her pinky. He coiled his own around hers obligingly.

‘Pinky promise.’
It was a silly, almost childish thing, and a promise that he wasn’t sure she could promise to keep (though, it wasn’t as if he could really ask her to come back safe either), but she was very serious when she spoke.

He wasn’t really sure what she was asking for (An anchor? A reminder? Just a little something to help her nerves? A good luck charm? All of the above?), but whatever it was, he was happy to provide it, so he smiled back at her, the widest he could manage, and pointed at her.

‘You know what the price for breaking one of those is…’

Riley smiled back at him, a very small, very wan little smile, but one nonetheless, and he was taking that as a win, and made her way to the door of the van, a serious expression, a business-like expression that reminded Bozer a little bit of their boss, slipping over her face.

He picked up the burner phone that Riley had patched into the bad guys’ comms for him, and cracked his knuckles, smirking at the still-asleep Mac and Jack in a way that showed bravado he wasn’t exactly feeling on the inside.

‘It’s show-time.’

Jack gave yet another particularly loud snore. Mac just shifted in his sleep, his head slipping out of Bozer’s makeshift sling-cardigan-head-rest yet again.

Bozer just shook his head. His best friend could put up with a sore neck; it was kind of like Sisyphus rolling the boulder up the mountain at this point.

He turned on the phone, and dialled the particular number Riley had instructed him to use.

After a moment of listening in, he started talking, in a voice very much unlike his own.

Riley smiled a little, almost grimly, as she heard some vague shouting, chaos, in the distance, doubtlessly courtesy of Bozer.

Jack’s gun in hand, she continued making her way towards the opening in the main air conditioning duct of the building in the basement. Thanks to the detailed maps she’d managed to obtain, and some plotting with Timothy, Miriam, Thornton and Agent Gonzales, and Bozer’s misdirection, she’d managed to make her way into the building and almost to her destination without being seen.

She ducked into the janitorial storage closet that they’d pin-pointed as being close enough to the vent for her to be able to hack into the weapon’s detonator with the aid of Mac’s Bluetooth-signal-booster, and after barring the door with a couple of mops and a broom, she pulled out her laptop, plugged in the little device, and started doing what she did best.

A couple of minutes later, the only way that the weapon could be detonated was manually. Riley glanced at the clock on her laptop as she put it away. 2:42 pm. Thornton and back-up would be here in thirty-three minutes.

She knew that the ring would attempt to carry out their test; they’d come too far to turn back now, and they knew that they were on to them.

Someone would come to set it off, manually.

And she was the only one standing between them and the deaths of far too many innocent people.
Riley took a deep breath, then slung her satchel back on her back, and secured Jack’s gun by her side, then tapped her earpiece in a pre-arranged signal.

Ritchie, the Phoenix’s agoraphobic resident expert on chemical and biological warfare (the attack on the Phoenix had really done a number on him; he’d only recently come back to work), started talking in her ear.

‘I’m here, Miss Davis!’ He fell silent, and she tapped her comm again, expectantly. ‘Oh, and the image is good, too!’

She tapped again, thank you this time, one of the few phrases she knew in Morse, not wanting to risk speaking, as she approached the vent, which had a rather scary-looking device attached to it.

Though, it was smaller than she’d thought it’d be.

Riley pulled out Mac’s Swiss Army knife, as Ritchie fed instructions to her.

Her breath hitched as she cut the first wire.

Riley finally finished disabling the chemical weapon (this was complicated, she had no idea how Mac could do stuff like this in minutes- well, she did, because he was Mac and this was what he’d been trained to do to boot, but as an expression, it stood), and let out the breath she’d been holding.

At just that moment, before she had time to even think about securing the device, she heard footsteps in the distance, getting closer, and, silently thanking Thornton and Jack and Mac for their training, pulled out Jack’s gun, stepping in front of the vent.

A moment later, a tall man, about Jack’s age and strongly built, holding a gun like he knew how to use it, stepped into the room.

‘Put that down, girlie.’

Riley raised her chin a little (how dare he call her that!), fixing her gun on him, just like he held his on her.

They stood there, still and eyeing each other off, guns pointing at each other’s heads, for what felt like an eternity. A true Mexican stand-off.

The tension built.

Sweat ran down the back of Riley’s neck, but she refused to let that man see any weakness. Her hands were steady and didn’t shake. Her training and her will held strong.

The tension kept building.

Footsteps rang out again.

Many sets of footsteps.

The man tensed ever-so-slightly, priming himself for movement, and Riley steeled herself.

She’d do what she had to do.

She, too, readied herself, keeping her muscles and her breathing as relaxed and loose as she could, just as Jack and Thornton had taught her, preparing to switch her aim at the very last moment.
possible, get the man through the shoulder.

Not a kill-shot.

She’d made it very clear that she wanted to be taught how to pull off shooting to injure and neutralize, not to kill, without putting herself or others in unnecessary danger.

Jack and Thornton pulled it off all the time; she knew it was more than possible.

More footsteps drew closer, and Riley tightened her hand on the trigger as the bad guy did too.

A shot rang out. Then another.

A bullet went past Riley, lodged itself in the far wall behind her, having missed the vent entirely, as the man dropped to the floor, clutching his left knee in pain.

Riley released the trigger, taking a deep breath as she did so (she hadn’t held her breath, really hadn’t – all those hours on the firing range, all that training, had paid off), as Thornton walked up to her. Her boss let her right hand, still holding her gun, drop to her side as she did so, stepping past the man on the floor, glancing at him briefly as if he were a wad of gum on her shoe, and kicking away his gun as she did. Two Kevlar-vest, black-uniform-wearing Phoenix agents stepped forward, and one cuffed the man, while the other field-dressed his knee.

‘You’re early.’

Riley didn’t have to look at her watch to know that it wasn’t 3:15 yet. In fact, she noted, as she glanced down briefly, it was 3:06 precisely.

Thornton gave a half-shrug.

‘The Phoenix can afford to pay a few speeding fines.’ She quirked an eyebrow wryly. ‘Particularly once Adam Browning sells his new Philadelphia investment property in, say, six months.’

Riley gave a little half-smirk.

‘I knew it was a good buy.’ Her expression turned more serious, as she watched Agent Gonzales carefully secure the chemical weapon, and his men haul away the man who’d held her at gunpoint. Her voice softened a little. ‘Thanks.’

She put as much as she could into that one simple word, hoping that the older woman would get the message.

Thornton did, loud and clear, because she smiled at Riley, genuine and a little sad and almost warm.

‘It’s my job to have your back.’

The moment Riley walked out of the building, she saw Bozer standing by the van, and, somehow (neither of them quite knew, and honestly, it didn’t matter who’d initiated it or how it came to be, just that it happened), found herself embracing him, being held back just as tightly.

Riley just hugged him for a moment, basking in the physical and emotional warmth of the embrace, before she whispered in Bozer’s ear, a teasing, joking note in her voice. The joking tone that promised normalcy and safety for them, even in the darkest of times.

‘Don’t have to pay that forfeit.’
She felt his chuckle before she heard it.

‘Hey, that’s why it’s there. Incentive, so you don’t break a pinky promise!’

With an answering smile, she gently let go of him, and they stood there, staring at each other for a moment, as Thornton came up to them, and noises started emanating from the van.

They all smiled, even Thornton, as Mac and Jack slowly came to. A weight that none of them had even seen her carrying seemed to lift from Thornton’s shoulders as the partners woke, not looking any worse for the wear for their extended and unwanted sleep. She always walked so straight and tall and strong, despite the burden that they knew knew, for sure, she’d been carrying on her narrow shoulders, alone, for so long – the burden of sending her agents, those she felt responsible for, and even her friends, into danger, because that was her job.

Both Mac and Jack blinked a few times and Jack rubbed his eyes, while Mac ran a hand through his hair.

‘What’d we miss?’

Riley’s response to Jack was just to gesture behind her. Mac and Jack looked out of the van, past Bozer and Riley and Thornton, at Gonzales and his team packing the chemical weapons gang into a couple of vans, cuffs around their wrists.

Mac smiled and Jack made a face.

‘Aww, come on, did we miss the whole thing?’

Riley rolled her eyes with no small amount of affectionate exasperation, putting a hand on her hip, as Thornton gave a small shake of her head, and Bozer smirked.

‘Yeah, you did. While you two were playing Sleeping Beauty, me and Riley saved the day!’ Riley jogged him with her elbow, and Thornton quirked an eyebrow at him. Bozer looked a little sheepish.

‘Well, we had some help.’

Mac grinned proudly at his best friend, and at Riley.

‘Good work, guys.’

Jack beamed too, and gestured at Mac with a jab of his thumb.

‘What he said.’ Jack’s words didn’t really match his smile or his eyes; there was a lot of pride in them, clear as day; it was very Jack. ‘Though, don’t you be getting any ideas about taking me and Mac’s jobs, okay?’

Riley snorted and Bozer chuckled, reaching out to fist-bump Mac. Thornton shook her head again, a little more than a hint of amusement on her face. Bozer pointed at Jack as he spoke.

‘Not gonna be a problem, man.’

‘You don’t try taking my job, I won’t gun for yours.’

Jack smirked at the hacker.

‘That a challenge, Riles? ‘Cause that sounded like a challenge. I’ve been working on my hacking skills, I hacked that computer that time Mac went to prison-’
‘Jack, that was not hacking.’

‘-Not hacking, Jack. How many times do I have to-‘

Mac and Riley spoke simultaneously, in near-identical exasperated and long-suffering tones.

It was Thornton who quelled Jack’s resultant protests with a look and a few words.

‘Jack, as Director of Operations of the Phoenix, I’m declaring that you are never getting Riley’s job.’

MACGYVER’S RESIDENCE

LA

Mac stepped out of his room, having collected what he’d gone inside for. It was currently resting in his pocket, solid and a little cold from being on his desk, but quickly warming up from his body heat.

Jack was leaning on the kitchen counter, chatting to Eli on the phone. Cody Agnew’s trial was progressing, and he was looking at a long jail sentence. His partner gave him a little wave and a smile as he went past, making his way out onto the deck.

Bozer and Riley were by the grill, cooking burgers which smelled deliciously divine, as usual.

Mac made his way over to the edge of the deck, where Patricia was leaning on the railing, looking out into the distance, a bottle of ginger beer in her hand.

She turned to face him as he approached, and Mac reached into his pocket, and pulled out the newly-made copy of his house key, and held it out to the woman with a smile.

‘You don’t have to knock.’

Patricia stared at the key for a moment, then reached out to take it, a smile on her face, genuine and as warm as she could be.

‘Thank you, Mac.’

He smiled widely at her, reached down and grabbed a ginger beer from his self-opening Esky (on the advice of Dr Farnham, he and Jack were refraining from alcohol for the next forty-eight hours – he honestly felt fine, despite the horse tranquilizer, apart from a very sore neck), opened it, and tapped it against hers in a cheers gesture, then leaned out on the railing and stared out into the distance too.

I know sometimes, it looks like Jack and I save the world with just his gun and my Swiss Army knife and whatever other odds and ends I pick up along the way.

But of course, that’s not close to the truth at all.

We don’t do it alone, not nearly.

It’s not the two of us saving the world, it’s a whole team.

A pretty big team.

Bozer and Riley.
Thornton.

People like Agent Gonzales, and Miriam and Timothy and Ritchie, even if he never leaves the labs. And Matty and Sarah and Charlie and Lil, protecting us while we try to protect everyone else.

Real life’s not like the movies.

It’s not like James Bond or Die Hard, not one big hero saving the day.

It’s not one big hero, or two, or even three.

It’s always a team effort.

And like any good team, we’ve always got each other’s backs.

Chapter End Notes

Creative liberties taken with what happens to Mac and Jack when they are shot by horse tranquilizer darts. Also, I know Mac describes Jack stealing the Phoenix jet in Compass, but considering that he also said they have 42 agents undercover around the world (or something like that) in Ruler, I don’t find it very feasible that they only have one – so please pretend that they have multiple jets/have purchased more jets since Compass (possibly because of the chaos caused by Jack stealing the jet)?

So, what’d you think? I love Mac and Jack, of course I do, but I thought it was fun and also important to explore Bozer and Riley (and Thornton) a little bit more – and surely, at some point, this has got to happen! (I also feel like Lucas Till and George Eads would have great fun filming an episode like this, and the end result would probably have Mac and Jack still somehow stealing the show while asleep/unconscious…)

Next episode: 2.06, Maple Syrup. Penny Parker has a new boyfriend. Mac and Bozer take an instant dislike to the man. Everyone else thinks they’re crazy…at least at first.

The only hint I’m giving is that it is very loosely inspired by an episode of Phineas and Ferb.

That episode is complete and will post next Saturday morning, my time (that’s the same time as this episode went up).
Chapter Summary

Penny Parker has a new boyfriend. Mac and Bozer take an instant dislike to the man. Everyone else thinks they’re crazy…at least at first.

Chapter Notes

Exams are over at last! I now have more time to write, and to try and finish this entire story – which is certainly going to be the longest thing I’ve ever written – in my one-month winter break.

Now that we’ve reached six episodes (well, once you get to the end of this episode/chapter), which I think is the usual number of episodes made before a show is committed to for a full season (don’t worry, there’s no chance of this being cancelled!), I’d love to hear what your favourite episode so far has been. (I think my personal favourite is either 2.01, The Falling, or 2.04, Jack.) Drop me a line?

See the end of the chapter for more notes

MACGYVER'S RESIDENCE

LA

The doorbell rang, and exchanging a smile, Mac and Bozer hurried over to the door and opened it, Bozer handing his barbecue tongs over to Riley as he did so, with muttered instructions to not let Jack touch them.

Penny was coming over for a barbecue with the two of them and Jack and Riley, and they hadn’t seen her for ages, with everyone’s (mostly theirs) lives being so busy of late.

Mac opened the door, to reveal Penny…and a man of about thirty, good-looking with wavy brown hair and blue eyes, whom neither of them had ever seen before.

Penny beamed at them. Neither of them had seen her so happy for a long, long time.

‘Mac, Bozer, this is my boyfriend, Aaron.’ She gestured to her two old friends. ‘Aaron, this is Mac and Bozer.’

The roommates glanced at each other, then at Penny, and blinked twice. They hadn’t heard anything about a boyfriend, which probably spoke to how long it’d been since they’d caught up. Aaron, seemingly unfazed, held out a hand to Mac, who took it and shook it on autopilot.

‘Mac, it’s lovely to meet you at last. Penny’s told me all about you.’

He had a distinct Canadian accent.
'It’s…uh…nice to meet you too.’

Aaron smiled at him, then moved away slightly to greet Bozer.

Mac just watched for a moment, as Bozer shook Aaron’s hand, while Penny positively vibrated with happiness.

Something just wasn’t sitting well with him.

‘I don’t like him.’

As they cleaned up, after Penny and Aaron had left, Bozer made that simple declaration, and Jack, Riley and Mac turned to him.

Mac nodded.

‘He’s hiding something.’

Jack and Riley stared incredulously at the two of them. As soon as Aaron had shown up, Riley had run a quick background check on him (they were all a little paranoid, which even Nate agreed was very normal after what they’d been through, and fine as long as it didn’t become unhealthily obsessive) and he’d come back clean as a whistle. Besides, Jack’s instincts were finely honed from years in the spy business; he had a good sense for bad guys, and Riley was pretty good at detecting assholes. Aaron didn’t set either of them off at all. They knew that Mac and Bozer were always going to be a bit set against any boyfriend of Penny’s; they were very protective of her. They were both very sure that their dislike just stemmed from that, and nothing on Aaron’s part.

He was a nice guy, a good guy.

Aaron Harper was a thirty-one year old accountant originally hailing from Ottawa, Canada, where he’d worked at a small accountancy firm called Beaver Accountancy until four months ago. Then, he’d gotten a new job in a bigger firm in LA, and moved. That was what he’d told them, and that story had checked out.

He was also polite, charming, worldly and grounded, yet still light-hearted. A good match for free-spirited, cheerful and sometimes-naïve Penny.

Jack shook his head.

‘Look, I get it, you’re protective of your sort-of-mutual-ex-girlfriend-still-friend, and we’re all a little paranoid because, well, you know…but I gotta say, you’re off the eight ball this time, guys.’

Penny and Mac had dated for precisely twenty-six days, while Bozer and Penny had been each other’s Prom dates, testing the waters to see if their friendship could be anything more. Clearly, they’d all decided that their feelings for each other were nothing but platonic, but they still loved each other dearly, even if they weren’t as close as they’d been back in high school anymore, with their busier, diverging adult lives and Mac and Bozer’s secret lying between them.

Riley was a lot more succinct.

‘You’re crazy.’

Mac and Bozer just exchanged a glance.

*Jack and Riley mean well.*
They don’t want us obsessing or worrying.

And they’re family, and family’s honest with each other.

But…I’m convinced he’s hiding something, and I’m about 78% sure that this isn’t paranoia. I don’t have any proof, but…

Well…I don’t have any proof yet.

WAREHOUSE

SOMEBEWHERE IN LA

Mac and Bozer sat in Mac’s Jeep (Bozer’s car was far too distinctive for something like this), carefully observing the warehouse from across the road.

They’d convinced Riley to run a full background check on Aaron Harper (that had required Bozer’s extra-special stuffed French toast, and a brand-new set of custom controllers for Riley’s gaming system), which had turned up nothing.

Of course, that wasn’t the end of the matter.

Mac’s gut still told him that Aaron was hiding something. Bozer still thought the guy had given off seriously dodgy vibes.

Hence, they’d resorted to good old-fashioned spying techniques.

Namely, following Aaron around on their Saturday off.

He’d done some very ordinary and admittedly not suspicious things for a while; going grocery shopping, stopping by a pharmacy, going to the gym.

But then, he’d driven off to this warehouse, driving a very circuitous route, as if to lose a tail. They’d actually lost him for a while, but thanks to some educated guesses and Mac’s bizarre ability to navigate through LA and avoid traffic (he claimed it wasn’t bizarre and was based entirely around math, but it all went over Bozer’s head), they’d found him (well, more precisely, his car, but they assumed he was inside; it was the only building on the entire block) again at the warehouse.

It was possible that he’d just gotten lost, being fairly new to LA, that might at least explain the circuitous route…but to Mac and Bozer’s eyes, this looked more than fishy. What in the world was an accountant doing at a warehouse?

Their vantage point honestly wasn’t that good, and the warehouse windows were blacked out (that wasn’t suspicious at all…), and the roar of the freeway right beside them severely limited their ability to hear anything.

Bozer had been all for getting out of the car and going in, using their super-spy skills, but Mac had talked him down.

His gut was telling him that trouble was afoot, and while he supposed he had a tendency to dive headfirst into things without a care for his own safety, he did have some sense of self-preservation, and he definitely had the brains and experience to know that sometimes, you had to sit back and wait for something to shake out.
They’d been sitting there for almost half an hour, the area suspiciously quiet (too quiet), when Mac thought he heard a few gunshots over the roar of the freeway. At least, they might have been gunshots, with makeshift silencers employed to muffle the sound. It was very hard to tell; there were at least nine other similar, but completely innocuous, sounds he could think of. Telling Bozer to be quiet, they listened very carefully for another ten minutes, before they heard something that Mac was very, very sure was a gunshot.

He was about to get out of the Jeep, ordering Bozer to stay put, when his phone rang.

With a sense of trepidation, Mac pulled out his phone, noting the mushroom cloud on the caller ID. He swallowed, showed it to Bozer, who quailed a little, and answered on speaker.

‘Boss-‘

‘MacGyver, Wilt, get back to the Phoenix now. If you aren’t here in twenty minutes, there will be consequences. Severe consequences.’

Thornton’s tone brooked absolutely no argument, as she abruptly hung up.

With a last glance at the warehouse (it’d take twenty minutes to get back to the Phoenix from here, even with all his tricks; they had to leave now, which Mac was quite sure Thornton had known very, very well), Mac and Bozer exchanged a look as Mac started up the engine.

‘We’re gonna get fired, aren’t we, bro?’

Not looking forward to his boss’s wrath at all, Mac attempted to assure his best friend.

‘We’re not going to get fired, Bozer.’

*Well, I’m 89% sure we aren’t going to get fired…*

*Look, she’s really, really mad.*

*She only ever calls us MacGyver and Wilt when she’s really, really mad…*

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**PHOENIX FOUNDATION HEADQUARTERS**

**SOMewhere IN LA**

When Mac and Bozer entered the war room, Thornton was nowhere to be seen…but the screen showed a very, very angry-looking Matty.

Bozer gulped and started trying to back out of the door.

‘This is like zombie apocalypse-level bad…’

He literally walked into an obstacle in his attempt to escape.

Eyes wide, Bozer turned around, to find Thornton standing behind him, a truly terrifying look on her face.

He gulped again, and slowly made his way into the centre of the room, Mac joining him a moment later, not even daring to pick up a paperclip.
Matty put her hands on her hips.

‘You know, for Baby Einstein and his BFF since you were in short pants, you two are really stupid.’ She paused for a moment to let that sink in, before continuing. ‘Lil notices that you two are getting far too close for comfort to members of a terrorist organization that we’re investigating for links to The Organization. Then, I get a phone call from a guy really high up in Canadian covert ops who owes me one, telling me that if it’s US agents chasing his guy, get them to back off, before his agent has to take them down, because their surveillance got him made, forcing him to take down some bad guys instead of maintaining his cover, and nearly got him killed!’

Matty watched as Mac’s eyes widened with realization, while Bozer still looked confused. She shot Mac a look, and the blonde explained to his best friend with a sigh, picking up a paperclip as he did so.

‘Aaron Harper, if that’s his real name, is an agent of the Canadian government. He’s here presumably investigating the same terrorist organization that Matty’s team is, and our surveillance got him made, and almost got him killed.’ There was genuine guilt in Mac’s voice at that. He looked down briefly at the maple leaf that the paperclip in his hands had taken the shape of, then back up again. ‘Does this mean that Beaver Accountancy is Canada’s equivalent of the Phoenix?’

‘Ding, ding, ding, we have a winner!’ Matty’s tone was very, very snarky. ‘Yes, and its Director owed me for hauling his ass out of the fire in Paraguay.’ She made a face and spoke mostly to herself. ‘I should’ve known he wasn’t actually retiring.’

Thornton, whom they’d almost forgotten was still standing behind them, spoke up, causing Bozer to jump slightly.

‘And now that we’re aware of each other’s existence and Agent Harper’s mission, and because of the suspected Organization links and the fact that they’re suspected to be targeting Buffalo, we’re teaming up with our northern counterparts to take down the terrorists.’ She levelled a sharp stare at Mac and Bozer. ‘You, Jack and Riley will be working closely with Agent Harper. I expect there will be no issues.’

Well, it is his real name.

At least he’s telling the truth about that.

Mac glanced at Bozer briefly, then back up at his boss.

‘There won’t be any issues, boss. I promise.’

Bozer nodded.

‘We’ll be on our best behaviour. In the name of international cooperation and all.’

Thornton regarded them for a moment, then nodded, satisfied.

She pulled out her phone.

‘Andi? Send them in, please.’

Jack and Riley walked into the room, and Jack immediately made a beeline over to Mac and Bozer.

‘Well, turns out you guys weren’t completely nuts.’ He pointed at his partner. ‘Still, told you he
wasn’t a bad guy.’

Neither Mac nor Bozer made much of a response to Jack, too busy watching Aaron out of the corner of their eyes as he walked into the room and briefly spoke to Thornton.

Jack sighed inwardly, and glanced over at Riley, hoping for some help, but the hacker was very lost in thought herself, her arms crossed across her chest. She was trying to work out how Beaver Accountancy had backstopped Aaron’s cover so well that her very thorough background check hadn’t picked up anything suspicious at all, and as a result, she was a bit moody. Riley was driven, so very driven, and always, always intent on being the best and constantly improving her skills. She kind of hated being bested, even by the good guys.

Jack sighed internally again.

This was not going to be a fun mission, with the young ones all moody. Sometimes, he swore they were like teenagers.

After the mission briefing, Mac and Bozer, unprompted, walked up to Aaron.

‘Agent Harper? I’m sorry for getting you made and nearly killed.’

It was a very genuine apology; it was his and Bozer’s fault, after all, and of course he didn’t want anybody to get killed.

Bozer nodded, looking the Canadian up and down for signs of injury. There didn’t seem to be any.

‘Yeah, we’re really sorry about that, man.’

The not-accountant just smiled at the two of them, a genuine and rather warm smile on his face.

‘It’s not your fault, you didn’t know who I really was or about my mission. I got out alright, now we’re going to take down the organization, all water under the bridge.’

With a glance at each other, Mac and Bozer just gave him a nod of acknowledgement, not returning his smile.

I know, I know…

Look, apologizing was the right thing to do, something I had to do.

And I promised Thornton there wouldn’t be any issues working with Harper, and there won’t be.

But I never promised to become friends with him.

Thornton knows that’s not necessary to get the job done perfectly fine, and just because I’m generally a nice guy doesn’t mean I have to become friends with everyone I meet who isn’t a bad guy.

JET

ON-ROUTE TO BUFFALO

Jack sighed again as he looked around the jet.
Riley was sitting by one of the windows, focused on her laptop, headphones over her ears, still intent on unravelling precisely how the Canadians foiled her background check and making sure it never happened again.

Mac was making various paperclip shapes. Jack watched as a paperclip beaver was thrown down onto the empty seat beside him.

Bozer was pretending to still be reading their intel briefing. He was relatively new to the spy game and all, though, Jack privately thought, Bozer had made it through several trials-by-fire and couldn’t be considered a novice anymore, and he read slower than Mac, but Jack knew that there was no way he could still be reading it.

Meanwhile, Aaron just stared into the distance.

Jack sighed yet again.

‘You know, we all lied to each other and all, but it’s all part of the job, and we all know that.’ He paused for a moment. ‘So let’s all try to be grown-ups about this and let it go, okay?’

He wasn’t sure how closely Riley was listening, but she gave him a thumbs-up anyway, not looking up from her laptop.

Jack shook his head a little, but he wasn’t really all that worried about Riley. She’d let it go once she worked out how the Beaver techs had foiled her background check; at this point, it was less about being bested and more an insatiable curiosity, an insatiable need to learn and know. Besides, Riley, as much as she hated being bested, somewhat contrarily, also loved to put her skills to the test, and enjoyed the challenge presented by a worthy opponent.

Aaron was suddenly paying rapt attention and looking very, very hopeful. Jack smiled a little at that; he honestly liked the man.

Mac sighed and started unwinding another paperclip with a bit more force than necessary.

‘It’s not that, Jack.’

*Lying to us about his true identity, of course I can forgive that.*

*I do that regularly, because it’s necessary.*

*I lied to Bozer for far longer than I really should have, because it was part of my job. Because I had no choice.*

*I know I sound like a hypocrite, because I’m still lying to Penny, but I genuinely believe I’m not.*

*Hear me out.*

*I was friends with Bozer and Penny long before I had any inkling about the DXS even existing. They were part of my life before. Long before.*

*Harper was a secret agent long before he met Penny; a secret agent who needed to establish a believable, rock-solid cover in LA.*

*A girlfriend’s a good way to help with that.*

*I don’t have a problem with him lying to us; I have a problem with him using Penny and lying to her about so much.*
At best, it’s a relationship built on a lie – who he is, what he’s like. She’s in love with a cover.

At worst – she’s part of the cover.

Trust me, I know how it feels to be used by somebody you love. I know how it feels to have them lie to you and betray you.

I know that heartbreak. I know that pain.

Intimately.

And I’d wish it on nobody.

Least of all my beloved friend.

Looking up at Aaron, who was watching him with something that looked like sadness and possibly regret in his eyes, Mac forced down the twinge of guilt he felt, and returned to his paperclips, as Bozer looked up briefly from pretending to read and pointed at Mac.

‘Ditto.’

Mac’s best friend returned to pretending to read, and Mac slid his gaze away from Jack’s searching one, both of them clearly signalling that as far as they were concerned, this conversation was over.

Jack sighed internally.

It was just as he’d suspected.

Mac and Bozer were convinced that Aaron’s relationship with Penny was built on lies, just like his cover, or maybe was part of his cover.

He couldn’t exactly blame them for that, with the whole Nikki Incident and all, and how much the two young men loved the wannabe actress, and how protective they were of her, a little naïve to the real, normal world and completely ignorant of the world of spies and lies they lived in, but from what he’d seen at that barbecue, Aaron’s feelings for Penny were genuine and honest and real, as honest as he could be.

Aaron and Penny’s relationship, Jack was completely convinced, was far more him and Diane than Mac and Nikki.

Diane had known everything about him, seen him for who he really was, known his deepest fears and strongest hopes and biggest dreams, all the things that really mattered. She’d known him completely, known absolutely everything…apart from the things related to the fact that he didn’t sell bathroom tiles for a living.

With a sad smile, Aaron stood and clasped Jack’s shoulder as he walked towards the bathroom. He leaned closer and spoke quietly, not intending for Mac or Bozer to hear his words.

‘Thanks for trying, Jack, I really appreciate it.’ The smile grew a little sadder. ‘I don’t blame MacGyver or Bozer, though. Can’t say I wouldn’t be reacting the same in their position.’

Aaron disappeared into the bathroom, and Jack shot his partner a look; he knew Mac had heard Aaron’s words, his hearing was very sharp. (Bozer was stubbornly refusing to look at anyone, and Jack didn’t know if he’d heard any of it.) Mac looked particularly young and regretful for a moment, before his eyes hardened again.
Jack sighed internally. He’d love to have a picture of Nikki to throw darts at right now.

Just as Aaron walked out of the bathroom, Riley made a loud noise of triumph, pulled off her headphones, and grinned at the Canadian.

‘You’ve got some seriously talented people at Beaver Accountancy.’

Aaron smiled back at her.

‘We do.’ He paused for a moment. ‘I’m sorry about the whole background check thing.’

Riley waved a hand, in a gesture of it doesn’t matter.

‘Nah, it’s okay.’ She gestured to her laptop. ‘It was kinda fun to work out, actually, and I’ve picked up a few tricks. My background check program’s better than ever.’

Internally, Jack gave a wan smile.

Well, maybe this would reduce the tension slightly.

A man could hope.

HOTEL SUITE

BUFFALO

After they’d gotten set up, putting together the Phoenix-issued security system, as well as a Mac-issued security system, and getting the series of laptops that Riley had brought with her up and running, Jack pulled up a chair and sat on it backwards, as Riley sat on the desk, Bozer in an armchair and Mac leaned against the doorframe. Aaron stood by the room’s mini-fridge.

‘So, what’s the plan?’

Jack talked around a mouthful of the Buffalo wings he’d insisted they pick up on their way to the hotel. Riley made a face of disgust, while Bozer stole a wing.

Aaron pulled out his own laptop and plugged in a USB. After a moment, he held up the screen for them all to see.

The screen showed some kind of accounting spreadsheet. Aaron had taken down all of the terrorist organization’s members in LA at that warehouse (there’d only been a couple in LA; only the money part of the organization had been based there), and this was what he’d managed to painstakingly gain after four months of hard work. A money trail.

‘We follow the money.’

Bozer gave a grin that was almost a smirk, wiping his hands on a napkin that he’d also pilfered from Jack, who was glaring at him.

‘Pass that here; I used to be a file clerk at my aunt’s accounting firm. I picked up some stuff.’

Riley gave a smile, indicating Bozer with a jab of her thumb.
'He’s really good at accounting.'

Aaron smiled wider, as Bozer grinned at Riley’s compliment.

‘I’m actually a CPA; that’s not just my cover.’ Bozer looked rather put-out (Accounting was usually his moment to shine! He so did not want Penny’s Canadian fake boyfriend stealing his thunder!), as Aaron offered his laptop to him. ‘It’d be great to have help, though. Two heads are better than one, particularly with the amount of files we’ve got to go through.’ His expression turned more wry. ‘And it’d be nice to work with somebody who appreciates the power of accounting; nobody ever really does.’

Bozer smiled back at him, a little hesitantly, but recognizing the olive branch that Aaron was offering, and remembering his and Mac’s promise to Thornton.

The personal stuff between the three of them was not to get in the way of the mission, and Bozer was a big enough man to put that aside.

He got up and took the laptop, having a look as he and Aaron made their way over to the desk, which Riley obligingly vacated. The two of them started poring over the spreadsheet.

Mac watched with an internal sigh, another paperclip starting to change shape in his hands as he did.

You know, if not for what he did to Penny, I’d really like this guy.
Apart from that, he’s a really nice guy.

He glanced down at the paperclip olive branch that he’d made, sighed again, and shoved it into his pocket, none too gently.

OFFICES OF A PRIVATE SECURITY COMPANY

(A DODGY ONE)

(A VERY DODGY ONE)

BUFFALO

The money trail led to a very dodgy private security company, which naturally led to Mac, Jack and Aaron (Bozer and Riley were back at the hotel, coordinating and digging even deeper into the money trail) fighting ten very burly guys with seriously good skills and guns that they knew how to use.

Fortunately, these guys knew enough about guns to know that shooting in close quarters with so many people around, locked in combat, was a very bad idea.

Occasionally, something has to go our way.

Entropy and the 2nd Law of Thermodynamics and all.

Mac shoved a wheelie chair into the path of the guy who was advancing on him to buy himself some time, seizing a paperweight off the desk behind him and tossing it at the back of the head of the guy that Jack was grappling with, giving his partner the chance to clock the guy in the jaw.
Then, he seized the tie of the man who’d disentangled himself from the wheelie chair, and pulled and twisted in a very particular way. The man dropped to the floor like a sack of potatoes.

Sensing somebody behind him, Mac stepped on his foot, hard, and picked up a bottle of Gatorade from a nearby desk and flung it into his would-be-attacker’s face. Jack came up from behind and hit the guy with the butt of his gun, neatly dodging a punch thrown by another bad guy as he did so. The Gatorade-stained bad guy crumpled, and Jack returned to fighting the bad guy who’d just tried to punch him. Mac quickly grabbed a yo-yo from the desk to his left (why someone had a yo-yo on their desk, he didn’t know, and right now, he didn’t really care – he’d think about that later), and made himself a makeshift bola, taking down another dodgy security guard who fell to the floor with a loud and rather satisfying ooph. Beside him, the man that Jack had been exchanging punches with dropped as well, as Aaron knocked out the lights of a third bad guy, then used the momentum of another to throw the man into the wall.

Mac thwacked another man hard in the kidneys with a stack of files, and the man roared and tried to lunge at him, which he neatly dodged, only to find himself somewhat cornered between a desk and the (unusually large) security guard. He felt someone else approach him, and started concocting a plan in his head, occupied as he was with defending himself against the much bigger man, who probably had close to a hundred pounds and almost a foot on him. Jack was very busy, wrestling with another bad guy who’d drawn his gun and currently had it aimed at Mac…

*If I just…*

However, before he had time to enact his rather desperate sliver of a plan, he heard a voice behind him.

‘MacGyver!’

There was a loud thudding noise behind him, then wrestling noises and more thuds. Mac’s right hand scrabbled on the desk behind him, as he dodged yet another punch that he estimated had a fifty-fifty chance of sending him flying through the plate glass window behind him, if it hit him in the right place at the right angle. Something that felt like a heavy tape dispenser was pressed into his hands, and he seized it, and then dived quickly around the abnormally large security guard, taking advantage of his superior speed and agility compared to the bigger man and neatly dodging a punch as he did so, and clocked the surprised man on the back of the head with the tape dispenser, which he realized was carved out of stone.

_The strange things that people will buy never cease to amaze me…though, I guess I can’t really talk. I did recently pick up six toasters, after all._

_They were on sale. 50% off, how could I resist that deal?_

Behind him, on the other side of the desk, Aaron gave him a grim smile as he finally took out his own opponent and stood.

Mac looked over at Jack, intending to rush over to help his partner, who was still wrestling with the man who had his hand on the trigger, literally.

Instead, the moment he glanced over at the two wrestling men, instantaneous, almost-unconscious, calculations about angles and flight paths started running in his brain, and he jumped over the desk instead, and tackled the Canadian agent to the ground.

A millisecond later, a bullet went whizzing over the two prone agents, right where Aaron’s liver had been a millisecond before, and smashed the plate glass window behind them, showering them both
with glass, just as Jack made a noise of triumph, having finally knocked out the lights of the last bad
guy.

Aaron looked up at Mac, breathing hard as the adrenaline rush subsided.

‘Thanks, MacGyver.’

Mac gave him a small smile in return.

‘Thanks yourself, Harper.’

Aaron had done the same for Mac, helped him and protected him, by throwing himself at the man
who’d been about to take Mac from behind and pressing that tape dispenser into his hand, after all.

Aaron smiled back at him, a wider, more open smile than Mac’s, as the blonde carefully got up,
avoiding the glass around them as best as he could, then reached out and offered a hand to the
Canadian, helping him up.

Aaron’s smile widened, as did Mac’s, just fractionally, as the blonde gave a small nod of
acknowledgment, then pulled some zip-ties from a nearby drawer and started securing the still-
mostly-unconscious dodgy security guards.

As Jack pulled out his phone to call Thornton and Matty to arrange pick-up for the captured men,
Aaron shot him a look, clearly asking what do I have to do?, to which Jack replied with a somewhat
helpless shrug.

Mac could be very stubborn when he wanted to be.

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**HOTEL SUITE**

**BUFFALO**

From the exceedingly-dodgy private security company, Mac, Jack and Aaron had picked up a lot of
bruises and a couple of cuts, as well as a large number of encrypted files, which Riley, Phoenix techs
and Beaver techs had managed to unencrypt very quickly and efficiently.

The files had turned out to be a client list, accounting records…and schematics for a bomb.

Unfortunately, while they at least now knew an attack was definitely planned, they had absolutely no
idea what the target was; it might not even be in Buffalo, as intel had suggested.

Hence, Riley, assisted by Jack, was reviewing the client list, trying to narrow it down to suspicious
clientele who might be involved, while Aaron and Bozer continued to follow the money trail, which
had gotten much, much longer (there’d been a lot of accounting files at that private security
company), and Mac studied the bomb schematics, looking for hints; a bomb-maker’s signature,
design elements that might narrow down the target.

Suddenly, Jack high-fived Riley, who was holding up her laptop. Mac, Aaron and Bozer all looked
over at her.

‘Narrowed it down to four potential leads.’

Jack gestured to Riley, grabbing his jacket as he did so.
‘Me and Riley will go check them out; you guys stay here and do your things.’

The other three agents nodded (it made sense as a plan, though none of them were particularly fond of the idea of Jack and Riley going and potentially endangering themselves alone, despite the fact that they knew both could handle themselves), and Riley grabbed her own jacket and her backpack, grasping Bozer’s shoulder briefly before she walked out the door after Jack.

Mac returned to the schematics, and Aaron to the accounting records. Bozer watched the closed door for a moment, before he, too, focused back on his work.

It was while they were all taking a short break and eating Chinese takeaway that Aaron took a deep breath and, somewhat hesitantly, addressed the elephant in the room.

‘I…I don’t know if you’ll believe me, but…’ Mac and Bozer looked up at him. ‘I love her. I really do; I know it might seem like too soon, but I do love her. I’m not using her, I promise.’ He ran a hand through his hair. ‘She…she knows me. The real me. All the important bits, anyway.’ His eyes were almost imploring. ‘I don’t keep things from her that I don’t have to, I swear.’ All three of them stared at each other for a long, long moment, before Aaron continued. ‘I seriously never intended to start a relationship when I was sent to L.A.’ He gave a small, wry smile. ‘It just…happened.’ The smile grew a little wider, softer and more wry. ‘In fact, she marched up to me and kind-of told me off for dragging my feet when it was apparently obvious that I fancied her…’ His smile widened a little bit more. ‘She’s a lot more of a spitfire than she looks.’

Mac and Bozer couldn’t help but give wry little grins at that. They were very aware of that.

They exchanged a glance; recognizing the genuineness, the openness, that the Canadian had just shown them, suddenly feeling very stupid and very small and very foolish.

It was Mac who broke the silence first.

‘I’m sorry for how I’ve been behaving towards you, Aaron.’

He used the man’s first name very deliberately, something that he clearly picked up on, because he smiled at Mac in return.

‘Sorry for being a bit of an ass, Aaron.’

Bozer reached out a hand, which Aaron shook firmly.

‘It’s alright, Mac, Bozer.’ He shrugged. ‘I’d probably have acted the same way in your position, and no harm, no foul.’

Stereotypically, Canadians are supposed to be unfailingly polite and constantly apologizing.

And, well, every stereotype is based upon a grain of truth, after all.

I mean, we nearly got him killed.

It’s an occupational hazard, but still…

Aaron’s smile turned more wry again.

‘You know, she warned me you guys would be protective, but I didn’t expect you to be that protective.’
Bozer snorted.

‘Well, sort-of-ex-girlfriends that you can still call a friend are pretty hard to come by and all.’

Mac’s face, in contrast, was much more serious. He pulled a paperclip out of his pocket and started fiddling with it and the wrapper from his chopsticks.

‘Half the reasons why we’re so protective…she doesn’t even have a clue about.’ Mac sighed, and looked down at the literal tangle he’d shaped the paperclip and chopstick wrapper into, silent for a moment, before speaking. ‘There was a woman. I thought she was the right one. She turned out to be working for The Organization.’ Aaron winced in sympathy, and almost looked like he wanted to reach out and grasp Mac’s shoulder in comfort, but refrained. There was a look of realization on his face, as it became clearer to him why Mac had been so paranoid. Bozer stared at his best friend, a little wide-eyed, surprised, but very proud. This was serious progress. Mac continued. ‘And…she might be in danger because of us. Because she’s our friend, because of what we do.’ His words were simply spoken, matter-of-fact as he stared at his own hands, speaking almost to himself, thinking out loud, almost.

Bozer sighed, as Aaron looked very lost in thought.

‘You know, bro, not that I don’t love doing what we do and having a decent job with a good pay-check and all…but sometimes, I miss the good old days, when we didn’t have this top-secret, classified, need-to-know secret to keep…’

They’d been closer before, when they’d been in high school, even when they’d all gone off to college, before the DXS, before the Phoenix. Closer before they had this secret sitting between them, before there became facets of Mac and Bozer that Penny couldn’t understand, because she wasn’t even allowed to know, wasn’t even allowed to try.

She thought that Mac was still struggling to get over his girlfriend’s death in a car accident while on a work trip, after all.

According to my grandfather, everything worth it requires sacrifice.

I definitely know that from experience.

Mac swallowed, reached out and clasped his best friend’s forearm.

‘Me too, Boze, me too.’

The two Phoenix agents stared at each other, a silent conversation of sorts, one they’d had before, at home, late at night, passing between them.

Part of me believes that we should let her go. Slowly withdraw from her life, to keep her safe.

Part of Bozer agrees with me.

But…we just can’t.

A, because Penny won’t let us. She’s stubborn and doesn’t often take no for an answer, as that intervention she and Bozer staged shows.

B, because maybe, after all this time, we love her too much to let go…and we just can’t help but be a little selfish.
Maybe it’s not right, and if anything happens to her, we’re going to have to live with it for the rest of our lives, but…

We can’t let her go.

With a sad little nod, he and Bozer finished their conversation of sorts, and Mac glanced back over at Aaron, who had an expression of deep thought on his face, with a tinge of sadness and maybe even regret.

Mac was suddenly struck with a powerful sense of guilt and regret.

I didn’t intend for… I didn’t intend to start him on this train of thought.

I really, really didn’t.

He gave a sad sigh.

But… the more I think about it, the more I think…

He does love her, and she really loves him, and he makes her so happy, they make each other so happy, and I want them to be happy, of course I do, but…

Maybe it would be better if he let her go.

Friendship’s different from romance.

There’s something about it, my grandfather said, something more, something deeper, maybe. Not necessarily a stronger love, but a different kind of love, one that you keep alive and strengthen in slightly different ways. I didn’t get it when I was fourteen and he told me that, but now, I do.

This secret between us and Penny? It’s cost us, cost us closeness that we used to have.

But that same secret between her and Aaron?

The cost will be higher.

It’s got to cause tension, which is only going to get worse and worse with time, with him disappearing and reappearing suddenly, having to rush off all the time, coming home and having to hide bruises and injuries…

Look, part of the reason why I managed to keep my double life from Bozer for three years is because he doesn’t see me in a state of undress.

Jack told me one night, when he was camping on my couch after Tahoe, that that tension, that secret, probably damaged his relationship with Diane, made it too hard, no matter how much they loved each other.

And… well, in my experience, the movies got something right – bad guys almost always go for the love interest.

Mac and Aaron made eye contact over Mac’s container of now very cold fried rice, as the blonde lifted it up and shovelled down the rest, not really tasting it or having much of an appetite, just knowing that he needed fuel for the mission.

There was definite sadness and regret and guilt in both of their eyes. Bozer caught the look, and, for once, had nothing funny or light-hearted to say; he simply nodded slowly, that same look in his eyes.
After a moment, all three agents took a deep breath and refocused themselves, their very cathartic meal break over.

They had a mission to complete, a terrorist attack to stop and people to save.

About half an hour later, Bozer looked up from his laptop, where he’d been so deep in the money trail that he was a year back in time in the records, eyes very wide with realization. He held out his laptop screen to Aaron, who was sitting next to him at the desk.

‘I recognize this account number.’ He turned to Mac, who had just gotten up from the from the room’s sofa, where he had the bomb schematics spread out in front of him. ‘I saw this account number in the money trail they used to set up Thornton.’ Mac’s eyes widened too, as Bozer nodded grimly. ‘This terrorist organization’s not linked to The Organization, it’s Omnis all over again; it is The Organization.’

Aaron swore under his breath.

‘The organization I’ve been chasing is Canada-based…’ He stated the obvious, something that they all knew, and there was no need to state the implicit, obvious fact that followed.

The Organization wasn’t just in the US.

It was also in Canada.

Combined with what had happened on Lake Como…they now all knew that there was a good chance that The Organization was truly international.

Mac’s face grew very grim, and he pulled out his phone to call Jack and Riley, while Aaron pulled out his own to contact Beaver Accountancy.

Bozer bit his lip.

‘Mac, can you get Riley to confirm that this is the same account? She’s got the records on her laptop, under like eight layers of encryption.’

Mac nodded, a small, wry, teasing smile appearing on his face, despite the situation (or maybe because of it; laughter being the opposite of fear and all).

‘Don’t know all her passwords?’

Bozer just shot him a look with a snort of laughter.

‘Bro!’

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**RARE BOOK DEALERSHIP**

**BUFFALO**

‘So, what’s our cover?’

Jack looked rather excited (he did love coming up with undercover identities – in another life, maybe Jack would have been an actor, Riley thought), as he and Riley sat in their rental car about half a block down the street from the little rare book shop, whose owner had rather frequently employed
the services of that dodgy private security firm.

Riley rolled her eyes, with no small amount of affection.

‘You’re my stepfather, you and my mom got together when I was twelve, and have been married since I was…sixteen. We’re buying Mom a birthday present; she loves Jane Austen, and we’re keen to get a first edition of one of her books for her, preferably *Pride and Prejudice.*’

Jack smiled, the tiniest bit of sadness in his eyes.

Diane’s favourite author was Jane Austen, and her favourite book was *Pride and Prejudice.*

He cracked his knuckles, then reached for the door handle.

‘Well, let’s get the show going!’

Shaking her head again, Riley followed the older man down the street.

‘…Sorry, Matty, Patty, it’s Mac, I gotta put you on hold…’ Jack winced a little as Matty made some kind of retort, clearly not happy about that, glancing at the handcuffed, stubbornly-silent rare book dealer (who’d tried to attack Jack and Riley with a first edition of *Pride and Prejudice* when he’d caught them snooping around his office) with a look that said *this is all your fault.* He answered Mac’s call. ‘Hey, brother…oh no, you’ve got to be kidding me…okay, okay, of course you wouldn’t make a joke about something like that…yeah, I’ll ask her right away.’ Jack’s phone chimed, and he held out the text message to Riley, switching his phone to speaker. ‘Riles, you recognize this account number?’

The hacker nodded, biting her lip.

‘Yeah…I’m positive The Organization used that account when they were setting up Thornton… Jack, does this mean…’

She trailed off, and Jack nodded grimly.

‘Yeah, Bozer said the same thing, and yeah, it means what you think. We got another Omnis Incident on our hands.’

Riley swore under her breath, glancing down at the book she was holding.

‘I’ll pull out my laptop, double-check that account number, just to be sure…’ She trailed off, her eyes fixated on the left-hand page of the open copy of Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales* in her hands. It’d been on the book dealer’s desk, the only book on his desk and the only book out of place in his otherwise obsessively, rigidly organized bookstore. There was a tiny, very light mark in pencil in the corner, if she wasn’t mistaken…she’d seen something just like this before. In a copy of *Paradise Lost.* A very specific copy of *Paradise Lost.* She flipped through a few more pages, noting the pale pencil markings that decorated the pages. She held up the book, meeting Jack’s eyes. ‘Actually, no need to double-check. It’s them, Jack.’ The older man walked closer, leaning over the book, and she pointed out the marks. Jack sucked in a breath. ‘This is just like how they communicated with Murdoc.’

Jack swore.

‘Mac, you guys get that?’
Mac’s voice was rather cold and set when he responded.

‘Yeah, we got that.’

Jack nodded.

‘We’ll be back with the book in thirty.’

Mac hung up, and then Jack swore again, as he realized Thornton and Matty were still on hold. He quickly switched them off hold and his phone off speaker (Riley would never let him hear the end of this already; didn’t need to give her more ammo), and winced as Matty’s voice came through the phone.

‘…Sorry, sorry, Matty, so sorry…it’s just, yeah, we got some shocking news. Like real shocking news…’

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**HOTEL SUITE**

**BUFFALO**

Riley and Mac signed off on their conference call with Lil (who still insistently called Riley Miss Davis for reasons that absolutely nobody – except Lil herself and probably Thornton and possibly Matty – knew).

Matty’s ‘borrowed’ analyst and the two of them had just successfully cracked the code in the copy of *The Canterbury Tales*. The code was very similar, but not identical, to the code that Lil had cracked in Murdoc’s copy of *Paradise Lost*.

Coupled with the fact that Riley had double-checked the suspicious account number, which was indeed one that had been in the money trail that supposedly led to Thornton, they now knew that The Organization was definitely behind this planned attack.

They also knew the attack’s target, and a good deal of the details.

Buffalo City Hall and the McKinley Memorial in front of it was the target. They were going to place a bomb in the sewer line underneath.

And the attack was set for two hours from now.

The five agents, four Americans, one Canadian, all exchanged a glance.

Their only saving grace was that The Organization wouldn’t be moving up the timeline, now that they probably knew they were on to them, simply because there was no time to do that.

Mac made a beeline for the bathroom, and emerged a moment later holding a hairdryer, before cracking it in half over his knee, then making his way over to the television.

Bozer smiled a little despite the situation, then started watching over Riley’s shoulder as the hacker quickly got hold of a map of the sewerage system of Buffalo and started scanning it.

Aaron just watched Mac work, a little surprised and in awe (he’d heard Penny’s stories about him and the things he’d made in high school and for around his house, of course, but they were absolutely nothing compared to what Mac did in the field), as Jack groaned a little internally (as the
technical senior agent – Mac was generally unofficially in charge, being the ideas man and all – he was in charge of the expense reports; Mac and his crazy, on-the-fly inventions were a pain to deal with in expense reports – really, the Phoenix should have adapted to Mac by now, but apparently, paperwork was paperwork and had to be done properly and by-the-book). The two agents then left Mac to his work, and started working on a rudimentary plan with Bozer and Riley.

Ten minutes later, Mac made a noise of triumph and held up a very strange-looking device.

‘Signal jammer. If we get this within fifty feet of the bomb, it’ll prevent them from detonating it remotely.’

They all nodded, rather impressed (though Jack was not looking forward to having to file a claim for a television and a hairdryer and several bottles of tequila from the minibar – apparently Mac had needed the lids of the little bottles for something), and then Jack gestured to Riley’s laptop.

‘We’ve got an entry point in the alley on the west side of this hotel. Me, Mac and Aaron will go down into the sewers –’ Jack made a face of disgust at that. ‘-and use Mac’s bomb-jamming-thingamajig to stop them from setting it off remotely.’ According to The Organization’s plans, the bomb was going to be placed within the next twenty minutes, an hour and a half before detonation. ‘Now, ‘course they’re going to send somebody or somebodies to set it off manually, so Mac’s gonna do his thing to it, and we’ll hold them off.’ Jack indicated himself and Aaron, then Bozer and Riley. ‘And you two are in charge of evacuating civilians from the area on our signal.’

They all nodded, and Mac pocketed his device as well as a couple of other choice pieces from the television and the hairdryer, as everyone else got up and grabbed their jackets, the adrenaline starting to build.

They had a terrorist attack to stop.

**SEWER**

**SOMEBODY UNDER BUFFALO**

Jack made a face.

‘This mission stinks, literally!’

Walking just behind him, Aaron nodded in agreement, his nose scrunched up in disgust.

In front of Jack, Mac just rolled his eyes (not that his partner could see) and retorted.

‘It’s a sewer, Jack. What did you expect? It’s hydrogen sulphide, and believe me, the fact that we can smell it is a good thing.’

*Hydrogen sulphide is detectable by the human nose at concentrations in the parts-per-billion range.*

*Concentrations greater than about 150 parts-per-million induce olfactory fatigue – that means the scent is no longer detectable.*

*It’s higher concentrations, over 300 parts-per-million or so, that are most dangerous, at least in the short-term, and hence for us, since we’re not going to be in these sewers for much longer, no matter what happens.*
Hence, Jack should be glad that we can smell it.

Jack was not placated.

‘Look, I guess no one’s likely to find the bomb or catch them in here…but seriously, why’d anyone put a bomb in a sewer, brother?’

Mac, of course, had a response.

‘Because sewer gas contains relatively high levels of flammable gases like hydrogen sulphide and methane, so if you set off a bomb in a sewer, especially with oxygen tanks nearby, like their plan says, you get a very big explosion. If the sewer runs relatively close to the surface, the blast is in a relatively small, contained space and you’ve got powerful-enough explosives…you can cause a lot of casualties and a lot of damage.’

They were coming up to the small, dead-end alcove off the main sewer that was where the bomb was placed, according to the plans (it made sense, according to Mac, being a pretty enclosed space, relatively close to the surface and all), and, after a last warning from Mac to not fire their weapons, especially near the bomb and the oxygen tanks, and to avoid letting any terrorists do the same, they fell silent and serious, all drawing on their training and experience, as Mac turned on his jamming device, and Jack tapped his earpiece, sending Riley and Bozer the pre-arranged signal to start evacuating people.

Reaching a corner, Mac ducked his head around it. At the entry to the alcove, there were two men, guns holstered, but very much on alert.

He ducked back around the corner, and after a quick conversation in whispers and hand signals, Mac pulled out a piece of hairdryer, then two bits of television, and with a nod at the two other agents, tossed the hairdryer piece into the water of the sewer, aiming for the far side.

As expected, the plink, plink, plink, plink noise (Mac was very good at skipping stones, something Jack had learned the hard way – that had been a stupid bet, in hindsight) drew the guards’ attention, and Aaron and Jack took advantage of that, silently running towards the guards as Mac distracted them again with another expertly-skipped spare part.

The guards barely had time to react before two highly-trained agents were upon them, soon joined by a third as Mac followed.

As Jack and Aaron secured the guards and tossed their guns into the sewer itself, Mac busied himself studying the bomb.

It was several grades better than the average bomb he encountered, similar to the one he’d encountered in Amsterdam. It was also a far more evolved and improved version of the bomb he’d seen in the schematics. It seemed that whoever had made it had improved on their initial design.

Fortunately, this time, there was no timer, so the only time constraint he had was…just as he thought; in the distance, he heard footsteps.

Trusting Jack and Aaron to be able to hold off the bad guys long enough for him to do his thing, Mac got to work, doing what he’d been trained to do.

He barely paid any attention to the thuds and thumps of flesh-on-flesh and the grunts of pain and swearing behind him, focused on neutralizing the bomb as quickly as possible.
As Mac cut the last wire and finished disarming the bomb, Jack punched out the lights of the last bad guy.

There was a literal pile at his and Aaron’s feet, but what was most strange about the whole thing was that the number of guys coming at them had decreased as time went by, as Mac’s disarming of the bomb had progressed, and there had never been more than they could handle in the first place…

It was almost as if The Organization had realized that they’d lost when they’d reached the bomb (when Mac got his hands on it), and had cut their losses, but hadn’t wanted them to know…

Or, more sinisterly, Jack thought, maybe they were being tested.

He shook his head.

That was a thought for later.

That was a thought to talk to Thornton and Matty about, when they got back home.

Right now was a time to celebrate another job well done.

He turned to congratulate his partner…only to find Mac pulling a concealed camera from the ceiling, ripping out its power source as he did so.

Mac looked very grim and very serious as he showed the device to Jack and Aaron.

The little voice that told Jack it had been a test of some sort, a twisted game, suddenly got a lot louder.

Still, Jack didn’t want, couldn’t have, his partner lost in deep, dark thoughts in that big brain of his (Jack imagined Mac’s brain was some kind of cross between a library and a maze that only the younger man could navigate), so he instead made a face.

‘These people are seriously creepy, man. No sense of privacy.’ Jack pointed to himself. ‘And I’m all for privacy and doing whatever you wanna do in your own time.’

His rather lame joking still had the desired effect, shaking Mac out of his thoughts, at least for the moment.

The blonde snorted.

‘Yeah, your singing’s definitely not fit for human consumption.’

Aaron just quirked an eyebrow at the two of them, looking incredulously at Jack.

‘You sing?’

Jack affected a very offended expression.

‘Hey, I’m a man of many talents!’

Mac leaned closer to the Canadian, shaking his head.

‘Trust me, it’s not a talent…except maybe as a torture device.’

PHOENIX FOUNDATION HEADQUARTERS
Mac, Jack, Bozer, Riley and Aaron all filed into the war room, where Thornton was waiting for them, and Matty was on the screen.

It was the Phoenix’s Director who spoke first.

‘Good work. You saved a lot of lives.’ She regarded Mac, Bozer and Aaron for a moment, a ghost of a smile appearing on her face. ‘And worked very well together. Perhaps there’ll be more cooperation between our agencies in the future.’

On the screen, Matty gave a snort.

‘Oh, there’s going to have to be all sorts of international cooperation going on; I’m reaching out to some trusted international contacts as soon as this call’s done.’ She flung her hands up in exasperation. ‘This Organization’s like a hydra; cut off one head, and another two grow!’

Jack made a face.

‘A what now?’

Mac pulled a paperclip, then another, from the bowl with a shake of his head, while Riley seemed to be resisting the urge to face-palm and Bozer looked incredulous.

‘Hydra, Jack. It’s a mythical creature with many heads fought by Hercules as one of his Twelve Labours. Whenever he cut off one head, another two grew in its place.’

In the field, Mac tended to err on the side of caution and assumed a rather low level of knowledge from Jack, for safety’s sake (the time in the garbage compactor had been a rare slip-up), but he’d found over the years that if he always assumed that of his partner, he A, tended to underestimate Jack, and B, his partner got a bit touchy, which Mac didn’t blame him for. Thus, out of the field, he liked to give Jack a bit more benefit of the doubt.

However, this time, Jack still looked confused, despite Mac’s explanation, so Riley cut in.

‘You know, the creature that the bad guys in Captain America are named after?’

Jack still looked confused.

‘The octopuses guys?’ He made a face. ‘The octopi guys?’

Bozer looked like he was about to launch into his rant about how Hydra’s logo was all wrong, so Riley literally clapped a hand over his mouth before he could say anything (she knew from experience that Bozer’s their-logo-is-all-wrong rant, once it got going, pretty much didn’t stop).

At this point, Aaron, Mac and Matty were all trying to contain their laughter, while Jack still looked confused. Thornton, with an expression that might have been a long-suffering one, simply cleared her throat to get their attention again.

Riley quickly removed her hand from Bozer’s face and took a half-step away from him, seemingly having come to her senses.

Their boss turned to Matty.

‘I have some international contacts I trust as well, I’ll put you in touch with them.’
Matty nodded back at the other woman.

‘Much appreciated.’ Her expression turned grimly serious. ‘We’ve got a lot of chasing to do.’

Thornton just nodded, as the serious mood engulfed them all, and debrief proper began.

‘Phoenix techs are processing the camera that Mac found as we speak, but preliminary results show that it’s common, almost rudimentary technology, tracing it is going to be practically impossible…’

‘Yes, boss…of course…no, that was just a little hiccup, everything’s all good now…can that be a later flight? There’s…there’s something I have to do first…thank you. Thank you very much.’

Aaron, standing in the corridor outside the war room, hung up, and turned to face Mac, Bozer, Jack and Riley.

‘Well, I’m going home.’

There was a sad sense of finality in his tone, as Jack reached out and clasped his hand, pulling him into a hug.

‘If we ever get sent to Canada…’

Aaron gave a little chuckle.

‘I’ll keep an eye out for you guys. Just to make sure you don’t get up to mischief.’

He and Riley hugged briefly for a moment, then he turned to Mac and Bozer. He held out a hand to Bozer, who instead hugged him surprisingly tightly, the Canadian’s eyes widening slightly.

Then, Aaron held out a hand to Mac, who clasped it, and pulled him into a hug that involved back-slapping.

Then, as he and Mac stepped away from each other, he made eye contact with both Mac and Bozer, a very sad, regretful and guilty look in his eyes.

‘Look out for her, for me?’

His voice was soft and matched his eyes exactly.

Mac swallowed the lump in his throat, and Bozer gave a slow, jerky nod, that same sadness, with no small amount of guilt and regret, in their eyes.

‘Of course.’

‘Always.’

Riley glanced over at Jack as they watched the scene; the older man looked very, very sad and world-weary, far older than usual.

Not quite conscious of what she was doing, she reached out for Bozer’s hand, and he, just as unconsciously, took it, weaving their fingers together.

The four friends stood there, in the corridor, as the lone Canadian made his way out of the building, off on one last painful, heart-breaking, personal mission on American soil.
As the doorbell rang, Mac and Bozer exchanged a look and a sigh, their shoulders slumping for a moment, before they mentally prepared themselves to look surprised.

Bozer opened the door, to reveal a sobbing Penny on their doorstep.

‘Penny? What are you-‘

She cut him off by flinging herself into his arms, and Bozer hugged her back tightly, rubbing her back soothingly.

‘He…he broke up with me, because he’s going back to Canada for work, and he said the distance between us is going to be too great…and…’ Penny gave a heart-wrenching sob. ‘And…and I said I loved him and that we should try long-distance…’ She sobbed again. ‘And…and he said that…he said he didn’t want to, because he’s got someone waiting for him back in Ottawa, has for all this time, and…’ She sobbed again, a truly heart-broken sound. ‘I…I love him.’

Mac and Bozer exchanged a glance over Penny’s shoulder.

They both knew that Aaron had absolutely nobody waiting for him back in Ottawa; he just had to find a way to make Penny let him go.

And if that was making her hate him, so that she’d let him go completely, not try to keep in touch, not pine over him as the one who got away…then he was willing to do it.

For her sake.

*From a purely statistical standpoint, I’m not often wrong.*

*But I’m man enough to admit that sometimes, I am.*

*Sometimes, I’m very wrong.*

*Like I was very, very wrong about Aaron Harper.*

*He’s a very, very good man.*

*One of the best.*

With a last pat on the back, Bozer let go of Penny, and Mac reached out to hug her instead, knowing that the oxytocin would at least help a little.

Bozer made his way into the kitchen to start making his special hot chocolate, while Mac guided Penny over to the couch.

He and Bozer had just ‘happened’ to buy several tubs of Ben and Jerry’s on their way home from work, one of which Bozer was bringing over now, complete with a spoon, as the milk for his hot chocolate heated on the stove. He pressed the tub and the spoon into Penny’s hands, and she managed a very small, very wan ghost of a smile.

Meanwhile, Mac busied himself with bringing up his Netflix account and finding one of those chick flicks that Penny adored.
We can’t change the fact that our secret will always sit between us.

We can’t change the fact of Aaron and Penny’s situation.

We can’t change the fact that her heart’s broken, and that it’s kind of our fault.

But we can be here to pick up the pieces.

And it’s going to have to be enough.

That night, after Bozer had driven a still very-much-heart-broken Penny, who’d at least stopped crying and had even managed a proper smile after the second rom-com and half of the third tub of ice-cream, back to her place, Mac lay in bed, lost in thought, his brain far too busy for sleep.

I can’t lie, not to a girlfriend, not to a wife, about what I do every day.

I lied to Bozer for far too long, and because he’s the best best friend ever, he forgave me.

I’m still lying to Penny, and that’s a burden I’ll have to carry to the grave.

And...well, it’s not as if I don’t love them with all my heart, it’s not as if they’re not family, it’s not as if I won’t fight to defend them until my last breath...but platonic love is different from romantic love.

Friends are different from a girlfriend.

I can deal with lying to Penny. I don’t like it, not at all, but I can deal with it.

But I can’t, I won’t, lie to a girlfriend, or a wife.

Nikki lied to me, and I know, I know, it wouldn’t be in the same way, but...I can’t do anything like what she did to me to somebody, I just can’t.

I won’t.

I’m twenty-five years old, probably far too young to be thinking about being forever single and all that, but look, I’ve got an IQ over 160 and I can read the writing on the wall; the life I lead’s not conducive to finding a life partner, as much as I want one.

And that’s not even considering what Nikki left me with.

He sighed, looking over at the handful of photos he had pinned on the corkboard in his room.

Him and Jack and Riley and Bozer, all dressed up for Penny’s Halloween party last year.

The four of them and Matty and Patricia, eating Mrs Patel’s cooking that time he and Jack had searched for Rocky (this photo was a selfie taken by Bozer using that selfie stick he’d talked a very bored Mac into making).

His twenty-fifth birthday party, Jack snoring on his couch as Riley and Bozer posed wackily next to the sleeping man (Jack had bunny ears, courtesy of Bozer), him and Bozer in front of the grill, the last time the pastrami had caught fire...

I’m very much lacking in the romantic love department right now.

Maybe...maybe I will be for the rest of my life.
But one thing’s for certain: I’m not lacking for love, and I never will be.

Chapter End Notes

Aaron Harper’s name is a kind-of meta joke with my own fics; in a couple of my other stories, Penny briefly dates Mac’s engineering buddy Aaron… I don’t know, it was vaguely amusing when I thought of it…

The relevant Phineas and Ferb episode is the one in which Perry the Platypus teams up with an agent from C.O.W.C.A, the Canadian Organization Without a Cool Acronym. (My brain is weird; just roll with it?) To the guest who made a guess: you were close, and it was an excellent guess, thanks for trying!

I hope that you don’t find it unbelievable that Matty and Thornton (especially Thornton) aren’t aware of the true nature of Beaver Accountancy, but let’s just say that they’ve got their own Canadian! Thornton and Canadian! Matty to keep them hidden?

I also really hope that none of Mac, Bozer and Aaron came across as being mean/assholes in this episode; I tried really hard to make them all sympathetic and I really hope I succeeded! Let me know? (I know Mac – and Bozer – are being very stupid in not initially considering that Aaron’s feelings are genuine, but they lack Jack’s life experience and personal experience in this matter, Mac’s still dealing with his Nikki-related issues, and they’re also blinded by their protectiveness of Penny.)

This was a very sad episode in many ways, I know. It all leads back to a moment in Chisel, which is what really sold me on MacGyver, TBH (I love science and the whole nerds-save-the-world thing, but that Team-as-Family/emotional moment was kind of the kicker), when Mac talks to Jack about lying to Bozer and about lying to a future girlfriend/wife/kids and Jack looks so heartbroken… that’s what sold it, and I still think moments like that make up the heart of the show. The explosions and MacGyverisms and saving the world are kinda secondary!

Next episode: 2.07, Sneaker. Matty sends Jack and Mac to protect an NSA analyst who is hot on the trail of a mole for The Organization. However, Vivian Ho’s not just a brilliant and beautiful analyst… she also has a close personal connection to their boss.

If you’ve read a certain chapter of Two Paperclips and a Stick of Gum, you may have some idea of what’s in store in the coming episode…
Sneaker

Chapter Summary

Matty sends Jack and Mac to protect an NSA analyst who is hot on the trail of a mole for The Organization. However, Vivian Ho’s not just a brilliant and beautiful analyst… she also has a close personal connection to their boss.

Chapter Notes

This is the shortest episode to date, I think (I believe it’s a couple of hundred words shorter than 2.02, Knitting Needle), but it’s also quite pivotal in terms of the overall plot and character development of this ‘season’. I hope you enjoy it!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

PHOENIX JET

SOMEWHERE OVER KANSAS

‘…You ever consider trying to start something up with Frankie? I mean, she’s smart, she’s gorgeous, she’s got plenty of sass, she kinda knows what you really do for a living, and you guys had some pretty serious flirt going on…’

Mac, who was curled up in his seat under a blanket and trying to get some sleep, opened his eyes and looked balefully at his partner.

They were on their way home from a 3 day mission, just the two of them, during which they’d had no more than 10 hours sleep total. He was very tired and really just wanted to get some shut-eye, but he’d foolishly forgotten how chatty Jack could be when sleep-deprived…and how interested his partner was in his (non-existent) love life.

He stared at the older man for a moment, and Jack stared back at him just as stubbornly, so Mac sighed and sat up a little straighter.

‘No.’ He hoped against all logic and experience that that’d be the end of the matter, but of course, it wasn’t, because Jack just shot him a look, and with another, rather long-suffering sigh, Mac continued. ‘A, we weren’t flirting. B, she’s out of my league.’ Jack shot him another look, one that showed he clearly disagreed with Mac on both matters, and the blonde just rolled his eyes. He didn’t think Jack fully appreciated exactly how brilliant Frankie was, or how their relationship quite worked, how special it was to have someone on the exact same wavelength, even at MIT; it was probably one of those things that you had to be like them to understand perfectly. He paused for a moment, voice and expression turning more serious. ‘C, she met someone at a conference.’ Jack opened his mouth as if to say something, but Mac cut him off before he could. ‘I’m fine, Jack. Not heartbroken. I’m happy for her. He’s a great guy. Felix Max Planck just received a professorship at Harvard; he’s only 34, which makes him the youngest Genetics professor there, and his work is
really fascinating and very well-done—'

Jack held up his hands in supplication.

‘Okay, okay, I get it, Frankie’s got a really smart and successful new boyfriend.’ Jack made a face. ‘He has a really weird name.’

Mac gave a snort of laughter.

‘He’s German, Jack, and his parents have the same sense of humour as Frankie’s parents.’

Jack made a face again (he really didn’t get it – this was probably some kind of science joke), and honestly, at the moment at least, he really didn’t care, focused on his partner’s reaction to Frankie’s new relationship as he was.

There wasn’t jealousy in Mac’s voice, there really wasn’t, he sounded genuinely happy for the new couple, genuinely happy that Frankie had found someone. No, the note in his partner’s voice was more some kind of sad wistfulness, a *longing* of sorts, something that was only confirmed as he kept speaking, voice soft and a little sad and definitely full of that wistfulness.

‘And…and finally…Frankie’s always going to be special…but I let her go years ago, Jack.’ Mac looked up at the older man for a moment, then back down again, pulling a paperclip out of his pocket as he did so and beginning to unwind it. ‘I picked a path that led me away from MIT and her and our other friends, away from that life.’ Mac shrugged as a forked path took shape in his hands. ‘Look… maybe, just maybe, if I’d stayed…we might have been something. Maybe.’ He glanced up at Jack for a moment, then stared at the fork in the road again. ‘But I made a choice…and that choice changed me and the entire course of my life.’ He looked up at Jack again, meeting his eyes. ‘I don’t think we’d fit together now.’

Jack looked into the younger man’s eyes for a long moment. Mac was not only very, very smart, he could often be very, very wise, too, something Jack thought he might have gained because of all the hardship he’d experienced, all he’d seen and suffered through in his short life. It was a sobering, rather sad thought, so Jack deliberately put on a smile, and shook his head.

‘When’d you get so wise, brother?’

After a moment of the two of them staring at each other, a silent conversation of sorts, full of shared sadness and sympathy and a couple of regrets passing between them, Mac smirked back at him.

‘Always have been, you just haven’t noticed.’

Jack shook his head in mock-hurt, as Mac looked more serious again, meeting his eyes again.

‘I don’t regret it, Jack. I do regret losing touch with Frankie and Smitty and the others…but I don’t regret the choice I made.’

Slowly, Jack smiled back at him, that soft affection in his eyes that was so unexpected from a tough, ex-Delta Force commando, ex-CIA agent of Jack’s stature, yet seemed so at home on his face just the same. He tossed another blanket at the blonde.

‘Get some shut-eye, Mac.’

The younger man shook his head, exasperated affection clear on his face and in his voice.

‘That’s what I was doing, before you interrupted!’
‘We’re buried under, we’ve made a lot of progress with the international intel, but new leads keep popping up…’ Matty, looking more stressed than they’d ever seen her before, was on the screen. ‘And then, a couple of days ago, this popped up.’ The screen split, one half now taken up by a photo of a very pretty woman who looked to be in her mid-twenties, with dark hair cut into a stylish bob, tortoiseshell glasses and eyeliner that made Riley a little jealous, as awesome as her own eyeliner skills were. ‘This is Vivian Ho, NSA analyst out of Seattle. She’s hot on the trail of a mole in her office, who’s turned out to be an Organization mole, and they’ve caught on to her.’ Matty looked down from the screen at Mac and Jack. ‘I can’t spare anyone, so you two are going to protect her and help her find the mole; once you get an ID and proof, I’ve got a couple of people in NSA Internal Affairs I trust who can take it from there, but till then, we’re keeping this compartmentalized.’

Mac and Jack glanced at each other, then at Riley and Bozer, then at Thornton and Matty, Mac shifting uncomfortably a little, Jack looking at the Phoenix’s Director with an expression that was a question all on its own.

Call me paranoid…but this wouldn’t be the first time The Organization’s tried to trick us.

Wouldn’t be the first time they had an analyst pretend to be on our side.

Thornton met their eyes after a moment, a look that none of them could place on her face; an open, honest sort of look, but nigh-impossible to read despite that. There was just too much in it; too many emotions to get a hold on any single one.

‘I trust her. Absolutely.’

A suspicion began to grow in Mac’s mind, as he glanced back up at the photo of Vivian Ho on the screen.

The team all nodded, trusting their boss’s judgement, and Matty continued.

‘Vivian’s been briefed on The Organization, and she’s at a safe house an hour and a half outside of Seattle and on alert.’ Matty looked over at Thornton. ‘And I need to commandeer Riley and Bozer too; we’re neck-deep in money trails.’

Bozer grinned and cracked his knuckles as Riley nodded with a little smirk. Thornton quirked an eyebrow at their response, and addressed Matty.

‘Consider them willingly commandeered.’

Matty smiled, and then her expression immediately turned solemn as they heard Sarah call out from off-screen.

‘Gotta go. Bozer, Riley, you’ve got a conference with Lil in twenty.’

Matty’s half of the screen went dark, leaving only the picture of Vivian on screen. Thornton reached out, tapping the glass in a particular pattern, causing it to become frosted, and, they all knew, top-secret mode to be activated.
Their boss glanced up at the photo of the young woman on the screen, then Bozer, Riley, Jack and Mac in turn, and spoke softly, almost a little hesitantly.

‘Vivian…Viv is my niece.’

Well, I was right.

She rubbed her left arm for a moment, looking down briefly, then meeting their eyes again. When she spoke, there was an imploring, pleading tone to her voice, full of worry and need, as she held Mac’s gaze, then Jack’s for a long moment, as open and vulnerable as she’d been that night at Mac and Bozer’s after Tahoe.

‘Keep her safe. Please.’

Jack reached out and clasped her shoulder, and for once, she didn’t shoot him a look in response.

‘Will do, Patty. Will do.’ Jack squeezed her shoulder gently, voice softening and glancing at Mac.

‘Always protect family, right, brother?’

Mac just nodded, and Thornton gave a small smile, which Jack answered with a slightly wider one, as Riley leaned over and whispered something into Bozer’s ear.

Then, their boss reached over and deactivated top-secret mode, the glass growing clear again as she started their mission briefing proper.

‘A week and a half ago, she became aware of some suspicious transmissions…’

SAFE HOUSE

SOMEWHERE OUTSIDE SEATTLE

Mac reached out and rang the doorbell, then knocked on the door, a ten-second gap between the two actions as instructed.

Then, a minute later, as instructed, Jack leaned forward and spoke.

‘You people with hearts have something to guide you, and need never do wrong; but I have no heart, and so I must be very careful.’

I might be reading far too much into this…but I do wonder if Thornton picked that particular phrase for a reason, even if I think she’s wrong.

She’s no Tin Man, even if I think, sometimes, she wants everyone to think she is.

Or maybe she’s just a Wizard of Oz fan.

There was a clicking sound, and when Mac tried the doorknob, the door opened. He and Jack stepped inside, into a narrow corridor…to find Vivian holding a gun that she clearly knew how to use on them.

With a glance at one another (they hadn’t been warned about this…), Mac and Jack slowly put their hands up.

Not as if we can blame her for paranoia.
She indicated Jack with a little nod of her head.

‘My aunt’s favourite chocolate?’

‘Belgian, dark, soft centred, preferably hazelnut-containing.’

Mac shot his partner an incredulous look (in all honesty, he hadn’t even known that Patricia liked chocolate, though, he supposed, most people did, and she did seem to enjoy Bozer’s hot chocolate… but then again, everybody loved Bozer’s hot chocolate), and Jack just shrugged.

‘Known her for years, man, and hey, I’m in the spy game and all.’

Turning away from Jack, Vivian turned her attention to Mac instead.

‘87th element of the Periodic Table?’

‘Francium.’

Viv nodded, and lowered her gun, smiling at the partners as she held out a hand for Jack, then Mac, to shake.

‘Well, you passed. Just.’ Both Mac and Jack shook their heads with a little smile at her joke. ‘Nice to meet you, Jack, MacGyver.’

It didn’t surprise them that she knew what they preferred to be called, just like it wasn’t surprising that she knew enough about them to test their identities. Thornton had briefed her, after all, and they were family; they imagined that her aunt would have provided Vivian with all the information she could possibly need.

Jack grinned.

‘You got good tradecraft, Vivian.’

She grinned back at the older man.

‘First, call me Viv. Please.’ She made a face as if to emphasise that. ‘Secondly, like there was any way Aunt Patricia and Grandmother would have let me go into the family business without proper training.’ Mac and Jack exchanged a look at the family business comment that involved raised eyebrows, as Viv pointed down the corridor. ‘There’s a room for the two of you on the left, dump your stuff, and then keep heading down the hall; I’ve set up in the breakfast nook.’

When she finished speaking, she started walking down the corridor, presumably heading for said breakfast nook.

As she went, Jack glanced over at his partner, intending to make some kind of comment about starting to see the resemblance between Viv and her aunt. (They certainly didn’t look much alike, at least at first – Viv was wearing a tied-off flannel over a tank top, fashionably ripped skinny jeans and what Bozer would describe as very cool kicks – nor did they act alike – Viv seemed casual and sassy while Patricia was serious and business-like, but Jack was starting to see a resemblance, probably because he did know about their relationship – Viv had the same tall, slender build, being perhaps only an inch or so shorter than Mac, and had that same elegant posture and way of moving and gave orders with the expectation that they’d be obeyed.)

The comment died on his lips as he noticed the blonde watching the analyst’s departing back with an interest that Jack hadn’t seen in his partner’s eyes for far too long.
Instead, Jack grinned with a hint of a smirk, before shaking his head as a realization dawned.

Mac really did have dreadful luck with women.

It was great that he was finally showing some interest, some attraction, to a woman again, but this woman?

Their scary boss’s niece?

Really?

Well, Patty was rather fond of him.

‘…this lady’s got all sorts of electronic stuff on her credit card purchases, might be making, I dunno, signal jammers or bugs or keystroke trackers…’

Mac looked at the laptop screen in front of Jack, and pursed his lips in thought.

‘Well, yeah, she could be, but there’s at least thirty-two things she could be doing with that stuff, including several DIY home improvement projects or helping her kids—’ Mac indicated his own laptop screen, where he had that NSA employee’s file on hand; she had two middle-school-aged children. ‘—with a science fair project.’

Viv knew that the mole was in her NSA office, unfortunately, she had no idea who the mole was.

(Fortunately, once she’d gotten a hint that there was a mole in her office, she’d concealed the work that she’d been doing from all her colleagues and convinced them all that she was off on vacation to Portland, Oregon, an excuse that had held until, it seemed, a couple of days ago, when the mole had caught on.)

She’d been going through everything she could get her hands on about her colleagues (which was a terrifyingly-large amount of information), slowly eliminating people from her suspect pool and picking out particularly suspicious individuals.

‘…Jones has just booked a vacation to Antigua and Barbuda.’ Viv reached out and put a pin by one of her co-worker’s names on the corkboard that she’d put up on the wall above the breakfast nook. ‘Martinez is exchanging messages in some kind of code on Words With Friends with a guy in Sweden…’

Jack and Mac glanced over at Viv’s laptop screen.

‘I don’t reckon she’s the mole, unless flirting in Klingon’s The Organization’s latest code.’

Viv and Mac both blinked, and glanced at each other, then at Jack, eyebrows quirked and incredulous expressions on their faces.

‘You know Klingon?’

‘You know how one flirts in Klingon?’

Jack shrugged.

‘I dated a girl in college who was really into Star Trek.’

Mac snorted, rolling his eyes, and Viv shook her head with a chuckle, as they all returned to going
through the files in front of them.

‘…This guy, Shaw, has been making a lot of trips to an auto shop that’s forty miles from his house and twenty-nine miles from your office.’ Mac’s brow furrowed. ‘And most of these purchases aren’t making a lot of sense. They’re not charging him enough; a functioning carburettor’s worth at least three times as much as he paid, and there’s no way a new custom paint job could be that cheap.’ He reached out and put a pin next to the man’s name, then muttered to himself under his breath. ‘Seriously? I couldn’t even build a fuel injector myself for that price.’

Jack glanced up at his partner, an amused grin on his face as Mac groused.

‘Maybe that’s why he’s driving so far out of his way; he’s getting a good deal.’ Jack held up his hands in supplication as Mac shot him a look. ‘Or maybe he’s blackmailing the auto shop owner or something.’ Mac raised an eyebrow (Jack, he maintained, watched far too many crime dramas), but as he dug further into said auto shop owner, huffed out a little sigh. ‘You’re not wrong.’ Said auto shop owner apparently had suspected gang ties, making him a pretty ripe target for blackmail if one had proof of said ties.

Jack smirked.

‘Louder, brother? Can’t hear you.’

Mac just glared at him in response and Jack’s smirk grew wider.

Viv elegantly quirked an amused eyebrow at the two of them, as she reached up to put another pin by another name.

‘Cheng’s husband is accusing her of having an affair because she’s coming home at all hours of night and disappearing all the time.’ Viv shrugged. ‘She might be having an affair, she might be doing some top-secret compartmentalized work, or she might be the mole.’ She rolled her eyes. ‘And that just about sums up our whole problem.’

Mac and Jack glanced at each other, then at her, with a sigh.

Unfortunately, that was the problem.

They had a pretty long list of suspects, who were all doing suspicious things.

The problem was that these suspicious things all had other explanations that had nothing to do with being an Organization mole.

*You can’t finish a puzzle if you’re missing a piece or two.*

*That’s our problem right now.*

*We don’t have all the information we need, despite the frankly somewhat-concerning amount of information that we have.*

*We need to find those missing pieces, or we’re not going to catch the mole.*

*Unfortunately, I haven’t got an idea.*

*Yet.*

*I’ll keep working on it.*
An hour later and no closer to finding the mole, Viv looked up from her laptop, face grim.

‘Jack, MacGyver, we’ve got incoming.’

She indicated her laptop screen to the two Phoenix agents, which showed an intruder alert in the backyard, and quickly called up the security cameras. Some had obviously been disabled, which also explained how the intruders had gotten into the backyard without setting off any of the other alarms (clearly, they’d come prepared). The screen showed that there were at least three men.

There was a loud crashing noise and some swearing and yelling as one of the traps that Mac had set up went off.

The blonde gave a satisfied little smirk as Jack and Viv pulled out their firearms, Jack signalling to the young woman to take up a position behind the half-wall separating the breakfast nook from the formal dining area, which had the door leading to the backyard in it. She did as told, moving into position with that same dangerous grace that her aunt had.

Mac slipped into the kitchen and grabbed a frying pan and two cans of soda as Jack took up his own position.

Silent and ready, the three of them watched and waited.

It was only seconds later that the door burst open.

Ten minutes later, Mac and Jack hauled the last of the four attackers into one of the safe house’s bedrooms (they all knew that one should always keep suspects separate if possible, but they didn’t have the resources to be able to guard four different rooms; they’d have to take a chance here), securing his hands and ankles with some of the duct tape that Mac always carried in his go-bag.

Viv was already back in the breakfast nook, re-organizing the papers and pins that had been displaced by the short fight.

(It really had been a short fight; while all four guys looked tough and had done a pretty good job disabling the security system, they clearly weren’t trained fighters.)

Checking that their four prisoners were secure and closing the door behind him, Jack turned to the two younger people.

‘Reckon we need to move?’

Mac shook his head immediately, as did Viv a moment later.

‘It’s harder to defend ourselves on the road than here, Jack.’ Mac gestured with his head towards Viv. ‘Besides, whoever sent those guys, A, underestimated Viv, and B, doesn’t know we’re here.’

Jack nodded, rubbing his chin in thought, as Viv spoke.

‘And those guys weren’t sent by The Organization; the mole sent them.’ She got up and started pacing. ‘The Organization’s ruthless, if they know their mole’s about to be caught, they’ll cut them loose if they haven’t got a further use for them. That fits the profile, and that fits what Matty’s team has seen so far. They’re also precise.’ She gestured to the closed bedroom door that Jack was leaning against. ‘And that was far from precise.’

Mac and Jack both nodded in agreement, then Jack gestured with his head at the makeshift jail cell
they’d created.

‘Well, I’ll give those guys a few minutes to stew and soften up. I’m gonna go check out their car, see what I can find.’ He smirked at the two of them. ‘Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do.’

As Jack headed out the back door, he winked at Mac and waggled his eyebrows, who shook his head and vowed to pull a prank on Jack at the next opportunity, as Viv quirked an eyebrow at the older man’s departing back. She and Mac exchanged a glance, Mac shrugging a little awkwardly, his ears pink under his hair.

‘Jack’s…Jack.’

Viv’s eyebrow rose a little further, her expression growing very wry.

‘I can see that.’

They stared at each other for a short, somewhat awkward moment, before Viv returned to her laptop as Mac picked up the kicked-in door and pulled out his Swiss Army knife.

He had repairs to make.

Twenty minutes later, Jack was deep in interrogation (both Mac and Viv knew how important it was to not interrupt at this point unless it was absolutely essential – if they had to communicate with Jack, a text message to his phone, which was obviously set to vibrate, was the best way), and Viv was deep in unencrypting the burner phone that had been all that Jack had found in the car.

Or, she was deep in trying to unencrypt the burner phone.

The phone was encrypted with a program developed for US covert ops by NSA analysts that was designed to wipe the phone entirely upon any attempt to breach the encryption in any way, shape or form. The only way to unencrypt it was to input a series of specific codes.

It was designed so that not even the NSA’s very best could crack it; there was simply no way she (or anyone else) could do it in the short time available to them (the mole, they all knew, was liable to do everything they could to disappear once they knew that their attempt to take her out had failed, and as much as it pained an NSA analyst like Viv to say it, people in this day and age could still disappear if they knew what they were doing…and an NSA employee certainly did). Viv glanced at the bedroom door, behind which Jack was hard at work. Their best shot was for Jack to get the codes. She pulled out her own phone and shot off a quick text message to the former CIA agent, knowing that he would get the message.

At least they now knew for sure that the men had been sent by the mole. Only someone in the NSA could get hold of this technology. And, she realized, the mole must have a fairly high security clearance, and a certain skill-set and certain access credentials to be able to get hold of this burner without raising too many red flags.

That narrowed down their suspect pool.

Viv leaned forward and removed a couple of the pins from next to the names of a couple of her co-workers. Then, she looked over at Mac, who was still fixing the door in the dining room, watching him as he worked for a moment. She let herself enjoy the view for another moment, before getting up and heading to the kitchen. There was nothing more she could do until Jack got the codes, and she’d had precious little rest of late; now was a good time for a break…and maybe for a little socializing.
As Viv grabbed a can of soda from the fridge, Mac sat back on his haunches with a noise of satisfaction, the door finally repaired. He put away his Swiss Army knife and picked up the remnants of the saucepan lid that he’d disassembled for its parts and stood, as Viv walked towards him, popping open her soda as she did so.

‘You know, MacGyver, you’ve got some serious moves. That thing with the frying pan? Now that was inspired.’ She took a sip from her soda can as she got closer, a definite swing in her hips and a little smirk on her face. ‘When this is all over, maybe you and I should get together, spar and teach each other a few tricks.’ The smirk widened somewhat. ‘It’ll be a mutually very beneficial experience.’

Mac froze like the proverbial deer-in-headlights.

There was a definite flirty undercurrent to her tone, of that he was very, very sure. One of the few good things to come out of that terrible evening in Tahoe was that he was now a little less oblivious than he’d been before.

*That* swing in her hips and *that* little smirk on her face made his heart rate quicken ever-so-slightly; though whether for good or bad reasons, he couldn’t quite tell (once upon a time, this physiological response to these stimuli was very much a positive thing, more recently, it’d been very much a negative thing, and now, he wasn’t sure). *That* swing and *that* smirk also brought to fore the ghost of feelings he hadn’t really felt for a long time now, a reminder of how he used to feel about these particular stimuli, perhaps, or maybe some impulse ingrained into him by thousands and thousands of years of evolution.

Mac firmly, albeit near-unconsciously, pushed away the association these stimuli had with a particular woman; something that pleased him very much that he was able to do, but simultaneously annoyed him as that association was still there.

Part of him, just a small part, smaller than in Cleveland, definitely, *still* wanted to run, *still* wanted to start digging himself and get Riley to do so too, to make sure that Thornton’s niece could definitely, definitely be trusted.

Part of him was very flattered. Viv was, after all, very beautiful, and very clever, and witty and sassy to boot. A very little part of him wanted to flirt back, as best as he could flirt anyway (in another life, he briefly thought, he probably would have).

But most of him was frantically trying to work out how to deflect her attentions without offending her or explaining why (for some reason that he probably didn’t want to think too much about, telling Viv about Nikki felt a lot harder than telling Aaron about his ex-girlfriend), and the rest of him was telling off that bit, because *hadn’t he been thinking, just so recently, that it’d be nice to meet someone and not have to lie to her about what he did for a living?*

The end result of all of these conflicting thoughts and desires and arguments with himself was, apparently, being completely frozen.

*Yeah, I know, I am really, really hopeless with women.*

Viv paused, all flirtatiousness falling away, examining him with that same inscrutable look on her face that he so often saw on Thornton’s face.

After what felt to Mac like a very awkward eternity (but, he noted, objectively *couldn’t* be; they were both still alive and appeared no older, after all), she spoke.
‘You’ve been burnt before. Badly.’ There was a note of sympathy in her voice, and he looked down as she considered a moment longer. ‘You were in love with Nikki Carpenter.’

That was spoken very resolutely, very certainly, as if she was saying today is Tuesday, as if she knew it for the fact it was.

Mac looked up at her instantly, letting go of the paperclip that he was just about to pull out from his pocket, shocked and relieved and the tiniest bit wary all at once.

‘Did Thornton-’

Viv shook her head firmly.

‘No, she didn’t tell me.’ She put down her soda on the dining table next to her, as if she’d lost all desire to drink it. ‘I only found out about Nikki Carpenter and the Chrysalis Incident and The Organization forty hours ago.’

He stared into her eyes for a beat.

‘You mean, you didn’t know-’

Viv nodded slowly.

‘No. I didn’t know that she was set up or put in prison.’

Mac looked desperately curious, but managed to stop himself from asking; there’d been something that he was quite sure was hurt in her voice when she’d said that. At least, that’s what he was pretty sure it was; in many ways, he thought, Viv was much like her aunt: hard to read.

Viv snorted at his expression and rolled her eyes in amusement, as she sat down on the edge of the dining table. Then, her face softened a little, growing more serious, and her voice was quiet when she spoke again, staring at the newly-repaired door.

‘We were estranged. Had been for three years. We’ve had our differences, still do.’ She paused for a moment and swallowed, glancing over at Mac before looking away again. ‘A few months ago, she reached out. We started talking again…but you know her.’ She gave a wry snort. ‘No way she’d share classified information unless I had a need to know, and she doesn’t share much of the unclassified stuff either.’ Viv sounded definitely hurt now, clearly and openly. ‘Took until she had to share the Chrysalis Incident with me for her to even hint what had happened to her.’ Viv glanced at him for a moment, then back into the distance for a beat, before looking over at him again. ‘And just to make it absolutely clear, she didn’t give any hints about your relationship with Nikki Carpenter.’ She smirked a little. ‘I joined those dots myself; a family gift, I guess.’

Mac gave a small snort of laughter, then, after pausing for a moment, spoke, voice gentle, compelled to tell her something that he felt was very, very important she knew.

He was very sure that Patricia would forgive him; this was need-to-know for Viv.

‘You know, she worried about you.’ Viv looked up at him, eyes meeting his, and Mac just gave a little nod and a small smile. ‘I’ve never, ever heard her so worried as when she asked me and Jack to keep you safe.’

Viv gave another snort, but there was a softness in her eyes that made her look much younger, a softness and a depth and something that he could only describe as hope that belied her next words.
‘Aunt Patricia knows I can look after myself, though help is appreciated.’ She hesitated a moment, then got off the table and held out a fist to him in the universal fist-bump gesture with a little smile. ‘You’re pretty awesome, MacGyver. Friends?’

There was nothing expectant, no flirtatiousness in her tone or her expression, something that he found relieved him greatly, as flattering as it’d been.

He reached out and bumped his fist to hers with a smile.

‘Friends.’ Viv’s smile widened, and he continued. ‘Call me Mac.’

Viv’s smile widened a little more, then turned into a teasing little grin as she picked up her soda again.

‘You know, it’s kinda a shame. It’d have been nice to bring home a guy that Aunt Patricia actually approved of.’ Mac could do nothing but stare at her for a moment and she rolled her eyes in response, shaking her head. ‘I’m joking, Mac. Even Aunt Patricia’s got a sense of humour.’

Blinking twice, he shook his head with a chuckle (it wasn’t so much Viv’s joke that had shocked him so, but more the idea of Thornton or even Patricia having a strong opinion about her niece’s boyfriends – he was getting mental images that brought to mind *Meet the Parents*).

‘Yeah, you try convincing Jack of that.’

Fifteen minutes later, Jack emerged, triumphantly holding up a piece of paper.

‘Dalton does it again!’

Shaking his head, Mac slapped Jack’s arm lightly as the older man handed Viv the piece of paper. The analyst glanced up at him.

‘You sure these are the right codes, Jack?’

Jack nodded.

‘Yeah, I’m sure. We’ve got four common-and-garden gang members in there; ain’t no match for me.’ Jack’s expression turned even more serious. ‘And they said that they did all this ‘cause the guy who gave them that phone owns their leader; he’s got something real incriminating on him, been holding it over his head for ages. Claim they don’t know his name, but he’s middle-aged, always wears a suit and is starting to go a bit bald.’

Jack’s tone suggested that he already had a very good idea of who the mole was, something that Viv and Mac shared.

Gang members? A gang leader being blackmailed?

That sounded *very, very* familiar.

Viv’s co-worker Shaw had been frequenting an auto parts store far out of his way, and had been making some odd purchases (good excuses for visiting the shop) for very low prices. Suspiciously low prices.

He also, according to Viv and his employee photo, wore a suit daily and was going bald.

*To be fair, I guess even those ridiculous crime dramas on TV have to get it right occasionally.*
I might owe Jack a beer.

It appeared that Shaw had discovered proof that the auto shop owner didn’t just have gang ties, but was actually the leader of a local gang, and had been using that to his advantage ever since.

Mac nodded, then raised an eyebrow at his partner, a ghost of a smirk on his face.

‘What deal did you promise them? Is Thornton going to be mad at you?’

_The only way Jack could make sure that they’d tell him the truth was by putting something in it for them._

_In this case, removing the threat that is Shaw, and probably promising them more lenient sentencing for their various crimes, all in exchange for their full cooperation, of course._

_Thornton hates having to deal with getting those through._

Jack rubbed the back of his neck.

‘We need to stop and pick up some soft-centred, hazelnut-containing, dark Belgian chocolates on the way home?’

Mac raised an eyebrow, as Viv laughed, shaking her head as she inputted the codes into the burner.

A moment later, she made a noise of triumph, and reached out and fist-bumped Jack absent-mindedly, scrolling through the phone.

They needed more proof that the mole was indeed Shaw, and this phone was their best bet at finding it.

After a moment of scrolling, Viv smiled as she brought up a voice-mail, and started it playing.

A heavily-distorted male voice, a disguised voice, started speaking, ordering the gang members to break into the safe house and take out Viv by any means necessary and giving them instructions on how to disable the cameras and alarms and the like.

Mac and Jack exchanged a glance (they’d need to tie this back to Shaw; at the moment, it could be anyone, technically), as Viv gave a little smirk and plugged the phone into her laptop, then brought up a couple of programs.

Jack leaned closer to Mac as the two of them watched Viv’s decryption process.

‘You get any of this computer voodoo, brother?’

Mac shot Jack a baleful, long-suffering look.

‘This is _not_ voodoo, Jack, there is _no such thing_ as voodoo.’ Mac huffed out a breath as his partner opened his mouth, doubtlessly to protest. ‘What happened in New Orleans last month _does not count_.’

Jack just crossed his arms, shaking his head at the younger man.

‘One day, brother, one day…’

Mac rolled his eyes and let out a very long-suffering sigh, as Viv raised an eyebrow at the two of them.
'If you’re done…'

Jack and Mac spoke simultaneously.

‘We’re done.’

‘This ain’t over, brother. I’m gonna get you to believe.’

Viv just shook her head as she pressed the play button on the newly-undistorted voicemail, starting up a voice comparison program as she did so.

They listened to the voicemail again, and all grinned when it came up a 97% match for Shaw.

Another mole had been found.

Jack pulled out his phone.

‘Time to give Matty and Patty the good news.’ He glanced over at the room in which the four gangsters were still locked and gave a little half-shrug and paled somewhat. ‘And the not-so-good news.’

Viv and Mac just exchanged a wry smile.

*Jack Dalton is a very brave man.*

*One of the bravest men I’ve ever known, maybe even the bravest, and I’ve known a lot of very, very brave people.*

*He is, however, scared of two women, one of whom is literally half his size.*

*In all honesty, I don’t blame him in the slightest.*

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**PHOENIX FOUNDATION HEADQUARTERS**

**SOMewhere IN LA**

‘…Shaw’s been brought in by my contacts; Sarah and I are heading out to do the interrogation as soon as this debrief is done.’ Matty offered them all a smile, then turned to Viv. ‘Clearly, I need more hands on deck…’

There was a clear invitation in her tone, and Viv simply smiled in response.

‘I’m in, as long as you can make it happen without me getting fired.’ The smile turned into a wry little smirk. ‘And as long as I don’t have to do any swabbing of said deck.’

Matty gave a little smirk in response.

‘Oh, we’re gonna get along just fine.’ She turned a little more serious, but the smirk was still firmly in place. ‘And the whole getting fired thing won’t be a problem; I’ve just got to make a call.’

Thornton glanced between Matty and Viv, and gave a small nod, a gesture of approval, before she turned to Jack, a *look* on her face.

Jack gulped and muttered *wish me luck* to Mac, who just shook his head and reached for the
paperclip bowl, then walked over to his boss and Matty to discuss the deal he’d made with the captured gangsters.

Bozer, with a smirk on his face, and Riley, with no small amount of interest, turned to Viv, as Mac toyed with a paperclip, lost in thought.

‘So I heard from Lil, who heard from a little birdie on the NSA Listening Post #27 Panthers, who heard from someone at Listening Post #34, who heard from someone at the Seattle office, that you’re really, really awesome at DDR.’ Bozer pointed to himself. ‘So, as the Phoenix’s undisputed DDR champ, I gotta challenge you to a DDR battle.’

Riley elbowed Bozer in the arm, none too gently.

‘Hey, I beat you best of three last week!’

Bozer pointed at her, shaking his head.

‘Yeah, but I won best of five!’

Riley put her hands on her hips, shifting her weight over to her left leg.

‘We agreed it was best of three!’

Bozer scoffed, incredulous.

‘No, we did not!’

It was Riley’s turn to look incredulous.

‘Yeah, we did! After we went and got those lemon curd donuts, remember?’

Viv just watched the two of them, an eyebrow raised in amusement, before cutting in when it became clear that Bozer and Riley probably weren’t going to stop bickering on their own any time soon.

‘Well, I am going to be in LA for the foreseeable future…we’ll find the time.’ She smirked at Bozer. ‘You’re on.’ The smirk grew wider. ‘I look forward to kicking your ass.’

Bozer, too, smirked, holding out a hand for Viv to shake, to seal the deal.

‘Oh, you only say that ‘cause you haven’t seen my skills.’

Viv quirked an eyebrow at him, in a look that was vaguely reminiscent of Thornton.

‘And you only say that ‘cause you haven’t seen mine.’

Riley also smirked, pulling out her phone and sending out a group text.

It was time to get a betting pool going.

After Matty hung up after debrief finished, Thornton turned to Mac, Jack, Riley and Bozer, a hint of a smile on her face.

‘Go home, get some rest.’

Bozer immediately started telling Riley and the still-lost-in-thought Mac about this awesome top-
secret burger sauce he’d been working on (he was hoping to kill two birds with one stone – impress Riley with his bad-ass cooking skills, and pull his best friend out of the rabbit hole his brain sometimes was), while Jack looked over at the three of them, shook his head fondly, then turned back to Thornton and saluted, even clicking his heels together.

‘Yes, ma’am!'

Thornton simply raised an eyebrow slightly at him as he walked out the door, tapping the glass to activate top-secret mode as he did so, leaving her alone with her niece in the war room.

The two women stared at each other for a stretched-out, awkward moment.

There were so many things that they should say, had to say, maybe, so many things to talk about, apologies, explanations…but neither of them really knew where to start.

Then, much to Viv’s surprise, her aunt’s expression softened, worry and relief and affection, maybe even love, appearing in her eyes, and the Phoenix’s Director closed the distance between them, reaching out and hugging her tightly, in a way that she hadn’t for a long, long time.

Maybe hadn’t ever.

Once the initial shock passed, Viv smiled as she hugged the older woman back just as tightly.

They did say that actions spoke louder than words.

MACGYVER’S RESIDENCE

LA

Mac smiled as he leaned back on his headboard, stretching out a little more over his bed, his phone held to his ear.

‘…Yeah, work’s been good, Dad…’

‘…No, I haven’t started the robot apocalypse…’

‘…Really? The fishing’s been that good lately?’ Mac chuckled as his dad relayed the result of his latest fishing day, then paused for a moment, his voice and expression growing softer, more hesitant. ‘Dad, can…can I ask you something…more personal?’ A soft little smile grew on his face as his father replied, before his face turned a little more serious again, as he reached out to grab an old, slightly-faded photo in an aged, slightly-wonky, colourful frame that looked like it’d been made by a child from his nightstand. He brushed a thumb over the smiling young woman in a wedding dress in the picture as he spoke. ‘How…how’d you know that Mom was the right one?’

Timing is very, very important.

In fact, some people say that timing is everything.

I’m not convinced that that’s true, but it’s certainly an important factor in just about everything.

Now, my grandfather used to tell me that finding the right one isn’t just about meeting the right person.
Timing, he said, was real important.

Finding the right one is all about meeting the right person at the right time under the right circumstances, according to my grandfather.

I think I’m going to add an appendix of sorts to that.

I think that, maybe, the characteristics of the hypothetical right one for you might change a bit over time, as a product of your experiences.

Once bitten, twice shy and all.

The thing is, that’s a lot of conditions that have to be met for you to find the right one.

Yet people do find the right one.

People fall in love and stay in love every single day.

Even, unlikely as it is, people in my line of work.

I’m quite sure that I’m seeing it happen right before my eyes, even if they’re still dancing around each other.

I didn’t get invited to play DDR and get lemon curd donuts last week, after all.

I still think that me finding the right one is an unlikely event. I’m still seeing the writing on the wall.

But…Professor V always did say that impossible isn’t a scientific term, and Jack and Bozer always say I can make the impossible happen, as oxymoronic and clearly empirically untrue as that is…

Mac smiled as he said his goodbyes to his dad and hung up, leaning over to put his parents’ wedding photo back onto his bedside table.

There’s always hope.

Chapter End Notes

Mac’s recovery from what Nikki did to him is progressing nicely, is it not? (I hope you guys find it believable!) I know he’s a bit contrary with Viv in this one, but I feel that reflects his current contrary state with respect to being ready for a prospective relationship. He’s getting there, but he’s not quite there yet. His voiceover at the end is meant to tie in with the voiceover from the last episode, 2.06, Maple Syrup and reflect Mac’s generally optimistic, never-give-up nature in all aspects of his life.

What did you guys think about this episode? I know there’s not much action (sorry, action fans!), but yay or nay to the (kind-of) exploration of Patricia’s family and backstory?

Frankie’s boyfriend’s name is a joke/meta joke to match her name. Frankie’s full name is Rosalind Franklin Mallory. Rosalind Franklin is the person who took the X-Ray
crystallograph of DNA that was essential to determining its double-helix structure, and contributed rather significantly to that determination. Max Planck is a very famous German physicist.

Next episode: 2.08, Rubik's Cube. A big mission in Taiwan leads to Mac, Jack, Riley and Bozer teaming up with fellow Phoenix agents Nick Edwards, Rowena Ho, May Torres, Carter Justin and Alex Lucas…who have some interesting parallels to our favourite agents.
Chapter Summary

A big mission in Taiwan leads to Mac, Jack, Riley and Bozer teaming up with fellow Phoenix agents Nick Edwards, Rowena Ho, May Torres, Carter Justin and Alex Lucas…who have some interesting parallels to our favourite agents.

Chapter Notes

I’m justifying my giant meta joke with the fact that the show itself has had at least two meta jokes, which may or may not have been ad-libbed entirely by George Eads (Jack’s mention of monster trucks in Flashlight, and his comment on going all CSI in Compass).

If you’d like a full explanation of said meta joke, please leave a review/comment/PM me.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

SWANKY NIGHTCLUB

(VERY SWANKY)

LA

Mac gave Jack a nod of acknowledgement as he walked past the older man and the other bouncer stationed outside, heading inside and making his way over to the bar, where he ordered a drink from Bozer, then made his way over to a corner of the bar, where he had a good view of most of the room, including Thornton, who was sitting on the other end, close by the stage, in one of her elegant jumpsuits – this one was a deep red.

He watched for a few minutes, keeping an eye out for anyone who looked suspicious.

They were running a sting operation, which they’d been working on for nearly two weeks, trying to catch someone who called themselves Mercury who was acting as a middleman for LA’s murky criminal underworld, buying up illegal or stolen tech and on-selling it to criminals, thereby taking away most of the risk for said criminals, as the more the tech changed hands, the harder it was for law enforcement to track down.

Riley was undercover as a black-hat selling a program to exploit a weakness in a very popular brand of GPS that enabled the tracking of anyone using one of those GPSs, and Jack and Bozer had been undercover at this club as a bouncer and a bartender respectively for the last week, after they’d chosen it as the place where Riley would arrange to meet Mercury.

Mac was here as a customer, and Thornton as the nightclub singer (they’d arranged for the normal Friday night singer to call in sick and recommend a ‘trusted friend and talented professional’).
She wasn’t due to start performing until 9, and it was currently 8:15, so they were fairly certain that they’d be able to get the op done before she wound up inevitably blowing her cover.

Thornton walked up to the bar and bought a drink from Bozer, then smiled at Mac.

‘Got any requests?’

He smiled back.

‘Two, but they can wait until later.’ He shrugged. ‘I’m not that fussed anyway, I’m a pretty flexible kind of guy.’

Thornton’s smile widened as she raised her drink in a cheers gesture.

‘I’ll improvise something.’

The presence of Mercury’s two henchmen, who were trying to be inconspicuous and doing a pretty decent job of it, but honestly weren’t all that inconspicuous to Mac or Thornton, trained and experienced professionals as they were, threw a spanner in the works. (They hadn’t expected Mercury to need them, as crowded as the club was and with how deep and convincing Riley’s cover was – Mercury hadn’t seemed suspicious in the slightest - but it appeared they were more paranoid than they’d expected.) The original plan was for Jack to take down Mercury while Mac, perhaps aided by Bozer if necessary, caused a distraction to enable the takedown to occur as discretely as possible while also keeping Mercury as in the dark as possible throughout. Instead, because of the two henchmen being present, Jack was going to need help with the takedown, which was what Mac was going to do, while Thornton improvised a distraction.

Once Thornton had returned to her own seat, Riley strolled into the club, and took a seat in a booth on the side of the room, calm, cool and collected.

Mercury was meant to be here in five minutes.

Two weeks of hard work was all coming down to this.

Precisely seven minutes later, a woman of about fifty with silver-grey hair in a very chic pant-suit walked in and made her way over to Riley’s table, greeting her with a nod.

Well, Mercury is definitely an appropriate name.

Though, I wasn’t expecting Mercury to be a woman.

After all, we do seem to encounter far fewer female bad guys than male ones; I wonder if that means that women are, overall, less inclined to be evil?

Mac turned his attention to Mercury’s two henchmen, who were getting less and less inconspicuous by the minute. He considered for a moment, then ordered a martini with extra olives from Bozer.

He needed toothpicks.

The moment Riley reached up and tucked a lock of hair behind her ear, Thornton got up and whispered to the pianist, and Bozer pressed a button behind the bar to call for the presence of a bouncer inside.

Jack slipped indoors, as Mac got up, toothpicks in hand, and Thornton picked up the microphone…
and started to *sing*, a sad yet sultry, jazzy song about lost love.

Mac started a little as he slung an arm around the first henchman, staggering as if he’d had a bit too much to drink, pulling him into the corridor leading to the bathrooms, and digging his makeshift toothpick-weapon into a very specific spot in the man’s neck, where it’d feel like he had a knife to his throat.

He wasn’t the only one, either. Bozer had almost dropped a glass, and while he couldn’t see Jack or Riley from where he was, many other patrons had stopped and stared and fallen silent.

*This is a very effective distraction.*

*Probably way better than that champagne spray disaster I was thinking about…and a lot cheaper for the Phoenix too.*

His boss, it turned out, could sing.

Could *really, really* sing.

Even better than Riley.

She certainly sounded like she belonged as a nightclub singer, a true professional performer.

*Bozer reckons she’s good at everything.*

*I’ve always maintained that it’s impossible to be good at everything…but Thornton just might prove me wrong.*

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**PHOENIX FOUNDATION HEADQUARTERS**

**SOMEBEWHERE IN LA**

‘…like, that was *so, so* cool. I’m totally putting that in the movie I’m gonna make of all of our lives!’

Riley shot Bozer a look, eyebrows raised and arms crossed.

‘You do know that pretty much all our lives are *really, really classified*, right?’

Bozer nodded, but shrugged.

‘Well, yeah, but it’s gonna get declassified one day…right?’

Mac reached for the paperclip bowl, shooting his best friend a half-wry, half-apologetic look.

‘Yeah, maybe when we’re eighty, Boze.’ Bozer looked very put-out, and Mac turned to Jack, a wry little smirk on his face. ‘Your autobiography’s going to have to wait a long time, Jack.’

The older man made no response to Mac’s teasing, instead, he just looked at the blonde, as if he was still coming to terms with a major shift in the way he saw the world.

‘Patty can *sing*, man. Like *really, really* sing. She’s as good as Mary-Ellen.’

Mac just nodded, rather exasperatedly.
‘Yeah, Jack, we’ve been over this. Three times.’

Jack had been in this state of shock ever since they’d successfully arrested Mercury and her two henchmen.

Well, I suppose Jack has known her the longest, and knows her the best of all of us, after all.

And he is Jack.

He doesn’t make much sense sometimes.

As Jack, Mac, Bozer and Riley approached the war room, a couple of days after the Mercury takedown, they noticed that it was already occupied.

There was a tall, muscular, brunette man who looked to be in his mid-forties, his hair starting to grey a little around the temples and in dark khakis and a grey T-shirt, lounging on one of the chairs. A very petite Asian woman who could have been anywhere between her late thirties to her late forties in an elegant black-and-white striped shirt with black slacks was standing with her hand on the chair’s back. They were having what looked like a fairly serious conversation.

An African-American man with a shaved head who was probably thirty-five or so was leaning casually against one of the walls. He had headphones around his neck and was wearing skinny jeans and a T-shirt that proclaimed There are 10 types of people in the world, those who understand binary and those who don’t, with suspenders and a tweed jacket complete with elbow patches. The woman standing next to him, an eyebrow quirked at something he was saying and in the middle of an eye-roll, looked to be about his age and had a stylish pixie cut and ethnically ambiguous features. She was wearing a white blouse with dark-grey slacks.

The fifth person in the room was a blonde man who looked to be about thirty, wearing smart jeans, a tight-fitting white T-shirt and a black leather jacket, sprawled in a chair while solving a 7-by-7 Rubik’s cube with ease.

All five looked somewhat familiar.

I’ve never met them personally, but this is the Edwards team.

They’re not often here; they do a lot of undercover work and a lot of long missions, but I’ve heard very good things about them.

Mac, Jack, Riley and Bozer shared a glance, exchanging raised eyebrows and shrugs and curious looks.

Looks like we’re doing a joint mission.

Don’t get many of those; this must be a big op.

Somehow, Bozer and Riley wound up standing a little awkwardly near the guy with the headphones and the woman with a pixie cut.

The guy with the headphones grinned at them, and held out a hand for them to shake.

‘Bozer and Riley, right?’

The two of them exchanged a glance (they had absolutely no idea who Headphones Guy was...were
they supposed to?), and Headphones Guy laughed.

‘You two and Jack and MacGyver are kind of celebrities around here!’ Bozer straightened his jacket proudly, and Riley shot him a look as if to say really?, though she did look a little flattered herself. ‘I’m Carter, by the way, Carter Justin. Lifelong white-hat extraordinaire and ex-FBI.’

The woman with the pixie cut shook her head

‘You’re ridiculous.’ She offered Bozer, then Riley, her hand. ‘May Torres, undercover specialist.’

Carter grinned wider and indicated May with his thumb, leaning a little closer to Bozer and Riley as he did so.

‘She’s a master of disguise and a killer actress.’ He stage-whispered. ‘She went to Julliard.’

Both Bozer and Riley raised their eyebrows at May (how did she get from Julliard to the Phoenix?), who just shook her head, shooting Carter an exasperated, yet fond, look.

‘It’s a long story involving the CIA.’

Carter stared at May for perhaps a moment longer than Riley would have expected, something in his eyes that might have been concern, before he turned back to Riley and Bozer and indicated the other three people in the room that they didn’t recognize, who were chatting with Mac and Jack. It appeared that Jack was asking the Asian woman whether she was also secretly related to Thornton, which was causing Mac to shoot his partner a very, very baleful look and the woman to quirk an eyebrow at him and the brunette with greying hair to look very confused.

‘The big guy who’s starting to go grey is Nick Edwards, badass former Marine and our team leader, and the lady’s Rowena Ho – don’t call her Ro, only Nick can get away with that – ex-Special Forces sniper and super-terrifyingly bad-ass. And the guy with the Rubik’s Cube is Alex Lucas, CalTech graduate and ex-Air Force fighter pilot.’ Carter leaned a little closer, as if imparting a secret. ‘Don’t let the whole cool-guy-outfit and charming-smooth-talk thing he’s got going on fool you; he’s a nerd. Massive nerd. Like obsessed with physics and math and engineering.’

Bozer and Riley exchanged a look and a chuckle.

‘Yeah, we’re pretty used to that.’

‘If you’re heard about what Mac gets up to…’

May and Carter exchanged a look of their own and nodded wryly, then May’s expression turned even more wry as she gestured to Carter with a nod of her head.

‘If you’re wondering why he’s like this, he insisted on watching Mean Girls last night.’

Carter affected a very betrayed expression.

‘It’s a classic, and you didn’t complain, Maysie!’ The woman in question rolled her eyes, but there was no small amount of affection in her expression. Carter smirked a little and jogged her gently with his elbow. ‘You know you love me.’ May affected a disaffected look, quirking an eyebrow at him before staring at her nails, but she’d looked at Carter just a second too long.

Bozer and Riley exchanged another look. There was clearly something going on between these two, and it was probably complicated.
After a somewhat-awkward moment, Carter made a face.

‘Jack and MacGyver are ex-military too, aren’t they?’

It was more statement than question, but Bozer and Riley nodded, and Carter shook his head.

‘Great, just what we needed, more military types.’ He shook his head again, as May did too, making a face herself. ‘Rowena still insists upon everything being like crazy-tidy.’

Bozer and Riley just nodded in agreement and commiseration.

‘Mac still keeps military hours.’

The four of them shared a moment of sympathy and commiseration for a moment, four former-civilians who’d somehow found themselves in this life, before Carter’s brow furrowed.

‘Actually…how did you guys wind up at the Phoenix?’

Bozer and Riley exchanged a look, Riley biting her lip and Bozer rubbing the back of his neck.

Riley wasn’t exactly keen on sharing how she’d wound up essentially busted out of prison by Mac, and Bozer didn’t even have a clue as to where to even start telling his own tale.

Fortunately, they were saved by Thornton coming in to commence the mission briefing.

Bozer leaned over and whispered in Riley’s ear.

‘Saved by the bell!’

It wasn’t even all that funny, but she smiled a little anyway.

Thornton tapped the screen, and photos of three people, two men and a woman, aged in their mid-twenties, appeared.

‘Alicia Cameron, Ryan Gupta and Patrick O’Donnell are PhD students at Brown. They were working on projects in partnership with the DoD.’ She tapped the screen again, and the schematics for a very complicated-looking drone appeared. Mac and Alex both noticeably sucked in a breath, which caused Nick and Jack to each give a small smirk. Thornton arched an eyebrow in what was likely amusement, and continued. ‘Yesterday, they stole a classified weaponised stealth drone and disappeared.’ She looked back at them, expression very grave. ‘Intel suggests that they’re smuggling it out of the country, to this tech expo in Taiwan.’ She tapped the screen again, and a banner announcing The Asia-Pacific STEM Fair appeared. ‘Intel also suggests that they’re planning to sell the drone there. We can’t allow that to happen.’ She tapped the screen again, and a series of undercover identities for them came up on screen. ‘Your mission is to retrieve the drone, stop the sale, arrest Cameron, Gupta and O’Donnell, and gather as much intel on the potential buyers as you can.’ Thornton levelled them with that stare that scared them all, even Jack and Nick and Rowena, very, very tough and bad-ass as they were. ‘Do not attempt to move on the buyers. Oversight wants to track them and see if we can take down their entire organizations, and that takedown is too much even for the nine of you.’ The stare turned even more deadly. ‘Do not take that as a challenge.’

She would not put it beyond any of the agents standing in front of her to take it as a challenge.

Putting these two teams together might be trouble…but it was always about the best team for the job, after all.
And this was the best team for this job.

Though she was definitely going to need another cup of coffee.

**PHOENIX JET**

**SOMEWHERE OVER THE PACIFIC OCEAN**

‘…LEDs would have been a better choice, and copper wiring is unnecessary…’

‘You could make this for half the price!’

‘…Eh, this isn’t half-bad.’

‘Efficiency could be increased if you just re-jigged the wiring, though.’

‘True, but conceptually it’s great.’

Over the tops of their briefing packets, Nick, Jack, Carter and Bozer exchanged a very amused look.

Mac and Alex had spent much of the last half-hour on the plane grousing together about the various inventions that the Phoenix techs had created for them. They were backstopped as inventor brothers John and Bobby Darling, heading to the expo to try and get investors for this array of inventions. (Jack personally thought that was an immensely believable cover – even though Alex was a couple of inches taller and broader than Mac, both of them were blonde, blue-eyed and unusually handsome and even more unusually smart; they’d easily pass for brothers.)

They all had thoroughly-backstopped covers for the mission.

Rowena and Nick were very wealthy married investors, Nathalie and Roger Cuming, with a reputation for being ruthless and not entirely above-board, while Jack was their ex-Delta Force bodyguard, Marcus Dale, whom they needed because they’d made quite a lot of enemies, being ruthless and all. When the jet landed in Okinawa, they’d stay on the Phoenix jet, which had its own backstopped cover as the Cumings’ private plane, while the others all changed to commercial airlines to fly into Taipei.

Bozer, Riley, May and Carter were backstopped as tourists heading to Taipei for a well-earned vacation. Bozer and Carter were Brian and Calvin Bozeman, cousins, and Riley was Rachael Davidson, an IT consultant and Brian’s girlfriend. The backstopped identity that May would use to enter Taiwan was high school teacher Melanie Lemarque, Calvin’s fiancé, though a whole array of identities had been backstopped for her to use as necessary.

Rowena and May, who were practicing their Mandarin and had been for the last hour, ignored the whole scene playing out around them, focused as they were. Rowena was fluent in Mandarin, though she’d explained that she spoke with a Cantonese accent, not that anyone on the jet could tell, while May, although she had perfect pronunciation as far as Mac could tell (he, in contrast, was told that he had a horrible accent), wasn’t yet fluent, though she was showing remarkable improvement with even just an hour of practice.

A couple of minutes later, May looked up and gestured to Alex with her head, then to herself and Rowena.

‘Want in?’ She smirked a little, teasingly. ‘You need practice; your Mandarin is really rusty…and
your accent is dreadful.’

Alex made a face at her.

‘Nobody’s going to expect me to speak Mandarin, and if anything, it’ll raise suspicion if my accent isn’t dreadful.’

He’s really not wrong.

After a moment, though, Alex nodded, and Mac spoke up as the other blonde turned in his seat to face Rowena and May.

‘Mind if I join in?’ He shrugged, toying with the paperclip in his hands. ‘My Mandarin’s pretty rusty too; I don’t get to practice much.’

Rowena gave him a small smile, and May grinned as Alex smirked and leaned over to whisper into Mac’s ear.

‘We like to mess with Carter and Nick, plan pranks, freak them out a little about what we’re talking about and the like. Rowena might not look it, but she likes a good joke every now and then. You down for that?’

Mac, too, gave a little smirk.

‘I’m in.’

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**PHOENIX JET**

**SOMEBWHERE OVER THE PACIFIC OCEAN**

**(STILL)**

‘Ten bucks on Mac.’

Nick shook his head at Jack.

‘You’ll lose your money, man. Nobody can solve that thing faster than our Flyboy.’ He nodded at Riley, who was playing bookkeeper. ‘Ten on Flyboy.’ He turned to Rowena. ‘Ro?’

The woman just quirked an eyebrow at him as if to say really? and Nick smiled, a soft, fond, easy expression, as if he’d already known what her answer would be, an expression that Rowena returned after a moment with a little shake of her head.

Mac, who was holding Alex’s 7-by-7 Rubik’s cube, having just solved it for the third time (it wasn’t that hard, though it was more of a challenge than the usual 3-by-3 cubes), held it out to the other blonde, both of them with rather interesting expressions on their face; some kind of mix of long-suffering, exasperated affection and eager competitiveness.

‘Do you want to go first, or…?’

Alex gestured at him, smirking.

‘Be my guest.’
Mac tossed the Rubik’s cube to Rowena, who scrambled it, then tossed it back to Mac and pulled out her phone to act as a stopwatch.

(By common unspoken agreement, she was clearly the most objective person here and the best adjudicator for this little competition-wager.)

‘Ready, set, go.’

Mac started solving the cube as fast as he could.

Who won?

Well…that’s classified.

‘JOHN AND BOBBY DARLING’S’ HOTEL ROOM

HIP HOTEL

TAIPEI

‘…Can you pass me a 220 Ohm resistor?’

Mac reached out and grabbed the relevant resistor, passing it to Alex, who was holding a screwdriver and a couple of wires, focused on setting up part of the security system they’d brought with them, disassembled into parts and disguised as bits of their inventions. They’d also brought a large amount of surveillance equipment, disguised in the same way. They’d have to assemble that after they finished the security system.

They were staying in a relatively cheap, cheerful and hip hotel in the middle of Taipei. Riley, Bozer, Carter and May were in the same hotel; they had two interconnected rooms a couple of floors down, while the ‘Cumings’ and their ‘bodyguard’ were at a very swanky hotel a few blocks away, as befitting their cover.

Mac returned to the ironing board that’d been in the wardrobe. It was partially disassembled (he’d re-assemble it when their mission was done if he had the time, to save Jack dealing with the expense report), and, picking up a length of the metal piping, he looked up at the door, examining the hinges.

Then he turned back to Alex, and after waiting for him to finish assembling the alarm he was working on, indicated the door and held out the piece of pipe to the other man.

‘Can you hold this normal to the door for me, about four inches under the doorknob?’

Alex nodded with a small smile and did exactly as instructed, as Mac pulled out his Swiss Army knife.

Alex turned to Mac with a smile as they finished assembling the last of the surveillance equipment.

‘It’s nice to work with someone who speaks my language.’

Mac smiled back at him, nodding.

‘Jack apparently almost failed high school biology and chemistry and physics.’
Alex looked rather astounded.

‘How?’

Mac shrugged.

‘I have absolutely no idea.’ He paused for a moment, lost in thought, a slow smile growing on his face. ‘He’s really not stupid.’ The smile grew a little wider, a little softer. ‘He’s the best partner I could ever have, despite the language barrier.’ Mac gave a half-shrug. ‘We’re not just partners.’

Alex nodded, a very similar soft smile on his face.

‘Yeah, I get that. My team’s my family.’ He toyed with his Rubik’s cube for a moment, then looked back at Mac, his smile growing a bit more wry. ‘Though it’s nice to not be a fifth wheel for once.’

Mac’s brow furrowed.

‘Fifth wheel?’

Alex shook his head and chuckled, slapping a hand on his knee.

‘Damn, I owe Carter and May a beer.’ Mac’s expression grew even more curious, and Alex continued. ‘I bet them you’d work it out. Nick and Rowena have been together since I was in college…’ He made a face as Mac’s eyes widened a little (he had not seen that coming). ‘…As they like to point out from time to time because I can’t keep a relationship going for longer than six months.’ Mac thought he might have heard a little sad wistfulness in Alex’s voice, but then again, he might also be projecting. Alex’s voice and expression turned a lot more wry. ‘And, well, May and Carter are kind of obvious; eventually, they’ll get their act together and I’ll officially be a fifth wheel.’ He shook his head with a snort and pointed at Mac. ‘Tell me I’m not crazy: they’re kind of like Agents Tommy and Lisa from Deep Six.’

Mac considered for a moment (Bozer was a massive fan of Deep Six, and Mac did admit to enjoying Thom E. Gemcity’s writing), before nodding.

Alex smiled, throwing his hands up.

‘Finally! Someone agrees with me! Nick and Rowena think I’m nuts.’ He looked thoughtful for a moment. ‘Though, that might be because they once met these two NCIS agents who were apparently terrifyingly similar to Tommy and Lisa, triggered some kind of bias…’

Poor Alex.

I can’t imagine that being a fifth wheel is very much fun at all.

Though, if Riley has her way, I might kind of end up a fifth wheel too – she’s convinced that Jack and Patricia would make a great couple and is ‘shipping’ them.

Bozer agrees with her, of course.

I really hope Riley and Bozer don’t end up being like May and Carter…

Watching them dancing around each other all the time has got to drive one crazy…
‘…Oh, come on, man, up your game!’ Carter turned to May with a smirk and waggling eyebrows. ‘My game’s way better than Gupta’s, right, Maysie?’

May snorted as she kept reading Carter’s laptop screen over his shoulder, then leaned over and stage-whispered into his ear teasingly.

‘College boy hasn’t got anything on you…but you’re still a long way from the major league.’

Carter affected a look of mock-pain, putting a hand over his chest.

‘Oh, you wound me terribly, my lady!’

May shook her head, amusement and deep affection very, very clear.

‘Sorry, not going to kiss it better for you.’

‘Even if I ask very, very nicely?’

‘Nope.’

May popped the p as she spoke, and the two of them turned back to Carter’s laptop, where they were going through weeks and weeks of communications between Gupta and Cameron, who were in a relationship.

Bozer and Riley, meanwhile, who were digging through the three students’ social media accounts, exchanged a look, as Riley made a face and Bozer put his head in his hands.

‘We totally need to just lock them in a closet.’

His voice was slightly muffled by his hands.

Riley nodded slowly.

‘I can’t believe I’m saying this….but that actually sounds like a good idea.’

At the moment, anything that would make May and Carter finally stop doing this dance around each other when they clearly had feelings for each other (it was so obvious, even to Riley and Bozer who had only met them less than 24 hours ago) sounded like a pretty good idea.

‘NATHALIE AND ROGER CUMING’S’ HOTEL SUITE

SWANKY HOTEL

TAIPEI

‘…Riles started it, and now she and Boze and Mac have taken to calling me old man from time to time!’ Jack speared a dumpling with his chopsticks with particular vehemence. ‘I’m not old!’

Nick reached out and slapped Jack’s arm sympathetically, then obediently ate the stir-fried bok choy
that Rowena had just put into his takeout container, gesturing between the two of them with his chopsticks.

‘Oh, me and Ro get that. Flyboy likes calling us old too.’

Rowena delicately picked up a dumpling, managing not to break the skin (Jack really couldn’t work out how to do that), as she spoke.

‘Though, I don’t envy you, it must be worse with all three of them doing that.’

Nick chewed thoughtfully.

‘You know, it’d be pretty useful to have three Flyboys. Probably would have gotten us out of that scrape in Budapest a lot easier.’

Rowena simply raised an eyebrow.

‘Do you want to deal with three of Alex on a regular basis?’

Nick looked very sobered, as Jack gave a wry chuckle.

‘If there were three Macs, I’d probably have blue hair and my house would be haunted by a flying scarecrow and a Roomba-lawnmower.’ Nick and Rowena both stared at him for a moment, looking mildly surprised, and Jack shrugged. ‘Weird stuff happens when he gets bored.’

The other two nodded slowly, as Nick picked up another dumpling.

‘And I thought Flyboy building himself a car from scratch was weird…’

‘JOHN AND BOBBY DARLING’S’ HOTEL ROOM

HIP HOTEL

TAIPEI

Mac did up his cuffs and then picked up his suit jacket, as Alex straightened his tie.

Properly attired for pitching ‘their’ inventions to potential investors, the two agents each glanced at their respective signature leather jacket, Mac’s hanging in the closet and Alex’s off the back of a chair, then, with a shared little smile of commiseration, headed out the door.

HOTEL RESTAURANT

HIP HOTEL

TAIPEI

Riley and Bozer exchanged a look over their cups of coffee.

They understood that they had a role to play, and that May and Carter, May especially, were really good at undercover work, and that May and Carter were meant to be engaged, but…
Riley huffed out a breath.

‘It’s way too early in the morning for this.’

Bozer just nodded in agreement.

PRIVATE ROOM
INTERNET CAFÉ
NEAR TECH EXPO
TAIPEI

‘…We’ve got someone here who seems far too interested in weaponry; he asked us if it was possible to arm our household assistance robot with lots of implying and double-meanings.’ Alex’s voice sounded out over their earpieces. He and Mac were at the expo, pretending to pitch, as were Jack, Rowena and Nick, pretending to be browsing for investments they were interested in. All five were really placing various surveillance devices and keeping an eye out for the students and potential buyers. Carter, May, Bozer and Riley were doing surveillance and more digging from the internet café. ‘I’m sending through a photo now, and I can tell you he’s staying at the Mandarin Oriental.’

As soon as Carter received the photo, he started running facial recognition.

‘Mikhail Zverev, he’s been flagged by Interpol for suspected arms dealing. I’ve got him leaving the expo, getting into a limo…and yup, looks like he’s heading back to his hotel.’ He typed a little bit more, and then the white-hat looked over at May, biting his lip. ‘He’s pretty famous for being a womanizer…’

May just nodded, and started pulling a few things, including a wig and a low-cut dress and a pair of very high heels, out of her backpack.

About ten minutes later, May looked completely unrecognizable. She stood to go, checking to make sure her weapon was properly concealed, and Carter reached out for her hand. May wove her fingers around his wordlessly, and Bozer and Riley looked away, feeling like this was a very private moment.

‘Be careful.’

There was a lot in Carter’s voice, and just as much in May’s when she responded, squeezing his hand a little tighter.

‘I will.’

She let go of his hand and slipped out of the room, and Carter leaned back in his chair, toying with his headphones with a long sigh.

Bozer and Riley glanced at each other, before Bozer breached the silence.

‘Not a fan of May doing honeypot work?’

Riley shot him a look, and Bozer just shrugged helplessly. That hadn’t been a good sigh at all, he had
to try and do something!

Carter toyed with his headphones again, looking down at his keyboard.

‘No.’ He sighed again. ‘Look…we do a lot of undercover work, especially Maysie. Sometimes, that involves honeypot work. Every now and then it’s Alex or Rowena, but mostly, it falls to her. It’s her job, and she does a damn good job of it.’ He paused again, and when he spoke again, there was a note of something in his voice that seemed to warn Bozer and Riley off of asking further. ‘She doesn’t like it either, just…she’s strong enough to keep doing it.’ A very small, very wan, yet very affectionate, loving smile appeared on Carter’s face. ‘She’s tougher than me, maybe the toughest person I’ve ever met.’

Unbeknownst to Riley, who was focused on staring at May’s backpack, lost in thought and almost-certainly trying to puzzle it out, Bozer glanced at her as the white-hat spoke, a look on his face that reminded Carter a little bit of himself, almost two and a half years ago, about nine months after their team had been put together.

The white-hat shook his head, pulling himself back together.

Funhouse-style reflections aside, they had work to do.

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PHOENIX FOUNDATION HEADQUARTERS

SOMEWHERE IN LA

‘…Thanks for the tip.’ Thornton gave a nod and a very small smile in acknowledgement of Matty’s words. Two days ago, Phoenix analysts had stumbled upon a very suspicious CGIS agent. Thornton had passed the intel along to Matty, whose team had discovered that the woman was, indeed, an Organization mole. ‘We’ve got her in interrogation right now; Sarah’s having a crack.’ The woman on the screen smirked. ‘I heard you sent Baby Einstein and friends off with the Edwards team. You know, I was kind of hoping I’d get an excuse to send them off on a joint mission…’

Thornton simply quirked an eyebrow at her replacement and predecessor, and Matty looked right back at her, completely unapologetic. Then, after a long, but not uncomfortable, moment, Matty’s expression softened and grew a little more hesitant, uncharacteristically.

Thornton’s face softened too, and she sat down elegantly in one of the armchairs.

There were so few people who understood the burden they carried, and so few that each of them trusted…perhaps it was natural that from time to time, they confided in each other, in their own way.

‘You know, after Jack broke his arm in that trash compactor incident…’ Thornton would know what she was talking about, that was on file. What Matty was about to share wasn’t. ‘…I thought about splitting him and Mac up and partnering Mac up with Alex.’

Thornton nodded slowly, and then spoke, no judgement in her voice, simply stating facts.

‘You’d have lost as least five, probably nine good agents.’

Matty just nodded, grimacing a little.

‘Not my finest moment.’ Matty snorted, but there was plenty of affection in her voice and expression hidden behind the snark, at least to those who knew her. ‘And all because I was worried about the
language barrier between Baby Einstein and the guy who stole the last cheese Danish getting them killed.’

Thornton raised an eyebrow at the mention of Jack as a cheese Danish thief, then nodded slowly and smiled hesitantly at Matty, openness and some kind of warmth in her eyes.

‘Mac is easy to…care about…and Jack Dalton has a way of getting under your skin.’

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**‘MELANIE LEMARQUE AND CALVIN BOZEMAN’S’ HOTEL ROOM**

**HIP HOTEL**

**TAIPEI**

‘…So we’ve got three potential buyers, but no sigh of Cameron, Gupta or O’Donnell.’

Jack sounded a little weary.

‘You forgot about the surveillance we have on all three potential buyers.’

Carter’s rather smart-ass comment earned him an eye-roll from May, as Rowena spoke, her voice and face calm as ever over May’s computer screen.

‘This is good progress for only a day’s work.’

Over the various screens, Mac, Jack, Bozer and Riley shared a look. On their screen, Jack turned to Rowena.

‘We’re kinda used to faster-paced missions.’ He made a face. ‘And we just got off a two-week sting op.’

Nick looked like he was about to make a comment about two weeks being nothing, but stopped himself when Rowena raised an eyebrow and spoke.

‘Alex, MacGyver-’

‘That’s a wig.’

‘That lady’s got a wig on.’

May and Bozer spoke simultaneously. They, Riley and Carter were reviewing security camera footage from the Arrivals Hall of Taipei International Airport on Carter’s laptop while they conferenced with the other Phoenix agents. Bozer reached out and pointed to a woman who appeared to have long brown hair on the screen, and wordlessly, Riley reached out and grabbed her own laptop to track the woman, as Carter did the same with his, Bozer and May looking over their respective shoulders.

‘Yeah, it’s definitely a wig.’ May scoffed. ‘She didn’t dye her eyebrows; rookie mistake.’

Alicia Cameron had dark, fiery-red hair, which she’d attempted to hide using the long brown wig, clearly not successfully enough.

‘…I’ve got her and another guy in sunglasses getting into a town car…’
Riley pursed her lips as Bozer leaned a little closer to her laptop.

‘That’s O’Donnell, he’s got the same bone structure and God, that’s cheap hair dye.’ Bozer made a face, and as the two of them watched, a third man, dark-skinned and bearded, got into the car. ‘And that’s Gupta; he’s grown a beard.’ Bozer ran a hand over his own cheek, suddenly slightly insecure. ‘Pretty good beard too, for like two days’ growth.

May, meanwhile, was focused on the footage in front of her, from the lobby of the very same swanky hotel the ‘Cumings’ were staying in.

(It was the closest swanky hotel to the expo; it did make sense that three people who were expecting a really big windfall who needed to access the expo would pick that hotel – the Phoenix had chosen that hotel to be where the ‘Cumings’ stayed for that precise reason.)

‘Cameron and Gupta have broken up.’ Those two students, as far as they knew, were a couple, but it was clear from their body language and May’s lip-reading that they were no longer on good terms. ‘…And O’Donnell’s definitely in charge, he’s keeping them going.’

Rowena, Nick, Jack, Mac and Alex were all listening intently to the four as they tracked the students, and as Bozer, Riley, Carter and May all looked up again, Jack gave an expression that was somewhere between a grin and a smirk.

‘I take that back, we’ve made pretty good progress.’

There were snorts of laughter and head-shakes and exasperated looks all round.

RESTAURANT

NEAR TECH EXPO

TAIPEI

Mac and Alex sat down at a little table in the restaurant which they’d learned was very popular among expo-goers, Mac putting one of their ‘inventions’ on the table as he did so. (It was supposedly a fully-automated air freshener and purifier – it walked itself to where it sensed it was needed – but was actually a device that allowed Riley and Carter to get access to all the digital devices within 50 feet of it.). Alex reached for one of the sheets of paper in a container in the middle of the table that also had spoons, chopsticks and condiments in it. The piece of paper served both as a menu and an order form, it appeared. He looked briefly at it (it was written entirely in Chinese characters), and then held it out to Mac.

‘Can you read any of this?’

Mac took one glance at the menu and shook his head.

‘No, I’m completely illiterate in Mandarin.’

Alex nodded a little glumly. He had no desire to eat some of the odd ‘delicacies’ that he’d had to eat on that mission to Beijing last year again.

‘Same.’

He picked up a pencil from the cutlery holder, intending to just order a couple of random dishes and
hope for the best (he and Mac had eaten MREs fairly regularly in the past, any food from a packed Taiwanese restaurant couldn’t be worse…and surely it couldn’t be as bad as those scorpions in Beijing…), but at just that moment, a pretty young waitress walked up and smiled at the two ‘brothers’, and handed Alex another piece of paper; an English version (poorly translated, but still English) of the menu/order form. It seemed that they’d had them specially made for the expo.

Mac watched as Alex flirted with the waitress in very bad Mandarin, making the young woman giggle and flush a little, and as the waitress walked away, still pink-cheeked, shot him a look, an eyebrow raised.

*My Mandarin’s not all that flash, true, and it’s still better than Alex’s…but I know he can do better than that.*

And he knows I know that.

Alex smirked back at him, which contrasted with the slightly-sheepish shrug of his shoulders.

‘We’ve got an in here now if we need it.’ He paused for a moment, shrugged again. ‘Besides, a little flirting never hurt anybody…and she is very pretty.’

Well…he’s not wrong about that last thing.

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‘JOHN AND BOBBY DARLING’S’ DISPLAY

TECH EXPO

TAIPEI

‘…They’re keeping the drone in their suite; they’ve got some kind of security system set up and I can’t get in…it looks pretty high-tech, sending you the best photos I can get right now…’

May had been scoping out the students all day (it was now late afternoon). Jack’s voice, followed by Nick’s, rang out over their comms. Mac and Alex turned away from the front of their display, ducking behind the projector screen, standing between it and the wall, and looked at the photos.

‘Mac, can you get in?’

‘Flyboy’s pretty handy with this sort of stuff too; can the two of you get in?’

The two blondes shared a glance, and both shook their heads. Mac spoke for both of them.

‘Based on what we’re seeing here, and the fact that they’re engineering PhD students who have a lot of experience in this area, not fast enough.’

They all knew that the three students would be into the wind the moment they realised that they were rumbled, and their mission was to recover the drone and catch them to answer for their crimes. There was no way they wouldn’t have built the security system to alert them if there was a breach, and deactivating it from the outside without setting it off was nigh impossible.

If they were going to recover the drone and catch the thieves, they were going to have to somehow do it without the students knowing.

Knowing that they couldn’t stay back here for too long without it being suspicious, Mac and Alex
ducked back out to their display… and spotted Alicia Cameron, still wearing that brown wig, in the distance, but getting closer.

She stopped at a booth three down from theirs, and paused to chat with the engineer there.

Alex gave a little smirk.

‘I’ve got an idea.’ He rolled his sleeves up (he’d forgone the suit jacket today; it was rather warm in the expo hall), exposing his forearms. ‘Cameron and Gupta just broke up—’ It hadn’t been a very good break-up, apparently, based on what May, Carter, Riley and Bozer had found. ‘—and she might be keen on, say, getting drinks with a handsome, older, more successful guy to make him jealous.’ Alex’s smirk widened a little, and he clapped Mac on the shoulder, as Cameron left the booth three down from theirs, and kept walking, pausing to examine the household-helper robot that was vacuuming a small section of carpet on the edge of their display. ‘Watch and learn, little brother.’

Mac just shot him a look (it was in character), and, indeed, watched as Alex turned on the charm.

‘…what’s a gorgeous, clearly-brilliant young lady like yourself doing so far away from home?’

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**‘JOHN AND BOBBY DARLING’S’ HOTEL ROOM**

**HIP HOTEL**

**TAIPEI**

‘…We have an in with O’Donnell, he approached us today.’

Rowena, Nick and Jack’s efforts at cultivating their cover had paid off, with the ringleader of the three students approaching the ‘Cumings’ as potential buyers that afternoon. They were to meet him in the restaurant with the pretty waitress that Alex had flirted with that night at 8, to discuss their ‘business deal’.

Jack spoke up, picking up where Rowena had left off.

‘But I can’t go, ‘cause they said they’d come without their bodyguard, gesture of good faith and all.’

Mac nodded at his partner and the two other older agents on Alex’s laptop screen, toying with a paperclip that was taking the shape of a martini glass.

‘I’ll be back up, nobody will think it’s odd for me to be eating at the restaurant late on my own.’

That was true, it wouldn’t be odd at all for Bobby Darling to be getting a quick dinner after a long day’s work, without his brother. He could just say that the more charming and confident John Darling was on a date, and nobody would bat an eyelid. It wouldn’t even really be lying, as Alex had not only managed to get Alicia Cameron’s phone number, he’d also managed to secure a drinks date at her hotel’s bar at 8 pm. He was quite confident in his ability to get himself an invitation to her room, giving him a chance to verify that the drone was there, deactivate the security system from the inside (hopefully without alerting Gupta and O’Donnell), and arrest her.

The other eight nodded, and Jack pointed at Bozer and Carter, who were on the left side of his, Nick and Rowena’s screen.

‘Then I’ll be back up for you two.’ May had noted that Gupta was spending quite a lot of time in that
same hotel bar, drinking away his seemingly broken heart, paying with money that he didn’t actually have yet, but thought he’d have soon. Bozer and Carter were going to target him, pretending to be broken-hearted cousins on a hedonistic trip to Taipei (they’d bought a package vacation very last-minute because it was cheap) to get over their heartbreak (Bozer’s girlfriend had just dumped him and Carter’s fiancée had just left him), luring him away with sympathy, commiseration and alcohol, then taking him out. Jack grinned. ‘Boys’ night out, it’s gonna be great!’

Riley raised an eyebrow, crossing her arms.

‘Just don’t forget you’ve got a job to do.’

Jack affected an affronted expression.

‘Hey, I’m a consummate professional!’

Nobody looked terribly convinced, but they all let it go.

Nick turned to May and Riley.

‘And that leaves you two as back-up for Flyboy’s ‘date’.’

May and Riley glanced at each other, little smile-smirks on their faces.

‘Expat BFFs on a girls’ night out at a swanky hotel’s bar?’

‘We can do that.’

Jack rubbed his hands together.

‘Plan’s done, we’re good to go!’

Alex, who was solving his Rubik’s cube without even really looking, gave a teasing little grin, as he looked up at Mac.

‘Well, Mac’s going to have to re-assemble the ironing board first, I need to iron my shirt…’

Jack crossed his arms.

‘You disassembled an ironing board?’ He jabbed a finger at his partner. ‘You know how much trouble that television and hair-dryer in Buffalo caused me?’

Mac sighed, running a hand through his hair, then flinging both hands into the air.

‘I needed those things to prevent Buffalo City Hall from getting blown up!’ Jack muttered something under his breath about the horrors of bureaucracy, and Mac’s expression softened somewhat. ‘I’m sorry, Jack.’ He held up his hands in supplication. ‘The ironing board will be good as new in…’ He glanced over at the ironing board. ‘…ten minutes. Nobody ever has to know.’

Nick, meanwhile, leaned forward a little, pretending to whisper to his own blonde teammate.

‘You better not be getting ideas, Flyboy. You know I hate paperwork.’

Alex just smirked in response.
‘…I mean, seriously, man, she just turned around and asked me if I liked her new haircut, and it’s like…well, she always yelled at me if I didn’t tell her the truth and all, but it’s a really ugly haircut…’

‘I feel you, man, I feel you.’ Bozer held up his drink, and clinked it against Carter’s. ‘Here’s to being bachelors again.’

‘To bachelorhood!’

Carter stared into his drink as he sipped, mood deflating.

‘I miss her. Stupid haircut arguments and all.’

Bozer sighed and clapped the other man on the shoulder.

‘Me too, man, me too.’

Ryan Gupta, sitting just one empty bar stool down from them, holding his own drink, which, as Bozer and Carter watched, he took a more-than-healthy gulp of, raised his glass to them.

‘Newly single too?’

The ‘cousins’ nodded, raising their glasses to Gupta, who took another gulp of his drink.

‘Yup.’

Gupta shook his head.

‘Why can’t relationships be simple, like…’ He stared into his now-empty glass. ‘…like mechatronics.’

Bozer and Carter shrugged (neither of them thought mechatronics would likely be easy, but they got the point), and drained their drinks (which, unbeknownst to Gupta, weren’t actually alcoholic, thanks to a little arrangement they’d made with the bartender earlier).

Carter reached out, pretending to be rather tipsy, and slung an arm around Gupta.

‘Well, I know something that is simple…’ He indicated Bozer with a jerk of his thumb. ‘Me and my cousin found this great bar last night; cheaper drinks and prettier waitresses than this place.’ He smirked. ‘Whaddaya say, wanna head there?’

Gupta hesitated for just a moment, but he was clearly sufficiently tipsy and emotional, and Carter and Bozer’s act was sufficiently convincing, to be off guard (and he was no professional spy or agent, after all), because he nodded.

‘Yeah, let’s blow this joint.’

As Carter and Bozer led Gupta out, Jack waited a moment, then followed them out, passing by a chatting Riley and May, wearing very stylish dresses and heels and heading for the bar as he walked through the lobby.

RESTAURANT
Mac walked into the restaurant, and sat down at a little table in the corner. He smiled politely at the pretty waitress from earlier that day when she handed him an English menu/order form (she didn’t seem upset at all that he was dining alone – he supposed that she was very pretty and probably got flirted with a fair bit, and as Alex had said, a little flirting was just a little flirting, which Mac supposed was true), and pretended to consider his dinner options as he watched the restaurant from the corner of his eye.

A couple of minutes later, Rowena and Nick, looking suitably snobbish and put-off by the restaurant’s décor (or rather, honestly, lack thereof – the food was excellent, but décor clearly hadn’t been on the owner’s mind at all) walked in and took a seat at one of the larger tables.

A minute later, they were joined by O’Donnell, and Mac ordered his dinner as the two agents began speaking to the man.

Alex smirked, reaching out and putting a finger on Alicia Cameron’s lips as she leaned a little closer to him. Instead, he leaned forward and kissed her cheek, then whispered into her ear, keeping his tone teasing, flirtatious.

‘I never kiss a lady on the lips on a first date.’

His job meant he had to get up close and personal to suspects or (potential) victims or even those completely uninvolved from time to time, even if their team avoided it whenever practical. But he’d worked out little tricks to limit how up close and personal he had to get, because honestly, it wouldn’t sit well with him if he didn’t.

She smirked right back at him, winding her arms around his neck.

‘Even if the lady wishes it?’

He smirked right back, bending to whisper in her ear again.

‘I can be persuaded.’

Her own smirk widened, and she, too, whispered in his ear (he’d forsaken an earpiece, going with a communicator-watch instead; he knew from experience that earpieces weren’t so great for up-close-and-personal work).

‘Well, I might go slip into something more suitable for persuasion, then.’

She unwound her arms from his neck, and stepped away, heading into what he assumed was her bedroom, smirk still firmly in place.
Once she was inside and had closed the door, Alex hurried over to the couch, which was where he’d worked out upon entering the room that the drone was most likely to be hidden. (The couch had been moved slightly; there were indentations in the carpet from where it’d previously been, and the cushions were sitting a bit funny.)

He started examining it carefully (he found no signs of booby trapping or security on the couch itself; he assumed that the students believed that their hotel room security was sufficient – which was a pretty good point, now that he’d seen the system up close and personal – it’d take him maybe half an hour to forty-five minutes to take down on his own from the outside, though he thought it’d be a lot easier from the inside), and then removed the couch cushions, exposing the drone, packed carefully in pieces.

He pressed a button on his watch in a set signal, telling May and Riley that he’d found the drone. Now, he just had to arrest Cameron and deactivate the security system, preferably without setting it off.

He heard Cameron’s footsteps as she presumably neared her bedroom door (she apparently didn’t take as long to slip into something more suitable as other women he’d…known), and quickly replaced the couch cushions.

However, he didn’t have enough time to get up off the floor, so Cameron, indeed dressed in something ‘more suitable’ found him half-lying on the floor, next to the couch.

Alex discretely pressed a button on his watch (alerting Riley and May that he might be rumbled, but hadn’t deactivated the security system yet), as he gave her a wink and a little smirk.

‘Just verifying the structural integrity of the couch…you never know with hotel furniture.’ He widened the smirk. ‘And I have plans that require pretty good structural integrity.’

Unfortunately, she didn’t buy it, expression turning hostile.

‘Who are you really?’

She lunged towards the television, which he assumed was how she could alert the other students (that was good to know), as he sprung up to block her from doing that.

Now, he had to prevent her from reaching the television (or any other transmitting device in the room, such as her phone), he had to deactivate the security system so Riley and May could get in and help, and he had to fight off Alicia Cameron, who was a sixth-dan taekwondo black belt. All at the same time.

Any one of those things individually would have been easy.

Any two would have been not *that* hard.

All three was going to be very difficult.

He fumbled around the doorknob as he dodged a roundhouse kick.

Worst first date ever.

---

CHEAP BAR

TAIPEI
Gupta downed what was his sixth drink at this bar (Bozer and Carter didn’t really know how many he’d had back at the hotel), and rested his head on Carter’s shoulder.

‘I love you, man.’

Exchanging a look with Bozer over the man’s head (this was a weird mission), Carter replied as he slung an arm around the drone thief’s shoulders.

‘I love you too, man.’

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STUDENTS’ HOTEL SUITE

SWANKY HOTEL

TAIPEI

Alex finally managed to deactivate the security system (he knew he hadn’t done a very good job – Gupta and O’Donnell would certainly be alerted, if the rapid vibrating of Cameron’s phone on the entryway table was any indication), but at least Riley and May could help him out now, and now he only had one task.

He pressed a button on his watch, taking a kick to his stomach for his troubles, and focused on Cameron.

May and Riley burst in a minute later, to find Alex struggling with Cameron on the floor. He clearly had the upper hand, but it was still a struggle; she wasn’t quite pinned.

May put her gun back into its holster, and laughed, helping Alex by seizing Cameron’s hands, as Riley took off the choker she was wearing (it was a re-purposed shoelace, but she’d actually received quite a lot of compliments on it) and used it to bind the woman’s wrists together, while Alex pulled off his belt and bound the red-head’s ankles.

May clapped the blonde on the shoulder as they all stood, Riley texting the others to let them know they’d secured Cameron (who did not look happy at all; she was glaring at all of them, which wasn’t surprising in the slightest) and the drone.

‘That’s three times I’ve saved your ass now.’

Alex glared at her, crossing his arms.

‘This does not count, I had her on the ropes!’

May shook her head with a snort.

‘Whatever you say, Cap, whatever you say.’

---

CHEAP BAR

TAIPEI
As his phone vibrated in his pocket, Gupta tried hard to stand up, though, he felt like the floor was spinning, like one of those theme park rides…

‘I…I gotta go…’ He stumbled, and Carter and Bozer steadied him, one of them on each side, as Jack came up from behind and cuffed Gupta, who didn’t really resist, as drunk as he was.

Jack grinned.

‘Easiest takedown ever!’ He held up a hand to Bozer. ‘High-five, man!’

Unfortunately, Jack spoke too soon, because Gupta choose that moment to throw up all over his shoes.

‘Aww, man, really? These are new!’

RESTAURANT

NEAR TECH EXPO

TAIPEI

The second that O’Donnell’s phone vibrated, he got up, shooting Rowena and Nick an apologetic look, though neither of them, trained and experienced professionals as they were, missed the suspicious glint in them.

‘I’m sorry, one of my friends has gotten himself into a spot of trouble, he’s had a bit too much to drink, and I need to-’

Seeming to realize that Rowena and Nick weren’t buying it at all, he just took off and ran, as Nick and Rowena got up and took off after him.

‘I’m getting too old for this!’

Rowena shot Nick a glance as they ran down the street after O’Donnell (he was fast).

‘Don’t let Alex hear you say that!’

Meanwhile, as soon as O’Donnell had started running, Mac had grabbed three plates (thankfully empty) from the pretty waitress’s hands.

‘Dui bu qi!’

He ran out of the restaurant, plates in hand, with an apology, but without looking back. Given that there wasn’t an angry waitress chasing him, and he hadn’t been slapped for seizing the plates out of her hands, maybe Alex’s method of getting an ‘in’ had worked…and maybe he’d simply shocked her so much she couldn’t react.

_I’m told I’m full of surprises._

STREET CORNER

TWO BLOCKS FROM RESTAURANT NEAR TECH EXPO
TAIPEI

As Rowena and Nick, about forty feet behind O’Donnell and unfortunately not really gaining, approached the street corner that O’Donnell had just reached, the drone thief suddenly fell to his feet, floored by three porcelain plates thrown like Frisbees.

Mac skidded around the corner as the two older agents approached O’Donnell, and immediately removed his belt and used it to cuff the man.

Nick leaned over to his second-in-command and whispered in her ear.

‘Maybe Flyboy should learn a couple of tricks from him.’

(Alex, with his CalTech physics and electrical engineering degree and genius-level IQ, was clearly the only one on their team with any hope of pulling stuff like this off on a regular basis.)

Rowena just raised an eyebrow gracefully at him.

‘You are not delegating those expense reports to me, unless you want to sleep in the guest room.’

PHOENIX JET

SOMEWHERE OVER THE PACIFIC OCEAN

Jack grinned as he looked around the jet.

Nick and Rowena were talking quietly in the corner, while Carter and Riley were busy sending all the intel they’d gotten on the potential buyers to Thornton and the Phoenix. Beside them, May was telling Bozer all about how she and Riley had ‘rescued’ Alex. Said ex-fighter pilot was sitting next to Mac, pointedly ignoring that conversation and trying to make paperclip shapes as the other blonde solved his Rubik’s cube repeatedly. Alex kept glancing between his attempts at paperclip shapes and Mac, as if wondering how in the world the younger man could make them so nicely so easily.

Jack’s grin widened.

It’d been a good mission.

A very good mission.

He wrinkled his nose.

Well, it’d been a good mission except for his new, just-broken-in shoes being ruined.

Carter and Bozer’s technique for subduing suspects left a lot to be desired.

PHOENIX FOUNDATION HEADQUARTERS

SOMEWHERE IN LA

After debrief finished, Alex held out a hand to Mac, which he took, and after a moment, pulled the other man into a hug that involved back-slapping.
When they stepped away from each other, Alex smirked at him.

‘We should play pool one day.’

Mac smirked back.

He was very good at pool, though he suspected Alex would be too.

It’d be a really fun challenge.

‘Well, we should have a rematch.’

He gestured to Alex’s Rubik’s cube, currently sitting next to the bowl of paperclips.

Alex’s smirk grew a little wider, and the two blondes looked around the room, where May and Bozer were exchanging a fist-bump, and Riley was talking to Nick and Rowena, as Jack and Carter hugged.

They made eye contact with Thornton, who was watching the whole scene with something that they both thought was a mix of pride and some kind of affection.

‘I put the odds of another joint mission within the next year at about 60%.’

*The only reason why it isn’t a bit higher is because missions requiring nine agents are few and far between.*

Alex pursed his lips, considering.

‘5% margin of error?’

Mac shot him a look, one that clearly said *who do you take me for?*

‘Of course.’

With a little grin, Alex held up his hands in supplication.

‘Margin of error’s important but frequently forgotten about, can’t be too careful!’ He nodded, rubbing his chin thoughtfully, then turned to Mac with another nod. ‘Yeah, I’d agree with that.’

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**MACGYVER’S RESIDENCE**

**LA**

As Bozer took the enchiladas out of the oven, Riley, who’d come inside supposedly to grab some beer from the fridge, walked up to him, looking, uncharacteristically, a little awkward, like she’d had when she’d first admitted that he was actually kind of cute.

She bit her lip, looking like she was going to say something, but couldn’t quite think of the words.

Instead, she reached out and kind-of grabbed him by the collar and *kissed* him.

It was a short and almost-hesitant kiss, not much more than a peck, but Bozer was grinning like an idiot when she released him.
Riley, too, smiled widely at the look on his face, and seemed to find her words.

‘We should stop dancing around each other, ‘cause, you know, May and Carter are kind of annoying and we don’t want to end up like them and…’ Riley cut herself off, and huffed out a breath, sounding a little annoyed at herself. ‘There’s a new burger place near that arcade that I’ve been wanting to try…’

Bozer grinned at her, somehow managing to look both teasing and sweet.

‘Miss Riley Davis, are you asking me out on a date?’

Riley shook her head, and socked him lightly in the arm, but she was grinning fondly and amusedly nonetheless.

‘Yeah, yeah I am.’

Bozer reached out and entwined his fingers with hers.

‘I’d love that.’

They stood there, comfortably, for a very pleasant moment, before Bozer gently unwound his fingers from hers, and pointed to the enchiladas.

‘Now, let’s get those enchiladas plated up before Jack starts eating the deck. Mac’s not gonna be happy if he’s got to repair it, and I don’t wanna deal with Jack with indigestion.’

Riley raised an eyebrow at him and stared for a moment, before she chuckled, shaking her head, and opened a cabinet door to grab some plates.

Outside on the deck, Patricia and Mac both shot Jack a look as Jack texted a photo of Bozer and Riley kissing to Matty. (The two of them, being considerate friends and all, had politely turned away when Riley had grabbed Bozer’s collar, but Jack clearly hadn’t done the same.)

The former CIA agent raised his hands in supplication.

‘Hey, I won that bet, fair and square, but you know what Matty’s like! She’s gonna want proof!’

Chapter End Notes

Alternate episode title: All the Meta Jokes.

The Patricia-is-an-excellent-singer headcanon belongs to helloyesimhere, as does the whole Matty-and-Jack-fight-over-a-cheese-Danish headcanon.

Jack’s constant (fond, exasperated and very affectionate) annoyance at Mac-caused expense reports is my own little dig at the fact that Mac constantly commits petty theft, property damage etc., all in the name of protecting people and saving lives and all, but still…it has to cause trouble for somebody, somewhere. As you might be able to tell from some of my fics, I’m kind of fond of sort-of-bad-boy!Mac, mostly because it’s so amusing, because everyone’s always calling him a Boy Scout (which he kind of is, but not a very well-behaved one…).
Dui bu qi is Mandarin for excuse me in an apologetic sort of sense.

So, what did you guys think about this episode? Was it fun to see our favourite agents team up with the Edwards team? Did I take the meta jokes too far? Please drop me a line!

I’m struggling a bit with motivation to write; 2.09, Scrubs is complete, as is 2.10, Barbed Wire, 2.11, Ski Jacket and 2.12, Water Filter, but I’m behind on the schedule I set for myself to get this done by the end of my winter break…but I’ll do my best for you guys! :)

If you’d like an explanation of the meta joke/an insight into my weird brain, please leave a review/comment/PM me.

Next episode: 2.09, Scrubs. Jack and Thornton are put into quarantine together after being exposed to an unknown pathogen. Mac, Riley and Bozer must race to save their friends, before the pathogen kills them…and before they miss Christmas. Meanwhile, change is in the air at the Phoenix.
Scrubs

Chapter Summary

Jack and Thornton are put into quarantine together after being exposed to an unknown pathogen. Mac, Riley and Bozer must race to save their friends, before the pathogen kills them…and before they miss Christmas. Meanwhile, change is in the air at the Phoenix.

Chapter Notes

This episode’s opening is dedicated to StBridget on AO3, who requested I do something with a little snippet out of Resonant Frequencies ages and ages ago.

This episode is also my personal favourite of all the episodes to date, and should be considered the ‘mid-season finale’ plot-wise. (2.11, Ski Jacket is the chronological mid-season finale.)

Thank you all for your support to date, especially the comments/reviews which really make my day! Hope you enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

MACGYVER’S RESIDENCE

LA

Mac and Bozer exchanged a glance, then looked back into the kitchen at Jack and Riley, who were both partially covered in flour and each determinedly attempting to make a pie, shooting glares at each other as they did so.

It had started with a little teasing and banter on the plane ride back from their latest mission…and had descended into an absurd competition that Mac and Bozer had been roped into designing.

Some kind of makeshift pentathlon.

The first round was who has superior upper body strength? That had involved both Jack and Riley hanging from a bar out on the deck, and had been won clearly by Jack. (Sure, Riley trained with Thornton and had less body weight to hold up, but Jack was ex-Delta Force, after all.)

Round Two was a computer-based challenge. Obviously, Riley had won that.

Round Three was a series of brain teasers prepared by Mac. Riley had won that conclusively too.

Round Four was a marksmanship competition using a couple of Bozer’s Nerf guns. They’d been purchased for a movie project about a year and a half ago, and Mac and Bozer never threw anything out (you never knew when it’d be useful, after all). Mac had found them while cleaning up for the
Christmas party, which was nine days away. (With his line of work, he knew he had to do things like cleaning when he had the time, because you never knew when you’d be called into work. Besides, his dad was coming for Christmas, and Mac hadn’t seen him for thirteen-and-a-half years, and he wanted everything to be just perfect…). Jack had won; even though Riley was a pretty decent shot, she was absolutely no match for Jack.

Round Five was pie-baking. Bozer had picked that; Mac privately thought that on one hand, it’d be an excellent tie-breaker, since Jack and Riley were both terrible cooks, so it’d be an even contest, but on the other hand, the fact that they were both terrible cooks (he really didn’t think either of them could bake a pie successfully) might mean that the whole thing just ended in a tie.

Currently, if the rather unpleasant smells emanating from the kitchen were anything to go by, judging this was not going to be fun.

*I’ve eaten some fairly unpleasant foodstuffs in my time.*

*MREs are seriously awful.*

*Still, I’m a little worried that these ‘pies’ are going to be even worse.*

The two best friends looked at each other again, then gulped.

‘Not my brightest idea, man.’

Mac just nodded.

‘Yeah, definitely not, Boze.’ He shrugged. ‘At least we’re in it together.’

Bozer just smiled at him in response (they’d been through a lot together, and gotten through pretty alright – and there was definitely causation there, not just correlation), then both young men winced as a particularly horrid smell assailed their senses.

Mac and Bozer stared at the two things in front of them that were supposed to be pies, but honestly looked absolutely nothing like a pie should and smelled absolutely nothing like pie either, sitting on the kitchen counter in front of them.

They both looked at each other, gathered their (considerable) courage, picked up their spoons…and then Jack’s phone rang.

The older man took his phone out of his pocket with slightly-floury hands, glanced at the caller ID and answered with a serious expression.

‘Patty?’

He listened for just a second, then put the phone on speaker. Their boss’s voice, very serious and accompanied by the rapid click of her shoes on the floor, rang out.

‘Mac, Jack, Bozer, Riley, there’s been a security breach at Heliconia Biotech. They contract with the DoD and they’ve detected an intrusion in a lab where they work on highly-classified projects.’ They heard a car engine start. ‘Andi is texting you the address, I need you four here in fifteen minutes.’

Mac’s phone beeped, and he pulled it out and glanced at the address. If they left right now, he could get them to Heliconia Biotech in fifteen minutes, though Jack would complain about his backseat driving.
Their expressions all very serious and without so much glancing back at the ‘pies’, the four Phoenix agents headed out the door, Mac grabbing a handful of paperclips as he did so.

*Of course, a security breach at a highly-classified biotechnology lab isn’t a good thing.*

*Not at all.*

*Though, I admit I am really, really glad I didn’t have to eat those ‘pies’.*

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**HELICONIA BIOTECH**

**LA**

Mac, Jack, Riley and Bozer all got out of Jack’s car as soon as he pulled up to the building, and jogged towards Thornton. A Phoenix SWAT team, led by Agent Gonzales, was currently making their way inside. Their boss handed them each an earpiece and pointed towards a Phoenix van, and then an area where lab-coated, nervous scientists were gathering.

‘Riley, we’ve got a mobile command centre in there, get into the security cameras and direct traffic. Bozer, they’ve evacuated the employees, go help with the headcount.’

With serious nods, Bozer and Riley jogged off to do as instructed, as Thornton nodded to Mac and Jack.

‘You two, with me.’

She pulled out her gun, and Jack did the same, Mac falling into step behind them as they made their way into the Heliconia Biotech building.

‘Boss, we’ve got a problem. We can’t get the door to one of the offices open…’

Gonzales’s voice rang out over their comms, and Mac, Jack and Thornton paused in the middle of the corridor.

They heard Riley’s voice next.

‘Gonzales is only about 200 feet away, just make a left on the next corridor to the right, then another left.’

Thornton nodded at Mac.

‘Go.’

With an answering nod, the blonde jogged down the corridor indicated by Riley, as Jack and Thornton continued to make their way through the building.

Jack and Thornton came upon a lab that had all the lights off, unlike every other lab they’d passed and cleared, which were all well-lit.

The door was also ajar.

They glanced at each other.
This might be a trap.

This might also be the result of a panicking scientist or scientists rushing out of their lab.

Either way, they had to clear the area. Standard SOP.

Jack nodded at his boss and mouthed 1, 2, 3, and then he burst through the door, followed by Thornton.

The moment they entered, the lights came flickering on…and some kind of white powder sprayed down from the ceiling, covering them both.

Eyes wide, Thornton quickly reached out and slammed the door shut, and as she and Jack made eye contact, tapped her earpiece and spoke, her voice calm and collected, belying the fear that she and Jack were both beginning to feel, that chill down their spines and that feeling in their guts that told both of them, experienced as they were, that whatever that white powder was, it was not good.

‘Riley, call Doc.’ She swallowed and glanced at Jack. ‘And tell Andi she needs to call the CDC.’

SECURE MEDICAL FACILITY

SOMEBWHERE IN LA

Mac paced in front of the glass, a paperclip in his hands that he was furiously unwinding and shaping.

On the other side of the glass, in a ‘room’ of sorts (it was a giant glass box, essentially, completely contained within the room that Mac was pacing in) that was completely sealed off, with a couple of airlocks for entry/exit, Jack and Thornton, clothed in scrubs, were sitting on two twin beds about fifteen feet apart, being examined by Dr Farnham and a couple of CDC experts, who were all wearing biohazard suits.

Mac made eye contact with Jack, who, in typical Jack fashion, smiled and waved, though Mac could see the fear in his eyes, clear as day.

*Whatever that white powder was...it’s not an enemy that Jack can punch or kick or shoot.*

*And that, I know for sure, scares him.*

*More than a guy standing in front of him with an AK-47 ever will.*

The blonde swallowed, did his best to manage a smile for Jack in return and turned away.

‘Riley-’

The hacker, sitting cross-legged on the floor of the room with Bozer crouched down next to her as they stared at her computer screen, shook her head.

‘Phoenix and CDC techs are still doing analysis, but they’ve determined that it wasn’t anything that Heliconia was working on.’ She swallowed, and wordlessly, Bozer reached out and put a comforting hand on her shoulder, his own face very, very grim. ‘Ritchie’s taking a look now, going through his bioweapon database...’

Mac crouched down, putting his head in his hands and letting the paperclip clatter to the floor. Bozer
reached out and put his other hand on his best friend’s shoulder.

‘Hey, bro, they’re gonna be okay. You ever know anybody as tough as Jack and Patricia?’

Bozer’s voice was firmly resolute, and Mac bit back the thoughts that were threatening to spill out of his mouth, thoughts that he absolutely hated he had.

Jack and Patricia were likely infected with an unknown pathogen or poisoned with an unknown toxin.

It wasn’t one that Heliconia had been working on, and, he could read between the lines, wasn’t one that CDC or Phoenix experts recognized on sight.

Sure, Mac wasn’t a doctor, but he knew more than enough to know that whatever the odds were, they weren’t good.

Instead, he gave Bozer a very small, very wan smile that was the best he could manage, and stood again as they heard a tap on the glass.

Dr Farnham and the CDC experts were in the airlock, getting out of their suits and in the middle of a decontamination cycle. Thornton and Jack were tapping on the glass to get their attention.

Mac, Riley and Bozer walked up to the wall; there were microphones in the ‘room’ to enable them to communicate, but since the speakers were embedded in the base of the quarantine ‘room’, it was easier to hear them if they were closer.

‘Mac, Riley, Bozer, go back to the Phoenix.’ Thornton’s voice was serious and business-like. ‘You can get more work done there.’ Her voice and expression softened somewhat. ‘You’re not doctors and there’s nothing you can do here, but there are things you can do to help, and you can do them better at the Phoenix.’

It was true.

None of them, not even Mac, could do any good here. They certainly weren’t doctors or experts in toxins or pathogens.

But they could identify who had broken in to Heliconia, and what had been taken and why they’d done it, and there was a very good chance that that would enable them to identify the white powder. The two events surely had to be linked.

And they could do that much better at the Phoenix, with all their resources at their disposal, than sitting here in a medical facility with just Riley’s laptop and their phones.

But by staying here…they could at least be here.

Jack tried for a teasing smirk.

‘Not helping my health by having to stare at your moping miserable faces.’

Mac huffed out a breath that might have been a weak attempt at a laugh, and Bozer managed a tiny smile, while Riley shifted her weight to her left leg and bit her lip, eyes not leaving the two on the other side of the glass.

Bozer glanced between Mac and Riley, the concern on his face growing ever-greater, and reached out and grabbed Riley’s hand and his best friend’s jacket sleeve, pulling them away.
‘Come on, boss said we need to get back to work, we don’t wanna get fired…’

Neither Riley nor Mac showed any signs of amusement at Bozer’s attempt at a joke, but they did allow themselves to be led away, towards the door.

As they reached the door, Jack shot Bozer a small, grateful smile, and Patricia gave him a nod of acknowledgement. Swallowing, Bozer just nodded back, and left the room, pulling Mac and Riley with him.

As the three younger agents left, Jack and Patricia just exchanged a glance, a long look full of affection and worry and a fear that they’d tried their hardest to hide earlier, when Mac and Bozer and Riley had been here, but found they no longer had the strength or even inclination to.

Then, wordlessly, Jack slumped onto his bed, while Patricia sat down, graceful as ever, on the edge of hers.

Thornton looked up at Dr Farnham as the doctor finished putting the IV line into her arm.

They hadn’t identified what the white powder was yet, but they had worked out that it was bacterial, so she and Jack were being started on a course of broad-spectrum antibiotics, as well as glucose and salt solutions.

‘I apologise for the inevitable delay in the start of the search for your replacement.’

Just the day before, she’d promised the Phoenix’s doctor that they’d begin searching for a new doctor for the Phoenix the next day, today (even if it was only a little over a week until Christmas), because they both knew that it would be a very, very long search. They had a lot of criteria to fulfil and a lot of background checks and vetting to perform.

Dr Farnham simply smiled a small smile back at her, though he made no attempt to hide his disappointment at the fact just the same. The Phoenix’s doctor was guileless; that was one of the things that the Phoenix’s agents liked very much about the man, and something that enabled them to trust him with their health and sometimes their lives.

‘This is definitely not your fault, Thornton.’

She gave him a very small smile in return as he turned to insert an IV into Jack’s arm. The former CIA agent looked up at him, brow furrowed.

‘You’re leaving the Phoenix, Doc?’

Dr Farnham shook his head with that same little smile as he found a vein.

‘I’m retiring, Jack, as soon as a new doctor can be found. I’m 65 and I’ve worked for the DXS and then the Phoenix for 25 years.’ He paused for a moment, the smile growing wider, softer and more affectionate, clearly unconsciously, something unusual for the normally very-professional, slightly hard-edged, ex-military doctor. Jack suddenly flashed back to when he’d realised how old Doc looked, when he’d been back in Rising Star and asking him for a favour. ‘I owe my wife a nice, long, fancy vacation, and my daughter’s got a toddler and my son’s got a baby on the way, and I’d like to spend time with my grandkids.’ He paused again, his expression growing more wry and more professional again as he inserted the IV into Jack’s arm. ‘And I’m not so up to the demands of this job anymore.’ Being the Phoenix’s doctor was a demanding job that required work at all hours, just like being a Phoenix agent. ‘This is a young person’s job.’
Jack nodded slowly.

The Phoenix hadn’t hired anyone new since Tahoe, with their paranoia (quite reasonable paranoia) causing them to not consider any non-essential hiring, and fortunately, no essential hiring had had to be done.

Until now.

There was absolutely no way the Phoenix could function without a doctor, after all.

He made eye contact with Thornton over Dr Farnham’s shoulder, a question in his eyes.

‘I intended to tell you all tonight.’ They’d planned a campfire dinner at Mac and Bozer’s tonight, which clearly wasn’t going to happen. ‘Doc’s official retirement announcement is going to be made at the start of the new year.’

Jack nodded, completely believing her. Having a new doctor, a new person brought into the Phoenix, someone new that they’d have to trust – that was going to be hardest on those who’d been closest to Nikki’s betrayal: him, Patty, Bozer, Riley, and most of all, Mac. As a result, he felt it was only fair and very important that they got forewarning. Especially Mac.

He shook his head, raising his right arm, which had the IV in it, and gesturing with his left to the glass around them, a wry little grin on his face.

‘Well, this really threw a spanner in the works.’

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**PHOENIX FOUNDATION HEADQUARTERS**

**SOMewhere IN LA**

Bozer paced along the length of the war room, as Riley sat in one of the armchairs, her laptop on her lap, and Mac in another, a paperclip in his hands that was taking the shape of an IV bag.

Jack and Thornton were on screen, both sitting on their beds at the medical facility.

Bozer ticked off what they’d worked out on his fingers.

‘…So as far as we know, there wasn’t anybody at Heliconia who wasn’t meant to be there…’

Mac and Riley both nodded, and the hacker spoke.

‘We’ve gone over all the security cameras, running facial recognition, and there’s nobody on them who isn’t Heliconia or Phoenix.’

Mac ran a hand through his hair.

‘And Phoenix techs scrubbed all the entry points for DNA, and there’s no trace of DNA that doesn’t belong to a Heliconia or Phoenix employee.’

Bozer turned around when he reached the wall, checking off another point with his fingers.

‘And Heliconia’s 100% sure that nothing was stolen?’

Riley nodded.
'Or moved, or damaged.' Riley gestured to her laptop. ‘And all the security camera footage backs that up.’

Bozer turned around again.

‘But a secure lab was broken into.’ Mac just nodded, reaching for another paperclip, as his best friend turned to the other four, his hands flung up in confusion and brow furrowed. ‘Why in the world would anyone break into a super-secure lab and not steal anything?’

Mac, Jack, Riley and Thornton all exchanged a glance, and Riley shrugged helplessly, Mac threw down another paperclip (this one shaped like a question mark) and Jack made a face.

‘That’s the million dollar question, man.’

As he finished speaking, he rubbed his head and winced, as if he had a really bad headache. Next to him on the screen, Thornton gave a very involuntary shiver.

Mac, Bozer and Riley just exchanged a very concerned glance.

We need to find out who broke in to Heliconia and why.

We need to find out what that pathogen is, and we need to find out how to cure it.

And we need to find out fast.

We need to.

‘…I’ve never seen anything like this. Ever. If this is out there…’

Ritchie trailed off, looking rather panicked. He wrung his hands as best as he could, considering he was wearing a biohazard suit.

Mac, Riley and Bozer exchanged a glance full of worry as Ritchie cut the connection from his lab, then Bozer flopped down into a chair, as Mac tossed yet another paperclip shape onto the pile that was rapidly accumulating as the paperclip bowl (which never seemed to empty even the slightest, as full as it usually was) grew noticeably emptier.

‘Human element. Motive. Jack likes to go on about it…’ Mac and Riley were more scientifically-minded and tended to like to focus on evidence rather than speculate, but Bozer was a storyteller at heart, and the importance of motive was something he got. ‘…why would somebody set up a sprinkler-thing full of mystery bacteria in a lab at their workplace?’

Mac answered, his voice flat.

‘Revenge on a co-worker, because they’re jealous of a co-worker, workplace romance gone wrong…’

Bozer nodded, pointing at his best friend.

‘Exactly, bro.’

Riley nodded, and looked up at Andi, who had poked her head in the door just as Bozer started talking about motive.

‘Andi, can you please get people running thorough backgrounds on all the Heliconia employees,
keeping an eye out for any reasons why anyone might want to hurt anyone else? Focus on anyone who might want to target somebody who worked in that particular lab.’

Andi simply nodded.

‘Right away, Miss Davis.’

She turned on her heel and walked out.

Andi normally called Riley by her first name, but since Thornton was out of commission, seemed to have decided that Mac, Bozer and Riley, especially Riley for some reason, were in charge and decided to address her accordingly.

Mac shook his head, tossing down yet another paperclip shape, this one looking like some kind of blob that reminded Bozer of a bacterium, and reaching for another paperclip.

‘Assuming that the security breach and the bacterial attack are linked, it makes no sense if someone was trying to target a co-worker. Why put everyone on alert, risk missing your target and/or getting someone else, and having it discovered?’

Bozer and Riley both looked at him, Bozer shrugging a little helplessly.

‘Maybe it was a coincidence?’

He didn’t sound very convinced.

Mac just shook his head.

‘The odds of that are…’ He shook his head again. ‘…So small as to be negligible.’

Riley pursed her lips, lost in thought as she stared at a spot between Mac’s head and the wall. Then, she started typing furiously, and a map of LA came up on the screen. She zoomed in on Heliconia Biotech, then got up, tapped the screen in a particular pattern, and circled Heliconia with her finger. A red circle appeared around it.

‘What if it wasn’t someone at Heliconia who was the target?’ She reached out and drew a blue circle around the Phoenix Foundation’s headquarters, then blue circles around several other buildings. Then, she turned to Mac and Bozer. ‘These are all the agencies in a forty-mile radius with a high-enough security clearance for the DoD to call in for the breach at Heliconia.’

She jabbed her finger at the circle around the Phoenix’s headquarters, as Bozer picked up her train of thought.

‘We’re closest. Makes sense we’d be called.’

Mac stood, very, very grim faced, as a flash of anger passed across his face.

‘We were targeted, by someone who knows that the Phoenix isn’t a think-tank.’

Another flash of anger crossed his face as he, Bozer and Riley spoke simultaneously.

‘The Organization.’

‘…We haven’t had any chatter about anything like this…’
Matty, on screen, looked grim and concerned, and there was more than a hint of sympathy in her eyes. Beside her (she’d called them over as soon as they’d finished explaining what had befallen Jack and Patricia), Viv, too, looked worried, but with something else, cold and set, in her eyes that reminded them of her aunt, while Sarah’s eyes also held angry helplessness along with the expected worry.

*If Jack had been taken prisoner, Sarah would probably be beating up bad guys by now.*

*Unfortunately, she can’t fight bacteria for Jack.*

*And unfortunately, neither can I.*

Their former boss continued.

‘But we’ll do a full investigation into Heliconia and its employees.’ They were all quite sure that the suspect or suspects was within Heliconia, since no trace, digital or DNA, of anyone who shouldn’t have been in that building had been found with a very thorough search. Matty turned to Viv and Sarah. ‘Starting right this minute, this is our number one priority.’ Both women nodded seriously, and with a last glance at Mac, Riley and Bozer, stepped off-screen and started speaking to the rest of Matty’s team. Matty, meanwhile, turned back to the trio at the Phoenix, her expression softening. ‘We’ll get back to you as soon as we can.’

The three of them nodded in thanks, Bozer managing a small, grateful smile for Matty, and Mac spoke for them all.

‘Thanks, Matty.’

She just nodded, growing more serious again, and hung up.

Mac, Riley and Bozer just turned to one another, and then Mac pulled up the plans for the Heliconia building Riley had gotten him, and started analysing it, while Riley focused back on her laptop. Bozer stood.

‘I’ll go make us some coffee.’

*Caffeine is going to be necessary.*

*This is going to be a long night.*

*It’s going to be nothing but long nights and long days until Jack and Patricia are okay.*

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**SECURE MEDICAL FACILITY**

**SOMEBWHERE IN LA**

Jack and Patricia lay in their respective beds, feverish yet suffering from chills at the same time, and sore all over.

Still, Jack turned his head and spoke, a smirk coming to his face with some effort.

‘You know what’s good about being sick, Patty?’ The woman turned her head to face him as well, each of them noting that the other’s eyes were quite red, and simply arched an eyebrow at him. ‘Pretty nurses and sponge baths.’
Patricia shook her head as best as she could, as if she’d completely anticipated that response (which was probably true), something that resembled fond disapproval in her eyes.

At least, that’s what Jack thought it was.

Patty was hard to read at the best of times, and it was much harder from this angle with a headache that felt like someone was jackhammering in his brain and when her eyes were all red to boot.

He started shivering with a grimace, very much involuntarily, as a particularly bad bout of chills hit him.

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PHOENIX FOUNDATION HEADQUARTERS

SOMETHERE IN LA

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At 3 in the morning, as he, Riley, Bozer and half the Phoenix burned the midnight oil, Mac ran a hand through his hair and picked up a paperclip, shaping it into an anvil.

He stared at it for a long, long moment, then spoke, his voice soft.

‘If it’s The Organization…’ He swallowed, and Bozer and Riley exchanged a worried glance over the coffee pot and her laptop respectively. ‘…then…’ Mac swallowed again, a note of guilt growing ever-stronger in his voice, as he tossed the paperclip anvil down on the table. ‘They’re planning something, and I’m pretty sure it’s got to do with me.’ He got up and paced around restlessly for a moment, as Riley and Bozer exchanged another, even more worried glance as Bozer put down the coffee pot and Riley put down her laptop. ‘That camera in Buffalo was pointed at the bomb, all the divergence from the plan we found was related to the bomb, and then Tahoe…’ Mac turned and faced them, anguish clear on his face and his voice heavy with guilt, as he sunk onto the couch, looked down for a moment, then back up. ‘It’s because of me, it’s my-‘

Bozer almost-flung himself onto the couch, and put an arm around his best friend’s shoulders.

‘Bro, it’s not your fault that crazy-creepy-vengeful people are crazily-creepily-vengefully obsessed with you.’

Mac looked up at him, considered for a long, long moment (he knew Bozer was right, he really did, deep down, but it didn’t really help much, unfortunately), and worried his lip for a beat, before he looked down again and spoke very, very softly.

‘If…if Jack and Patricia aren’t okay, I…I don’t know how…I don’t know how I can-‘

Riley cut him off, her voice fierce and resolute and vulnerable all at once.

‘They’re going to be okay because we’re going to make sure of it.’ She paused, taking in a sharp breath, and wordlessly, Bozer reached out with the arm that wasn’t around Mac’s shoulders and took her hand, rubbing his thumb over it in a soothing pattern. ‘And because they have to be okay.’

She slumped onto the couch beside Bozer, who let go of her hand to rub her back instead.

Sitting there, in the dark of night, doing his best to comfort his best friend and the woman he was dating, Bozer prayed that Jack and Patricia would be okay.

Not just because they were his friends too, but because he wasn’t sure if Mac and Riley, strong as
they were, as many times as they’d been hurt and broken and had still managed to heal, would be okay if they weren’t.

At 7:30 am in the morning, while Mac, Bozer and Riley were halfway through their fifth pot of coffee in the last fifteen hours, Matty called them back.

She looked very tired, much like them, and shook her head as she dashed their best lead.

‘It’s not The Organization. We’ve got no links with any of the Heliconia employees, and there’s no links between any of them and any emerging terrorist organizations either.’ The Organization did like to hide behind other names, other supposed organizations, after all. Riley crossed her arms, her face set, Bozer sighed and Mac put his head in his left hand (his right was holding his cup of coffee), then looked up at Matty again as she continued. ‘In my professional opinion, you’re looking for someone acting alone.’ Her expression softened. ‘Good luck. I’ll have Viv, Lil and Sarah keep looking and coordinate with the Phoenix.’

They nodded in thanks (though, Viv and Sarah would probably insist on continuing to try and find out who had done this to Jack and Patricia, no matter what Matty’s orders were), and Matty hung up, with a last, small, wan but encouraging smile.

Mac drained his coffee, then put the cup on the table and started pacing around the war room.

‘If the Phoenix was the target and it wasn’t The Organization, then why localise the pathogen release?’ The Organization, he knew, played a long game and had very complex, convoluted plans. He didn’t know what game they were playing or what their plan was, but he knew that, and a long game would more likely involve infecting just a couple of Phoenix agents, instead of a larger number. Bozer glanced at Riley, who was also lost deep in thought; Mac sounded like he knew the answer to his own question, something he confirmed immediately. ‘Maybe Jack and/or Thornton were targeted.’

Bozer rubbed his chin.

‘Well, they’ve gotta have made a lot of enemies…’ His brow furrowed. ‘But how could anyone target them? Like, how’d the bad guy work out that Jack or Thornton or both of them would check out that lab?’

Mac and Riley’s eyes met over the coffee table.

‘Logic.’

‘And patterns.’ Bozer’s brow remained furrowed as Riley spoke, and she continued. ‘Thornton’s the best spy in the business, but she still has some routines.’

Mac nodded and started writing on the screen with his finger, annotating a map of the Heliconia building.

‘Jack and Thornton often take point, and they usually work alone, or with a partner, or, at most, with a small team.’ He divided the building into two unequal parts, using the main entryway as the starting point for the line, and pointed to the larger, left-hand side. ‘It made sense for Gonzales and the SWAT team to take that side, which left me, Jack and Thornton to take the other.’

He pointed to the smaller right-hand side, which was where the lab with the pathogen sprayer had been. Riley nodded in agreement.
‘So anyone who is familiar with the layout of Heliconia, basic SOP and how Jack and/or Thornton operates, and has decent reasoning skills could have pulled off that targeting.’

Mac nodded, grabbing another paperclip from the now half-empty bowl. (There was a very large pile of paperclip shapes next to the bowl, and Bozer made a mental note to make sure that it was refilled at some point today.)

‘It’s not much, but it’s something and it’s better than what we had half an hour ago.’

Riley and Bozer both nodded in response, and then the hacker picked up her phone.

‘We’ll see if Jack and Thornton are up to looking through the employee photos, see if they recognize anyone…’ She paused for a moment, closing her eyes briefly. ‘Doc promised us an update at 8 anyway.’

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**SECURE MEDICAL FACILITY**

**SOMewhere IN LA**

Jack and Thornton, sitting up (propped up on pillows, but still sitting up) in bed, watched the screen in front of them, as Riley, from the Phoenix, flicked through the Heliconia employee photos.

They were both feeling much better this morning, and everyone was cautiously optimistic as a result.

It’d been a horrid night, and they weren’t feeling back to normal, of course, but it did look like the worst was over.

Suddenly, Thornton sat up a little straighter.

‘Riley, stop.’ She looked a little closer at the screen, which showed a picture of a Latina woman who looked to be about thirty in a lab coat. ‘Can you run de-aging software on her? Take off sixteen years.’

Riley’s voice rang out.

‘It’s running now. Employee records show that’s Dr Mariana Sanchez. She’s thirty and has worked for Heliconia since graduating with a PhD in microbiology from UC Berkeley at twenty-six.’

Thornton shook her head, as the de-aged image of Dr Sanchez popped up on the screen. She stared at the image for just a moment, and her eyes closed briefly, then opened as she nodded.

‘I’m certain that’s Luciana Hernandez. Her father Carlos was a Colombian drug lord, I was part of an op to take him down, sixteen years ago.’

There was a note of something in her voice, and Jack glanced over at her, and they locked eyes for a moment. He saw that something in her eyes, too, before she looked away.

‘Patty, I get the whole why now thing, but why you?’

It wasn’t unreasonable that it’d take sixteen years to enact revenge on her (she was the best covert operative in the business, after all, and Luciana Hernandez did have to grow up first too); what didn’t make sense was why go to all this trouble (it was a lot of trouble) to take down one US government operative involved in her father’s takedown.
She looked up at him for a long moment, then back down again and spoke.

‘Luciana wasn’t supposed to be there.’ The *something* was very much still in her voice, and Jack swore he heard a quiver in there too. ‘Her being home sick from school was the first thing that went wrong.’ He was dead certain about that quiver now, as she looked up at him, sadness and sorrow and a touch of something like regret in her eyes. ‘It was a six-membered team. Why *me*? Because I’m the only one who *survived* that op.’ Jack swallowed reflexively, but before he could speak and offer what condolences he could, not very helpful as they were (as he knew from experience), she continued, that sadness and sorrow and hint of regret carrying into her voice. ‘She knew how to target me because…we split up. My fiancé and I took point and…’ Her voice grew very small. ‘Her father’s henchmen killed my team. Her father killed my fiancé…I killed him.’

Jack really wanted to get up and give her a hug, but firstly, he couldn’t get out of bed, and secondly, he liked his body parts where they were and in the state they were in, so he simply offered her a nod and a look that spoke volumes. She nodded in return, a sense of gratefulness to it, and he addressed their friends back at the Phoenix.

‘Mac, Riley, Bozer, you guys got that?’

It was Mac who replied, no shortage of sympathy and sadness to go with the worry in his voice.

‘We got that. We’ll find her.’ He paused for a moment. ‘Someone wise once told me that you’re not to blame if someone crazy and vengeful is obsessed with you and acts accordingly.’

A ghost of a smile touched Patricia’s face.

‘Thanks, Mac.’

A few minutes later, after Mac, Riley and Bozer had hung up, promising an update as soon as they had one, and after a couple of minutes of quiet while they processed, Patricia turned to Jack.

‘I’m sorry, Jack.’ There was clear guilt in her voice, as she rubbed her right arm with her left. ‘Luciana almost certainly assumed that I’d be alone…’ She looked away, down at her hands for a moment, before looking back up at him. ‘If not for me, you wouldn’t be here, in this situation…’

Jack tilted his head to the side, jokingly considering her for a moment and rubbing his chin, before smirking.

‘Well, you *do* give off lone wolf vibes, Patty.’ That earned him a little shake of her head, which he counted as a win. His expression turned more serious. ‘We’re friends, Patty, and friends stick together through everything, even possibly-Ebola.’

That earned him an actual, though small, grateful smile, matched by a soft look in her eyes.

‘We don’t have Ebola, Jack.’

Ebola was a virus; they had a bacterial infection.

Jack shrugged, a wry little grin on his face.

‘I nearly failed high school biology, how’d I know?’ His face turned much more serious as he locked eyes with her. ‘I’ve got your back, Patty, always, just like you’ve always got mine.’

Her smile widened a little bit, and Jack’s grin, too, widened.
Possibly-Ebola or not, that was definitely a win.

PHOENIX FOUNDATION HEADQUARTERS

SOMEBWHERE IN LA

Mac looked up from where he was researching Luciana Hernandez/Mariana Sanchez, who’d disappeared twelve hours after the Heliconia Incident (just long enough after that it wouldn’t be suspicious), trying to work out where she’d gone.

He’d been going through her academic record, and was partway through the Introduction of her thesis.

‘Riley, call Ritchie and Doc. Now.’ There was great urgency and fear and worry in his voice. Riley nodded, and got up to step over to the screen, as Mac continued. ‘Mariana Sanchez’s PhD thesis is on leptospirosis; it’s a two-phase illness, the first phase matches their symptoms, there’s an asymptomatic phase and then…’

Bozer looked over at his best friend, face very worried.

‘Do we wanna know what the second phase is?’

Mac swallowed.

‘Meningitis.’

‘That sounds bad.’

Mac nodded grimly.

‘It is very bad, Boze. Inflammation of the membranes covering the brain.’

At that moment, Ritchie came up on screen, and then, a moment later, Dr Farnham.

Riley blinked, a little surprised for a moment (she hadn’t yet called the doctor, though she had called Ritchie), as Mac and Bozer looked up at the screen.

Dr Farnham spoke immediately.

‘They’ve taken a turn for the worse, tell me you have a lead on what this is.’

His voice was clipped with worry and urgency.

Mac swallowed and nodded.

‘Leptospirosis.’ Mac glanced back down at the PhD thesis in front of him, then back up. ‘Likely a hyper-virulent strain with an accelerated life cycle, it’s almost certainly a unique, modified, engineered strain.’

The doctor swore under his breath, seeming to be kicking himself internally. (Mac didn’t blame him or Ritchie or the CDC in the slightest; leptospirosis was hard to diagnose normally, and this strain had, from Jack and Patricia’s symptoms, and how they’d acquired it, been heavily, heavily modified.) He nodded in agreement with Mac.
Alright, that gives us a lot more than we had. There was indistinct shouting in the background, and one of the CDC experts came up behind him. ‘I have to go.’

Dr Farnham abruptly hung up, and glancing at one another, Bozer, Riley and Mac turned to Ritchie, who was worrying his lip and wringing his hands.

‘Nobody’s ever weaponised leptospirosis before…and I’ve never seen anything like this.’

The implication, that finding a cure or a treatment plan that had worked previously was unlikely to say the least, was clear to them all.

The Phoenix’s biological and chemical weapons expert took one look at the three of them, the worry and the fear and yet that determination in their eyes, and lifted his chin a little.

‘I’ll keep researching.’

Bozer was the only one who could find his voice.

‘Thanks, Ritchie.’

The older man nodded once, then hung up, and Mac, Bozer and Riley all turned to each other, not having any words to say.

Eventually, Mac found his voice after staring at the newly-refilled paperclip bowl intently for a moment, and stood as he spoke.

‘I wouldn’t create a bio-weapon without creating a treatment, just in case.’ He paced around for a moment, hands fist ing and un-fisting at his sides repeatedly. ‘She has a PhD in microbiology, she wouldn’t develop this strain without…building in a susceptibility to a certain antibiotic or developing a new antibiotic to treat it or creating a star-shaped peptide polymer to target it…’

Bozer and Riley glanced at one another, worried and concerned and fearful.

Mac was rambling, and sounded like he was trying to convince himself.

Then, they both nodded resolutely.

Maybe they were grasping at straws.

But this was their best hope.

Jack and Patricia’s best hope.

And they couldn’t lose hope.

They just couldn’t.

‘We find her.’

‘And we get that cure.’

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SECURE MEDICAL FACILITY

SOMEWHERE IN LA
Feverish, more feverish than he was sure he’d ever been, Jack, with great effort, turned his head to face Patricia’s bed.

‘I’m sorry, Patty. For believing that you were Chrysalis and not digging…’ He’d already apologized before, but it felt very, very necessary to say this, for some reason. ‘I know, I know, the young ‘uns believed it too, but…they haven’t known you as long and they don’t know you like I do.’ He hadn’t known that, hadn’t realized it, not really, until he’d said it. He paused for a moment, the two of them staring at each other, softness and some kind of depth in their eyes, for a few beats, then tried for the best approximation of a charming grin that he could manage. ‘If I die, will you sing at my funeral?’

She stared at him for a moment, and he swore there was some kind of wry smile on her face, and that it wasn’t a fever-induced vision.

‘If I die, will you promise not to sing at mine?’

His response was to blurt out the first words that came into his head.

‘You have a sense of humour.’

She managed to raise an eyebrow at him.

‘Yes, Jack, I have a sense of humour.’

He blinked.

‘I’m hallucinating. Pinch me.’

She just shot him an exasperated look, and then his vision started to go all blurry…

PHOENIX FOUNDATION HEADQUARTERS

SOMEWHERE IN LA

Mac paced in front of one of the Phoenix’s interrogation rooms, counting his steps in base-7 numbers, in an attempt to at least occupy part of his brain.

They’d tracked Luciana Hernandez/Mariana Sanchez to a little apartment on the outskirts of LA, that she owned under yet another alias, and Gonzales had taken a SWAT team to capture her.

Mac, Bozer and Riley had desperately wanted to go, but Gonzales had talked them down, told them to stay at the Phoenix, where they could prep for interrogation, keep in touch with Dr Farnham, and keep touching base with Ritchie and the CDC experts, and let him and his team do what they did best.

He was right, of course.

But still, I hate just waiting here.

He heard clear, distinct footsteps behind him, and turned to face Riley, whose face was very set.

‘They’re here.’

He nodded in acknowledgement, his own face growing very grim, very set.
‘…I’m sorry your partner got caught up in it. He didn’t do a thing to me. I assumed she’d be alone, given, you know, what happened sixteen years ago.’ Luciana Hernandez leaned back in her chair as far as she could, given that her wrists were chained to the table, and tilted her chin up at him defiantly. ‘But I am *not* going to apologize for making *that* woman suffer and I am *not* going to apologize for killing her.’ She smirked darkly at Mac. ‘There’s no fail-safe. There’s no cure, no treatment. I never bothered.’ Her glare turned even darker as helpless anger bubbled up in Mac. ‘She killed my father. The only family I had. If I died trying to get my vengeance…what does it matter?’

Refusing to believe her, Mac put both his palms on the table and leaned down, very close to her face, barely-restrained anger in his eyes and his voice.

‘I don’t believe you.’ His voice grew a little harder, a little darker. ‘I’m usually a nice guy…but if you go after my family…’

He let the implicit threat hang in the air for a moment.

Luciana Hernandez just smiled darkly back at him, uncowed.

‘Well, then you and I understand each other perfectly.’

He knew, for sure, in that moment (had, probably, known as soon as she’d made that simple declaration of *she killed my father*), that she was telling the truth.

She’d never bothered trying to cure, trying to treat the disease she’d created. Never tried to neutralise that weapon, never tried to disarm her own ticking time-bomb.

Because she didn’t care about what happened to her.

All she cared about was getting revenge on Thornton.

Avenging her family.

Her own life didn’t matter.

*About us understanding each other perfectly…I…I don’t know if she’s right.*

*I’ll do everything I can to make sure I never find out for certain.*

*But…I don’t think she’s wrong.*

That anger, that darkness, inside him threatened to boil over, and he heard Riley’s voice in his earpiece, eerily reminiscent of their boss.

‘Mac, get out of there *now.*’

Watching the interrogation over the cameras in the room, on the screen in the war room, Riley and Bozer exchanged a glance.

They *had* to make sure that Mac didn’t do something he would regret forever, wouldn’t ever be able to forgive himself for.

They both let out a breath that they didn’t quite know they’d been holding when the blonde
obediently left Luciana Hernandez’s interrogation room.

Mac slumped to the floor in the empty interrogation room three doors down from Luciana Hernandez’s.

He put his head in his hands for a moment, trying to calm his raging temper, trying to tamp down that anger he felt at her, and, most of all, at his utter helplessness.

After a moment, he pulled a paperclip from his pocket and started savagely cutting it into tiny pieces using the wire cutter of his Swiss Army knife.

_I knew, deep down, that it was unlikely she’d have a magic bullet, a miracle cure._

_There almost never is one with diseases like this._

_No, it’s usually antibiotics and IV lines, glucose and salt solution and maybe dialysis…and watch and wait and hope._

_And that doesn’t sit well with me._

_Not at all._

_I’m a fix-it, do-something, find-a-solution kind of guy._

_But this time…there’s nothing I can do._

_I’m not five anymore…but I still can’t help._

‘Bro?’ Bozer poked his head into the interrogation room. ‘Doc’s got an update for us.’

Mac looked up at his best friend, who was now examining the bits of paperclip on the floor around him with no small amount of sadness and concern.

Bozer walked into the room and held out a hand to him, which Mac took, and allowed Bozer to pull him off the floor. The shorter man enveloped him in a tight hug, which somehow made things a little bit better.

_Oxytocin is a wonderful thing._

_And Bozer gives great hugs._

_Always has._

‘They are very ill.’ Dr Farnham was as frank as ever. ‘But we’ve put together a treatment plan, and they’re receiving the best care possible. They were both very fit and healthy prior to infection. I can’t give you any numbers, but they have a fighting chance.’ His voice softened, growing almost-fatherly. Or grandfatherly. ‘Have hope.’

Mac, Riley and Bozer all glanced at one another, Riley reaching for Bozer’s hand as Bozer put a comforting hand on Mac’s shoulder and gave a very wan smile.

‘Hey, it’s almost Christmas. Maybe we’ll get another Christmas miracle.’
Mac and Riley gave very, very wan smiles in response.

_Last Christmas, I moved the Earth, Jack got through electrocution perfectly fine, Riley started to believe in the magic of Christmas again, Patricia kissed Jack – on the cheek, but still – and Bozer moved Christmas for us, because we spent it in a Chinese prison._

_It makes absolutely no sense…but maybe there are such things as Christmas miracles._

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**SECURE MEDICAL FACILITY**

**SOMEWHERE IN LA**

‘Mac?’

The blonde turned around at the sound of Riley’s voice. The hacker was sitting up, her lower half still tucked inside her sleeping bag and her hair very messy from sleep.

The two of them and Bozer had taken to sleeping in the room that Jack and Patricia’s glass quarantine room was contained within, as the three sleeping bag-covered cots in the room and assortment of snacks and travel mugs of coffee cups beside them attested to. In fact, they were spending all their time in the room. (Andi was running the Phoenix, though they were still doing some work on their laptops, and Mac had brought along the household assistance robot that he and Alex had been given as part of their cover for the mission in Taipei; with some work, it could actually be useful, and the Phoenix did occasionally need to do something think-tanky if it was going to maintain its cover…)

_We can’t do anything to help._

_But we can be here._

_And that’s going to have to be enough._

The blonde, sitting on the edge of his cot, shrugged.

‘No change, Riley.’ She nodded, as if expecting that (that’s what they’d been told constantly by Dr Farnham and the other medical professionals for the last two days – it was better than another turn for the worse, of course, but it wasn’t _they’re getting better_, it wasn’t _they’re going to be okay_), and his expression softened a little as Bozer let out a snore. ‘Go back to sleep.’

It was the middle of the night, after all.

She didn’t lie back down, but instead crossed her arms and looked him up and down.

‘Mac, when was the last time _you_ slept?’

He shrugged and looked down.

‘I’ve gone without sleep longer before on missions.’

Riley stared stubbornly at him, noting that that definitely _wasn’t_ an answer.

Eventually, Mac sighed and ran a hand through his hair.

‘Thirty-nine hours ago.’
She nodded slowly.

‘And how much sleep did you get?’

Mac sighed again.

‘Two hours.’ Riley shot him a look that really was reminiscent of Thornton. Mac’s brain idly, randomly and crazily (the lack of sleep really must be getting to him) wondered if Thornton’s fighting lessons with Riley also included a side of facial expressions tutoring. He sighed, and pulled his sleeping bag over to himself and grabbed his phone. ‘I’ll try and get some sleep.’

He set his alarm for two hours later. He’d sleep two hours, and then return to keeping his vigil.

He put down his phone and got into his sleeping bag, then started reciting off the digits of Pi in his head and deliberately calmed his breathing, trying to lull himself into sleep.

Mac woke 7 hours later, to the sound of Matty yelling.

‘Jack Dalton, you still owe me a cheese Danish!’ She put her hands on her hips. ‘You are not allowed to die!’

Beside her, Sarah was watching Jack with eyes full of concern and that same helpless anger, while Viv’s dark eyes watched her aunt, too much emotion in them to be read (that same helpless anger, worry, sorrow and perhaps guilt and regret…), her face conspicuously missing her usual flawless eyeliner.

Mac looked over at Riley and Bozer, who looked completely unapologetic at tampering with his alarm, and found that he couldn’t be annoyed at them in the slightest.

We’re family.

Family cares, and family looks after one another.

Even if sometimes, we show it in…interesting…ways.

Like by making a big fuss over a cheese Danish.

Though, I’m 96% sure that Matty doesn’t really care about the cheese Danish.

I say 96% because…well, cheese Danishes are really delicious.

Five days before Christmas, in the middle of the night, Mac, Riley and Bozer were woken by a smiling Dr Farnham.

‘Doc-‘

The Phoenix’s doctor simply pointed to the quarantine room, where Jack and Patricia, looking very pale and weak still, but fully conscious for the first time in days, were being examined by a couple of doctors and nurses. As they watched, Jack waved at them, surprisingly energetically, and Patricia smiled.

Mac felt himself smiling in return, as Bozer whooped and danced around, pulling a not-really-protesting, grinning Riley with him.
He turned to Dr Farnham, whose smile widened a little.

‘They’re out of the woods, they’re going to be fine, Mac.’

He turned back to face the glass wall, and Jack smiled and mouthed can’t get rid of me that easy, brother at him.

Mac’s smile widened further, as Dr Farnham stretched, his back cracking, muttering something about being too old for this and looking forward to retirement.

Even the little stab of panic that that news brought (someone new, a stranger, being brought into the Phoenix that he’d have to trust, and trust very much) couldn’t dampen his mood.

*Jack and Patricia are going to be okay…

...And it’s almost Christmas.

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**MACGYVER’S RESIDENCE**

**LA**

An hour before everyone was due to arrive for their Christmas party, Mac was frantically vacuuming, while at the same time, trying to put away all of his (and Bozer’s, but honestly mostly his) various unusual belongings. He’d planned to do more cleaning, but with Jack and Patricia being infected with leptospirosis and being in hospital, he hadn’t had the time.

*What kind of normal, self-respecting, successful, and someone-to-be-proud-of twenty-five year old owns a jury-rigged children’s arcade game made out of a gumball machine and a vacuum cleaner? Or a scarecrow? Or a pancake-making toaster and an automatic iron and a kiddie-pool-hot-tub, most of which he made himself?*

As he was shoving the gumball-machine-vacuum-cleaner arcade game into his bedroom, Jack came up to him and put both hands on the younger man’s shoulders, gently forcing him to stop what he was doing and look him in the eyes.

‘Mac, he’s your dad. He loves you. He ain’t gonna care and he’s gonna be proud. Real proud.’ Jack squeezed his shoulders tighter for a moment, then smirked, jerking his head at the living room. ‘Besides, this is pretty neat and pretty tame for a bachelor pad.’

Slowly, after a moment, Mac smiled back at the older man.

‘Thanks, Jack.’

*What for* never really had to be specified between them.

Mac grinned as he carried a couple of bowls of potato salad out onto the deck, where Bozer was tending to the pastrami by the grill (there’d been no fire this time), Riley was pouring drinks, and Jack and Patricia (both still a bit wan and pale from their illness, so firmly and insistently barred from doing anything) sat by the fire pit, Jack playing a familiar Christmas carol on Mary-Ellen’s guitar and Patricia singing along softly.

He headed back inside to the kitchen to pick up the coleslaw, which Penny had just finished making
(she was now starting on a garden salad). His ex-girlfriend-still-friend was giggling and a little pink, probably because she’d had some of Matty’s extra-special egg-nog (Viv, Sarah, Charlie and Lil would all have been welcome too, but they had their own families to spend Christmas with), which she was making a second batch of right that minute, while chatting with Diane, who was perched on a barstool by the counter, peeling carrots.

Just as he was about to pick up the coleslaw bowl, the doorbell rang, and palms suddenly sweaty, Mac walked over to the door and opened it…and laid eyes on his dad for the first time in thirteen-and-a-half years.

The two of them stared at each other for a very, very long moment (His dad, Mac thought, looked shorter and older than he remembered, which he supposed made a lot of sense; he should have expected it, but it still shocked him…at the same time, all James MacGyver could think of was that his son had grown so, so much).

Then, Mac smiled, a little awkwardly, but broadly and very genuinely nonetheless. It was a smile his dad returned.

‘Hi, Dad.’

‘Hello, Mac.’

His dad had always called him Gus when he was a kid, but after the first couple of letters they’d exchanged, he’d started calling him Mac.

Mac felt that it sat well, that he preferred this new form of address.

I guess it kind of symbolises a clean break.

Building a new relationship, perhaps, not restarting a broken one.

Not making the same mistakes and causing the same wounds again.

Then, after another not-altogether-awkward moment, his dad hesitantly reached out and hugged him.

‘Merry Christmas, Mac.’

His head over his dad’s shoulder (the fact that he was tall enough that his head now sat over his dad’s shoulder when he hugged him was another little shock all on its own), Mac’s smile widened.

‘Merry Christmas, Dad.’

When they broke apart, Mac gestured inside.

‘Come meet my friends.’

His dad’s smile widened.

Merry Christmas indeed.

Chapter End Notes
Are you all mad at me for making literally everyone suffer? Also, I know that Christmas is very early in this season; I originally wanted this to be episode 11, to fit in with the first, actual season, but I couldn’t fit the plot for the second ‘half’ of the season into 11 episodes, so it instead occupies 13 episodes. What did you guys think? I’m hoping that I got the ~emotion~ of this episode and the characters’ reactions fairly right!

Personally, this episode is my favourite so far. I can’t put a finger on the why, but it is! My favourite moment might be Matty yelling at Jack that he’s not allowed to die because he owes her a cheese Danish, TBH. (Thanks again, helloyesimhere! Cheese Danishes are mentioned at least once more in this story as of halfway through 1.17, so there’s a lot of thanks in that thank you!) I have never actually eaten a cheese Danish but am assuming that they are delicious.

Leptospirosis is a real disease, though I have fictionalized aspects of it – the modified strain that they talk about is entirely fictional and I’m not sure that such a strain could even be created.

I know it might seem weird that Riley, Bozer and Mac are in charge of the Phoenix in Thornton’s absence, but I based that off the fact that at the start of Large Blade, it did seem that Riley was giving quite a lot of orders and she mentions that she and Bozer got to boss around the CIA. I’m also assuming that Mac and Co. are very, very well-regarded by the other Phoenix agents/are considered ‘star’ agents, as Carter mentioned last episode. Also, if you’re wondering why Mac and Bozer’s guests are helping make Christmas dinner, it’s because, 1, it’s a family sort of thing, so they’re all working on it together, and 2, there was a really, really, really bad gastro outbreak (*wink, wink*) at the Phoenix, and Jack and Patricia have been very sick so Mac and Bozer barely had time to do any prep, and need all the help they can get, and of course, everyone’s very nice about it!

Next episode: 2.10, Barbed Wire. Mac’s past has returned to haunt him again. The Ghost is back, and Thornton’s finally found the Phoenix a new doctor. In Jack’s mind, neither development is good for his partner’s well-being.
Barbed Wire

Chapter Summary

Mac’s past has returned to haunt him again.

The Ghost is back, and Thornton’s finally found the Phoenix a new doctor.

In Jack’s mind, neither development is good for his partner’s well-being.

Chapter Notes

This is about 7000 words, making it a very, very short episode, but I really didn’t want to add too much ‘filler’ to this one and draw it out, for reasons that will hopefully become fairly clear as you read. Hope you enjoy anyway!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

MACGYVER’S RESIDENCE

LA

‘What the hell is that, brother?’

Jack, who’d just showed up with poppyseed bagels, stared at the thing that Bozer and Riley (now very much official – last month, Mac had wound up at Jack’s on Valentine’s Day, drinking beer and watching a selection of Bruce Willis films, including Die Hard, while Bozer made Riley dinner) were driving around the floor of Mac and Bozer’s living room. Bozer was grinning ridiculously in amusement, while Riley looked a little astounded at how much she was enjoying herself.

Mac grinned, seizing the poppyseed bagel bag out of Jack’s hands and pulling one out.

‘It’s a remote-controlled potato car. There’s a lot of electrochemical energy in a potato, I just harnessed it.’

With that, he took a large, enthusiastic bite of his poppyseed bagel.

Jack raised an eyebrow and nodded slowly.

‘Right…’

Well, he’d always known his partner was crazy.

Mac was halfway through his second poppyseed bagel when the front door opened to reveal Thornton, holding four rather thick files in her arms.
She walked inside, closing the door behind her, and held the files out to them, one each, without any preamble.

‘I’ve found the Phoenix a new doctor.’

_Thornton and Doc have been searching for months, since just after Christmas._

_It was always going to be a long, difficult search._

_There were a lot of criteria._

_Practical ones, like being trained in emergency medicine, being under forty, with no partner, children or any other dependents, not being well-known among medical professionals or active in the research community, and it being possible to establish a believable cover for them. That is, having some kind of reason to take a job at a think-tank, doing some research and looking after the staff._

_And more intangible ones. Stubbornness, patience. A lot of us, I’ll admit, are pretty terrible patients._

_And a strong moral compass, a sense of idealism, wanting to do good and save lives above all._

_And then there was a lot and a lot of vetting. Extremely thorough background checks, psych evals, even interrogations…_  

_Combined with the fact that Thornton and Doc only considered candidates that came recommended by trusted contacts of theirs…well, it’s been a very, very long search._

_Overkill?_  

_Possibly._

_But after Nikki…well, let’s just say we don’t want that to happen again._

_Really don’t want that to happen again._

There was a photo on the right side of the top half of the first page in the file, which drew Jack’s eye as soon as he opened it.

It showed a young woman, with long, light brown hair, pulled and pinned neatly back into a ponytail. She had brown eyes and wore a doctor’s coat.

She was also pretty, and he’d even call her attractive if she didn’t look young enough to be his daughter.

He read on.

Dr Beth Taylor, 26 years old in May.

He was about to make a snappy comment about whether she was even old enough to be a fully-qualified doctor (sure, he worked with Mac and Riley, but as smart as they were, Mac was a college dropout, and Riley’s past was even more complicated – doctors had to follow a pretty by-the-book path to be qualified, in contrast), but the words died on his lips as he kept reading.

Dr Taylor graduated high school at 16 (like Mac, because she was a genius too), did pre-med in two years at Purdue (by, it seemed, starting as soon as her Senior year had finished, giving up her
summer, and then giving up every break after that and spending them in class instead), and did
medical school at Northwestern, followed by an ER residency in Detroit.

Then, she’d spent 9 months serving with MSF in Aleppo, Syria.

Well, there was the answer to his next question: what would be her cover for joining the Phoenix?

People would believe, easily, readily, without question, that a young female doctor like her, pretty
and sweet-looking, and very, very young would be pretty broken by what she’d seen over in Syria,
and that with her brilliant intellect, she’d choose to do research and prevent caffeine overdoses and
treat diabetes and high blood pressure in think-tank staff instead of diving back into the stress and
trauma of an ER.

He looked up briefly for a moment, making eye contact with Thornton, who held his gaze calmly
and spoke.

‘Dr Taylor comes highly recommended by Dr Chris Garcia, Doc’s best friend since medical school.
They served in the Army Medical Corps together, until Dr Garcia went civilian and Doc joined the
DXS. Dr Garcia still serves with MSF; that’s how he met her.’ Thornton made eye contact with all
four of them in turn, her eyes a little bit softer. ‘I cleared her, and Matty cleared her.’

Jack looked back down at the file again.

All those people who’d believe that Dr Taylor was rather fragile would be very wrong.

He knew that she’d have seen some things over there, a little like how he and Mac had seen some
things (more than some things, honestly) when they’d been over there.

If she’d made it through 9 months over there, and interrogation by both Thornton and Matty (who
would not have gone easy on her in the slightest), and was still strong enough to be able to do this
job…well, she had to be a lot tougher than she looked.

Jack looked up at Riley, then at Bozer, then Patty, then Mac.

Just like this lot.

They all turned the page (by some unspoken agreement, Mac and Riley had waited for Bozer and
Jack to finish reading), and found that the rest of the file contained, essentially, everything on Dr
Taylor.

Her psych evals, the transcripts of Thornton and Matty’s interrogations of her, her whole life story…

If they read this, Dr Taylor would have no secrets from them, none at all.

Mac, Jack, Riley and Bozer looked up at each other, then at their boss, who held their gaze, ever-so-
slightly uncomfortable, but also very resolute.

‘If it helps you to trust her…’

If they ever needed proof that she was willing to bend the rules occasionally, because she really did
care, this was it.

Riley closed her copy immediately, followed quickly by Bozer, and the two of them handed the files
back to Thornton, who simply took them with a nod, as if she’d been expecting them to do that
(which was probably true).
Everyone, Riley felt, was entitled to some secrets, and to not be pre-judged by what they'd done in the past (what mistakes they might have made). She trusted Thornton and she trusted Matty and she trusted their judgement and she trusted their entire hiring and vetting process.

Bozer firmly agreed with that. Mac, his best friend, had kept an entire secret life from him for years, and Bozer was well aware that there were still some things that Mac would never, ever tell him. He was cool with that and got that Mac had his reasons. That didn’t change the fact that they were BFFs. It didn’t seem right to read and learn a stranger’s secrets when he didn’t begrudge his best friend a few secrets of his own.

Mac turned back to the page that detailed Dr Taylor’s educational history, staring at the file, but lost in his mind for a full minute.

He was so tempted.

So, so tempted.

It was wrong. He knew that.

It was the wrong thing to do to anyone, without a good reason, and even with a good reason…it still wouldn’t sit well with him.

(Even with all of what Murdoc had done, even though it’d been so essential to force him to cooperate, he hadn’t approved of using Murdoc’s son against him at all. He’d understood it was necessary, but it didn’t sit well.)

Dr Taylor hadn’t given him a single reason to not trust her.

In fact, she’d given him, despite never having met him, many reasons to trust her, including being recommended by Doc’s trusted contact, being cleared by the most thorough vetting and psychological evaluation process possible, and Matty and Thornton’s interrogations to boot.

He trusted Doc. He trusted his Phoenix colleagues. Most of all, he trusted Matty and he trusted Thornton, and he trusted their judgement. They would not allow themselves to be fooled twice.

He knew enough, had enough information, to trust her to do her job. To trust her to be the Phoenix’s doctor, he told himself. (He didn’t wholly believe that, not yet, but, he told himself, from a purely rational perspective, he should trust her as the Phoenix’s doctor. The more emotional and irrational parts of him would take some time, some persuading, he knew, which would only happen once he actually met Dr Taylor.)

Reading this entire file, learning all her secrets when he was but a stranger to her…that was not the right thing to do to a woman who had decided to devote her life to helping people and saving lives (sacrificing, he was completely sure, many other, more glamourous offers to do so – with her intellect and obvious drive, she could have become a well-recognized academic or eventually taken a well-paid and well-titled role in R&D in Silicon Valley or the like), and was going to give up so much to become the Phoenix’s doctor.

Mac always, always, always tried to do the right thing.

He closed the file, and handed it back to this boss, who looked at him for a long moment with something inscrutable in her eyes, then turned to Jack.

The older man closed the file, but didn’t hand it back.
'Can I hang on to this for a while, Patty?'

Her dark eyes meeting his, she simply nodded.

Mac, Riley and Bozer all glanced at Jack, and Mac was about to say something when Thornton’s phone rang.

She picked up, and listened for a moment, before hanging up again and turning to them, very grim and with a hint of anger in her eyes.

She held Mac’s gaze and spoke words that he’d hoped he would never hear.

‘Mac, The Ghost is back.’

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**PHOENIX FOUNDATION HEADQUARTERS**

**SOMEWHERE IN LA**

‘Two hours ago, the LAPD bomb squad were called out to this block of condos in Koreatown.’ An image came up on the screen of a rather nondescript condo building on a busy, buzzing street as Thornton spoke. She looked over at Mac, her eyes set and hard and cold. ‘They found a bomb-within-a-bomb, both made of pure PETN. The second one caught them by surprise.’

Mac swallowed, throwing the paperclip ghost he’d been making down onto the table, then looked up at Thornton.

‘How many casualties?’

Thornton looked at him for a moment with what Jack thought was sadness, as Mac stared at the picture of the condo building, eyes set and grim and determined and with anger simmering under the surface.

‘No civilians, but two LAPD bomb techs.’ Jack heard his partner swear under his breath, as Thornton continued. ‘Mac, you’re meeting Charlie at the site. Jack, I need you to stay here; Gonzales and his team are on another mission, and I need a SWAT team ready to deploy.’ Jack glanced at his partner with no small amount of concern, not really wanting to let Mac go face this particular demon without him, but nodded (Charlie was a good man, and Jack trusted him, just as his partner did, and maybe Charlie did understand Mac’s exact feelings about The Ghost a little better, being a fellow EOD and having known Mac when Pena’s death was still very, very raw), as Thornton addressed Bozer and Riley. ‘Bozer, Riley, there’s got to be a money trail, find it.’

They all knew that this was unlikely to be the only bomb The Ghost had planted.

Something sinister was definitely afoot.

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Jack walked with Mac down to the parking garage, and grasped his partner’s arm just as the younger man was getting into the car.

‘Go get him, Mac.’ He paused for a moment. ‘Drive careful. You’re a bit of a menace behind the wheel.’

Mac snorted.
‘Who was the one who crashed into a garbage bin in Maryland last month?’

Jack pointed at him, looking rather affronted.

‘Hey, we were under fire, man!’

Mac shook his head with a little smile.

‘Still crashed, Jack.’

Jack shook his head and muttered something about Mac having no respect for his elders, before squeezing his partner’s arm one last time and stepping back.

Mac gave a small, grateful little smile as he started up the ignition.

He and Jack both knew very well that Jack hadn’t (just) been referring to his driving when he’d told him to be careful.

DETONATION SITE

KOREATOWN

LA

Charlie reached out and clasped Mac’s hand, pulling him a little closer and slapping him on the back, a gesture that Mac returned with a wan smile.

‘Hey, Charlie. How’s Marissa settling into LA?’

Charlie’s girlfriend had received a job transfer to LA from New York (some strings had been pulled) when it became clear that Charlie was going to be working for Matty indefinitely.

Charlie’s smile widened despite the situation.

‘Oh, she’s loving the West Coast life, man.’ He looked Mac up and down with a wry little expression. ‘She’s been working on her tan, unlike you.’

Mac shook his head, before the darkness of the whole situation caught up with both of them as they approached the barricaded-off area, Charlie flashing his FBI ID to get them through.

‘We have to get him this time.’

Charlie looked over at him with a bit of concern, but his eyes mirrored that grim determination and cold, hardened anger that Mac’s held just the same. He nodded.

‘SOB’s not getting away again, Mac.’

As he spoke, Charlie crouched down to examine the scorched ground more closely, while Mac stepped carefully over to the other side, and started doing what he’d been trained to do.

Mac carefully picked up the half-burnt postcard with the tweezers from his Swiss Army knife.

What was a postcard depicting the Venice Beach Boardwalk doing on a busy, but admittedly not
really touristy, street outside of some condos in Koreatown?

He turned the postcard over, to find an address, singed and partially burnt off, but still legible.

Well, not so much an address, but a set of coordinates.

Coordinates that he knew very, very well, that were seared into his memory forever.

Coordinates for a specific building in Kunduz, Afghanistan.

The postcard had been perfectly placed, just at the right spot, so that it’d be caught in the blast zone, but not absolutely destroyed.

Only an expert, a bombmaker or an EOD, could pull off something like that.

Mac swore, causing Charlie to look up at him, and wordlessly, Mac showed the other EOD tech the postcard.

Charlie glanced over at him a moment later, and Mac just nodded.

‘It’s him, and we’ve got to get to the Venice Beach Boardwalk.’

Charlie just nodded, swallowing, and silently, he and Mac jogged back over to the car that Mac had taken from the Phoenix motor pool, Mac tossing Charlie the keys.

That was as close as he was going to get to admitting that he was in no fit state to drive.

They both knew that there was a bomb on the Venice Beach Boardwalk, courtesy of The Ghost.

We also both know that this is a taunt and likely a trap.

But we have a job to do, and we’re going to do it.

VENICE BEACH BOARDWALK

LA

The second bomb was much, much simpler.

No bomb-within-a-bomb, no tricks.

Well-built, pure PETN again, but nothing special.

Mac and Charlie had disarmed it without too much trouble, something that was giving them both a strong sense of unease.

Whatever this was...this was not his endgame.

Charlie was currently speaking with LAPD, while Mac searched the area for something out of place.

They were both completely certain that The Ghost was toying with them, playing a twisted game.

They knew he’d have left another message for them, another twisted calling card, another taunt.

I chased this man through Afghanistan for two years.
He earned his name.

But I’m going to catch him.

I will.

I’ll chase him the rest of my life if that’s what it takes.

Crouched beside a garbage bin, Mac picked up a discarded movie ticket for a screening of *Top Gun* at the Egyptian Theatre.

At first glance, it was just a piece of litter…but looking closer, he found that the date on the ticket did not make any sense at all.

The ticket looked new, recently printed.

But it was dated about six and a half years ago.

Printed on the ticket was a very, very specific date.

Pushing away the feelings that had been running amok through him ever since Thornton had spoken those fateful words that morning (he had to focus), Mac stood, and pulled out his phone.

‘Riley, is the Egyptian Theatre showing *Top Gun* tonight?’

There was the sound of her nails clacking on her keyboard for a moment.

‘Yeah, they are, Mac. Do you need it cancelled?’

He motioned discreetly to Charlie, who had glanced over at him when he’d started talking to Riley, and the other EOD started to disengage himself from his conversation with the two LAPD officers he was talking to.

It was only just before noon.

He and Charlie had plenty of time to find and disarm the bomb, and although he was quite sure that this was definitely not The Ghost’s endgame, he also knew that the man was vicious and would, despite the implicit promise-threat he’d just given them to force them to keep playing his twisted game, detonate the bomb he’d put in the Egyptian Theatre early at the slightest provocation. It was better to not poke the bear.

He might just do it anyway, but all they could do to prevent that was get there and disarm the bomb as soon as possible, just like they’d done here at Venice Beach.

‘No, Riley. Charlie and I will deal with it.’

‘Alright.’ She paused for a moment. ‘Good luck.’

He gave a very, very wan smile.

‘Thanks, Riley.’

He hung up and jogged up to the car, as Charlie did the same, and showed the ticket to the older man.

‘Egyptian Theatre.’ Charlie put the key in the ignition with a grim nod, knowing how important time
was. ‘You want the next left, then right at the next set of lights…’

PHOENIX FOUNDATION HEADQUARTERS

SOMEWHERE IN LA

Riley and Bozer glanced at one another as they attempted to find the money trail. The current tack being tried by Riley (several other Phoenix analysts were working different angles) was tracking sales of the heart medication Lentonitrat, which was almost pure PETN.

The Ghost, they all knew, worked for money. He didn’t have an ideology or an agenda.

Sure, given the nature of the taunts he was leaving Mac and Charlie (they’d found yet another at the Egyptian Theatre), he was definitely trying to get to Mac, definitely targeting him in some way, but they were quite sure that it wasn’t because he’d decided to target Mac all on his own.

That didn’t fit the profile at all.

However, they had a theory that The Ghost was very choosy about his jobs, being an elite and, unfortunately, surely very wealthy bombmaker. He hadn’t operated on US soil until New York, after all, and when he had, it’d been to disrupt UN peace talks. It’d been a big job.

This job had to be viewed as just as big by the man in order for him to take it, so there clearly was something personal in it for the man. Bozer had argued that The Ghost probably viewed Mac as some kind of ‘worthy adversary’ or a challenge of sorts, something that Riley, Thornton and the Phoenix analysts thought made sense, given that Mac had chased the man through Afghanistan and foiled quite a lot of his plots, including the New York one.

Thus, targeting Mac was something that The Ghost took as significant, as a big job that he wanted to do, but he wouldn’t do it all on his own.

Somebody, therefore, was paying him to do this.

Paying him to play this twisted game with Mac.

And, with all that had happened in Tahoe, in Buffalo…the prime suspect was The Organization.

Everyone knew that, but nobody, absolutely nobody, wanted to say it out loud. (They didn’t need to, after all.)

They didn’t have any proof, but deep in Riley’s gut, she just knew that The Organization was involved somehow.

Glancing up at the pacing Jack, and Thornton, who was talking quietly with Andi by the door, Riley knew that they shared the same gut feeling.

Beside her, Bozer just handed her a fresh cup of coffee, his hand clasping hers, seeking and giving comfort all at once.

She smiled wanly at him, and sipped her coffee and squeezed his hand back for a moment, before letting go and focusing back on her work.
Mac and Charlie both let out a sigh of immense relief as they finished disarming the bomb that had been attached to a lion, looking up at the sky. The sun was getting lower; sunset would be in a little more than an hour.

Each bomb that they’d encountered had gotten progressively harder and harder to disarm, more and more expert.

As if they were being given increasingly difficult challenges, tests, something that they both knew was very, very deliberate.

In this case, even after locating the bomb, they’d had to have an LAPD officer and zookeepers sedate the lion first, before attempting to disarm the most difficult-to-disarm bomb that either of them had encountered for a very, very long time.

They exchanged a glance as Mac pulled a photo of the Gateway Centre off the lion (it’d been taped to the poor animal), which had a short note written on the back: Wish you were here, Al.

Mac resisted the urge to rip up the photo (it was important evidence), and instead handed it to Charlie, who wordlessly placed it into a small plastic evidence bag, then stood and offered Mac, who was lost in memories and thought, a hand and helped him up.

He and Mac jogged back to the car, and although he gave his usual directions, the blonde was clearly lost in thought the whole drive.

*He’s a ghost in every sense of the word.*

*Nobody’s ever seen him, but he sees everything.*

*He always manages to disappear.*

*And he haunts.*

*That, I’ve learned empirically.*

Mac and Charlie exchanged a glance over the top of the bomb that they’d found attached to a crucial, load-bearing wall in a janitor’s closet in the Gateway Centre.

This one had a timer, but no remote detonator.

The timer was ticking down, and this was so complicated...
There isn’t enough time.

Mac hurriedly pulled off his jacket and wrapped the bomb carefully and quickly in it. He picked it up gingerly, then glanced at Charlie.

‘Stay here!

The other man opened his mouth to protest (they’d already found The Ghost’s next clue; it’d been pinned on the janitor’s mop), but Mac had already started running, and Charlie had no idea if the blonde had heard him or not.

‘Mac!’

GATEWAY PLAZA

LA

Mac ran out into the Plaza, which was mostly empty, save for LAPD officers (once they’d learned that the Plaza was the target, they’d called LAPD to evacuate the area; there were simply so many people that they had to take the risk that The Ghost might detonate the bomb early – Mac didn’t think the risk was as big as it seemed; his gut told him that the game wasn’t over yet).

0:46

0:45

0:44

He yelled at a nearby officer to give him his bulletproof vest, then ordered the man to run. Mac wrapped the bomb in the vest, then tossed it into the fountain, as close to the centre as he could manage, then turned and ran, holding his leather jacket over his head and diving forwards as he counted down in his head.

He heard the (unfortunately familiar) sound of a blast behind him, and felt the heat and the force of the explosion (an also-unfortunately-familiar sensation).

When it passed, Mac looked up, sore and rather covered in soot, but alive, thanks to the water dampening the explosion.

He glanced over at the fountain behind him.

Well, Thornton’s not going to be happy about the clean-up bill on this one…

He looked over towards the Gateway Centre. About three-quarters of the way between him and the Centre, closer to him, stood Charlie, breathing hard and shaking his head, a look in his eyes that reminded Mac of when he’d been not even twenty and in Afghanistan.

A look that Charlie had given him more than once or twice during a very dark period of his life.

Internally, he sighed.
'Don’t you dare do that again, MacGyver.’ There was worry in Charlie’s voice, and a hint of disappointment and tightly-restrained anger. The older man glanced over at Mac as he drove, his eyes matching his voice. ‘We do our job together, you and me, just like we always did.’ Mac opened his mouth to say something, to protest, because as they all knew, The Organization was the number one suspect ultimately behind this cruel, twisted game, and they all knew that they had something planned, and that he was at the core of that, but Charlie cut him off. ‘We do this together, man, no matter if he was sent after you or not. We both signed up for this, we both trained for this.’ Charlie’s voice softened a little, and simultaneously grew more concerned, growing remarkably similar to the voice he’d talked to Mac with some particularly dark nights in Afghanistan about six years ago. ‘You’ve got a lot to live for, Mac.’

Mac, who was fiddling with a paperclip as he stared out the window, turned and made eye contact with Charlie briefly, as the older man glanced over at him, then back at the road.

‘It’s not that, Charlie. I promise.’ Charlie glanced back over at him, and seemed satisfied by the genuine honesty in Mac’s eyes and voice, because he just nodded and turned back to the road, as Mac continued, the paperclip becoming a circle in his hands. ‘And you do too.’

Charlie nodded slowly.

‘Yeah, I do, Mac.’ He paused for a moment. ‘I got a ring hidden in my ugliest socks in the back of my sock drawer.’ Charlie turned to the blonde, who was about to say something, and cut him off. ‘But that doesn’t mean you should stop me from doing my job, Mac, just like I shouldn’t, and won’t, stop you from doing yours.’

Mac stared at him for a long moment, then nodded. Charlie nodded too, a small, wan smile appearing on his face, then disappearing as he focused back on the road.

Mac returned to staring out the window.

_I will always, always do everything I can to defend my loved ones._

_Of course, the best way to do that is to prevent danger from finding them in the first place…but with our line of work, that honestly doesn’t happen all that often._

_But maybe Plan B isn’t sending them away from danger or luring danger away from them, but making sure you defend them with everything you’ve got while they’re beside you._

_After all, your loved ones are trying to defend you too._

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SERVICE CORRIDOR OFF MESS

LA AIR FORCE BASE
As Charlie and the three EODs stationed at the base who were accompanying them stared at the very, very complicated and very, very powerful PETN bomb in front of them, Mac’s attention was instead drawn by the condolence card proclaiming sorry for your loss taped to the wall several feet away.

After checking that the card was not booby-trapped, he reached out and plucked it from the wall, a horrible, horrible feeling growing in his gut, and opened it.

What he saw inside chilled him to the bone and made his blood boil all at once.

‘Charlie.’ The FBI agent looked over at him, and Mac held out the card, showing Charlie Pena’s wife and daughter’s address neatly printed inside. ‘That’s Al’s house.’

Charlie’s eyes closed for just a moment, then he and Mac both glanced at the bomb, then at each other, then at the other three EOD techs.

The oldest and most senior of the three just nodded at them, a look in his eyes that showed he very clearly understood what they felt.

‘Go. We can handle this.’

With one last glance at the bomb, Mac and Charlie ran.

PENA RESIDENCE

LA

There was a van parked in front of the Pena house when Mac and Charlie turned the corner.

As their car skidded to a halt two houses down, before they could even get out, the van exploded, lighting up the night, destroying the Penas’ front yard and most of the road, and sending debris everywhere, including many large chunks of concrete and brick and asphalt through the windows.

Both breathing hard and in shock, Mac and Charlie glanced at one another, then without another word, rushed out of the car.

He’s used more than one bomb before…

Mac glanced at the house, noting that the windows were dark and it seemed like nobody was home.

Please let them not be home, please…

As that thought ran through his head, another car pulled up, and he instantly recognized Mrs Pena and Annabelle, who was wearing a Chuck E. Cheese cardboard hat.

He let out a sigh of relief internally, the tense knot that had been growing inside him all day loosening ever-so-slightly.

He motioned to the woman to stay put in her car, and Mrs Pena nodded, turning to Annabelle to offer the little girl a mother’s comfort, as Charlie told some shocked neighbours who were poking their heads out of their front doors to stay put and stay down.
As sirens started to wail in the distance, Mac and Charlie exchanged a glance and got to work clearing the area.

PHOENIX FOUNDATION HEADQUARTERS
SOMEWHERE IN LA

‘…Arrogant SOB got himself in the end.’

Mac glanced at Charlie, who was sitting in one of the war room armchairs, then at the others; Matty on the screen, Thornton standing by it, Jack sitting in the other armchair, and Bozer and Riley on the couch.

The last bomb that had gone off in The Ghost’s van was a TATP bomb. It was also immensely, immensely complicated and designed to be detonated with a pressure plate.

(The Ghost, as had become very clear, had a very perverse and twisted sense of humour.)

His intent, according to the computer hard drive that had been painstakingly reconstructed and analysed by Riley, Lil and some of the Phoenix techs, had been to set it up in the Pena house while Mrs Pena and Annabelle were out at their monthly Saturday night Chuck E. Cheese dinner.

Then, they’d step inside the house, onto a pressure plate…and Mac and Charlie would have been powerless to do anything.

They wouldn’t have been able to get to it, not with the pressure plate trigger, and it’d have been far, far too complicated for them to analyse from afar and direct Mrs Pena to disarm.

They’d have had no choice but to watch and…

Mac pushed the thought away before his brain could finish it.

However, The Ghost had not managed to pull off his plan, pull off his intended endgame, as the plans found on his laptop confirmed the bomb at the Pena house was, just as Mac had suspected as soon as he’d pulled that card off the wall.

TATP was nicknamed Mother of Satan.

Mother of Satan lived up to its name, because it had gone off unexpectedly inside the van, killing the bombmaker.

Human remains, matching The Ghost’s description in terms of sex and profiled age and ethnic background, had been found in the van.

All signs pointed to, as Charlie had said, The Ghost’s arrogance catching up with him, and Mother of Satan living up to its reputation and (rather poetically) killing the master bombmaker.

Still, Mac was hesitant to allow himself to believe that The Ghost was really gone.

Particularly since the hard drive had also revealed that, as they’d suspected, The Ghost had been hired by The Organization.

Nothing was ever simple, nothing was ever as it seemed when The Organization was involved.
He ran a hand through his hair as he paced.

‘Why would he change to TATP? There was no need for him to do that; it’d have been completely sufficient to–’

‘Arrogance, Mac. He was a sick show-off, you know that.’

Charlie’s voice was certain, and Matty, Thornton, Jack and Riley all nodded, but Mac still wasn’t convinced.

‘He’s done this exact same thing before–’

Riley interrupted him.

‘Last time, that explosion at the warehouse wasn’t his endgame, Mac. Faking his death was part of his plan to get to his endgame. This time…the Penas were clearly, definitely his endgame. He doesn’t have another move up his sleeve.’

‘He’s finally gone, bro.’

Bozer’s voice was comforting (that particular tone had always been a comfort to Mac, for reasons he wasn’t quite sure of), but it still wasn’t enough to settle him, not completely.

Instead, the blonde just sighed and stopped pacing. The moment he stopped walking, Thornton continued their debrief, as if sensing that he needed a distraction.

*This isn’t one of the rare occasions in which she’s wrong.*

As he listened, a paperclip started changing shape in his hands.

__________________________________________________________

After debrief, Jack walked up to him, and put a hand on his shoulder, looking into his eyes, his own eyes very, very serious.

‘Brother, he’s *gone.*’ Mac opened his mouth to protest, but Jack cut him off. ‘And even if he ain’t, chasing ghosts doesn’t do you or anybody else any good.’

Mac stared at him for a long, long moment, and Jack stared right back, the two of them standing eye to eye in the middle of the war room, before Mac nodded slowly.

‘I’ll try to let it go, I promise.’ Jack nodded with a wan smile, squeezing Mac’s shoulder gently, and a wry look appeared on the younger man’s face. ‘And you *know* I hate your puns.’

Jack looked rather confused for a moment, before he caught on and made a face at Mac, removing his hand from the blonde’s shoulder and crossing his arms.

‘Hey, that was a good one! I spent half of debrief thinking it up!’

Mac shook his head with a smile, letting himself get lost in their familiar, comforting banter.

‘Well, if it took you half of debrief to think *that* up…I think your pun skills need *serious* work, Jack.’

Jack huffed out a breath.

‘You just don’t appreciate fine wordplay when you hear it, brother.’
Mac snorted.

‘Keep telling yourself that.’

‘Oh, I will!’

PHOENIX SAFEHOUSE

SOMEWHERE IN LA

Mac nodded at Agent Gonzales as he made his way into the safehouse, where Mrs Pena and Annabelle were staying while their house was repaired and while Matty’s team made sure that their safety was no longer directly threatened (they’d have a protection detail on them for an indefinite period of time, even after they moved back home, something that Mac was very grateful to both his current boss and former boss for).

Mrs Pena was standing at the end of the corridor, and Mac swallowed as he approached the woman.

They stood there, staring at each other in silence, a little awkwardly, for a long moment, then both spoke simultaneously.

‘I’m sorry, Mrs Pena.’

‘Thank you.’

There was another silence, then Mrs Pena reached out and hugged him, a gesture that Mac, slightly hesitantly, and, he was sure, rather awkwardly, returned.

They broke apart, and stared at each other again, this time comfortably, a silent conversation, an understanding, passing between them.

When the moment passed, Mrs Pena gave him a small smile, shaking her head affectionately.

‘How many times do I have to tell you to call me Rachel, Mac?’

He smiled back, giving an awkward, sheepish little half-shrug.

‘Sorry, Mrs Pena…uh, sorry, Rachel.’

Her smile widened a little, as she shook her head again and started leading him into the kitchen.

‘Annabelle wouldn’t stop talking about you last time, you know…’

A little later, Mac watched little Annabelle (who insisted she wasn’t little anymore) play with the pink slime he’d made her in the safehouse’s little kitchen, a small, soft smile on his face, with a tinge of sadness to it.

*I’m not convinced that he’s really gone.*

*I know, I know, I promised Jack I’d try and let it go. I meant it and I’ll keep that promise.*

*I’m willing to accept that The Ghost is dead until I get evidence to the contrary.*
It’s going to irk me and keep me up at night, just like The Organization’s big plan, the game they’re playing, does, but I’m going to let it go for now.

He glanced up at Mrs Pena, who smiled at him, then over at Annabelle, who grinned, her hands coated with pink slime.

They’re safe for another day.

There’s always going to be another threat. Even if The Ghost is really gone, even when we finally take down The Organization for good…there’s still always going to be others to take their place.

I’m always going to have to defend my loved ones, but they’re safe for another day, and that’s just going to have to be enough for today.

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THORNTON’S RESIDENCE

SOMEWHERE IN LA

Jack walked up to the door and rang the doorbell, his face set into determined lines. He was a man on a mission, and nothing was going to stop him.

A moment later, the door opened, to reveal Thornton, dressed in a smart, long-sleeved, cream-and-black striped tunic over black yoga pants.

Jack supposed this was as casual as she ever got.

‘Jack.’ She opened the door a little wider, and motioned to him to come inside, which he did. ‘What brings you here?’

Standing just inside her door, in the entrance hall, Jack crossed his arms and snorted.

‘You know why I’m here, Patty.’ She simply nodded in acquiescence, and he continued. ‘New Doc.’ He handed her the file he’d had in his hands, the one she’d given him, and answered her unspoken question, the question he could see in her eyes, the slight arch of her eyebrow. ‘I didn’t read it.’ She didn’t look surprised. ‘Didn’t need to.’ He uncrossed and crossed his arms again, taking a moment to gather his thoughts. ‘Come on, Patty. IQ almost as high as Mac’s, his age, pretty, served 9 months with MSF.’ He paused for a moment. ‘And got plenty of spunk, too; she got through interrogation with you and Matty the Hun, after all.’ He pinned her with the best approximation of her deadly stare that he could manage. ‘And we all know that Mac’s got a type. Intelligent, beautiful, plenty of sass…you could’ve picked New Doc out of a Mac-Attractor Catalogue.’ Thornton simply arched an eyebrow elegantly at that last phrase, and Jack shook his head and waved a hand, brushing it off as relatively unimportant and pushing onwards with his point. ‘He’s gonna be attracted to her, and you know all about his issues, Patty.’

It had become abundantly obvious that Mac had issues with women that he found attractive. Sure, he was working through them, but it hadn’t even been a year since Tahoe. It was still a process.

There was silence for a moment, two pairs of brown eyes, one noticeably darker than the other, staring at each other, neither flinching nor blinking, before Thornton spoke, softer and gentler than Jack had expected.

‘You thought Mac might develop an interest in Riley when she started working for the Phoenix.’ Jack couldn’t deny that, as wrong as he’d clearly been. ‘These things aren’t certain or predictable in
any way, shape or form, Jack.’ There was a firmness, a resoluteness, a certainty in her tone and her expression. ‘And you know how much progress he’s making and continues to make, Jack.’ Jack nodded, a little reluctantly, something that he mentally kicked himself for (he should be proud of and always acknowledging Mac’s progress, as any supportive friend would) and attributed to the protectiveness he’d felt for the younger man ever since they’d met in an Afghani desert. Thornton’s expression softened and grew more open, becoming as honest and vulnerable as Jack thought she could ever be. ‘You know how difficult this search has been.’ He nodded; he was very aware of how long it’d taken and how many criteria had had to be fulfilled and how much vetting had had to be done. He also knew how very badly Dr Farnham wanted to start his retirement, and couldn’t begrudge the older man for that one bit. ‘I…I considered trying to find someone else.’ Jack looked at her with no small amount of shock. It was so very unlike her to admit to or acknowledge being even the slightest bit unprofessional and bending the rules. In response, a hint of a wry little smile fluttered across her face, before her expression grew more serious again, though her voice was soft and as affectionate as he ever heard it when she spoke. ‘Mac…Mac’s a friend. He…he matters.’ She looked up at him, her voice growing a little firmer. ‘But so do all my other employees, and I have to look out for them too. We need a new doctor, Jack, and Doc deserves his retirement as soon as possible, and she was the best fit for the job that we could find.’

Jack nodded slowly, accepting that she’d done what she had to do. He couldn’t begrudge her for that, really couldn’t, because he’d just done exactly what he thought he had to do as well. He hesitated for a moment, part of him thinking that he should probably apologize to her (he recognized that he was being rather unreasonable – implicitly opposing the hiring of New Doc just because she happened to be young and really smart and pretty and female and confronting his boss for doing her job), but the rest of him was staunchly refusing to apologize for doing what he firmly, firmly believed was right and had to be done. Firmly and staunchly refused to apologize for looking out for his partner.

Patricia solved his dilemma for him.

She did seem to have a knack for making problems go away.

‘You don’t need to apologize for having your partner’s back. I’d do the same.’

The implied if I still had a partner (her long-deceased fiancé had been hers) hung in the air between them.

They stared at each other for a long moment, then, pulled by some kind of compulsion, Jack reached out and clasped her shoulder for a moment. She gave him a small smile, driven by that same compulsion, then stepped away and gestured down the corridor.

‘You haven’t had dinner, I assume?’ It was more of a statement than a question, and Jack’s stomach chose that moment to rumble loudly. Patricia’s stomach widened a little in amusement, as they entered an eat-in kitchen. Jack raised an eyebrow as he noted that the table was set for two, and that the casserole dish that she was pulling out of the oven, which contained something that smelt really good, held the perfect amount of food for the two of them.

He turned to face her, eyebrow still raised and expression somewhat incredulous.

This woman always, somehow, managed to surprise him. Just when he thought that nothing she did could surprise him anymore, she’d pull out something else, it seemed.

‘Patty…’

He simply got an enigmatic little smile in return.
What did you guys think? What’re your thoughts on Jack and Thornton’s behaviour in this chapter, or Charlie’s ‘guest-starring role’ or the Phoenix’s New Doc, whom you’ll get to properly meet next episode? Let me know, please!

According to one of my city’s major newspapers, in late June, a man in Poland made a self-driving potato, by harnessing the electrochemical energy in a potato and adding wheels etc. Thus, Mac’s remote-controlled potato in this episode.

I also firmly maintain that Mac very much has a type. The beautiful and intelligent thing, he has admitted himself, but quite literally every single love interest he’s had in the show to date (in that, I count Nikki, Penny, Katarina, Cindy and Frankie) sasses him or bosses him around or in general, is not awe-struck by him at all.

In terms of the major event of this episode: Is The Ghost really dead? Is he going to be back? Has Mac’s rogues’ gallery really shrunk? I’m not telling!

Rachel is the name for Pena’s wife that I invented and used in Just Another Patriotic Guy.

I have only two episodes left to write (I’m halfway through Episode 21 right now), but I go back to uni on Monday. I should manage to get these two episodes done within the month anyway, and once they’re done, I might go to bi-weekly updates, I haven’t decided yet.

Next episode: 2.11, Ski Jacket. It’s Mac’s twenty-sixth birthday! Last birthday, he wound up in Hawaii. This year, he’s off to Alaska on a simple mission to rescue a stranded Russian submarine. Of course, nothing in his life is ever simple…
Ski Jacket

Chapter Summary

It’s Mac’s twenty-sixth birthday! Last birthday, he wound up in Hawaii. This year, he’s off to Alaska on a simple mission to rescue a stranded Russian submarine. Of course, nothing in his life is ever simple…

Chapter Notes

Now that we’re at the ‘(chronological) mid-season finale’, I’d like to take the opportunity to thank everyone for the wonderful support I’ve had for this story! Your support, especially your reviews, really make my day! I hope you continue to enjoy the rest of the season!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

PHOENIX JET

SOMEWHERE OVER ARIZONA

‘...We could go see monster trucks, or hedgehog racing?’

Mac looked incredulously at his partner, as Bozer pointed at the older man.

‘Or there’s turtle racing, or snail racing?’

Riley, curled up under a blanket, shot her boyfriend a raised eyebrow, as if to say really? She turned to Mac with a shake of her head, and made her own suggestions.

‘How about we go to an arcade? Or play laser tag?’

Both of those were honestly more sensible suggestions (Mac expected nothing less of Riley, in all honesty), though he admitted to being somewhat intrigued by the monster trucks and curious as to whether hedgehog racing was actually a thing, or whether Jack was just messing with him.

Riley, Bozer and Jack all looked at the blonde, waiting expectantly for his decision.

It was his 26th birthday, after all.

Birthdays are arbitrary and irrational.

But that doesn’t mean they’re meaningless, not in the slightest.

Feeling a little bit awkward, Mac shifted a bit in his seat. Jack’s party for him last year had been, as promised, (mostly) classy, dignified and intimate, but he really didn’t want another birthday party this year, for unrelated reasons to his 25th birthday party.
His 26th trip around the Sun had been, in a lot of ways, worse than his 25th trip around the Sun, despite the fact that he hadn’t gotten shot this year.

He looked up at the three of them, who were, honestly, his three closest family members (even if they weren’t biologically related to him), and spoke.

‘Can it just be a quiet dinner with my nearest-and-dearest?’

Riley gave a soft little smile and nodded, while Bozer grinned and leaned over and clapped him on the back. Jack pointed at him, an eyebrow quirked in a question, though his eyes were soft and there was an equally-soft, affectionate smile on his face.

‘Will there be birthday cake, brother? ‘Cause if there’s no birthday cake, hell no.’

Mac gave a smile that slowly turned into a smirk.

‘What kind of question is that, Jack?’

Bozer looked very affronted, and tossed a muesli bar at Jack’s head, which the former CIA agent neatly dodged.

‘You think I’d let my BFF’s birthday pass without an absolutely amazing, knock-your-socks-off cake? What do you take me for, man?’

Jack put up his hands in supplication as Bozer held up another muesli bar, and Riley took advantage of Bozer’s momentary distraction as he ranted to seize the bar out of his hands, unwrap it and take a large bite. Bozer shot her a look, but Riley just grinned around her muesli bar mouthful and kept chewing it unapologetically.

Mac shook his head with a chuckle, as Jack turned to him, that soft, affectionate smile back again and looking more serious.

‘Hey, it’s your birthday, man. Whatever you want.’

Bozer pointed at his best friend with an expression somewhere between a grin and a smirk.

‘It’s gonna be the best, most awesome quiet-dinner-with-your-nearest-and-dearest ever!’ He made a face. ‘That’s a serious mouthful.’

Jack reached out and high-fived Bozer.

‘Amen to that, man.’ He made a face, too. ‘Amen to both of that.’

Riley, her mouth covered with a hand as she tried to hold back laughter while her mouth was full of muesli bar, and Mac, not even bothering to hold back his amusement, looked over at each other, sharing a glance full of fond exasperation.

I have a good feeling about this birthday.

If I believed in jinxes, I’d probably say that I might have just jinxed it.

Well, even if my quiet-dinner-with-my-nearest-and-dearest doesn’t get to happen…with this lot around, it’s going to be a good birthday regardless.

PHOENIX FOUNDATION HEADQUARTERS
Thornton tapped the screen, an action that brought up a map of a very bleak part of Alaska, all snowy tundra and about as far removed from sunny LA as one could get.

Jack, Riley and Mac all groaned a little internally. Missions to really cold places were the *worst*. Bozer made a face and patted Mac and Riley’s shoulders sympathetically. (He’d already been told he wasn’t going on this mission, but for reasons known only to Thornton, he had been summoned to the war room anyway.) Their boss looked briefly at them with something that might have been a hint of sympathy, before tapping the screen again, bringing up schematics for a submarine.

What was unusual about them was that the schematics were labelled in *Russian*. This was clearly *not* a US submarine.

‘This Russian submarine is stranded off the northern coast of Alaska with severe engine trouble. You are to deliver the necessary parts and assist in the repairs.’

_Sometimes, due to the messy and complicated world of geopolitics, the fact that we’re a highly clandestine organization means that we’re stuck in the middle of highly secretive favour-trading._

_Or, put more simply, sometimes we have to run glorified errands._

_This is one of those times._

_Since the Russian submarine is not supposed to be there, and the USA is not supposed to be helping said Russia submarine in exchange for a really big favour in the future, guess who gets sent to help them out?_

This time, they all groaned out loud (political horse-trading was the absolute *worst*), and Thornton’s expression was very much one of sympathy, as she continued with their mission briefing.

‘The submarine is approximately 200 miles from Barrow. The Phoenix jet will land in Barrow, and you’ll transport the parts the rest of the way…’

As the mission briefing finished, there was a knock on the door.

‘Come in.’

At Thornton’s instruction, the door opened to reveal a young woman, her hair neatly tied back and wearing a doctor’s coat. A woman they all recognized from a very particular file.

Dr Taylor stepped inside the war room, closing the door behind her and clapping her hands in front of her waist, calm and professional.

‘You wanted to see me, boss?’

Mac, Jack, Riley and Bozer glanced over at Thornton. Dr Taylor had been working at the Phoenix for the last week, working with Dr Farnham on changeover, but they hadn’t met her yet, having been away on a mission. (They’d also missed Dr Farnham’s retirement party, which was something that saddened them all a little bit – it’d been a very good party, apparently, and it’d have been good to thank Doc properly for all his years of service in person. Unfortunately, they weren’t going to be able to do that, because he’d started his retirement off with a bang and jetted off the very next day with his wife on a European river cruise, just two days ago.)
Thornton simply gestured to the new doctor.

‘This is Dr Taylor.’ She gestured to the team. ‘And this is Jack Dalton, Riley Davis, Wilt Bozer and Angus MacGyver.’

Dr Taylor smiled at them, a genuinely warm smile, and gave a little wave.

‘Please, call me Beth.’ She gave a small half-shrug. The motion had a bit of sheepishness or awkwardness to it. ‘Or Doc.’

She reached out and held a hand out to Jack, who was closest, for a handshake, seemingly kicking herself internally for being awkward. The older man gave her a smile and shook her hand firmly.

‘Call me Jack, Doc.’

Her smile widened a little, and she turned to Riley, who also smiled at her.

‘Call me Riley, please.’

Miss Davis just sounded weird to her ears.

There was a flicker of curiosity in the other young woman’s eyes for a moment at the inflection on please, but it quickly disappeared to be replaced by that look that was best described as warm professionalism that she’d had in her eyes ever since she’d entered the room.

Bozer held his hand out to the new doctor next, and shook her hand rather enthusiastically, as was his general nature.

‘Everybody calls me Bozer.’ He stage-whispered and gestured with his head towards Thornton. ‘Only the boss calls me Wilt when she’s really, really mad.’

Beth nodded slowly, her smile becoming a bit more wry, then turned to Mac, who shook her hand firmly.

‘Just MacGyver, thanks.’

She nodded, and as she let go of his hand, her phone buzzed and she pulled it out of her pocket, glanced apologetically over at the room’s other occupants and quickly looked at the screen. She muttered to herself under her breath as she finished reading.

‘I knew he was going to be a terrible patient.’ She turned to Thornton. ‘Sorry, boss, but if there’s nothing else, I’ve got to get back to the infirmary. Agent Ho informs me that Agent Lucas is trying to escape.’ Bozer, Riley, Mac and Jack exchanged amused glances (it really did sound like Alex to try and escape the infirmary, and it really was very in-character for Rowena to tattle on him), and even Thornton, they all swore, had a hint of amusement in her eyes as she nodded at the doctor.

‘Of course, there’s nothing else, Doc.’

Beth gave a little nod of acknowledgement, then turned to look at Mac, Jack and Riley.

‘There’s a med kit in the jet as usual, and I expect you to use it if necessary.’

She really was quite little, no taller than 5’2’’, and young-looking, even for her age, but there was a fierceness in her eyes and posture as she spoke that told them that they really should do as she said.

And though she be but little, she is fierce.
Shakespeare’s writings are largely fictional, but in this case, I’d say it looks like that phrase is fact.

As soon as she’d impressed that upon them, Beth turned and hurried out of the war room, towards the infirmary.

Mac grabbed a couple of paperclips from the bowl, as Riley packed up her gear, Bozer busying himself with helping his girlfriend out (though, he didn’t touch her rig as he knew Riley did not like it when other people touched her rig – he packed up things like her wireless mouse and headphones instead). Jack and Thornton exchanged a glance over the top of the three younger agents’ heads, and after staring at each other for a moment, Jack just gave a little nod, a gesture that Thornton returned in acknowledgement.

Then, she gestured to the door of the war room.

‘Riley, Mac, Jack, you’ve got wheels up in forty-five, go get your snow gear.’

*Well, at least it shouldn’t be as cold as Siberia.*

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**STRANDED RUSSIAN SUBMARINE**

**NORTH COAST OF ALASKA**

As they walked through the Russian submarine, carrying the requisite parts, Jack leaned closer to Mac, adjusting his load slightly to do so, and whispered in his ear.

‘I don’t like the way some of these guys are looking at us…’

Mac nodded, almost imperceptibly, and Jack glanced at Riley, whose posture, at least, to somebody who knew her as well as Jack did, showed that she shared that same sense of unease.

Most of the Russian sub’s crew seemed at least somewhat grateful, and though unhappy about the fact that they needed rescue, not resentful.

However, all three Phoenix agents sensed that there were eyes on them, and not just in the sense of we-should-keep-an-eye-on-the-agents-of-a-foreign-government-in-our-submarine.

Jack was seriously getting the heebie-jeebies.

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**PHOENIX FOUNDATION HEADQUARTERS**

**SOMEBWHERE IN LA**

Bozer strode into the infirmary, a plastic document holder under his arm. He glanced over at the large high-tech whiteboard that was next to the door, and found that it was now covered in a survey of sorts, asking the Phoenix’s employees for their favourite muesli bar, Jell-O and Gatorade flavours. With a grin, he filled in his own votes.

Hopefully, this meant no more of the strawberry Gatorade that tasted like chalk that everyone hated, except Cal from Cartography because he was weird.

(Dr Farnham’s infirmary had been run a little bit *military*, his time in the Army having really shaped
Doc and how he did things. That meant having to drink strawberry Gatorade if that was what you were given.

Then, he walked towards the large room that had appeared in the infirmary, with three opaque walls and one transparent one that faced the doctor’s office that was located off the side of the infirmary. (The infirmary had lots of pocket, retractable walls, which enabled the configuration of the rooms in the infirmary to be changed as needed, to provide agents or groups of agents with privacy and comfort and to allow the Phoenix’s doctor to monitor them as necessary.)

Bozer knocked on the door, sticking his head around the corner to the glass side so that the occupants could see who he was, and heard a chorus of ‘come in’.

He opened the door, and stepped inside with a sympathetic little grin and a cheerful greeting.

He got some not-so-cheerful greetings back, for obvious reasons.

Nick, Carter, Alex and May were all in infirmary beds.

Nick had an IV coming out of his arm and a sick bag next to him. Carter was sitting up comfortably on his own, but three of the fingers on his left hand were splinted and taped together, while May’s left shoulder was strapped and her left arm was in a sling. Alex, who, like Nick, was wearing a hospital gown (and not looking happy about it), also had an IV coming out of his arm and was looking rather pale.

The former Air Force pilot also had several Dora the Explorer Band Aids on his arm, taped over the medical tape that secured his IV to him.

Based off the fact that he’d earlier attempted to escape the infirmary (something that Bozer was pretty sure no doctor approved of for obvious reasons), it seemed that Dora the Explorer Band Aids were Dr Beth’s punishment for escape attempts (Dr Farnham’s had been a heavy scolding and his legendary I-am-disappointed-in-you look, which Bozer privately thought was like being told off by both Captain America and your grandfather at once).

Bozer definitely approved of this punishment. He knew it was really wrong to think of one’s best friend injured…but Mac did get hurt every now and then and then and he did like to try and escape…he couldn’t wait to get hold of photos of Mac covered in Dora Band Aids; he wouldn’t have to buy the Honey-Nut Cheerios for months!

Rowena, who was sitting cross-legged on a chair and looking completely unhurt, smiled wryly at Bozer and indicated each of her teammates in turn.

‘Nick has bruised kidneys…” The older man grimaced, but waved at Bozer nonetheless, then reached for his sick bag, looking a bit green. ‘…Carter has three fractured fingers…” Carter made a face, causing May to shake her head at him. ‘…And May’s got a dislocated shoulder…” Carter was now sticking his tongue out at her, and Bozer was suddenly rather smug that he and Riley had managed to get their act together like proper, mature adults. Rowena’s smile turned even more wry. ‘…And Alex needed twenty-three stitches in his left leg and has a highly-bruised ego.’

Alex shot Rowena a look, and she simply quirked an eyebrow at him, staring right back without blinking.

Eventually, Alex sighed and gave a half-shrug, glancing down at the Dora the Explorer Band Aids on his arm with distaste, then looking up again with a smirk.

‘Well, at least New Doc’s much prettier than Old Doc.’
His four teammates just shot him a *look*. Bozer tried and failed to hide his grin behind his hand. (The Edwards team were always excellent and entertaining company.)

It was Nick who spoke, between sips from the bottle of Gatorade that had been resting on the little nightstand beside his bed.

‘Really, Flyboy, really?’

Alex shrugged, the smirk on his face growing a little wider.

‘Just an observation. An objective fact.’

To be fair, he wasn’t wrong. Dr Beth really *was* much prettier than Dr Farnham, though Bozer supposed that *both* doctors would be rather offended if someone said that wasn’t the case.

Carter and May just looked at each other, then Alex, with fond, exasperated head shakes, while Rowena just looked over the entire scene with amusement and Nick pointed at Alex with a smirk of his own.

‘Maybe I should stop calling you Flyboy, Flyboy, and call you *Playboy* instead.’

Everybody, Bozer included, just shot Nick a very baleful *look*. The former Marine huffed and looked rather put-out.

‘Hey, that was a good one!’

Carter, May and Alex glanced at each other, then all looked at Nick. It was Alex who spoke.

‘No, that was a dreadful one, old man.’

‘I’m *not* old!’

As Carter opened his mouth to retort, Bozer decided to retreat (it was one thing to visit them while they were laid up hurt and hang out with them for a bit, but a completely different thing to get involved in a team argument – besides, he hadn’t come to the infirmary *just* to visit the Edwards team, he *also* needed to talk to Dr Beth). Rowena was the only one who noticed, distracted as the others were (they were *supposed* to be super-spies!), and she waved at him with a wry little smile as he backed out slowly, careful to not make any sudden movements, lest he get dragged into deciding whether Nick was old or not.

(He totally was.)

(Just like Jack totally was.)

Bozer stuck his head and upper body through the open door of the doctor’s office, and grinned as Beth looked up from her computer and smiled at him.

(He had a sneaking suspicion that she’d looked him up and down for injury while he’d been filling in her survey on the whiteboard – Dr Farnham used to covertly check agents for injury whenever he saw them, Bozer was pretty sure.)

‘Hi, Bozer.’

‘Hey, Dr Beth.’ He glanced down at what she was doing. ‘If you’re busy, I can come back later…’
She shook her head with a wry smile.

‘No, I’m just doing a stocktake and going through the order forms for restocking supplies.’ She gestured to the computer. ‘Based on Dr Farnham’s years of detailed usage records, there’s still another month until I need to do a restock, so I’m just trying to get as prepared as I can during a quiet moment.’ She looked up at him, looking even more wry. ‘I’m told there aren’t many of those.’

Bozer gave a snort of laughter, then shook his head.

‘There’s more than you’d think; super-spy life’s not as glamourous and action-filled as the movies make it out to be.’ He held up the document holder in his hands. ‘I’ve got a project I’m working on that I’d like to get your help with.’ She nodded, patting an empty spot on her very-tidy desk, and he put down the holder and opened it with a flourish. ‘Scar prostheses.’

Beth looked up at him with a furrow in her brow.

‘Prostheses to conceal scars, or prosthetic scars?’

Bozer blinked, processing.

‘The first one, but seriously, the second one’s a good idea, I’ll get on to that next…’ He’d done those before for his movies, but hadn’t at the Phoenix yet. He should probably change that. He cut himself off, both verbally and in his mind, and got back on topic. ‘Anyway, I’ve got a couple of attempts here, but I’m no doctor and you are, so I was wondering if you can help me out…’

She picked up one of the prostheses, feeling the texture and examining it closely for a moment, then glanced over at him again.

‘Do you need it to be convincing to the touch, or just visually?’

Bozer sucked in a breath, considering, as he grabbed a chair and sat down opposite her at her desk.

‘Well, I’m working on the visuals first, but I’d like to get it to be convincing to the touch as well…’

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**STRANDED RUSSIAN SUBMARINE**

**NORTH COAST OF ALASKA**

Mac, deep in the bowels of the Russian submarine with a couple of the crew’s engineers, finished screwing in the last part, and pocketed his Swiss Army knife. After a quick conversation with the two engineers (which ended with them complimenting his Russian – his accent was much better than his Mandarin one, apparently), he got up as Riley, who’d been sitting cross-legged on the floor nearby, closed her laptop and fell into step behind him.

The two of them made their way over to the door, where Jack was standing with a couple of the crew, whom they were quite sure were there solely to keep an eye on them.

As their ‘guards’ led them back up towards the bridge to quickly speak with the commander of the submarine before they headed off back towards the ex-fil site at Barrow, Jack leaned closer to his two younger teammates and spoke quietly.

‘Seriously, one of those guys was definitely giving us some serious stink-eye. Gonna be so glad to get out of here.’ Mac and Riley nodded in agreement, as Jack spoke louder and jerked a thumb at
Mac’s chin. ‘Oh, and you got some grease there, brother.’

Mac brought a thumb to his chin, and rubbed, then pulled it away, noting that there was grease left on his thumb and thus grease on his chin. He shot Riley a look, clearly asking the hacker *why didn’t you tell me this earlier?*, and Riley just gave a mischievous little smirk.

Mac shook his head and got to work cleaning off the grease as best as he could.

It would be highly undignified to converse with a Russian submarine commander with grease on his chin, since he was an agent of the US government and all.

*And of course, Jack and Riley would find that hilarious.*

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**NORTH COAST OF ALASKA**

**(MIDDLE OF NOWHERE)**

‘Uh, Mac, are they *supposed* to be leaking?’

Jack looked rather concerned as he glanced back at the trail over the pristine white snow that their snowmobiles were leaving.

Shouting over the din of their snowmobiles, Mac replied.

‘No!’ He looked behind them, and swore internally, cursing himself for not properly and thoroughly checking over the snowmobiles before they’d left the Russian submarine. They were leaving fuel behind. ‘Someone cut the fuel lines!’

He signalled for them all to stop, and Jack and Riley did so, gathering around him as he crouched down and examined his snowmobile.

Jack crouched down next to him, a furrow in his brow that wasn’t really visible due to his hat and snow goggles.

‘If they cut the fuel lines, how’d we get so far, brother?’

Mac, who was holding up said fuel line in his gloved hands, pointed to the jagged-edged split in the line.

‘They cut them, then patched them, badly. As we drove, it increased the strain on the patch job, and then it failed.’

Riley crouched down beside the two men, glancing between Mac and the fuel line.

‘Can you fix it?’

Mac sighed and shook his head.

‘Properly? No. But I can get us another hundred miles or so.’

The three looked at one another, and Riley made an expression of distaste.

‘I *hate* cold missions.’
Mac and Jack just glanced at each other, then back at the hacker, and spoke in unison.

‘This hasn’t got anything on the Bering Strait Incident.’

‘And it’s still much warmer here than it was in Siberia.’

Riley rolled her eyes, then looked very seriously at them. Far too seriously.

‘I’m going to get the Bering Strait Incident story out of you two.’

Jack and Mac glanced at each other again, and then Jack spoke.

‘Oh, there ain’t enough tequila in the world to get that story out of us, Ri.’ He paused for a moment, and Riley could hear the smirk-grin in his voice, though she couldn’t see most of his face. ‘Or maybe vodka would be a more appropriate drink of choice, eh, Mac?’ Jack nudged him none-too-gently with his elbow.

The blonde just snorted and rolled his eyes (leading to Riley to conclude that vodka was most definitely somehow involved in the Bering Strait Incident), and handed Jack the sat-phone.

‘For that, you’re calling Thornton.’

Jack made a face (at least, Mac was completely certain his partner was making a face at him from behind all the snow gear, anyway).

‘Aww, man!’

Mac pointed a finger very firmly at him.

‘We swore never, ever to mention the vodka-Bering Strait relationship ever again. You broke it, you have to pay a price.’

Jack huffed and shook his head, but started dialling Thornton anyway, as Riley started scheming as to how she (and Bozer) could get the Bering Strait Incident story out of the partners.

She was going to find out one day.

It was just a matter of how long it took.

‘…Mac can get us another 100 miles or so, so we’ll only be 25 miles from the jet; we can hike the rest of the way.’

As Jack finished speaking into the sat-phone, Mac continued, leaning a little closer so that Thornton could hear him clearly back at the Phoenix.

‘I can jury-rig the navigation systems on the snowmobiles so that we can use them to navigate.’ He looked up at the sky. ‘And I can navigate us by the stars if necessary.’

Thornton responded very abruptly, and they could all hear her head-shake, and the hints of concern (for them) and anger (at the Russian saboteurs) in her voice.

‘No. Mac, do your fix, go the 100 miles, then stay put and try and stay warm for the night.’ Mac opened his mouth to protest (he was very sure that he could get them back to the jet safely, much sooner than sometime tomorrow afternoon, which was when they’d get back if they listened to Thornton), but Thornton seemed to be able to sense that from thousands of miles away. ‘There’s
heavy fog forecast for tonight, and it’s going to be a particularly cold night. You’re all well aware, especially you, Mac, that hypothermia causes confusion and fatigue. It’s too risky.’ Her voice softened a little with that last phrase, then became their all-business boss’s tone again. ‘Hike the 25 miles in the morning once the fog has cleared and it’s warmed up. I’ll send the jet pilots out to retrieve you if necessary.’ Her voice softened that tiny bit again, but remained as firm and, for lack of a better word, bossy, as ever. ‘I want a status update every two hours.’

She hung up, and Mac, Jack and Riley glanced at one another, before Mac got to work jury-rigging the snowmobiles.

‘Jack, I need you to tear one of the tarps into equal quarters, and Riley, can you pass me that length of rope…’

This situation precisely illustrates why I always avoid throwing things out.

The packaging that we used to transport the submarine parts is now being recycled, or ‘up-cycled’, for a quick-and-dirty fuel line repair job.

It's not going to be pretty, but it'll do the job.

PHOENIX FOUNDATION HEADQUARTERS

SOMEBEWHERE IN LA

As she hung up, Thornton took a deep breath, tightening her restraints on her anger, which had been rising steadily ever since she’d learned about the sabotage that her team had suffered.

The actions of the Russian saboteur or saboteurs were unacceptable, and there was going to be a full investigation by the Russians with proper, just punishment for the perpetrators.

She would make sure of that.

Oversight was going to hate it, but she was going to do it.

She turned to Andi, who was standing in the doorway, tapping on her tablet.

‘Andi, arrange a call to Oversight, please, in twenty minutes’ time. Don’t give them any forewarning.’ She paused for a moment, reaching out to tap the glass to activate top-secret mode. ‘And please make sure I’m not disturbed for the next fifteen minutes. I have a call to make.’

Andi nodded, and ducked out of the doorway, closing the door behind her.

Thornton pulled out her phone and typed in a number that she hadn’t had to use for a very long time.

‘Zdravstvuyte, Betsy. It’s Kitty…’

NORTH COAST OF ALASKA

(MIDDLE OF NOWHERE)

(104 MILES FROM THE LAST MIDDLE OF NOWHERE)
As their snowmobiles ground to a halt, Mac, Jack and Riley dismounted and started looking around at the bleak tundra around them.

Jack threw his hands out.

‘How’re we supposed to stay warm for the night in ice and snow?’

All three of them looked around, Mac with his thinking face on.

They had ice, snow, some supplies (food, drink, very basic medical supplies, some leftover tarp and rope), and broken snowmobiles, plus Riley’s computer, Mac’s paperclips and Swiss Army knife and Jack’s gun and the knife he had in his boot.

Then, Mac’s I-have-an-idea expression appeared on his face.

‘We’ve got everything we need to stay warm right here.’

Jack sounded very confused, and gestured at the broken snowmobiles.

‘Don’t think even you can make a heater from this, brother.’

The blonde made his way over to a spot about ten feet from where they were standing, and crouched down.

‘I’m not going to make a heater, Jack. That would be extremely inefficient.’ He started digging.

‘This, on the other hand, is a tried and tested method that has been used for thousands of years in the animal kingdom.’ Jack and Riley glanced at one another, then back to Mac. How quickly did hypothermia set in? He seemed pretty confused. Mac looked up from his digging and gestured at the two of them. ‘Come on, help me out! Start digging!’

As they settled into their shelter for the night, Jack glanced around it.

‘How’d you learn how to build an igloo, man?’

Mac looked up from where he was organizing the navigation systems and assorted snowmobile parts he’d brought into the shelter with them (he didn’t want them to be freeze or be otherwise damaged or lost overnight – he could probably still improvise something, but unnecessary risks were just that, unnecessary).

‘A, this is not an igloo, Jack; it’s not made up of blocks of compacted snow. It’s a snow cave.’ He glanced around. ‘And it’s not a half-bad one even if I say so myself; we got to five feet deep. B, I watched a YouTube video.’

Both Jack and Riley stared at him for a moment, the hacker looking up from where she was checking over her precious rig and speaking after a beat (she apparently hadn’t liked what she’d found when investigating her laptop because she was rather snarky when she spoke).

‘We might be getting hypothermia and Mr Wizard is lecturing us about snow cave construction, which he learnt off YouTube. Great.’ Glancing back down at her laptop, Riley huffed and put it away. ‘I really miss sunny LA right now.’

Jack nodded in agreement.

‘Oh, yeah, Riles. I don’t wanna die in an igloo!’
Mac rolled his eyes.

‘A, we’re *not* going to die, Jack.’ He crossed his arms. ‘B, this is *not* an igloo, this is a snow cave!’

As they sat there, closely huddled together for warmth, Jack complained. Loudly.

‘I’m bored.’

Mac and Riley both rolled their eyes (it was the sixth time he’d said that), before Riley gave a half-shrug as she glanced at the blonde.

‘He’s not wrong.’

Mac nodded.

He himself was on the 265th digit of Phi, having already finished going through the Periodic Table; boredom was definitely going to be a problem.

He thought for a second, then an idea came to him.

‘You know, if we had a power outage or had a quiet moment while camping, my grandfather and I used to tell each other stories…’

Jack and Riley glanced at each other, a deviousness quickly appearing in both of their eyes that had Mac mildly concerned.

*According to Robert Burns, the best laid plans of mice and men often go awry.*

*And you wonder why I’m an on-the-fly kind of guy?*

They both turned to him with identical devious smirks.

‘You gonna tell us the story of how you got kicked out of the Boy Scouts, brother?’

Riley’s smirk widened a little.

‘After all, we’ve got all night, Mac…’

*Yeah, best laid plans.*

He stared at them for a moment, then sighed and nodded.

*Like ripping off a Band Aid.*

‘It all started when I decided that I really wanted to get this particular Merit Badge, and I had a very particular idea as to how I was going to get it…’

Jack and Riley stared at Mac for a long, long moment, shocked into complete and utter silence.

‘*That* is how you got kicked out of the Boy Scouts, brother?’

Mac just nodded, then gave a very curious expression that was half sheepish smile, half smug smirk.

‘Yes, and I actually got more than kicked out of the Boy Scouts…I’m officially banned from attending any and all Boy Scout events in any capacity.’
Jack and Riley stared some more, then Riley looked down and muttered half to herself.

‘No wonder Bozer wouldn’t tell me the story…’

Mac snorted, then smirked a little deviously and pointed at Riley.

‘Your turn.’

Riley threw her head back with a groan, then straightened up and considered for a moment, before settling on a story.

‘So, my mom’s next boyfriend after Jack was an asshole. He took my mom for everything she had… so…’ That same half-sheepish, half-proud expression that had been on Mac’s face only a minute ago appeared on her face. ‘…I persuaded a bikie gang to break his legs.’

A flash of sadness and regret that neither Riley nor Mac missed darted across Jack’s face, before his expression turned much more wry, and he turned to his partner, then to Riley.

‘Do we wanna know how you did the persuading, Riles? Or is it better that we got plausible deniability?’

The hacker shrugged and toyed with a lock of her hair that had escaped her hat.

‘Well…all I did was make a few outstanding warrants disappear…’

Mac and Jack knew about some of the questionable decisions that she’d made in her past, albeit for the right (or what she’d thought were the right) reasons, or at the very least, benign reasons (like hacking the Pentagon just to see if she could).

They knew and they still loved her and didn’t judge.

That was why she was willing to share this particular story with them.

Besides, it was kind of amusing.

Mac and Jack both shook their heads with exasperated affection, and then Riley pointed at Jack and crossed her arms.

‘Don’t think you’re getting off easy, old man.’ She smirked. ‘Sharing is caring, after all.’

Jack made a face, but when Mac raised an eyebrow at him, he put his hands up in supplication.

‘Okay, okay, fine.’ He thought for a moment, then continued. ‘You guys wanna hear the story of how Mary-Ellen got Ole Bessie?’

Mac and Riley glanced at each other, shrugged (it did sound like it at least had the potential to be interesting) and then turned to Jack and nodded.

The Texan rubbed his hands together, and launched into the tale.

‘It was a dark and stormy night…’ Mac and Riley looked balefully at him. ‘…it really was!’ Jack huffed when neither of them seemed convinced. ‘It was a dark and stormy night in Rising Star, Texas, and Mary-Ellen’s dad was driving her home from my house, when they went past Old Man Danvers’ farm…’
Riley was bent over in laughter, with her head between her knees. Mac just stared at Jack, then blinked twice.

‘That…is surprisingly plausible.’

Then, he too burst into hysterical laughter.

Jack looked between the two younger agents, vaguely concerned that this hysteria was some odd symptom of hypothermia that he’d forgotten about (or, more likely, a sign of their slight sleep deprivation), but a moment later, Mac and Riley both stopped laughing, and looked up at him, still rather pink. He puffed up a little and smirked.

‘See, I can tell a good story! Reckon I could be one of those Brothers Grumm?’

‘Brothers Grimm, Jack. The German storytellers were the Brothers Grimm.’

Jack shrugged off Mac’s correction.

‘Eh, you say po-tah-to, I say po-tay-to.’

Mac opened his mouth to retort and Riley cut him off before he could.

She didn’t want to deal with Mac and Jack having a sort-of argument, with Mac being pedantic and Jack (possibly – he wasn’t stupid, after all) deliberately winding him up, while stuck in a small enclosed space with the two of them.

‘You guys wanna hear the story of my first-ever hack or what?’

As they started on their hike the next morning, Jack gestured to the snow cave.

‘You know, we should do this more often. For the sake of team bonding and all!’

Mac and Riley both looked incredulously at the older man, then Mac snorted and Riley scoffed.

‘Yes, Jack, we should willingly subject ourselves to extreme cold in a very isolated place, which is dangerous, more often.’

Riley pointed at Mac and nodded in agreement.

‘Who was the one who didn’t want to die in an igloo-‘

‘-snow cave-‘

‘-snow cave, again?’

Mac was pursing his lips in thought as Riley jogged Jack with her elbow as she spoke, then he mused out loud as she finished.

‘Though, it was nice to be able to build and test a snow cave, I mean, I’ve been wanting to try it out, but getting enough snow in SoCal’s obviously not going to happen…‘

Mac trailed off as Jack and Riley just shook their heads affectionately at him, and then Jack rolled his eyes and tossed his hands in the air.

‘I meant do it more often without the whole freezing-our-asses-off-in-Alaska bit, of course! You
know, share stories with each other, it’s a bonding experience!’

After a little head-shaking, both Mac and Riley nodded.

‘Sharing stories around the fire-pit sounds like fun.’

‘Especially with snacks and beer.’

Jack pointed at Riley as she finished speaking, grinning.

‘You got it, Riles.’

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PHOENIX JET

(WARM)

(VERY NICE-AND-TOASTY WARM)

BARROW

ALASKA

Finally back in the nice and warm jet, dressed in clean, dry, warm clothing, Jack hummed to himself as he went through the medical kit. He pulled out the instant heat packs that were standard for all Phoenix medical kits (with extra for any mission to anywhere cold), and cracked a couple and tossed them at Mac and Riley (quite literally, they had to work on their catching skills or they were never going to beat the NSA Listening Post #27 Panthers), then stumbled upon something that was definitely non-standard that he had never before encountered in a medical kit.

A packet of chamomile tea teabags.

With a smile (his still-niggling, though now-smaller, concerns about smart, pretty, spirited, young women and Mac aside, Patty really had chosen well, not that he expected anything less from her), Jack headed into the little galley area of the jet, where they had a kettle, some cups, coffee, sugar packets and creamer, and set about making three cups of tea.

A couple of minutes later, Jack handed Mac and Riley each a cup of tea. Both of them stared at their tea, sniffed it and took a sip, then looked up at Jack, with hilariously-similar curious looks on their faces.

‘Since when did the jet get herbal tea?’

That was Riley.

Jack did his best to hide his smirk behind his own cup of tea, and responded with a shrug.

‘Found it in the med kit.’

‘Since when did herbal tea become part of the med kit? I mean, it makes sense, given that we had a mission to Alaska and that caffeine is not good if you have hypothermia, but…’

Mac shrugged as if to say you get what I mean as he trailed off and took another sip of tea.
Jack’s smirk-smile widened a little behind his cup of tea, as he took a sip himself, then replied.

‘Apparently since we got a cuddlier Doc.’

(Dr Farnham was a great man and a brilliant doctor, and they know he cared and he showed that in his own way, and maybe he’d softened in the last few months as he’d gotten closer to retirement, but cuddly he was not.)

Riley took another sip of her tea, and smiled, cupping her hands around the mug to enjoy the warmth for a moment, before pulling out her phone and chuckling at something that Bozer had sent her, then putting down her tea and typing out a reply, a soft smile on her face as she did so.

Mac stared at his cup of tea for a moment, then took a sip, then returned to staring at it.

He didn’t seem, to Jack’s rather expert eyes, to be thinking about something dark and heading down a scary rabbit hole, so the older man let Mac be and took a seat himself, enjoying his own cup of tea.

I will remember that there is art to medicine as well as science, and that warmth, sympathy and understanding may outweigh the surgeon’s knife or the chemist’s drug.

That’s a part of the Hippocratic Oath.

And I know that I really don’t have sufficient evidence for this, but I think it’s a part of the Hippocratic Oath that Beth remembers very well and strives very hard to uphold.

I just know that, for some reason.

I’ll call it a gut instinct.

Mac took another sip of his tea, enjoying the pleasant warmth. He glanced over at Riley, who was smiling at her phone. The hacker chuckled as he watched, and then he turned and looked over at Jack, who was smiling as he drank his own cup of tea. Mac smiled at the older man, and then, as Jack’s smile widened in response, the older man raised his cup of tea in a silent cheers gesture, which Mac returned.

MACGYVER'S RESIDENCE

LA

Mac smiled as he talked with his dad on the phone. He’d been practically shoved into his room by Jack, Bozer and Riley, who were preparing his birthday dinner (Bozer was doing a pretty good drill sergeant impersonation), as soon as they’d gotten home from Alaska, and his dad had had excellent timing and called him to wish him happy birthday about five minutes ago.

‘Thanks, Dad…’ He chuckled. ‘Yeah, I only just got back home from work. It was a long day…’

He smiled wryly. ‘…Well, deadlines don’t stop for your birthday, Dad…’

The smile grew even more wry. ‘…Yeah, they work us pretty hard at the think tank…’

He laughed again, flopping onto his bed.

‘…Anyway, how’s the fishing up there?’

After about twenty minutes of talking about not-much (yet, somehow, talking about not-much felt like it was important, which he knew didn’t make heaps of sense, but he also just knew was true),
Mac said his goodbyes and ended the call.

He got up off his bed, stretched, and put his phone back into his pocket, and still smiling, opened his bedroom door, just slightly at first, and when he wasn’t yelled at to close it again, opened it fully…to find that his house was decorated.

Tastefully and relatively subtly, but definitely decorated.

It looked like it wasn’t quite going to be a simple, quiet dinner with his nearest-and-dearest.

He found that he didn’t really mind.

Not at all.

Bozer, Jack, Riley, Penny, Patricia and Matty were standing in the living room, a pile of presents on the coffee table in front of them and all smiling and grinning at him.

Everyone except Patricia was wearing a party hat, and Penny ran up to him and jammed one on his head, which he obligingly helped her with. As he hugged his ex-girlfriend-still-friend, Mac shook his head affectionately and grinned at the others over her shoulder.

Bozer grinned and gestured at the decorations as if to say come on, man, like we could resist, while Riley smiled broadly and gestured with her head to Bozer as if to say he’s not wrong. Jack just smirked and slowly spread his hands out wide like a showman, the smirk becoming a grin as he did so.

Patricia smiled at him, with as much warmth and affection as he ever saw from her and a slightly-awkward little shrug of her shoulders, while Matty put her hands on her hips.

‘Not a proper birthday without decorations, Mac, come on!’

Mac let go of Penny, and shook his head again at his former boss, then looked around at them all.

‘Thanks, guys.’

They all smiled back, and then Jack stepped forward and hugged him.

‘Happy birthday, Mac.’

It is very much a happy birthday.

‘…I have absolutely no idea what this is, but Charlie, Viv and Sarah were all adamant that you’d love it, so…’

(Charlie, Viv and Sarah were away chasing a lead on a mole, but had sent their regards along with Matty.)

Matty offered him a ridiculously-wrapped present (it had two types of wrapping paper that clashed with each other on it, and a large bow that clashed horribly with both kinds of wrapping paper – Mac suspected this was a product of too many cooks, as he noted that the card attached said it was from Charlie, Viv and Sarah), which made a lovely (at least, to him) metallic clanging sound as she handed it over.

Mac grinned.
Yeah, that’s a really good sound - I’m about 97% sure that I’m going to love this present.

At that moment, the doorbell rang, and Mac turned around to face the door, brow furrowed.

They weren’t expecting anyone else, and his phone hadn’t gone off to give him an alert, so evidently, it was someone that his home security system recognised as a friend…or family.

Something that felt an awful lot like hope bloomed in his chest, and Mac wordlessly passed Charlie, Viv and Sarah’s present off to Matty, who took it with a knowing smile that Mac did not notice, and quietly walked away and started herding everyone else out onto the deck to give Mac some privacy.

Mac didn’t notice the herding either, as he approached the door and opened it…to reveal his father standing on the other side, holding a wrapped parcel with a gold bow on the top.

James MacGyver rubbed the back of his neck, looking rather awkward and sheepish.

‘Err…hey, Mac…’ He thrust the parcel at his son, and Mac took it and put it on the side table under the scarecrow without thinking, and just kept staring at his dad, who rubbed the back of his neck again and shifted his weight from leg to leg. ‘I…I…I just wanted to, I don’t know…surprise you? Come full circle? ‘Cause of your twelfth, and…I really wanted to show I was sorry and try and make up for it a little bit, and…’

He trailed off, not really knowing what to say, but in the end, words weren’t necessary, because Mac just threw his arms around his dad and hugged him.

Eyes suddenly a little teary, James MacGyver reached out and hugged his son back, just as tightly.

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*Every New Year, my grandfather always said that we should try and make every year better than the previous one.*

*In the same vein, perhaps we should try and make every birthday better than the last.*

*Now, a paperclip cookie-cake is pretty hard to top, but I think that’s happened this year.*

*And who knows?*

*It's going to be hard to top this year's, but maybe my 27th birthday will be even better.*

Chapter End Notes

What did you guys think? I really, really value your feedback; please let me know your thoughts? (I know Mac and Riley’s hysterical laughter at Jack’s story is probably a bit out-of-character…but it was so amusing, and chalk it up to their slight sleep deprivation, okay?)

According to Google Translate, Zdravstvuyte is Russian for hello. Apologies to anyone out there who actually speaks Russian! Kitty and Betsy are characters from Tolstoy’s Anna Karenina.

I suspect some of you might think that Mac should be scared of/wary of Beth, but my thinking is that she has undergone a ridiculously-thorough vetting process, as he
acknowledged in Barbed Wire, and she hasn’t done anything to set him off (like flirting with him or behaving suspiciously), he’s had a lot of therapy and his recovery has progressed significantly and Mac, at the end of the day, believes in the fundamental goodness of people. Thus, he’s okay with trusting her to be the Phoenix’s doctor and to do her job, and do it well, as he concluded in Barbed Wire.

This mission is also this universe’s version of the mission in Igloo in Paperclip Charms.

Next episode: 2.12, Water Filter. There’s something fishy going on…someone is stealing poisonous fish all over LA, and the Phoenix’s analysts believe this isn’t just Grand Theft Pufferfish. It might be the weirdest mission they’ve ever had, but after all, weird doesn’t mean much when you’re around Mac…
Water Filter

Chapter Summary

There’s something fishy going on…someone is stealing poisonous fish all over LA, and the Phoenix’s analysts believe this isn’t just Grand Theft Pufferfish. It might be the weirdest mission they’ve ever had, but after all, weird doesn’t mean much when you’re around Mac…

Chapter Notes

I know it sounds ridiculous, but seriously, please give this episode a chance! It actually has a serious plot, I promise, despite appearances!

SHOPPING MALL

LA

Bozer held up a stylishly ripped and faded pair of skinny jeans and a graphic T-shirt declaring the wearer’s adoration of pizza. It had emoticons on it.

‘What do you think my chances of getting Mac to wear this are?’

Riley raised an eyebrow at the outfit and snorted.

‘Practically zero.’

Bozer smirked and quirked an eyebrow at her.

‘You sure? I mean, he does love pizza…’

Riley just shook her head with an amused smile and a half-suppressed laugh, as Bozer put the ridiculous outfit away.

A couple of minutes later, Riley stumbled upon a shirt decorated with a very colourful plane pattern. With a little smirk, she held it up to show Bozer, who also smirked as she spoke.

‘Reckon Jack will like this, as a change from his usual uniform?’

Bozer and Riley had had a couple of shared rants about how Mac and Jack essentially wore the same (honestly boring and not fashionable) outfits every single day, and how Mac dressed a bit like an old man, which he really, really wasn’t. (Jack could dress like an old man, because he was one.)

This had led to them making some very clever little bets with Jack (Mac was, unfortunately, too clever by half to be conned into these bets), and Jack had lost the latest one, so he was getting a new
outfit (paid for by him), which he had to wear at least three times within the next three months.

Riley and Bozer had ventured out to the mall on their Saturday off to pick out the outfit they were going to bill Jack for and force him to wear. (They’d also gone shoe shopping – Bozer had some awesome new kicks and Riley a new pair of kickass boots.)

The plane shirt looked like it was a winner.

Bozer grinned and pointed at the shirt.

‘That is awesome.’ Bozer then pointed at her. ‘You are awesome.’

He was cheesy and ridiculous, but Riley grinned anyway, and reached out and took his hand as they took the shirt over to the cashier.

New boots, annoying and making-over Jack, and a day out with her sweet, ridiculous, and very cute boyfriend?

This was a very good day in Riley’s book.

PHOENIX FOUNDATION HEADQUARTERS

SOMEWHERE IN LA

‘…last night, there was a break-in at the California Science Centre’s aquarium, and five poisonous pufferfish were stolen.’ Thornton tapped the screen, bringing up a photo of said pufferfish on one side and the California Science Centre on the other, then continued, completely seriously. ‘This is the third aquarium break-in and pufferfish theft in the last week, and overall, seventeen pufferfish have been stolen.’

She looked over the team, who were all trying very hard to be serious, because they all knew that this had to be very serious, as it was their mission, but at the same time, it did sound absurd.

She didn’t blame them, and just pressed on.

Thornton tapped the screen again, and Timothy, Miriam and Ritchie all appeared on the screen.

Timothy and Miriam, on the left side of the screen, spoke first.

‘We believe that the thefts are the work of individuals intending to perpetrate a terrorist attack using tetrodotoxin extracted from the pufferfish.’

‘It simply doesn’t make sense to steal the pufferfish to sell for consumption or as pets; it’d cost more to steal them than what you’d earn from selling them.’

‘We also think that we’re likely looking for eco-terrorists, since it appears that every effort was made to keep the fish alive.’

‘We also think that the attack is going to be highly-targeted and on a relatively small number of people.’

Ritchie cut in at this point, wringing his hands.

‘Pufferfish are really, really poisonous, and there’s no known antidote to tetrodotoxin…’ He wrung
his hands again, then forced himself to focus, taking a deep breath. ‘Each pufferfish has enough
tetrodotoxin in it to kill 30 adults, but most of it is in its ovaries and liver. There’s a small amount in
the skin that can theoretically be extracted without killing the pufferfish…’

Miriam continued.

‘…So since they went to so much effort to keep them alive when they stole them, we think, firstly,
that they needed to steal so many to extract sufficient toxin for their plans, and secondly, they thus
only intend to attack a fairly small amount of people.’

Timothy explained further.

‘We’re talking about fifteen victims or so, at absolute most.’

Ritchie cut in.

‘At least, that’s what I think. Nobody’s ever done this before, as far as I know…’ He shrugged. ‘It’s
a guess.’

Thornton turned to Mac, Jack, Bozer and Riley, who were now finding it a lot easier to be serious.

Impending terrorist attacks always put everyone in a very serious mood.

‘Your mission is to confirm that this is a case of eco-terrorism, and not a case of black-market fish
sales, and stop the attack and apprehend the would-be terrorists.’

They all nodded seriously, Mac picking up a paperclip which rapidly took the shape of a pufferfish,
before Jack rubbed his hands together with a slightly-inappropriate grin, lightening the mood as he so
often did.

‘Let’s hope it’s just people going way too far for their fugu fix.’

Everyone turned to Jack with expressions that ranged from incredulous (Riley, Mac and Bozer,
Bozer especially) to just a slightly-raised eyebrow (Thornton).

It was Mac who broke the silence and asked the question that they all had.

‘How do you know about the pufferfish’s role in Japanese cuisine?’

Jack looked affronted and crossed his arms.

‘*The Simpsons*, man! There’s an episode in which Homer eats fugu and freaks out that he’s gonna
die, and…’ Jack made a face as he had a realization. ‘…I think that episode is from before you were
born.’

Bozer snickered, Riley mouthed ‘old man’ at Jack and Mac just gave a little smirk.

Timothy, Miriam and Ritchie watched the scene with no small amount of amusement, as Thornton
cleared her throat.

Mac, Jack, Riley and Bozer glanced over at her, then, a little sheepishly, made their way to the door.

Thornton watched them go, and slowly, the ghost of an amused smile appeared on her face.
Mac, Bozer, Riley and Jack walked out of the Science Centre, having examined the aquarium thoroughly, as well as the security footage, and found that there were practically no clues – the robbers had worn gloves and the security camera footage had been wiped far too well to recover anything, though, the method of wiping in the first place, the expert breaking-and-entering and the evidence of very careful treatment of the stolen fish and all the other sea creatures that shared the tank with the stolen fish told them that they were looking for someone who had expert computer and technical skills, someone who had expert breaking-and-entering skills (and likely had the corresponding criminal record) and someone who had expert knowledge and skills regarding sea creatures. These individuals may or may not be the same individual.

It wasn’t much, but it was something to go off.

They’d only just left the building and were starting to walk towards their car when a motorcycle, with a man and a woman on-board, both of them clothed in black leather and wearing helmets, which served to conceal their faces, came speeding down the street.

Without any warning, the woman fired at them using a semi-automatic that had been concealed on her far side, and Mac, Jack, Riley and Bozer all ducked for cover as shots rang out rapidly.

When the shots stopped, Jack, his own gun already in hand, ducked out from behind cover and swore, as the motorbike was already too far away for any meaningful pursuit attempt, and people were already swarming, busy as the area was.

The four of them, still breathing hard, adrenaline still pumping, glanced at each other for a moment, then Jack broke the silence.

‘Yeah, I don’t think we’re dealing with people going overboard for sashimi.’

‘They were blanks.’

Mac and Jack exchanged a glance, a silent communication, confirming that both of them were on the same page, which they were.

They had combed the area thoroughly, as Bozer and Riley tracked the motorbike and its passengers, and they’d found no signs of bullets whatsoever.

Bozer and Riley looked up at Mac as he spoke, and Jack continued.

‘Meant to scare us, not hurt us.’ Jack crossed his arms. ‘They’re not pros and they don’t know anything about us.’

*Whoever these wannabe eco-terrorists are, they clearly have no idea who we are and are relatively inexprienced in these matters.*

*Or they’d know that shooting blanks at us, A, is not going to work and scare us off, and B, makes it easier for us to track them down.*

*They are also clearly the particular kind of terrorists who take their particular political message very seriously and consider themselves to be noble heroes or martyrs, given that they tried to scare us, not hurt us, because we’re not their target.*
Bozer and Riley nodded, both understanding the implications, then Riley pointed at her laptop screen.

‘I’ve managed to track the bike for about two miles, but it disappears around here.’ She pointed to a region under a freeway overpass. ‘It’s pretty much all blind-spots, good site to dump the bike and change vehicles.’

Mac and Jack nodded, and then Jack pulled out his keys and wordlessly, they all got back into the car.

They say that the road to hell is paved with good intentions.

I have a feeling that we’re dealing with people who are unknowingly walking that road right now.

UNDER FREEWAY OVERPASS

(TRAFFIC CAMERA BLIND-SPOT)

LA

Jack crouched by the dumped motorbike, examining it, while Mac crouched beside him, looking around the area.

Riley was looking at nearby traffic camera feeds, trying to find the getaway car that the shooter and her companion had changed to, with Bozer looking over her shoulder, providing an additional pair of eyes.

Mac seemed to spot something, because he got up and crouched beside a concrete pillar, examining it very closely. He pulled out his Swiss Army knife and took out the magnifying glass, motioning to Bozer, who tapped Riley on the shoulder, causing her to look over at Mac.

‘Riley, we’re looking for a light blue car, this colour, to be precise.’

He gestured to the region he’d placed the magnifying glass over; indeed, there was a speck of light blue paint, shiny and metallic, stuck to the pillar, as if it’d been scraped off a car.

Jack, who’d gotten up and was now looking over Mac’s shoulder, as Riley nodded and she and Bozer returned to searching traffic cameras, furrowed his brow.

‘How in the world did you spot that tiny little thing, brother? You been eating your carrots?’

Mac shot his partner a baleful look.

‘Eating carrots wouldn’t improve my eyesight, Jack.’ He stood up, adopting an expression that Jack referred to in his mind as his Mr-MacGyver’s-Science-Class look, and indicated the dumped bike, the pillar with the paint on it, and the adjacent pillar, as well as the small skid mark the getaway car had left. ‘Given the location of the skid mark, the speed needed to produce a skid mark like that, the motorbike’s position and the other pillar’s location, assuming that the car is in the standard width range and the driver has normal driving patterns, it was highly likely that the car would come slightly too close to this pillar.’ He gestured to the paint spot. ‘Thus, it was likely that there was some kind of paint residue left on this pillar.’

Jack blinked twice and was about to say something very articulate like huh? (he knew all those
words, Mac was good at explaining as usual, and he kind of got what his partner meant, but still, it was a lot to take in…) when Riley interrupted.

‘Yes, got them!’

Bozer high-fived Riley, then the hacker turned her laptop to show Mac and Jack the light blue car on the screen. Mac looked at it rather admiringly for a moment, then nodded.

‘Tesla Model 3. That supports the eco-terrorist theory.’

Bozer and Jack nodded as Riley ran the plates.

‘Plates are fake, they’re registered to a suburban mom in Pasadena who drives a 2014 Toyota Camry.’ She pursed her lips for a moment. ‘Okay, cross-checking Tesla Model 3 owners with people who have environmentalist leanings, marine biology or aquarium experience, computer and tech skills, breaking-and-entering records, or have connections with people who do…’

She typed furiously as she spoke, and glancing at each other, Bozer, Jack and Mac spread out, examining the motorbike dump site more thoroughly, hoping to find more clues so Riley could narrow down their suspect pool.

‘Mickey Chan-Lewis, twenty-eight.’ Jack, Mac and Bozer looked over Riley’s shoulders at her laptop screen, which showed a pretty brunette wearing very stylish, simple, smart clothes, as the hacker spoke. She’d narrowed down their suspect list, and Mickey Chan-Lewis was their number one suspect. ‘She’s an app developer and runs a successful company here in L.A.’ Riley’s nails clacked on her keyboard for a moment, then an address appeared next to the photo of the woman. ‘She owns a light blue Tesla Model 3, her boyfriend Matthew De Silva is a marine biologist, and she’s also aggressively environmentalist.’ Riley’s eyebrows rose slightly. ‘Really aggressively environmentalist.’ A few more keystrokes, and several posts and articles appeared on the screen. ‘She managed to bury most of it so deep down that most people wouldn’t be able to find it, but…’

Bozer grinned proudly, and Jack reached out and high-fived Riley.

‘But you ain’t most people, Riles.’ He glanced at the screen again. ‘Hiding that environmentalist stuff? Real fishy.’

Bozer cocked his head to the side, as if saying not half-bad, Riley groaned and Mac huffed out a long-suffering sigh and muttered something about hating Jack’s puns under his breath.

Riley typed on her keyboard again, and glanced up at the other three agents.

‘I can’t find any suspicious communications involving her, but I suspect she’s been using the dark web for that, and I’m going to have to get in there and go digging.’

Jack and Mac exchanged a look, and both nodded after a moment, then Jack spoke.

‘Alright, how about you two-‘ He indicated Bozer and Riley. ‘-head back to the Phoenix and go into this shadow web-‘

‘Dark web, Jack.’

Jack made a face at Riley’s correction.

‘Shadow sounds better. Cooler. More mysterious.’ Riley and Mac both shot him a look, and he
raised his hands in supplication. ‘Just saying! A man’s entitled to his two cents!’ After a second, during which Mac and Riley shook their heads balefully at him while Bozer looked like he thought Jack had a decent point, he looked more serious again. ‘And me and Mac will head over and check out Miss Chan-Lewis and her offices.’

Mickey Chan-Lewis’ Offices

LA

The loft-like office space in a converted warehouse was dark when Mac and Jack got there, despite it being the middle of a workday.

At the door stood two burly men in suits with dark glasses.

Security guards.

The partners exchanged a glance, then walked up to the two men. Jack held out a hand to the slightly taller of the two.

‘Afternoon, I’m Jack, this is my partner, and we want to talk to Miss Chan-Lewis about a possible business deal—’

The shorter security guard cut Jack off.

‘She’s not here.’

The taller guard continued.

‘Boss lady gave everyone the day off, soon as they came in.’

The shorter guard seemed to shoot the taller one a look from behind his dark glasses, and the taller one seemed slightly cowed by the look, and took a step back, away from Jack.

Jack nodded, looking astounded.

‘Day off, on a Wednesday?’ He turned to Mac and jogged him with an elbow. ‘This is why we should get into the tech game, man!’ Mac just nodded in agreement, and Jack turned back to the security guards. ‘Well, I assume she’ll be back tomorrow?’

The shorter security guard gave a single abrupt nod, and Jack nodded back, far less abruptly, slapping Mac on the arm.

‘Alright, we’ll be back tomorrow, then.’ He gave a casual salute to the two guards, while Mac nodded in acknowledgement, playing the ‘silent and mysterious’ one of the pair. ‘See you then, gentlemen.’

And with that, Jack and Mac walked way, exchanging a significant look as they did so.

This is definitely fishy.

…Pun unintended.

Café Next to Mickey Chan-Lewis’ Offices
Carrying a cup of coffee each, Mac and Jack made their way up onto the rooftop deck of the next-door café.

They sat down at a table by the edge closest to Miss Chan-Lewis’ office building, and sat there, sipping coffee, for three minutes, before Mac got up and eyed the gap between the two buildings (they were three stories up and the gap was about nine feet), looking down, then back up again and swallowing, closing his eyes for a moment. Then, he looked over at the roof of the office building again, and glanced around the (thankfully-empty) rooftop deck.

Mac walked over to a decorative planter box that was suspended from a hook attached to a pole that also had a light fixture on it, and started undoing the knots in the rope.

‘Please tell me we ain’t tightrope walking, brother.’

Mac didn’t even look up at him as he, rope successfully removed from the planter box and the pole, moved onto a long wooden picnic table, removing the salt and pepper shakers and sugar bowl from the middle and flipping it upside down.

‘I’m not making a tightrope, Jack.’

As Jack well knows, I’m terrified of heights.

Of course, in this job, sometimes, you’ve got to man up and face your fears.

So, if ever the time comes, and I have no choice but to walk a tightrope, I’ll do it.

But if I can avoid it, like today?

I’ll say: hell no to tightrope walking.

ROOF

MICKEY CHAN-LEWIS’ OFFICES

LA

Jack watched as Mac picked open the skylight in the roof of Miss Chan-Lewis’ offices, then the older man pointed at himself, then Mac, as his partner opened the skylight. Mac nodded, and then Jack lowered himself carefully through the skylight, dropping lightly onto the floor, between a couple of desks in the central, open-plan workspace.

He listened carefully for a moment, but it seemed that their intrusion had gone unnoticed so far, so he shot Mac, who was looking down at him, a double thumbs-up, and got out of the way, as his partner dropped through the skylight, landing as light as a cat.

The two of them took a moment to orient themselves, then with a couple of hand signals (they didn’t want to make any unnecessary noise and risk alerting the guards), they split up, Jack heading for Miss Chan-Lewis’ personal office, while Mac headed in the opposite direction.
Jack inserted a special USB prepared by Riley and some of the Phoenix techs into Mickey Chan-Lewis’ computer, and watched as it turned on and, eventually (he’d learned that hacking took time), the download started.

As it continued, Jack searched the rest of the office systematically. On one of the walls was a whiteboard (high-tech like the ones at the Phoenix), with assorted notes and scribbles that he didn’t understand, but snapped pictures of on his phone nonetheless, as well as a calendar.

Just as he was about to photograph the calendar, he heard footsteps.

Two sets, and the footfalls were too heavy to be Mac’s anyway.

The security guards.

He pulled up Mac’s number and quickly texted him a specific couple of words, then snapped a photo of the calendar and yanked the USB from the computer, despite the fact that the download was only 29% complete.

As he poked his head carefully out of the door of the office, his gun in hand, Jack swore internally as he watched the two security guards head in the opposite direction of their boss’s office (which was very stupid, he didn’t think those two guards had all that many brain cells, honestly…or it meant that whatever they were really here to guard, even if they weren’t completely aware of what it was, was on the other side of the building…where Mac was.)

He swore again internally, and started rushing over, quietly as he could.

Well, his partner should have an ace or two up his sleeve, as always.

As soon as he got Jack’s message, Mac swore internally, then quietly and quickly closed the door to the kitchenette, which had been closed when he’d gotten there.

He grabbed several jawbreakers from the bowl on the counter (he assumed that office jawbreakers were just one of those random Google-inspired office perks that tech companies of this sort were so keen to have – he found it a bit weird, but then again, the Phoenix break room’s newly-acquired pool table was pretty awesome…), and put them in the microwave.

*Jawbreakers consist of a small sugar core that has been coated with layers of sugar syrup, in a process that takes four days.*

*The inner layers melt faster than the outer layers, which gives you, if you microwave it long enough at high enough power, a relatively-fragile sugar ball filled with molten sugar at 225 degrees Fahrenheit.*

Mac carefully picked up the now-weaponised jawbreakers, just as the door burst open.
A minute later, Mac and Jack made eye contact over the two unconscious, sugar-splattered security guards.

Jack glanced down at the guards, then back up at Mac as he put his gun away, with an expression that clearly said *really, brother?*

Mac just shrugged sheepishly, an action that contrasted with the little smirk on his face.

Jack shook his head, an eyebrow still raised, and then Mac stepped around the guards, who were starting to stir weakly, and they high-tailed their way out of there.

**PHOENIX FOUNDATION HEADQUARTERS**

**SOMewhere IN LA**

‘The calendar you got from her office shows that she’s going to be at a corporate meet-and-greet tonight.’ Riley gestured to her laptop screen, which showed a guest list for the meet-and-greet. ‘Attendees include the CEOs of two companies involved in fracking in California and three members of the board of Adani.’

Mac tapped the large screen on the wall, bringing up a photo of a coral reef, and a map of the north-eastern coast of Australia.

‘Adani is establishing a mine in Queensland, Australia that severely threatens the Great Barrier Reef.’

Jack nodded grimly, as did Thornton, who walked up to the screen and tapped it herself as she spoke.

‘We have their targets.’ Photos of four men and one woman, all middle-aged, appeared. She turned to Riley. ‘And we have three of the eco-terrorists.’

The hacker nodded, as Bozer got up and took over control of the large screen, bringing up photos of each suspect as Riley talked.

‘Mickey Chan-Lewis, obviously.’ Bozer pulled that photo aside, and brought up another one. ‘Her marine biologist boyfriend, Matthew De Silva.’ They all nodded; this wasn’t new information, as Bozer brought up a third photo. ‘And Will Donaldson, Matthew’s best friend and one of Mickey’s employees.’

Mac reached out and picked up a paperclip, which started taking the shape of a coffee mug in his hands.

‘There’s five people involved in the attack; there were five dirty mugs in the kitchenette sink, despite all the employees being sent home as soon as they arrived at work.’

Riley started typing rapidly.

‘Anything else you’ve got to help me track down the other two, Mac?’

He thought back to what he’d seen at Mickey Chan-Lewis’ offices, recalling everything that had been in the recycling bin in the photocopying/filing room. (You never knew what was evidence and
what wasn’t, what was useful and what wasn’t; he’d had no time to do a systematic search, and since the bin was fairly empty – which made sense, since the boss was an eco-terrorist – he’d simply memorised the entire contents.) There’d been the usual accounting records, a couple of takeaway menus delivered as junk mail, half a contract with a client…and the very top portion, just the header, of a print-out of a LAPD rap-sheet, and a staff briefing for The Sea Lab, an aquarium run by the LA Conservation Corps that had been the second aquarium to be broken into. (It seemed that the eco-terrorists were clever enough to know that it was not a good idea to break into the aquarium that one of them worked at or had worked at first, since that would be the one they’d scrutinize the employee records of the most, expecting that they’d start with where they had someone on the inside and/or someone with inside knowledge.)

He nodded at Riley.

‘Look for somebody with arrests for breaking-and-entering by the LAPD, and current or former members of the LA Conservation Corps.’

The click-clack of Riley’s nails on her laptop continued for a minute, then she made a noise of triumph, and wordlessly, Bozer reached out and fist-bumped her.

‘Got them.’ There were a few more keystrokes, and then two more photos appeared on screen, a man and a woman, both appearing in their late thirties. ‘Jenny Beck, member of the LA Conservation Corps who worked at The Sea Lab until three weeks ago, and Peter Chekov, who has a long and illustrious criminal record involving a lot of breaking-and-entering and a lot of stealing.’

They all nodded, and then Thornton spoke up, tapping on the screen to rearrange the various photos on it as she did so.

‘We have our suspects and their targets. We’ll go undercover at the meet-and-greet, capture the eco-terrorists and stop the attack.’ She turned back to face them. ‘We have to assume that they’re well aware of what you four look like; you’ll need disguises.’

She glanced over at Bozer, who had a look on his face that was somewhere between a grin and a smirk, as he rubbed his hands together in anticipation.

‘Don’t worry, guys, I got you covered. I’ve got a couple of special pieces I’ve been saving for a special occasion…’

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PHOENIX LIMOUSINE

OUTSIDE OF A VERY FANCY HOTEL

LA

‘It’s show-time.’

Jack (now with a different nose and a blonde mullet– he’d argued that he looked ridiculous, but Bozer had said that since he was supposed to be a crazy rich guy and a silent investor in a whole series of businesses, it totally worked and helped sell the cover) rubbed his hands together with a bit of a grin.

Thornton, wearing yet another one of her very elegant jumpsuits (this one was fuchsia and they were beginning to wonder, especially Mac – he was no connoisseur of women’s fashion, but he was just curious about just about everything - if she had an entire wardrobe full of them) and pretending to be
the crazy rich guy’s girlfriend, simply raised an eyebrow at him, as Riley’s voice rang out through their earpieces.

‘Thank God; I can’t wait to get out of here!’

(None of them blamed her; Riley was currently hiding in a secret compartment under one of the limo’s seats – the whole vehicle was tricked out; it was bulletproof, had tinted windows and lots of secret compartments that folded out to give the same computer system as there was in the van.)

The only advantage to her part in this mission (coordinating and monitoring from the limo) was that she hadn’t had to put on a disguise.

Mac and Bozer were undercover as waiters. The former was now a brunette with brown eyes (thanks to temporary hair dye and coloured contacts) and no longer had a cleft in his chin, while the latter had an Afro (thanks to a wig) and fake glasses but had had to shave off all his facial hair (which he’d been complaining about constantly).

The plan was for all of them to try and prevent the poisoning of the eco-terrorists’ targets (they had a few strategies they’d brainstormed, depending on whether or not the poison had already been put into their food or drink), but Jack and Thornton were focused on capturing Mickey Chan-Lewis and her boyfriend, who were attending the event, while Mac and Bozer caught the other three wannabe eco-terrorists, who were posing as staff as well.

The limo pulled up to the front steps of the hotel at last (this whole fancy drop-off thing was really inefficient, Jack thought), and Jack got out, offering a hand to his ‘girlfriend’.

It was show-time indeed.

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**SERVICE CORRIDOR OFF HOTEL KITCHEN**

**VERY FANCY HOTEL**

**LA**

‘Oh, I’m so, so, sorry…here, let me help you get cleaned up…I’m so, so sorry, man…’

Talking over all of Will Donaldson’s protests, Mac half-dragged the man, who was covered in bits of petit fours from the platter of them that Mac had ‘accidentally’ spilled on him, towards the bathroom.

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**BACK DOOR OF HOTEL KITCHEN**

**VERY FANCY HOTEL**

**LA**

‘Hi, sorry, I know you’re on break, but there’s this huge cake that Chef asked me to carry out to the ballroom, but it’s really way too big for me to manage, can you two give me a hand? Please?’

Bozer did his best impression of his roommate’s (almost-certainly unintentional) puppy-dog-eyes, and to his relief, Jenny Beck smiled at him and nodded, and shot Peter Chekov a look. The man snorted and rolled his eyes, but straightened up a little anyway, and put his lighter and cigarette back
into his pocket.

‘Of course we’ll help you out.’

Bozer smiled at the older woman. (He hadn’t met many terrorists and didn’t really want to, but he was pretty sure Jenny Beck was one of the nicest ones ever.)

‘Thanks so much, it’s in one of the walk-ins, just this way…’

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**WALK-IN FRIDGE**

**VERY FANCY HOTEL**

**LA**

‘High-five, bro!’

Mac reached out and high-fived his best friend with less enthusiasm than Bozer, his focus still on the three would-be eco-terrorists, who were restrained with their own belts and shoelaces.

Will Donaldson, who still had some quiche on his shirt, smirked darkly at Mac.

‘You’re too late. They’ll be drinking the tetrodotoxin any minute now…’

He didn’t sound like he was bluffing.

Not at all.

Mac tapped his earpiece, as Bozer’s expression instantly turned from cheery satisfaction to grim.

‘Jack, Thornton, the poison is already in their drinks.’

A second later, Riley’s voice came through their earpieces. (She was watching Jack and Thornton for any signals through the hotel’s security cameras, since to keep cover, they might not be able to reply over their comms.)

‘They got it, Mac, and they’re on it, but they’re probably going to need back-up…’

Mac glanced around the fridge, catching sight of a large crate full of grapes, and then hurried out, followed by Bozer.

Mac locked the door behind them, and interrupted Bozer, who had a vaguely-concerned look on his face, before he could speak.

‘They’ll be fine as long as we come back within half an hour or so.’ He pointed down the corridor.

‘Boze, can you grab three bottles of champagne and meet me at the ballroom entrance?’

Bozer nodded and ran off, as Mac hurried towards the glassware storage area.

He needed champagne glasses. Lots of champagne glasses.

*I didn’t get to create a champagne spray disaster when we took down Mercury, but it looks like I’m going to get to do it today.*
Thornton’s not going to like the bill on this one...and I know this isn’t exactly situation-appropriate...but it’s going to be really, really cool.

BALLROOM

VERY FANCY HOTEL

LA

Jack reached out and grabbed the glasses that the three Adani executives were holding out of their hands before they could drink from them. He dumped their contents into a nearby pot-plant, and flung an arm around the nearest executive.

All three executives stared at him, and silently, Jack thanked Bozer for the horrible hairstyle, because it was really helping him pull off this whole crazy rich dude act. (So did Thornton’s look of indulgent exasperation.)

‘Come on, fellas, those aren’t drinks!’ He gestured to one of the passing waiters. ‘Get me two fingers of your finest Scotch for me, these three gentlemen and my lady.’ The waiter nodded and walked off, as Jack smirked. ‘Now those’ll be drinks.’ He squeezed the executive a little tighter as Thornton’s smile grew slightly more exasperated (she was not going to like the bill on this one, Jack knew).

‘Now, tell me, what do you fellas do?’

At that moment, everyone was showered with champagne (particularly the two CEOs of the fracking companies and Mickey Chan-Lewis and Matthew De Silva, who were conversing with them).

‘I am so, so sorry, sir…’

‘…Of course, of course, again, so sorry, ma’am…’

Mac and Bozer were playing the role of very apologetic clumsy waiters to the hilt, but that evidently wasn’t enough for the two would-be eco-terrorists, because, making the excuse that they had to go get cleaned up, they split up and hurried out of the crowd that was gathering around Mac and Bozer, which was full of people yelling at the two of them and generally being very unhappy.

Jack and Thornton simply glanced at one another, and split off to give chase.

That proved very difficult, given the agitated crowd in the ballroom.

Well, this was definitely one of my cooler ideas...but, I’ll admit, probably pretty far from one of my best.

Thornton’s voice rang out over Jack’s earpiece.

‘I’ve got De Silva.’

At that moment, as Jack watched and gave chase, Mickey grabbed a knife from a stunned sushi chef who’d been preparing fresh sushi on the side of the ballroom, near the entrance. He ran harder, but she’d had too much of a head start and he was still dealing with the edge of the crowd.

She’d be out the door in moments. Armed.
Riley’s voice, calm and cool, rang out over their earpieces. (For a moment, Jack had almost forgotten that she was watching the whole scene play out over the security cameras.)

‘I’m on it.’

Adrenaline spiking further, Jack kept running, pushing himself just that little bit harder, passing Thornton, who was cuffing De Silva with a pair of handcuffs she’d pulled from somewhere.

‘She’s got a knife, Riles.’

He couldn’t quite keep the worry out of his voice.

‘I know, I got it.’

OUTSIDE OF THE VERY FANCY HOTEL

LA

Jack got outside (after dodging a fish thrown by a very angry sushi chef who’d had his knife stolen – Jack figured that the man thought he was working with Mickey or something), to find Riley cuffing Mickey, having pinned the other woman to the sidewalk leading up to the hotel steps.

He grinned, despite the situation and his earlier worry, and Riley smiled right back up at him.

Mac and Bozer (looking rather battered – Mac had quiche in his hair and Bozer’s uniform was ripped) skidded to a halt beside Jack, and Bozer gave a congratulatory whoop, while Mac smiled and nodded, impressed.

Then, their eyes all fell on the sushi knife, which was lying several feet away from Riley and Mickey (who was looking very angry, unsurprisingly).

There was blood on it.

Seeing where their eyes were going, Riley secured the cuffs, and held up her left arm. There was blood oozing down her forearm, quite a lot of blood.

‘I’ll be fine, but I’m going to need a trip to the infirmary.’

They all let out a sigh of relief (more internal for Mac and very external for Bozer), and Jack hurried over to take over keeping Mickey under control, while Bozer grabbed the medical kit from the limo and Mac examined Riley’s arm.

She’s going to be fine, but I think that Riley’s not going to be playing video games or even typing very much for a while…

Though, I’m sure we’ll all come up with distractions to help keep her from getting bored.

Bozer especially.

He’s a bottomless well of movie recommendations, after all.

INFIRMARY
Beth glanced between Riley, who was sitting on the edge of a bed in a newly-created ‘room’ in the infirmary, and Mac, Jack, Bozer and Thornton, who were standing near the door, a bit like a worried family (which, she supposed, based on what she’d seen of them, which wasn’t that much – none of them had needed medical attention yet - and what she’d heard, was kind of what they were).

She turned to her patient and spoke quietly.

‘Would you like them to stay or go?’

If Riley wanted them to go, she would make them go, even Thornton, despite the older woman being her boss.

This was her infirmary and her patients’ wellbeing (and wishes, if that didn’t contradict their wellbeing) always came first.

Riley looked over Beth’s shoulder, shooting the four in the doorway a significant look.

‘I’d like them to go.’

That was said very firmly.

Thornton and Mac nodded, and started making for the door. Bozer hesitated a moment, but after a little nod from Riley, he too started heading out. Jack looked like he didn’t want to move, watching Riley for a long moment, but he allowed Mac to pull him out the door.

Beth pulled on a pair of gloves, and picked up a syringe, filling it carefully with liquid from a small, sealed glass bottle, and showing it to Riley.

‘This is just a local anaesthetic.’ She carefully injected it into the other young woman’s arm, then reached for some disinfectant wipes. ‘I’ll clean the wound, then we’ll wait a few minutes for the anaesthetic to kick in, and I’ll stitch it up.’ She held up a wipe. ‘This is going to sting, I’m afraid.’ Riley gave a little hiss of pain as the doctor started cleaning the wound (it really stung), and Beth smiled sympathetically at her. She reached for a distraction (those always helped) and quickly found one. ‘The field dressing on your arm was really well done.’

Riley smiled, glad for the conversation and the distraction.

‘Yeah, Mac did it, and he’s not you, but he’s a really good field medic.’

Beth gave a wry little smile as she continued her work.

‘I should have known it was MacGyver, given the rumours I’ve heard.’ She paused for a moment. ‘Is there anything he can’t do?’

She sounded more genuinely curious than anything else.

Riley snorted, the stinging sensation starting to fade (a little like how their fear and worry seemed less acute in the field when they joked around), and looked down at the doctor.

‘He really can’t dance. And he really can’t sing. And he’s not much of a green thumb.’
Beth’s smile widened as she shook her head with amusement, as well as, Riley noted, satisfaction at her curiosity being sated, and then she straightened up. She wanted to wait a bit longer for the anaesthetic to take effect before stitching, and so she started cleaning up, throwing out the bloodied disinfectant wipes. She happened to glance at the little table next to the bed as she did so, and noticed Riley’s Captain America phone case, a recent gift from Bozer, and she turned back to Riley with a smile.

‘I like your phone case.’

The hacker smiled right back.

‘I am so pumped for Infinity War.’

Beth picked up a reel of surgical thread and a sterile needle, still smiling as she did so, then glanced back at Riley.

‘Not long to go now!’ She threaded the needle, then looked back up once her task was done. ‘Do you think the huge cast is going to be a problem?’

Beth finished the last of Riley’s twelve stitches, and snipped off the thread, looking up rather sheepishly at her patient.

‘I didn’t actually listen very closely to most of what you were saying…’ She’d had to concentrate on stitching, but the talking kept Riley distracted, which was a huge positive. ‘…but I agree with your general I-hate-rom-coms point.’ Riley gave a little chuckle and nodded in understanding, as Beth applied an antibiotic gel, then attached a bandage gently over the stitches. ‘Keep that clean and dry and change the dressing daily; I’ll give you some supplies.’ She looked very seriously at Riley, eyes very firm. ‘Keep an eye out for swelling, heat, redness or discharge, and contact me immediately if any of those symptoms appear. You’re going to have to take it very easy with that arm for the next week or so.’ Her expression softened. ‘It shouldn’t scar permanently, with proper care, if you’re worried about that, and typing is fine, provided you take plenty of breaks, stop if there’s any pain and have a surface to rest your arm on. If there are no complications, I’ll see you in a week to have those stitches out.’

Riley nodded seriously, then a wry look appeared on her face.

‘Oh, trust me, Beth, I’m not a terrible patient, you don’t have to worry about me…unlike some people I work with.’

She jerked her head at the doorway.

Beth nodded, her expression half-wry, half-deadly serious.

‘I know. Dr Farnham warned me about MacGyver.’

Riley nodded, and gestured with her head towards the door again.

‘He’s earned that reputation. Really earned that reputation.’

To her credit, Beth didn’t look terrified. Instead, after a moment and a little shrug, she smiled wryly.

‘Well, I’ve dealt with Alex Lucas; I’m sure I can deal with MacGyver when he inevitably needs medical care at some point in the future.’ She glanced at the door, then back at Riley, tilting her head a little towards her left shoulder, expression turning more wry. ‘Hopefully far in the future.’
Riley’s smile widened into a grin as she nodded.

Beth would do just fine as the Phoenix’s doctor.

Beth and Riley stepped out of the room a minute later, to find Thornton standing by the infirmary door, Mac slouched in a chair and making paperclip shapes, and Jack and Bozer pacing.

As soon as they noticed Riley’s entrance, both Bozer and Jack stopped pacing immediately and turned and looked at the hacker for a long moment, and then Bozer walked up to her and bowed dramatically.

‘I’m at your service, my lady.’

Riley quirked an eyebrow at him and shook her head, but there was nothing in her eyes save affection.

Jack walked up to her, and gently put an arm around her shoulders, pulling her into a side-hug from her uninjured right side.

‘He’s been saying that he’ll wait on you hand and foot until you get better, Ri.’ He leaned a bit closer and whispered into her ear. ‘I reckon you picked a good one, Riles.’

Riley smiled a soft, affectionate smile and nodded.

They’d all look after her, because that’s what they did, looked after each other.

That was what family did, after all.

Meanwhile, Beth and Thornton conversed quietly about the medically-imposed restrictions on Riley for the next couple of weeks.

As their conversation finished and Mac got up to join the others, leaving his paperclip shapes (including a paperclip nigiri and a California roll) on the chair he’d been sitting on, Thornton looked over the four of them with a hint of fondness in her eyes that didn’t go unnoticed by the young doctor, not after the infirmary visits she’d seen their boss pay her agents, or the unlimited budget she’d allocated the infirmary or the interrogation Thornton had put her through and the implicit threats she’d given her before she’d been hired.

Similarly, the curious look that Beth gave Mac’s paperclip shapes, tilting her head ever-so-slightly to the left and furrowing her brow as she looked over at them, seemingly trying to discern the source of inspiration behind them, didn’t go unnoticed by the Phoenix’s Director either.

It was her business to notice things, and she was the best in the business, after all.

MACGYVER’S RESIDENCE

LA

Mac put the DVD into the DVD player, and turned on the television. For reasons unknown to him (he was currently trying to puzzle it out and figured it almost certainly had to do with her new phone case), Riley wanted to watch the first Captain America, and he, Jack, Bozer and Patricia had all
come to the unspoken agreement that the next few days were Riley’s – whatever she wanted, they’d get it for her or do it for her if it was within their power (well, reasonable power, anyway – not that Riley would ask for anything outrageous).

When Mac had gotten shot on Lake Como, Jack and Bozer (unknowingly) had done that for him.

After the attack on the Phoenix, they’d all fussed over Bozer and worried over Riley, and after Tahoe, Jack had driven himself nearly into the ground fussing over all three of the younger agents.

_We’re family._

That’s all the explanation needed.

For similar reasons, Patricia was standing in the kitchen, plating up the large quantity of takeaway sushi they’d purchased on the way back to Mac and Bozer’s.

Mac privately thought it was rather odd that Riley was craving _sushi_, of all things (and he was pretty sure everyone else agreed with him), but then again, he also couldn’t really judge when it came to weirdness.

_Besides, sushi is delicious._

A moment later, a smirking Bozer emerged from his bedroom, where he’d dragged Jack as soon as the two of them had made sure that Riley was sitting on the couch and not trying to do anything (right now, Mac was pretty sure that she was calculating the area of the ceiling in the living room, but he supposed doing _nothing_ was always going to be a bit of a stretch for Riley – stilling his mind completely was essentially impossible for _him_, after all). Bozer gestured grandly to the ajar door.

‘Ladies, gentleman, may I present: the new and improved Jack Dalton!’

Jack emerged, making a face and tugging at the shirt, covered with a colourful plane motif, that he was wearing.

‘Seriously, man? It’s got a cream base, you know how I feel about light colours! They add ten pounds!’

Riley and Bozer’s matching mischievous smirks disintegrated into snickers, while Mac chuckled and shook his head, and Patricia quirked an eyebrow at Jack, a small, amused smile on her face.

Jack huffed and rolled his eyes and muttered about how much he hated the shirt and how ungrateful his co-workers were, since he saved their asses all the time, but they could all see the love and fondness in his eyes.

_Again, we’re family._

_And again, that’s all the explanation needed._

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_And for the record, we did not consume any fugu._

Chapter End Notes
So, what did you guys think of the not-actually-that-silly silly mission? Honestly, apart from the actual premise (which I think becomes less absurd as you get into it…I hope), the most absurd thing to happen in this episode is probably the angry sushi chef throwing a fish at Jack, in my honest opinion. Did I go too far with the absurdity, or is it just enough to be interesting/amusing?

Mickey the app developer is apparently a character in the unaired original pilot. She was an app developer who is aggressively progressive in her political views but has a soft spot for Mac, and I assume that she was his original love interest, and that the character was re-imagined into Riley and Nikki. I’ve re-purposed her here as a villain and invented a surname for her.

I have no idea if it is possible to extract tetrodotoxin from a pufferfish without killing the pufferfish, but am assuming that it might be possible based off the fact that there are small amounts in the skin, and thus it might be possible to extract small quantities by taking a scraping of skin from a pufferfish (which would not kill it or hurt it very much, I think…). Therefore, that is why a very large number of pufferfish were required by the wannabe eco-terrorists. Please just roll with it?

One Fish, Two Fish, Blowfish, Blue Fish (The Simpsons episode that Jack is referring to) originally aired in the USA in January 1991, which is indeed before Mac’s birth, at least according to what he said in Wire Cutter about being born after the fall of the KGB, which is what I’m using for this story. Incidentally, I have not seen it either (it aired well before I was born), but my parents watched it at the time and told me about it.

Mac’s trick with the jawbreakers is heavily inspired by an episode of Mythbusters. The fact that he had jawbreakers available is a bit of a dig at the fact that Mac always manages to find what he needs/something he can use, even when it doesn’t make much sense for said thing to be there (like the floppy discs in the escape room on his date with Cindy).

Thornton’s jumpsuits are becoming a running gag with me (she wore like three different-coloured but otherwise identical jumpsuits in her eleven episodes of the actual show, I think…), while Jack’s mullet hairstyle is a joke about the original MacGyver’s mullet.

Next episode: 2.13, Basketball. Mac, Jack, Riley and Bozer participate in a war game, helping to test security at one of the NBA Finals, only to find that the game has suddenly become very real. Meanwhile, Mac is not happy about Valerie’s new friend Ralph.
Basketball

Chapter Summary

Mac, Jack, Riley and Bozer participate in a war game, helping to test security at one of the NBA Finals, only to find that the game has suddenly become very real.

Meanwhile, Mac is not happy about Valerie’s new friend Ralph.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

**INFIRMARY**

**PHOENIX FOUNDATION HEADQUARTERS**

**LA**

‘Okay, brother, what’s got you in this mood?’

Jack, from his own bed, looked over at Mac, who looked like someone had pinched his Swiss Army knife, disparaged his favourite leather jacket and stolen his spare toasters. Jack was quite sure that his partner’s mood wasn’t only to do with the fact that he had bruised kidneys and had an IV coming out of his arm. He was also quite sure that it wasn’t just down to the fact that Mac had several *Dora the Explorer* Band Aids on his arm, over the IV line. (That had been his punishment from Beth for attempting to escape the infirmary. Jack was really becoming rather fond of the Phoenix’s not-so-new doctor.)

Mac looked like he was very tempted to say nothing, but seemed to realize that that was futile and Jack would just keep annoying him until he told him. Instead, he sighed and gathered his thoughts for a moment before speaking.

‘You remember how I told you that Valerie came down to LA for a program at CalTech?’ Jack nodded, a sneaking suspicion growing in his mind, and Mac turned away for a moment, staring at his arm where the IV emerged. ‘Well, she met someone there.’ He paused for a moment. ‘A boy.’ Jack fought to hide his smirk (he’d been so right) as his partner turned back to him, making a face. ‘His name is Ralph, and he’s about her age, and he’s apparently very, very smart and has a really awesome stepfather who has an IQ of 197 and an even more amazing mother…’

Mac trailed off, still looking like someone had stolen his toasters, and Jack couldn’t help himself.

‘You really gonna go all Daddy-on-the-porch-with-a-microwave-death-ray, man?’

Mac just shot him a baleful look, but Jack noted, seemed to also be thinking rather seriously about the microwave death ray.

Maybe that hadn’t been a good joke to make.

Thankfully, at that moment, Beth re-entered their room in the infirmary, with a sandwich, an apple
and a container of Jell-O for each of them. She put down Mac’s food in front of him, then handed Jack his own lunch. Then, she glanced back at Mac, who was examining his spoon, her eyes narrowed.

‘Eat the food, MacGyver; do not use it to attempt to escape.’ She took in Mac’s someone-stole-my-toasters expression, and her own expression softened after a moment. ‘You’re not going to be here much longer, MacGyver. Just another 12 hours or so. The more you rest and look after yourself and generally be a good patient, the sooner you’ll get better.’

His partner’s expression brightened ever-so-slightly, and he gave Beth a wan smile. The doctor smiled back at him, then turned her attention back to her two patients’ charts.

Jack opened his Jell-O, noting that it was the strawberry flavour, the general favourite among all the agents.

(It was much better than the orange flavour, which they all universally hated.)

He brought a spoonful of Jell-O to his mouth and smiled.

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**PHOENIX FOUNDATION HEADQUARTERS**

**SOMewhere IN LA**

‘The Phoenix has been asked to participate in a war game.’ Thornton tapped the screen, and a photo of Oracle Arena, home of the Golden State Warriors, appeared. ‘NSA analysts have profiled that a terror attack on an NBA Final is very plausible. Thus, they want to test Oracle Arena’s security during the Final to be held in three days’ time.’ Her expression turned fractionally grimmer. ‘Last year, a terror playbook generated by a Homeland think tank that brought in civilians was stolen, because of a double-cross. The NSA and Homeland obviously want to avoid this occurring again, so we’ve been brought in.’ She tapped the screen again, and a plan of the stadium appeared, and then she looked straight at them. ‘We are going to plan and execute a terrorist attack.’

Jack grinned.

‘And we’re going to the NBA Finals, Patty!’

Thornton raised an eyebrow at him, as Mac, Bozer and Riley all shot him a look (sure, they all liked to shoot hoops from time to time – Mac and Jack especially – but Jack was not an NBA fan; he was definitely a football guy).

Jack looked incredulously at them.

‘Hey, come on, it’s the NBA Finals!’

Nobody’s expression really changed. Jack sighed.

He worked with boring nerds.

He loved these boring nerds, but they were still boring nerds.

‘…You could bring down 65% of the stadium and cause a mass-casualty event by placing sixteen small charges at these strategic locations.’
Mac indicated the screen, where he’d put sixteen bright-red asterisks on the plans. Jack let out a low whistle.

‘Just sixteen charges?’

Mac nodded.

‘It’s all about the location.’

Jack nodded, then smirked.

‘So my agent wasn’t lying when she was going on about *location, location, location*?’

Mac shot him an exasperated look, Riley rolled her eyes and Bozer groaned. Thornton simply arched an eyebrow at Jack, then turned to Mac.

‘What explosives would you use?’

Mac replied instantly.

‘C-4. A, it’s easy to mould into the correct shape to optimize its efficiency, so that would minimise how much you have to use, which in turn minimises likelihood of detection and getting caught. B, it’s fairly readily available, and C, it’s stable, so it’d be easy to smuggle in without blowing yourself up.’

Jack nodded, then spoke, leaning back in his seat a bit as he did so.

‘Getting the C-4 and the det. cord and the detonators in is still gonna be a pain, brother. You’re not going to get a whole device through, it’s recognisable enough.’

Mac nodded, grabbing a paperclip as he thought.

‘Yeah, we’d have to smuggle them in in pieces and assemble the devices on the spot; another reason to use C-4, you can assemble a C-4 device fairly easily.’

Bozer slowly put up a hand, and, when they all looked at him expectantly, spoke.

‘You could, I dunno, try hiding the C-4 in hot dogs?’ He shrugged. ‘Scent of the hot dogs might throw off any police dogs or something?’

Riley, Thornton and Jack all looked at Bozer with looks that showed they were thinking, in varying degrees, *you’re crazy*, but Mac pursed his lips in thought, the paperclip in his hands rapidly becoming a hot dog.

‘Actually, I think he’s on to something…’ He got up and started scribbling on the screen. ‘There’s going to be food vendors around, we could easily do something with a hot dog cart…’

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**ORACLE ARENA**

**OAKLAND**

**CALIFORNIA**

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Jack, leaning on a cane and wearing a leg brace on his right leg, limped into the bathroom, entered a
cubicle and closed the door, then tapped his comm.

‘I’m in, guys.’

Over the last two hours, he, Riley, Mac and Bozer had been smuggling in the parts for the sixteen devices they had to assemble, place and detonate, using the Wi-Fi-synchronised detonators Riley and some Phoenix techs had prepared. (They were all carrying C-4, to properly test security, but they were going to be detonating dye bombs instead, of course.)

Mac had come in first, with the lion’s share of the equipment, in disguise as a pyrotechnics technician setting up for the half-time entertainment.

Then, Bozer had followed, pretending to be a food worker bringing in an extra hot dog cart to help cope with the expected extra demand, this being an NBA Final and all. (He did, indeed, have det. cord and C-4 hidden inside hot dogs.)

Riley and Jack had come in with the crowd, with Riley smuggling in C-4 hidden in tiny pieces in various make-up containers, concealed under the make-up itself (they were fairly certain that the scent of the various perfumes she had on her and in her make-up bag, as well as the smell of the make-up that she was carrying – all heavily scented varieties, of course – would mask the C-4, and that had proven true), and a couple of detonators inside her wedge-heeled platform shoes. Jack was a war vet with a limp and leg brace and a cane. He had a lot of stuff hidden away in said brace and cane, and as predicted, the limp and his story about serving in the Gulf War and being hurt in Desert Storm when he was practically just a kid had gotten him a lot of sympathy and only a very light security check.

Riley’s voice sounded in his ear a moment later.

‘I’m through too.’

Mac’s voice rang out next.

‘Alright, good work, guys. Time to start Phase 2.’

Mac had just finished placing the final charge and stood up when he heard footsteps.

Multiple sets.

He ducked into a small janitor’s closet, lying on the floor and examining the shoes that went past a moment later (standard-issue police footwear) and tapped his comm twice, to signal that they’d been rumbled, then typed a code into his phone to detonate the dye bombs.

Then, he stood up and a moment later, the door burst open.

He put up his hands slowly and looked the policeman closest to him in the eye.

‘Chartreuse octopus boots.’

That was the code phrase used to signal that they were not actually terrorists, but government agents running a war game.

The policemen holding guns relaxed, and the most senior one held out a hand to Mac, who took it and shook it firmly.

‘That was damn good work.’
Mac smiled at the compliment, and gestured at the group of policemen. ‘Not bad yourselves.’ He let go of the man’s hand. ‘I’m MacGyver.’

SECURITY COMMAND CENTRE
ORACLE ARENA
OAKLAND
CALIFORNIA

‘…There are architectural modifications that can be done, yes, but the main tactic is improving security.’ Mac shrugged. ‘There’s always going to be a weakness or weaknesses in any building.’

Jack cut in, gesturing to Riley, who started playing back security footage of Jack’s very brief and honestly inadequate security search. He glanced at the stadium’s Head of Security.

‘Like the search done on me. On one hand, you need to try and be polite and all, but you can’t cut corners on searches.’

He was interrupted by one of the local policemen bursting in, panting. He looked up at Mac, Jack, Bozer and Riley.

‘You blew up all your dye bombs, right?’

They all nodded, exchanging a glance that spoke volumes about the very, very bad feeling developing in their guts.

All their bombs, C-4 and dye, were accounted for.

The policeman handed Mac his phone, on which he’d snapped a picture of something that Mac instantly recognized as an improvised C-4 explosive device.

_The NSA were right about a terrorist attack on an NBA Final being highly plausible._

_They were also right about this particular Final being a good choice for a war game, because it’s a perfect target._

_Because right now, a terrorist attack on this very event is in progress._

_And it goes without saying, we have to stop it._

‘Based on the size of the charge, its shape and its positioning, plus the detonator, they’re using the same plan we had.’ Mac glanced up at Jack and the local police. All of their faces were grim and set. ‘Many small charges placed at strategic locations.’ He nodded grimly, looking down at the plan of the stadium that the Head of Security had provided, then back up again. ‘We have two things on our side. A, they have to place and set off a certain number of the charges, or there won’t be any significant structural damage. B, we probably disrupted their plans when we were placing the dye bombs. They’ve got to be improvising.’ Mac pursed his lips, a small, grim smile appearing on his face briefly. ‘Unfortunately, so are we.’

Jack clasped his partner’s shoulder for a moment.
‘Well, nobody does that better than you, brother.’ He looked over at Riley, who was typing frantically on her laptop. ‘Riles, you got access to their comms yet?’

Riley was trying to access the terrorists’ communications network, while Bozer was coordinating with Thornton and the Phoenix’s analysts, trying to get an ID on the terrorists.

A moment later, the hacker shot them a thumbs-up and spoke, without turning away from her laptop.

‘I’ve got access, and I’ve got that voice imitation program I wrote last month up and running as well.’ She glanced at Jack and Mac. ‘That should be able to keep them from working out what you’re doing for a while.’

Mac and Jack nodded at her in thanks, both managing a small smile, which Riley returned, before she focused back on her laptop, now working to jam the terrorists’ remote detonation system so they wouldn’t be able to detonate their explosives remotely in-sync, but would have to do the detonation manually. The partners, meanwhile, turned back to the police gathered around the stadium plan, and Jack started briefing them on the plan.

‘We can’t evacuate the stadium without risking a mass-casualty event.’ The terrorists, if spooked, would likely detonate their explosives early and likely would do so in crowded areas, instead of the generally-isolated key structural spots. ‘So we gotta take down these guys and their bombs, and we gotta do it without alerting them.’ He started pointing to locations on the stadium plan that Mac had earmarked as likely candidates for the terrorists to target. ‘We’re going to sweep in small groups. Take out each of these guys individually, and disarm their bombs.’ Fortunately, there were police with EOD training present. ‘Stealth’s the order of the day…’

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As Jack hauled the unconscious would-be terrorist up (given the man’s tattoos, which included several anarchist symbols, Jack had relayed to Bozer to tell the Phoenix analysts that they were probably dealing with domestic anarchists), preparing to take the man to the nearest room that had been earmarked as a makeshift jail cell for the terrorists by Mac, Jack, the stadium’s Head of Security and the local police (they’d earmarked several such rooms in strategic locations around the stadium, to minimise the number of police who were needed to guard the terrorists and to minimise the amount of time that they spent having to haul apprehended terrorists around and hence the likelihood of the other terrorists catching on to their mission to stealthily take them out), he turned to his partner, who’d just finished disarming the explosive device that the man had just placed when Jack and Mac had taken him out.

‘What were the odds of this coincidence happening, brother?’

Mac huffed out a breath.

‘Without knowing the identity of these terrorists or reviewing the NSA and Homeland files on the war game in detail, it’s pointless to try and calculate odds.’ He made a face. ‘It’d be like trying to win *Mastermind* by repeatedly guessing randomly.’
Jack stared at his partner for a moment, then slowly, a smirk grew on his face.

‘So what you’re saying is, you don’t know?’

Mac crossed his arms.

‘No, I’m saying that I don’t have enough information to calculate the odds-‘

Jack’s smirk grew wider and more gleeful.

‘You don’t know!’ He blinked, as if he couldn’t believe it. ‘You don’t know something! There’s gonna be a blue moon tonight, brother-‘

Mac rolled his eyes.

‘Taking both commonly accepted definitions of a blue moon, there is definitely not going to be a blue moon tonight, Jack.’

And with that, Mac picked up the disarmed C-4 explosive, and poked his head out of the plant room door, and once he saw it was clear, started jogging down the corridor, clearly signalling that as far as he was concerned, the conversation was over.

Jack turned to the still-unconscious anarchist.

‘Don’t take it personally; he gets huffy when he doesn’t know stuff.’

GRANDSTAND FOUNDATION

ORACLE ARENA

OAKLAND

CALIFORNIA

As they snuck up on the man placing a bomb on a crucial support pillar far underneath the stadium (Riley had helpfully raised the volume incrementally on his comm over the last five minutes, and added in a little extra noise, so that he was less likely to hear their approach), Mac suddenly turned and grabbed Jack and tackled him to the ground, as they were less than 20 feet away from their target.

A second later, they both felt the heat of an explosion wash over them.

Adrenaline pumping, Jack looked up at his partner, who was breathing hard himself and stony-faced.

‘The wiring was done poorly and incorrectly; the moment he stuck that det. cord into the C-4, it was going to blow.’ Mac grimaced, kicking himself internally. ‘I should have noticed earlier-‘

Jack cut him off with a quelling look.

‘You ain’t Superman, Mac.’

Mac looked at him for a long moment, his eyes a mixture of gratefulness and a stubborn desire to contradict Jack somewhat, to tell him that he should have done better (which Jack would just as stubbornly refute), then tapped his comm.
'We’ve lost the pillar at Site 9.'

The grandstand wasn’t going to collapse just because they’d lost this pillar, but at the same time, they could not afford to lose any other of the grandstand supports.

If they did, there was a serious risk of the stand collapsing.

The urgency behind their mission had just increased even more.

Mac got up, glancing around.

He couldn’t repair the support (not with the time and materials he had available anyway)...but maybe he could give them a little more breathing room.

He pulled out his Swiss Army knife, and gestured to Jack.

‘We passed a janitor’s closet about a hundred feet back. Can you grab me all the mops and brooms inside?’

Jack nodded, a small smile growing on his face as he took off.

His partner wasn’t Superman, but he was pretty damn close.

SECURITY COMMAND CENTRE

ORACLE ARENA

OAKLAND

CALIFORNIA

Riley finished the last line of code, then grabbed her phone and did a quick test.

It’d worked.

The terrorists would no longer be able to remotely detonate their bombs. They’d have to set them off with manual detonation.

She did a fist pump and let out a triumphant sound. Bozer, who was sitting next to her conferencing with Timothy and Miriam back at the Phoenix (they’d managed to trace the particular anarchist group that was perpetrating the attack and were now digging through their online histories and past communications to get more intel), reached out and fist-bumped her, offering a congratulatory smile.

Riley tapped her comm.

‘Guys, I’ve jammed remote detonation; manual detonation only now.’

A moment later, she got a response from Jack, praise and pride clear in his voice.

‘Good job, Ri.’

Mac’s voice echoed that sentiment a moment later, praise and pride less obvious, but still clear to the young hacker.
Thanks, Riley. Can you get eyes on all the teams?’

Riley started typing on her laptop again, knowing that more back-up, more support, was always going to do nothing but good.

‘Coming right up, Mac.’ She paused for a moment. ‘Beta team, you’ve got incoming…’

SERVICE CORRIDOR

ORACLE ARENA

OAKLAND

CALIFORNIA

After disarming another bomb (but not encountering another terrorist), Mac and Jack exchanged a glance as a very grim female voice that they didn’t really recognize echoed over their comms. ‘This is Gamma team, we’ve got a situation at Site 12.’ Jack was already checking his phone to see where this site was, while Mac concentrated and called up the labelled stadium plan he’d memorised before they’d left the security command centre. ‘Lopez has been taken hostage.’ Jack and Mac both swore internally, as the policewoman continued. ‘We’re at Site 17, we’ve got a line of sight but no good shot on the target.’

Jack swore again, and he and Mac made eye contact, a silent conversation passing between them.

Jack had a gun, was a better shot and could shoot to kill if necessary.

Mac was the master of improvisation and had a knack for distractions.

Their plan (or, rather, their ghost of a plan) was clear.

Mac nodded, and then jogged off down the corridor, towards Site 12, while Jack ran off in the other direction, towards Site 17.

The former CIA agent tapped his comm and spoke as he ran. ‘Gamma team, this is Jack, MacGyver and I are coming to assist.’

SITE 17

(WALKWAY OVER SITE 12)

ORACLE ARENA

OAKLAND

CALIFORNIA

Jack’s expression grew even grimmer as he carefully and quietly walked to the edge of the walkway, looking down through the wire grill at the scene.
The anarchist had his right arm wrapped around the neck of a young policeman, Lopez, and a detonator in his left hand.

He was leaning against one of the grandstand pillars (one of those pillars that they absolutely could not let be destroyed, not after already having lost one), which had a C-4 explosive affixed to it, and was ranting at the female police officer, Lopez’s partner, who was holding a gun on him.

‘…Come any closer, missy, and I blow up him, me and this pillar…’

It was a true Mexican stand-off with no real winner, no matter what happened.

Jack looked up at the two police officers who made up the Gamma team, an woman in her early forties and a younger man, all three of them with grim expressions.

None of them could get a clean shot at the terrorist, not with his and Lopez and the pillar’s current position.

Jack readied his gun and steadied himself, muttering under his breath.

‘Come on, brother…come on, we really need you to pull off one of your miracles right now…’

Mac, of course, came through, because a moment later, there was the sound of an explosion going off that sounded like one of the terrorists’ explosives going off in the distance.

Jack mouthed it’s okay at the two police officers next to him, as they suddenly tensed, holding out an arm to prevent them from moving. He was fairly certain, after so long working with Mac, that his partner had used one of the blasting caps he’d scavenged from the bombs they’d defused to do that.

The anarchist holding Lopez hostage whipped his head around, a little confused (he wasn’t expecting that explosion, but on the other hand, it wasn’t necessarily suspicious, after all, one of his associates might have just done the same thing he was threatening to do…) and Mac obviously took advantage of the man’s distraction, because as Jack and the Gamma team and Lopez’s partner watched, Mac’s Swiss Army knife, with the large blade exposed and expertly, perfectly, thrown, sliced through the detonation cord of the explosive device.

Disabling the detonator and removing the terrorist’s threat.

(If Jack didn’t know better – didn’t know that Mac could do vast numbers of complicated calculations that were completely beyond most people in his brain in mere seconds, didn’t know that Mac had the physical skills to execute precisely what he’d calculated – he’d say that that throw was impossibly lucky.)

Lopez’s reflexes and reactions were very, very quick, and he rammed his elbow into the slightly-stunned terrorist’s nose, and slammed his foot into the man’s knee, getting himself free, and allowing his partner to shoot the terrorist clean through the shoulder, bringing him to the ground.

As they watched, Mac came into view, and the blonde quickly field-dressed the terrorist’s shoulder, then turned his attention to the bomb.

Jack, crouched on the walkway beside two still-slightly-gobsmacked police officers, gave a little smirk-smile at their reactions.

‘Yeah, he does that sort of thing all the time. Your reaction’s pretty standard, too.’ He leaned a little closer to them. ‘You get used to it.’ He gave a half-shrug. ‘Mostly.’
At their second site after rescuing Lopez, Mac swore as he pulled his Swiss Army knife out and started examining the bomb. He gestured to his partner without looking at him.

‘Jack, get out of here.’ Jack opened his mouth to protest, but was cut off by the blonde. ‘They made a mistake with the detonator, this could go off at any second. Get out of here.’

Jack crossed his arms stubbornly and did not move.

‘No.’

Mac really wanted to argue back, but he didn’t have the time or the ability, he had to focus on disarming this bomb, making it safe. He could argue with Jack about this later – if he didn’t focus now, neither of them would be able to do any arguing ever again.

After another moment of examination, he carefully reached out and cut a wire.

As soon as he’d finished disarming the bomb, and double-checked that it was indeed neutralized, Mac, still crouching by the disabled bomb, rounded on his partner.

‘What was that, Jack? I told you to get out of here!’

Jack crossed his arms and stared right back at the blonde, but his voice was surprisingly calm when he replied.

‘You ain’t the boss of me, brother.’ His voice softened a little. ‘I wasn’t gonna just leave you. You know I ain’t ever doing that, Mac.’ Mac stared at him for a moment, then opened his mouth to protest, but Jack cut him off. ‘Besides, I believe in you, brother.’

Mac blinked twice, still staring at the older man, then ran a hand through his hair in frustration.

‘But…Jack…If I hadn’t managed to…’ He gestured at the now-inert bomb. ‘…and…and you…I don’t know how I’d forgive myself!’

A little part of Mac was still berating himself for the trash compactor incident. His failure to properly translate normal into normal language had given his partner an axial fracture in his left radius.

He’d just been lucky it wasn’t something worse.

Jack uncrossed his arms, and crouched down next to Mac, putting a hand on the younger man’s shoulder. Then, he smirked.

‘Well, wouldn’t have been much of a problem, brother. We’d have been deader than the dede.’

‘Dodo, Jack. The extinct flightless bird in that saying is the dodo.’

It was a half-hearted correction. Mac was completely sure that that had been a deliberate mistake on
his partner’s part.

It was a very Jack thing to do to try and lighten the mood.

Then, the older man’s face turned more serious again, and he put his arm around Mac’s shoulders.

‘We’re partners, Mac. We watch each other’s backs and we always stick together.’

Mac stared into Jack’s eyes for a moment, noting the resoluteness there, noting the softness and the affection and the love in them, and then nodded slowly.

Jack smiled wanly at him, then got up and helped the blonde up.

*If we do wind up in this sort of situation again, which we likely will, given our line of work and the fact that we’ve been in similar before, I’m still going to tell Jack to get out of there.*

Same goes for the rest of my loved ones.

I’m still going to say it, but I’m sure that none of them will listen.

They haven’t before.

Riley and Patricia stayed when Jack was trapped in that van near the UN in New York, after all.

I’m never going to like that fact.

I know I said that we have to give our loved ones a chance to defend us, just like we always defend our loved ones…but it wasn’t as if Jack could defend me from this bomb in any way, shape or form.

And it’s always easier to say something than actually do it.

There’s only one solution to this problem.

And that’s to make sure that in these situations, I don’t get it wrong.

*Improbable? Highly improbable?*

Yes.

But improbable is my specialty.

And if I may say so myself, I’m really good at it.

GRANDSTAND FOUNDATION

ORACLE ARENA

OAKLAND

CALIFORNIA

As he was about to place the last charge, the last anarchist (not that he knew it – at least not yet) paused suddenly, his brow furrowing in suspicion.

He listened closely to his comm for a moment, that suspicion growing stronger and stronger.
Then, to confirm it, he spoke.

‘Bald eagles mate for life.’

He didn’t get the correct response, and he swore repeatedly internally.

He glanced over at the bag of explosives that he still had.

(As the leader of the anarchists, he’d taken the spare C-4, detonators and det. cord. They’d come prepared with extras, in case one or more of them had gotten caught coming in.)

He smirked darkly as he started pulling out the extra C-4.

His brothers-in-arms might all be caught and their original plan foiled…but he could still go out with a bang.

SECURITY COMMAND CENTRE

ORACLE ARENA

OAKLAND

CALIFORNIA

Riley’s eyes widened and she swore under her breath when she saw the man appear on the security camera feed, standing in one of the service corridors. Silently, she gestured to Bozer, who came over and swore too as Riley spoke into her comm, Bozer calling over the Head of Security as she did so.

‘Mac, Jack, you need to get back up here now. There’s something you have to see.’

The anarchist was wearing a makeshift suicide vest, a detonator in hand.

A moment later, as he stared up into the camera (at her, it felt), the man spoke, holding up the detonator in his right hand. Bozer squeezed her shoulder in support.

‘I know you’re listening.’ He paused, as if for dramatic effect. ‘I have three pounds of C-4 on me. In fifteen minutes, five minutes after the game finishes, I’m going to walk out onto the concourse.’ He smirked evilly. ‘And I’m going to go boom.’ He tilted his chin defiantly at the camera. ‘Come near me, try anything, and…’ He gestured slightly with the hand holding the detonator. ‘Boom. I’ll take as many of you government dogs with me as I can.’

As the anarchist finished, Mac and Jack burst into the room, and took one look at the security camera feed and stopped in their tracks, Mac sucking in a breath and Jack swearing.

Then, Jack hurried over to her and Bozer and the Head of Security, while Mac examined the stadium plan.

‘Riley, where is that camera?’

Bozer looked up at Mac and Jack, and the handful of police officers who’d gathered. (The Head of Security was currently ordering all of his men to under no circumstances approach the anarchist.)

‘How bad is it?’
Mac glanced up at his best friend, at Riley, and then at the police officers.

‘It’s very bad, Boze.’ He gestured to the man on the security camera feed. ‘Based on the quantity of explosives he’s got on him and the location he’s chosen…no matter if he detonates the vest there or on the concourse, we’ve got a mass casualty event on our hands.’ He pointed to the man’s location on the stadium plan. ‘He chose a very, very good spot.’

It was a key structural area. With the amount of explosives the man had on him, if he detonated it there, there’d be serious structural damage, causing part of the concourse to collapse, which they all knew would lead to a huge number of casualties, not just directly, but also through the resultant panic and stampede.

Jack nodded grimly.

‘And we haven’t got a clear shot at him.’

There was a fully-enclosed wire walkway above the location, where, if it wasn’t fully enclosed, they might have been able to get a clear shot at the man without him noticing and detonating his vest in response.

Jack glanced at his partner, intending to ask if he had an idea, but Mac’s eyes had just fallen on a radar gun belonging to one of the police officers. Then, he turned back and stared at his partner.

‘Microwave death ray.’

Jack’s brow furrowed, but before he could say anything, Mac had seized the radar gun and started taking it apart with his Swiss Army knife. One of the police officers, presumably the owner, made a small noise of protest and Jack winced internally, knowing that they’d be compensating the local police for a radar gun. He hoped they weren’t expensive. The paperwork was more complicated when things were expensive.

Mac looked up briefly from the radar gun and gestured with his head at Jack and the police officers.

‘There’s a corridor running 90 degrees to the one he’s in-’

Jack cut his partner off, understanding where Mac was going.

‘You want us there and ready, waiting for your signal?’

Mac nodded with a small, grim smile.

‘Yeah. Once he drops that detonator…’

Jack nodded, and with an answering nod, Mac ran out of the room, still modifying the radar gun as he did so.

Jack gestured with his head towards the police officers, who were all looking very stunned except for Lopez, Lopez’s partner, and the Gamma team.

‘Well, you heard the man. Let’s move!’

---

WALKWAY ABOVE SERVICE CORRIDOR

ORACLE ARENA
Stepping quietly and quickly along the walkway, Mac got in range, and then pointed his modified radar gun at the terrorist.

Some varieties of sonic weapon are currently in limited use by the armed forces and the police, and further research into sonic weapons is being conducted by the military, including some highly-classified research that I can neither confirm nor deny I've consulted on.

This particular sonic weapon, like most others, is designed to disrupt the eardrums of the target, and thus cause pain and disorientation.

The man stumbled and dropped the detonator, clutching his ears, and a second later, a shot rang out and he fell to the ground, clutching his knee in pain.

Mac switched off his sonic weapon (though he kept it pointed at the anarchist, in case he tried to reach for the detonator that was now several feet away from him), as footsteps sounded below him, and as Jack and the police officers came into view and took possession of the detonator, he put down the modified radar gun and breathed out a sigh of relief, slumping to the floor and smiling as Jack looked up and shot him a thumbs up.

He tapped his comm.

‘Riley, Bozer, we got him.’ He took a deep breath. ‘It’s over.’

SECURITY COMMAND CENTRE

ORACLE ARENA

OAKLAND

CALIFORNIA

As Thornton signed off with a small smile, Jack turned to Mac, Riley and Bozer, looking disappointed.

‘I can’t believe we missed the entire game!’

Mac, Bozer and Riley glanced at each other, shaking their heads, then turned to Jack. Riley spoke, crossing her arms and leaning back in her seat.

‘You don’t even follow basketball, Jack.’

Bozer nodded sagely.

‘What she said, man.’ He pointed at Jack. ‘When was the last time you even watched a game?’

Jack opened his mouth to protest (he normally watched the play-offs, he’d just missed pretty much all of them this year because of work), as Mac smirked at him, the paperclip in the blonde’s hands taking the shape of a basketball as he spoke.
‘They’re not wrong, Jack.’

Jack huffed and crossed his arms, just as the Head of Security (he’d spent most of the afternoon with Riley and Bozer in the control centre, helping them out as best as he could and coordinating his own men – he seemed nice, Bozer and Riley quite liked him) re-entered the room, and grinned at the four Phoenix agents and assorted police officers.

Jack turned to his three teammates, a slow smile growing on his face. He nudged Mac with his elbow.

‘I’ve got a good feeling about this, brother.’

Mac smiled back.

_Well, he’s not wrong._

---

**COURT**

**ORACLE ARENA**

**OAKLAND**

**CALIFORNIA**

---

Mac grinned as he pushed Jack out of the way and tossed the ball into the hoop.

‘Getting slow, old man!’

Jack shot him a glare as he picked up the ball and tossed it to Riley to make the throw-in.

‘I’ll show you slow, brother!’

He reached around Mac and caught the ball that the Gamma team policewoman passed to him (she’d gotten it from Riley), and after a bit of back and forth and darting from side to side, slipped quickly around his partner, who, grin widening slightly, shook his head, and ran into a new position, preparing to intercept the ball when it rebounded his way after Jack (inevitably, given his current mood) scored.

Behind him, Lopez, jostling good-naturedly with Bozer, whooped, while Mac’s best friend called out to him.

‘You just got burned, bro.’ Bozer smirked. ‘Want some ice?’

Mac chuckled and shook his head. He could _hear_ the smirk in Bozer’s voice.

‘No, all good, Boze! I’m going to get him right back, just you wait and see!’

---

**PHOENIX FOUNDATION HEADQUARTERS**

**SOMEWHERE IN LA**

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The day after their mission in Oakland, Mac was in the lab, bright and early, working on Sparky,
adjusting the robot’s shoulder joints slightly (the adjustment should enable Sparky to perform CPR with better technique – at least, perform the compression motion, they were still working on the artificial lung system that Sparky would need to be able to actually do CPR), when Bozer and Riley came in.

(They’d gone out for a quick breakfast at a diner before work. It was only just 9:05, they weren’t late, Mac was simply very early – he’d woken up at 6 in the morning, which was not unusual for him, gone for a run, had some breakfast and then headed into work, having gotten the idea for the shoulder joint modification while on his run.)

They seemed a little hesitant, which was rather out-of-character, as he looked up at them expectantly.

Bozer was the one who spoke.

‘Morning, bro. What’re you doing?’

Mac gestured to Sparky, and the robot spoke.

‘Mr MacGyver is modifying my shoulder joints so that I can conduct CPR compressions with the proper technique.’

Bozer nodded, and Riley nudged him with her elbow, and Bozer, with a glance at Riley that clearly said I’m getting to it, spoke.

‘So, we were thinking that since he’s meant to be a healthcare companion and all, we should get Dr Beth to help out.’

Riley continued.

‘Are you alright with that, Mac?’

Both Bozer and Riley looked a little concerned.

Internally, Mac sighed.

Look, I’ve noticed that Beth is a beautiful young woman.

I have also noticed that she is brilliant.

I am also very aware of my own issues.

I suppose that this concern from them is logical and I should have expected it, because they really, really care, but honestly, working with her is a non-issue.

A, I’m recovering.

B, she’s a co-worker. Working on Sparky is collaborating on a project for work. Why would I have an issue with that?

C, as the last couple of months have shown, she doesn’t trigger an unfavourable response pathway.

Externally, he shrugged nonchalantly, then nodded.

‘Sounds like a good idea to me.’

He turned back to Sparky’s left shoulder joint. It was still a bit off, for reasons he wasn’t quite sure of
yet.
He’d work it out.

Bozer grinned at Beth and gestured grandly to the sheet-covered lump in the middle of the lab.

‘Dr Beth, meet Sparky!’

As Riley, who was perched on an empty table and working on some new code for the robot, shook her head and rolled her eyes fondly, Mac whipped off the sheet dramatically (Bozer had insisted and promised him and Riley his famous stuffed French toast if they cooperated – if there was any complaint that Mac could make about his two friends’ relationship, it was the fact that Bozer very rarely made his world-class waffles anymore, since Riley preferred French toast), exposing Sparky.

‘Good morning, Dr Taylor.’

Beth’s eyes lit up and she grinned, waving at the robot, clearly very impressed.

‘Good morning, Sparky. It’s nice to meet you.’

She looked up at Mac, cocking her head to the side in an unspoken question, and he simply smiled (it was practically impossible to not smile at her reaction) and nodded, and that grin widening just a little more at receiving the permission she’d asked for, she walked up to Sparky and started examining him more closely. Mac spoke as she did.

‘He’s a healthcare companion, we’re working on giving him the ability to triage and perform first aid.’ He ran a hand through his hair. ‘CPR is proving to be a bit of a challenge.’

That left shoulder joint was still not quite right, despite the fact that he’d done the exact same thing to it as he’d done to the right.

Beth looked up at him, nodding with a wry look on her face.

‘I can imagine, he’d need some sort of artificial lungs, which aren’t going to be easy.’

Mac nodded and continued as she looked back down at Sparky.

‘We’re thinking that he can assist in hospitals, care for the elderly and the disabled in their own homes, assist with search-and-rescue and triage after earthquakes, tornados, hurricanes, tsunamis…’

He trailed off, figuring she’d have gotten the point (if not already thought of all of those possibilities herself already).

Beth looked up at him as he fell silent, a look in her eyes that he instantly recognised.

It was the look he’d seen in the eyes of medical staff and aid workers all through Afghanistan and Iraq, and it was a look that he was never, ever going to forget.

It was a look that he thought he could, fundamentally, understand.

It wasn’t all too dissimilar from the look he’d seen in the eyes of quite a few of his fellow soldiers, had seen in Jack’s eyes and Pena’s eyes and Charlie’s and in the mirror.

‘After airstrikes, especially when you’re anticipating the double tap…’ She glanced down at Sparky. ‘…He could save so many lives, help people when we can’t…’ She fell silent for a moment, lost in a
memory, then looked back up at him, and Bozer, who was standing by him, and Riley, who’d looked up from her laptop. She shook her head apologetically, almost awkwardly. ‘Sorry.’ Mac shot her a sympathetic look (or, perhaps more accurately, an empathetic look), which earned him a small, grateful smile in thanks, and then Beth looked back down at Sparky. ‘How much can he lift? And how stable are his motions, and how good is his hand-eye coordination?’

With a little smile, Mac crouched down next to her, replying as Sparky demonstrated some of his motions. (He swore that the AI had somehow picked up Bozer’s flair for the dramatic.)

‘He can lift 500 pounds, though there’s a limit to the surface area or size of what he can lift that realistically limits that further. You know, it’s just the physics of carrying big and bulky things, not the weight.’ Beth just nodded. ‘Motion stability is good, similar to a human’s, and hand-eye isn’t too bad, though he’s not quite at human level yet, we’re working on it.’ He gestured to Riley. ‘She’s working on some code to help out with that right now…’

After about an hour of work, during which Mac finally figured out how to fix up Sparky’s left shoulder joint and they made a fair bit of progress, considering that it’d only been an hour, on the artificial lung system (it really did help to have a doctor on board – despite the fact that he had once successfully convinced a target that he was a medical resident, since Mac hadn’t actually been to medical school or done a residency, he simply didn’t have the knowledge of someone who had, namely Beth), Beth looked up at the three of them, a slightly-wry and slightly-sheepish smile on her face.

‘Is it bad that I want to ask you guys to turn Sparky into Baymax?’

They all laughed, all being fans of Big Hero Six.

Sparky responded, sounding, somehow, a bit put-out.

‘I am…adapted, perhaps even attached to my current physical form, Dr Taylor. I request that you do not convince Mr MacGyver, Mr Bozer and Miss Davis to alter it.’

Riley laughed, shaking her head as she made a mental note to write some kind of patch to get Sparky to call her Riley, not Miss Davis. (Somehow, she suspected it wouldn’t work – Sparky might have inherited some of Bozer’s dramatic flair, but he’d also seemed to have picked up some of Mac’s stubbornness.) Bozer chuckled, and reached out and offered his clenched fist to Sparky, who, after a moment of staring at Bozer’s fist, slowly fist-bumped him.

Beth let out a little, somewhat-surprised laugh, then grinned even wider than she’d had when Sparky had first greeted her, her eyes lighting up even more than they had then.

Mac found himself grinning too.

It would have been impossible not to, given her reaction.

Chapter End Notes

Yay? Nay? I think there was a little bit of everything in this story, so hopefully, there was a little something for everyone in this one! Did I succeed? Do you all like the idea of Mac being Valerie’s protective big brother figure? What did you think of
grousing! Jack, or developing-a-personality! Sparky and the ‘young uns’ working on him?

Valerie’s friend Ralph is indeed Ralph from Scorpion; I’m fairly certain that he is close to Valerie’s age – I think Ralph was 9 when Scorpion premiered in 2014, which makes him born 2005 in all likelihood, while Valerie was 12 in 2016, so is probably born 2004.

This episode references the NCIS episode Pandora’s Box, in which Abby participates in disastrous war games.

Mac’s method (and the terrorists’ method) of bringing down Oracle Arena is entirely fictional – it was something I did not want to research so made up completely.

Would the Head of Security let assorted police officers and four government agents play basketball on court after the game as some kind of thank you? In our world, probably not. In the world of MacGyver, I think it’d happen.

Next episode: 2.14, Rope. A DARPA scientist goes rogue, and the team is dispatched to stop him. However, it appears that more is going on than they initially thought… Meanwhile, there’s a new man in Diane Davis’ life.
A DARPA scientist goes rogue, and the team is dispatched to stop him. However, it appears that more is going on than they initially thought…

Meanwhile, there’s a new man in Diane Davis’ life.

This chapter is a bit longer again, over 8000 words. Thanks for bearing with and continuing to give a great reception to the last few shorter episodes!

MACGYVER’S RESIDENCE

LA

Jack sat back on the couch and propped his feet up on the coffee table with a comfortable sigh, as Bozer started *Die Hard*, then sat back himself and bit into his slice of pizza (there were two pizza boxes lying on the coffee table, and Mac’s self-opening and now-walking – he’d done some work on it last week – Esky was by the couch).

They and Mac (who was in his room chatting to his dad – he’d told them to start the movie without him, since he didn’t know how long he’d be, and he’d long memorised it anyway) were having a boys’ night in, since Riley was having dinner with her mom.

John McClane had just arrived at Nakatomi Plaza when the door opened and Riley, looking very lost in thought, walked in, ignoring Jack and Bozer’s surprised and concerned calls of her name, and sat herself down on the arm of the couch next to Bozer, stole his beer and drained it.

Bozer reached out and rested his hand on his girlfriend’s.

‘Riley, is everything okay?’

Jack put down his pizza slice and his beer, having suddenly lost his appetite.

‘Is your mom alright?’

Riley eyed off Jack’s beer, and Jack picked it up again, holding it closer to himself, to prevent her from stealing it (he had the feeling that she probably shouldn’t have more alcohol right now…). The hacker rolled her eyes at his action, then sighed and squeezed Bozer’s hand, looking down, then up again.

‘My mom’s got a new boyfriend.’
Fifteen minutes later, Mac walked out of his bedroom to find Jack struggling for words, drinking beer and not paying very much attention to Hans Gruber’s takeover of Nakatomi Plaza, Riley chewing determinedly on a piece of pizza and staring at the television, but not really watching, and a rather concerned-looking Bozer glancing between the two of them, silently rubbing circles on his girlfriend’s back.

_I missed something really big, didn’t I?_

_PHOENIX FOUNDATION HEADQUARTERS_

_SOMEBODY IN LA_

‘This is Jeremy Howard, PhD.’ Thornton tapped the screen, and a picture of a man of about forty, wearing glasses and a lab coat appeared. ‘He was an electrical engineer with DARPA in Arlington until last night, when he stole a USB of classified schematics.’ Mac, Jack, Riley and Bozer all nodded seriously, as their boss continued. ‘You are heading to Arlington, where you will recover the USB and arrest Dr Howard.’ They all nodded again, Mac putting down a paperclip in the shape of a USB. Thornton gestured with her head towards the door. ‘Wheels up in thirty minutes, get your go-bags.’

_PHOENIX JET_

_ON-ROUTE TO ARLINGTON_

‘…Dr Howard is married, and he has two children.’

As Riley spoke, Jack looked up thoughtfully.

‘Somebody kidnap or threaten them to make him go rogue?’

Riley, still reading something on her laptop screen, shook her head, as Bozer, reading over her shoulder, did the same.

‘Unlikely, he’s estranged from them. Walked out four months ago.’

Bozer looked up at Jack and Mac.

‘And seriously, Mrs Howard has said some real nasty things about him to her friends since…’

Riley continued.

‘It looks like their marriage has been in trouble for a while; they started going to marriage counselling a year ago.’ Her nails clacked on her keyboard for a moment. ‘And Mrs Howard is fond of social media; she’s got a routine and checks in at the same few locations every day. According to this post, she and her kids have just arrived at their favourite park, and their car’s GPS confirms that.’ She looked back down at her screen, then up again. ‘And there’s no record of anything that could be considered a threat to Dr Howard or his family.’

Jack and Mac both nodded, as the latter toyed with a paperclip, and Jack replied, looking back down at his own briefing packet for a moment.
Alright, so not protecting his family. So we’re thinking he went rogue for money?’

Bozer shrugged, Riley gave a little nod and Mac’s paperclip took the shape of a wad of cash, as the blonde spoke.

‘Based on the information we currently have, it’s the most likely explanation.’

Riley continued, her fingernails clacking on her keyboard as she spoke.

‘I’m looking through his financials right now; he hasn’t received any payment yet, but…’ She trailed off, and looked more closely at her laptop screen. ‘…For at least the last year, he’d frequented the same diner, until four months ago, when he changed diners.’

Bozer crossed his arms, leaning back a little in his seat.

‘One does not simply change favourite diners.’ Jack pointed at him and nodded in agreement, as Bozer continued. ‘That’s definitely worth checking out.’

Riley, Jack and Mac nodded in agreement.

*I know it sounds a bit ridiculous, but people are creatures of habit.*

*Bozer’s right; one does not simply change favourite diners.*

*There has to be a reason, and that reason might just give us a good lead.*

*As he said, it’s definitely worth checking out.*

---

**JEREMY HOWARD’S NEW FAVOURITE DINER**

**ARLINGTON**

**VIRGINIA**

Jack walked into the diner, ignoring Bozer, Riley and Mac, who were sitting in a booth that *just happened* to have an excellent view of just about everywhere in the diner, in particular the door, and eating club sandwiches and fries.

The three younger agents had scoped out the diner, and unfortunately, had not noticed anything suspicious occurring, so it was time to try the second part of their plan.

Jack walked up to the counter and smiled his most charming smile at the older woman behind the counter, currently cutting up a cherry pie, whom he guessed was the owner.

‘Afternoon, ma’am.’

She smiled back at him.

‘Afternoon, young man.’ She plated up a slice of pie and put the rest of it back under a glass cloche on the counter, before ringing a bell. A waitress, tall, blonde and in her mid-twenties, her nametag proclaiming that her name was Ana, bustled over and picked up the plate of pie, taking it over to a man in an expensive suit. ‘What can I get for you, dear?’

Jack pulled out his phone and brought up a photo of Dr Howard.
‘I went to school with Jeremy, and…’ He looked sheepish and uncomfortable and regretful. ‘…I wasn’t very nice to him, and I want to apologize, so I looked him up, but…’ He affected a deflated posture and expression. ‘…he refuses to take any of my calls or respond to my emails, and my conscience has been keeping me up at night and all, and I just wanna tell him I’m sorry…’ He spread his palms out flat on the counter. ‘…so I’ve been trying to track him down. One of his co-workers told me he likes this place.’

The diner owner shot him a sympathetic look.

‘Oh, dear, that’s very good of you.’ She nodded. ‘Yeah, Jeremy’s a regular now. I haven’t seen him in the last couple of days, but he always sits in Ana’s section…’ She gestured to a section of the diner. ‘…she might know where you might be able to find him; they seem pretty friendly; chatty, you know?’

Jack nodded, and smiled charmingly at her again.

‘Well, thank you very much, ma’am, much obliged.’ He eyed the cherry pie. ‘I might stay for some grub, sure smells good in here.’

The woman smiled widely at him, and Jack, with a last little nod, got up and sat down in Ana’s section, just as his phone buzzed.

He took it out and glanced at it. It was a text from Mac.

**Ana the Waitress reacted when you mentioned Howard. She seemed suspicious and put on alert.**

Jack pretended to laugh, and shook his head, putting his phone back into his pocket.

He agreed. Ana the Waitress seemed like she was definitely hiding something.

Reacting to a mention of Dr Howard, with suspicion and alertness?

Dr Howard always sitting in her section?

The two of them seeming ‘chatty’?

Well, they *could* be having an affair.

*Or*, she might be somehow involved in the theft and intended sale of the USB of classified schematics.

(Or both.)

Either way, she’d have information that they needed.

Jack smiled up at Ana the Waitress as she walked up to take his order, putting in an order for steak and eggs.

(They’d skipped lunch and he was hungry.)

Fifteen minutes later, the diner owner brought Jack’s steak and eggs over with an apology.

‘I’m sorry, dear, Ana went on a quick break, you know, have a drink of water, get some fresh air, go to the bathroom, she was only supposed to be ten minutes, but she’s not back yet…’ The diner
owner shrugged a little helplessly. ‘She’s usually one of my most reliable waitresses, I don’t know what’s gotten into her…’

Jack smiled at the woman, then pretended to have gotten a text message. He pulled out his phone with an apologetic look, and shot off a quick text to Mac.

**Ana’s done a runner.**

Mac, Bozer and Riley had left a few minutes ago, heading back to the car to start digging into Ana the Waitress.

Then, he grinned and turned to the diner owner, dropping some bills on the table to pay for his meal and a tip and standing.

‘That’s the co-worker. He talked to Jeremy for me, says he’s willing to meet up. I gotta go.’

Jack rushed out the door, as the diner owner called out behind him.

‘Would you like that to go, dear? Oh, well, I guess that’s a no…good luck, dear!’

---

**CAR**

**ARLINGTON**

**VIRGINIA**

‘…Next left, then right after the lights…’

They were pursuing Ana the Waitress, whose full name was Anastasia Petrova, through Arlington, chasing her motorbike.

She’d managed to leave the diner without Mac, Bozer and Riley noticing, not passing the parking lot at the front of the diner and presumably leaving through the back, but Riley had found her motorcycle registration when digging into the waitress, and from there, it’d not been too difficult to find her on traffic cams.

She’d had a head start, but they were making up ground, though Thornton would have to get Jack out of a lot of speeding fines.

Bozer gave a fairly high-pitched yelp as Jack made a particularly sharp turn.

‘Seriously, man, you’re driving like Mac here!’

In the front passenger seat, Mac huffed out a breath, then, as he spotted Ana’s motorbike and the road ahead of them, his *I’ve-got-an-idea* face appeared and he seized the take-away box containing a slice of cherry pie that was sitting at his feet, and pulled out his Swiss Army knife.

‘Jack, get us as close alongside her as you can.’

Mac opened his window with his elbow as he worked on some strange contraption on his lap.

Jack groaned internally.

Mac was going to hang out the window of a moving vehicle *again*, he just knew it.
His partner was really going to make him go grey.

He floored the accelerator.

Ana Petrova glared at them as her motorbike sputtered, courtesy of Mac, and banked hard into an alleyway, obviously hoping that the size of their car meant they wouldn’t be able to make that rapid turn.

She didn’t count on Jack’s driving skills.

ALLEYWAY

ARLINGTON

VIRGINIA

A moment after Ana Petrova’s bike, their car screeched to a halt in the alleyway’s entrance and they all rushed out.

Ana’s motorbike lay dumped in front of them, and the woman herself was running down the alley.

Jack, Bozer and Riley took off in pursuit, as Mac glanced around quickly and noted a coil of rope next to a skip (someone – likely from the outdoor equipment store on the west side of the alleyway – was clearly throwing it out), and seized it (it was definitely from the outdoor equipment store; it smelled a bit fishy), tying a strategic knot as he ran after his teammates and the waitress.

Thirty seconds later, Jack, Bozer and Riley came to a stop in front of a struggling, but firmly lassoed Ana Petrova, as Mac jogged up behind them.

Jack glanced from the waitress to his partner.

‘Brother, I’m taking you to a rodeo and entering you into the roping competitions.’

Mac snorted.

‘I’d have to learn how to ride a horse first.’

Jack reached out and put an arm around his partner, as Riley secured Ana’s wrists with her shoelace-choker (she’d kept it after their mission in Taipei, partly because it was useful, and partly because it did look pretty awesome, even if she said so herself), and Bozer took and pocketed the woman’s phone.

‘I’ll teach you, man.’

Mac just shot Jack a look.

‘Not happening, Jack.’

PHOENIX SAFEHOUSE

SOMEBWHERE IN WASHINGTON D.C.
Sitting her down on a dining table chair, Jack pulled the paper bag that the take-away container of cherry pie had been in off Ana’s head.

Meanwhile, Riley got her laptop set up, and Bozer turned on the lights and checked the supplies in the cupboards of the safehouse’s kitchen, as Mac activated the security system and started making his usual improvements and additions.

(At least there were no expense reports when Mac ‘altered’ Phoenix property.)

(Besides, Thornton herself had directed them to this safehouse – it’d been in their briefing packets; with the amount of covert activity that happened in the Arlington-DC area, the Phoenix kept a permanent safehouse or two in the region – she’d wave through any ‘alterations’ that Mac made.)

The blonde woman blinked a couple of times, adjusting to the light, then stared into the distance, resolutely quiet.

Jack sat down, backwards, on a chair in front of her.

‘Alright, Ana, who do you work for?’

They were quite sure that she wasn’t having an affair with Dr Howard. At least, not just an affair.

People having affairs didn’t usually go to that much effort to run from people who were clearly digging into it.

People having affairs also didn’t usually stay so calm and not spill the beans immediately, tearfully and emotionally after being essentially kidnapped by mysterious strangers.

No, she was definitely involved in the USB theft, and given Dr Howard’s diner habits, she was probably a co-conspirator or a contact.

The woman turned to him, staring defiantly into his eyes, but refused to say anything, remaining stubbornly silent.

Following a gut instinct, Jack’s voice softened a little.

‘If you or your family are being threatened…’

No, it wasn’t that. She wasn’t being coerced; her eyes hadn’t softened in the slightest, hadn’t shown any worry or fear when he’d said that, simply hardened and grown a little more defiant, arrogant.

She wasn’t going to talk.

Jack had a couple of sneaking suspicions, but he wasn’t going to share them out loud with their prisoner. He stood and motioned with his head to Mac, who’d just re-entered the room, presumably satisfied with the security system, and the blonde agent nodded in return, sitting himself down on the chair that Jack had just vacated, turning it the right way around before he sat, to keep an eye on Ana. Jack got up and whispered to Riley, who was just starting to go through Ana’s phone.

‘I reckon she’s a Russian spy, or she’s with the Russian mafia.’

Riley glanced up at him, and he nodded grimly.

Both possibilities were extremely unpleasant and did not bode well for them.
Both possibilities meant that it was obvious that Ana wasn’t going to talk.

Either way, this was going to be one tough mission.

‘…Ana works for an Odessa Russian mafia boss.’ Riley indicated her laptop screen to Jack, Mac and Bozer (they’d locked Ana in the special room in the safehouse meant for the purpose of keeping and interrogating prisoners; Mac was currently leaning against the door, while Jack and Bozer sat next to Riley on the dining table). ‘Dr Howard is meant to meet her boss tomorrow night, presumably to turn over the USB, but I haven’t managed to find out where yet…’ Just at that moment, her laptop made a beeping sound, and Riley gave a little smirk. ‘Well, this could be it…’ Ana’s boyfriend was a key, trusted enforcer for said mafia boss, and Riley had used Ana’s phone to get into his phone, assuming that at some point, he’d have to be told where the meet was going to occur. Her smirk turned into a triumphant little smile, as an address appeared on her laptop screen. Jack and Bozer both reached out automatically to high-five her, and she held her right hand up to Bozer and her left hand up to Jack, eyes still not leaving her laptop screen. ‘Got it. Red Dragon Chinese Restaurant in Arlington.’

Jack’s eyebrows shot up, as did Bozer’s.

‘A Chinese restaurant?’

‘I thought we were dealing with the Russian mafia?’

Riley shrugged, nails clacking on her keyboard.

‘Owners are Russians…’

Jack and Bozer’s expressions got even more confused.

Mac straightened up, a paperclip dragon starting to form in his hands.

‘There are about 15,000 ethnic Russians who live in China and hold Chinese citizenship.’ He shrugged. ‘I suppose that some of them, logically, have to be interested in the restaurant business.’

Jack made a face, as Bozer shrugged, as if saying *I guess that makes sense.*

‘Still think it’s weird.’

About half an hour later, Riley sat at the dining table, digging further into Ana Petrova, Dr Howard and the Odessa Russian mafia. Jack sat in an armchair, perfectly positioned so that he had a good view of both Riley and the door of Ana’s cell.

Bozer and Mac had headed out to scope out the Red Dragon Chinese Restaurant. (They were very sure that Ana had not managed to relay anything about them to her boss, having gone through her phone very thoroughly.)

After a while, Jack broke the near-silence (all was quiet, save for the sound of Riley’s typing), a little hesitantly.

‘How’re you…adjusting?’ He paused, as if not sure if she’d understand what he was referring to, and then continued, explaining further. ‘You know, to the big news and all…’

Truth be told, he had a little bit of adjusting to do as well. He and Diane had tried again, after the Collective Incident, after that Christmas, but whatever they’d tried to restart had well and truly died
the day he’d gotten Sarah’s wedding invitation in the mail, and realized that he was not over his former partner, not at all, no matter what he’d thought.

He’d let Sarah go now, really had, just like he’d let Diane go too.

He was pretty sure it was for good now.

(They were always going to be special, but, he thought – he hoped – they’d be special in the way that Penny was special to Mac and Bozer, and Frankie special to Mac.)

Riley snorted.

‘No need to dance around it, Jack. My mom’s got a new boyfriend. That’s just a fact, it doesn’t need euphemisms.’ She hesitated a moment, fingers dancing across her keyboard, but not actually typing. Then, she looked over at Jack. ‘I ran a background check on him. A really thorough background check.’ A wry expression appeared on her face for a moment. ‘I’m not going to be fooled again.’ The wry look disappeared, and she toyed with her shoelace-choker for a beat. ‘He’s clean. He’s a good guy…’ She snorted and looked down, sounding a little sad to Jack. ‘…unlike most of my mom’s exes.’ She glanced back up at Jack, a half-wry, half-soft smile on her face. ‘Present company excepted.’ She fell quiet for a couple of seconds, looking down, then looked back up at him, crossing her arms. ‘It’s just…’ She shrugged, not quite able to find the words, and looked down again.

Jack watched her for a moment, then spoke, his voice soft.

‘It’s always hard for children when their parent starts dating someone new.’

Riley looked up and stared at him for a long moment, then made a face of disbelief.

‘That sounds like you read it in a book.’

Jack rubbed the back of his neck.

‘I did.’ It was his turn to look down, then back up. ‘I read this book when you were twelve, and me and your mom hadn’t been dating very long and I was trying to get through to you.’ He and Riley looked into each other’s eyes for a long moment, the young hacker’s eyes soft and affectionate and a little bit sad and above all, touched. Then, Jack shrugged, a little smile appearing on his face. ‘The book was about teenagers, but I figured that it probably applies pretty well to adults…’

A similar little smile appeared on Riley’s face, and she glanced down at the floor for a moment, fingers dancing across her keyboard, then looked back up at Jack.

‘Oh, yeah? You know, I’m going to prove you wrong about that, old man.’ She looked into his eyes for a beat. ‘If you start dating someone…I’m going to be perfectly cool with it.’

Jack was the closest thing to a father she’d ever had. (And the only surrogate father she’d ever want – maybe that was part of the reason why she was a bit iffy about her mom’s new boyfriend. She didn’t want a stepfather. She wanted Jack, because he understood and cared and didn’t judge and believed in her and when he didn’t understand, he tried, tried so hard, and he’d always been like that, even when she’d been much harder to love, when she’d been younger, before her transformation or reformation of sorts.)

The older man’s eyes looked suspiciously damp (just a little bit, but still), and he smiled back at Riley, one of those affectionate, loving smiles, and the young woman found herself returning the gesture.
Then, Jack pointed at her, the smile becoming a bit more like a smirk, but not losing that affection.

‘I’m gonna remember this conversation, Riles. And I’m not gonna let you forget it if it turns out you’re wrong…’

Riley smirked too, but her eyes didn’t lose any of their softness either.

‘Oh, I know you won’t.’

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CAR

ON-ROUTE TO RED DRAGON CHINESE RESTAURANT

ARLINGTON

VIRGINIA

‘I’m worried about Riley, man.’

Bozer had been worried about his girlfriend ever since she’d come to his and Mac’s place on their boys’ night in.

Mac glanced over at Bozer, and simply nodded.

‘We all are, Boze.’

His roommate nodded and continued, staring out the window as Mac drove.

‘I mean, I know it’s probably just an adjustment, and I know she’s gonna be okay, because she’s really tough and all, but…’ He sighed. ‘I still worry.’

Mac glanced over at him again, then spoke after a moment of hesitation.

‘We worry about our loved ones…that’s just the nature of love.’

Bozer nodded, glancing back at Mac, then back out the window.

‘Yeah.’ He was silent for a moment, then glanced back at the blonde. ‘All we can do is be there for her, you know, be supportive and listen and be a shoulder to cry on and make comfort food…’ He sighed again. ‘But I really wish I could make it all go away.’

There’d been more times in his life than Bozer liked that he’d had to just be there for his loved ones, be supportive and listen and a shoulder to cry on and feed them comfort food, despite having that wish to make it all go away. (Not because it was a burden, but because of what it meant for his loved ones.) When Mac’s dad had left, when his grandfather had passed, when Mac had come home from war, when he’d been hurt badly and his girlfriend had ‘died’ in a car accident on a work trip, after the attack on the Phoenix (after Riley had killed Horn) and after Tahoe (and he’d been even more limited in that period, having been stabbed and all).

Mac just nodded sadly, as his best friend perked up, with maybe slightly forced cheer (only slightly forced - Bozer was simply cheerful by nature), but cheer nonetheless.

‘Hey, at least we know for sure she’s not upset because she wanted Jack and her mom to get back together.’
Riley was always very insistent that she did not want Jack to be her actual stepdad, despite having admitted to both Mac (albeit rather unintentionally in an elevator in a classified building in Shanghai, at least the first time) and Bozer (much more intentionally) that Jack was the closest thing she’d ever had to a father, the father figure in her life.

She was equally insistent that she believed that Jack and Patricia would make an excellent couple and that it would happen one day.

Mac shook his head with a smile.

‘I still don’t see it at all, Boze.’

Bozer shot him a look, shaking his head.

‘You’re just blind, man, blind.’ He snorted. ‘Though, I shouldn’t be surprised.’ He pointed at Mac. ‘I love you, bro, but you’re a little hopeless at this stuff, especially when it involves your love life.’

Mac nodded, and gave a half-shrug, sheepishly and a little sadly.

A, he’s not wrong. Not wrong at all.

B, what love life?

PHOENIX SAFEHOUSE

SOMEWHERE IN WASHINGTON D.C.

A couple of hours later, as Riley was neck-deep in Dr Howard’s financials and Jack had just finished taking another (futile) crack at Ana, Mac and Bozer returned, the former dropping a couple of large Beltway Burger bags on the dining table, and the latter scrubbing his hands thoroughly at the kitchen sink.

Jack looked at the burger bags in surprise. (Riley wasn’t really paying attention; she had her headphones on and was really, really deep in Dr Howard’s credit card history.)

‘Not Chinese food?’

Bozer mimed being sick and Mac just shook his head resolutely as he spoke while washing his hands.

‘The restaurant seems clean, we didn’t see anything suspicious.’

Bozer shuddered.

‘It might be clean in a doesn’t-seem-run-by-the-mafia way…but it was not clean in any other way.’

Mac nodded in agreement.

‘They need a visit from an inspector from the Arlington County Public Health Department. Urgently.’

Jack, too, made a face, then reached into the nearest Beltway Burger bag, and started handing out dinner.
He deliberately waved a cheeseburger in front of Riley’s face.

‘Come on, Riles, time for eats!’

Riley shot him a look that was part exasperated affection and part you-are-an-embarrassing-dork, but took off her headphones and took the burger from Jack anyway with a small smile and a grateful nod.

As they got stuck into their own dinner, Mac and Bozer shared a smile and a knowing look.

At 7:30 the next morning, Riley, who’d been up quite late the night before digging through Dr Howard’s financials (they’d all tried to help, especially Bozer, but this was really her domain) with consultation from some Phoenix analysts, and had woken at 6 in the morning to continue her task, suddenly pulled off her headphones and spoke very seriously.

‘I’ve got something.’ She typed frantically for a moment, then turned her laptop screen to face Bozer, Mac and Jack, who were all suddenly paying rapt attention to her and not to their breakfast. ‘Every single week, Dr Howard goes and purchases a candy bar from this old-school candy store. It’s ten miles from his workplace and fifteen from his house, and he’s been doing this for years.’ Riley shrugged. ‘He must really love these candy bars, because he hasn’t missed a week in the last four years.’ She pulled up a map, quickly getting directions from the safehouse to the candy store. ‘Assuming he still needs his chocolate fix when he’s on the run and selling stolen tech to the Russian mafia, he’s going to be at the candy store in an hour.’

They all glanced at each other, then Mac and Jack stood, the older man speaking.

‘Mac and I will go catch the chocoholic doctor; you two stay here, keep digging and keep an eye on our guest, okay?’

Bozer saluted, and Riley nodded, and then Mac and Jack made their way towards the door.

‘Reckon we can get salt water taffy there, brother? ‘Cause I’ve got a sudden craving…’

‘A, we are working, Jack. B…if you still have a craving when we get home, maybe I’ll re-create my automatic taffy-puller and talk Bozer into making salt water taffy again…’

Or maybe not.

Last time didn’t go so well.

Some might describe it as a disaster, actually.

Still, the taffy was delicious.

It was just hard to get off the ceiling.

OLD-SCHOOL CANDY STORE

ARLINGTON

VIRGINIA

The aisle (if it could be called that; the candy store was tiny) that Dr Howard’s favourite candy bars
were kept in was, handily, near a small storage closet and out of view of both the register and the street.

Mac and Jack were simply chatting and reading descriptions of candy bars, pretending to try to decide what bars to buy, when Dr Howard came in and made a beeline for the bars he always bought.

Seconds later, before he really knew what was happening, he was shoved into a storage closet.

Mac had only just closed the door behind them when the scientist realised what had happened to him, and the first thing he did was cry out in anguish.

‘You’ve killed them!’ He cried out again and struggled futilely against Jack. ‘You’ve killed them!’

A horrible, horrible realization formed in Mac’s mind, a few seconds before it started to grow in Jack’s.

_Sometimes, I’m wrong._

_I think this is one of those times._

Mac and Jack both swallowed as they glanced from the paused video on Dr Howard’s phone, showing a woman in her early forties holding yesterday’s newspaper in one hand, her other arm wrapped around a crying boy of six or seven, with a little girl, no older than three or four, sitting in her lap, desperately holding on to her mother’s shirt, cheeks stained with tears, to the scientist himself, who was sobbing himself.

Jack pulled out his phone, intending to call Riley to tell her the news and get her to double-check Dr Howard’s story (though, they were both very inclined to believe him, with the video before them and his raw grief and anguish which seem so genuine to their experienced – and somewhat suspicious and paranoid, after all they’d gone through – eyes), but it rang, with Riley’s caller ID appearing, before he could. Jack put his phone on speaker and answered.

‘Riley-’

‘The check-ins and social media posts by Dr Howard’s wife, the GPS tracking? That was all faked, Jack. Faked well, but faked.’ She paused for a moment. ‘Digital signature looks like Odessa mafia work; Jack, I think his family-’

‘Was kidnapped as leverage.’ Jack paused, glancing at the still-sobbing scientist. Mac had crouched down and was trying his best to offer the man some comfort. ‘We know, Riles.’

Mac glanced helplessly at the distressed Dr Howard, then looked up at his partner, his eyes hardening a little and growing very resolute, very determined. Mac looked back at the engineer.

‘Dr Howard, we are going to save your family.’ He put both hands on the man’s shoulders. ‘I promise.’

CAR

ON-ROUTE TO PHOENIX SAFEHOUSE

ARLINGTON
'Four and a half months ago, the Odessa mafia started threatening me... started threatening my family to get me to steal plans for them.' Dr Howard glanced at Mac and Jack. 'You wouldn’t have found any record of it; they were very careful and only ever threatened me in person.' He sighed and looked down, toying with his hands. ‘I had to keep my family safe, prevent them being used as leverage, so…’ He sighed again, sounding a little regretful. ‘I picked fights with my wife, so that it’d seem real when I left. Even to her.’ He sighed again, more regretfully. ‘It...well...we were having problems already, with my job on top of all the everyday things, you know, raising kids, paying the mortgage, just being married...’

Dr Howard’s job was mostly classified, though nowhere near as much as their jobs.

Mac and Jack exchanged a glance. They both very much understood Dr Howard’s impulse to protect his family, and the strain that having what you did for a living be classified put on relationships. (Though, Jack supposed, he probably understood that a bit more than Mac, and he had more of an inkling about the everyday things that Dr Howard was referring to as well – for a short, but fondly remembered, period of his life, he and Diane and Riley had been a domestic little family, after all.)

Dr Howard sighed yet again, this time, a more frustrated sigh.

‘Obviously, my plan didn’t really work.’

Three days ago, his wife and children had been kidnapped, and he’d been given a burner phone and the first of three videos, telling him that his family would be killed if he didn’t steal the plans.

This morning, he’d received the third video, reminding him that they’d be killed if he didn’t deliver the USB of plans to the mafia boss at the Red Dragon tonight.

_We are not going to let that mafia boss get his hands on the plans._

_But we are also not going to let Dr Howard’s family be killed._

_I promised him we’d save them._

_I don’t break my promises._

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**RED DRAGON CHINESE RESTAURANT**

**ARLINGTON**

**VIRGINIA**

‘This is unacceptable!’

A minute after Dr Howard had entered the restaurant, just as he was getting seated and just as the man they’d identified as the mafia boss, with two big, brutish men, presumably his enforcers (one was definitely Ana’s boyfriend), was walking in, Mac and Bozer stormed into the restaurant, dressed smartly and carrying clipboards. Mac also had a couple of bottles of cleaning supplies.

As Bozer waltzed around, dramatically making a scene and demanding to speak to the manager, Mac checked off boxes on his clipboard and carefully inspected the floor, spraying a bit of cleaning fluid...
on it, scrubbing for a moment, harrumphing, then checking another box on his clipboard. He then got up and turned to a man who looked to be the most senior waiter.

‘Good evening, sir. My colleague and I are from the Arlington County Public Health Department.’ He flashed an ID that had been obtained after Matty had called in a handful of favours on Thornton’s request, when they’d concocted their plan. The man paled. ‘We were here yesterday on a surprise secret inspection, and we have found at least twenty-four code violations…’

The entire restaurant, as Bozer ranted and raved and Mac calmly explained, had come to a halt, with everyone staring at the two of them, and some diners, despite the protestations and assurances of the waiters, getting up to leave.

In the chaos, the mafia boss ground his teeth as he was stalled from making his way across to the other side of the dining room were Dr Howard sat, as the engineer looked at him, eyes darting away every now and then, increasingly nervous and fearful, playing the part of a terrified, coerced man who’d just been presented with an unwanted obstacle to getting his family back perfectly.

Mac figured he probably wasn’t acting, as he continued listing off violations of the Arlington County Public Health Department’s code (which he’d memorized ten minutes ago) that he and his colleague had found on their surprise undercover visit.

*Just like I’m, unfortunately, not lying either.*

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WAREHOUSE

ARLINGTON

VIRGINIA

Jack and Riley quietly snuck up on the door of the warehouse, as shouts and footsteps sounded in the distance (Thanks to a favour called in by Matty, which had also led to Ana being taken off their hands by the FBI, NCIS had received an anonymous tip that stolen Navy merchandise of some kind or the other was being stored in the warehouse two doors down – all the warehouses on this lot were owned by a shell company ultimately owned by the Odessa mafia – and their raid had ‘conveniently’ drawn most of the guards away from this warehouse, which they’d determined via some of Riley’s computer magic was where Dr Howard’s family was being held.). Riley pulled a couple of bobby pins out of her hair, picking the lock, earning a grin from Jack, who then put his business face back on as he burst through the door, his gun at the ready.

The three guards left in the warehouse were taken completely by surprise. One dropped to the ground almost-instantly, floored by a bullet in his knee, while a second had time to pull out his gun, but soon joined his colleague on the ground, clutching his shoulder. A third had simply rushed at them (there was a gun on a table over a map about ten feet away, which they assumed was his), and fell, whimpering, after a couple of well-placed, quick, precise and surprisingly-strong punches.

Jack glanced over at Riley, who was cuffing the man, with a smirk, which Riley returned, then eyed the man with a hint of sympathy.

On one hand, he deserved what he’d gotten, keeping a woman and her two small kids prisoner and all, but on the other hand…he’d been on the receiving end of that punch combo a couple of times, courtesy of both Thornton and Riley, and while they’d been pulled punches during sparring…they still hurt.
Then, as Jack dealt with the two other men, Riley hurried over to the locked door on the other side of the warehouse, from behind which she heard faint cries for help, and started picking the lock.

She opened the door, and held her hands up to show she was unarmed.

‘I’m not going to hurt you…’ She stepped inside and indicated Jack with a jerk of her head. ‘I’m Riley, that’s Jack, and we work for the government. We’re here to rescue you…’

As the woman nodded, then smiled slowly, as if she couldn’t quite believe it, pulling her two children even closer and dropping a kiss on her daughter’s head, Riley tapped her earpiece.

‘Mac, Bozer, they’re safe.’

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**RED DRAGON CHINESE RESTAURANT**

**ARLINGTON**

**VIRGINIA**

‘…See, this upstanding gentlemen and his sons just want to have dinner with a friend, but no, they’re risking severe food poisoning *at the very least!*’ Bozer gesticulated to Dr Howard, the mafia boss and the two enforcers, who were seated together at a table at last, then at the restaurant’s owner and the chief waiter. ‘This is absolutely unacceptable; how dare you treat your patrons like this! I will…’

The mafia boss’s teeth ground further; he looked very annoyed at the scene that Bozer was making, which was preventing him from getting his hands on the USB (he obviously couldn’t demand the handover when two local government officials were around) but just as they’d been sure of, he didn’t gesture for his enforcers to drag Bozer away, for example. They’d known he wouldn’t dare attack a public official so openly, it simply wasn’t worth it for a man who skirted around the edges of the law, hid all his illegal dealings in the grey areas and the shadows.

Mac, meanwhile, was trying to talk his colleague down and apologizing to the mafia boss, his enforcers, Dr Howard, the restauranteur and his staff.

‘I am *so*, *so* sorry, he gets like this when he’s had a bit too much caffeine, and he’s very passionate about our work…’

At that moment, they heard Riley’s words over their comms, and immediately set in motion the next portion of their plan.

Mac, from the mafia boss’s side of the table and with a bottle of cleaning fluid in his hand, reached out to pull Bozer away, and his co-worker immediately started struggling, and the resultant little scuffle between the two of them, which was watched, wide-eyed, by the restauranteur and the wait staff, and even one of the mafia boss’s enforcers, led to the top of the cleaning fluid bottle flying off (Mac had done his thing to it earlier in the car), sloshing the mafia boss and his two enforcers with the liquid inside.

All three swore loudly in Russian, and glared at Mac, who had instantly stopped struggling with Bozer. As Bozer herded the wait staff and the restauranteur away, Mac pulled a lighter from his pocket and smirked darkly, eyes hard.

‘It smells a bit like gasoline, doesn’t it? That’s because it’s xylene, one of the chemicals that gives gasoline its distinctive smell.’ The three Russians, who had clearly noticed the smell and the
implications for them, had gone very still. Mac held the lighter close to the mafia boss’s also-xylene-soaked chair and moved his thumb ever-so-slightly, not enough to trigger a flame, but still a clear movement. ‘Xylene is very, very flammable.’ His smirk widened and his eyes grew darker as he leaned closer to the boss. ‘If my thumb slips…well, I’m sure you get the picture.’

The boss glanced up at him and spoke, not quite cowed, but definitely recognizing Mac as some kind of equal and according him the relevant respect.

‘What do you want? Money? Power? I can give it to you-‘

Mac chuckled, just as dark as his earlier smirk.

‘Oh, no. I just want you to do absolutely nothing.’

He gestured to Bozer with his head and Mac’s best friend started zip-tying the hands of the mafia boss’s enforcers.

When the second enforcer twitched as Bozer bound his wrists, Mac simply held the lighter up, near his boss’s head, and the man stilled.

As Bozer bound the compliant boss’s wrists, they all heard the wail of approaching sirens, then moments later, local FBI entered the restaurant and with nods at Mac and Bozer (they’d been briefed by Thornton), took the three mafia members off their hands.

As he was about to be hauled off, the boss looked up at Mac, confused and a little scared, Mac was sure.

‘You are law enforcement?’ He gestured with his head towards the lighter. ‘And yet you would set me and my men on fire?’

Mac shook his head firmly.

‘Oh, no. Never.’ He gestured to the discarded cleaning fluid bottle on the floor. ‘There’s xylene in there, but the concentration’s far too low for it to be flammable. Though, the concentration is high enough to get that gasoline smell; xylene’s detectable by the human nose at very low concentrations; even 0.5 ppm will do.’

The mafia boss’s face contorted in anger as he realized the bluff that Mac had just pulled off, and he tried to lunge at the blonde, but was pulled away by two FBI agents.

Bozer walked up to his best friend as the FBI led the men away.

‘Bro, you should totally audition for the next Bond villain.’

Mac gave a little chuckle, shaking his head, then he and Bozer turned to Dr Howard, who was looking up at them with hope and relief and worry in his eyes, all at once.

They both smiled at him, and Bozer pulled out his phone to call Riley.

‘They’re safe.’

Dr Howard sagged with relief, then looked up, making eye contact with Bozer, then Mac.

‘Thank you.’

There was a lot in those two words.
I promised him.

PHOENIX SAFEHOUSE

SOMEBEHERE IN WASHINGTON D.C.

‘…Sixteen members of the Odessa mafia have been arrested for various offences, including kidnapping, false imprisonment and assaulting federal agents, and the classified schematics are back in the proper hands.’ Thornton graced Jack and Riley with a small smile. ‘Good work.’

She hung up, and Jack and Riley looked back over at the couch in the living room, where Mrs Howard was sitting, her son tucked into her side and her daughter on her lap. Beth had done a video consultation on them, and concluded that aside from being a bit malnourished and dehydrated, and in shock and with some scrapes and bruises from their ordeal, they were physically alright. She’d said that a proper examination by a doctor would be needed, but it could wait a couple of hours. Both Howard children were now chewing happily on the strawberry and yoghurt muesli bars that’d been in the medical kit.

Both Phoenix agents smiled, just as the door opened and Mac, Bozer and Dr Howard entered.

Dr Howard stared at his wife and children for a moment, before his daughter, only three and not entirely aware of what had happened, with half a muesli bar still in her chubby toddler’s hands, walked over to him and flung her arms around his legs.

‘Daddy!’

Dr Howard let out a slightly-hoarse laugh, and picked the little girl up, and took the piece of muesli bar she offered him with a smile. Then, his son came up to him and flung his arms around his dad’s waist, and a moment later, Mrs Howard came up to them. She poked her finger into her husband’s sternum.

‘You are an idiot.’

Jack and Riley had explained everything to her.

Then, her expression softened and her eyes got a little teary, and she put an arm around his waist and pressed a kiss to his cheek, joining the family hug.

Mac, Jack, Bozer and Riley, who’d all shifted away to try and give the family a little privacy, simply exchanged warm smiles.

After a long moment, Dr Howard put down his daughter, and let go of his wife, then reached into his pocket and pulled out a candy bar (he’d bought it at the candy store upon Mac and Jack’s instruction, since they needed to make it seem like he was going about his usual routine). The Phoenix agents watched as he divided it into three pieces, and handed a piece each to his wife and his children.

Jack stared for a moment, then shook his head and addressed Dr Howard as the man looked up at them.

‘Wait, you don’t eat those things?’

The newly-reinstated DARPA engineer shook his head.
'No, I don’t really like chocolate.’ He glanced over at his family and smiled affectionately, gesturing with his head to his wife. ‘But Mel adores them, and the kids got her sweet tooth, so…’

He shrugged simply and smiled at his family as they enjoyed their chocolate, smile growing wider as he did so.

Mac, Jack, Bozer and Riley exchanged a glance as their own smiles widened too.

Love isn’t just about grand gestures and bold declarations and defending your loved ones.

Love, my grandfather told me, is about the little things.


Little gestures, little gifts, like bringing home a favourite chocolate bar every week, without fail. Picking up a little present just because you thought of them. Making their favourite dinner. Buying their favourite ice-cream flavour. Picking up more Honey-Nut Cheerios, even if it’s not your turn, just because.

The potential energy stored within a miniscule Uranium nucleus is huge. Fission of a single atom of Uranium-235 generates $3.24 \times 10^{-11} \text{ J}$. That might not sound like a lot, but trust me, it is.

My point is, like an atom of Uranium, these little gestures pack a lot of power.

They do say big things come in small packages, after all.

MACGYVER'S RESIDENCE

LA

Mac stirred the soup on the stove, then grabbed a spoon from the cutlery drawer and had a taste.

Riley was having a long lunch and probably even longer chat with her mom and Diane’s new boyfriend. Bozer had gone to pick her up, solely for moral support reasons, and Jack had said he’d had to go grocery shopping and run some other errands, but that he’d be over for dinner with beer.

Thus, Mac had decided to cook dinner for them. (Sure, Bozer usually cooked, but Mac could handle himself in the kitchen very competently – it was just applied edible chemistry, after all – and with Bozer having been so worried of late, and since he probably wouldn’t be back with Riley until fairly late, he thought the only right thing to do was to give his best friend a break.)

He smiled as he swallowed the spoonful of soup. His mother and grandfather’s secret-family-recipe tomato soup, traditional Jackson family comfort food that he’d had countless times as a boy, was coming along nicely.

Mac glanced over at the casserole dish in which bread for French toast, Riley’s favourite breakfast food (and everyone knew breakfast food was the best food), was soaking in preparation for cooking, and then got to work putting the bacon, one of Jack’s favourites, whether for breakfast, lunch or dinner, on the baking tray.

Bacon, French toast and tomato soup sounded a bit odd as a dinner menu, but bacon and French
toast were delicious together, and tomato soup went really well with bread, and Mac was sure he could make it work.

Just as Mac had finished putting the bacon in the oven (he’d just gotten a text from Bozer saying that he and Riley would be back in 20 minutes), the door opened, and Jack walked in, beer in one hand and a box of paperclips in the other.

He put the paperclips down on the countertop beside Mac, and moved past him to put the beer in the fridge.

‘I picked up some paperclips for you while buying the beer, brother, they were on sale.’

Mac grinned, putting a hand on Jack’s shoulder.

‘Thanks, Jack.’ He hesitated for a moment, his expression softening and looking into the older man’s eyes. ‘Are you…are you okay with Diane moving on?’

Jack stared at him for a fraction of a second, then shook his head with a little smile. There was a tinge of regret, sadness, to it, but nothing that made Mac feel worried about the older man.

‘That ship sailed a very, very long time ago, Mac, and trying to catch up with it by helicopter James Bond-style failed. Badly.’

It was Mac’s turn to stare at Jack for a moment, then, satisfied by what he saw there, no longer concerned, the blonde gave a wry smile, raising his brows.

‘I think your analogies are even worse than your puns, Jack.’

The older man looked very put-out and started protesting that both his analogies and puns were excellent, thank you very much.

Mac smiled and shook his head.

Jack was alright. He was okay with Diane moving on, because he’d let her go too.

Still, Mac resolved to let Jack succeed in stealing a piece of bacon off the tray when Mac took it out of the oven.

(He often tried and never succeeded because Bozer, or occasionally Mac, was rather vigilant about it, but Mac figured Jack deserved a break this time.)

It’s all about the little things.

Chapter End Notes

This episode developed more feels than I intended it too. (It was always going to have a lot of feels, but I did not intend for it to have this many…) Anyway, hope you guys liked it!

Like the feels, Mac and Bozer as restaurant inspectors just kind of happened, but it is honestly one of my favourite scenes in this episode, the others being Jack and Riley’s
little talk and the end scene.

And yes, ‘one does not simply change favourite diners’ is a *Lord of the Rings* reference. The Russian-run Chinese restaurant is a sort-of *NCIS* reference – there’s an episode of *NCIS* in which the team are rather shocked to find a Russian man with a Chinese name running a fortune cookie business – and Beltway Burger is the burger chain that frequently appears in *NCIS*.

I am also very slowly establishing a list of things that Mac *cannot* do. So far, the only thing (according to my memory, anyway – feel free to correct me) that the show has established he can’t do is garden (well), if you don’t count things like ‘be evil’ and fly/walk on water/be bulletproof/teleport etc. (You could also put something there about being slightly hopeless with/awkward around/not very good at flirting with women, I suppose…) Now, Mac’s pretty amazing, but that’s just ridiculous for any human being, so I’ve been slowly adding things to that list: driving (sort-of – their teasing of him is kind of a ‘friend group joke’, and it’s probably sort-of canon that Mac is not a terribly good driver based on what happened in *Fish Scaler*), singing, dancing and horse-riding.

Next episode: 2.15, Chair. After getting food poisoning, Jack is forced to stay behind at the Phoenix when the team gets a mission. He gets a taste of the Director’s chair, while Thornton returns to Colombia for the first time since that fateful mission went very, very south…hopefully, this mission goes better.
Chair

Chapter Summary

After getting food poisoning, Jack is forced to stay behind at the Phoenix when the team gets a mission. He gets a taste of the Director’s chair, while Thornton returns to Colombia for the first time since that fateful mission that went horribly, terribly south.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

MEN’S RESTROOM

PHOENIX FOUNDATION HEADQUARTERS

SOMEWHERE IN LA

Mac sighed as he listened to his partner retching in one of the cubicles, then spoke after he heard the flush of the toilet.

‘You know, this almost-certainly wouldn’t have happened if you’d just let me order for you.’

Mac and Jack had gotten back last night from a mission in China, and now, the following afternoon, Jack had food poisoning.

Mac didn’t.

They’d eaten at the same restaurant, and while it could be attributed to the different meals they’d eaten and Jack just being unlucky, Mac was quite sure it was down to something else.

That something else being Jack accidentally propositioning the waitress while trying to order dumplings, hence leading to him receiving an improperly cooked meal.

His partner emerged from the bathroom stall, looking rather pale, and went to the sink to wash his hands, grousing at Mac as he did so.

‘But if I don’t get to practice my Mandarin, how will I keep my skills sharp?’

Mac rolled his eyes as he handed the older man the bottle of lemon-lime Gatorade he’d obtained from the vending machine down the hall, and Jack took it, opened it, and took a swig, then raised the bottle to Mac in a cheers gesture as thanks.

‘Jack, your Mandarin skills are, for all intents and purposes, non-existent.’ Jack opened his mouth to retort, either to defend his skills or to protest then how am I to learn if I don’t get to practice?, but Mac cut him off. ‘You could try and learn, but practice with me, or Rowena, or May, or Alex or some combination of the above, not random and slightly scary waitresses in restaurants in China!’

Pronunciation is the key to speaking Mandarin.
There are many words that sound similar, but not quite the same, and have different meanings.

Very different meanings.

It is, therefore, fairly easy to accidentally offend someone when trying to say something mundane, or even complimenting them.

Of course, we wouldn’t get mad at Jack for accidentally offending us.

We might tease him, but we won’t give him food poisoning.

Or worse.

I really don’t want Jack to accidentally offend a Triad boss, for example.

Taking another drink of Gatorade, Jack rubbed his stomach and made a face, then nodded.

‘Point taken, brother.’ He gestured towards the door. ‘Let’s go find out what Patty’s got in store for us.’

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**WAR ROOM**

**PHOENIX FOUNDATION HEADQUARTERS**

**SOMEBWHERE IN LA**

‘This is Diego Gomez…’ Thornton indicated the screen, where there was a photo of a middle-aged Latino man, and then tapped it, bringing up a second photo of a slightly younger Latino man. ‘…And this is Hector Moreno.’ She tapped the screen again, bringing up a map of southern Colombia. ‘They are rival drug lords caught in a territory skirmish.’ She zoomed in on part of the southernmost area of Colombia. ‘We’ve received intel that Moreno has arranged for a case of dengue fever vaccines meant for children in this cluster of villages to be contaminated with live non-attenuated virus.’

Mac cut in at that point, to explain, as Jack and Bozer made confused faces.

‘Meaning that the virus in the vaccine is still harmful.’

Thornton nodded at Mac in thanks, as Jack and Bozer looked less confused, and continued the briefing.

‘Gomez grew up in the region and considers it under his protection. Once the locals experience a spike in the number of dengue fever cases, he will, with only the slightest bit of evidence, blame it on Moreno, leading to an escalation of their territory war. We cannot allow that to occur.’ Thornton paused for a moment, a hint of tightly-leashed anger appearing in her voice. ‘We also cannot allow innocent children to be infected with dengue fever.’ After another brief pause, her voice grew business-like and cool again, as she continued. ‘Mac, Bozer, Riley, we will head to Colombia to retrieve the contaminated vaccines before they are administered.’

*It sounds simple, but there’s a reason why this is a Phoenix mission.*

Let’s just say there’s no way Moreno is going to be happy about the vaccines being recalled and that he’s likely to take action to prevent that.
Jack picked up on the *we* and his omission, his brow furrowing.

‘Then what am I going to do, Patty?’

Everyone else turned to look at him. Mac huffed out a sigh, though there was a look of sympathy on his face all the same, while Bozer just patted Jack’s shoulder and Riley shook her head. Thornton simply arched a brow at him.

‘You are ill, Jack. You are staying here, you aren’t fit for duty.’ Jack opened his mouth to protest, but was cut off. ‘You threw up fifteen minutes ago.’ Jack’s brow furrowed, and he stood there for a moment, wondering how in the world she could know that, then turned to Mac with an accusatory look. The blonde looked innocently back at him, raising his hands as if to say *I didn’t tell her!* Thornton’s expression softened somewhat as Jack, believing his partner, tried to work out how in the world his boss knew *everything.* ‘I am leaving you in charge of the Phoenix in my absence. That should soften the blow.’

Jack stared at her for a moment.

‘Wait, so I get to be Director of the Phoenix?’

Thornton nodded, an eyebrow raised.

*Acting* Director, until my return, but yes.’

A slow smile grew on Jack’s face.

‘Consider the blow softened.’ He turned to Mac, Riley and Bozer with a grin. ‘I get to sit in the Director’s chair!’

The three younger agents just exchanged a *look.*

‘Yeah, as a *seat-warmer*, Jack.’

‘What Riley said, man.’

‘The Phoenix doesn’t even have a specific chair meant for the Director.’ Everyone, Thornton included, stared at Mac as he spoke. He huffed out a sigh. ‘I’m aware that’s an expression, it just…’ He made a face. ‘…doesn’t sound right to me.’

As Mac filed out after Thornton, Bozer and Riley, he dropped a chair-shaped paperclip on the table.

Only minutes after Mac, Riley, Bozer and Thornton had left, Beth bustled into the war room, carrying a fairly large bag over her shoulder.

‘Good afternoon, Jack.’ She looked over him, taking note, Jack was quite sure, of the bags under his eyes from lack of sleep (he and Mac hadn’t slept all that much on their mission, and he hadn’t been able to catch up on the plane or last night at all, unlike his partner, who was back to looking and feeling as fresh as a daisy) and the paleness of his skin.

‘Afternoon, Doc.’

She smiled at him in response, just a little smile, then crouched down by the table (her eyes fell on the chair paperclip, and curiosity flickered across her face for a moment, before her expression returned to its usual caring professionalism) and started unpacking the bag, taking out two bottles of
lemon-lime Gatorade, three bottles of water, anti-nausea medication, saltine crackers, a Thermos neatly labelled ginger tea, and several sick bags. Done unpacking, she pulled out an ear thermometer, and stood, walking up to him.

‘I need to take your temperature.’

Jack made a face and was about to protest that he was mostly fine and absolutely didn’t have a fever, but she narrowed her eyes at him, and the protests died on his lips.

As she inserted the thermometer, Jack looked up at her as best as he could.

‘How’d you even know I was sick?’

Beth’s expression turned rather wry and somewhat amused.

‘Oh, I received four text messages from four different people informing me of the fact and variously asking or ordering me to look after you.’ He gave a little shake of his head in fond exasperation as she removed the thermometer. ‘Well, you don’t have a fever.’ Jack opened his mouth, but she cut him off (that was happening a lot today). ‘That does not mean that you are fine. You still have food poisoning, you just don’t have a fever.’ She indicated the supplies that she’d left on the table and reached out and pressed a bottle of Gatorade into his hands (he’d finished the one Mac had given him before the briefing had started). ‘Keep sipping at that.’ She narrowed her eyes at him. ‘I expect you to use the supplies as needed, and I’ll be back in two hours to check on you.’

She crouched down again to pick up her bag and put away the thermometer, and it was only then that Jack realized how tired she looked herself.

He briefly wondered why, before he remembered that today was the 5th of July.

Yesterday had been the 4th.

There’d have been fireworks last night.

He and Mac had missed them, not having landed until 1 in the morning.

Besides, time helped; neither of them were very bothered by them anymore, especially Jack.

But he remembered distinctly how it’d been when he’d first returned home, and he remembered even more clearly how it’d been for Mac when he’d come back from Afghanistan for good.

That first 4th of July had been very tough.

Yesterday was Beth’s first 4th of July, first encounter with fireworks, certainly, since her return. Since after.

He looked up at her as he cracked open his Gatorade, and spoke, voice soft and gentle.

‘Fireworks keep you up last night?’

He figured she’d know that he wasn’t just asking about the literal fireworks, but also the memories they brought back.

Everyone who’d been over there or had personal experience with those who had always seemed to know.
She hesitated a moment before she nodded, as if wondering if she was crossing a line into unprofessional territory. It seemed to help that he’d asked her; he got the feeling that she’d never have raised it herself to him. Or anyone, really.

But she did nod, which Jack took as a sign that she was beginning to get used to the culture of the Phoenix, that odd blend of cool professionalism (or, in the case of some of them – including her – a warmer sort of professionalism) that they had to have, and the close bonds they all formed with each other, and the consequences of these bonds, bonds that they needed just as much as that professionalism, if not more.

It was a contrary and sometimes confusing and difficult line to walk, to say the least, and one that they diverged from relatively frequently, Jack was sure.

Still, it worked.

And if it ain’t broke, don’t fix it.

He gave her a sympathetic smile.

‘Time helps.’ She nodded, a little wryly – she would have heard that many times, from many people, he was sure. ‘And so does being around friends and/or family during the actual event. Noise-cancelling headphones, white noise of some kind, other distractions. A movie or something.’ He shrugged, tilting his head a little to the left. ‘Probably best to stick with kids’ movies.’ He stopped himself and made a face. ‘Sorry, you probably heard all of this before. Or read it.’

She nodded, a wan smile on her face.

‘Yes, but thanks, Jack.’

He smiled a little wider.

‘Just remember you aren’t alone, Beth. If you need to talk to someone…quite a lot of us have personal experience, and those who don’t…’ He shrugged. ‘Most of ‘em understand pretty well.’

After a pause, during which she looked down, then back up at him, her own smile widened a little too.

‘Thank you.’

Then, after another beat, that caring professionalism that she had around her patients reappeared and she pointed at the supplies and then at him, brows raised expectantly.

Jack just nodded easily, sipping at his Gatorade obediently. Beth smiled at him again, nodding approvingly, then picked up her bag and slipped out the door.

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PHOENIX JET

ON-ROUTE TO COLOMBIA

‘…He’ll buy an 80 inch flat-screen for the break room.’

‘And get vending machines for the basement floors.’

Riley rolled her eyes.
'What’s so annoying about catching the elevator up like three floors for a snack or a drink?'

Mac shrugged, while Bozer pursed his lips, tapping his chin in thought, then pointed at Riley.

‘Hey, sometimes you just really need a Snickers.’

Mac, Bozer and Riley all stared at each other for a moment, then chuckled. Thornton, sitting in the corner and reading a mission briefing, didn’t show much of a reaction to their hypothesising as to what Jack would do while in charge, but they all swore that a look of amusement flashed across her face with each increasingly-bizarre suggestion.

Smiling, Mac exchanged a glance with Bozer and Riley, both of whom were smirking. (They were taking this as evidence for Riley’s theory that Jack and Patricia would make an excellent couple – which he still thought was crazy.)

Shaking his head, Mac pulled a paperclip from his pocket and starting playing with it.

We like to joke around and tease Jack, but in all seriousness, we know he’s doing a great job as the Phoenix’s Acting Director of Operations.

It was annoying, but he did have a point when he was grumbling about oversight’s failure to ‘promote from within’ when they hired Matty.

Jack would be a perfectly competent, and honestly very good Director, if not for the fact that he would absolutely hate being Director and being stuck at HQ all the time, as he realized himself in Kazakhstan.

He’d hate not being able to watch our backs with his own eyes.

Mac glanced over at their boss, who appeared to be still reading.

Though, Thornton always manages to watch ours anyway, even if it’s in a different way.

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ISOLATED AIRSTRIP

AMAZONAS DEPARTMENT

(COLOMBIAN EQUIVALENT OF A STATE)

COLOMBIA

As they stepped off the plane, Thornton stared out at the jungle before them for a long moment, a look on her face that wasn’t so much inscrutable, but had so much in it (regret and sadness and longing and yearning and maybe a little love and a hint of a happy memory and so many other little hints) that it was indecipherable.

After that long moment, during which Mac, Riley and Bozer shared concerned looks (this was the country in which she’d lost her fiancé, after all), she spoke, her voice very soft and quiet and with just as much in it as her expression.

‘I haven’t been here in almost seventeen years.’

That glance between the three younger agents grew even more concerned, and it was Riley who
spoke up, a little hesitantly.

‘Will you be alright?’

She stared out into the distance for another long moment, then glanced back at the three of them for just as long, noting the concern and care in their eyes, and nodded.

‘The past is the past.’ The cool, professional look she so often wore slipped back onto her face, and she started walking away from the plane. ‘The mission comes first.’

With another glance at each other and a silent promise to keep an eye on their boss (to watch her back, like she watched theirs), Mac, Bozer and Riley followed.

SOMEBEWHERE IN THE JUNGLE
(MIDDLE OF NOWHERE)
AMAZONAS DEPARTMENT
COLOMBIA

‘Mac, your next project better be better insect repellent!’

Riley grumbled as she swatted another mosquito off her arm.

Bozer nodded and pointed at her as they hiked. (The roads were unreliable and they didn’t want to draw attention to themselves unless absolutely necessary– obviously, landing a jet couldn’t really be done all that covertly and they’d have to talk to the healthcare workers who were delivering the vaccines, but until then, it was best to keep this as covert as possible, even if it might ultimately prove futile.)

‘I second that, bro!’

Mac glanced at their boss, whom he was walking alongside. She gave a small smile and nodded.

‘It would be useful.’

He swatted another mosquito off his arm, thankful that the Phoenix had a very thorough vaccination regimen.

Well, at least Beth put sodium bicarbonate in the medical kit.

That should help with the itchiness.

But my next project is definitely going to be better insect repellent.

LEAST-ISOLATED ISOLATED VILLAGE
AMAZONAS DEPARTMENT
COLOMBIA
‘...You received a shipment of vaccines yesterday, right?’

Pablo, the head healthcare worker in the team distributing the vaccines, nodded as he talked with Thornton. (The four of them were pretending to be USAID workers tracking the vaccines because they had been contaminated with lead during the manufacturing process.)

‘Yes.’ He looked worried. ‘Is there something wrong with them?’

Mac responded, nodding.

‘We suspect they were contaminated with lead during manufacture.’ He shrugged helplessly. ‘We can’t be sure until we test them, but of course, we can’t let them be used. We’re here to take them back; we have replacements on the way.’

Riley continued.

‘We tried contacting you, but our communications network is on the fritz, or maybe yours is, but we just couldn’t get in touch…’

Pablo nodded very seriously.

‘Thank you for coming so far to notify us.’ He wrung his hands. ‘Unfortunately, the vaccines have already been distributed to the five other villages in this area, so retrieving them all is going to be difficult.’ The villages were moderately far-flung from each other and the roads between them poor. He started leading them into the hut that was serving as the headquarters for the healthcare workers. ‘But I can contact my team so that they do not use them.’

HEALTH WORKERS’ HEADQUARTERS

LEAST-ISOLATED ISOLATED VILLAGE

AMAZONAS DEPARTMENT

COLOMBIA

A couple of minutes later, Pablo took off his headphones and shook his head, his brow furrowed.

‘I do not know why, but I cannot communicate with any of my team either.’ He pointed to his computer. ‘There is no signal.’

Thornton, Mac, Riley and Bozer all exchanged a glance (they all had a bad feeling about this), then Mac addressed Pablo.

‘Mind if I take a look at the antenna?’

Riley continued.

‘And if I have a look at your laptop?’

He gestured at the two of them, then at the laptop.

‘Be my guests.’ He gestured outside and glanced at Mac. ‘Did you see the communications array when you were coming in?’
The blonde simply nodded, and jogged outside, his Swiss Army knife in hand.

Ten minutes later, Riley looked up from Pablo’s laptop, shaking her head. She’d run a thorough check, but nothing was coming up.

‘Whatever’s stopping communications, it’s not a software issue.’

She spoke just as Mac jogged back inside, looking very grim. He had a broken antenna in his left hand.

‘Yeah, definitely not.’ He held up the antenna. ‘It’s a hardware issue.’ His face looked grimmer as he made eye contact with Thornton. ‘Someone sabotaged the communications array.’

Thornton, Mac, Bozer and Riley stood in an arrangement a bit like a huddle, in the corner of the hut. Pablo had gone out to talk to a couple of his team, arranging for the retrieval of the contaminated vaccines that had been distributed.

‘Moreno has to have someone working for him in the village, or one or more of the health workers are in on it. Or both.’ Thornton’s eyes were dark and cold as she spoke. ‘We can’t trust anyone.’ All three younger agents nodded seriously, as their boss continued. ‘I’ll go with Pablo to retrieve the vaccines, you three stay here, catch the saboteur or saboteurs and repair the communications array.’ All three of them had the first instinct to protest, before realizing that their boss’s plan was the most sensible arrangement. In order to repair the communications array, Mac’s skills were needed, as were Riley’s in all likelihood. The same went for catching the saboteur, and it made more sense for Bozer to stay and help them with the two tasks. And Thornton was the most able of them all to defend herself without someone to watch her back. Their boss nodded as they came to that conclusion, then reached into her backpack and pulled out the sat-phone, handing it to Riley, who did open her mouth to protest at that action, but was cut off by Thornton shaking her head. ‘You may well need to contact the Phoenix.’ She held up her own phone. ‘And when Mac gets the comm system up and running again, you can patch me in.’ She crouched down and zipped up her backpack again, pocketing her phone, and stepped away a little, towards the door, before glancing back at them. ‘Be careful.’

Mac, Bozer and Riley glanced at one another for a moment (so much for watching her back, Bozer thought – though he, like Thornton, had absolute faith that Mac and Riley could have the communications array back up and running in no time, it just wasn’t quite the same as actually being there, something he’d become keenly aware of since he’d started going into the field – it made sitting in the lab back at the Phoenix just that little bit harder, and not because he missed the supposed glamour of field work), then at their boss, and Mac spoke for them all.

‘You too.’

With a nod and small smile, Thornton walked out of the hut to talk to Pablo.

Mac, Bozer and Riley glanced at each other again, and then Mac started examining the antenna more closely, as Riley sat down and opened her laptop.

‘…So there’s no security cameras, no traffic cams, no GPS, no digital trail we can trace…how in the world are we gonna catch the bad guys?’

Bozer paced through the hut, around Riley, who was on her laptop, getting into the census data on the village’s inhabitants that had been collected by the health workers, and Mac, who had brought
most of the broken communications array and a broken bicycle he’d purchased from a villager into
the hut and was currently doing something with the bicycle chain.

Bozer’s best friend looked up at him, a small, wry smirk on his face.

‘The old-fashioned way.’ The smirk widened a little. ‘Deduction and elimination.’

He made eye contact with Riley, who nodded and started typing.

‘I’m cutting out everyone under the age of fourteen, anyone who’s more than four months pregnant,
anyone over the age of seventy-five…’

Sabotaging the communications array would have required pretty significant agility that pregnant
women or elderly people would not possess. Similarly, it was highly unlikely that anyone under
fourteen would have the ability to sabotage the array, and furthermore, while it wasn’t improbable
that a child had been convinced (bribed, most likely) to do Moreno’s bidding, it was essentially
impossible that they were his only or main minion in the village.

Mac looked back down at the communications array, as Riley kept reducing their suspect list,
estimating what time the array had to go down based off when the last successful communication
occurred and when Pablo had tried and failed to contact his team. She then eliminated people who,
according to the metadata on the census forms, which had been filled out on a series of tablets, were
filling theirs in at that moment (timestamps could be relatively easily altered, but metadata was nigh
impossible).

The blonde pursed his lips as he stared at the half-rebuilt array before him.

A toaster would have been really, really useful right now, but beggars couldn’t be choosers, and
improvising was kind of his thing anyway…

With an internal sigh, he grabbed the handlebars of the bicycle.

Fifteen minutes later, Mac suddenly looked up, and before Bozer or Riley, engrossed in trying to
eliminate more suspects, could say anything, he grabbed their medical kit and pulled out the baking
soda and some Band Aids.

Bozer and Riley exchanged a glance, with an inkling of what he was about to do, and turned their
attention back to suspect elimination, as Mac gently sprinkled a rather inaccessible, hard-to-clean part
of the antenna with baking soda, going off a hunch.

A minute later, the blonde made a noise of triumph and held up a piece of Band Aid, which had a
fingerprint (or rather, most of one) on it.

Riley and Bozer grinned, and Bozer reached out to high-five Mac’s free hand.

‘Awesome, bro.’

Part of the healthcare workers’ census had involved collecting fingerprints. This was their best lead
for finding the saboteur.

Riley crossed her arms, pursing her lips.

‘We’re not using a database like the ones back home, writing a program to match fingerprints is
going to take time, and I’ve already got to write one to patch Thornton in…’

Bozer rubbed his hands together and smirked. He had a good eye, an eye for detail, an artist’s eye. He was good with visual stuff, and had watched heaps of CSI. This was right up his alley.

‘Well, doing this old school then.’ He held a hand out expectantly to Mac, who smiled and handed Bozer the fingerprint, then his Swiss Army knife a moment later, magnifying glass already at the ready. Bozer looked rather inappropriately excited. ‘I’ve always wanted to do this!’

Mac and Riley exchanged a glance and a smile, and shook their heads, before the hacker seized one of the healthcare worker’s tablets, and brought up the fingerprints of their non-eliminated suspects on it.

Bozer eagerly got to work.

PHOENIX FOUNDATION HEADQUARTERS

SOMEWHERE IN LA

‘Jack?’

Matty looked rather surprised to see the former CIA agent lounging on the couch in the war room, eating saltine crackers and drinking a bottle of water.

Jack grinned at her (he hadn’t thrown up in three hours and was feeling much better; besides, it was rare to see Matty the Hun surprised).

‘Hey, Matty.’ His twice-former boss made a face of disgust as he sprayed cracker crumbs everywhere, having neglected to cover his mouth. ‘What’s up?’

Matty raised an eyebrow at him, crossing her arms.

‘Andi put me through to the Acting Director…and I found out it’s you, that’s what’s up. Thornton left you in charge?’

Jack looked affronted, noting that Andi clearly also had a pretty wicked sense of humour (he hadn’t really expected that of her, but then again, he hadn’t believed Patty could have one either, so…).

‘Hey, I’m a responsible agent!’ That was punctuated by him attempting to pick up the cracker crumbs from the floor, and giving up halfway through. ‘I can so be a good Acting Director!’

Matty gave a snort of laughter, shaking her head.

‘You sent me an empty cheese Danish box after you got over your gastro.’

The last word was punctuated by air-quotes. Gastro had been the cover story for Jack and Patricia being sick with leptospirosis for all of their civilian friends.

Jack looked even more affronted.

‘Didn’t anyone ever tell you it’s the thought that counts, Matty?’

She made a face, completely astounded, putting her hands on her hips.
'What is the thought in an empty cheese Danish box?' Jack crossed his arms stubbornly, and Matty kept staring him down. After a moment, she smiled, shaking her head (Jack was never going to buy her that cheese Danish he owed her, and that was fine with Matty – it gave her something to yell at him about if he wound up nearly dying again, after all), and Jack smiled back, leaning back in his seat with a saltine cracker hanging out of his mouth. Then, Matty’s face grew serious as she got down to the business of her call. ‘We found another mole in Homeland, and Viv and Lil think we’ve got one in NCIS’s Southwest office…’

VERY ISOLATED VILLAGE

AMAZONAS DEPARTMENT

COLOMBIA

Thornton leaned against the tailgate of the truck as Pablo conversed with one of his team, the box of contaminated vaccines in his hands.

She seemed casual, relaxed, but was anything but.

She was on high alert and watching everything around her, eagle-eyed.

It wasn’t only because she was the best able to defend herself alone, or because Mac and Riley’s skill-sets were needed at the first village, that she’d decided she’d go with Pablo and another member of his team to retrieve the vaccines.

It was also because she had the best eyes for this sort of thing.

She was still the best covert operative in the business, after all.

(She did consider, from time to time, that if Riley had started younger and wasn’t so keen to go completely straight – to let go of her slightly dubious past so completely – and hadn’t fallen in with Jack and Mac and Bozer, the younger woman might have had the potential to match her, or even best her. Similarly, if Mac wasn’t so inherently guileless and noble, and wasn’t, still, even now - despite being one of her best agents – more soldier than spy, with his mind and his unique skill-set, he could have been better than her.)

(She tried very hard not to consider that she’d once thought Nikki could have been her successor to that title, that she had even taught her like a protégé. In some ways, with what she’d pulled off, Nikki had probably proved that she’d been deserving of that faith – even if all other faith in her had been utterly misplaced.)

Pablo finished his conversation, seemingly unaware of her eyes on him, and handed her the box of vaccines. Thornton carefully checked that all were present and accounted for, and finding nothing suspicious, put them into the Esky for storage.

Pablo smiled at her as they got back into the truck to head to the next village, he climbing into the cab, she into the truck bed, and she gave a small smile and nod back, but if he’d known her, he’d have known it didn’t reach her eyes.

Thornton trusted very few people.

Patricia trusted even fewer.
This man seemed like an upstanding citizen of his country, trying to help his fellow countrymen, but he set something off inside her. Some alarm of sorts.

She was clever enough and had been in the game long enough to know that whatever it was, it might be completely unrelated to the matter at hand.

She’d seen enough people corrupted by something or the other. Had felt its effects, up close and personal, too.

Money, power, lust.

He knew the area. If he was Moreno’s man, there might be reinforcements nearby. Now was not the time to move.

Now was the time to watch.

Spying involved a lot of watching and waiting for that precise moment to strike.

She’d been doing this for years, and she was very, very patient.

Thornton leaned back a little in her seat, seeming to relax a little.

Her mind did anything but.

**HEALTH WORKERS’ HEADQUARTERS**

**LEAST-ISOLATED ISOLATED VILLAGE**

**AMAZONAS DEPARTMENT**

**COLOMBIA**

Mac slipped back inside the hut, with a nod at Bozer and Riley.

‘The communications array is back up.’

Riley nodded and executed the script she’d written earlier to patch Thornton in.

When it finished, she picked up her phone and called their boss.

There was no response.

She tried again.

Again, no response.

Mac, Riley and Bozer exchanged a look that reflected the very unpleasant feeling settling in their guts.

It was Riley who verbalized what they were all thinking.

‘The only logical explanation is that her signal’s being jammed.’

And that had implications that none of them needed to express. After all, somebody had to be near
her to be jamming her signal.

Mac swore internally.

*So much for watching her back.*

Fifteen minutes later, Bozer whooped and jumped up.

‘Got him!’

Mac and Riley, who’d been trying to work out a way, *any* way (if he thought it’d work, Mac would have happily built a fire and sent smoke signals), to contact Thornton, both turned to him.

Bozer turned the tablet he’d been using to face the other two, as his expression turned serious again.

‘Jorge Diaz. Head of the village.’ Bozer nodded at the expressions on Mac’s and Riley’s faces. ‘Yeah, power corrupts, doesn’t it?’

Mac sighed, nodding in agreement, then pulled a paperclip from his pocket.

‘Well, at least I’ve got a good idea for the takedown…’

‘…We need your help, Mr Diaz. We’re hoping you can help us narrow down who sabotaged the communications system…’

Riley led Jorge Diaz into the hut, the man completely unaware of what was about to happen to him (at the end of the day, Riley was young, female and pretty, and with the right posture and speech, could pull off being not very intimidating or threatening in the slightest relatively well).

Once the man was inside the hut and out of view of outside, Mac acted quickly, and before he could react, Jorge Diaz had an arm firmly around his throat and something that felt like the tip of a knife pricking at it.

‘Don’t move. Don’t make a sound.’ Mac’s voice was cold and calm. Jorge Diaz swallowed and nodded as best as he could, as Bozer bound his hands using his belt. Mac’s arm tightened around his neck fractionally. ‘Is there anyone else in the village working for Moreno?’

The man hesitated for a moment, then responded when he felt that prick again.

‘No.’

‘The health workers. Anyone of them work for Moreno?’

Diaz struggled to shake his head.

‘I…I don’t know. I swear.’ He swallowed. ‘Please don’t kill me…’

Mac made eye contact with Bozer and Riley, a silent conversation passing between the three of them in their eyes and tiny nods.

They all believed that Jorge Diaz was telling the truth.

Bozer grabbed a length of gauze from their medical kit, and gagged the man as best as he could. Mac eased the village head into a sitting position, releasing his neck, then checked the gag to make sure it
was effective but not too painful or limiting Diaz’s breathing, and nodded, satisfied.

Crouching beside the man, Mac looked him dead in the eye.

‘We won’t kill you.’ He tucked the nail file in his Swiss Army knife back into place, and pocketed it. ‘Never would have.’

Diaz relaxed noticeably, and all three exchanged a glance.

*Moreno is a ruthless man.*

*A cruel man.*

*He’s willing to put the lives of innocent children at risk, make them suffer and quite possibly die, to get to his rival, after all.*

*Let’s just say… I can’t possibly imagine him having a good healthcare plan or a retirement package or sick leave for his employees.*

*Not at all.*

**10 MILES FROM A VERY, VERY ISOLATED VILLAGE**

**(MIDDLE OF THE JUNGLE)**

**(THAT IS, MIDDLE OF NOWHERE)**

**AMAZONAS DEPARTMENT**

**COLOMBIA**

She’d known that something was going to happen.

There was no way it’d take Mac and Riley so long to fix the communications array and patch her in. And they knew to contact her as soon as they did.

Someone, therefore, was jamming her communications.

Her money, if she was the gambling type, would be on Pablo, because of that feeling she’d had ever since the second village, a feeling that had only escalated as the day wore on.

She had been very tempted, once they’d recovered the last of the vaccines, to make her move, but simply couldn’t in the middle of the village.

No opportunity had presented itself yet, but she was waiting.

And as ready as one ever could be for this sort of thing.

The truck stopped, and her adrenaline levels rose, though one would never know it to look at her. A very bad feeling settled in her gut, telling her that she’d waited too long to make her move (the cold, purely rational part of her knew that she’d had no other chance to make her move), and that if this went south…well, if this went south, she was never coming back to this country again. She drew her gun.
Pablo got out of the cab of the truck (Thornton was sitting in the truck bed, with the Esky of vaccines), dragging the young healthcare worker who’d accompanied them, Julia, with him, holding a gun to her head. The young woman was scared and shocked and a little teary-eyed.

(Thornton had known he was armed; he’d shown her himself as they’d left the very first village, explaining it was for protection purposes. His act, she had to admit, was quite convincing.)

The man smirked at her, darkly, and it changed his entire, previously-friendly face, as she levelled his gun on him.

‘Now, now, do not be hasty.’ He pouted, the expression just as dark as the smirk. ‘You would not want sweet Julia to get hurt, would you?’

Thornton didn’t move further, but didn’t drop her gun either, relying on her finely-tuned instincts to tell her how far she could push.

Those instincts told her that Pablo didn’t particularly want to kill Julia…and that he also wanted to do some bragging. She could hold a gun on him without consequence…for now.

Instead, she gestured to him with her head, eyes dark and cold and set.

‘You’re Moreno’s. But you took back the vaccines. Foiled your own boss’s plan.’

She was quite sure why he’d allowed that, but keeping him talking would only help her. Her suspicions were confirmed when he smirked and laughed.

‘An American government agent, even one for USAID, is worth much more! My boss would reward me for you!’ He raised an eyebrow. ‘Particularly since you are clearly a boss of some kind yourself…and I do not think that you are really USAID, not with how you hold that.’ He gestured to her gun with his head. ‘Now, put that down, and come here quietly and I will let Julia go…’

She hesitated for a moment (she had a decision to make, and very little time to do it), gun still held up to his head level, and slowly started lowering it, posture and face falling ever-so-slightly, defeated, but still proud, speaking as she did so.

‘Just don’t hurt-‘

Quick as a flash, as her gun reached his chest level, she pulled the trigger.

A second later, Pablo fell to the ground, shot clean through the heart, his gun falling to his side.

Thornton jumped down off the truck bed, and kicked his gun away, though she was quite sure he was dead (that was something to process later – she knew she’d had no other choice, realistically, but it’d been a long time since she’d killed and though she’d still get to sleep at night without too much difficulty, it was never something one really got used to – at least, she hoped it wasn’t and hoped that she never would if it was), before turning to the young woman, standing there, shaking and stained with blood that wasn’t her own.

(Thornton, hesitantly, reached out and put a hand on her shoulder. She was not good at this, never had been, and had gotten worse, she would admit, since almost-seventeen years ago, after her last trip to Colombia, when she’d closed off her heart.

(Some of her agents had managed to worm their way inside anyway.)

Julia’s breathing steadied a little at the gesture, and Thornton spoke, as softly and gently as she could
manage.

'It’s alright.’ Julia nodded slowly, jerkily, and the Phoenix’s Director’s hand tightened on her shoulder a little. ‘It’s alright.’

When the young woman seemed mostly steady on her feet and had calmed a little, Thornton, her hand still on her shoulder, guided her back into the truck’s cab, and set about searching for the signal jammer.

She located it, and with a vehemence that surprised her, destroyed it.

Almost immediately, her phone rang, and she pulled it out of her pocket, noting that she had many missed calls and text messages, and answered.

‘…I’m alright, Riley…’

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**PHOENIX JET**

**ON-ROUTE TO LA**

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As Mac and Bozer slept, Mac whiffling and Bozer scratching unconsciously at a mosquito bite on his arm, Riley made eye contact with her boss, the two of them staring at each other for a long moment.

Then, a little hesitantly, Riley spoke.

‘Are you…are you really alright?’

It was the first time she’d been back to Colombia since that horrible, fateful mission, and she’d had to kill Pablo.

Riley knew that if she’d been through that, she wouldn’t be okay.

Patricia looked into the distance for a long, long moment, long enough that Riley wondered that maybe she should never have asked, but then she turned back and made eye contact with the young hacker, speaking with a soft voice.

‘I will be.’ She gave a slightly awkward half-shrug, looking away, then back at Riley, her voice growing even softer. ‘The past is a part of you. You learn to live with it.’

Riley nodded. She understood that well. As much as she wished to sometimes, she couldn’t forget her past or pretend it didn’t happen. Then, she responded, her voice just as soft as Patricia’s had been.

‘But the past doesn’t have to define you. You don’t need to dwell on it forever.’

Patricia stared at her again for a long moment, and Riley briefly wondered if she’d said the wrong thing (though her intuition told her she’d absolutely said the right thing), then, slowly, a small, wan, yet grateful smile grew on her face.

‘No, I guess you don’t.’ The smile widened ever-so-slightly. ‘The present and the future always seem to manage to shove their way in.’
Mac ducked his head into the infirmary and knocked lightly on the open door.

Beth, who was unpacking a box and rearranging supplies (the infirmary was currently devoid of patients), looked up and examined him for signs of injury or illness quickly. When she found none, she smiled up at him.

‘Welcome back, MacGyver. How was Colombia?’

He made a face and resisted the urge to scratch at his many mosquito bites (though, the sodium bicarbonate had helped).

‘Itchy.’

Her smile widened a little, becoming both amused and sympathetic, and she bent down and grabbed something from the newly-opened box at her feet, and then threw the tube she pulled out to him.

Mac caught it and looked at the label and chuckled. It was anti-itch cream. Beth looked up at him apologetically.

‘I’m sorry I couldn’t send any in the medical kit for you guys, we’ve had a lot of missions to tropical locations lately, and we were out, which would never have happened if my order hadn’t been delayed by two weeks.’ She looked rather annoyed at that, and gestured to the box at her feet. ‘It just got here.’

Mac simply smiled, making a hand gesture as if to say it doesn’t matter.

‘It’s not your fault, and thanks for sending the bicarb instead, it helped.’ His expression turned a bit more wry. ‘Probably more than you thought it would.’ She smiled back, and he raised the tube in a sort-of cheers gesture. ‘And thanks for this; I’ll make sure the others use it too; no need for you to hand a tube out to all of them, we can share.’ He got out of the doorway, walking further into the infirmary and closer to her. ‘And thanks for looking after Jack.’

She smiled wryly and gave a little shrug.

‘Well, it is literally my job description.’

He, too, shrugged, smiling right back.

‘That doesn’t mean you don’t deserve thanks, Beth.’

(He never called her Dr Taylor, or Doc, never had since they’d met. For some reason, it didn’t feel right. Beth did.)

Her smile widened, clear gratefulness in it, then she gestured at the anti-itch cream, then the door.

‘Go home, get some rest. Use that anti-itch cream, if you start feeling ill in any way, shape or form, come see me or contact me immediately. Pass that message on to Riley, Bozer and Thornton, please, tropical diseases are extremely unpleasant…’
Mac smiled, rather unconsciously, as the little doctor herded him out of the infirmary.

MACGYVER’S RESIDENCE

LA

That night, as the five of them were sitting by the fire pit, Patricia raised her beer in Jack’s direction.

‘You did well as Acting Director.’

Jack puffed up in pride, grinning.

‘Thanks, Patty.’ He smirked. ‘You better watch out; I’ll be coming for your job!’ Then, a moment later, he shook his head, his eyes almost-comically wide as he stared at her. ‘I don’t know how you do it, Patty. The sitting around and waiting, the paperwork, the meetings, that helpless feeling…’ He looked very imploringly at her. ‘Don’t make me Acting Director again, please.’

Patricia looked like she was actually going to laugh for a moment, then shook her head with a very amused smile.

‘Unless there is absolutely no one else suitable available…I promise, Jack.’

Mac shook his head as Jack slumped forwards in relief.

I am quite sure that Jack is being a drama queen.

He can be very dramatic from time to time.

Riley theorises that he missed his calling and really should have been an actor.

Considering his undercover…personalities…I think she has a very good point.

Anyway, Jack doesn’t belong in the Director’s chair.

He belongs in the field.

And I am more grateful than I could ever say that he’s never going to leave us for supposedly bigger and better and brighter things.

He could, but he won’t.

And that’s what I’m grateful for.

Chapter End Notes

Yay? Nay? Did you like Thornton and Jack’s sort-of role swap and bossy-doctor Beth? What did you think about Mac, Riley and Bozer being protective of Thornton? (I thought that the role-swap from the usual would be interesting to explore…)

It is indeed possible to accidentally proposition someone while ordering dumplings in Mandarin – my parents have a funny story about one of their friends accidentally doing
that. Jack and Mac’s bathroom conversation continues the noble NCIS tradition of bathroom conversations. In case you didn’t know, you can mix sodium bicarbonate (baking soda) with water to make a paste and apply that to mosquito bites – it really helps with the itching! (In my personal experience, anti-itch cream is not very useful, but let’s all pretend Beth’s got better anti-itch cream, okay?)

I know we’ve had two episodes in a row now where Mac’s gone quite menacing/pretended to be a lot crueller than he is. Of course, Mac is a nice guy (which is why in both cases, there was never any risk to the lives of those involved – he just bluffed). Obviously, these actions do weigh on Mac, but I also think that he’s capable of doing them to protect people (in these cases, an innocent woman and her kids, and a lot of equally-innocent Colombian children – plus Thornton, who’s family); I think we saw him do similar when he went all Murdoc on that engineer in Hole Puncher (though he was clearly very haunted by the experience), and also to the terrorist in the embassy in Chisel. I hope that makes sense and seems in-character to you guys!

Next episode: 2.16, Stiletto. An Air Force Colonel vanishes and her husband is murdered. The murder weapon? A Louboutin from her shoe collection. It looks like an open-and-shut, albeit interesting, case, but things are never quite as they seem…
An Air Force Colonel vanishes and her husband is murdered. The murder weapon? A Louboutin from her shoe collection. It looks like an open-and-shut, albeit interesting, case, but things are never quite as they seem…

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

MACGYVER’S RESIDENCE

LA

‘…He’s a robot, Jack. He can’t breathe.’

Jack made a face at his partner, who was telling Jack all about how he and Beth had finally completed and tested a successful artificial lung system for Sparky to enable him to perform CPR.

‘But you said you put lungs in him?’ Jack jabbed at Mac with a finger. ‘And lungs are what we use to breathe.’

Jack sounded a little smug about that. Riley rolled her eyes and Bozer snorted, while Mac sighed and continued.

‘They’re artificial lungs. They enable Sparky to perform CPR, but they don’t enable him to breathe. He doesn’t need to.’

Riley reached out and slapped Mac’s arm lightly, as Jack’s brow furrowed and he opened his mouth to retort again.

‘I think it’s time to give up, Mac.’

I hate giving up.

But…Riley’s not wrong.

Just then, there was a perfunctory knock on the door, and it opened to reveal Matty, who was holding a large box and smiling. She walked out towards the deck.

‘I bring pie from Mama.’

Jack, who was sitting nearest the door, looked wounded.

‘You went to visit Mama without us, Matty? How could you?’

Matty rolled her eyes.

‘Do you want pie or not?’ That was obviously a rhetorical question; the answer was always I want
pie, after all. ‘And it was a slightly-unexpected encounter on a work trip.’ She gave a little smirk. ‘The Coltons are excellent mole hunters.’ As Matty handed off the pie to Bozer to dish up, and Bozer headed into the kitchen, Riley following to give him a hand, she jabbed a finger at Jack’s chest. ‘Besides, like she was so won over by your charm last time.’ Matty’s tone of voice was quite snarky.

Jack smirked right back.

‘Well, Jessie was definitely won over by my Texan charm.’

Matty snorted and was about to retort again (Mac was leaning back a little and enjoying the show, and Patricia was watching the two of them with amusement in her eyes), when Bozer pressed a piece of pie into her hands (he and Riley were really fast at this sort of thing), while Riley handed Jack his own slice.

As Mac took his own slice of pie and dug into it enthusiastically, he smiled and shook his head.

There were few things that could stop Matty and Jack when they got going.

But pie, especially Mama Colton’s pie, was definitely one of them.

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**PHOENIX JET**

**SOMewhere OVER IDAHO**

**ON-ROUTE TO LA**

‘…I think I still have sand in my shoes.’ Jack made a face and briefly considered taking off his shoes to tip out the sand, but figured that the people who cleaned the plane would not be happy about that, so kept them on, despite that uncomfortable feeling. Then, he shrugged. ‘At least no sunburn this time. Better than our last trip to Miami, eh, brother?’

He gestured to Mac, who was chewing on a muesli bar and reading a copy of *New Scientist* that he’d had stashed in his go-bag.

Mac swallowed his mouthful of muesli bar and nodded wryly, as Bozer chuckled and nudged Riley.

‘Seriously, you should have seen Mac explaining away why he looked like a lobster.’ Bozer’s brow furrowed. ‘Man, I can’t believe I never worked it out. In hindsight, it was seriously obvious.’

Riley, smiling, patted Bozer on the shoulder comforting, as Mac took another bite of his muesli bar and returned to the very interesting article he’d been reading.

He’d barely gotten through the rest of the page before there was a ringing sound emanating from Riley’s laptop, signalling a video call.

Riley answered it, getting up and setting down her laptop on the couch, and they all congregated around it, as Thornton’s face appeared on the screen.

‘Jack, Mac, Riley, Bozer, I’m sorry, but I’m sending you all on another mission. You’re the nearest team with the relevant skill-set, and this is urgent.’ She looked genuinely apologetic, as they all gave little groans (they were tired; Miami hadn’t been a crazy mission – not like the time that Mac and Jack had gone home looking like lobsters – but it hadn’t been easy, their missions never were,
Despite being a surveillance mission. Then, her usual all-business look took over her face, as they all let go of their exhaustion and focused. A photo of a woman, in her late forties with red hair pulled into a bun and in an Air Force uniform, appeared on the screen. ‘This is Colonel Alice MacGregor. Two hours ago, her husband was found dead and she disappeared completely.’ Thornton’s expression grew even more serious. ‘Colonel MacGregor works on highly classified projects in Area 51 and is privy to highly-classified information, so her husband’s death and her disappearance are highly suspicious and require a compartmentalized, high-security-clearance investigation.’ They all nodded, and Thornton continued. ‘You’ll be landing in Vegas in less than half an hour, and Andi has just sent everything we have to you.’ She looked a little apologetic again. ‘When this is over, I’ll pull you all off the roster for at least five days.’ A wry little smile fluttered across her face. ‘Or Doc will overrule me and pull you off duty on medical grounds.’ She turned more serious again. ‘This may be a domestic dispute gone wrong, or we could be talking about the leak of highly-classified information threatening our national security. Good luck, be alert.’

They all nodded seriously, as Thornton hung up, and Riley pulled up the information Andi had emailed through to her.

‘Colonel MacGregor and her husband Mitchell MacGregor, a high-level accounts manager with the Bellagio, live on the edge of Vegas. They have no children, and have been married for almost twenty years…’

As they all prepared for landing, Bozer suddenly had a realization and turned to his three teammates with an eager grin, waggling his eyebrows.

‘We might get to find out what really happens in Area 51!’

Riley and Mac glanced at each other as Bozer’s enthusiasm spread to Jack, fond exasperation clear on their faces.

Mac pulled a paperclip from his pocket and started re-shaping it as he spoke.

‘They test classified aircraft in Area 51, Boze.’

Jack pointed at him.

‘Just what the government wants you to think, brother.’

Mac shook his head, and in response, tossed a paperclip UFO at his partner.

‘That’s the closest to seeing a UFO we’re going to get, Jack.’

MACGREGORS’ RESIDENCE

LAS VEGAS

With a last nod at local law enforcement, they stepped inside the house.

As per instructions, the local police hadn’t altered the scene, beyond to check that Mr MacGregor was actually deceased, and had cleared out.

Mr MacGregor’s body was upstairs, on the landing that the bedrooms were off.
Mac crouched down to examine the body, as Riley, downstairs, set up her laptop to start a digital search. Bozer, upstairs, slipped into the MacGregors’ office, putting on a pair of gloves as he did so, looking for USBs or hard drives that Riley could analyse.

Jack crouched down by his partner, who was examining the stab wound in Mr MacGregor’s chest very closely with a curious, somewhat confused expression. Jack, too, examined the body and looked around, then spoke, knowing that Mac was capable of both listening and examining the stab wound at the same time.

‘So we’ve got minimal signs of a struggle, no sign of breaking-and-entering, absolutely nothing to suggest a robbery…’ Jack bent to examine Mr MacGregor’s knuckles. ‘Only real minor defensive wounds…’ He shrugged. ‘It looks to me that the wife did it.’ He shrugged again. ‘That’d explain her running too. And she’s Air Force, he’s got to have like six inches and fifty pounds on her, but she’d be able to take him down, he’s just an office drone…’

From downstairs, Riley called up at them.

‘One problem in that theory, Jack. There’s no sign of any relationship issues between the two of them.’

Bozer stuck his head out of the office, made eye contact with Jack, then called back downstairs.

‘Alien possession, Riley!’

Riley’s retort was completely incredulous, as Mac snorted.

‘Aliens made her do it?’

Bozer nodded and pointed at his best friend.

‘If you eliminate the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth.’

Mac shook his head, raising an eyebrow at Bozer.

‘We haven’t eliminated anything impossible yet, Boze.’ His brow furrowed as he glanced back at the stab wound again. None of the MacGregors’ knives were missing; he’d glanced over at the knife block in their open-plan kitchen when they’d passed it earlier. Besides, the stab wound didn’t match a kitchen knife, and it didn’t match any of the standard issue military knives either. Then, as his eyes fell on a series of photos of the MacGregors that were hanging on the wall in the landing, Mac’s I’ve-got-an-idea expression appeared on his face, and he got up and hurried into the master bedroom, followed closely by Jack.

Riley called up as they moved.

‘Guys, the security cameras were deactivated. Looks like it was a homeowner deactivation as well… maybe Colonel MacGregor did do it.’

Jack stuck his head out of the master bedroom and called downstairs.

‘Thanks, Riles.’

Then, he turned back to his partner, who’d suddenly disappeared behind an open door.

‘Brother, what are you looking for?’ Jack ducked through the doorway as well. ‘Woah…that’s a lot of shoes.’
Mac simply nodded. The room (and it really was a room, not just a master closet or something) was full of shelves of high heels. It appeared that Colonel MacGregor was a shoe fanatic, which had been reflected in the photos of her and her husband – she was wearing a different pair in every photo.

Jack let out a low whistle as he glanced over the shelves.

‘Manolo Blahniks, Louis Vuittons, Alexander McQueens, Jimmy Choos…man, she’s got expensive taste.’

Mac indicated a cluster of shoes with red soles, placed directly in front of the doorway, pride of place.

‘And a fondness for Louboutins, it appears.’

Riley and Bozer, who’d just stuck their heads through the doorway as Jack had started talking about the shoes, stared incredulously at the two of them. Riley spoke, her brows raised.

‘How in the world do you two know about women’s shoes?’

Jack gave a little smirk.

‘I once spent two months undercover as a ladies’ shoe salesman in NYC.’

Mac glanced at the racks of Louboutins for a moment, then spoke a little hesitantly, gesturing towards the red-soled shoes.

‘Nikki had a couple of pairs.’

Jack glanced at him, a furrow in his brow.

‘Really? Never saw her wear them.’

Mac hesitated another moment, and Jack was pretty sure his partner’s ears, mostly concealed under his hair, had gone red.

‘They were for…uh…special occasions.’ Mac turned away and started examining the shoes more closely, signalling an end to the conversation. Jack, Riley and Bozer exchanged a glance and a smile (and a double-thumbs-up, on Bozer’s part). Mac really had made progress, even if they might now know a bit more about his relationship with Nikki than any of them had ever wanted to know. Meanwhile, Mac muttered half to himself behind them. ‘They’re organized by brand, then style and colour…spacing is pedantically even…’ He came to the shelves of Louboutins. ‘This isn’t right. This pair shouldn’t go here, and the spacing is too great…’ He reached out with his gloved hands and rearranged the shoes, putting them into the correct order and with the correct spacing. There was an empty gap left, just enough for one pair of shoes. There were two identical pairs of stilettos on either side of the gap, one in black and one in nude. Mac picked up one of the black heels, and walked back out to Mr MacGregor’s body, examining the stiletto heel and then the stab wound more closely.

Jack glanced between his partner, the shoe in his hand left hand, and the dead body on the floor.

‘You aren’t seriously thinking he was stabbed with that, are you, brother?’

Mac looked up at his partner, pulling out his phone as he did so with his right hand.

‘I am, Jack. Stiletto heels were named after the dagger, and genuine ones, like this—’ He held up the shoe. ‘—have a solid metal stem. They concentrate a lot of force in a very small area, which exerts a
lot of pressure; more pressure than under an elephant’s feet. I’m pretty sure you can stab somebody with a stiletto heel, but I’m getting a second opinion.’

Mac dialled one of the numbers he had saved into his phone, putting it on speaker and on video, as Jack, Riley and Bozer clustered around him and the phone.

A moment later, Beth appeared on Mac’s phone, and after a moment of being a little surprised at the call, she started looking the four of them over for injury, despite the fact that she couldn’t see very much of them at all.

‘Hi, MacGyver, Jack, Bozer, Riley. Are you-

Jack smiled and waved, rather tempted to exchange a significant look with Bozer and Riley (of late, he’d seen the two of them exchange significant looks from time to time when they were sure Mac – or Beth - wasn’t looking, mostly when they were heading off to the labs with them to work on Sparky, or coming back from that – he didn’t know why they exchanged significant looks the rest of the time, but he’d work it out eventually), but managing to stop himself.

‘-Hey, Doc. No need to worry, we ain’t hurt. Mac just wants to ask you something; he needs your opinion, apparently.’

If there was a hint of a smirk on his face, Jack would deny it until his dying day.

He was still firmly convinced that Mac had a type.

He was also still firmly convinced that Beth was definitely Mac’s type.

He was, however, no longer convinced that that was a bad thing. He hadn’t really thought it was for months now.

In fact, of late, he was thinking that it was a very good thing.

Maybe he should buy Patty some soft-centred, dark Belgian chocolates, as a sort-of apology and a sort-of thank you, a you-did-good sort of thing.

Mac ignored his partner and held up the high heel instead.

‘Beth, do you think that it’s possible to stab somebody with a stiletto heel?’

She pursed her lips.

‘One with a solid metal stem?’ Mac simply nodded. ‘There’s a lot of variables to consider, MacGyver. Angle, velocity, force behind it, heel length and thinness, getting the right spot…so many factors influence whether you’d get significant sharp force trauma…’

Mac nodded with a sigh.

‘Yeah, that’s why I want a second opinion.’ He glanced at the heel again, then back at the Phoenix’s doctor. ‘Assuming ideal angle, positioning and force, would you say yes or no?’

Beth considered, thinking, for a moment, tilting her head to the side and fixating her eyes on the Louboutin.

‘Assuming that, yes, with the caveat that I’m sure it’d take an extraordinary amount of skill and luck to achieve that.’
Mac nodded.

‘Agreed.’

He smiled at her, a gesture that she returned as she spoke.

‘I can run some experiments if you need? I can borrow some stilettos from wardrobe, and I can get hold of some pork or possibly even a human analogue?’

Mac shook his head with a smile, and, they all noted, with more than a hint of interest in his eyes (Bozer was pretty sure he’d wake up in the middle of the night sometime soon and find his roommate stabbing pieces of pork with women’s shoes that he’d gotten from somewhere).

‘We’re on a tight timeline, and I don’t think it’s necessary.’ She nodded in understanding, as Mac continued. ‘Thanks, Beth.’

With a last nod and a smile, she hung up, and Mac pocketed his phone, lost in thought again. After a moment of staring at Mr MacGregor’s body and the Louboutin, he glanced up at Jack, Riley and Bozer.

‘I don’t think that Colonel MacGregor killed her husband.’ He indicated the shoe he still held in his left hand. ‘Why would a woman who loves her shoes and is clearly fastidious about keeping them clean-’ Every pair of her shoes was meticulously spotless.-’stab her husband with one of her most precious heels, particularly since she had access to a large number of other weapons?’

Just inside the master bedroom was a baseball bat, which probably belonged to Mr MacGregor, who was a big baseball fan, according to the photos on the wall. There was a heavy stone statuette on the table on the landing. Downstairs was a whole block of knives, and Colonel MacGregor might even have been armed and could probably even kill her husband with her bare hands, being so experienced in the military.

There are people who are really obsessed with their shoes, be those sneakers or high heels, and go to extreme lengths to keep them clean.

Including by not actually wearing them.

Given the whole purpose of shoes, I don’t get it.

…Okay, I admit to kind of getting it regarding the high heels.

Not so much the sneakers.

But I’m not going to complain about people’s idiosyncrasies if it’s going to help us solve a murder and prevent what I’m convinced is the kidnapping of an Air Force Colonel and the theft of highly classified information.

The other three all considered that for a moment, seeing Mac’s point.

Colonel MacGregor worked in Area 51 and was privy to highly-classified military intelligence, the kind that threatened US national security if it were stolen, even if they didn’t even know any more than that.

It was that compartmentalized.

That classified.
Worth killing and kidnapping over for some.

But they all knew there were no signs of breaking-and-entering, and the security cameras appeared to have been turned off by one of the MacGregors…

Mac must have known exactly what they were thinking, because he gestured to the door, then looked back up at them.

‘I can think of at least seven ways to break in without making it look like you were breaking in.’ He turned to Riley. ‘Can you think of a way to switch off the cameras while making it look like one of the MacGregors did it?’

Riley thought for a moment, then nodded.

‘Yeah, but it’d be really hard.’ She shifted her weight to her left leg. ‘Only someone with serious skills could pull it off.’

Jack swore and crossed his arms.

‘So we’re dealing with pros. Real pros.’

Mac nodded.

‘Unfortunately, that’s what it looks like.’

Jack sighed and rubbed the back of his neck.

‘Great. Patty better keep that promise.’

Fifteen minutes later, as they combed the house for clues that might let them identify who these pros were, or where they’d gone with Colonel McGregor or where they’d come from, anything, Riley’s computer made that ringing sound again, signalling a video call, and calling Mac and Jack down from downstairs, Riley answered as they all congregated around the dining table.

Thornton’s face appeared, serious and grim. (They’d called to update her on the situation fifteen minutes ago, and she said she’d call back when the Phoenix found something – it appeared that the something had been found.)

‘We’ve had a sudden spike in chatter about selling US black project secrets.’ They all nodded, their theory all but confirmed, and Thornton continued. ‘Phoenix techs have traced most of it back to the MGM Grand in Vegas. We assume the source is in one of the rooms, but we can’t determine which. Riley?’

The hacker nodded.

‘I need to be closer, but I can pinpoint it.’

Thornton nodded as if she’d expected that, then addressed them all.

‘We’re organizing a room for you at the MGM, and we’re sending you appropriate attire.’

She hung up with a last nod, and Jack turned to the three younger agents with a smirk.

‘Well, it ain’t a mission in Vegas without a trip to a casino.’
HOTEL SUITE
MGM GRAND
LAS VEGAS

As Mac set up a security system (Jack was already dreading the expense reports) and Riley got to work doing her computer magic that nobody else really understood (though she was teaching Bozer, he was never going to be anywhere as good as she was), Jack and Bozer unpacked the clothes hidden in the room service cart that Thornton had arranged to be delivered.

Jack had just finished hanging up the last suit jacket when Riley made a noise of triumph, and briefly took off her headphones.

‘I've got them. Room 1135.’

Jack grinned, and Bozer reached out to fist-bump his girlfriend in congratulations. Mac smiled, looking up from the disassembled alarm clock he had laid out on the floor. Bozer and Jack leaned over Riley’s shoulder, the latter speaking.

‘Got any intel on them, Riles?’

Riley gave a little smirk, putting her headphones back on.

‘Give me ten minutes.’

Ten minutes later, Riley turned her laptop around to face Mac, Jack and Bozer.

‘The pros we’re looking for are the Cobra Brothers.’ Jack sucked in a breath, clearly recognizing the name, while Mac seemed to be mentally searching his brain’s database and Bozer made a mental note to use that as a name for the villains in his next movie script. ‘There’s six of them, and they’re all ex-Special Forces mercs from several countries. They’ll do pretty much anything for money. They’ve provided security for some seriously bad guys, done some kidnappings for ransom, robbed a couple of banks, stolen a few artworks, and they’ve done something like this in the UK before. They got away with classified intel that time and sold it.’ Riley pulled up Interpol profiles on the six men. ‘They’re on Interpol’s Most Wanted list, but they’re really, really good. Lots of agencies have come close, but nobody’s managed to catch them yet.’

Mac, Jack and Bozer all nodded, then after a moment, Jack gave a little smirk.

‘Well, we haven’t gone after them yet. They won’t know what’s hit them.’ He turned away and started pacing, as Mac pulled a paperclip from his pocket. ‘They can’t be keeping the Colonel here; they’d never manage to get her in without drawing way too much attention to themselves…”

Mac nodded, depositing a paperclip in the shape of the club on a deck of cards on the table next to Riley’s laptop. He pulled out another paperclip that started to take the shape of a diamond.

‘Riley, can you ID which of the Cobra Brothers are here at the MGM?’

If Colonel MacGregor wasn’t here, then obviously, not all of the Cobra Brothers were here either. And it’d be a lot easier to take down, say, two of them, then all six at once.
And they were probably their best lead for finding Colonel MacGregor.

The hacker pursed her lips and typed for a minute, then looked up again.

‘I can tell you that there’s two here at the MGM, and two of them, Fourier and Sun, have a known weakness for poker…’

Jack smiled as Mac nodded, and the older man reached into the wardrobe and tossed a suit on a clothes hanger at his partner.

‘Get dressed, brother.’ He addressed Bozer and Riley. ‘Mac and I will go take down Fourier and Sun, Riles, Boze, you guys do some of that computer magic stuff, see if you can find out where they’re keeping the Colonel.’

Riley rolled her eyes at the magic comment (Mac was already in the bathroom getting into his suit, or he would have too), and Bozer saluted Jack, clicking his heels together.

‘Aye, aye, Captain.’

POKER TABLES

MGM GRAND

LAS VEGAS

Jack threw down his last hand and groaned, as Sun, sitting opposite him, scooped the pot. The mercenary smiled at his opponents and stood, picking up his sizeable rack of chips and inclining his head.

‘Gentlemen.’

He headed off to exchange his chips, and Jack picked up his own rack and followed a moment later.

Mac reached out and scooped the pot, as Fourier shook his head at him, the gesture implying well-played.

He smiled at the other players as he picked up his rack of chips.

‘Good game, gentlemen. Well-played.’

The Texan next to him shook his head.

‘Not well enough.’ He glanced up at Mac. ‘Where’d you learn how to play like that, kid?’

Mac gave a half-shrug.

‘MIT.’

At the chip exchange desk, in full view of many casino employees and patrons, Jack casually slung an arm around Sun, as if they were friends, and grinned at the mercenary.

He knew that the other man could feel the knife that Jack had had in his boot that was now held
against his throat.

He also knew that the mercenary would not want to make a scene by retaliating out here, in full view of so many people, getting them both arrested.

So although Sun glared darkly at him, he allowed Jack to pull him into a deserted service corridor.

Then, he stomped on Jack’s foot and elbowed him in the gut, twisting away when Jack’s grip loosened.

Jack recovered quickly and lunged at the man.

Mac jogged the last ten feet towards the elevator, getting there just before the doors closed and joining Fourier.

They were the only two in the elevator.

Mac smiled at him a little apologetically.

‘Sorry, didn’t want to wait for the next one.’

Something flickered across Fourier’s eyes, but essentially before he could move, there was a sharp pain (like the most horrible papercut known to man) across his right hand.

He looked down, seeing the bloody cut that had seemingly appeared on his hand without warning, then noticed the blood-stained playing card (one of several that Mac had swiped with a clever sleight-of-hand trick from the poker table as he’d left it) on the floor.

Then, as the shock abated, he lunged at the young agent sharing the elevator with him.

Jack wrestled with Sun on the floor of the service corridor (his knife had long been kicked out of reach of either of them), attempting to pin the other man.

It was a stalemate and he wasn’t getting anywhere.

He suddenly remembered a trick that Sarah had used on him years ago, and flipped them so that he was lying on the floor, not Sun (that surprised the mercenary slightly, which was what Jack had hoped for), and then kneed the man in the groin and, not even pausing, head-butted him hard, then sent a sturdy right-hook at his jaw.

Then, Jack got up and dusted off his hands, staring at the unconscious mercenary for a moment, a small smile growing on his face as he let himself be lost in a memory for a moment and silently thanked his former partner. Then, he pulled out his belt and cuffed the unconscious man’s hands.

Mac kicked Fourier, who was bleeding from cuts on both hands and one on his forehead, away from him with a hard kick using both his legs, having clenched both hands around the railing that ran all around the elevator and jumped up.

As the mercenary stumbled and wiped off the blood that was dripping into his eyes from the cut on his forehead, Mac pulled his makeshift weapon (a stack of poker chips held together with chewing gum, long enough so that the ends protruded ever-so-slightly when he held it in his clenched fist) out of his pocket.
He and Fourier circled each other for a few beats, then the mercenary rushed at Mac, who, having observed Fourier do this three times now, was very, very ready and counting down in his head.

At just the right moment, he seized Fourier’s right arm, and used the man’s momentum to fling him into the elevator wall, then hauled the still-stunned mercenary quickly back towards him, using the momentum from his collision with the wall, and socked him in the jaw with his makeshift poker-chip weapon.

Fourier slumped to the ground rather like a bag of potatoes, and Mac pulled out his belt and cuffed the man’s wrists together, slipping the poker chips back into his pocket to join the spares he’d had after he’d made that weapon.

Perhaps Jack wouldn’t complain so much about the expense reports this time.

(The paperwork would be easier if they didn’t have to use Phoenix money to pay for damages and the like – he hadn’t counted how much he’d won exactly yet, but he was quite sure it was more than enough to pay for any of his ‘modifications’.)

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**HOTEL SUITE**

**MGM GRAND**

**LAS VEGAS**

Jack took a crack at the two mercenaries, despite the fact that they all knew that they were almost-certainly not going to talk.

They also knew that they didn’t have much time before the other four Cobra Brothers worked out what had happened to their fellows. Riley’s voice imitation program and her strategic alterations to security camera footage would buy them some time, but it wouldn’t be long before they caught on. And when they did, the consequences for the Colonel and their ability to find her were not good.

Riley was currently digging through the two men’s phones, with Bozer’s help, while Mac, after unpacking his poker chips out of his pocket, examined the suit jackets of the two mercenaries, as well as their shoes.

They’d obviously changed clothes to go play poker, but he was hoping that they hadn’t quite caught everything and there might be some clues in their clothing.

He carefully picked up a slim purple flower from the inside of the back of the collar of Fourier’s suit. If he had to guess how it’d gotten there, he’d say that it’d probably been caught in his hair, and had eventually fallen.

‘Riley, we’re looking for somewhere near jacaranda trees.’

The hacker was looking at the metadata in their phones, both their sent and received messages, and triangulating which cell towers their calls had come through, attempting to work out where they were likely keeping the Colonel.

They all suspected it was one of the many abandoned houses in the many abandoned housing developments in and around Las Vegas; they needed somewhere quiet where they wouldn’t be disturbed or reported by suspicious neighbours.
Riley glanced up at him, nodded, then returned to her laptop.

Three minutes later, Riley made a noise of triumph and indicated the address on her laptop screen.

‘Got them.’

Mac smiled and Bozer grinned and reached out and high-fived Riley.

As Mac went to retrieve Jack, Riley’s eyes fell on Mac’s stack of poker chips, and after a moment, an impressed expression appeared on her face.

‘He is really good at poker.’

Bozer nodded, grinning.

‘He’s even better at blackjack, since there’s no luck or bluffing involved. He just memorises all the cards.’ Bozer bent down to stage-whisper into Riley’s ear. ‘I’ve tried to get him to go to Reno or Vegas for the weekend, ‘cause I’m pretty sure he could pay off his mortgage with his winnings, but he won’t do it.’

Riley laughed, and then she and Bozer started preparing for their rescue of Colonel MacGregor, bringing up the Google Earth Streetview and some satellite maps of the abandoned house that corresponded to the address that Riley had determined.

ABANDONED HOUSE

ABANDONED HOUSING DEVELOPMENT

LAS VEGAS

Jack brought the car to a stop half a block away from the abandoned house were Colonel MacGregor was being held, around a corner and very much out of view.

Sitting beside him, Mac was carefully pocketing small pellets of explosive with long pieces of the shirt that he’d been wearing with his suit embedded in them like candle wicks. (He’d done his trick with the coffee pot and packets of sugar again, like in Latvia.)

In the back seat, Riley had finished arranging pick-up of the two captured Cobra Brothers with Thornton about ten minutes ago, and was now running through last-minute instructions with Bozer.

(Bozer was staying in the car to run a distraction using the captured Cobra Brothers’ phones, Riley’s voice imitation program, his own voice imitation skills, and another quick code Riley had written to interfere with the mercs’ security system.)

Jack checked his gun, then turned to his three teammates.

‘Ready for show-time?’

They all nodded back, Riley fastening her special satchel, the one that Mac and Bozer had made for her (it wasn’t actually the same as the one she’d used in Philadelphia – it was now on Mark 4 and better than ever), even though it was empty (it was mostly-bulletproof, after all), Bozer cracking his knuckles, Riley’s laptop on his lap, and Mac picking up the lighter he’d purchased quickly back in
town.

Jack opened the car door with a grim smile.

‘Then let’s get the show going.’

On the other side of the fence (which was falling down) marking the border between the target house’s backyard and the backyard of the house behind it, Jack and Riley waited for Mac’s signal.

When what sounded like gunshots began to pepper the front of the target house, Jack and Riley darted through a hole in the fence, and keeping low and moving fast, ran to the back door, where Riley immediately got to work picking the lock.

They heard shouts inside, and as soon as Riley unpicked the lock, she opened the door, and Jack darted inside, gun at the ready.

On the other side of the open living-dining-kitchen area, there were two of the Cobra Brothers, guns in hand and staring out the front windows. They’d been investigating what they thought had been a drive-by shooting, and were now trying to find who they thought was a shooter, as the ‘gunshots’ from Mac’s little explosives kept ringing out.

Jack aimed and fired, taking down one of the men, which caused the other to turn instantly, but he didn’t manage to fire off a shot before Jack took him down as well.

Motioning to Riley to restrain them, Jack turned his attention to the stairs, where he heard movement. He started up the stairs, gun at the ready, and about 2/3s of the way up, encountered a very big, very burly and very angry-looking man, and Jack immediately brought the butt of his gun down on the guy, who knocked it away, and they started grappling.

Jack swore to himself (he was already shorter than this guy, and his lower position on the stairs was not helping), and went for a punch to the kidneys, ducking a punch to his head as he did so, hoping to turn that into an advantage.

Less than a minute later, as Jack, pinned against the wall of the stairwell, tried to work out his next move (he still had at least two aces up his sleeve, even if it didn’t seem like it), there was a sudden thud, and the mercenary pinning him to the wall dropped, severely winded by a manhole cover hitting the side of his torso, and Jack was able to knock out his lights with a solid punch.

Jack turned to his slightly-smirking partner, who was standing at the bottom of the stairs, with a protest.

‘Careful, brother! What if you’d have hit me?’

He knew Mac absolutely would not have, knowing that the blonde must have run hundreds of calculations in his head to get the right angle and force and velocity and whatnot, but he was still going to say it.

Mac shook his head, as he took the stairs two at a time.

‘Then I wouldn’t have to listen to your singing for at least a week.’

Jack rolled his eyes, as he and Mac rushed up the stairs, game faces back on, knowing they still had one mercenary to take down and an Air Force Colonel to rescue.
It turned out that they didn’t need to rescue Colonel MacGregor.

Well, not completely, anyway.

Upstairs, in the first bedroom, Mac and Jack found the Colonel, still partially bound to a chair and with severe rope burn on her wrists and ankles, and with cuts and bruises, including a very nasty shiner over her left eye and a series of methodical cuts along her right thigh. She was strongly favouring her left shoulder.

She was also standing over the last Cobra Brother, who had a navy-blue Louboutin (they’d obviously taken the shoes so that they could frame her for her husband’s murder when they dumped her body after they’d gotten what they’d wanted) embedded in his neck and was very clearly dead. There was a gun that looked like it’d been knocked away and the room was full of signs of a struggle.

Well…that’s that question definitively answered.

You can definitely stab someone with a stiletto heel.

The other shoe was clutched in her right hand, the heel, which was already bloody, positioned to stab anyone else who tried to attack her.

Jack and Mac glanced at the dead mercenary, the Colonel, and the shoe held in her right hand, then at each other, and slowly held up their hands, Jack dropping his own gun and Mac speaking.

‘Colonel MacGregor? Ma’am, we’re…well, we’re here to rescue you.’ He paused for a moment, glancing at the shoe, then looking at her. ‘I’m so sorry about your husband.’

The Colonel glanced at the bloodied shoe in her hands, then at Mac and Jack, then at the dead man on the floor, then, slowly, started shaking and let out a heart-wrenching sob as everything that had happened finally caught up with her.

Mac and Jack glanced at each other, then made their way over to the Colonel, Jack taking the shoe gently from her hand and patting her shoulder, while Mac made short work of the rest of her restraints.

Colonel MacGregor is a very strong person.

I’m sure that she didn’t give anything up under torture. I’m sure she held fast, despite the fact that her husband was killed in front of her eyes. Despite the pain, physical and emotional.

And she was strong enough to fight back, even after her ordeal.

But the strongest of us are still human. Still bleed. Still hurt. Still feel.

Some people take tears or I-love-yous as weakness.

That’s something I’ve never, ever understood.

They just mean that you feel, that you care, that you love.

And that’s not weakness.

Not at all.
Slumped around the fire pit, lounging on the chairs and some cushions and blankets they’d dragged out, all absolutely exhausted, Mac, Bozer, Riley and Jack barely managed to lift their heads as the door opened and Patricia walked into the house, then out onto the deck, a six-pack of beer in one hand and a couple of bags of what smelled like Thai takeaway in her other hand.

(Thankfully, debrief had been finished up in Vegas with Colonel MacGregor, and then all the ends tied up on the plane home, so they’d been able to head straight back to Mac and Bozer’s.)

Riley sat up and reached for the takeout bag, and started handing out the boxes of Pad Thai inside, complete with forks.

Patricia handed out the beer (it was room temperature, but they were all too tired to care, and she didn’t see Mac’s self-opening, walking Esky anywhere – he was probably in the middle of some modification to it), and for a few minutes, the four exhausted agents just ate and drank in silence.

Then, Patricia broke the silence, with a small, sympathetic smile.

‘You are all off active duty for the next five days, barring an imminent apocalyptic event.’ She’d apologized once, and she wasn’t going to again, not when they all knew it had been necessary to send them on two back-to-back missions. She made eye contact with each of her agents, seeing the understanding there, and the smile grew fractionally wider and quite a bit more wry. ‘I have no interest in being scolded by Doc.’

That got a couple of chuckles and some smiles and head shakes.

Patricia smiled herself, sipping at her beer, as a realization dawned on Bozer’s face, and he sat up straight suddenly.

‘We...we…’ He looked devastated. ‘We didn’t get to learn the truth about Area 51!’

Jack, too, looked disappointed, as Riley pulled her boyfriend into a comforting side-hug, shaking her head with fond exasperation as she did so, and Mac sighed, shaking his own head with that same look in his eyes as Riley.

When I was a kid, I really wanted to go to outer space.

It’s fascinating and beautiful and such a great unknown. I was curious.

And I always believed that there were other life forms out there.

There are so many life forms on Earth, after all, and already so many planets and planetoids in our Solar System, and so many solar systems in the Milky Way, and so many other galaxies out there in the universe...there has to be something, or rather, someone, out there.

I fantasized about discovering somewhere where I could be normal and just like everyone else, or, on better days, where I could be accepted even though I was that skinny, awkward, weird kid who got excited by weird things.

Somewhere where I could belong.
He glanced over at his friends, eating Pad Thai by the light of the fire; Jack talking to Patricia, who had an eyebrow quirked at Jack’s enthusiastic insistence that aliens were real and the government was hiding them in Area 51 (which Mac was pretty sure Jack didn’t actually wholeheartedly believe – he worked for the government and was privy to lots of classified stuff, after all), Riley and Bozer mischievously stealing each other’s shrimp, happy and loving and fiercely competitive, all at once.

He remembered, with a stab of sympathetic pain, Colonel MacGregor’s grief.

*When I was a kid, I wanted to go to outer space to find somewhere to belong.*

*I never even considered that I’d find it on Earth.*

Three nights later, Bozer woke up in the middle of the night and padded into the kitchen for a glass of water, only to find his best friend stabbing chunks of pork with an assortment of stiletto heels.

Mac looked up a little sheepishly at his roommate from where he’d been examining the hunk of meat that he’d just thrust a black high heel into.

‘Err…I’ll have this all cleaned up by morning, Boze.’

Bozer shook his head with a smile as he grabbed a glass of water, then sipped it, and slapped Mac’s arm lightly.

‘Hey, my BFF’s a crazy-mad-scientist-super-spy-puppy, and I wouldn’t have him any other way, bro.’ Mac smiled right back at him, and Bozer waggled a finger at his roommate. ‘Just make sure you get some sleep, okay, Mac? Or I’m going to have to tell Dr Beth and set her on you!’

As he walked back to his room, glass of water in hand, Bozer heard Mac’s slightly-petulant reply.

‘I’m not scared of Beth!’

No, Bozer thought, you really aren’t.

Chapter End Notes

What did you guys think? Did you like the gang playing CSI? (Finally, my obsessive watching of *NCIS/CSI/Criminal Minds* is useful for something!) Did you like Mac being a mad scientist at the end? Or slightly-teasing Bozer (and Jack and Riley)?

Mac’s trick with the playing cards is inspired by an episode of *Mythbusters*. His makeshift poker-chip weapon is inspired by the strikers in the *Ranger’s Apprentice* series. This entire episode is based off one chapter of *The Roommate Chronicles*, as some of you might have realized. (Shout-out to star.crossed.heart.beat for catching it last week!)

I also think that crazy-mad-scientist-super-spy-puppy is an excellent description of Mac and, like Bozer, will get into a very fierce argument with anyone who disagrees. ;)

Next episode: 2.17, Stethoscope. When Mac’s hurt on a mission, he’s forced to stay behind in the infirmary while the rest of the team heads to Monaco. Of course, he’s not happy about the situation.
When Mac’s hurt on a mission, he’s forced to stay behind in the infirmary while Jack, Riley, Bozer and Thornton head to Monaco. Of course, he’s not happy about the situation.

Mac shoved the trolley of heavy boxes at the three gang members who were rushing at him, then took off at a run through the rows of shelves, drawing another group out behind him, letting Thornton pick a few off with expert shots. This mission had started with them chasing some money launderers who were suspected to be washing money for a couple of terrorist organizations.

It had started out, in other words, simple. Then, they’d discovered that the little money-laundering ring was, instead, a huge operation with its hands in a lot of pies, including this import-export business whose warehouse they were currently in.

They’d also discovered that the money-laundering ring was run by the Chinese Triads. That was when Thornton had insisted that they return Bozer to the Phoenix and that she’d come with them, something that Mac was very grateful for now, knowing that Bozer was safe and sound and that he had very, very capable help holding off the huge number of gang members who’d flooded the warehouse, as Riley, with Jack very occupied watching her back, went through all their computers in the office on the mezzanine on the far side of the warehouse.

He was also thankful for the fact that not all the gang members had guns.

He glanced behind him, then half-threw himself around a corner and skidded to a halt. He picked up the large, fake (at least, he really hoped it was fake) Ming vase that was sitting there, and broke it over the head of one of his pursuers, then kept running.

Mac jumped down from the shelving system, and practically landed on top of the last of his pursuers.

The two of them grappled on the floor and Mac had the man almost pinned when he felt his opponent reach into his pocket.
Mac swore internally as he came to the realization that his opponent had a switchblade in his pocket, a fact confirmed by the click he heard a moment later, and positioned as he was, he only had time to roll slightly out of the way.

A terrible sting ran through his left side, and though a cut was a lot better than getting stabbed, it still really hurt, despite the adrenaline coursing through his veins.

Panting a little, Mac returned to grappling with his opponent, steadfastly ignoring the pain in his side and the blood blooming on his light-blue shirt.

With great effort, and with the aid of a little feint inspired by his opponent’s actions involving reaching for his Swiss Army knife (not that his opponent knew what he had in his pocket), Mac managed to dislodge the switchblade from the gang member’s hand, and kick it under a shelving unit, putting it well out of the man’s reach.

The man snarled at him in response, and although his side throbbed, Mac gritted his teeth and kneed the man hard in the kidneys, dodging a punch to his head by rolling to the side as he did so.

Two minutes later, Thornton clocked the last gang member who was still standing that she could see or hear in the back of the head with the butt of her gun, then kicked him hard into the boxes behind him.

She listened for a moment, then ran down the corridor between the shelves on her left, then made a right, and came upon Mac, kneeling on the floor, breathing hard and clutching at his left side, an unconscious gang member next to him.

Jack’s voice rang out over her comm at that very moment.

‘Patty, Riles is done.’ Jack whistled as he presumably looked down at the main floor of the warehouse. ‘Woah, you and Mac have done a lot of damage.’ Then, he fell quiet for a moment, during which she heard a gunshot and a thud. ‘And I think we just got the last of the bad guys.’

Thornton glanced down at her agent, who was gritting his teeth and removing his belt with his right hand to, she assumed, make some kind of tourniquet, all the while keeping pressure on the wound with his left hand.

‘Good, because we need to get Mac back to the infirmary immediately.’

Said blonde looked up at her and spoke, addressing Jack and Riley over his earpiece at the same time.

‘It’s not that bad, I didn’t get stabbed, it’s just a deep cut…’

His head also ached from being punched in the jaw and near the eye by the bad guy, both very hard punches, and at first, he’d seen two of Thornton, but now wasn’t really the time to mention that.

Thornton pursed her lips (Mac was pretty sure that she figured he was withholding something, but that she’d also decided to pick her battles), and crouched down next to him to help him with his tourniquet as Jack ranted at him in the background.

He winced as his boss pulled his belt a little tighter, getting the amount of pressure just right.

Being injured really sucked.
Beth shone a light into Mac’s left eye, carefully examining the reaction of his pupil.

‘What’s your name?’

He sighed. He wasn’t concussed, as he’d resolutely told her, but she’d just narrowed her eyes at him and pointed out that he, unlike her, did not have a medical degree, and that even if he did, no doctor would be taken seriously if they made such a declaration themselves; another medical professional would have to check over him even if he was a doctor.

He conceded that she was right about that, but it still irked him.

‘Angus MacGyver.’

She moved on to his right eye.

‘Age?’

‘Twenty-six.’

She straightened up, done with examining his pupils. He shifted uncomfortably in the infirmary bed he’d been forced into, and fiddled with the edge of his hospital gown.

He hated wearing hospital gowns.

‘What’s the square root of -1?’

He looked up at her, an eyebrow raised. This was not a standard concussion test.

Beth simply looked right back at him, her head tilted slightly to the left and her arms crossed.

‘You have a non-standard brain, and thus require a non-standard concussion test.’

He conceded that she probably had a point; he could probably answer standard concussion test questions while concussed, so he simply replied after a moment.

‘i, an imaginary number.’

She picked up the tablet that was sitting on the little table beside him, along with his Swiss Army knife, wallet and phone, and started updating his chart.

‘Second law of Thermodynamics?’

He toyed with a loose thread on the bedsheat.

‘The entropy of the universe increases for a spontaneous change.’

She finished typing and looked up at him again.

‘And what are the advantages of the Swern oxidation?’
He actually had to think for just a moment to answer that.

‘It proceeds under mild conditions, without the use of a toxic metal like chromium, and enables oxidation of primary alcohols to aldehydes without over-oxidation to carboxylic acids.’

She nodded, satisfied, made a note on her tablet, and then looked back up at him.

‘Well, no vomiting or signs of nausea either; you’re not concussed.’ He looked balefully at her, as he’d told her that fifteen minutes ago, when she’d been stitching up his side. She looked sympathetic and the slightest bit apologetic. Just the slightest. ‘I had to check, MacGyver. Better safe than sorry.’

He sighed, knowing she was right, as there was a knock on the door, and Jack and Thornton’s heads (Bozer and Riley were digging through the intel that they’d found – Riley and Jack had accompanied him all the way to the infirmary, and Bozer had ducked in earlier while he was getting his stitches) became visible as they stuck them around the corner to face the glass wall of his room in the infirmary.

Beth glanced at him, and when he nodded, she opened the door and let them in.

‘You are not going, and that is final!’

Jack and Thornton were relegated to the role of spectators as Mac argued with the Phoenix’s doctor about being allowed to go to Monaco (Bozer and Riley had determined that the heart of the money laundering operation was there) with Jack, Riley, Bozer and Thornton.

The blonde was currently glaring at the young woman, who was staring back at him with crossed arms and a very firm look on her face.

‘But-’

‘You have seventeen stitches in your side, at least fourteen contusions, including what is becoming a rather impressive shiner, and you took at least two serious knocks to the head.’ He hadn’t told her that, and it wasn’t as if any of his teammates could have had, though he supposed that the bruises that were blooming on his jaw and over his left eye were dead giveaways. ‘I cannot give you medical clearance to go. In fact, I cannot give you medical clearance to leave this room.’

Mac glanced over at Thornton imploringly.

‘Boss-’

Thornton shook her head, cutting him off.

‘You heard Doc, Mac. You’re confined to the infirmary until you’re cleared by medical.’

He protested, even though he was pretty sure it was futile.

‘But-’

‘No buts, Mac. You’re staying here, and that’s an order.’

Jack put a hand on his shoulder gently.

‘It’s nothing me and Patty and Riley and Bozer can’t handle, brother.’

Mac sighed, glancing down for a moment.
I have faith in them. I know, intellectually, that they probably can handle it.

But on the off-chance that they can’t, and I’m not there to defend them…

Beth glanced between him, Jack and Thornton, then spoke up, her voice relatively gentle yet firm.

‘How about a compromise? MacGyver, if you’re a very good patient, you can watch a live feed of the mission and give advice and assistance as you see fit.’ The infirmary had a couple of high-tech screens that she used for consults on missions as needed. She gestured to Jack and Thornton. ‘They won’t land in Monaco until tomorrow morning, our time. I can make sure that there are no painkillers or sedatives that can cloud your mind in your system by then.’

Mac nodded with a wan smile up at her, realizing that that was as good as he was going to get. Honestly, it was a pretty good compromise for him.

Jack bent down a little to whisper in his ear, squeezing his shoulder.

‘We’ll be back, brother. I promise.’

Mac offered his partner the widest smile he could manage, as Jack and Thornton stepped out of the room.

As they left, Beth held up an IV bag and showed him the neat labels she’d printed on it.

‘Saline, painkillers, antibiotics. No sedatives.’

He nodded with a little smile of thanks, then spoke as she prepared the IV line for insertion into his arm.

‘Before you do that, can I please have some proper clothes?’ He plucked the sleeve of his hospital gown. ‘Please?’

She considered for a moment, eyes flicking down to his left side, clearly considering the position of his stitches, then nodded.

‘A T-shirt and tracksuit pants, basketball shorts or pyjama pants or the like would be fine. I presume you have something suitable in your locker?’ (Every Phoenix agent had a locker for things like spare clothes and their ID when they were on missions, and they were secured via fingerprint scanners, though agents could authorise others to open their locker – Mac’s could be opened by Jack, Riley and Bozer, for example – and Thornton, as the boss, and Beth, as the doctor, could open them all.) Mac nodded, his gratefulness showing on his face, and she smiled, putting down the IV line. Then, her eyes fell on his Swiss Army knife, and she narrowed her eyes at him. ‘No escaping or attempting to escape while I’m gone.’

He smiled up at her, wryly, but eyes sincere and reassuring.

‘I won’t, I promise.’

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PHOENIX JET

SOMEBWHERE OVER KENTUCKY

ON-ROUTE TO MONACO
‘…They use a lot of methods, but it seems that gambling is their main way of laundering money.’ Riley looked up from her laptop at the other three Phoenix agents. ‘They wash some through casinos all over the world, including in Monaco, but their method of choice seems to be gambling on sports.’

Bozer’s brow furrowed.

‘Isn’t gambling a really awful way of laundering money? I mean, you’re gonna lose a lot of it…’

Riley shook her head.

‘They lose some, they win some, overall, it just about breaks even, which is all they need.’ She looked down at her laptop again. ‘They’re really good at gambling; they’ve got to have a lot of brainpower working on this…’

Jack and Thornton nodded, as a smirk slowly appeared on Bozer’s face.

‘So, like evil Mac and-‘ He pointed at Riley. ‘-evil you?’

Riley stared at him for a moment, an eyebrow quirked, and then shook her head as a smile appeared on her face.

‘Maybe.’

INFIRMARY

PHOENIX FOUNDATION HEADQUARTERS

SOMEWHERE IN LA

Beth checked Mac’s IV line, having already examined his left side for any signs of infection.

She glanced at the clock display that was built into the table by his bedside. It read 9:30 PM. Then, she glanced at him, with that caring, professional, doctor-y look in her eyes.

‘Try and get some sleep, MacGyver.’ He nodded, suppressing a yawn. Despite the fact that it was really rather earlier for an adult to go to sleep, he was exhausted, which he supposed was attributable to his current state of health. Besides, sleep, even if it might be hard, with Jack, Riley, Bozer and Patricia on a mission (potentially in danger) without him, would help to pass the time. ‘I’ll be checking on you every two hours; do you want me to leave you to sleep, or wake you up?’

He considered for a moment.

‘If you’re just checking the monitors-‘ There were a couple by his bed that he was hooked up to. ‘-then let me sleep, please. But anything else, wake me up.’

He really didn’t want to accidentally attack her while half-asleep, mistaking her doing her duties as somebody attacking him.

She nodded in understanding, checked over the monitors one last time, and picked up the tray she’d brought him dinner on, a small smile on her face.

‘Sleep well.’

He nodded and smiled up at her, a small smile, but a warm one, as she left.
‘Thanks, Beth.’

Her smile widened a little as she slipped out of the room.

Mac closed his eyes and slowed his breathing, running off the digits of Pi in his head to calm his mind.

He’d found that worked reasonably well for helping him sleep, like the proverbial sheep-counting.

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PHOENIX JET

SOMEBWHERE OVER THE ATLANTIC OCEAN

ON-ROUTE TO MONACO

‘…Boze, real life is not a romance novel.’

Jack pointed at the younger man as he spoke, and Riley made a face as she addressed her boyfriend.

‘Also…eww.’

Jack jerked a thumb in Riley’s direction.

‘Ditto, man.’

Bozer, who’d been smirking and waggling his eyebrows, suddenly made a face as a realization hit him.

‘…Yeah, eww.’ His face contorted further. ‘Ugh.’

Patricia simply quirked an eyebrow at Jack as he made eye contact with her, then turned back to reading something on her tablet after he gave a half-shrug with a little smirk.

In all seriousness, despite the significant looks that the three of them exchanged from time to time (had ever since that really odd stiletto conversation in Las Vegas when Mac had asked Beth for a second opinion) when Mac wasn’t looking (he could be surprisingly blind about these things – either that, or he’d noticed and was stubbornly ignoring them), none of Bozer, Jack or Riley expected anything interesting to happen while Mac was stuck in the infirmary under Beth’s care.

The Phoenix’s doctor was a professional, after all, and took her professional duties very seriously. She was still, Jack was sure, getting used to the culture of the Phoenix, still working on accepting that she was going to be more attached to her patients than she’d thought acceptable in the past, and that that wasn’t a negative, but a positive. (He was certain that she’d have had an even harder time accepting that, understanding that, if she hadn’t served with MSF. He knew from experience that lines tended to blur and rigid rules fell away out in a place like Aleppo, in that environment.)

He knew she’d picked up on that point, understood it, but walking the walk was always harder than talking the talk. He hoped that she’d have a breakthrough at some point, if only to save her from loneliness.

And that was before considering any of Mac’s issues.

No, Jack was quite sure that the most that might happen was that Beth finally started calling Mac Mac and not MacGyver, and that she’d finally get invited over for dinner around the fire pit, both of
which he thought should have happened around the time she’d started working on Sparky regularly with Mac, Bozer and Riley (not long after which the significant looks had started).

He, Bozer and Riley all knew that there wasn’t something going on between their favourite secret-agent-mad-scientist and their new favourite doctor (with apologies to Dr Farnham – but then again, he might not care, since he was very much enjoying his retirement).

Yet.

They all could see that there was the potential for something. The possibility.

Mac, Jack knew, had become fond of her (like he had, like they all had, Patty included, he was sure, albeit, he believed – or maybe he hoped, having known about Mac’s white-picket-fence dreams since the younger man was barely out of his teens - in a different way), had connected to her.

He was also, Jack was sure, fairly oblivious to the fact.

Jack did wonder, from time to time, how someone who was usually rather self-aware and so smart, so intelligent, could be so stupid.

He’d been on that train in Germany.

He’d seen how obvious Nikki had had to be to get Mac to finally notice her flirting…despite the fact that Mac’s brain turned to mush (unfortunately- very unfortunately- in hindsight) whenever she got close (when they weren’t on a mission, anyway…well, most of the time).

(He’d had to listen to Mac’s firm insistence that there was no way a beautiful, brilliant woman like Nikki would have any interest in someone like him.)

Jack had thought that after Tahoe, maybe Mac’s obliviousness might be gone for good.

(He had certainly become less oblivious to flirting – though Jack suspected that he would always be a little oblivious, that that would always be part of Mac.)

He’d thought that he’d been very much right to think that when Mac had been very much aware of his attraction to Viv (rather short-lived attraction; they really had settled into being nothing but friends very quickly – that had relieved Jack; he wasn’t sure how Patty would take that news, as fond as she was of Mac).

In hindsight, perhaps Mac had been so aware of that because it’d been such a surprise, such a shocking punch to the gut, after it’d been so long since he’d noticed a woman like that.

Perhaps, Jack thought, Mac’s apparent obliviousness to his own feelings of attraction to or intrigue in or interest in or connection to a woman was some kind of subconscious defence mechanism.

Something activated after their encounter with Viv along with his renewed interest in the fairer sex.

Mac was so, so good at compartmentalizing, after all.

Maybe he could compartmentalize those feelings away without even noticing himself.

That, Jack suspected, was the legacy of what had happened with Nikki, in Tahoe, at that hotel, at that airstrip and on that plane, on Lake Como. It was also probably the legacy of the same things that led to Mac’s obliviousness to flirting and his firm belief, to this day, that Frankie was out of his league: his dad leaving, getting shot down cold by Darlene Martin, Donnie Sandoz and his other
bullies, and everything else that befell a near-orphaned, skinny, shy, awkward genius fascinated by weird things who did things that no one else could.

As Bozer leaned over and whispered something into Riley’s ear, causing her to simultaneously make a face and laugh, Patricia quirked an eyebrow at them. There was a hint of amusement in her expression, in her tone, but her words were rather firm nonetheless, as she put away her tablet.

‘We should all get some sleep.’ She paused for a moment, as Bozer actually pouted. She raised her eyebrow again. ‘Or I’ll tell Mac the subject of your recent conversation. I’m sure he’ll find it very interesting.’

Jack hid a small smile behind his mouth as he faked a yawn (well, maybe not so faked…he could sleep). Patty did have a sense of humour, and not just when she was almost-dying. Then, he pointed at his boss and crossed his arms.

‘You wouldn’t dare.’

Her sole response was to raise her eyebrow further.

Jack quailed. They all did, falling silent and reaching for blankets and curling up under them.

None of them wanted to have blue hair.

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INFIRMARY

PHOENIX FOUNDATION HEADQUARTERS

SOMEWHERE IN LA

He was drowning in nitrogen again…then he was standing on the edge of Lake Como, holding out the bioweapon…then he was sitting on that bed in that hotel, kissing that woman (and then more than kissing)...tied to that tree in Tahoe…watching that video, of that building on that day in Afghanistan, except the person on the pressure plate kept changing; first Al, then Jack, then Rachel, cradling Annabelle and whispering empty reassurances to her daughter…then he was standing in the dark, Jack and Bozer and Riley and Patricia by his side…only a bullet flew straight between Jack’s eyes and he vanished, and shadowy figures with no identifying features pulled Patricia away, and then a person who looked like hundreds all at once, somehow, slit Bozer’s throat, and Riley yelled at him, screamed words he couldn’t hear but knew the identity of, the meaning of, anyway, and she vanished too, and he was left all alone in the dark…and he stood there, alone and scared and sobbing and begging to not be left alone, to not be left like this…

And then he heard a voice.

A familiar voice.

‘…You’re safe, MacGyver…you’re in the infirmary…but you’re having a nightmare…wake up, MacGyver…’

He woke and sat bolt upright, which caused a searing pain in his side, panting like he’d just run miles…and as his mind awoke fully, it registered that the lights were on, only just, the light soft and low and not searing to his eyes, and that Beth was standing at the foot of his bed, seemingly making an effort not to loom (though, part of his brain noted dimly, it probably didn’t make much difference, as small as she was) and had been speaking to him, voice soft and gentle and insistent.
His breathing started to slow, and he noted the empathy and understanding in her eyes, and wound up verbalizing the first coherent thought that formed in his brain.

‘You have them too.’ It registered that she might not know what he was talking about, so he continued almost immediately. ‘Nightmares.’

Remembrance and pain and fear (or maybe the ghosts of those) flickered across her face for a moment, and then the look in her eyes settled into some mix between that remembrance and pain and fear, and her earlier understanding, and her usual doctor-y look.

‘I…Yes.’ She stood there staring at him, a little frozen, for a moment, before stepping around to the side of his bed, and gently pressing on his shoulder to get him to lie down again, bringing up the bed to meet him halfway. ‘I…I need to check your stitches.’ She lifted up his shirt and examined them for a moment, as he turned his head to watch her. ‘Well, luckily you haven’t torn any of them.’ She put down his shirt and looked back up at his face. ‘Do you think you can get back to sleep?’ He shook his head, and she nodded, as if she’d expected that answer, and glanced at the clock on the bedside table, which showed that it was 4:13 AM. ‘I could give you a small dose of a sedative?’ He was already shaking his head resolutely halfway through that sentence, and she nodded again, definitely having anticipated that answer. Then, she seemed to hesitate for a moment, falling silent as she checked the monitors and updated his chart. When she finished her tasks, she spoke. ‘Would you like to be left alone, or would you like company?’ She gave a wry little smile. ‘I can even bring Sparky in here if you’d like.’

That made him smile wryly too. Only a small smile, but still definitely a smile.

‘I’d like company, but you know Sparky’s a terrible conversationalist. I also think he’s gunning for my job.’

Her wry smile grew wider.

‘Well, we can’t have that!’ She turned around and grabbed the chair sitting in the corner, angling it so it faced his bed, and watched his hands, playing with the edge of his blanket, for a moment. Her own I-have-an-idea face appeared (he’d become very aware of people’s I-have-an-idea faces ever since Jack had pointed out his own to him), and she put her tablet down on the chair, and pointed at him sternly. ‘No escaping. I’ll be back in a minute.’

She came back almost exactly a minute later (he’d counted out of boredom), holding a kidney dish full of paperclips, and narrowed her eyes at him as his own expression brightened.

*Okay, maybe I get irrationally excited about paperclips.*

*But they keep my hands busy, and that’s calming and relaxing, and there’s so many possibilities…I can think of at least four hundred uses for paperclips, give or take a dozen.*

*Paperclips, in my admittedly biased opinion, are undervalued and underappreciated.*

‘No escape attempts, or you will not like the consequences.’

He was quite sure that the consequences would be the paperclips being confiscated (which, she was right, he would not like at all). He nodded solemnly and gave a little smile in response, and she handed over the kidney dish.

As she sat down in the chair, he plucked a paperclip from the dish, and started re-shaping it.
It took the shape of a stethoscope as she updated his medical records, then glanced up at his IV bag appraisingly, nodded to herself, and then glanced back over at him, gaze falling on the MIT logo on his T-shirt.

‘What did you study at MIT?’

There was curiosity in her voice, but she also sounded like she already had a theory or two, and wanted to know if she was right.

He understood that feeling, and answered with a little smile.

‘Mechanical and electrical engineering.’ He ducked his head slightly, a somewhat-wry, somewhat-sheepish look appearing on his face. ‘Though, I dropped out.’

She looked rather surprised at that (the Phoenix’s medical records included all military and alphabet agency medical records, if relevant, and he knew she must have noticed that his medical records started from when he was eighteen – though he supposed she wouldn’t be surprised at someone with his IQ finishing their undergraduate degree by eighteen; she had, after all), and spoke almost immediately, her voice very curious, though not probing. It was the same sort of curiosity he’d had when Jack had refused to tell him why he and Matty had had that tension between them, when he’d completely forgotten to consider that that might be a sore point for Jack, so desperate to know he’d been.

‘Why?’ Then, she blinked, seeming to remember herself, and shook her head, sheepish and apologetic and a little awkward. ‘I’m sorry…that was crossing a line.’

He regarded her for a moment, the paperclip in his hands taking the shape of a wiggly line. He could see, very clearly, how the Phoenix could be a culture shock, though he hadn’t felt it himself. He’d seen it in new employees on occasion (though, it’d been a while), and he’d seen the signs in her, too. That was a thought, a realization, that sharpened suddenly in his mind, like it’d been there beforehand, but hadn’t been clear. (That happened relatively frequently for him.)

‘Beth, it’s half-past four in the morning. You’re not…’ He sighed and marshalled his thoughts into order before continuing. ‘Thornton is our boss. But Patricia is our friend.’ He held up the wriggly-line paperclip in his hands, then put it down on the nightstand before picking up another one from the kidney dish, looking down at it. ‘That makes things messy, sometimes. And…if we had normal jobs and lived normal lives, it might be problematic.’ He looked back up at her. ‘But we don’t live normal lives; what we do is special, dangerous and isolating. Very few people outside the Phoenix know the truth or understand.’ She, of course, knew those facts, but it always helped to hear it from others, he knew. The paperclip in his hands took the shape of a link of chain. ‘If we kept our distance…we’d be very lonely, and that’s no way to live.’

She considered his words, staring at the re-shaped paperclip in his hands for a long, long moment, then nodded resolutely.

‘You’re right. You’re very right.’ She gave a little half-shrug and a small, sheepish smile. ‘I think I knew all that, it’s just…’

She shrugged again, and he smiled in understanding.

‘Always harder to walk the walk than talk the talk.’ She nodded with a bit more wryness in her smile. After a pause, he spoke again. ‘And…and I dropped out because I realized that while I was sitting at MIT solving theoretical problems…soldiers were out there facing real ones. Ones that I could solve.’ He shrugged. ‘After that…it wasn’t really much of a decision.’
She nodded solemnly.

‘I get that.’ She shrugged, a little awkwardly, and looked down for a moment, then back up at him. ‘I turned down a couple of PhD offers to go to medical school, because I…I guess I wanted to save lives directly, with my own two hands.’

He was very sure that she’d turned down more than a *couple* of PhD offers, and probably quite a few very prestigious ones, but that was just a stray thought, drifting across his mind with so many other such stray thoughts.

His mind had decided to fixate on one thing, for reasons that he didn’t know and at that moment, didn’t really care about, given the fixation.

‘I’m sorry.’ She stared at him, her brow furrowed, confused, and he pressed on, driven by that compulsion that he didn’t know the source of. ‘I’m sorry for keeping a distance from you.’ He recognized now, that he *had* kept a distance from her, completely irrationally and through absolutely no fault of hers. For four and a half months, she’d cared for him and his family and worked alongside them, given him so many reasons to trust her and so many reasons to actually really *like* her, and yet, she *still* called him *MacGyver* because he’d never given her permission to do otherwise. He knew that he really should change that, and in all honesty, he admitted to himself, should have changed that a long time ago. She knew his friends called him Mac, and honestly, he’d not have felt the slightest bit unsettled if she’d simply taken up using the nickname on her own initiative, but she hadn’t, seeming to consider getting the proper permission, straight and clear from his mouth, to be important. She opened her mouth to respond, but he continued. ‘And I’m sorry for what Thornton and Matty must have put you through when you were hired.’

That, technically, wasn’t really his fault, but he still felt he had to say sorry for it anyway, if only in the sense of *I-find-it-unfortunate-that-this-happened.*

She was silent for a moment, gathering her thoughts, then spoke, her voice soft.

‘With what you all went through with Nikki Carpenter…I’m not surprised that you were all wary.’

A very small, sardonic smile appeared on his face.

‘Oh, you don’t know the worst of it.’ She didn’t, he was certain, because Thornton and Matty would never have told her. The rest of the Phoenix wouldn’t have either. They all seemed to think it wasn’t their story to tell, which he was grateful for. He sighed. ‘She’s my ex-girlfriend.’

Beth winced, and put a hand over her mouth.

‘Oh, *ouch*…Well, even more good reason for you to be wary of new people, then.’ She shook her head sadly. ‘I’m *really, really* sorry, MacGyver.’ She hesitated for a moment, then a wry look appeared on her face. ‘You know, I once dated a guy who insisted that the Periodic Table was wrong, because lithium can’t be lighter than oxygen.’ It was his turn to wince sympathetically. ‘It’s nowhere near the same scale of betrayal that you went through…but what I’m saying is that I kind-of understand.’

That drew a little chuckle and a real smile from him.

ER doctors and soldiers and secret agents shared that same dark sense of humour, it appeared.

He looked over at her, expression turning solemn again.

‘Thanks…but I’m still sorry.’
She gave a small, grateful smile.

‘Your sentiment is very much appreciated, and we’re probably labouring the point, but…rational fear is perfectly reasonable.’

He gave a small, teasing smirk.

‘That’s a tautology.’

Beth shot him a look, and he shrugged, just a tiny bit sheepishly, in response. Then, she gave a little shake of her head and continued.

‘And humans are allowed irrational fears.’ She shrugged with a smile. ‘I have an irrational fear of flying…and an irrational love for pie.’

He tilted his head to the side.

‘The foodstuff or the irrational number?’

She laughed.

‘Well, I meant the foodstuff, but the number’s pretty awesome too.’

He smiled right back, and then turned a little more solemn, seeking out her eyes. Eye contact seemed important for this.

‘Call me Mac. Please.’

He didn’t need to explain why. All his friends called him that.

Her smile widened.

‘Of course, Mac.’

At 6 am, as he stacked another re-shaped paperclip onto the pile of paperclip shapes that he’d made, Beth looked up from the medical journal she was reading on her tablet, glanced at the time, then put down the tablet.

She held the IV bag she’d prepared earlier out to him, showing him the label that indicated it contained only saline and antibiotics, then switched out the bags, addressing him as she did so.

‘If you need or want them, I’ll give you some over-the-counter painkillers after you’ve had some breakfast.’

He nodded; such painkillers wouldn’t cloud his mind, not like the good ones that had been in his IV, and smiled up at her.

‘Thank you, Beth.’

He hoped that she understood it was for more than just the painkillers.

From the way that she smiled back, he had a feeling that she did.

‘So…Mac, how was your night?’ Jack wagged his eyebrows at his partner. ‘Feeling better?’
Grateful that Beth was sitting in her office filling in paperwork and absolutely nowhere near being in earshot, Mac pretended not to notice Jack being ridiculous, and replied.

‘Yes, I’m feeling better, thank you.’ He addressed Riley. ‘I read your email; their gambling operation is very sophisticated.’

The hacker nodded, and glanced back down at her laptop, which Bozer was also focused on. As Mac watched, his best friend pointed out something on the screen, and Riley nodded again, pursing her lips and typing.

Thornton glanced over at them, then looked back at Mac.

‘We’ve already found six properties in Monaco with Triad links…’

The implication, that they couldn’t search them all and had to narrow it down to the property where the money laundering operation was based, was very clear to Mac.

He looked back down at the tablet in his lap, reading through the packet of intel that Riley had sent him, skimming through the list of bets that they’d placed (which was a very, very, very long list).

Then, he noticed what he thought might be a pattern. He wasn’t much of a sports fan, but he retained huge reams of information, often completely unintentionally.

He looked up.

‘Riley, can you cross-reference the tennis players whose matches they bet on with those who are Monaco-based?’

She caught on to what he theorised might be the case, and quickly typed something, then, reading over her shoulder, Jack let out a low whistle, while Bozer looked up at his best friend.

‘Good catch, bro.’

Riley looked up too.

‘Almost all their bets involve at least one Monaco-based player.’

Thornton nodded at Mac, in acknowledgement of his breakthrough, then spoke.

‘They must be using inside information or even attempting to influence the outcomes of the matches.’ They could be using various psychological techniques to subtly manipulate players; it was no guarantee, and wasn’t match-fixing per se, but it would help tilt the odds in their favour. ‘The property is likely to be one with good access to tennis players.’

They all nodded, and Mac glanced up at Riley.

‘Riley, can you mark the location of the properties on a contour map of Monaco, as well as the residences of all Monaco-based pro tennis players?’

She nodded and started typing.

‘Elevation and sight lines, right?’

Mac nodded, as the map, marked properties appearing one by one, appeared on his screen.

‘Alright, we can knock off this one, there’s a high-rise in the way…’
‘Baby, I swear, I wrote down the address correctly, this is it!’

‘This does not look like a hotel!’

‘It’s a boutique hotel; they don’t look like hotels! That’s like the whole point!’

Bozer and Riley, strolling down the driveway of the rather fancy house, bickered with one another as they walked. They got to the door and Bozer rang the doorbell.

It was answered by a very dour-looking Chinese man in a suit, and before he could say anything, Bozer started speaking.

‘Hi, we’ve got a reservation for the Honeymoon Suite under Brian Bozemann? You know, this place is really hard to find, you guys might want to invest in street signage…’

The man in the suit stared at them, then made to close the door, but Riley cut in, and reached out and put a hand on the door, kicking Bozer in the shin as she did so.

‘sorry, sir, my husband is an idiot and has gotten us lost. This is clearly not our hotel.’ That was punctuated by her glaring at Bozer. ‘I’m so sorry, sir, we’ll get out of your hair, but could you please just give us directions towards our hotel!?’ She thrust a piece of paper with a hotel name on it. ‘Please? It’s our honeymoon, and…’ Riley looked rather imploringly at him.

Bozer looked very annoyed and reached out and tried to grab the piece of paper out of the man’s hand.

‘Come on, baby, you don’t have faith in my navigational abilities?’

Riley rolled her eyes, raising her voice.

‘Given that you just got us lost and we’re bothering this gentleman at his house, no!’

‘Mac, are you sure this thingy’s gonna work?’

Jack held up the makeshift grappling hook gun that Mac had instructed him, step-by-step, to make.

Mac considered for a moment, examining the grappling hook gun over the screen of Jack’s phone.

‘…Yes.’

Jack shot him a look.
‘You don’t sound very certain, brother…I don’t like that.’

‘I’m as certain as I usually am.’

Jack blinked, then made a face.

‘I don’t know if that’s reassuring or really concerning…’

Thornton looked up from her binoculars, which were focused on Bozer, Riley and the front door. The ‘newlyweds’ were causing quite a commotion, and several of the Triad members were now at the front door. She estimated that in a couple of minutes, perhaps sooner, they’d start bodily removing the two from the property.

‘Bozer and Riley’s distraction is working.’ She gestured to the grappling hook gun. ‘We need to get going.’

Jack shot Mac one last look, then put his phone back in his pocket, aimed the grappling hook gun, and fired.

HEADQUARTERS OF THE TRIADS’ MONEY LAUNDERING OPERATION

MONACO

Riley rolled her eyes and crossed her arms.

‘This isn’t more about your whole my-stepdad-thought-I’d-hook-up-with-your-roommate theory again, is it? Because I keep telling you…just…’ She made a face. ‘Ugh, no. Not happening. Ever.’

Bozer raised his hands, trying to placate his ‘wife’.

‘No, no, sweetpea, it’s not that. I promise.’ He gave a little smirk. ‘Besides, he got a cute doctor’s number when we were at the ER-‘

‘What were you doing at the ER? Was this during your bachelor party?’ She walked closer and jabbed Bozer in the chest with a finger. ‘What happened at your bachelor party?’

Bozer looked terrified.

‘Baby, it was nothing, I swear, just, you know what he’s like…a little accident, that was all-’ As Riley glared at him, one of the Triad men grabbed Bozer by the shoulder, and started pulling him towards the end of the driveway, away from the house. ‘-Hey, let go of me!’

As another one herded Riley away as well, the young woman just yelled at Bozer again.

‘This is all your fault! If you hadn’t gotten us lost-’

‘I did not!’

‘Did so!’

Jack, followed by Thornton, landed quietly on the 3rd floor balcony, then, pulling out their firearms, the two of them made their way inside, darting down the corridor, which soon and suddenly opened out into a large room filled with computers… with several people working at said computers, and a
couple of burly guys in suits standing around.

‘Well, that was easy.’

Thornton shook her head at Jack’s quip as the first of the suited men lunged at them, then her expression turned dead serious as she focused, Jack doing the same beside her.

Bozer and Riley were bundled out onto the sidewalk, and given very brusque instructions to their hotel, just as the original man who’d answered the door brought a hand to his ear, the tell-tale sign of pressing on an earpiece.

A moment later, he barked out instructions in Cantonese (at least, Bozer thought it was Cantonese – he was pretty sure it wasn’t Mandarin, at least), and the cluster of suited men, with a last glance and glare at the ‘newlyweds’, ran back towards the house.

Bozer and Riley glanced at each other, then Bozer pressed the button on his watch in a set pattern to alert Jack and Thornton to the incoming, while Riley pulled out her phone, adjusting the camera-glasses she was wearing.

‘Mac, how can we get in?’

Jack looked around the room, taking in the unconscious, weakly-stirring or restrained bad guys.

‘Yeah, corner office has not made you any softer, Patty.’

He swore he saw a hint of a smirk on her face, before it disappeared as their phones beeped in unison. A signal from Bozer and Riley that they were going to get incoming.

With a glance at one another, they took up positions facing the hallway leading to the rest of the house.

A moment later, they heard footsteps, and both felt their adrenaline spike.

As the suited Triad members came into view, Thornton aimed carefully, then pulled the trigger.

She heard a shot ring out beside her as Jack did the same.

‘Seriously, man?’

Back at the Phoenix, Mac huffed out a sigh.

‘We climbed plenty of trees in our day, Boze.’

Riley rolled her eyes as she reached for the next branch, already starting to make her way up the tree, towards the 2nd floor balcony, and with a sigh, pocketing his phone, Bozer reached for the nearest sturdy branch.

The super-spy life was so not as glamorous as he’d thought it’d be.

Bozer and Riley stared at the middle-aged man in a silk bathrobe, who’d just stormed out into the corridor from what they assumed was his bedroom and started yelling in a mixture of Cantonese and English about the commotion and hadn’t he specified that he did not want to be woken until two
hours before the meeting? The man, whom they assumed, based on his clothing and manner, to be the boss of the operation, stared right back at them.

The staring went on for a beat, before the Triad boss took off down the corridor at a run, with a last glance back them.

Shaking off their shock, Bozer and Riley glanced at each other, Riley gesturing to the corridor on the left with a jerk of her thumb. Bozer nodded, and took off after the Triad boss, while Riley ran down the left corridor.

She passed a couple of tennis bags and quickly seized a tennis racquet, tossed it in her hand to test the weight and balance, found it to her liking, and kept running.

Bozer chased the Triad boss around the house, grateful for Mac’s running training program, but definitely not grateful for tacky bathrobes (Why did the guy have to dress like an awful, knock-off Bond villain? Didn’t he know that understated wardrobes for villains were in?).

As the Triad boss rounded a corner in front of Bozer, the boss fell back on his buttocks with a groan and started rubbing his head.

Bozer jogged up and grinned at Riley, who was holding a tennis racquet rather menacingly over the Triad boss. Bozer pulled out his belt and bound the man’s wrists together, then looked up at Riley and pointed at her.

‘That was ace!’

Riley groaned at the pun (it was almost – only almost- as bad as Jack’s), but shook her head and laughed anyway, as Jack jogged up to them (they presumed Thornton was dealing with the rest of the Triad members).

The older man eyed the tennis racket in Riley’s hands, and they could see the cogs turning in his head, and just as he was about to open his mouth, Riley jabbed a finger at the air in front of his chest, then jerked a thumb at Bozer.

‘He already said it, don’t you dare, Jack.’

Jack made a face and whined.

‘But it’s a good one!’

‘No.’

INFIRMARY

PHOENIX FOUNDATION HEADQUARTERS

SOMEWHERE IN LA

Jack and Bozer grinned as Beth opened the door to Mac’s room in the infirmary.

Bozer smirked at his best friend, making his way over to where Mac was sitting up in bed, reading something on a tablet.
‘Were you a good patient for Dr Beth, bro?’

Mac rolled his eyes, as Jack addressed the doctor.

‘Did he behave, Doc?’

Beth smiled wryly and raised an eyebrow at Mac, who looked a little sheepish (he had earned that reputation, he supposed), then her smile widened a little.

‘Well, there were no actual escape attempts.’ She gestured towards her office. ‘I’ll be in my office if you need me.’

Bozer and Jack rounded on the blonde, who groaned internally as he continued to pretend to be engrossed in the medical journal he was reading.

(To be fair, it was fascinating – he was definitely taking more reading recommendations from Beth.)

Jack’s smirk widened, and Bozer waggled his eyebrows. Mac sighed internally and decided to be proactive, before they started making an even-bigger mountain out of nothing (not a molehill, nothing).

‘I was not going to pull a you-’ He pointed at Jack. ‘-And steal a Phoenix jet to get to Monaco.’ He made a face. ‘Besides, I did not want to wind up covered in Dora the Explorer Band Aids.’

MACGYVER’S RESIDENCE

LA

‘…And she swings the racquet, and there’s this thwack and he goes flying into the wall…’

Riley shook her head, though she also seemed rather flattered, as Bozer, sitting next to her on the deck, told a very exaggerated version of her takedown of the Triad boss, his slice of cherry pie beside him and completely neglected.

Jack snorted, eyeing off Bozer’s slice of pie (Mac slapped his partner’s arm none-too-gently – Bozer deserved his slice of pie), while Patricia raised an eyebrow at the more unbelievable bits, the light of amusement in her eyes.

Mac smiled and shook his head, chewing on his pie, and then looked up, making eye contact with Beth over the fire. The young doctor was smiling brightly, laughing at Bozer’s ridiculous story and enthusiastically eating her pie.

Mac’s smile widened a little as he kicked Jack lightly in the shin when the older man made a move towards Bozer’s pie.

Obviously, Beth is not the only one with an irrational love for pie.

He took another bite of his cherry pie, still smiling widely.

Honestly, I don’t blame either of them.

Pie is really, really delicious.

Especially with friends.
I know there’s not much action, but you got character/relationship development instead? And lots of introspection? What did you guys think? Did it work, do everyone’s reactions/actions make sense?

And yes – Riley’s ‘innovative’ uses of sporting equipment are becoming a running gag, as is Bozer and Riley being undercover as a couple and being ‘inspired’ by real life when undercover. Beth is obsessed with pie, A), because pie is delicious, B), because when I first wrote a particular scene in *Paperclip Charms*, I had a weird craving for (sweet) pie (we don’t eat sweet pies that much here in Australia – we mostly eat meat pies, which I’m told is vaguely disturbing for Americans…). It was not supposed to grow into this, but you know what they say about best-laid plans…

In other news, I’ve finally finished the last episode! Thus, this story is officially complete! (I still have lots of editing to do, but I’ve at least finished writing!) I also have the following (rather important, I think) announcement:

I have every intention of writing stuff for the new season, but I also love this universe, and I’ve spent so much time and effort on it, that I don’t want it to be over, not completely, even when I post the finale. I’m going to start a one-shot collection exploring missing scenes and other bits and bobs in this universe – such as glimpses into the future or into the lives of other characters (like the Edwards team or Matty’s team). I’m very open to requests (in fact, I really, really want requests) for this series; so please, please let me know if you’ve got something you’d like to see! It is tentatively titled *Somewhere in the Middle*.

Next episode: 2.18, Vodka. While chasing a drug-running, weapons-dealing, possibly-classified-intelligence-selling gang, Mac gets himself into trouble. As usual. It’s how he gets out of it that’s unusual, even for him.
Vodka

Chapter Summary

While chasing a drug-running, weapons-dealing, possibly-classified-intelligence-selling gang, Mac gets himself into trouble. As usual. It’s how he gets out of it that’s unusual, even for him.

Chapter Notes

This is a really short chapter, I’m afraid, about 6700 words…hopefully it’s still good!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

GYM

PHOENIX FOUNDATION HEADQUARTERS

SOMEWHERE IN LA

Mac clicked one of the pair of handcuffs closed around the heavy piece of gym equipment, then locked the other around Beth’s left wrist.

Everyone who worked for the Phoenix, including people like Ritchie and Cal from Cartography, was required to complete self-defence training, and to take regular refreshers. Beth was hence doing self-defence training, had been since she’d started working at the Phoenix, and Mac figured that adding some lock-picking and escape lessons and some stuff on the general principle of improvising your way out of trouble could only help.

‘Can I borrow a bobby pin?’ With a little grin (he knew she knew where this was going – using bobby pins to pick locks was the oldest trick in the book, though very few people actually knew how to do it properly – it wasn’t as easy as it looked on TV, after all), she pulled one out of her hair with her right hand, and handed it to him. ‘As you know, humans didn’t become the most dominant species on Earth by being stronger or faster, but by being adaptable. We look at a sharp rock, and we see a spear.’ He tapped on the handcuffs with a finger. ‘We turn a metal ingot into handcuffs.’ He held up the bobby pin. ‘We look at a bobby pin and we see a key.’

He worked the bobby pin into the lock of the handcuffs, working through the process slowly for teaching purposes as Beth watched closely. Then, when the cuffs clicked open, she nodded in understanding, and turned to him with a teasing look on her face.

‘That was a really dramatic speech! I think you might have missed your calling, Mac. You should have gone to Julliard, not MIT, and left for the stage, not the Army!’ He chuckled, and after a moment of staring at her bobby pin in his hands, her expression grew more solemn. ‘And those were very wise words.’
His smile grew softer, and he gave a half-shrug of sorts.

‘I borrowed at least half of that off my grandfather.’ His voice softened and he glanced down, then back up at her. ‘He was a very wise man.’ There was a soft, sympathetic look in her eyes, and he ducked his head a little in thanks, and they stood there, quiet, for a beat. Then, he clicked the handcuffs closed around her left wrist and the gym equipment again, and handed her the bobby pin. ‘Your turn.’

‘Not bad at all.’

Mac smiled as Beth finished picking the lock. The doctor looked fairly proud of herself, as she should be. She’d done well for her first time; he supposed that there was something to be said about a doctor’s or surgeon’s hands.

She held up the cuffs and her bobby pin.

‘I’m not sure what good it’s going to do me if I can only get out of them when one of my wrists is bound, though I guess one has to start from the beginning and work their way up…’

Mac nodded in agreement, then the smile on his face disappeared, replaced by a more solemn look.

‘And you’d be surprised; you’d be underestimated.’ He shrugged. ‘That’d play out in your favour.’

It had for him, more so when he’d been younger and looked it.

The two of them glanced around the gym. Jack was supposed to be working with Bozer on punching, but they’d abandoned it in favour of cheering on Riley, who was sparring with Thornton in the ring. The two men gave a particularly loud cheer as Riley managed to pin their boss, and Mac grinned in pride, then the expression grew into a wry smirk as he turned back to Beth, who’d cuffed herself to the gym equipment again, and was just about to start working the bobby pin in the lock.

He gestured to Jack and Bozer with a small movement of his head.

‘At least we’re not getting distracted.’

She was focused on picking the lock, but gave a little smile in response.

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WAR ROOM

PHOENIX FOUNDATION HEADQUARTERS

SOMEWHERE IN LA

‘Intel suggests that there is a group of individuals smuggling drugs and weapons in their custom cars all around the country.’ Thornton tapped the screen and a series of pictures of said cars, both old-school muscle cars and modern sports cars, appeared on the screen. Jack let out a low whistle. ‘There have been a handful of arrests, and a spike in contraband, associated with car shows and rallies. Unfortunately, while all intel suggests there must be a link, it hasn’t been found yet.’ She tapped the screen again, and a Latino man in his early thirties appeared on the screen. ‘This is ATF agent Sam Ramirez. He has been undercover, following car shows and rallies, attempting to gain more intel.’ Her expression became grimmer, as she turned to face Mac, Bozer, Jack and Riley. ‘He missed his last check-in.’ Thornton paused for a moment. ‘He’s an undercover specialist, he may well have
simply had to go deeper, or…’ They all knew that the other possibility was that he’d been found out, which had terrible consequences for Agent Ramirez. Thornton tapped the screen again, and a couple of messages appeared on the screen. ‘From his last communications, we suspect that the smugglers are now also dealing in stolen intel’– They all nodded grimly; USBs were a lot easier to smuggle than drugs or guns, and from a national security perspective, stolen intel was a lot worse than drug-running or small-scale weapons-dealing. ‘–and that this network is LA-based.’

They all nodded seriously, before Bozer shrugged and gestured at the screen.

‘Well, at least *these* bad guys have style.’

Riley shot him a look, though she also shuddered in revulsion at the memory of the Triad boss in Monaco’s horrible silk bathrobe. Thornton quirked an eyebrow slightly, and Mac dropped a paperclip on the table in the shape of a Corvette. Jack simply pointed at Bozer with a grin.

‘Amen to that, brother.’ He glanced back up at the screen. ‘Those are some *smoking* cars.’

Thornton tapped the screen again, and a picture of a sleek red sports car appeared.

‘LAPD picked up a very small fish in this group for smuggling cocaine in his car yesterday.’ She gestured to the door. ‘It’s downstairs and probably our best lead; he refuses to talk beyond saying that he’s never moved any weapons or intel and he’s only been doing it for three weeks. Riley, you should have received all the intel the ATF has collected so far.’

Riley nodded as she followed a rather inappropriately excited Jack, and Mac, who was probably best described as rather keen to get some grease under his nails and get into the car’s innards, out the door, exchanging a long-suffering, yet fond, look with Bozer as they stepped out of the war room.

Sure, she was pretty fond of *GTA* and had set herself the goal of persuading Jack to let her drive his Shelby Cobra by the end of the year, but this was just ridiculous.

Then again, since it was Jack (whose prized possessions were his Shelby Cobra and the complete works of Bruce Willis on DVD) and Mac (who grinned like a kid on Christmas morning when you gave him a box of scrap metal and assorted metal doo-dads from garage sales for his birthday), she probably shouldn’t have been surprised in the slightest.

Jack, taking a break from going through the files for all arrests for drug or weapons smuggling involving nice cars for the last year in the entire USA, ran a hand over the bonnet of the red sports car, talking to it.

‘I usually go for the older, classic ladies, but I gotta say, you got charm, young lady.’

Bozer made a face, as Riley, who was looking up from her laptop, where she was running a complicated cross-referencing program on all social media pages and forums on the topic of cars with more than a hundred members and all of the ATF’s intel (it’d been a hard program to write and the amount of data it was generating was just insane), gagged.

Mac’s voice, which sounded rather muffled, since he was underneath the car, looking at something, rang out, sounding intrigued and impressed.

‘…Suspension’s *amazing*, this is almost the ideal suspension system…’ His face, a grease stain on his cheek, appeared as he rolled out from under the car, holding a metal part of some sort that neither Bozer nor Riley recognized. ‘This…’ He pointed to the bit of metal. ‘…is *brilliant*.’
He rolled back under the car before either of them could respond.

Bozer leaned over and whispered into Riley’s ear.

‘The day Mac looks at a woman that way is the day I head over to Jack’s so we can start our Best Men speech.’

Riley nodded in agreement, then shrugged her shoulders and wriggled around, trying to get some of the soreness and tension out of her back.

Bozer immediately looked sympathetic.

‘Would you like a back rub?’

Part of Riley was very tempted to say yes (her back really hurt and Bozer gave great back rubs), but they were also at work and that was unprofessional. She and Bozer had some rules in place for work; back rubs (at least, back rubs when it wasn’t the middle of the night when you were worried about your friends – your surrogate father and the woman who’d become your mentor – dying) definitely broke those rules.

So she just smiled up at him and shook her head.

‘Rain-check?’

Bozer smiled right back and put a hand on hers for a moment.

‘I can totally do that.’

‘…They’re all members of the same forum.’ Suddenly, Riley looked up from her laptop and spoke. Her complicated cross-referencing program had finally yielded results. Matching Agent Ramirez’s list of suspects to their usernames had been very difficult, but she’d pulled it off, and determined that everyone on the list was a member of a particular car appreciation forum. As Jack and Bozer looked up at her (Mac was still under the car), she glanced down at her laptop again, typed in a few things, and then looked back up. ‘And there’s a couple of threads that sound like there’s some kind of code in them…’

Bozer reached out and fist-bumped her, and Jack grinned.

‘Good work, Riles.’

Mac rolled out from under the car again, with several grease stains on his cheeks, chin and forehead, and very grease-stained hands, and looked up at her.

‘Riley, do they all frequent the same few auto shops? Or maybe even the same one?’ Mac gestured at the car. ‘This guy had some work done on his car in the last month or so; matches the timeline of when he started smuggling drugs.’ Mac shrugged as best as he could considering he was lying down. ‘I’ve got a gut feeling.’

Riley, who’d already started typing as Mac spoke, looked up with a smile.

‘Well, your gut’s on the money, Mac.’ She turned her laptop screen so that they all could see. ‘All the suspects have been to one of three auto shops in LA, run by three cousins, at least once in the last six months.’

Jack reached out and high-fived Mac, then grinned, rubbing his hands together.
I’ve got a gut feeling that we’ve got undercover work in our future.’

The three younger agents exchanged a look, wondering whether Jack (currently swearing under his breath as he realized that his hands were now greasy) was going to pull out another one of his bizarre and detailed undercover personas.

They (even Bozer, who believed in method acting) still didn’t get why Jack needed to work out things like Bryce’s favourite breakfast or TV show, or whether he was a cat or dog person.

And Jack thought they were crazy…

FIRST AUTO SHOP

LA

‘…It’d cost you $400, but…’ The mechanic-owner looked her up and down with a leer. ‘…maybe we can work out a discount. I can do $300 if you do dinner with me, babe?’

Riley crossed her arms, completely unimpressed.

‘Firstly, I always pay only in cash.’ She pulled out her keys and started walking away, back towards her car. ‘And secondly, if this is what you call customer service, I’m taking my business elsewhere… and telling everyone I know to do the same. Enjoy being lonely and broke.’

And she got into her car and drove away without looking back.

She drove to the lot around the corner, where Mac, Jack and Bozer were waiting in the van, watching the feed from her camera-and-microphone-necklace.

Well, Mac was watching the footage and listening to the recording, trying to see if there was anything suspicious.

Jack and Bozer were looking rather put-out on her behalf, which Riley got, because the guy was a sleaze-ball, but rolled her eyes at anyway (she could take care of herself in a situation like this, she knew they knew that, and that this was just because they cared…but still). She squeezed Bozer’s hand and Jack’s shoulder, getting a small, sorry and sympathetic smile from each of them, then left them to get over it themselves, sitting down next to Mac and smiling as he handed her headphones over.

‘That was a pretty good burn.’

Riley’s smile widened a little as Mac simply turned back to watching the footage.

An hour and fifteen minutes later, Jack stormed back into the van, clearly in a bad mood.

He crossed his arms stonily, then, after a moment, complained.

‘He called me old!’

Mac, Bozer and Riley simply glanced at one another, then looked back at Jack.

Mac gestured to the screens that they’d been monitoring, which showed the feed from the camera-
microphone-watch that Jack was wearing.

‘We know, Jack.’

SECOND AUTO SHOP
LA

‘…I…err…don’t know much about cars.’

The mechanic just looked at Bozer, as if to say, no kidding.

He was at least a little more polite when he spoke.

‘I can see that.’

‘…You don’t seem the usual type to be into racing.’

The mechanic looked up at Mac, who, admittedly, in his beige chinos, spotless white button-down shirt and black-framed camera-glasses, looked very clean-cut and wholesome.

The blonde simply smirked.

‘Well, it’s always the quiet ones…and this get-up has gotten me out of trouble more than once.’ He shrugged. ‘Besides, my girlfriend wanted me to clean up a bit, and, well, she’s persuasive.’

The mechanic nodded in understanding.

‘Well, you’ll definitely get more horsepower with this mod…’

PHOENIX VAN
CAFÉ CARPARK THREE BLOCKS FROM SECOND AUTO SHOP
LA

‘We’re not getting anything this way.’

Riley put down her headphones, shaking her head, a little frustrated. Bozer reached out and patted her shoulder, as Mac and Jack nodded in agreement.

‘We have to change tack.’

‘We gotta go deeper.’ Jack rubbed his hands together. ‘What do you say to Joe ‘Wildcat’ Stevens, B-grade rally-car driver past his prime and hoping to make a quick buck or two?’

Riley shook her head immediately.

‘Jack, all of Agent Ramirez’s suspects are under thirty-five. You’ll be too suspicious.’

Bozer reached out and clapped Mac on the shoulder.
'Looks like I’m giving you a makeover, bro.'

Mac made a face, then took in the expression on his partner’s face, and patted his shoulder.

‘Sorry, Jack. Maybe next time?’

PHOENIX FOUNDATION HEADQUARTERS

SOMEWHERE IN LA

‘Was the hair dye really necessary, Boze?’

Bozer shook his head at his best friend.

‘It completes the look, bro.’

Mac sighed. He personally hated hair dye, but he did have to admit that Bozer had done an incredible job.

He now had a different nose, dark-brown hair, hazel eyes and even a scar down his neck, under his left ear.

He barely recognized his own reflection.

‘Well, you did good, Boze.’ Bozer grinned and tossed a black leather jacket from wardrobe at him. Mac gave a small smile. At least he’d have something halfway familiar with him. ‘Thanks, Boze.’

Bozer shot him a thumbs up.

‘That should help you get into character, man.’

‘…Don’t go with the Mazda, everybody nowadays goes with the Mazda. Danny Zimmerman seems like more of a classics kind of guy.’

Riley shook her head as Jack gave commentary on the cover identity she was backstopping for Mac, building up an online profile for him, including on the suspicious forum being used by this gang or network or whatever they were.

‘Yeah, but he’s also twenty-six, Jack. He can totally appreciate the classics, but he’s got to be age-appropriate…’

THIRD AUTO SHOP

LA

Mac pulled up at the third auto shop and casually parked his motorcycle.

The shop’s owner nodded at him, pointing at the bike with his chin.

‘Nice ride.’
Mac nodded in return, pulling off his sunglasses.

‘Thanks.’

The owner glanced over at the bike again.

‘You want something done?’

Mac shook his head.

‘Nah, I can take care of her fine myself.’ He shrugged. ‘No, I’m looking for a job.’ He looked pointedly at the auto shop owner. ‘Heard you were hiring.’

The owner crossed his arms.

‘You heard wrong.’

Mac stared right back at him.

‘Don’t mind off the books.’

They stared at each other for a long, long moment. The shop owner (whom they were quite sure was one of the masterminds – if not the mastermind – behind the whole operation) seemed to decide that Mac passed muster, because he nodded and scribbled down an address on a scrap of paper.

‘What’s your name?’

‘Danny Zimmerman.’

He handed Mac the piece of paper.

‘Tonight, 8:30. Don’t be late.’

Mac looked at the piece of paper, nodded and pocketed it.

‘Never am.’

He put on his sunglasses again, mounted his motorcycle and took off.

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SECRET ADDRESS

SOMEWHERE IN LA

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Mac’s motorcycle skidded to a halt just feet away from the owner of the third auto shop, whom he was now very sure was the mastermind behind all of this.

The man let out a low whistle.

‘You can ride, Danny.’

Mac got off the bike, crossing his arms.

‘So, I got the job or what?’

The man regarded him for a moment.
‘Eh…you got a trial; that’s the best I ever give. Call me Mustang.’ He gestured to Mac’s bike. ‘Gonna have to make a couple of mods to her.’

Mac smirked, and crouched down to open the couple of secret compartments he’d built into the motorbike.

‘I came prepared.’ Mustang examined them, clearly impressed, then looked up at Mac as if demanding an explanation on the why. Mac just shrugged easily. ‘I’m a guy who likes a challenge, and I learned one thing from my very brief stint in the Boy Scouts: be prepared.’ He smirked. ‘Besides, there’s some things I don’t want my girl finding.’

That is not, actually, entirely a lie.

Well, obviously, the girlfriend bit is a complete lie, in more ways than one.

But I did put those in because I wanted to give myself a challenge, and because I thought they might come in handy one day…and also because I thought they’d be cool.

Come on, secret compartments are awesome!

Mustang nodded, convinced, as Mac stood, having closed the compartments again.

‘Alright, Danny. Meet me tomorrow morning at the shop, 7 am.’ He gestured to the bike with his head. ‘Make sure she’s got a full tank.’

I re-built this bike because I thought it’d be an interesting challenge. Something fun to do after work or on a day off, keep my hands and my mind busy.

In hindsight, I think I underestimated how enjoyable riding it would be…

Mac rode down the highway, strangely calm, and probably enjoying himself more than he should be, considering the circumstances. The secret compartments in his bike contained a not-insignificant quantity of cocaine, which he’d marked with special trackers the size of a rice grain, designed and made by the Phoenix, so that the ATF could track the drugs after he delivered them, as ordered by Mustang, to a woman code-named Shelby in San Diego, and thus bust at least some of the traffickers when the Phoenix’s op finished.

…Yeah, I really underestimated how enjoyable riding it would be.

Mustang looked down at him, from where he was standing behind his desk, and nodded.

‘You did good, Danny.’

Mac, sprawled in the chair before it, gave a little smirk.
‘So I get the job?’

Mustang eyed him for a moment, then shrugged.

‘Let’s say you’re on probation.’

Mac’s smirk widened a little, and at just that moment, one of Mustang’s minions burst in.

‘Boss, what do you want us to do with that ATF rat? He-’

The minion, wide-eyed and fearful, cut himself off when he realized Mac was in the room, and his boss’s face contorted in anger.

After a beat, Mustang’s expression returned to normal, save for the cold, calculating anger in his eyes. The minion cowered by the door.

‘What did I say about interrupting me when I’m in my office?’ He glared at the cowering man, then gestured to Mac. ‘You’d better come with. At least this’ll keep you from even thinking about snitching.’

That was unmistakeably an order.

As he followed Mustang out of the office, a very nasty feeling settled in Mac’s stomach.

Ramirez was alive, though badly beaten up and restrained tightly by two men. Mac took it as a good sign that the ATF agent was able to glare at Mustang and his gang.

What he didn’t take as a good sign was the gun that Mustang pulled out and pointed at Ramirez, right between his eyes.

Mac crossed his arms, acting casual, relatively nonchalant, but also critical.

‘You really gonna kill him?’ He scoffed. ‘It’s not worth it, you know how Feds get if you take out one of their own.’ He took a step forward, knowing the eyes of all of Mustang’s gang, and the man himself, were all on him. ‘Besides, he’s worth way more alive than dead.’ He stared down at Ramirez. ‘He’s got to have heaps of intel in his head.’

One of the men spoke up with a snort.

‘Yeah, sure, but he won’t talk, pretty boy.’

Mac smirked, bending down and staring at Ramirez’s face.

‘Maybe it’s because you don’t know how to make him talk.’

He straightened up, noting the suspicion on the faces of most of the men. The one who’d called him pretty boy tossed him a box cutter.

‘You think you know better than us, pretty boy? Make him talk, then.’

It was a challenge.

A test.

Mac exposed the box cutter blade and stared at it for a fraction of a second.
It was a test that he had no intention of even attempting to pass.

He made as if to turn to Ramirez, blade in hand, but then quickly tossed it towards Mustang’s face instead.

The blade had barely left his hands when the rest of the men descended on him like wolves.

‘What kind of dangerous man carries around a Boy Scout’s tool and office supplies?’

Mustang, a nasty cut on his cheek courtesy of Mac, toyed with Mac’s Swiss Army knife and a couple of his paperclips, looking down at the young agent, whose wrists and ankles were zip-tied together.

Mac gave a little smirk, knowing that the longer Mustang and his gang’s attentions were focused on him, the better Ramirez’s chances were. (His actions had had their intended consequences; last Mac had seen him, the ATF agent was alive and conscious.)

‘A very dangerous Boy Scout.’ He shrugged as best as he could. ‘Or, well, more accurately, ex-Boy Scout.’ He shrugged again and looked very wry. ‘Not really a boy anymore.’

Mustang backhanded him across the face in anger, and Mac fought hard to keep his reaction to the stinging pain as insignificant as possible.

‘Who are you?’

Mac fixed the smirk firmly back on his face.

‘Not Danny Zimmerman.’ His smirk widened. ‘Though, if you hadn’t worked that out already, I’d be pretty-‘

He was cut off by another hard slap across his face. Mustang seized his collar, thrusting his face into Mac’s.


Mac smirked again.

‘A very dangerous ex-Boy Scout.’

*I really am a dangerous ex-Boy Scout.*

*It’s not the answer he was looking for, but it’s a true and honest answer to his question.*

*Though, I don’t think he’s going to like that explanation, probably better not to share it…*

Mustang swore and half-threw him against the wall.

‘You’ll regret that.’

He stormed out of the room, slamming the door behind him, as Mac turned his attention to how he could escape. (He knew that Jack, Bozer and Riley would catch on to what had happened to him, even though he’d forsaken a comm for this mission, worried about it giving him away, when he didn’t make his check-in, or, honestly, even sooner, but he was never one to sit back and wait, not when he could find a fix-it, which was pretty much always.)
He didn’t have his Swiss Army knife or any paperclips, but he did still have all his clothes. The zipper on the black leather jacket had serrated edges, the teeth strong, thick and even a little sharp.

He could definitely work with that.

It was now just a matter of working the zipper and his zip-tied wrists into a useful position…this was going to require some contorting, both of the mental and physical variety.

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PHOENIX VAN

PARKING STRUCTURE

FOUR BLOCKS FROM THIRD AUTO SHOP

‘I don’t like this.’

Jack tapped his fingers in a pattern of some kind on his knee, staring at the monitors over Riley’s shoulder. Bozer nodded in agreement.

The hacker turned to the two of them.

‘He’s still got half an hour until his next scheduled check-in…’

She sounded like she agreed with them, despite her words. Mac hadn’t appeared on any of the cameras near the shop since he’d headed in after his successful delivery in San Diego.

It’d been too long for just a chat with Mustang.

Too long for nothing to be wrong, in Jack’s mind.

He could see that Bozer and Riley agreed with him, and that was only confirmed when Mustang appeared, just briefly, on one of the cameras outside his shop.

There was a long gash down his cheek and he did not look happy. He looked very, very angry.

All three agents glanced at one another, then Jack made for the driver’s seat.

‘Time for you to put your punching skills to the test, I reckon, Boze.’ Jack sighed as he started the ignition, muttering half to himself. ‘Mac, brother, why do you always have to get yourself into trouble?’

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THIRD AUTO SHOP

LA

Arms and legs freed from their restraints, Mac quietly moved over to the door, turning his attention to the lock.

With no small amount of effort, he worked the zipper of his jacket free.

It would have been very useful to have a bobby pin or a paperclip right then, but he could make do.
Slowly and quietly, Mac eased the door open, his belt in his right hand at the ready, and found that the shop was empty (from the voices, soft and distant and muffled, emanating from Mustang’s office, he figured that that was where Mustang and most of his crew had gone), save for two guards watching the door of his ‘cell’ and the door to the storage room next door, which was where he presumed (and hoped) Ramirez was.

The two guards were also, helpfully, dozing.

As quietly as he could, Mac slipped out of the room, and started moving towards the door of Ramirez’s makeshift prison…only for one of the guards to let out a very loud snore.

The other man woke up instantly, and the first thing he laid eyes on was Mac, who swore internally, bringing his belt up in preparation for thwacking the man with it, as the guard yelled at his colleague, then rushed at Mac.

*Murphy’s Law essentially states that everything that can go wrong, will go wrong.*

*I’m having a Murphy’s Law kind of day, aren’t I?*

As two of his henchmen zip-tied Mac to a chair back in his cell (using two zip-ties for each wrist and ankle this time), Mustang stormed in, his face thunderous and contorted with rage.

He backhanded Mac hard across the face, twice, then leaned down to look into his eyes, and spoke, the anger in his voice barely restrained.

‘You’re gonna really, really regret this.’

He pulled out a bottle of anti-freeze from behind his back and unscrewed the lid, and Mac firmly clamped his lips shut. Mustang smirked darkly and nodded at one of his henchmen, who reached out and pinched Mac’s nose to force him to open his mouth.

The blonde agent held on as long as he could, turning a deep shade of red, but he did have to breathe, and he eventually was forced to open his mouth.

And as soon as he did, anti-freeze was forced down his throat. Reflexively, Mac gagged and tried to jerk away, but the henchmen and the zip-ties held him fast, and Mustang simply forced the bottle into his mouth a little harder.

*I’m going to preface this with the following warning: never, ever, ever drink anti-freeze.*

*Anti-freeze contains ethylene glycol, and ethylene glycol poisoning is very, very nasty. It’s metabolized into glycolic acid and oxalic acid, which can eventually cause kidney failure or heart failure, among other very unpleasant symptoms.*

*And unfortunately, I’m about to experience it first-hand.*

*I’m usually pretty open to trying new things, but this was something that I’d happily have gone my entire life without experiencing, thank you very much.*

A moment later, there was a gunshot, clear as day, followed by another.

Prickles of concern appeared in Mac’s mind (had they followed through with their plans for Ramirez?), then abated as Mustang, full of rage and shock, tossed the half-empty anti-freeze bottle
away and pulled out his own firearm. Mac found himself suddenly able to breathe properly again (though the anti-freeze had left behind a horrible, unpleasant burning sensation), and Mustang flung open the door, his gun in hand...then almost as quickly, dropped to the floor as a bullet embedded itself in his right shoulder.

Similar shots took out the two henchmen, and then the door opened wider, and Jack and Riley hurried into the room, Jack crouching down beside him, face very concerned, and slicing through the zip-ties binding Mac with his knife.

Mac, still catching his breath again, gestured weakly to the wall bordering Ramirez’s prison with his head.

‘Ramirez…’

Jack nodded with the tiniest of smiles.

‘Yeah, we know, he had a couple of guys in there with him who burst out when we got going, just like these guys here. Bozer’s checking on him right now.’

Mac nodded a little more strongly and tried to indicate the half-empty bottle of anti-freeze that’d been lying a couple of feet away, as Jack finished freeing his wrists and turned his attention to freeing Mac’s ankles, but Riley had already picked it up, and after looking at the label for a moment, the hacker pulled out her phone and called Beth.

Bozer, armed with the baseball bat from the secret compartment in the van, ducked his head into the room.

‘Ramirez’s alive, but he’s unconscious and pretty beaten up…’

Bozer trailed off as his best friend started retching, immense concern and worry filling his eyes, and rushed over to his side.

Then, Jack, who’d finished cutting Mac’s restraints, and Bozer, turned, gluing their eyes to Riley’s phone as the Phoenix’s doctor’s voice rang out.

‘Riley-’

‘Mac’s been poisoned with anti-freeze. About two quarts of it, and literally a minute ago. What do we do?’

Beth’s response was near immediate.

‘Get him to throw up as much of it as possible.’

Riley glanced over at Mac, who had a puddle next to his feet and a very, very worried Jack crouching next to him and an equally-worried Bozer rubbing his back as he kept retching.

‘He’s got that down.’

‘Alright, then get some vodka into him.’ She paused for a moment, seemingly doing some calculations and estimations in her head. ‘At least a quart, as soon as possible.’

Riley, Bozer and Jack all looked incredulous, slightly concerned that the Phoenix’s doctor had lost her mind.

‘Vodka?’
‘Get him to drink vodka?’

Bozer glanced at the other two, then at his best friend, who was throwing up again, and took off at a run towards the bodega down the street. Dr Beth was almost as smart as Mac, he thought, and Mac said crazy stuff like this all the time but it always turned out alright, more than alright, so…

Mac nodded frantically as he finished throwing up, and Beth continued explaining.

‘Yes, you don’t have fomepizole handy, and ethanol, the alcohol that we drink, is the next best thing for ethylene glycol poisoning. It’s toxic because of what the body breaks it down into, but the body can’t break down ethylene glycol and ethanol at the same time, so ethanol will help.’

Jack did his best to grin as Mac retched again.

‘Vodka, eh? Lots of vodka. Just like the Bering Strait Incident, right, brother?’

Mac, still retching, managed to muster up some kind of glare, which Jack took as a very good sign.

As Mac downed the vodka that Bozer had brought back (Bozer himself was currently holding Riley’s phone, in video call mode, over Ramirez so Beth could check over the ATF agent, while Riley was restraining Mustang and his crew and field-dressing their injuries), Jack smiled wryly at his partner.

‘You’re gonna have the hangover from hell tomorrow.’ He eyed the bottle of vodka. ‘It’s gonna be even worse than the morning after Penny organized drinks after you turned 21.’

Mac put down the vodka bottle.

‘No hangover can ever top that.’

Jack pointed at him as Mac picked up the vodka again, shaking his head.

‘Just you wait and see, brother.’

Unfortunately, I was wrong and Jack was right.

The hangover I suffered after Penny’s definitely-not-a-belated-celebration-of-your-21st drinks night is now the second-worst hangover of my life.

And I am never, ever drinking vodka again.

And this should really go without saying, but I’m also determined to never, ever drink ethylene glycol again.

MACGYVER’S RESIDENCE

LA

A couple of days after Mac was put off vodka for life, Thornton stepped inside Mac and Bozer’s house, and walked into the kitchen, where Bozer was cooking dinner and Jack and Riley sipping beers at the kitchen counter. As she reached the kitchen, Mac stepped inside from the deck.
She addressed her four agents with a small smile.

‘I have good news; Ramirez has been discharged from hospital, and the ATF’s taken down Mustang’s whole operation. He’s looking at a long prison term, along with his cousins and their crew.’ Her smile widened a little. ‘You did well.’

Bozer and Riley shared a fist-bump, then Bozer reached out to do the same with his roommate, who was smiling, as Jack grinned, getting up and going to the fridge and grabbing a beer. He opened it and handed it to her, still grinning, and Patricia took it with a smile and sat down at the counter.

Mac walked over to the pantry and scanned the inside for a moment, before pulling out a packet of spaghetti with a smile and heading back outside to the deck, which was half-covered with a very strange contraption that he’d hauled outside in pieces and assembled over the course of the afternoon.

Patricia glanced at the odd contraption, sipping her beer, then turned to Jack, Bozer and Riley with a quirked eyebrow.

They all shrugged.

‘I’s so weird…’

‘…But so awesome at the same time.’

‘Just like Mac.’

About half an hour later, there was a knock on the door, which was answered by Mac.

(Patricia and Riley were chatting on the couch, while Bozer cooked and bossed Jack around in the kitchen.)

Beth was standing on the other side, smiling and holding a six-pack of ginger beer, which made Mac’s smile widen a little more.

(He was, by doctor’s orders, to refrain from drinking alcohol for at least the next week, something that he was absolutely not going to complain about.)

‘Hey, Beth!’ His smile widened further as he gestured through his house out to the deck. He was very excited about this, and probably even more excited to show it to her, given how excited she got about this sort of thing and how enthusiastic she’d been about the first half of the contraption. ‘You’ve got excellent timing; I just finished the first successful test run of my spaghetti-machine-spaghetti-machine.’

(It made pasta, albeit in a very complicated and extremely inefficient, though also very amusing, way.)

Just as he’d expected (hoped), her eyes lit up and her smile widened, and as they walked through his house, she absent-mindedly deposited the ginger beer on the kitchen counter as she spoke.

‘The first half was so cool already, and I can’t wait to see how you actually got it to do the spaghetti-making!’

Mac gave a little smirk.

‘If you thought the first half was cool…this is going to blow your mind.’ He led her out onto the deck, pulling out his Swiss Army knife as he did so. ‘Just give me a couple of minutes to reset it…’
That is the weirdest way of wooing a woman that I’ve ever seen.’ Jack paused for a moment. ‘And I’ve seen a lot of wooing attempts.’ He shrugged. ‘And tried a fair few ways myself.’

Jack looked rather incredulous as he and Bozer watched from the kitchen as Mac enthusiastically demonstrated his spaghetti-machine-spaghetti-machine to a rather excited Beth.

Bozer shook his head with no small amount of fondness for his roommate.

‘Pretty sure he’s not trying to do any wooing, man.’

Jack nodded, conceding the point that they both knew was very much true. Still, he thought, even though he wasn’t doing anything consciously but show his cool new invention to a friend (who was rapidly becoming a very close friend) whom he thought would like it very much, that didn’t mean that Mac’s subconscious wasn’t trying to woo a brilliant, pretty girl and had picked a really, really weird way to do it.

Spaghetti, as everyone who’d seen a certain Disney movie, in particular a scene involving an accordion and meatballs and serenading, as well as the aforementioned spaghetti, could be very romantic, but Jack wasn’t sure if Mac’s interpretation fell into the romantic-use-of-spaghetti category.

He turned to Bozer with a wry look on his face.

‘Not sure if it’d be any less weird if he was trying.’

An equally-wry look on his face, Bozer nodded with a small chuckle.

‘Yeah, Mac’s romance game is pretty out-there.’ He glanced back outside, where the spaghetti-machine-spaghetti-machine had finished doing its thing. Beth had just clapped her hands together and was grinning in delight, even doing an excited little spin as she turned to face Mac, and Mac was smiling broadly and triumphantly (whether the triumph was at the machine working perfectly or the doctor’s reaction, Bozer couldn’t tell – it was quite possibly both). ‘But it looks like it might be working.’ Jack nodded with a snort. Then, Bozer looked over at the couch, where Riley and Patricia were talking, eyes soft and a goofy grin on his face. ‘And you know, my game was pretty awful and I was doing it all wrong, but...I still got the girl.’ He shrugged, voice softening. ‘She says it’s because she really liked actual, real me, behind the game.’ Bozer gestured with his head towards the deck. ‘This is my BFF. The real, crazy-brilliant-mad-scientist side of him. Beth seems to like him an awful lot, so…’

He trailed off with another shrug and looked back over at the couch.

Jack nodded, something soft appearing in his eyes as well, as Riley looked up and waved at Bozer, a small, slightly-teasing smile on her face.

Patricia simply smiled an enigmatic little smile, as if she knew exactly what they’d been talking about.

Jack gave a little smile himself.

He’d put a hundred bucks on that.

Chapter End Notes
What did you think? How’d you like bad-boy-undercover!Mac? Mac’s motorcycle wasn’t supposed to originally feature in this episode, but it kind of happened…hope you guys don’t mind! And what do you think about the spaghetti-machine-spaghetti-machine? (It’s featured at least twice in Two Paperclips and a Stick of Gum, and I couldn’t resist including it here!)

Headcanon that just got spontaneously invented as I wrote this: If Mac ever gets married, Jack and Bozer will be his Best Men. He’ll have two and none of his loved ones will bat an eyelid. In fact, Bozer already knows it’s going to be that way.

As for the ethylene glycol poisoning that Mac suffers – vomiting is not a recommended means of clearing it from the stomach, however, in this particular situation, I imagine it’d be a logical thing to try. Furthermore, usage of ethanol therapeutically is typically done in an ICU, since blood alcohol levels have to be carefully monitored. I’m taking creative liberties with Mac’s treatment in this episode – I have no idea exactly how much vodka would be administered. I also don’t know if anti-freeze burns on the way down, but A), am not trying it myself to find out, and B), don’t want to Google that…

I’ve started writing Somewhere in the Middle, which is currently more-or-less nothing but fluff and feels. If you’ve got a missing scene, a flash-forward or a ‘here’s what these characters were doing while we were following some other characters’ that you’d like to see, please drop me a line!

Next episode: 2.19, Business Card. Mac, Jack, Riley and Bozer head Down-Under to Melbourne, Australia, in pursuit of an Organization mole. They do not see any kangaroos, much to Bozer and Jack’s disappointment.

Or, in which Mac and Co. show up in my home town!
Chapter Summary

Mac, Jack, Riley and Bozer head Down-Under to Melbourne, Australia, in pursuit of an Organization mole. They do not see any kangaroos, much to Bozer and Jack’s disappointment.

Chapter Notes

I hope your week has been better than mine! I’ve had a pretty awful week; firstly, I had a German oral exam (NOT good), secondly, my paltry attempt to try and impress this professor that I’ve been doing a research project with backfired pretty spectacularly. (Long story short, I felt that it would be expected that I could run this fairly simple test on my own, so I should at least attempt it on my own first, and of course, it turns out that I couldn’t and had the wrong approach the whole time…and now…well, not good.)

Anyway, on with the story! Hope you guys like it!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

MACGYVER’S RESIDENCE

LA

Jack, who was curled up on the couch watching a 2000s NFL highlights reel on YouTube, looked over at Mac, who was sitting on the floor repairing a Vespa that used to be not much more than a pile of parts.

(Jack firmly thought that the motorbike was cooler and would help him get the attention of the ladies far better, but when Jack had told Mac that when he had first started fixing it up, Mac had rolled his eyes and said that, A, that wasn’t the point of fixing it up and B, he wasn’t trying to do that anyway, then shrugged and thought for a second and said that he had a feeling that Beth would not approve of his motorcycle, given the rate of motorcycle injuries and fatalities, but then again, she did appreciate fine engineering…then his ears had promptly turned red and he’d shut up completely and refused to acknowledge the entire conversation since. Jack had tried to keep his smirking to the minimum at this first clear sign that Mac had finally realized, a whole two months after Monaco, that there might be something there, even if he wasn’t willing to admit it yet.).

The blonde was now smiling at something on his phone, shaking his head with a chuckle. When Jack raised an eyebrow at him, Mac handed over his phone with a sigh, and Jack looked down at the screen.

There was a series of pictures that had been texted to him, clearly from Bozer, Riley and Beth’s shopping trip.
There was a shot of Bozer wearing beige chinos and a blue button-down shirt, holding up a stick of gum. He was clearly meant to be impersonating Mac.

There was a picture of Beth and Riley presumably as each other; the taller hacker (with a hint of a smirk on her face) wearing a cute blue and white floral sundress, and the shorter doctor (a bit pink-cheeked) in a tight-fitting black bandage dress.

While he was holding the phone, Mac got a new message, a photo that was obviously of the two young women pretending to be their boss, both wearing very smart, elegant jumpsuits. That made Jack smile and shake his head in amusement as he handed Mac back his phone, and the blonde glanced at the image and smiled an amused, fond, soft little smile. (Riley carried off the jumpsuit very well, graceful and elegant, and Beth looked adorably ridiculous, since the legs were too long and pooled over her feet.)

Jack noted Mac’s expression for later, then raised an eyebrow as Mac laughed at a new message, then, smirking, handed the phone off to Jack again.

Jack glanced down at the photo on the screen, which showed Bozer wearing a black T-shirt and jeans, with a finger gun and posed James-Bond style.

Jack stared at it for a moment, then looked back at Mac.

‘Is this supposed to be me, brother?’

Mac smirked wider and seemed to be suppressing a laugh.

‘What do you think, Jack?’

PHOENIX FOUNDATION HEADQUARTERS

SOMEWHERE IN LA

‘This is Kirk Russell.’ An image of a man in his late thirties with a shaved head appeared next to Matty on the screen. ‘He was a DEA agent…until we worked out he was an Organization mole.’

Matty crossed her arms, looking rather annoyed. ‘Arresting him didn’t go as planned, and he fled the country.’ Kirk Russell was swapped for another photo, this one of the south-eastern corner of Australia. ‘We’ve tracked him down to Melbourne, Australia. He’s trying to sell intel gathered by The Organization.’

That made sense, The Organization would’ve abandoned him as soon as they knew he’d been discovered, and the intel was all he had to raise the cash he needed to hide from the long arm of the law.

Thornton continued with a nod up at Matty on the screen. Mac, Jack, Bozer and Riley turned to her.

‘You four are to pose as buyers for said intel, recover it and capture Russell.’

They all nodded, then Jack grinned.

‘And we’re off to Down-Under!’ He jogged Mac with his elbow and pointed at Mac’s pocket, where his Swiss Army knife was as always, then tapped the special concealed holster in his boot that contained his conventional knife. ‘That’s not a knife. That’s a knife!’
Mac raised his brows and looked a little confused, nodding slowly, while Riley looked incredulously at Jack and muttered *what?*. Bozer groaned audibly.

Jack, meanwhile, stared at Mac and Riley incredulously. How had they not gotten that?

Thornton raised an amused eyebrow at him.

*Crocodile Dundee* was released six years before Mac and Riley were born, Jack.’

Jack’s eyes widened further, as Matty smirked at him, her hands on her hips.

‘You’re getting old, Dalton!’

Jack was just about to retort that if he was getting old, so were Matty and Patty, but thought better of it.

One did not say that to women.

Especially not these women.

He liked his limbs where they were and how they were, and he also liked being alive.

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**PHOENIX JET**

**SOMEWHERE OVER THE PACIFIC OCEAN**

**ON-ROUTE TO MELBOURNE, AUSTRALIA**

‘…What I’m saying, man, is that we better get some time to go for a kangaroo ride.’

Mac huffed out a very long-suffering sigh.

‘Jack, they don’t ride kangaroos in Australia.’

Similarly, everything was not upside down, toilets did not flush the opposite way because they were in the Southern Hemisphere, drop bears weren’t real, and Australians, unlike what Jack claimed, did not throw shrimp on the barbecue, they barbecued prawns (which were what Americans called shrimp – Australians called smaller forms of those crustaceans shrimp). Koalas weren’t bears, Australians didn’t live off Vegemite (the Internet informed him that the reason why many foreigners disliked it was because they put an excessive quantity on toast, but Mac personally wasn’t keen to give it a go regardless), and while Australia had many dangerous creatures, they were practically certainly not going to be killed by one, especially given that Melbourne was a very urban city of about 4.5 million people.

Riley looked up from her laptop and at Jack, rolling her eyes.

‘Melbourne’s just another large, modern city in a Western liberal democracy. It’s not going to be that different from home, Jack.’

Mac pointed at Riley and nodded, as Bozer looked a little sad.

‘*Come on*, we’re flying sixteen hours and we might not even see any kangaroos?’

Both Mac and Riley nodded. Riley reached out and patted Bozer’s arm comfortably and Mac gave a
little shrug.

‘Sorry, Boze, but that seems pretty likely.’

Bozer’s face fell and Jack shook his head.

‘Seriously, man, don’t tell me that Australia’s just like home, I wanted something, I dunno, exotic and interesting!’

Riley snorted and spoke, her tone snarky.

‘Don’t get enough adventure as it is at work, old man?’

Jack shot her a look.

‘Adrenaline keeps you young, Riles!’

Mac shook his head, but took pity on Jack and Bozer.

‘Well, Australia did once declare war on emus…and lost.’

Bozer, Jack and Riley stared at him, unblinking for a moment, then all looked very incredulous.

‘No.’

‘No way, Mac.’

‘You’re messing with us, brother.’

Mac shook his head with a little smirk.

‘No, I’m telling the truth. In 1932, Australia declared war on emus in a district of Western Australia. Despite valiant efforts on the part of the Royal Australian Artillery, the emus were victorious.’

Jack shook his head as Bozer stared at Mac as if he’d grown a second head.

‘Mac, bro, that’s just…unbelievable! If I made a movie with that plot, everybody would say it’s ludicrous!’

Mac spread his palms wide with a shrug.

‘Well, you know what they say: the truth’s stranger than fiction, Boze.’

Riley, meanwhile, was typing frantically on her laptop. She made a noise of surprise, and turned her laptop screen to face Jack and Bozer, where they could see the Wikipedia page for the Great Emu War.

It was real.

Jack, Bozer and Riley all stared at each other for a long moment, then looked back at Mac, who was smirking, then burst into hysterical laughter.

Mac smiled, shaking his head with a little chuckle at their reaction, as the paperclip in his hands took the shape of an emu.

I suppose the question now is: why do I know about the Great Emu War?
The answer: I was bored.

I’ll read just about anything when I’m bored.

I know the ingredients lists of most common children’s breakfast cereals sold in the mid-90s because I used to get bored when Mom took me grocery shopping.

They’ve yet to come in handy, but you never know…maybe I’ll use that information one day.

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HOTEL ROOM

OAKS ON COLLINS

(A HOTEL IN MELBOURNE’S CBD)

MELBOURNE

AUSTRALIA

…Their football coverage ain’t even on football.’

Jack made a face as he skimmed a local newspaper, The Age. Riley was working on a cover for Mac and Jack, who were going to pose as potential buyers, making certain posts on the conventional web, and even a couple of posts on the Dark Web, slowly building up a profile so that they could then approach Russell, while Bozer got together disguises for them (they knew The Organization knew exactly what they looked like; they thus had to assume that Russell did too).

Mac, who was assembling a security system (Jack was just pretending he wasn’t seeing this; expense reports were even worse when they weren’t on US soil), looked up at Jack with a roll of his eyes.

‘Jack, we’re in Australia. Their coverage is going to be on Australian rules football, which honestly, uses the feet more than American football, so is probably better described as football…’ He trailed off and smirked at Jack. ‘Besides, didn’t you want something exotic?’

Jack huffed.

‘I like my football just as it is. Just as it should be.’ He returned to reading the Sports section, then after a moment, looked up and smirked. ‘Hey, Mac, don’t know why, but there’s all these guys called Angus in here. Angus Monfries, Angus Brayshaw…’ He flipped back to the serious news section. ‘…and even the Chief of the Army here’s called Angus.’ The smirk widened as Mac shook his head. ‘You’re finally where you belong, brother!’

Bozer and Riley both looked up, Bozer grinning teasingly and Riley smirking, and Mac shook his head again, simply turning back to his security system.

When I was seven, I wanted to move to Australia.

What Jack’s going on about was one of the reasons why.

Evidently, I failed in my attempt to convince my dad that we should make the move.

That obviously worked out for the best, but I was very annoyed at the time.

He sighed internally as Jack, Bozer and Riley snickered.
A little bit like I am now.

Riley straightened up and made a noise of triumph, throwing her hands up. Bozer reached out and fist-bumped her with a smile, then turned his attention back to the wig he was perfecting.

‘Got it!’ She turned to Mac and Jack. ‘You’ve got a breakfast meeting with Russell tomorrow morning at the Grand Hyatt.’

Both of them smiled, and Jack reached out to high-five Riley.

‘Great work, Ri.’ Then, after a moment, he made a face. ‘We’re not gonna have to eat that Vegemite stuff, are we, brother?’

Mac resisted the urge to pull out his own hair.

HOTEL RESTAURANT
GRAND HYATT
MELBOURNE
AUSTRALIA

Mac, now with green eyes, glasses and a different nose and chin, as well as a tan, and Jack, with a different hairline, a beard, and a new nose, sat in the restaurant, drinking coffee (it was very different coffee from back home, but really rather good) and nibbling pastries, a newspaper spread in front of each of them. Both of them wore lounge suits (Jack’s was grey and Mac’s blue), but no ties.

Jack leaned over to whisper to his partner, indicating his watch subtly.

‘He’s late, brother. Real late.’

Mac nodded, a very bad feeling settling in his stomach.

Russell was almost an hour late for this meeting. This went far beyond some surveillance to make sure they were who they said they were; he’d either made them and fled…or something had happened to him.

The latter was more responsible for the very bad feeling in Mac’s gut, in all honesty.

Jack pulled out his phone and spoke quietly.

‘Riles, can you work out which room Russell’s in?’

KIRK RUSSELL’S HOTEL ROOM
GRAND HYATT
MELBOURNE
AUSTRALIA
Jack kept watch as Mac did his thing to the electronic lock on the hotel room door.

‘You nearly done, brother? These fancy hotels just make me feel antsy; you know I’m not really a fancy hotel kind of guy.’

Mac didn’t look up, but he responded without really thinking.

‘Yeah, you and me both, Jack.’

Mac did something (Jack wasn’t really sure what it was) and the light in the lock turned green. Mac pocketed his Swiss Army knife and the hotel business card he’d swiped from the front desk, and carefully opened the door, as Jack put his hand on his gun, ready to draw it. (He didn’t want to in the corridor, even if it was empty, not wanting it to end up on security cameras.)

The small hotel room, they very quickly found, was devoid of anyone.

Well, anyone living.

Kirk Russell was lying on the bed, clearly dead.

Jack put his gun back into the holster, looking grim and exchanging a glance with his partner, who looked just as grim, if not a bit grimmer.

Mac, who’d been checking the man’s vital signs as Jack cleared the room, carefully turned over the body and started examining it.

As Jack watched and called Riley, putting his phone on speaker, Mac’s attention zeroed in on Russell’s neck. He pulled out his Swiss Army knife and took out the magnifying glass, and put a knee on the bed and leaned forward to better examine it. Then, Mac sighed and shook his head, even grimmer, and turned to Jack, holding out the magnifying glass to the older man.

Jack took it and examined Russell’s neck as Mac explained.

‘He was poisoned. From the appearance of the body, I’d say it was abrin if I had to make a guess.’

Mac pointed to the region that Jack was examining under the magnifying glass. There was a very small mark, about mole-sized, there. ‘Insertion of a small ball-bearing containing the poison under the skin was the method of delivery.’

Jack nodded, very solemnly, and swallowed.

‘Soviet-era method of delivering toxins, very discreet, and hard for the victim to feel or notice.’

Mac, too, nodded, as Riley and Bozer spoke up over Jack’s phone.

‘So somebody assassinated him.’

‘And of course the number one suspect, hell, the only suspect, is The Organization.’

Mac and Jack exchanged a very serious, very grim look. Jack spoke, as Mac turned away from the body and started searching the room for the intel that Russell was going to sell. (He was pretty sure he wasn’t going to find it, that the killer had taken it, but it was better to be sure.)

‘Yeah, Boze, looks that way.’

Jack glanced concernedly over at Mac.
They all knew what effect even a hint of The Organization’s involvement had on the blonde, and this was a hell of a lot more than a hint.

Mac didn’t look up, just kept searching, getting a little frantic and frustrated as he pulled out drawers.

Internally, Jack sighed.

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**HOTEL ROOM**

**OAKS ON COLLINS**

**MELBOURNE**

**AUSTRALIA**

‘…There’s not much on his phone; it’s a burner, just one call, and I’m pretty sure it’s a butt dial.’

They’d found Russell’s phone, but, as they’d suspected, the intel was gone. Taken by whomever had killed Russell.

Taken back by The Organization, who’d obviously killed their discovered mole to get back the intel he’d stolen.

The one call had contained absolutely nothing, just some background noise. Bozer had also tried calling the number and gotten a seventeen-year-old girl in a rural town in the north of the state.

That was clearly a dead end.

Mac paced around the room, fiddling with a paperclip.

‘Abrin poisoning kills in about 36 hours, but symptoms only start to show at about 24 hours, usually…’ He ran a hand through his hair. ‘Riley, can you get footage of Russell about 37, 38 hours ago?’

The hacker nodded and started typing, as a video feed appeared on her laptop screen.

Mac stopped pacing and made his way over to watch over her shoulder, along with Jack, as Bozer scooted his chair over, closer to Riley.

They watched as Russell walked down a busy street in Melbourne’s CBD.

‘Stop there, please.’ Riley paused the video on her laptop screen, which showed Russell in the hotel’s lobby 37.5 hours ago, as Mac and Jack examined it more closely, then they both nodded (Mac a second before Jack), and the blonde continued. ‘That’s the right angle. That’s the assassin.’

He pointed to the tall woman in a very smart blazer who’d just bumped into Russell at just the right angle, and in just the right position, to inject him with the poisoned ball-bearing.

Unfortunately, her face was not visible, and the stylish hat she was wearing obscured even her hair. They had a vague notion of her skin tone and her height, but nothing more.

Riley nodded, fingernails starting to clack on her keyboard, as Bozer grabbed his own laptop, which had a live feed of the Grand Hyatt’s foyer on it, and rewound the footage, both of them looking for
the woman on the security camera feeds.

A couple of minutes later, both of them sat back and shook their heads, frustrated.

‘She’s good. And I’m talking real good.’

Riley gestured to her laptop screen.

‘She knows how to avoid the cameras. That shot with her poisoning Russell is the best one we’ve got of her. She managed to disappear.’

Mac and Jack exchanged a glance, then looked back at Bozer and Riley, Jack swearing under his breath. Mac pulled a paperclip from his pocket, which took the shape of the assassin’s hat.

‘She had to go to his room to retrieve the intel. Riley-‘

‘On it, Mac.’

The hacker was nodding and already pulling up the feed from the security camera nearest Russell’s room.

They watched in silence for a moment, before Mac pointed to a woman pushing a housekeeping cart and dressed in a housekeeper’s uniform, the timestamp on the footage indicating that it was not even half an hour before Mac and Jack had been in Russell’s hotel room.

‘There. That’s her.’

Jack, Bozer and Riley all stared at the woman for a moment.

‘You sure, bro? I mean, she’s walking differently and everything…’

This woman looked exhausted and worn down and seemed to walk as if she didn’t want you to see her; the assassin strutted around as if she owned the place.

The skin tones didn’t even seen to match, and while the housekeeper was tall, she didn’t seem nearly as tall as the assassin.

Mac nodded firmly.

‘Yeah. Height and skin tone match, just doesn’t look it because of the camera angles, her changed posture and the different lighting.’ He glanced at Jack, who shook his head and started swearing repeatedly under his breath, then looked back at Riley, who was nodding grimly, and Bozer, who looked like he knew what was coming but was hoping desperately that he was wrong. ‘We’re dealing with somebody who really knows what they’re doing; a serious pro.’

He pulled out another paperclip and started re-shaping it, as Jack affected an almost-comical disappointed expression, accompanied with a dramatic sigh.

‘Guess we’re not going to get to see any kangaroos then.’

That got a slight chuckle from Bozer and a fond eye-roll and head-shake from Riley and a tiny smile from his partner, so Jack counted that as a win.

FEDERATION SQUARE
Without any other leads, Mac and Jack, still in disguise, were re-tracing Russell’s steps, using what little Riley could glean from his phone, and the stalking of Russell that Riley (with Bozer’s help) was doing using any type of footage she could find of him (CCTV, ATM cameras, traffic cameras, people’s social media posts…).

They figured that it was likely that the assassin had been following him for some time, and were hoping that she’d shown her face at some point, figuring that nobody could be that good so as to completely avoid all the cameras in Melbourne’s CBD. They also figured that even she couldn’t have fled too far in about an hour and a half.

Besides, things were never simple when The Organization was involved.

Mac had a feeling that this wasn’t just a simple assassination and intel retrieval; that there was more to this, but he wasn’t sure if he was being paranoid because of all the other encounters he’d had with The Organization. (He figured that not everything they did could be extremely convoluted; they did have to do simple things from time to time, didn’t they?)

Unfortunately, there were lots of holes in his trail, which was where Mac and Jack came in, on the ground so that Jack could use his AMOS skills to fill in those blanks, with help from Mac and his very unique skill-set.

Jack looked up at the busy, grand, but somewhat run-down train station across the road, then down the busy street, devoid of cars, but with plenty of trams and pedestrians, that ran past the square.

He gestured to Mac, and with a nod, the blonde followed his partner as Jack made his way across the pedestrian crossing and down the busy road (the street sign showed that its name was Swanston Street), walking past the spectacular church on the corner. Mac spoke into his phone as they walked.

‘Riley, he probably went down Swanston St, towards the CBD.’

There was the sound of her nails clacking on her keyboard again, then she replied.

‘Alright, I’ve found him again. Outside City Square; it’s essentially a giant construction site, you can’t miss it…’

‘…No dice, Mac.’ Security cameras had captured Russell on the steps outside the library, but hadn’t, unfortunately, captured any sign of the assassin, beyond a glimpse of what might have been her hat, and that was assuming that she was wearing the same clothes as in the hotel lobby. ‘And I’ve lost him again, guys.’

Jack nodded as Riley finished speaking and turned away to discern which way Russell might have gone; it was no more than educated guessing, but it’d stood them in good stead so far.
After a moment, Jack pointed towards a building with strange green blobs on its side. The signage indicated that it was part of RMIT University’s campus.

‘That way.’ He jogged Mac, who was lost in thought, and, Jack could tell, worrying his big brain about The Organization and its seriously big and seriously complicated plan and endgame, with his elbow. ‘Come on, brother, keep up!’

He started walking away, and with a little huff and a very wan smile, Mac followed.

_He’s silly and ridiculous half the time and he believes in voodoo and magic and can’t remember the difference between Nostradamus and Nosferatu or Nefertiti and nefarious – at least he seems not to be able to; I still think he’s faking it half the time – and he’s far too interested in my love life and believes all the ludicrous myths about Australia…but I really hope that Jack never changes._

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**OUTSIDE THE CHEMISTRY BUILDING**

**UNIVERSITY OF MELBOURNE**

**MELBOURNE**

**AUSTRALIA**

Despite the situation, Mac couldn’t help but give a small smile as a couple of students walked by, hotly debating quantum mechanics, as his partner shook his head and mouthed _crazy_ at Mac’s reaction to what sounded like gibberish to him.

They’d traced Russell’s steps all the way to the university (he’d been here presumably meeting a potential buyer two days ago, just before he’d been poisoned - Mac conceded that it was actually quite a good meeting place for him to meet a potential buyer; it was during semester and there were people everywhere, no-one would notice that he didn’t fit in – given the variety of accents he heard, nobody would even consider his American accent to be all that out of place, certainly nothing to be suspicious over), but Riley had lost him somewhere around here.

His eyes fell on the strange building just across from the Chemistry building, which had a few archways underneath it. As he watched, a female student staggered a little as she walked under the building (the signage on it said it was the Raymond Priestly building), buffeted by the wind.

Mac took a step towards it, and spoke to Riley on his phone as he did so.

‘Riley, can you play Russell’s phone call for me? And look up the prevailing wind direction here when he was here?’

He could practically hear the confusion in her voice, but she did it anyway.

‘Alright, playing now, Mac…’ Mac listened to it, nodded, and then Riley replied to his question. ‘And it was North-North-East.’ He glanced up at the sky for a second, licking a finger and holding it up to test the wind direction, then nodded again, and made his way under the Raymond Priestly building.

Jack followed, looking rather confused.
‘Brother-‘

Mac gestured at the building that they were now standing under, their suit jackets billowing in the wind.

‘This is essentially a wind tunnel, Jack.’ He gestured to his phone. ‘It’s a distinctive sound, and Russell was standing right here during the second half of his accidental phone call.’ Mac spoke more clearly into his phone as Jack smiled, glad that Mac’s brain was at least functioning to pretty close to full capacity, despite his preoccupation. ‘Riley?’

The hacker responded a moment later.

‘Yeah, I got that Mac.’ She let out a noise of triumph, and there was the sound of a high-five, then Riley continued. ‘I’ve got her!’

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HOTEL ROOM
OAKS ON COLLINS
MELBOURNE
AUSTRALIA

‘She’s known as Delilah, and she’s an assassin for hire.’ It’d taken a lot of digging, including some stuff that was technically illegal (Thornton would cover for her) and snooping through the Dark Web, but Riley’s laptop screen showed several photos of a woman, varying in age from late-twenties to late-thirties, and varying in quality. The most recent-looking one was the one taken at the University of Melbourne. In the photos, she had different hairstyles and very different clothing and postures, but the structure of her face, her skin tone and her height showed she was the same person. ‘Those are all the photos of her face that have ever been taken.’ Riley typed for a moment, and a large number of documents emblazoned with most wanted appeared on the screen. ‘She’s wanted by Interpol, the police of at least six countries…’

Bozer glanced over at Mac and Jack. The former was pacing with a paperclip in hand, the latter sitting on the edge of the bed. Bozer spoke.

‘She’s basically gender-swapped Murdoc.’

Jack made a face, while Mac’s jaw tightened ever-so-slightly. He shoved the paperclip back in his pocket.

‘The Organization hired her.’

It was a statement, not a question, and something that they all knew to be true, despite the fact that it was quite possible that a potential buyer might have assassinated Russell and stolen the intel to avoid paying him.

They just knew.

This had The Organization’s fingerprints all over it.

At that moment, Riley’s laptop made a noise that signalled an incoming video call, and she answered it.
Matty appeared on the screen, looking very serious.

‘Russell was killed by an assassin known as Delilah. She was hired by The Organization–‘

They all glanced at one another as she spoke, then Jack interrupted her, speaking for all of them, sounding a little weary.

‘We know, Matty.’ Then, a slightly-forced smirk appeared on his face. ‘You’re getting slow, Matty!’

Matty simply smirked right back at him, crossing her arms.

‘Oh, who got run out against the NSA Listening Post #27 Panthers for the third time last week?’

Riley snorted, and Bozer pointed at Jack, a small, wry smile on his face.

‘She’s got you there, man.’

Meanwhile, Mac simply paced around the room, deep in the rabbit hole of his mind, a paperclip constantly changing shape in his hands.

Bozer, Jack, Riley and Matty simply exchanged a worried look, before Matty nodded once at them and hung up.

Riley and Bozer shared another worried glance as Jack sighed internally, as the paperclip in Mac’s hands took the shape of a pair of scissors.

FIFTEENTH FLOOR OF A HIGH-RISE APARTMENT BUILDING

MIDDLE OF THE CBD

MELBOURNE

AUSTRALIA

Riley, through some very resourceful digging, had managed to locate where Delilah was staying, hence, Mac and Jack were loitering in the corridor just outside her apartment. They’d changed into another set of disguises, courtesy of Bozer (Mac now had a man-bun, something which annoyed him to no end – and amused Jack to no end.).

*I’m usually the sort of guy who’ll do almost anything for the mission, but this might be crossing one of my lines.*

*It’s certainly going to haunt me.*

*Especially if that look on Jack’s face means what I think it means.*

Jack was ranting at an imaginary wife (the person on the other end of the line was really Riley), who was mad at him because of his business trip to Australia, while Mac, standing at the other end of the corridor, was pretending to text somebody, laughing occasionally as he lounged around, holding a bunch of roses, pretending to be waiting to surprise a date.

They’d been there for fifteen minutes when Delilah’s door opened, and the woman, now dressed in sneakers, leggings and a casual jacket over a tunic with a large pair of sunglasses obscuring her face, stepped outside.
She glanced at Mac and Jack, seemingly casually, and through some kind of sixth sense that so many professionals in their field (both good and bad guys) had, seemed to realize who they were, and literally bolted towards the fire stairs.

Mac and Jack bolted after her, Jack shoving his phone back into his pocket, but Mac keeping hold of the bunch of roses, thinking that he might be able to do something with them.

As they hurried down the stairs, Mac before Jack, after the assassin, Jack grumbled.

‘My knees are not going to thank me for this…’

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**FIRE STAIRS**

**SECOND FLOOR OF A HIGH-RISE APARTMENT BUILDING**

**MIDDLE OF THE CBD**

**MELBOURNE**

**AUSTRALIA**

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As they kept chasing Delilah, Mac paused and peered over the railing, down towards the next floor, as Jack continued pursuing the assassin. He watched and waited, doing calculations in his head, until she was in position, then threw the bouquet of roses.

The assassin tripped and tumbled down the flight of stairs, out of his view, and Jack’s view, then Mac jogged down the stairs to join Jack, who glanced at him with a small smirk as they both rushed down the stairs, taking them two at a time.

‘Tell me that’s not how you usually give a lady flowers, brother.’

Mac just shot him a look.

*My grandfather raised me properly, thank you very much.*

*I know the proper way to give flowers to a lady. Knock politely on her door before your date – never be early, but never be late, either – of course, it goes without saying that you’re supposed to pick her up - and present the flowers – which must not be dead, must be themselves aesthetically pleasing, must be aesthetically-pleasingly wrapped, and ideally should be her favourite - possibly with a kiss on the knuckles, cheek or lips, depending on the lady and what date it is.*

*Just like I know that a gentleman always walks a lady back to her door after said date, and gives her a kiss goodnight, but never, ever kisses a lady on the lips on the first date.*

---

As Mac and Jack reached the bottom of the fire stairs moments later, they didn’t find a slightly-dazed assassin.

They did find a much-mangled bunch of roses, but no assassin.

Both of them swore, and Jack pulled out his phone again, as Mac looked frantically around (there were a couple of doors, including one leading to the carpark).
This situation was all-too-similar to another incident that they’d all much rather forget.

‘Riley, we lost her—’

‘Door on the left, then make a right.’

Mac pushed the door open, as Jack replied, following Mac outside on to the street.

‘Thanks, Ri.’

ALLEYWAY
MIDDLE OF THE CBD
MELBOURNE
AUSTRALIA

Jack and Mac half-leapt over a table, quickly apologizing to the diners seated at the table, as they chased Delilah through the crowded alleyway, full of tables and heaters and diners and waiters.

Mac swerved to avoid crashing into a waiter juggling three plates of pasta, then pushed himself a little harder to try and make up ground on the assassin.

ANOTHER ALLEYWAY
MIDDLE OF THE CBD
MELBOURNE
AUSTRALIA

‘Next left!’

Riley’s voice rang out over Jack’s phone, and Mac and Jack turned into the next laneway they came upon, which was full of graffiti and garbage bins and had a dead end.

There was no sign, however, of Delilah.

Jack pulled out his gun, as Mac pulled out his Swiss Army knife and looked around. He looked up, and out of the corner of his eye, spotted movement on a fire escape.

‘Jack—’

Just then, the assassin dropped almost on top of Mac’s partner, who, thanks to his warning, managed to roll away from her grasp slightly, though he was taken to the ground.

As the assassin and Jack both quickly recovered, Mac seized a large plastic bag of trash and swung it at her, almost as if he was in a pillow fight, which had the intended effect of pushing her towards the wall as she darted away to avoid it, giving Jack a chance to act.

Jack attempted to thump her on the chin using the butt of his gun, but she managed to duck out of the
way, kicking the gun out of his hands and sending it through the air, until it landed about ten feet away with a clatter.

Jack winced, then formed his slightly-sore right hand into a fist instead, as Delilah failed to avoid the wheelie bin that Mac pushed at her, but recovered admirably (or at least admirably if they weren’t trying to take her down). The former CIA agent darted around her, fists raised, intending to keep her distracted and to get her to put her back to Mac, so that his partner could act.

That mostly worked, because the assassin did indeed turn away from Mac, as Jack swung a series of punches at her that only connected as glancing blows.

The blonde took advantage of that, and quick as a flash, grabbed Delilah’s jacket, twisting it in such a way to trap the assassin in her own clothing.

The trapped assassin, however, did not give up, struggling strongly and forcing Mac towards one of the alley’s brick walls, before pushing off the ground, jumping up and thrusting Mac into the brick wall, at the same time kicking Jack hard in the diaphragm.

Mac’s head bounced off the brick, making his ears ring for a second, and Jack fell to the ground with a nasty thump. Delilah took advantage of their momentary distraction by undoing the zip on her jacket to free herself, then ran back out of the alleyway.

Jack groaned, and Mac, his ears still ringing a little, staggered over to his partner, nudging him in the shoulder with a hand, and rolling him over.

‘Jack? Jack, are you alright?’

Jack groaned, clutching at his ribs, then gestured frantically towards the alleyway entrance.

‘Yeah, go get her, Mac…I’ll follow in a sec…’

Mac didn’t need to be told twice; he rushed out of the alleyway, turning left just like Delilah had.

He couldn’t see her, but he ran for the entire block at top speed, still holding her jacket, before he came to a crossroads, where he stopped and looked both ways frantically, trying to spot the assassin, a sinking feeling growing in him as every second passed.

Jack caught up with him, holding his phone to his mouth.

‘Riley-‘

The hacker’s response was immediate, her voice frustrated and a little apologetic.

‘I lost her, guys.’

Mac and Jack both swore, Mac fisting his hand in the assassin’s jacket, knowing, just as Riley knew, that they wouldn’t find her again.

She was too good.

Mac’s brow furrowed as his fist closed on something small and hard.

He reached into a concealed pocket in the jacket, and pulled out a USB.

He had no way of knowing this for sure, yet as soon as he pulled it out, he knew exactly what was on it.
He held it up to Jack, who swallowed, looking even grimmer, and Mac knew his partner knew exactly what was on the USB too.

*She was too good for us on unfamiliar territory, territory that I’d venture she knows much better than we do.*

*Yet...we recovered the intel.*

*It wouldn’t have been hard for her to take it with her.*

*I suppose The Organization already has this intel, but even so, why let the USB fall into our hands? Why give us a chance to know what they know? Why give us a chance to possibly learn more about how they do things, more about them? I think I know the answer, and I don’t like it.*

*This is part of their plan.*

*Part of their twisted game.*

*Another one of their tests.*

Mac looked down at the USB in his hands again. This, he felt, was some kind of prize in this twisted game.

*This time, we passed.*

*I passed.*

He closed his fist over the little data stick.

*But what will happen if I fail?*

---

**PHOENIX JET**

**SOMEWHERE OVER THE PACIFIC OCEAN**

**ON-ROUTE TO LA**

On the jet home, Bozer, Riley and Jack exchanged several concerned looks.

Mac didn’t notice, which spoke volumes for how lost in his mind he was.

The mission hadn’t been a complete failure.

In fact, it’d been moderately successful.

Kirk Russell, although they’d have preferred to capture him alive, to interrogate him for what he knew, was no longer in the wind.

Besides, how much new useful intel he had was questionable, with so many other Organization moles already identified, arrested and thoroughly interrogated. (And, they knew from that experience, The Organization kept their moles pretty in the dark; they’d recovered precious little intel
from the captured moles.)

They’d recovered the intel, and while they knew that The Organization had a copy, they also knew that it hadn’t found its way into the hands of other hostiles.

Riley, Lil, Viv and the Phoenix’s analysts could also now analyse the USB for any information about The Organization.

They were also well-aware that The Organization may well have laid traps for them on the USB, among the intel, and would keep their eyes wide open for such.

Still, as always, The Organization’s involvement made him very, very uneasy.

There was no rational reason for him to think this, but somewhere, deep inside his mind, the thought that it was all going to come to a head very, very soon took root.

Bozer, Riley and Jack exchanged another concerned glance in a long line of concerned glances, and then Jack shook his head minutely and decided to do something about it.

He pulled out his phone and brought up a picture of Mac with a man-bun, and showed it to Riley (who’d been very, very busy while Bozer was disguising Mac and Jack, conferencing with Matty, Lil, Viv and Thornton and thus hadn’t had a good look), nudging Bozer as he did so. Jack smirked as he spoke loudly.

‘Reckon Beth would like to see a picture of Mac’s man-bun?’

Bozer gave a chuckle that sounded a bit forced, slapping his thigh a couple of times with a hand, as Riley gave a snort that didn’t seem entirely genuine.

Mac, pulled out of the rabbit warren in his mind, at least temporarily, rolled his eyes and shook his head with no small amount of fondness…and no small amount of annoyance.

_I appreciate it, I really do._

_And of course, it goes without saying, I appreciate them too. More than I could possibly describe._

_Still...why are they so interested in my only-just-barely-non-existent – and I’m not admitting that out loud, even under torture - love life?_

_There are far more interesting things to talk about._

MACGYVER’S RESIDENCE

LA

With a soft little smile, Mac pocketed the key that had been lying on his desk since the night before and slipped out of his room, walking into the kitchen where Beth was putting down the large square box she’d brought with her and just taken out of the bag it’d been in.

Bozer and Riley were standing outside, grilling (tonight’s dinner menu included grilled shrimp, because Jack had an odd sense of humour), while Jack was picking up Patricia, since her car was in the shop, so they were the only ones in the house.

He pulled the key out of his pocket and handed it to her with a smile, and she took it, looking up at
him and returning that smile as he spoke.

‘You don’t have to knock.’ Her smile widened a little bit more, while his turned a bit sheepish. ‘I’m sorry, I intended to give you that a while ago, but…’ He trailed off, somewhat awkwardly.

Beth just gave a little chuckle, looking down at the key for a moment as she laughed, then looked back up at him, a teasing little grin on her face.

‘Well, better late than never, and I think it’d be very unwise for a secret agent for the US government to have the key to his house duplicated in Russia.’ The grin grew a little wider. ‘Besides, I don’t think you’d have had time to seek out a locksmith.’ Her expression turned more serious. ‘No apology necessary, Mac. It’s not your fault you spent two weeks in Russia, then got sent to Australia only three days after you’d gotten back!’ He’d planned to duplicate the key while going grocery shopping the day he got sent to Russia (which obviously had never happened), and he’d actually duplicated the key during those three days he’d spent back at home, and intended to give it to her when she came back with Bozer and Riley after their shopping trip, which instead had to be cut short so that they could go to Australia to pursue Russell. Then, a soft little smile grew on her face, and she gestured to his home in general. ‘Besides, I feel very welcome here already.’

He, too, smiled softly at her, then, after they stared at one another for a fraction longer than they should have (both kicked themselves internally for being awkward, and Beth’s cheeks pinked and his ears turned a little red), he pointed to the box on the kitchen counter.

‘What’s in there?’

She beamed as she opened the box.

‘Pumpkin pie.’

His brow furrowed (it was the middle of October), and then he glanced over at her, a teasing expression on his face.

‘I think you’re mixing up your holidays, Beth. Thanksgiving isn’t for another six weeks.’

She narrowed her eyes at him and jabbed at his chest with her pointer finger.

‘Firstly, pumpkin pie is amazing and hence should be a perfectly acceptable foodstuff all year round. Secondly, it’s a spooky pumpkin pie for Halloween. I’m practicing!’

His grin widening, he reached into the box and pulled out the pie, which was decorated with meringue ghosts, and laughed as he set it down on the kitchen counter.

‘Oh, very spooky!’

Beth poked him in the chest.

‘Mock it again, and no pie for you!’

Still grinning, Mac raised his hands in the air.

‘Woah, not mocking!’ The grin turned a little more wry. ‘Besides, that’d be cruel and unusual punishment.’

She raised an eyebrow at him.

‘Don’t they teach you to withstand torture in spy school?’
Mac shook his head, the grin turning into something a bit more like a smirk.

‘Not something as terrible as denial of pie!’

Out on the deck, Riley and Bozer exchanged knowing looks, watching the two of them laughing in the kitchen through the glass door, listening in on their conversation (in the least creepy way possible) through the slight opening in the door.

With a smile, Bozer reached out and put his arm around his girlfriend’s waist, pulling her close.

‘Remember when we were just starting out and realizing that there was something there and were all cute and sweet and adorable like that?’

Riley pulled away a little to stare incredulously at him.

‘Bozer, we were never like that.’

She leaned over to kiss him on the cheek as he looked a little put-out and rather confused, then gestured with her head back inside, where Mac was telling Beth a story about Archimedes (his childhood dog, not the Ancient Greek scientist).

Bozer actually gave a happy, proud sigh, and, Riley swore, sniffled slightly.

‘He’s come so far since Darlene Martin…’ He glanced back at Riley. ‘I think I’ve got a second OTP.’

He didn’t need to explain which couple the first one was; even if Riley refused to use the term OTP, she definitely agreed with the sentiment (she’d started it, after all, and the two of them were now working on converting Mac – and more recently, Beth – to their way of thinking).

Riley snorted and shook her head, but tucked herself a little closer to him anyway.

‘You know, by definition, you can only have one OTP, right?’

The look that Bozer shot her in response was so murderous that Riley decided that a change in topic (to avoid poking the bear further) was necessary.

‘So, how are the Halloween costumes coming?’

Bozer always picked a theme, and made the costumes, and as the costume-maker, he had the privilege of determining what everyone else was going to be. (Except her; she got to pick, because she was the costume-maker’s girlfriend.)

This year’s theme was monsters, and Bozer was going to be a ghoul, and Riley had picked a banshee. She didn’t yet know who everyone else was going to be.

Bozer grinned knowingly at her, but let the topic change as he turned over the shrimp skewers.

‘Well, I’m thinking Dr Frankenstein for Mac, and of course, Frankenstein’s Monster for Jack, and I’m thinking Beth would make a pretty good Corpse Bride…’ He turned over the corn and then glanced back at her. ‘You think we can get Patricia to come this year?’

Bozer had been very put-out last year when Patricia had refused to come to Penny’s Halloween party, because they’d done The Martian last year, and she’d have been the perfect Lewis.
Riley shook her head, sipping at her beer.

‘Sorry, Boze, but that’s not going to happen.’

There was absolutely no way that Patricia was going to dress up as a monster for Penny’s Halloween party, let alone go.

There was no such thing as Halloween miracles, after all.

Chapter End Notes

How’d you like the gang’s trip to my hometown? Yay? Nay? Did I get the balance of silly and serious right in this episode? Is everyone laughing at the image of Mac with a man-bun and looking grumpy about it? What did you think about Bozer and Riley’s shipping shenanigans?

Most of the stuff about Australian stereotypes and what it’s like in comparison to the US (at least, what Melbourne is like compared to the US) is based off my own experiences (I lived in the US for a while as a child, before moving to Melbourne). The Great Emu War is a real historical event, and my brother’s class even covered it in history lessons (as a joke).

The joke about the name Angus come from the fact that Angus is actually a very common name in Australia (I’ve had at least two teachers/professors called Angus, and I know/know of many people about my age called Angus, there are several Australian football players – including the mentioned Angus Brayshaw and Angus Monfries, called Angus, etc.). If Mac were Australian, there’s a fairly decent chance that he’d call himself/be called Angus, though with Australians’ penchant for nicknames and how common the name is (a friend, for example, went to a co-educational school with 150 students in his year level, of which 4 were called Angus), people might still call him Mac to avoid confusion (that is what was done with the 4 Anguses at my friend’s school; they went by surname). It’s implied in the show that he was teased for the name, which would have never happened here.

The method of Russell’s murder is very similar to a method used in an episode of NCIS, in which Tony falls in love with a journalist dying of ricin poisoning.

I’m on my mid-semester break this week (it’s not much of a break; I’ve still got lots of work to do), but I do have a little more time to write this week, so if you’ve got a request *hint, hint* for Somewhere in the Middle, this is a good time for it!

Next episode: 2.20, Pool Cue. Jack, Mac, Riley and Bozer are sent to provide protection detail for and to investigate a threat against a US Senator. As usual, Mac has to improvise his way through something new, with a little help from his friends.
Pool Cue

Chapter Summary

Jack, Mac, Riley and Bozer are sent to provide protection detail for and to investigate a threat against a US Senator. As usual, Mac has to improvise his way, through something new, with a little help from his friends.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

BREAK ROOM

PHOENIX FOUNDATION HEADQUARTERS

SOMewhere IN LA

Jack shook his head as he watched Mac and Alex play a game of pool against one another. Alex had just made a shot that seemed almost impossible, and Mac, after a moment of consideration, was currently bending over the table, making his own shot.

The Edwards team had just returned from almost three weeks undercover, and had stayed overnight in the Phoenix’s bunkrooms, having gotten in very late at night. Mac, Bozer, Jack and Riley had returned just that morning from a very easy and straightforward surveillance mission, and now, the two teams were hanging out in the break room.

Rowena, Riley, Carter, Bozer and May were chatting and occasionally calling out encouragement to Mac or Alex, and Nick and Jack both shook their heads as they watched.

‘He always beats me.’ Jack gestured at the pool table. ‘I’m glad Alex can give him a run for his money; knock him off his high horse.’

Nick chuckled.

‘Flyboy’s real good at pool.’ A smirk grew on his face. ‘He uses his skills to hustle unsuspecting people, and to pick up women.’ The smirk grew more wry. ‘Says the hustling worked easier ten years ago, but picking up women goes much better now.’

Jack laughed and shook his head (Mac would not take up hustling people, he knew, and he also wasn’t the type to try and pick up random women…though Jack had also been witness to a couple of pool games between Mac and Nikki that made him wish that brain bleach was a thing – obviously even more now, since the woman was Mac’s evil ex-girlfriend and all.), as Bozer sidled up to him, smirking and waggling his eyebrows.

‘We should totally get Beth to come watch.’

Jack grinned and pulled out his phone, as Nick gestured to Alex with his chin, then turned to Jack with the most interesting expression on his face.
‘Flyboy would like that.’

Bozer watched, a bit like a tennis match spectator, as the most interesting look passed between Nick and Jack.

He really hoped that they weren’t about to get a love triangle.

Love triangles were messy.

Great for drama and all, not great for the people involved.

That is, great in fiction, not in real life.

Suddenly, the three of them heard someone clear their throat behind them.

They all jumped a little, then turned to find Thornton standing behind them.

‘Firstly, Jack, Bozer, you and Mac and Riley have a mission. Pool will have to wait.’ She raised an eyebrow slightly. ‘Secondly, Doc is currently conducting minor surgery.’ A slightly wry look flashed across her face. ‘Col from Cartography went on his first field mission; the mission was a success, but he has a bullet in his calf.’

Bozer winced. That was a tough initiation to field work; he was very glad he hadn’t wound up shot yet (touch wood); getting stabbed had been awful, he reckoned getting shot was probably even worse.

Thornton was currently shooting Nick and Jack a look, clearly warning them off intervening in Mac and Alex’s love lives (and as a consequence, Beth’s).

Both of them clearly got the message (and were clearly sufficiently terrified), because they just nodded obediently.

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WAR ROOM

PHOENIX FOUNDATION HEADQUARTERS

SOMEWHERE IN LA

‘Senator Grant Thompson has received a series of anonymous threats.’ Thornton tapped the screen, and a picture of a man in his early forties, whom they all recognized as a Senator from California who’d been elected to Congress two years ago who was also a former Navy SEAL. ‘Tonight, he’s attending a short cruise on San Francisco Bay, with constituents and political supporters and donors.’ She tapped the screen, and an image of a rather fancy boat appeared. ‘You four are to provide protection detail for the Senator and investigate.’ She paused for a moment. ‘This would normally be the task of the Capitol Police, but Senator Thompson was rather…resistant towards that. He conceded to a more discreet protection detail.’

Jack rolled his eyes and crossed his arms.

‘SEALs. No sense of self-preservation.’

Mac, Riley and Bozer all exchanged a look, then Riley crossed her own arms and gestured towards Jack with her chin.
‘Don’t think Delta’s much better, Jack.’

‘SECRET ROOM’

BOAT

DOCK

SAN FRANCISCO BAY

SAN FRANCISCO

‘We’re all good here.’

As Bozer shot her a thumbs-up, indicating that they had a Wi-Fi signal, Riley spoke to Jack and Mac on her phone.

The two of them were in this ‘secret room’, not much bigger than a small walk-in closet, protected by a security system built by the Phoenix and tweaked by Mac, that they’d found on the ship’s plans by some very, very careful examination. (It wasn’t explicitly on the plans, they’d found it by inference and it’d proven to be very difficult to access, involving going through a series of doors and crawling through a crawl space, but it would help to keep Bozer and Riley, and the Senator, safe should a threat arise.) Besides, it was kind of cool to use a ‘secret room’ – they were secret agents, after all, and it was cool to do something like in the movies.

Mac’s voice responded.

‘Thanks, Riley.’ His tone turned more wry. ‘We’re…mostly good here.’

TOP DECK OF BOAT

DOCK

SAN FRANCISCO BAY

SAN FRANCISCO

Jack held out a hand to the Senator, then gestured to Mac with his head.

‘Evening, sir. I’m Jack Dalton, ex-Delta Force, this is Angus MacGyver, ex-Army EOD.’

The Senator shook Jack’s hand, then Mac’s, politely enough, but didn’t look all that eager to see them.

‘And you’re my protection detail for tonight.’

He clearly was not enthusiastic about that.

Mac resisted the urge to pull out a paperclip from his slacks pocket (this was one of the – honestly few – times where he had to look very, very professional, and the paperclips didn’t fit in with that), and instead addressed the Senator.
‘Senator Thompson, intel suggests that the threats made against you are highly credible, and as a United States Congressman, you need to be protected.’

The Senator’s expression softened somewhat and grew more wry.

‘Not all that long ago, I watched my own back and the backs of my brothers, and we kept a lot of people safe.’ He nodded at them. ‘I’m used to protecting myself; don’t like other people doing it for me.’ The Senator sighed, then gave a small, wry smirk, as he started making his way down to greet his guests. ‘Well, if the threats prove credible, perhaps I’ll get a chance to demonstrate the superiority of SEALs over Delta.’

He winked at Jack, who shook his head.

‘With all due respect, sir, you’re wrong.’

‘SECRET ROOM’

BOAT

DOCK

SAN FRANCISCO BAY

SAN FRANCISCO

‘…None of the usual suspects have any chatter relating to the Senator.’

Riley sounded a little frustrated as she kept typing, trying to work out who might be threatening the Senator.

Bozer reached out and squeezed her hand for a moment, then shook his own head.

‘And nobody on-board’s triggered a facial recognition hit either.’

They’d run facial recognition of everybody on-board (sourcing photos from the boat’s cameras, the lapel-pin-camera on Jack’s suit and Mac’s camera-glasses) through every database they had access to, but no one had come up as suspicious.

Everyone on-board, it seemed, was an upstanding citizen and had nothing against the Senator.

FUNCTION ROOM

BOAT

SAN FRANCISCO BAY

Everyone on-board, Mac thought, seemed to adore Senator Thompson.

The Senator was currently engaged in a conversation with a couple of his donors about Veterans’ Affairs, and Mac was listening with half an ear as he pretended to peruse the buffet of canapes, assessing the room for any threats as he was doing so.
Jack was on the edge of a conversation on the other side of the room, so that the two of them covered the entire room and always had eyes on the Senator.

Something, a flash of red, in one of the windows caught Mac’s eye.

The Golden Gate Bridge.

That was not an unexpected sight; the cruise route came close to the bridge.

Except it was on the starboard side.

Not the port side, like it was supposed to be.

A very bad feeling gathered in Mac’s stomach, and acting on a hunch, he tapped his comm twice, a signal to Jack to get the Senator to their ‘secret room’, where he’d be reasonably safe.

He picked up two canapes at random and made his way out onto the deck, as if getting fresh air, and scanned the Pacific Ocean before him, peering through the building fog.

Mac squinted through the fog for a moment, before his eyes caught a flash of light. Then another. Then another beam.

Torches.

That very bad feeling intensified, and he put down the canape plate on the railing.

He now knew two things:

Firstly, the boat was about to be hijacked.

Secondly, at least one person on this boat certainly did not adore Senator Thompson.

He tapped his comm twice, then waited three seconds, then tapped it three times.

That was the signal for the threat is a big one. A really big one.

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CRAWL SPACE OUTSIDE ‘SECRET ROOM’

BOAT

PACIFIC OCEAN

NEAR SAN FRANCISCO BAY

‘It could be nothing.’

Senator Thompson’s arms were crossed. Jack looked the other man in the eye.

‘Senator, look, my partner’s the best. I know he’s real young and looks even younger, but Mac’s the best. He’s got damn good instincts and he’s saved my life more times than I can count. If he says there’s a real big threat, then there’s a real big threat. And that’s not something you can protect yourself from, so don’t get any ideas, sir.’

Jack spoke firmly and resolutely to the other man, who, after a moment, nodded, and Jack tapped his
comm three times.

A moment later, Bozer opened the door to the ‘secret room’ and helped the Senator into it, nodding at Jack, who nodded back in acknowledgement.

Jack then started crawling backwards, back to the little entryway after the first door, where he’d meet Mac.

He tapped his comm in a quick 1 tap, 2 tap, 3 tap pattern to alert his partner to that plan.

He got a single tap (acknowledged) back.

JUST BEHIND FIRST DOOR TO ‘SECRET ROOM’

BOAT

PACIFIC OCEAN

NEAR SAN FRANCISCO BAY

A very grim Mac was waiting for Jack when he arrived at the meeting point. The blonde didn’t waste any time before he started explaining what the really big threat was.

‘The boat’s been hijacked. They had somebody on-board, I don’t know who, who took us off-course to meet the hijackers.’ Mac pulled out a paperclip and started toying with it. ‘I counted at least fifteen; all armed, competent at using their firearms and all in masks or balaclavas and black clothing. They’re organized, and they’re rounding up hostages. They don’t seem to be gathering them into one place; I counted at least three groups with separate guards in separate locations.’

Jack nodded, just as serious as his partner.

‘So we’re dealing with an organized, cohesive group, but they’re not pros.’

Mac nodded in agreement, the paperclip in his hands taking the shape of a Zodiac boat, which Jack presumed was what the hijackers had used to reach the charter boat. The older man addressed Riley over his comm.

‘Riles, you got that?’

‘Yeah. Should help with our search.’

Jack made a noise of assent, then turned back to his partner.

‘Well, we gotta un-hijack this boat, brother. And we’re gonna have to do it stealthily and pick ‘em off in little groups.’

Mac nodded. They’d have to try and pick off as many as they could without letting hostages be harmed, and they were grossly outnumbered and out-gunned.

He pulled out his phone, and found that he had no signal, just as he’d expected. The hijackers had brought a jamming device with them.
He considered for a moment, then addressed Riley and Bozer over his earpiece.

‘Riley, Bozer, we need you to pull off another Oracle Arena.’

Bozer was the one who responded, and Mac could hear the note of somewhat inappropriate excitement in his best friend’s voice.

‘You got it, bro. Riley’s getting in to their comm system right now. Just give it a few minutes before you go out there so we can get the voice stuff up and running and all.’ He paused for a moment. ‘You and Jack be careful, alright?’

Mac gave a small smile in response.

‘We always are, Boze.’

We really are.

Neither of us have a death wish.

We have an awful lot to live for.

We just have an inherently hazardous occupation.

‘SECRET ROOM’

BOAT

PACIFIC OCEAN

Riley rubbed her temple (the hijackers’ jamming had caused her a bit of trouble; she’d had to do some finagling and some pretty difficult tricks – what Jack called her computer magic – to keep their communications up, though she couldn’t do anything about mobile phones or Wi-Fi, and thus Jack and Mac’s cameras – the hijackers seemed to have focused on blocking long-range communications, which made a lot of sense), then turned to face the Senator (Bozer was very busy keeping the voice imitation program and the security camera looping program running to keep the hijackers from working out that Mac and Jack were picking them off), who was looking very antsy, a bit like a caged predator, in Riley’s eyes.

‘Senator, did anybody you see or speak to tonight seem off, or suspicious in any way? Like they were hiding something?’

There’d been somebody on the inside. Somebody who’d not thrown up any red flags earlier when she and Bozer had run facial recognition and quick background checks on all the guests and the ship’s crew.

There had to have been, in order for the boat to change course like it had.

The Senator focused a little, becoming less antsy, and thought long and hard. Riley glanced back at her laptop screen, and found, just as she’d expected, that the facial recognition program she had running on the live feed from the security cameras (she’d managed to get her connection to them back up, luckily), on the off-chance any of them caught a glimpse of one of the hijacker’s faces, hadn’t gotten a hit yet.
She knew Mac and Jack would get her a shot of one of the hijacker’s faces as soon as they could, which she knew could be a while, given that they had to do a very good job of hiding the captured hijackers, lest they be noticed by one of their colleagues.

After a moment of thinking, the Senator nodded, and started reeling off a handful of names (it seemed that in politics, people were always hiding things).

‘Uh…Kevin Lee, engineer in Silicon Valley, he kept looking around as if he was waiting for something…Anthony Bellows, he’s in banking, asked some pretty pressing questions…’

CORRIDOR

BOAT

PACIFIC OCEAN

‘Uh…brother, where are we going?’

Jack whispered as he silently followed Mac down the deserted hallway.

‘Kitchen. Well, technically, galley.’

As Mac quietly opened the door to said galley and pulled Jack inside, the older man silently shutting the door behind him automatically, Jack made a face.

‘Look, I know you’re a growing boy and all, brother, but we got other priorities right now.’

Mac rolled his eyes as he looked for what he needed.

‘A, I’m twenty-six, Jack. I’m clearly not a growing boy.’ He opened a cupboard and grabbed the electric mixer inside, cracking it open on his knee, then stole a piece off the KitchenAid. Jack sighed internally as he thought of the expense report to follow this mission. KitchenAids, if he remembered correctly, were pricey. ‘B, that’s not what we’re here for.’ Mac pointed to the bucket of spoons in the corner. ‘Grab me one of those, please.’

Jack walked over and grabbed a spoon and passed it to Mac, then watched for a couple of minutes as…something…it had a bent spoon sticking out of it) took shape.

Mac tucked the device into the pocket of his suit jacket, then immediately started building a second, identical device, explaining as he did so.

‘These’ll jam their radios when they’re within 50 feet of us, and they should vibrate as well to give us a warning.’

Jack pocketed his own device with a little smile (Mac really was the best – these odd devices of his should help them take out the hijackers without alerting the others and risking the hostages). Then, he gave a small smirk as Mac edged the door of the galley open the tiniest bit.

‘Shame we haven’t got time for a snack…’ He flexed his biceps. ‘Need more than canapes to keep this well-oiled machine running.’

GAMES ROOM
Mac seized a pool cue off the wall and thwacked the man that Jack had ambushed as he patrolled and pulled into the room in the stomach. The man, who was currently held in a chokehold by Jack, with the former CIA agent’s other hand clamped over his mouth, doubled over as best as he could, given his position, and Jack took the opportunity to cut off the man’s air supply until he fell unconscious.

Jack let him crumple to the ground, then checked to make sure the hijacker, the third that he and Mac had taken out, was still breathing. He pulled off the man’s balaclava, then looked around the room, and spotting a security camera (the first two hijackers that he and Mac had taken out had had to be hidden in a storage closet and a toilet cubicle respectively, where there were no cameras), positioned the man so he could be clearly seen, then started securing his hands with the zip-ties that he and Mac had had the foresight to bring along.

As Jack handled the hijacker, Mac glanced around the room and pocketed four of the pool balls, causing his suit jacket’s pockets to bulge comically.

Jack finished gagging the man with a long strip of cloth cut from his balaclava, double-checked that the man was breathing, and then addressed Riley over his comm.

‘Got the photo, Riles?’

‘Yeah, thanks, Jack.’ They heard her fingernails clack on her keyboard for a moment. ‘I’ll let you know when I’ve got something.’

Jack, with Mac’s help, shifted the man into a camera blind-spot.

Then, Jack and Mac exchanged a glance, took a deep breath and slipped out of the games room.

They had more hijackers to take out and hostages to save.

‘SECRET ROOM’

BOAT

PACIFIC OCEAN

‘…Kevin Lee’s probably not involved; he intended to propose to his girlfriend tonight, he was waiting for a good view of San Francisco…’ Riley trailed off as her facial recognition program started running, courtesy of Jack bringing an unconscious hijacker into view of a security camera in the games room. She heard Jack’s voice over her comm and nodded. ‘Yeah, thanks, Jack.’ There wasn’t a hit in any of the government databases, but that wasn’t the end of it, she could try social media accounts. Riley pulled up the program she’d written to do that and executed it, then continued. ‘I’ll let you know when I’ve got something.’

Senator Thompson bent over to glance at her computer screen.

‘We got anything?’
Riley gave a little shrug as she watched her program work, glancing at Bozer, who was still doing his best to make sure that the hijackers remained unaware of Mac and Jack and their actions. It was working so far. Then, she looked up at the Senator.

‘Well, we’ve got more than we had.’

Bozer looked up at the Senator too, briefly.

‘Yeah, I know, it doesn’t sound all that good, freaked me out a few times when I started doing this sort of stuff, but she and Mac and Jack are the best, don’t you worry, man…errr…sorry, sir.’

The Senator gave a very wry little smile.

‘We’re stuck in a room smaller than my closet together, no need to call me sir.’

ROOM NEXT TO LOUNGE WHERE HOSTAGES ARE BEING HELD

BOAT

PACIFIC OCEAN

The hijacker who’d been standing outside the door to the room next door to the lounge slumped forwards, unconscious, as Mac hit him with a pool ball held in his right fist.

Jack caught the man before he hit the ground, and busied himself zip-tying his wrists, while Mac seized a vase off the table in the middle of the room, tipped out the flowers and water, and held the vase against the wall, then pressed his ear to it.

As Jack finished restraining the hijacker, Mac pulled away from the wall, put down the vase and turned to his partner.

‘There’s hostages in the next room, and at least one hijacker.’ Jack nodded (after everything that Mac had done – he’d seen through walls before, after all, at least sort-of – hearing through walls with a vase didn’t really rate), and Mac pursed his lips, staring out the window on the side of the ship, thinking back to the plan of the boat that he’d memorised earlier. Then, he nodded, and gestured with his head to Jack. ‘Jack, I need a distraction. Can you keep the hijacker or hijackers in there facing the inside of the boat?’

Jack glanced down at the unconscious hijacker, then a slow smirk grew on his face as he looked back up at Mac and nodded, before he looked back at the hijacker.

‘You and me are gonna have some fun, buddy.’

Mac shook his head with a little smile as he gently and silently opened the window, putting a foot up on the ledge as Jack picked up the unconscious hijacker and readied his gun.

LOUNGE WHERE HOSTAGES ARE BEING HELD

BOAT

PACIFIC OCEAN
Jack stared at the two hijackers in the room, both of whom had their eyes on him. One held his gun at Jack, while the other had aimed his at a middle-aged woman huddled in the corner with tearful eyes. Jack’s own gun was held to the head of the still-unconscious hijacker he was holding in front of him.

‘I’m warning you, this ain’t gonna end well for either of you.’ Jack was calm and resolute as he spoke, even though the two hijackers snorted derisively. ‘So how about you just put those guns down and you won’t get hurt?’ They snorted again. ‘Alright, boys, but don’t say I didn’t warn you…’

There was the sound of smashing glass, then a perfectly-thrown pool ball clocked one hijacker in the head, and seconds later, before the second hijacker could do anything but stare at his fallen colleague for just a moment, he, too, was taken down by a pool ball.

Jack dropped the unconscious hijacker he was holding, and then moved to zip-tie his colleagues, but not before smiling at his partner, who was hanging outside the window and being stared at by all the (now former) hostages. As Jack watched crouched to bind the wrists of the first man, Mac smiled and waved awkwardly at the Senator’s staring guests.

That made Jack’s smile widen just a little as he pulled the zip-tie tight.

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Jack surveyed the people in front of him. He and Mac knew that while they’d like to get these people to safety, they couldn’t allow them to leave this room, as that’d alert the hijackers and put the other groups of hostages at risk, and nor could they do the next best thing and stay here to protect them, as they had other hijackers to take out and other hostages to rescue.

So, they were doing the next best thing.

Mac was doing his thing, setting up some kind of complicated rig over the door (bits of a bookshelf – it looked like it was mahogany, which made Jack shudder – the expense report would be awful – were involved).

Jack, meanwhile, had collected the two hijackers’ guns and ammo.

‘Anybody here have military experience?’

Two people raised their hands, a woman about Mac’s age and a man in his mid-thirties, who was on crutches and missing the lower part of his left leg.

Jack made his way over to the man on crutches, gesturing to the young woman to do the same.

The woman introduced herself as she crouched down next to Jack.

‘Petty Officer Arthur, sir. USS Sterett.’

Jack handed her one of the guns and half the ammunition.

‘Jack Dalton, ex-Delta Force.’ He held the other gun and the other half of the ammunition out to the man on crutches, who nodded at him.

‘Staff Sergeant Crisper, Army Sapper.’ He glanced down at his leg for a moment. ‘Well, former Staff Sergeant.’

Jack reached out and grasped the man’s shoulder for a moment, the two of them sharing a look and a nod, then Jack slapped his back and stood, nodding at Petty Officer Arthur and (former) Staff
Sergeant Crisper, as Mac explained the operation of the security system he’d designed to the couple of people who were helping him out with it.

Jack walked over and tapped his partner’s shoulder.

‘Brother…’

Mac glanced around the room and at his security system, the fact that they couldn’t do any better for these people clearly grating him, but after a moment, he took a deep breath and nodded, following Jack to the window and climbing out after him.

*My grandfather always told me that I couldn’t fix everything completely. Sure, he always believed I could improve everything, at least a little bit, but I couldn’t make everything perfect again.*

*I spent a fair bit of time trying to prove him wrong.*

*Sometimes, I think I’m still trying to do that.*

*But the more I encounter situations like this, the more I know that he was very, very right.*

*I don’t like it, but I can’t always force the best-case scenario to happen, no matter how hard I try.*

---

‘SECRET ROOM’

BOAT

PACIFIC OCEAN

‘…Anti-war campaigners? *Seriously?*’

Bozer looked incredulous, and Mac and Jack made noises that expressed the same sentiment, as Riley pointed to the online forum that she’d determined the hijacker from the games room was very, very active on.

He was a very active ‘pacifist’ and had posted some pretty awful stuff about how wrong it was to glorify and honour those who’d come home from war, and stuff that involved attacking veterans, which had been enthusiastically received by other members of the forum, whom Riley was sure were the other hijackers and who were behind the threats to Senator Thompson.

After all, their views on veterans made the Senator, a veteran himself and a steadfast and outspoken campaigner for protecting and properly funding the VA, a prime target.

They glanced at the Senator, who was seething quietly, and then back at one another. Bozer gestured to the security camera feed on Riley’s laptop, then the voice imitation program on his own.

‘Seriously, these guys are, like, the worst pacifists ever.’

---

CORRIDOR

BOAT

PACIFIC OCEAN
Mac, holding a hijacker in a chokehold and dragging him into a storage closet, as Jack did the same with a second, as the group of hostages held on the interior balcony over the function room looked on a little wide-eyed, really had to agree with Bozer.

*I consider myself a pacifist.*

*I certainly try to be.*

*Look, I guess you could say I’m a pretty awful one, given the only two jobs I’ve ever held in my adult life and what they entail and what I’m doing right at this minute…but I’m 100% sure that I’m a better pacifist than these guys.*

*They don’t exactly set a high bar.*

---

**SECRET ROOM**

**BOAT**

**PACIFIC OCEAN**

‘Senator Thompson. We know you’re here, somewhere.’ Riley, Bozer and the Senator exchanged a glance as the voice rang out over the PA system, darkly threatening. ‘You’re a politician, you’ve got to know about deals.’ There was a pause, possibly for dramatic effect. ‘We’ve got a deal for you. Surrender yourself in the next ten minutes…or we kill a hostage. One dies every five minutes until you’re in our hands, Senator.’

The PA system crackled and cut off.

The Senator immediately made for the door, and Riley placed a firm hand on his arm and pulled him back, shaking her head.

‘Mac, Jack, did you guys hear that?’

Jack was the one who responded, over Bozer and Riley’s comms and her laptop.

‘Oh, we heard that, Ri.’

Mac continued.

‘Senator Thompson, don’t do it.’

The Senator’s eyes were hard and calm and focused, like how Mac’s or Jack’s got from time to time on missions, Bozer and Riley thought. It was probably a soldier thing.

His voice was almost frightenly calm when he spoke.

‘Dalton, MacGyver, can you rescue the third group of hostages in less than ten minutes?’

Conversations with the other two groups of hostages and security camera footage had confirmed that there was one group remaining, and that that group was the largest group.

They were being held on the top deck of the boat, which was a fairly inaccessible location.

Mac was silent. Jack made a noise of frustration, then Mac spoke, his voice rather clipped.
‘No. Not in ten minutes.’

The Senator simply nodded, as if he’d known that’d be the answer.

‘I can buy you some time. And give you a distraction.’

There was silence for a moment, Bozer and Riley exchanging a glance, then they heard Jack’s voice.

‘Only easy day was yesterday, right, sir?’

The Senator gave a small smile, his hand on the door.

‘Trust a Delta to mangle our motto, Dalton.’

_He doesn’t go up for re-election for another four years, but you know; I think Senator Thompson might get my vote._

_Sometimes, when he was feeling cynical, my grandfather would say that good men in politics were as rare as hen’s teeth._

_Hens, obviously, don’t have teeth. But I think there are good men, and women, to be found in politics._

_I think I’ve got proof on this boat._

---

**TOP DECK**

**BOAT**

**PACIFIC OCEAN**

His hands bound, a gun to his head, but almost eerily calm, Senator Thompson stood in front of the man whom he realized must be the head of the hijackers. He was in his forties, bearded and a little scruffy, and a bit wild-eyed.

Deceptively so, the former SEAL thought.

The Senator gestured to the hostages, who were huddled together, cold and scared, with his chin.

‘You got me, you got what you want. Let them go.’

The chief hijacker snorted, as the two men holding the Senator snickered.

‘And why would I do that?’

Senator Thompson was seemingly unperturbed.

‘You hold something against me. I don’t know what it is-’ That was a lie, but he also had to protect Bozer and Riley. ‘-but it’s against me. It doesn’t have to do with them. Let them go.’

The man snorted again.

‘I’m not losing my leverage.’ He narrowed his eyes at the Senator. ‘You’re making me lose my
temper, Senator. I’m usually a pacifist, but you’re making me lose my cool.’

Senator Thompson looked him dead in the eye.

‘If you’re a pacifist, then you should let these innocent people go.’

The head hijacker snorted yet again, and leaned back against the railing of the deck, tilting his chin up in a challenge to the Senator.

‘They’re guilty of supporting you, Senator. Glorifying you. Glorifying a war-mongering killer. Glorifying—’

The man didn’t get to finish his sentence, because at just that moment, a hand reached up, grabbed his collar, and yanked him over the railing.

As the other two hijackers reeled in shock, the Senator drove his heel into the knee of one, twisting out of his grasp, and thwacking the man hard in the solar plexus with his bound hands, then striking him in the head, so that he fell to the ground, unconscious. The second hijacker staggered as Mac jumped up over the railing and onto his back, wrestling his gun out of his hands and forcing the man to the ground.

As Mac secured the two hijackers, Senator Thompson hurried over to help up some of the now-freed hostages, and peered over the railing, where Jack was cuffing the head hijacker, who was very much unconscious.

‘Bit late, Dalton. I was expecting you about thirty seconds earlier!’ He gave a little smirk. ‘Still, you’re pretty good…for a Delta.’

Jack grinned right back, tossing the Senator the man’s gun.

‘You’re pretty alright for a SEAL, Thompson.’

---

CORRIDOR

ON-ROUTE TO BRIDGE

BOAT

PACIFIC OCEAN

Mac, Jack and Senator Thompson zip-tied the hijacker and locked him in a bathroom (Mac taking care to remember where they’d put him so they could get him out later), then kept proceeding down the corridor. Now that the hostages were rescued, their priority was to seize back control of the ship from the hijackers.

After the scene on the top deck, the hijackers had finally, finally caught on and the remaining ones had rushed towards the top deck. Their disorganization and shock had made them a lot easier to take out, and they’d managed without too much of an issue.

Riley’s voice rang out over Mac and Jack’s earpieces.

‘Based on my count and what I’m seeing, that’s the second-last one, guys. You’ve got one more on the bridge, but that’s it.’
Jack replied.

‘Thanks, Riles.’ Then, he turned to the Senator. ‘Got one more hostile on the bridge.’

The Senator nodded, a small, satisfied smile appearing on his face, before it grew calm and serious again.

They reached the door to the bridge, and Mac started dealing with the lock.

Senator Thompson raised a brow as Mac unlocked the electronic lock with only his phone, his Swiss Army knife and a couple of paperclips, and Jack just smirked and mouthed *told you he’s the best* at the Senator.

---

**BRIDGE**

**BOAT**

**PACIFIC OCEAN**

The masked man in the oversized black overcoat who’d been standing in the middle of the bridge, facing the door, as if he’d just decided to leave (which made a lot of sense, given what had befallen his colleagues), fell to the ground almost immediately, floored by a shot to the right knee and one to his left shoulder.

Both Jack and Senator Thompson nodded with satisfaction and tucked their guns back into their waistbands, before Jack went to unmask and secure the man and field-dress his wounds, while Mac darted around the bridge, examining the bodies of the crew members slumped over or on the floor, hoping to find signs of life. He didn’t, and closed his eyes for a moment, then shook his head at his partner and the Senator when they looked over at him. Both older men nodded sadly, staring down at the floor for a moment, before Jack returned to his field-dressing and the Senator to examining the boat’s controls and navigation systems.

Jack addressed Riley over his comms as the removal of the hijacker’s mask and overcoat revealed him to be one of the ship’s crew.

‘Riley, this last guy’s crew.’

The hacker replied almost immediately.

‘Yeah, that’s your insider.’

Jack glanced over at the bodies of the deceased crew members, then at the stubbornly-silent man before him. He swallowed down his anger, and got up and made his way over to the Senator, who was putting in a new course to take them back to San Francisco.

‘You know how to drive this thing, Thompson?’

The Senator nodded.

‘I was in the *Navy*, Dalton.’

*To be fair to Jack, having been in the Navy does not guarantee, strange as it sounds, that he can drive a boat.*
Many Navy personnel do not work on or around boats.

Yeah, I think that’s weird too, but it’s true.

Jack looked like he was tempted to retort, but didn’t, and instead addressed Bozer and Riley over his earpiece.

‘Bozer, Riley, get out of there. We need to do a welfare check and secure the hijackers.’ He glanced at the Senator. ‘You can handle this?’

The Senator just nodded, and then pointed to the PA system.

‘I’ll call if I need a hand.’

Jack nodded, and clasped the man on the shoulder for a moment in fellowship, while Mac nodded with a smile.

The Senator returned that smile, then returned to steering the ship as Mac and Jack left the bridge.

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LOUNGE OFF MAIN FUNCTION ROOM

BOAT

PACIFIC OCEAN

(ON-ROUTE BACK TO SAN FRANCISCO)

Mac, Bozer and Riley, checking the welfare of the freed hostages, as Jack and some of the boat’s passengers with military training secured the hijackers, exchanged very concerned and rather terrified glances as they stared at the very, very pregnant woman in front of them and listened to her and the middle-aged woman who was holding her hand and helping her stand explain.

‘…She’s been having pretty strong contractions for the last four hours…’

That meant they’d started about an hour after they’d gone off course.

The woman was panting and sobbing, partly out of the pain, and, they were all sure, partly because of just how her baby was coming into the world.

(The timing was terrible.)

‘I’ve been having little ones, I thought they were just Braxton-Hicks, and I thought that it’d be fine, since it’s just a three hour cruise around the Bay…’

Her face contorted in pain and she slumped a little more on the woman beside her as another contraction ripped through her.

The woman supporting her looked very concernedly up at Mac, Bozer and Riley.

‘That’s only four minutes between contractions now…’

Mac ran a hand through his hair, swore under his breath, then he busied himself moving some furniture around.
‘We can’t land a helicopter on this boat…we’re too far out to get a medic out here by boat…damn it.’ He took a deep breath. ‘Bozer, we need clean towels, gloves and boiling water, you should be able to get that all from the galley…’ He helped the woman in labour lie herself down on some of the shifted furniture, as she was now shaking and struggling to stand. ‘Riley-‘

The hacker held up her phone. Beth’s caller ID was on the screen.

‘Already calling.’

As the kindly middle-aged woman held the pregnant woman’s left hand, Mac took her right and tried to be as reassuring as possible.

‘I’m Mac, and I’m sorry, I’m not a doctor…’ Riley, having quickly explained the situation to Beth, held out her phone, which now had the doctor on screen. ‘…but this is Dr Beth Taylor.’

Beth, calm and caring professionalism on her face, waved at the woman.

‘Hi. I’m Beth, I’m trained in emergency medicine and I’ve delivered four babies.’ The woman looked slightly reassured. ‘What’s your name?’

Panting, the woman replied.

‘Karen…’ Her face contorted as another contraction tore through her, a long one lasting nearly a minute. Mac and Riley exchanged a concerned glance, as the gap between that one and the last had been about three minutes. Bozer burst into the room again, holding clean towels and a box of food handling gloves, then ran out again to fetch hot water. ‘…that…it was a bad one…’

Beth looked concernedly up at Mac and Riley from Riley’s phone screen, Mac holding up three fingers to indicate three minutes. Beth’s expression grew more concerned, and then she nodded seriously and gave them a look that confirmed their suspicions, and wordlessly, Mac and Riley switched positions, Riley holding Karen’s hand in her left and the phone in her right, Mac pulling on a pair of gloves as he did so.

‘Then I think you’re almost ready to start pushing, Karen…’ Beth turned to Mac as best as she could, given that she wasn’t actually there. ‘Mac, you’re going to check if she’s fully dilated yet. I’ll talk you through it.’

Mac finished pulling on the gloves and turned very apologetically to the labouring woman.

‘Karen, I’m so sorry about this…’

As the boat pulled into view of the dock, Mac handed a bloody, squalling baby boy, wrapped in a towel, to a very, very exhausted Karen.

The middle-aged woman, Clara, and Riley, crouching by Karen’s head, having held her hands throughout labour, smiled broadly at him, while Bozer, who’d been holding Riley’s phone wherever it was needed, pulled his best friend into a side-hug. On Riley’s phone screen, Beth smiled and nodded up at the blonde, a gesture that Mac returned.

Karen, who was marvelling at her baby, running a finger gently along his cheek, spoke up, voice a little hoarse.

‘We were going to call him Michael, but…’ She glanced up at Mac. ‘Maybe we should name him after you instead.’
Mac shook his head immediately and a little sheepishly.

‘I’m very flattered, but you really, really don’t want to give your son my name.’

When I was six years old, I decided that there would not be, under absolutely any circumstances, an Angus MacGyver Jr. Nor was there going to be an Angus MacGyver the Second.

I wasn’t going to let any son of mine have to put up with being called that.

Twenty years later, I’m adding on to that.

I don’t expect it to be a major problem at all, in fact, this situation will probably not come up ever again – at least, I hope it won’t - but I’m going to make sure that nobody names their poor child after me.

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MACGYVER’S RESIDENCE

LA

Jack, Bozer and Riley lounged on the couch, while Mac slouched in the armchair and Beth perched on its arm.

It was early evening, and they were all relaxing while the chicken for dinner marinated. Nobody had enough energy to contemplate doing anything else.

Hostage situations were draining, and when they tossed in delivering a baby on top of that…they were all content to sit there in relative silence.

That was broken by a perfunctory knock on the door, which then opened to reveal a very serious-looking Matty.

They all turned to face the woman, who nodded at them in greeting, before revealing the reason for her visit.

‘I have good news; we’ve swept every covert operations and intelligence agency in the country, and we’re sure we’ve gotten all the moles.’ There was a small smile on her face for a moment, before it disappeared and was replaced by a very, very grim, very, very serious look. ‘And I have bad news.’

At that moment, the door opened again, and Thornton stepped inside, looking even more serious than usual.

‘Murdoc’s escaped.’

From the kitchen, where he was supposed to be chopping cucumbers for the salad (they were all trying to be calm and go on as normal, and honestly, rallying admirably), Mac stared at Matty and Thornton, who were out on the deck, sorting out protection details for Mac’s dad, Penny, Mr Ericson, Valerie, Rachel and Annabelle, and Frankie.

Murdoc’s after me.

We all know that.

He has, after all, vowed to kill me.
Mac swallowed and looked around the kitchen; at Jack, who was moving beers from the fridge into Mac’s walking, self-opening Esky, at Riley, who was making coleslaw, at Bozer, who was pan-frying the chicken, and at Beth, who’d stolen the cucumbers while he’d been distracted and was now chopping them, the tomatoes she’d cut up earlier already in the salad bowl. He glanced back at the two women on the deck, both on the phone.

He had a very strong urge to not let any of them out of his sight until Murdoc was back in prison, where he belonged.

Unfortunately, he also knew that that wouldn’t happen. Firstly, out of practical reasons, and secondly, because he’d wind up signed up to hundreds of spam mailing lists, never get to eat Bozer’s world-class waffles again, be covered in *Dora the Explorer* Band Aids, be stubbornly argued with, probably with an awful analogy or two in there, and have eyebrows raised at him and be simply foiled.

*But Murdoc’s not content to just put a bullet in my head.*

*He wants to get to me.*

*He wants to make me suffer.*

Mac looked out on the deck for a moment, then glanced around the kitchen again, taking in the sizzle of the chicken on the stove, staring at the pile of neatly-chopped cucumbers resting on the chopping board next to his, accepting a spoonful of coleslaw on auto-pilot and tasting it, before nodding at Riley to show that it tasted fine (at least, he thought it did – his sense of taste was a bit thrown, but it didn’t seem to contain sugar instead of salt this time), and accepting the beer that Jack pressed into his hands, eyes meeting the older man’s for a moment.

*And you don’t have to be even half as smart as Murdoc to know how to do that.*

Mac’s eyes hardened as he stared out into the distance.

*I know you’ll come after my loved ones again, Murdoc.*

*But know this: I’ll defend them, all of them, with my very last breath.*

*You’re going to regret this.*

Matty stared, wide-eyed, as Jack relayed the story of Mac delivering Karen’s baby, Patricia listening in with a wry, amused little smile.

‘…Baby Einstein delivered a baby? An actual *baby*?’

As Jack finished, Matty actually started chortling.

Mac nibbled on his chicken and looked rather put-out, grumbling to Bozer, Riley and Beth.

‘He wasn’t even a witness to the whole thing!’ He made a face. ‘And he’s taking significant creative license.’ Mac shook his head and almost-pouted. ‘I’d like to see him try and deliver a baby.’

Beth patted his arm comfortingly.

‘You did an excellent job, Mac.’

Riley snorted and socked him none-too-gently in the other arm.
‘Besides, you shouldn’t be so traumatised about it, Mac.’ She ignored his protests that he wasn’t *traumatised*; childbirth was a natural process necessary to life, sure, it was messy, undignified, bloody and looked very, very painful, but he’d seen worse. ‘You aren’t ever going to have to actually give birth.’

Bozer pointed at him, as if to say, *she’s got you there.*

Mac nodded, conceding the point, then made eye contact with Jack across the fire pit. Jack’s eyes were concerned as they stared back at Mac, but Mac just gave a little shake of his head and a small shrug, and then the concern faded a bit, Jack smiling instead and raising his beer to Mac in a toast of sorts.

Two days later, Mac smiled as he sent his dad a photo of himself, Jack, Bozer, Riley and Beth, all dressed up in Bozer’s amazing-as-always costumes and enthusiastically eating Beth’s spooky pumpkin pie at Penny’s Halloween party the night before.

---

*We have a Sword of Damocles hanging over our heads.*

_But we keep on living. We keep on laughing and loving, because if we don’t, if we live in fear, then that’s a win for Murdoc._

_And I’m not going to let him win._

_I can’t._

Chapter End Notes

What’d you think about that? Matty and Co. have caught all the moles…but Murdoc’s back! *cue dramatic music* Surely you must have guessed I’d bring him back; he’s Mac’s arch-nemesis, after all! ;)

And yes, I wrote a significant part of this to make Mac deliver a baby…

I loathe love triangles; rest assured that there won’t be one (I think for a love triangle to actually be a love triangle, the person in the middle actually needs to be interested in both of their potential love interests). The scene in the beginning of this episode is there because it is A), amusing (hopefully), B), sets up something for the next two episodes, C), sets up something for *Somewhere in the Middle.*

Quick request: please no spoilers for the real 2.01, DIY or Die, in the reviews; I’m not in the States so I have to wait a little bit longer to see the episodes!

Next episode: 2.21, Defibrillator. When Mac is taken by The Organization, his friends must work frantically to save him…before it’s too late.

* Cackles and runs away*
Defibrillator

Chapter Summary

When Mac is taken by The Organization, his friends must work frantically to save him…before it’s too late.

Chapter Notes

Warning on this episode for torture. This is definitely a dark episode; the darkest of the whole season.

At about 16,500 words, it’s also the longest episode of this story. Strap yourselves in!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

JACK’S CAR

ON-ROUTE TO A JUNKYARD

LA

Jack glanced over at Mac as he drove them to the junkyard where they believed the gang of arms dealers that Mac and Jack had been chasing for the last 24 hours (Mac had barely had time to finish texting his dad a photo from Penny’s Halloween party and a quick happy Halloween message before he’d been summoned to work for this mission) had secreted some of their wares.

It was just the two of them in the field for this mission, since it was LA-based and was relatively straightforward. Riley was coordinating and digging through the gang’s online presence and financials back at the Phoenix (since she could work far more efficiently there), while Bozer was down in the labs working on a prosthesis for another team going out on a more urgent mission in less than two hours.

Jack glanced back at the road and spoke, deliberately casually.

‘You know, Rowena told me yesterday that Alex asked Beth out two days ago.’ Mac shot him a look, clearly seeing where the conversation was going, which Jack ignored. ‘She shot him down. Well, she shot him down nicely, but still shot him down.’ Jack made a face. ‘Guess it isn’t really shooting down maybe…errr…forced to make an emergency landing?’ He shrugged. ’Anyway, point is, what’s taking you so long to make your move, brother?’

Mac sighed internally, pulling out a paperclip, which rapidly took the shape of a stethoscope.

‘Your terrible analogy is not helping.’

Jack glanced over at his partner, essentially ignoring Mac’s snarky comment.
‘If you say it’s because you’re scared she’s gonna go all Nikki on you, I will whoop your ass.’

Jack spoke almost-completely jokingly, because he was quite sure that wasn’t the problem, but wanted to triple-check.

Mac shook his head firmly and immediately.

‘That’s not it, I promise.’

Jack turned and gestured at his partner as they waited at a red light.

‘Then what is it? What’s stopping you, brother? If you think it’s because she’s not into you, I’m telling you-’

Mac huffed out a sigh, interrupting Jack, and stared down at the paperclip shape in his hands (his second one; the stethoscope had been shoved into his pocket already). It was an ECG line.

‘It’s not that either.’

Jack turned to him, an eyebrow raised and hands held out as if to say then what is it, man? Then, he put his hands back on the wheel and turned back to the road as the traffic lights changed.

_Honestly, I don’t really know._

_It’s not that I don’t have ideas, it’s just that I don’t really know why._

Mac had been arguing back and forth with himself in his own head about the various reasons why he should and should not ask the Phoenix’s doctor out since around the time of the mission to Australia.

It was the fact that his last relationship had ended really, really terribly. Though, as the other half of his brain pointed out, _that was because your last girlfriend was crazy and evil_. Beth was crazy, but it was in a good way, and she definitely wasn’t evil. She would be _terrible_ at being evil. He supposed that he had thought that of Nikki once upon a time…that was usually where he tried very hard to cut off that train of thought, because that train of thought just led in circles and technically told him that he shouldn’t even trust Bozer or Jack, which was just absurd.

It was the fact that he was very much aware that he had issues because of that, and that frankly, Beth would probably be better off with, say, Alex. A voice that sounded a little like Jack and a little like his grandfather admonished him for that; reminding him that A, _everyone_ had issues; Beth herself was not without them at all (between growing up a genius who’d won nine science fairs, being an ER resident and nine months with the MSF in Aleppo…), B, he was selling himself short, and C, and most importantly, that wasn’t up to him to decide. It was up to her to decide who she did or did not want to date and _not_ up to him to decide that for her.

It was the fact that Mac had not forgotten being nine years old and being beaten up by Donnie Sandoz, or being that weird, awkward, shy kid who got excited by weird things and had skipped two grades, or being skinny and dorky and fourteen and being shot down cold by Darlene Martin. It was the fact that, sometimes, despite everything, he _still_ saw himself as awkward and dorky and weird. The other half of his brain pointed out that Beth probably wouldn’t be anywhere near as interested in him if he _didn’t_ have a brain that got excited by weird things and spat out even weirder things, like his spaghetti-machine-spaghetti-machine.

It was the fact that he knew very well that Beth had her own reservations about having a…_something_…with one of her patients (even if they worked for an extremely covert agency and he wasn’t always an active patient – wasn’t an active patient all that _often_, honestly). Though, he also
recognized, she’d come to embrace being friends (and embrace becoming very close friends) with her patients, and he was as sure as he could be (He wasn’t so good with this sort of thing, but Jack was, usually. He was, admittedly, feeling a little bit more certain—just a little bit; he’d been near-completely certain before this conversation started.) that she recognized this connection that they had, saw it the same way that he did, and she hadn’t pulled away. Not in the slightest.

(Sure, she hadn’t made a move—he had a feeling that she never would, considering her doctor’s ethics and the fact that she knew all about his history with Nikki and the aforementioned being a genius who’d won nine science fairs before she’d turned sixteen and everything that came with that, but she hadn’t pulled away, had simply let this connection keep growing as these sorts of connections did when given the chance.)

It was the fact that there was a voice in his head that sounded like his grandfather, and also, somehow, like Jack, which kept telling him that there was something special there. Something really, really special there. That she might be the right one. After all, somehow, despite her hesitation and concern about growing too close to her patients, and his issues with attractive women, they’d been comfortable with each other, connected in some way, even when she’d still called him MacGyver.

(The more pessimistic and reticent part of his brain didn’t have any decent responses to that, beyond saying that if that was the case, it was better not to rush things. Better to let this something grow a little more first.)

They pulled up to the entry of the junkyard, and Jack turned off the car, then reached out and put a hand on Mac’s shoulder, staring into his eyes for a moment. Then, he nodded, a gesture tinged with sadness, and squeezed Mac’s shoulder.

‘Just don’t keep dragging your feet forever, thinking she’ll always be there, okay? ‘Cause that way lies pain, brother.’

Jack spoke with great finality. He’d walked that road, after all.

Mac simply nodded.

‘I promise, Jack.’

Jack nodded back, with a tiny little smile, then opened the car door.

‘Well, good chat, but now we gotta get back to work…’

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**JUNKYARD**

**LA**

Jack searched through the somewhat haphazard piles of scrap metal and rusty appliances and God-knows-what-else that littered the dusty junkyard.

He and Mac had split up to hasten the search, since there were no signs of life or activity at the yard, at least according to the very limited surveillance camera footage Riley had of the area (there were very few security cameras and many blind-spots).

Then, he heard a shout. A scream, in a voice as familiar as his own.

Desperate and fearful.
It registered that Mac’s voice hadn’t come from his earpiece, but had carried over the junkyard. The former CIA agent instantly started running towards the source of that sound, tapping his own earpiece as he did so.

‘Riley-‘

‘I’m sending you to the last spot I can pin Mac’s phone as being. Next left, then right after 100 feet…’

The hacker was on the ball as ever, having heard Mac’s cry through Jack’s earpiece. Her voice was steady, but Jack could hear the worry in it, and he ran faster, ignoring the protests of his lungs and legs, pushing down that horrible, horrible feeling that had settled in his gut.

Jack skidded to a halt at what Riley said was the last place that Mac’s phone had been. There was absolutely nothing there, but about 50 feet ahead of him, he could see clear signs of a struggle as he jogged forwards.

Tyres kicked out of their stacks, scrap metal thrown around…but no sign of Mac. No sign of whoever must have attacked him.

Jack swore as he stopped in his tracks, his eyes falling on the only sign that his partner had ever been here at all.

Mac’s phone and earpiece.

Completely destroyed.

PHOENIX FOUNDATION HEADQUARTERS

SOMEWHERE IN LA

‘…We can rule out Murdoc; he’d kidnap someone else to force Mac to come to him, not kidnap Mac-‘

Jack cut off Thornton as she addressed Matty and Sarah (the latter’s left arm in a cast and sling; it’d been broken in their failed attempt to arrest Kirk Russell before he’d fled to Australia) on the screen. As he spoke, Bozer looked over from where he was standing with his hands on Riley’s shoulders in a gesture of comfort as the hacker conferenced with Viv and Lil, typing frantically as she did so (there was absolutely no trace of anyone entering the junkyard to ambush Mac or leaving with him, but they were going through the very limited surveillance footage for the third time with a fine-toothed comb, just in case). Beth, in contrast (she’d been summoned to the war room by unspoken agreement between them all), did not look up from where she was sitting on the couch and staring at the bowl of paperclips on the table.

‘-Come on, Patty, we know it’s The Organization! Who else would it be?’ Jack punched one of his hands with the other in frustration. ‘We’re wasting time, we need to-‘

Quite suddenly, Thornton reached out and grabbed Jack’s shoulders with both of her hands, forcing him to look at her.
The action surprised him enough that he stilled, and when she spoke, her voice was much gentler than he’d expected.

‘Jack…’ Her gut, every one of her finely-honed instincts, told her that The Organization had taken Mac. But rationale and training told her that no possibility could be ignored. ‘…a wrong assumption could prevent us from rescuing Mac before it’s too late.’ She paused for a moment. ‘He’s one of our own, but we need to put that aside for a moment and approach this like we always do.’

After a moment of staring at her, Jack drew in a long, shuddering breath and nodded jerkily.

Thornton nodded back, and squeezed his shoulders gently, before removing her hands and stepping away, turning back to face Matty and Sarah on the screen.

UNKNOWN LOCATION

SOMEWHERE IN LA?

When Mac regained consciousness, he was in a dark, concrete room. His arms, shoulders and upper back were sore, since he’d been essentially hanging from the ceiling, to which his wrists were shackled, while he’d been unconscious. The chains were barely long enough to prevent his shoulders wrenching, even when he stood up straight. His ankles were also shackled to the floor, and he could tell that his jacket, shoes, belt, Swiss Army knife, paperclips, phone and earpiece were all gone.

There were four armed guards at the door, and a man in his sixties, with thinning grey hair and wire-framed spectacles and wearing a pristine white lab coat, standing before him, another two guards flanking him.

The lab-coated man smiled at him, a predatory, dark smile.

‘Hello, Mr MacGyver. It’s simply lovely to finally meet your acquaintance.’

*I am absolutely terrified. Who wouldn’t be, in this scenario?*

*But there’s absolutely no way I’m giving them the satisfaction of seeing that, no matter what.*

Mac scoffed.

‘Yeah, can’t say the same of you, I’m afraid.’

The man simply shook his head, as if Mac was a small child whose bad behaviour had disappointed him.

‘Manners, Mr MacGyver.’ Then, he paused for a moment, tapping his chin and pretending to consider. ‘Oh, I’m sorry, where are mine? I haven’t introduced myself, have I?’ He turned back to Mac. ‘I am Dr Popovich.’ That name matched his vaguely Eastern-European accent. ‘Do you know who I work for?’

Mac rolled his eyes.

‘Well, I’m sure you guys actually have a name, but since you don’t have the courtesy to share it, we call you guys The Organization.’

Dr Popovitch smirked.
'Oh, we don’t need a name, Mr MacGyver. We’re The Organization after all.’ He leaned closer to Mac. ‘We’ve been watching you, Mr MacGyver. Sending a few challenges your way. You…have promise.’ The lab-coated man leaned back a little, a deceptively pleasant smile on his face. ‘So we have a proposition for you. We could use somebody with your skill-set…’

Mac threw his head back as best as he could and laughed, then straightened up again and shook his head at Dr Popovich, still laughing.

‘You want me to come work for you?’ Mac gestured to the room in general with a hand, at least, gestured as best as he could. ‘I’m telling you, you’ve got to seriously re-work your recruitment pitch. Far less kidnapping and imprisonment, more talking up your dental plan.’

Dr Popovich stepped back, that disappointed look reappearing on his face, as well as a hint of savagery in his eyes, leashed and controlled, but still there, that Mac knew did not bode well for him.

‘You are…flippant…now, Mr MacGyver.’ He gestured to one of the silent men flanking him, who handed him a knife. A very sharp-looking knife. ‘You won’t be soon.’

PHOENIX FOUNDATION HEADQUARTERS

SOMEBWHERE IN LA

Riley swore loudly, then repeated the action again, making Bozer, who’d been rubbing her shoulders and staring into the distance, jump, and Beth, who had been concentrating on filling out supply orders for the infirmary on her tablet, seemingly relying on the work to keep her calm, to look up. From the screen, they heard two other female voices echoing Riley’s language, one of them, Viv’s voice, swearing up a blue streak.

As Viv and Lil walked into view of the camera on Matty’s tablet, appearing on screen with Matty, Matty, Thornton, Jack, Sarah, Bozer and Beth all turned to the analysts.

‘That arms-dealing gang you and Mac were chasing?’ Riley gestured to Jack with her chin as she continued. ‘They’re really The Organization.’

Viv continued, as the looks on Jack, Sarah and Matty’s faces turned murderous, Bozer looked like he was going to throw something, Beth shook her head and put her head in her hands, and Thornton’s eyes grew colder than the Arctic in winter and harder than diamond.

‘We didn’t find the link earlier because it’s four layers deep.’ She threw a hand out in frustration. ‘The gang’s a front for another gang, which is a sub-section of a small, unsuccessful, fledgling terrorist organization, which is really a front for The Organization.’

They all exchanged a glance, shaking their heads, running hands through their hair, starting to pace around the room or swearing under their breaths.

It was Thornton who spoke, her voice harder than ever, a hint of restrained anger in it.

‘This is their endgame. This is what they’ve been leading up to.’ That theory they’d had, that The Organization had been testing them, testing Mac? They could now consider that proved. The Organization had taken him, and it was clear that this had to run beyond simple revenge. They’d been testing him. In Tahoe, Nikki had tried to get him to join her, join them. They wanted him to do something for them, probably multiple somethings. ‘We’re in deep. Maybe deeper than we’ve ever been. We need more intel.’
They all knew how cunning and clever The Organization was, and with how complex and difficult their ‘tests’ had been…

From the screen, Matty shook her head when Bozer looked up at her, a little hopefully.

‘None of the moles are going to do us any good.’

It’d become clear that the moles had all been very low down in The Organization, largely kept in the dark. They hadn’t given up much useful intel.

Jack shook his head.

‘One of them might.’ His eyes hardened and he practically spat out the next word. ‘Nikki.’

Everyone reacted to the mention of that name. Fire blazed in Sarah’s eyes, Matty’s entire posture and expression grew hard-edged, Lil muttered obscenities under her breath, and Viv and Thornton’s eyes grew hard and icy with a touch of cold, leashed anger. Bozer clenched his fists, Riley cursed and crossed her arms, and the look in Beth’s eyes was an odd mixture of sorrow and sympathy and a fierce, protective anger.

Then, Thornton nodded, as did Matty, the former speaking.

‘Jack, you and I will go interrogate Nikki.’

Matty continued, pulling out her phone as she spoke.

‘I have some favours I can call in.’ She gestured to Sarah, who was already pulling out her own phone. ‘Sarah, can you cash in a few?’

The woman nodded, shooting Jack a look that clearly said watch your back (an expression of concern), as she followed her boss out of view. Lil and Viv hung up, returning to their computers to conference with Riley. Bozer pulled up a chair and sat down beside her, rubbing her shoulder comfortably on autopilot, and Beth returned to staring at the paperclip bowl. After a moment, she shook her head, and picked up her tablet, took a deep breath, and resumed filling out supply orders with great determination.

Jack and Thornton stared at each other for a moment, a silent conversation passing between them, then both of them nodded in wordless agreement.

Thornton turned to Bozer, Riley and Beth.

‘You three are not to leave the Phoenix until further notice.’

Her tone brooked absolutely no argument. All three of them stared back at her for a moment, before nodding.

They all knew, even Beth, why The Organization had taken Mac.

Thornton and Jack exchanged a glance as they made their way out of the war room.

And though they suspected that Bozer, Riley and Beth knew this too, Jack and Thornton also knew that they understood most clearly that Mac would withstand any torture The Organization threw at him, but that he’d also do practically anything for them if they were to torture his loved ones.

Thornton gave a little nod as she stalked towards the motor pool, Jack right beside her.
She knew that she and Jack, especially Jack, fell into that category too, but she also knew (just like Jack did) that they were less likely to be successfully kidnapped by The Organization than Bozer or Beth or Riley, especially when they were together and had each other to watch their backs, and that Mac would at least manage to hold out a little longer against them being tortured compared to the three younger Phoenix employees.

Not because he loved them less, at least, not because he loved Jack less, but because they weren’t, at the end of the day, civilians who’d fallen into this life.

They’d chosen this life, eyes wide open, and they’d been hardened and forged in the fire of this life, in ways that even Riley, with her years in prison, or Beth, with her time in Syria, hadn’t been.

Maybe, Thornton thought, as she glanced over at Jack, who was checking his gun as they walked, eyes harder and colder than she’d seen them for a long, long time (since he’d met Mac), they were harder in that way than even Mac (only three years a soldier and still, despite all that had happened, a little sheltered – or maybe wilfully blind - to some aspects of the world of lies and spies).

He, after all, was still innocent in a way that she didn’t think she’d ever been, and that Jack, good man (one of the best she’d ever known) though he was, hadn’t been for a long, long time.

She hoped (prayed) that he wouldn’t lose that.

With a glance at Jack, she walked a little faster.

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UNKNOWN LOCATION

SOMEWHERE IN LA?

‘…Gallium…Germanium…Arsenic…’

Mac gritted his teeth and concentrated on reciting off the Periodic Table, forcing one word out after the other, as Dr Popovich methodically thwacked his abdomen, and then his lower back, alternating between the two, with a baseball bat. He was surprisingly strong for a rather thin man in his sixties, but each hit was careful, precise and showed restraint; he clearly wasn’t trying to cause Mac serious injury, just pain.

He let out a hiss of pain as the latest hit fell just over one of the myriad of cuts that now decorated his body (as best as he could tell, several were still oozing blood slowly, but none were deep enough to need stitches).

Dr Popovich withdrew the baseball bat and handed it over to one of the men that Mac was now thinking of as his minions, then leaned a little closer to Mac and smiled at him.

‘Have you changed your mind yet, Mr MacGyver?’

Mac scoffed.

‘I’ll join you when hell freezes over!’

Dr Popovich looked at him as if he were a misbehaving child again, and motioned for the baseball bat again.

Mac took a deep breath, just before the first thwack connected with his stomach again.
Jack crossed his arms and glanced over at Thornton, who was driving, having refused to give him the keys.

After having spent most of the trip staring out the window and lost in his brain, he now conceded that he was in no fit state to drive.

‘How’re we going to do it?’

Nikki had been imprisoned for well over a year. She hadn’t talked, despite being subject to countless interrogations.

Well, that wasn’t quite true.

She’d talked plenty (Matty and Sarah – they hadn’t allowed Jack or Thornton to do the interrogations, at least, not until now, since they were too close to it all – now knew a lot about things that they did not want to know anything about at all), but hadn’t given up anything of use.

Now, they had to make her give that up.

By any means necessary.

Thornton glanced over at him, making eye contact for a beat, before turning back to the road. She spoke after a pause.

‘Nikki has one weakness: Mac.’ She swallowed. ‘She got caught because she made a gross miscalculation– What happened in Tahoe hadn’t required her to be there. The Organization’s ‘foot soldiers’ could have taken Mac then, without Nikki being there in person. She could have kept up her cover, but she’d chosen to reveal herself to Mac. ‘-almost certainly because of her feelings for him.’

Jack pursed his lips.

‘He rejected her real strongly that night, Patty.’

Thornton nodded in agreement, then after being silent for a beat, spoke again.

‘It’s not just that, Jack.’ She glanced over and stared into his eyes for a beat, before turning back to the road. ‘You know that.’ He did. ‘Nikki always had power over Mac. She revelled in that power.’

Jack swallowed and nodded.

That was so, so true. Nikki Carpenter remained, Jack was quite sure, the only person to turn Mac’s brain to mush.

(Jack had seen Mac interact with Penny, his only other ex-girlfriend. He’d seen him interact with Frankie, the first woman he’d loved, and Viv and Katarina, and he’d heard enough about Cindy and
Mac’s two dates with her to have, he felt, a good sense of their interactions. For months, he’d seen Mac and Beth become friends and inch towards being more. None of them could turn Mac’s brain to mush.

(They could make it stutter or slow down, but not turn it to mush.)

(Jack thought that was a very good thing, and was completely certain that Mac would agree.)

His voice was hard and utterly devoid of the affection he’d once felt for the woman (hadn’t really felt, honestly, since that day at the airstrip, more than two years ago) when he spoke.

‘We can use that to break her.’

It would be cruel. There’d be deception and threats and words wielded like knives.

(There was a reason why this hadn’t been used yet, at least not to its full potential, not even by Matty.)

(Nobody believed that Nikki’s feelings for Mac – both that love she’d had for him, before what had started on Lake Como, when Jack had believed that the woman was the right one for this partner, and its twisted remains – were really lies.)

Jack found that he didn’t care.

Not after what Nikki had done to Mac.

Not when the stakes were so high.

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UNKNOWN LOCATION

SOMEWHERE IN LA?

‘…1…6…9…3…9…’

Having finished the Periodic Table, Mac had now moved on to the digits of Pi.

Similarly (but rather more twistedly and sadistically, Mac thought), Dr Popovich had moved on to a new torture implement.

The lab-coated man held up a hand, and his minion withdrew the cattle prod (thankfully, a relatively low-powered one). Then, he addressed Mac, who was taking slow, deep breaths, raising an eyebrow expectantly.

‘Well, Mr MacGyver?’

Mac stared at him for a moment, then gave a little smirk.

‘Pretty sure it’s still hot in hell.’ The smirk widened a little. ‘I guess you’ll find out one day.’

Dr Popovich shook his head and gestured to his minion, who poked Mac with the cattle prod again. Mac recoiled as best as he could, given his restraints, as the electric shock hit him.

‘…9…3…7…5…1…’
‘Your Organization has taken Mac.’

At Thornton’s words, genuine surprise flickered across Nikki’s face (at least, what looked like genuine surprise, though neither of them were all that inclined to believe it, both being intimately familiar with the fact that Nikki was an incredible liar and actress – Jack’s gut was undecided as to whether she really was surprised) before it grew blank again. She shrugged as best as she could, given that her wrists were chained to the table.

‘I’m in prison. What does that have to do with me?’ A slow smirk grew across her face. ‘Though, maybe you’ve missed me. It’s been a while, hasn’t it?’ She glanced at Jack, who was standing behind Thornton, who was seated at the table across from Nikki, the smirk widening a little. ‘I must say, this location lacks the…gravitas…of our previous reunions, doesn’t it?’ Jack seethed internally at the references to that day at that church and Tahoe, as Nikki dropped that smirk and clasped her shackled hands together, raising an eyebrow. ‘I don’t know anything.’ She scoffed, staring at her nails. ‘And even if I did, do you really expect me to break down in tears over my ex-boyfriend and tell you everything?’ She smirked again. ‘You know me better than that.’

Jack, his hands in his pockets, turned sideways and leaned casually against Thornton’s chair. The Phoenix’s Director seemed to know where he was going (of course she did, she was who she was, after all), because she simply elegantly folded her hands and sat with a neutral expression, a mere spectator.

‘You know, he’s got a new woman now.’ His tone was casual, conversational. Nikki’s eyes narrowed. ‘New girlfriend. She’s very smart.’ Jack glanced over at the blonde woman. ‘Smarter than you. And very pretty.’ He smiled, small, soft and slow. ‘And kind and sweet and fierce, all at once, he says.’

Most of that wasn’t actually a lie.

In fact, from Jack’s point of view, the only lie in there was that Beth wasn’t actually Mac’s girlfriend. At least, wasn’t yet.

(He’d borrowed the kind and sweet and fierce thing straight from Mac, who’d described the Phoenix’s doctor as that while half-asleep on the way home from Russia, after being examined by her for any injury over video-call and ordered to eat, drink some of the chamomile tea in the medical kit and sleep.)

Nikki smirked, but Jack was positive that he’d touched a nerve. There was just something about the way that she was sitting, the look on her face, the notes in her voice…she could, he supposed, still be playing them, but his gut told him that this was definitely genuine.

‘Oh, like Mac could ever forget me. They say you never, ever forget your first. And I was first.’

Part of Jack snorted internally.

What she was referring to, yes, Nikki had been first.

But she hadn’t been Mac’s first girlfriend, or even the first woman he’d loved. Maybe that had helped, at the end of the day. Helped Mac to break that spell she’d had on him.
(Jack was certainly very, very happy that Penny and Frankie were very much not evil and very much good people. He thanked his lucky stars that Nikki hadn’t also been Mac’s first girlfriend and first love.)

Externally, Jack scoffed.

‘Oh, yeah, of course he can’t forget about you. We all know Mac doesn’t ever forget.’ Jack’s expression returned to that soft little smile. ‘I just ain’t ever seen him look at a woman like he looks at her.’

(That was also true – Jack had not seen Mac look at anyone, male or female, the exact way he looked at Beth when she got all excited and curious about their new idea for Sparky or his spaghetti-machine-spaghetti-machine or this fascinating new medical research paper she’d read in her favourite journal. The closest he’d seen was how had Mac looked at Frankie when she’d shown them the home she’d made for herself in the Tombs and the DNA sequencing recipe she’d invented, and it wasn’t quite the same – that had had some awe in it; these looks that Jack was referring to conspicuously didn’t.)

Jack smirked, as Nikki, he was sure, positively glowered.

‘And you know, not forgetting has its perks.’ The smirk widened. He was sure Nikki was seething now. ‘She compares real favourably to you, in any which way you look at it.’

Finally, Nikki snapped, lunging across the table as far as she could at Jack.

‘You’re lying, firstly.’ She smirked darkly. ‘And secondly, you really think an adorable little thing like her could satisfy him?’

The after me was implicit.

Jack had to swallow down his anger as Nikki slumped back into her chair and fell stubbornly silent, glaring murderously at both him and Thornton (mostly him), having just realized what she’d been taunted into revealing.

He’d been raised never to hit a woman.

(He did, obviously, in combat – though he often didn’t really think about the gender of the people he was fighting. He was pretty pro-gender equality in that sense, in general, really, but the notion still didn’t sit all that well with him.)

At that moment, he really wanted to break Nikki’s nose, for her insults to both Mac and Beth.

Meanwhile, as soon as Nikki had finished her declaration, Thornton stood and turned to leave. She shot Jack a look, sharp and sympathetic and as comforting as she could be, all at once.

She started making her way to the door without another word.

Her message was clear.

They’d gotten what they’d come for.

Intel.

Nikki had some way of knowing what was going on outside her prison.

That was a lead.
A better lead than they’d had before.

A better lead than what Riley, Viv, Lil and Bozer, back at the Phoenix and Matty’s headquarters had found, working off what little they’d gleaned from the junkyard and combing the internet and everything that Matty’s team had gathered during their mole hunt and what Matty and Sarah’s called-in favours had granted them.

And they were going to chase this lead with everything they had.

With one last glance at Nikki, who gazed back at him with just as much anger as he looked at her, Jack stalked out of the room.

He hoped he’d never have to look at that woman’s face again.

Except maybe to throw darts at it.

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**UNKNOWN LOCATION**

**SOMEWHERE IN LA?**

‘We the people…of the…United States in order to…form a more…perfect…union…’

Mac gritted his teeth again as Dr Popovich carefully, methodically, pressed a lit cigarette to his skin, holding it there just long enough to burn and *hurt*, but only leave the barest of marks.

After another two repetitions of that searing pain, the man looked up at him, an eyebrow raised.

‘Mr MacGyver, what do you say now?’

Mac did his best to adopt the look that Jack called his Mr-MacGyver’s-Science-Class face (he’d never tried to do it *deliberately*, and now wasn’t the *easiest* time to try – he was pretty sure he didn’t do a very good job, but Dr Popovich didn’t care, obviously).

‘You know, Einstein said insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results.’ He gave a little smirk, the best he could manage, anyway. ‘I think you need to get checked over by a shrink.’

Dr Popovich shook his head at him yet again, again looking at Mac as if he were a wayward child, and then returned to his methodical torture.

Mac gritted his teeth again and focused on forcing the words of the US Constitution’s Preamble out.

‘…establish justice…insure domestic…tranquillity…provide for the common defence…’

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**PHOENIX FOUNDATION HEADQUARTERS**

**SOMEWHERE IN LA**

‘…Why’d he do it?’

As he and Riley sat in the war room (Beth had returned to the infirmary to keep herself busy), Bozer looked away from the screen on the wall, which showed Thornton and Jack interrogating one of the
guards at the prison where Nikki (and Murdoc, before he’d escaped) was held. Once they’d known that Nikki had contact with the outside world, Riley, Lil and Viv had done their magic (with a little help from Bozer), and determined that this guard had been passing her messages, orally and in code, that he’d been given, already encrypted, on a burner.

They’d cracked some of the code, and so far determined that The Organization had drip-fed Nikki information.

For example, they’d told her about Beth, and something about finding another way to recruit Mac, since her way had failed spectacularly.

(That sent shivers down their spines, despite the fact that they’d known, deep in their hearts-of-hearts, that that’d been The Organization’s endgame ever since Mac had disappeared from that junkyard – it had never been to just do one thing for them, or even a few things - because whatever that way was – and none of them could even think of what it might be, because they couldn’t think of a better way to make Mac do anything than love, which clearly hadn’t really worked - it could not be good.)

Riley shrugged.

She and Bozer both knew very well that the guards at that prison were heavily, heavily vetted. Matty, Thornton, Jack and Sarah knew and trusted quite a few of them personally, and the prison’s guards had been swept carefully for moles very early in Matty’s mole hunt.

‘Money? Blackmail? Ideology?’ She shrugged again. ‘There’s a lot of possible reasons, Bozer.’

He nodded a little glumly, slouching down on the couch beside her. Riley reached out wordlessly and took his hand, rubbing little circles on it with her thumb.

‘And how’d they know about Beth? And you know, her and Mac’s thing?’

That, Riley had an answer to. She, Viv and Lil had been working on that.

‘Not every organization we’ve worked with since she came on-board had been cleared of moles when we worked with them.’ She sighed and gestured to her laptop. ‘We’re pretty sure they found that out when we worked with the Office of Naval Intelligence in Russia last month.’ She gave a very small, very wry smile. ‘Remember when Mac had to call Beth about the frozen dead guy in the lake?’ Bozer nodded as it grew clearer to him and Riley continued. ‘Anybody with half a brain and decent social skills who heard and saw that conversation could tell that they’re well on their way towards something.’ The ONI agent that they’d worked with had definitely been privy to that conversation, and had much more than half a brain and very, very good social skills – he was a very sharp profiler, after all. ‘Obviously, Bryant wasn’t a mole, but if he went back and gossiped with one of his co-workers, who gossiped with another one of his co-workers, and so on and so forth…’

She trailed off, and Bozer nodded.

Eventually, the gossip could have made its way to the mole in ONI that had been the last one caught by Matty’s team, and with a tiny bit of information about the people involved, The Organization’s knowledge and some digging and educated guesses (after all, Beth was a real person – she hadn’t been erased from existence when she’d joined the ‘think-tank’), they could have learned, as Bozer said, about Beth, and his BFF’s and the doctor’s thing.

Riley and Bozer’s attention was pulled back to the screen, when the guard suddenly burst into tears, sobbing about how he hadn’t wanted to do it, but he’d had to, to save his hometown.
He started talking, through his tears, about how they’d threatened his beloved hometown, since his parents were deceased and he had no partner or children, threatened to unleash a heavily-modified strain of the flu, to cause a mysterious, deadly and near-untraceable outbreak.

Thornton glanced up at the camera for a brief second, then pulled out her phone under the table, and seconds later, Riley’s phone beeped. She pulled it out, and she and Bozer read the message.

**Verify. Send CDC. Ask Matty to send Hippocrates too.**

Riley nodded and sent a reply, with a gut feeling, as she looked up at the screen, that the guard was telling the truth, and that Thornton and Jack thought so too.

**Yes, boss.**

She started typing, calling Viv and Lil as she did so, and wordlessly, Bozer got up, heading, she knew, for the break room to get her a cup of coffee.

That made her smile, just a tiny bit.

He really was the best.

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**UNKNOWN LOCATION**

**SOMEWHERE IN LA?**

‘…all men…are created…equal, that they…are endowed…by their Creator…’

Mac winced involuntarily as Dr Popovich sliced him with that knife again (it seemed to be a favourite of his; either that, or he’d run out of different torture tools to use on him, so had to start repeating them), the new cut running perpendicular to one of the older ones. He did his best to look down at the man.

‘You know, your logic is terrible. Torture me until I agree to work for you? You seriously think I’d be anywhere near loyal?’

Dr Popovich simply laughed darkly, a sound that was truly terrifying.

‘Oh, we’ll break you, Mr MacGyver.’ He held the knife closer to Mac’s face for a moment, smirking just as darkly as his laugh. ‘Then we’ll remake you into exactly what we want.’ He resumed his methodical slicing through Mac’s skin. ‘We tried Miss Carpenter’s way, now we’re trying my way…’ He gestured to one of his minions. ‘Prepare Phase Two.’

*That does not sound good.*

*That does not sound good at all.*

*As Bozer and Jack – and Han Solo - would say, I have a bad feeling about this.*

*A really, really bad feeling about this.*

He allowed himself to close his eyes for a moment, to send up a prayer of some sort that his friends would come for him soon (because he knew, he knew as well as he knew the square root of 256 or the Third Law of Thermodynamics, that they were searching with everything they had, had known
that all along, and that had provided him with fuel for his stubborn insolence and constant defiance and helped him to show as few signs of pain as possible and given him undying hope).

Then, he opened his eyes and gritted his teeth and forced his mind back onto the Declaration of Independence.

‘…with certain…unalienable rights…that among those are…life, liberty and…the pursuit of happiness…’

PHOENIX FOUNDATION HEADQUARTERS
SOMEWHERE IN LA

‘Got it!’

Riley’s shout was echoed by Viv and Lil over the screen.

The blackmailed guard knew very little, not even knowing the meaning of the messages he’d had to pass to Nikki (he didn’t have any idea what the code actually meant), and had been given the burner phone by The Organization, which they used to contact him.

The phone was encrypted and geo-blocked and had absolutely everything possible done to it to prevent it from being hacked or its calls and texts traced, but Riley, Lil and Viv working together had managed to crack it, and found that all the text messages originated from an old doctor’s practice on the outskirts of LA.

They’d ‘borrowed’ some satellite time to get imagery, which had confirmed that The Organization had taken Mac there, and also shown that it didn’t look like he’d been moved.

Thornton, standing by the screen, and Matty, on the screen, both nodded, and the taller woman spoke.

‘Good work.’ She walked over to Jack, who had stopped suddenly in his pacing as soon as Riley had spoken, and was now staring into the distance with rising hope in his eyes, and put a hand on his shoulder. ‘Jack, we’re going to get him back.’

She meant it, both ways.

‘Wilson’s a good medic, but he’s not a doctor. I am.’

Beth stared down Thornton and Jack, eyes fierce and resolute, arms crossed.

Mac’s imminent (and they all firmly believed that it was going to be imminent) rescue was a very, very big operation, given that the place seemed to be positively swarming with Organization operatives.

Jack was leading one Phoenix SWAT team, Gonzales another. Matty, Thornton, Viv, Charlie (who’d been pulled off the Penas’ protection detail once Matty had a moment after the news of Mac’s abduction) and Sarah were going as well (though Sarah – after a shouting match with Matty – was staying with the vans, on account of her broken arm). Riley was going to coordinate the entire operation from one of said vans, which Bozer would drive (they genuinely believed he would sneak out with them, which would be more dangerous, so were taking him along on the condition that he
did nothing but drive a van and stayed firmly inside the van), and Matty, Sarah and a couple of other agents would stay to help protect them if necessary.

They knew they’d need a medic, and were taking Wilson, an ex-Pararescue, and thus medic with combat skills.

Jack opened his mouth to protest, because nine months in Aleppo and self-defence training with him and Mac and Patty wasn’t combat experience, and they all knew that The Organization knew what she meant to Mac, which, Jack thought, probably made her the hottest target of them all, even if it couldn’t be called love yet.

Bad guys always went for the love interest, after all.

However, before he could say anything, Beth cut him off.

‘Would you have taken Dr Farnham?’ It was a question posed as if she very much knew the answer, and that that answer would have been yes (which was true). ‘I’m the Phoenix’s doctor. This is my job. This is what you hired me for.’

Jack still really wanted to protest, despite knowing that she was right, but Thornton, standing beside him, nodded.

‘You’re wearing a vest and staying in the ambulance-van.’

Beth nodded obediently.

‘Yes, boss.’

Thornton glanced around, at Matty, Viv, Lil, Sarah and Charlie on the screen, Jack beside her, Bozer and Riley on the couch and Beth standing across the war room.

She nodded again.

‘We leave in ten.’

OLD DOCTOR’S OFFICE

OUTSKIRTS OF LA

(NO LONGER UNKNOWN LOCATION)

As Dr Popovich prepared the IV line to insert into his project’s arm, all alone in the room, except for his project (he had secured the door and ordered all The Organization’s men out; this part of the process was critical and he did not want any disturbances and he thus needed to be alone for this part), he heard gunshots.

Silenced gunshots, and much closer than he’d have expected them to be given how heavily guarded the place was.

He looked at his project, who was nearly unconscious, but the blonde managed to open his eyes and give a very, very small smirk.

Dr Popovich swore.
Part of him desperately wanted to continue the process, because this project was going so well, but he had only just gotten started and had no hope of finishing it before those Phoenix Foundation agents (it could only be them, after all) got here.

And if he were captured or dead, his projects, his goals, would never come to fruition.

He would lose all the progress he’d made on this particular project, but another opportunity could be generated.

The Organization would guarantee it.

(This project, when it was finished, would be a masterpiece, after all.)

Getting out of here alive and free was more important.

He tucked the IV bag (it contained a special mixture of his, painstakingly created and just as painstakingly kept secret, even from his bosses, and he was not going to let it fall into enemy hands, especially these enemy hands) into his lab coat pocket.

Then, without looking back at his project (best not to explicitly tell him that they’d find themselves in this same position sometime in the future, after all), he opened the door to the room carefully, looked around, saw it was clear, and slipped out, closing the door firmly behind him.

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**PHOENIX VAN**

**NEAR OLD DOCTOR’S OFFICE**

**OUTSKIRTS OF LA**

Riley felt sick to her stomach and simultaneously relieved that Bozer, sitting in the driver’s seat, ready to drive at a moment’s notice if necessary, wasn’t seeing this, as she watched the footage on her laptop screen.

The facility had no surveillance cameras inside, save this one.

It’d taken a lot of work for her to get into it, but she now had hours and hours of video footage of Mac being tortured by this clearly very sadistic man in a lab coat.

Riley addressed the teams over her comm, as Matty, who’d been conversing with Sarah over her phone (Sarah was with Beth in the ambulance-van), came over and saw what was on Riley’s screen. Her face grew thunderous with anger as Riley spoke.

‘There’s a man, sixties, white hair and balding, in a lab coat. Do not let him get away.’

Matty continued, the rage on her face growing more tempered, controlled and harnessed, but no less powerful and dangerous.

‘Trust me, Thornton, we’re going to enjoy breaking that SOB.’

There was a silence for a moment, before Thornton’s voice echoed over their earpieces, restrained, leashed anger in her voice that told them that she very much understood what they’d implied.

‘Acknowledged.’
Two of the SWAT team busted down the door, and then Jack led them into the room.

He’d barely gone a step inside when he stopped entirely in his tracks. He’d been expecting this, had known that they’d find him like this, but it was still…

Mac was chained in a standing position in the middle of the room, barely conscious. He was bloodied and bruised and clearly beaten…and were those cigarette burns?

Jack swallowed the bile that was rising in his throat and that burning rage, that desire to find that man that Riley had described as having done this and rip him limb from limb with his bare hands, and let his worry and concern for his partner take control.

He forced himself to move towards Mac, as two of the SWAT team worked on freeing him from his restraints, and Wilson started examining him, and addressed everyone over his earpiece.

‘We found him, he’s conscious but in a bad way.’ He paused for a moment, allowing some of his anger to seep into his voice. ‘You gotta get that SOB.’

Thornton responded a moment later.

‘Jack, you, Doc and Wilson get Mac back to the infirmary or to hospital, whatever he needs, ASAP. Take Bozer with you.’ There was a pause. ‘We can handle it from here.’

Jack nodded.

‘On it, Patty.’

He came closer to his partner, reached out hesitantly, as if to touch him to check that he wasn’t a dream, but stopped at the last moment.

Mac, clearly very, very weak, managed to raise his head and smiled at the older man.

‘Jack.’

His tone of voice was expectant, as if he’d always, always known that Jack would come for him, that they’d all come for him.

Jack still wanted to rip that lab-coated man limb from limb. He still also kind of wanted to throw up.

But now he also wanted to smile and cry, because Mac had so, so much faith in him, in them.

He compromised by returning that smile and reaching out to ruffle Mac’s hair gently.

‘We’re here, brother, we’re here. You’re gonna be okay, buddy, you’re gonna be okay…’

Thornton stared down the lab-coated man, her gun aimed at his head, as he stared right back at her, holding a gun aimed at her head.

The man smiled, an almost-saccharine smile that was also very, very creepy.
‘Oh, you couldn’t kill a little old man, could you? Especially one who’s a doctor…’

She replied, her voice strong and as cold and cutting as a knife.

‘Real doctors heal, not hurt.’

At that moment, just as she finished speaking, a shot rang out, and Dr Popovich fell to the ground, clutching his left knee.

Thornton nodded at Viv, who was standing in the doorway behind the man and lowering her gun, having circled around to get him from behind, approaching while her aunt kept him occupied. Then, Thornton walked over to him, kicking his gun to Viv, and picked him up by the collar with surprising strength.

She stared into his eyes, letting him see that fury, that rage, that she’d been keeping so tightly leashed since Mac had disappeared from that junkyard. That anger that she’d carried within her ever since Nikki Carpenter turned out to be not-dead, since The Organization had first shown itself.

‘You are alive right now for only one reason: I need what’s in your brain.’

She meant it wholeheartedly.

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**PHOENIX AMBULANCE-VAN**

**NEAR OLD DOCTOR’S OFFICE**

**OUTSKIRTS OF LA**

Jack, Wilson and Mac, the former two mostly-carrying the latter, who had insisted on walking (or, at least, doing the closest to walking that he could), approached the ambulance-van, in front of which stood Beth, in a bullet-proof vest as ordered by Thornton, a gurney by her side.

There was a very pained expression on her face, Jack noted, as she laid eyes on Mac (a couple of stray thoughts crossed his mind – the thought that Mac really was dragging his feet, had dragged his feet when it came to a lot of things about this woman, probably because his subconscious had always recognized that connection they had, but also the thought that this woman would wait a long time for his partner to feel completely sure that he was ready for a relationship). Then, she closed her eyes for just a moment, and took a deep breath, and when she opened them again, there was that calm, caring professionalism in them.

She jogged forward several feet, meeting them halfway to the gurney, and after a small, reassuring smile at Mac (and Jack), she started talking rapidly to Wilson in a conversation full of medical lingo.

Mac glanced over at her as she conversed with Wilson, a soft, somewhat-relieved little smile on his face, something that Jack very much noticed, before his eyes rolled into the back of his head and he fell completely unconscious.

Glancing at one another, Jack and Wilson quickly carried him over to the gurney and lifted it into the van, as Beth hurried into it and started methodically pulling out medical supplies.

Wilson climbed into the back with Beth and closed the door, as Jack ran over to the passenger side and got in, nodding at Bozer, who was seated in the driver’s seat, already ready to go.
Without a word, Mac’s best friend started the ignition.

PHOENIX AMBULANCE-VAN
ON-ROUTE TO PHOENIX FOUNDATION HEADQUARTERS
SOMEWHERE IN LA

‘I don’t know how she does it, man.’

Bozer glanced over at Jack as he drove. The older man was staring out the window and Bozer could see the wetness in his eyes. He himself was only not sobbing and completely broken down because he was concentrating on driving, for his best friend’s sake.

Jack swallowed and spoke, still staring out the window.

‘Training. That always helps.’ He was silent for a moment. ‘And sheer strength of will, Boze. Knowing that you’ve gotta keep yourself together and do your job, for their sake.’ He glanced over at Bozer. ‘Like how you’re doing it now.’ Like how Jack had, earlier, back at that old doctor’s practice. ‘Like how you did it when that fake Zodiac Killer took Riley.’ Like how Jack had kept himself together, back then.

It was always easier to keep going when you had someone (or, more accurately – someones) to keep going for.

INFIRMARY
PHOENIX FOUNDATION HEADQUARTERS
SOMEWHERE IN LA

Beth stepped out of Mac’s room in the infirmary and walked up to where Jack, Bozer, Riley and Patricia (who’d returned to the Phoenix with Mac’s leather jacket, Swiss Army knife, belt and shoes about twenty minutes after Jack and Bozer, after Matty had assured them that she’d personally oversee Dr Popovich’s imprisonment – he wasn’t being kept at the Phoenix, which was a very good thing for both him and them – Jack didn’t know if he’d be able to resist punching the man’s lights out a few times if he were accessible) were sitting, looking every bit the worried family (which she supposed they were).

She managed a very small, reassuring-doctor smile.

‘Physically, he’ll be fine in about two weeks.’ They all relaxed ever-so-slightly. Jack ran a hand through his hair and let out a slightly-shuddering sigh of relief. ‘He has bruised kidneys and pulled muscles in his arms, shoulders and back, as well as a large number of cuts and bruises and minor burns. He’s dehydrated and exhausted and he was electrocuted multiple times.’ Beth swallowed, and they could all see the flash of protective anger in her eyes. ‘That man knew exactly how to inflict immense pain without causing permanent injury or scarring.’ Her eyes flickered closed for a moment, and she took a deep breath, and when she opened her eyes again, they’d returned to their previous doctor-y look. ‘I’d like to keep him sedated for the next 36 hours; that will aid his recovery and spare him the worst of the pain.’ She shrugged a tiny bit awkwardly and gestured to the four of them.
‘You’re really his next of kin, so…’

Jack, Bozer, Riley and Patricia all glanced at each other for just a moment, then Jack turned back to face Beth and spoke for them all.

‘He trusts you, Beth. Completely.’ He gestured to the door of Mac’s room. ‘If that’s best for him, do it.’

Beth gave a small, rather serious smile, then gestured to the door of Mac’s room.

‘You can come see him for a few minutes, but then you’re all going to have a shower and get a bite to eat before you come back.’

They all nodded, and trooped into his room, and gathered into a little half-circle around his bed, none of them with any words as they stared at the blonde lying there very still and very pale, an IV in his arm and a nasal cannula in his nostrils, hooked up to beeping monitors.

Beth followed a moment later, with Mac’s belongings in hand, and put his Swiss Army knife down carefully on one of the infirmary’s little nightstands by his head, then pulled two hooks out of one of the walls and hung up his belt and jacket, putting his shoes on the floor below them.

Then, she walked back over to the door and opened it.

‘I’ll be back in five minutes.’

She wasn’t sure if Jack, Bozer or Riley heard her, but Patricia at least managed a nod of acknowledgment.

Beth gave a tiny, sad smile, stepped out and closed the door behind her.

True to her word, five minutes later, Beth slipped back into the room, a book in her hands.

Bozer, Riley, Jack and Patricia hadn’t really moved, all still staring at Mac, a myriad of emotions in their eyes (sadness and sorrow and anger and fondness and affection and love and worry, and something that made it seem as if they were drinking in the sight of him, as if to prove to themselves that he was really there – really safe – and that they weren’t dreaming), though Bozer and Riley were now holding hands, seeking and offering comfort, and Riley’s other hand was on Jack’s shoulder.

They all looked up at her, and Beth gestured to the door, her expression and voice very firm.

‘Showers, food and water for all of you. I’ll let you back in in half an hour.’ Her expression and voice softened. ‘I’ll stay with him until you get back, I promise.’

Patricia nodded, glancing back at Mac, before walking towards the door. Riley and Bozer stared at Mac for a moment longer, before, with a gentle tug on his hand, Riley led her boyfriend towards the door. Jack stared at Mac for a couple of breaths, before staring at Beth for almost as long, then looking back at Mac again, swallowing and closing his eyes for a moment, then walked over to the door, following Bozer and Riley, who’d paused in the doorway, waiting for him, out.

Beth pulled a chair over to Mac’s bedside, sat down and watched his face for a moment. Then, she closed her eyes for a beat, taking several deep breaths, then opened them again, and held up the book in her hands with a wan smile.

‘I’m reading this again. Well, for the ninth time, but I guess that’s not really relevant, though again is
typically used to refer to the second incidence of something, I think…’ She huffed out a breath. ‘I’m talking to myself and I’ve put a foot in it.’ She looked over at Mac again. ‘Though, I guess I am talking to you…I wonder if it counts if the other party is unconscious?’ She thought for a second, brow furrowed, then shook her head, kicking herself internally, and opened the well-worn copy of *The Martian*. ‘I don’t know if you can even hear me, the literature is pretty divided, and it’s all anecdotal anyway, but if you can…well, some of Watney’s spirit should help, and, well, it’s *The Martian*. You love *The Martian.*’ She looked up at him again, brow a little furrowed. ‘Who doesn’t love *The Martian*?’ Shaking her head as if to get herself back on track, she looked back down at the book and started to read out loud. ‘Log Entry: Sol 6…’

Jack slipped back into the infirmary (he’d ducked out to go to the bathroom – it was just past midnight now), and then his brow furrowed in concern as he heard sobbing.

He glanced over at the door to Beth’s office, which was slightly ajar, as if she hadn’t quite managed to close it properly.

The sobbing was definitely coming from there.

Jack sighed sadly, shaking his head with both sadness and fondness, making his way over to the office, making his steps deliberately a little louder than usual, so as not to startle her. The sobs stopped, mostly, though there was the occasional, slightly-muffled one, as he neared.

He nudged open the door gently, to find Beth sitting on the cot in her office (for when she had to monitor patients overnight, or just when she had to grab a nap – the Phoenix’s doctor’s hours weren’t standard office hours, after all, and it wasn’t even like an ER where they had set shifts – she worked when needed, as needed), trying to stem her tears.

She looked up at him, wiping her eyes, and her voice was a little shaky as she spoke.

‘It’s…it’s not wrong, is it?’ She took a deep shuddering breath. ‘I mean, I’m his doctor…’ Jack crouched down beside her, as she looked down for a moment, then back up. ‘…but we have special circumstances, and, well, I’m already compromised whichever way you look at it, you’re all my friends, feelings don’t really go away even if you ignore them…’ She shrugged a little helplessly, trailing off and looking up at him, seeming to desperately want confirmation.

Jack offered her a small, but soft, gentle smile. A reassuring one.

‘No, it’s not wrong.’

It was probably, in many ways, a complicated issue.

But to Jack, it was simple.

He didn’t think it was wrong, not in the slightest.

(Maybe it was partly because of all his life experiences, the heartaches and the lost loves and the knowledge that he’d never have a wife or little Jacks.)

(Maybe it was partly because of that deep wish he had for Mac – and Bozer and Riley, though they were looking like they’d get there someday already – that wish that they’d get that white-picket-fence happy ending, in the traditional, not roundabout, way, unlike him.)

But mostly, it was because he knew so, so well, that the Phoenix really was special; the lives its employees lived completely unlike the lives of ordinary people.
There weren’t many people out there who understood what they did and what they went through, and with the high pressure and frequent danger and all the secrets they had to keep, it was natural that they all bonded with each other.

It was natural and healthy and very much not wrong (even if it might have been wrong, if they lived normal lives) for them to grow to love each other.

Platonically. As family. Romantically.

Besides, Beth was right.

Jack knew that romantic love was different from platonic love.

But he also believed that while the bonds were different, they could be equally as strong.

People could (and would) do just as much for their loved ones, no matter which way they loved them, in his experience.

Beth had grown comfortable with the very close friendships she was developing with them, those nights sitting around the fire-pit at Mac and Bozer’s. She’d decided that when it came to platonic love, it was worth the extra difficulties that came with treating your loved ones with a doctor.

Romantic love wasn’t a big leap from that.

And she’d proven today, to all of them and to herself, that she could compartmentalize very, very well.

And perhaps most importantly, Jack thought, she was also right about feelings not going away even if you didn’t do anything about them. Even if you tried to ignore them.

His own love life was proof of that.

Beth stared at him for a long moment, then nodded, and stopped fighting her own tears and sobs, letting them pour out, allowing herself that catharsis.

Jack smiled wanly at her, a little proud (he was pretty sure Beth was going to become another one of his surrogate sort-of children; he was accumulating quite a lot of them…), and held out his arms.

‘Come here, kiddo.’

The kiddo was very, very deliberate. He called her Doc at work, and Beth the rest of the time, but he hoped that kiddo would make her a little more comfortable about seeking comfort.

She immediately leaned forward and let herself be enveloped in his arms, burying her head in his shoulder.

Jack patted her back gently, feeling a little better himself.

Mac really was on to something with that oxy-stuff.

Oxycontin?

Oxycortin?

Something like that.
Sometime in the middle of the night, Bozer woke, for no discernible reason.

He opened his eyes, blinking a little sleepily, and found that Riley, lying on the cot beside his and facing him, was very much awake, propped up a little on an elbow and staring over at Mac, her eyes a bit unfocused.

She started a tiny bit when she realized he was awake, and he reached out automatically for her hand, and just as automatically, she took it and wound her fingers around his.

‘You wanna talk?’

His voice was soft, barely more than a whisper, and gentle and simply, in Riley’s mind, comforting.

Riley let out a long breath, then tightened her hand around his just fractionally and gestured at Jack, who was sitting in a chair by Mac’s bed with his back to them (he seemed, from his posture, to be awake, but not terribly aware of anything except his partner), with her head, then whispered back.

‘You know, there was a moment, just a moment, after he threw my dad around to protect my mom, that...that I thought that Jack was Superman or Captain America, or...you know, a superhero.’ She glanced up at the unaware Jack, and then Mac, who was still in a way that he never really was, and then looked back into Bozer’s eyes. ‘Then, you know, pretty much literally just after I met him, Mac hung onto a plane while it was taking off and somehow managed to force it to land.’ Riley fell silent for a moment, gathering her thoughts, then snorted. ‘Of course I know they’re not superheroes. No crazy costumes or names, for one.’ Bozer gave a little smile at that. ‘And they’re heroes, but they’re not super, and...’ She trailed off, gesturing with a little nod of her head at Mac, and then, when she spoke again, her voice was even softer and plaintive and vulnerable, a side of Riley that very few people ever had the privilege of seeing (and it was a privilege; she let so few people in, after all, hid so much behind snark and sass and those very strong walls of hers, that had kept her going through so much). ‘...I don’t have much family. I don’t want to lose any of you, and I don’t want any of you to lose yourselves.’

Bozer just nodded sadly (he was also very touched, and did his best to try and communicate that to his girlfriend with his eyes and expression and demeanour), lifting her hand and pressing a quick kiss to her knuckles, a gesture that brought the tiniest of smiles to Riley’s face (it was something she found very sweet, even if she’d never admit it out loud).

‘Hey, Mac’s really, really strong. He’s one of the strongest people I know, and he’s got us.’ Bozer gestured to the room at large (Patricia was asleep on a cot on the other side of the room, as was Beth, the doctor having shifted into the room at some point while Bozer and Riley were asleep – she’d been in her office last they recalled). ‘And he’s got everyone else, you know, Matty and Charlie, Penny, even if she’s not gonna know anything about this, and...’ Bozer trailed off and got himself back on track. ‘He’s gonna be okay.’

Bozer himself was, of course, worried about his best friend.

He was, honestly, beyond worried.

But, he also knew, deep down, that Mac would make it through, because that’s what Mac always did.

Mac fixed things.

He’d fixed himself before.

He’d do it again.
With help and support from his loved ones, of course.

Bozer was very, very sure of that.

He squeezed Riley’s hand, looking deeply into her eyes for a moment.

‘He’s strong, just like you. Mac’s gonna be alright.’

Riley squeezed his hand in return, and smiled a small, soft smile at him.

‘He’s strong like you are too, Bozer.’

They were all strong people.

And the fact that they all had each other was a significant contributing factor to that strength, in Riley’s mind.

Just before dawn, Patricia slipped back into Mac’s room after having had a shower.

Her eyes immediately fell on the Phoenix’s doctor, who was sitting on her cot, making a paperclip chain from the paperclips in the kidney dish beside her.

Beth had been checking on Mac when she’d left the room; clearly, she’d finished her tasks and had found something else to occupy herself.

Patricia walked a little closer, sitting down on her own cot beside Beth’s, and simply raised an eyebrow with a little smile, gesturing with her head at the paperclip chain.

The younger woman shrugged a little awkwardly, and gave an answering wan smile, gesturing to Mac with her head.

‘Mac’s on to something with the paperclips; keeping your hands busy helps.’ As she spoke softly (Jack had finally dozed off in his chair by Mac’s bed, and Bozer and Riley were still sleeping), she added another paperclip to the chain. Patricia’s smile widened a little, and then Beth glanced up at her boss, and gestured to Jack (who’d just given a snore) with a nod of her head and a slightly-wry and moderately-serious look on her face. ‘I’m not going to be able to persuade him to sleep in a cot, am I?’

Patricia simply shook her head.

‘Unfortunately, no. Jack Dalton is possibly the most stubborn agent I’ve ever dealt with.’

Beth nodded, as if she’d anticipated that answer.

‘I’ll start preparing for the treatment of his inevitable sore neck and back, then.’

Patricia’s smile widened a tiny bit more, and her expression grew wry too.

‘He’s going to be very…Jack…about it.’

She didn’t need to explain to Beth what that meant.

(It’d mean plenty of complaining and also bad jokes about massage therapists – complaints and jokes played up for their benefit, to lighten the mood, because that was Jack.)
Beth just smiled and nodded in response.

‘How is he?’

As Bozer, Riley, Patricia, Jack and Beth ate a quick, cold breakfast in Mac’s room in the infirmary, Matty called them on Riley’s laptop, Viv, Sarah, Charlie and Lil appearing on the screen with the Phoenix’s former Director.

Riley handed her sandwich off to Bozer, and obligingly turned her screen so that they could get a look at Mac, while Beth swallowed her mouthful of sandwich and started speaking.

‘There’s no signs of infection, he’s not dehydrated anymore and the healing process is progressing as I’d expect. He’s as well as he can be.’

The mole hunters all smiled; wan smiles, but smiles nonetheless, before Matty’s eyes filled with a fiery sort of anger again, as did Sarah’s. Viv’s eyes grew hard and cold, and Lil crossed her arms. Charlie’s expression changed to something that Jack very much recognised from his time in Afghanistan and Iraq, and the two former soldiers made eye contact for a second, sharing an understanding.

It was Matty who spoke, voice full of fiery determination and restrained anger.

‘The Organization is not going to get away with this. We’re going to take them down.’

She and her team had taken down the moles.

But their mission wasn’t over yet.

They hadn’t disbanded after the mole hunt was over, because they still had a job to do.

Take down The Organization.

It was a big task, but they weren’t going to rest until The Organization was taken down.

Especially after this.

The two teams stared at one another for a moment, mutual understanding and determination and protectiveness and anger passing between them, before they all nodded, and Patricia spoke, voice a bit softer and gentler than usual.

‘We’ll call you back when he wakes up.’

Matty nodded, and replied, her own voice also rather gentle.

‘When we’ve got an update, you’ll be the first to hear it.’ She got several nods in return, and some wan smiles, and then she continued. ‘Take care of yourselves.’

That was said firmly, though far from being devoid of affection or care.

It was Jack who responded, the wan smile on his face widening a tiny bit.

‘Same to you guys.’

They all stared at each other again for another beat, and then with a last nod of acknowledgement, Matty hung up.
Wordlessly, Beth sat back down on the edge of her cot and turned her attention to finishing her breakfast; Mac was due for another check-up in ten minutes. Bozer handed Riley back her sandwich as the hacker put her laptop down, and Patricia pulled another sandwich from the little stack beside her and tossed it to Jack, who caught it on autopilot and bit into it, still on autopilot.

The Phoenix’s Director eyed the former CIA agent with a hint of concern in her dark eyes, then glanced back over at Mac, and with a small, internal sigh, turned her attention back to her own breakfast, glancing at her phone as she ate.

Despite the fact that part of her really didn’t want to leave, wanted to stay and keep vigil like the others, she would be heading off after breakfast.

She had a job to do, a job that (unlike Riley’s or Bozer’s or Jack’s), couldn’t be put on hold until Mac was at least awake, if not mostly physically recovered.

The coerced guard’s hometown needed attention.

Dr Popovich had to be interrogated.

(It was, she admitted, easier to pull herself away from the young blonde agent who’d somehow managed to break through all those defences she had and worm his way into her heart – which in hindsight shouldn’t have surprised her, because keeping Mac out of – or in - anything was nigh impossible – to deal with that man.)

(Vengeance – flawed and problematic though it could be – was sweet.)

And the Phoenix didn’t stop just because one of its agents was down.

She still had a whole agency to run, and while Andi was doing an admirable fill-in job and clearly making sure that her workload was filtered, given how few unread emails she had, she still had to do her job.

No matter what.

It was the price one paid for the corner office.

Beth slipped back into Mac’s room, having just finished removing Cal from Cartography’s stitches (his calf had healed up nicely, though he was going to have a scar – which he thought was pretty cool, and had babbled on about for quite a while).

Bozer and Riley had cajoled Jack into playing a game of cards with them, though the older man’s mind was clearly very, very elsewhere, because he was losing terribly (honestly, Bozer wasn’t heaps better, and Beth was pretty sure that Riley was simply so much better at Go Fish than the two men that she’d win even if distracted).

The three of them, Beth knew, weren’t going to be leaving Mac’s sick room unless absolutely necessary (to use the bathroom or maintain the standards of hygiene that she insisted that they maintained – she’d decided that making them leave to get food or drink was a battle not worth fighting, and simply brought it to them).

She was also convinced that if she didn’t have a job to do (a job, like a doctor’s job, that required putting aside personal feelings sometimes to be able to do it, putting aside personal feelings and wants and desires for a while because you had a job to do that had to supersede those), Patricia would be right there with them, sitting by Mac’s bed and keeping vigil.
Beth gave a little smile as Riley declared victory, then, with nearly no hesitation (the infirmary was all in order, the supply orders for the next six weeks were all done, and she had her phone on her and had set up the infirmary’s considerable tech to alert her if anyone entered; if needed, she’d be out of Mac’s room in a flash and ready to do her job…and she was human, not some kind of doctor-robot, and even Sparky had his moments, like when he stubbornly refused to call Riley anything but Miss Davis…), she walked over to the trio playing cards, and gestured to Riley with a hand and a slightly-wider smile.

‘Deal me in?’

When he woke sometime in the middle of the night, Jack stretched and shifted in his chair, trying to ease the ache in his back and neck. The discomfort was probably his own doing; he could (and probably should) sleep in a cot, but he found himself unable to tear himself away from this chair beside his partner’s bed, even if he was going to be aching for a while after Mac woke up.

‘I’m getting too old for this.’

From the other side of Mac’s bed, Patricia, who was sitting straight, hands folded on her lap, quirked an eyebrow at him with a small, very wry smile. She gestured at Bozer, Riley and Beth, asleep on cots, and then at Mac with her head.

‘Don’t let them hear you say that.’

Jack made a face.

‘I’m not old. The kids are just-’ He cut himself off as he realized what he’d just said and made another face. Patricia’s smile widened a little, and her eyebrow rose a bit more. After a moment, Jack sighed and his face grew more serious. He gestured to the blonde on the bed, and then to the three other young people, still relatively-peacefully asleep. ‘Since when did adults start becoming kids?’ His face scrunched up a little. ‘Or is that kids becoming adults?’ He shrugged, and waved a hand. ‘Doesn’t matter, you get my point, Patty.’

The dark-haired woman simply nodded, and her voice and expression was part-wry and part-serious when she spoke.

‘When we started getting old, Jack.’ Jack gave a little snort, but nodded nonetheless, and Patricia continued, her voice rather firm. ‘After this, you’re giving Nate a call.’ She glanced over at Mac, something soft and sad in her eyes that kind of made him want to give her a hug (Jack was a hugger, even if Patty was definitely not one), then looked back up at Jack. ‘We’re all giving Nate a call.’

Jack nodded, the two older agents making eye contact over Mac’s bed, something akin to affection and fondness and protectiveness and a bit of sadness and anger passing between them, then, the Texan spread his hands out and gave a little smile.

‘Well, you’re the boss, Patty.’

To emphasise that point, he gave a jaunty little salute.

Patricia simply shook her head, with a small smile and clear fondness in her eyes (at least, clear to Jack).

Jack Dalton was ridiculous.

He was an incredible agent and a very good man, but he was ridiculous and occasionally a pain in
the neck.

But he was also a friend.

A close friend.

He… mattered.

At about five in the morning, Riley woke up suddenly for no discernible reason, and with a bit of a groan, sat up in her cot. She glanced over at Bozer, who was still sound asleep, and then looked up and made eye contact with Beth, who was in the middle of braiding her hair into some kind of elaborate coronet style.

The doctor smiled rather sheepishly at Riley, and the hacker got the impression that she might have waved awkwardly if her hands weren’t otherwise occupied.

Riley returned the smile with a little one of her own, then quietly got up, noting that Jack was asleep in his chair by Mac’s bed (he was going to be insufferable about his sore back and neck later, she just knew it), and that Patricia was also sleeping (at least, Riley thought she was sleeping – her breathing was slow and even and her eyes closed and she was rather still, but if anybody could pull off faking being asleep so convincingly, it’d be her) in her cot, facing the door.

Stepping quietly over to the door, she slipped out.

When Riley returned from the bathroom, Beth was finishing up braiding her hair, fixing the last couple of bobby pins in place.

Riley sat down on the doctor’s cot beside her, and smiled and gestured at her elaborate hairstyle.

‘Could you do mine?’ Her smile widened a little, and became a bit more of a smirk. ‘We should be stereotypical girlfriends at least once.’

(They weren’t very good at being stereotypical girlfriends.)

(They both hated rom-coms with a passion. It was easier to convince Bozer to watch a rom-com than either of them – he had a deep and abiding love for Love, Actually. While Riley painted her nails, Beth never did since they were so impractical for a doctor – though she’d painted Riley’s for her once; she had really steady hands and was an excellent manicurist. Neither of them, however, were adverse to eating ice-cream on the couch while watching superhero films.)

Beth gave a little snort of laughter as she shifted a little and started separating Riley’s somewhat sleep-wild hair into sections.

‘I thought we did that when we went shopping before you all got sent to Australia.’

Riley made a sound of acknowledgement (she’d have nodded if not for the fact that she couldn’t exactly do that at that moment) and then smirked, not that Beth could see her face.

‘You should totally have bought that dress.’

She didn’t have to specify what dress it was. Riley had been a very staunch advocate of Beth buying that little black bandage dress she’d worn when they were dressing up as each other.

Beth’s face scrunched up slightly in response to that statement, as she started braiding. Riley’s curly
and slightly-wild hair was a bit harder to braid than her own, mostly-straight hair.

‘It was much more you than me…since that was what we were going for, after all.’

Riley’s smirk widened a bit more. (Sure, she and Bozer and Jack were trying to keep the teasing and significant looks on the down-low, but since Mac was unconscious and Beth couldn’t see her face, and it was five in the morning and they were all worried and a bit stressed, Riley figured she could have a free pass.)

‘It looked really good on you…and it was an awesome date dress.’ Beth’s cheeks flushed a little at that, and Riley’s voice was a bit more curious and probing when she continued. ‘Do you even have a date dress?’

The doctor actually had to think for a moment about that.

‘I have a couple of nice dresses, and I’d wear them on dates, though I’m fairly certain none of them are what you’d call a date dress…they’re not really like that dress…’

Riley really would have shook her head then if she could, and did her best to put her head-shake into her voice instead.

‘When we get time, we are going shopping, and we’re going to get you a date dress that suits your style. Or a couple of date dresses.’ Her smirk widened. ‘I think you’re going to need them.’

Still a bit pink-cheeked, Beth kept braiding Riley’s hair as she responded.

‘As long as we can go see *X-Men: Dark Phoenix* or *Wreck-It Ralph 2* as well.’

Riley grinned.

‘Sounds like a plan.’

As Beth finished off the last of Riley’s new hairstyle, Bozer sat up in his cot, rubbing his eyes blearily. He blinked at the two young women, then grinned, then sort-of pouted.

‘I missed the hair-braiding? Come on!’

Beth gave a little snort of incredulous laughter, and Riley chuckled, shaking her head fondly, before leaning over and stage-whispering into Beth’s ear.

‘He’s really good at hair-braiding.’

(Hair and make-up was kind of his thing, along with film-making and cooking, of course. In high school, he’d practiced a lot on Penny, and once or twice, Mac, either when his best friend was asleep or after he’d won a bet he’d made with the blonde.)

Bozer glanced over at his best friend, then turned back to face the two young women, hands toying with his blanket.

Wordlessly, Beth reached out and handed him the kidney dish, which now contained a long paperclip chain. With a grateful smile, Bozer started undoing the chain.

‘Keeping your hands busy really does help.’ He glanced over at Mac again. ‘I always used to think my bro was, like, crazy, ’cause of his paperclip thing. Not that I don’t still think he’s crazy, but…’

Bozer sighed and glanced down at the paperclip chain in his hands, then back over at Mac, and after
a moment, he swallowed and spoke, voice very soft. ‘I’ve been worrying about that crazy-mad-scientist-genius-puppy since I was eleven years old.’ He shook his head, a wry look on his face. ‘You have no idea how relieved and happy I was when he left the Army and picked up a job at a think-tank; you know, since I figured he wasn’t all that likely to get blown up working at a think-tank, at least, not more likely than usual, with what he does with toasters and vacuum cleaners and all…’

As he spoke, Riley reached out and took his hand, and Beth rummaged around in the bag she had beside her cot and pulled out a chocolate chip muesli bar, which she handed to Bozer.

‘…and then it was just…boom…and of course, I’m proud of him, who wouldn’t be, ‘cause he’s Mac and all, but…’

After they’d all eaten a very early breakfast and she’d checked the monitors and washed her hands thoroughly, Beth carefully removed the IV line from Mac’s arm, then took out the nasal cannula as well.

Jack, who was still sitting in his chair by Mac’s side, though he’d moved it out of her way to let the doctor do her work, cocked his head to the side in an unspoken question.

Beth moved the IV pole out of the way, then answered.

‘I’ll have to reinsert the IV later, but I thought it’d be better for him to wake up without it, considering…’

She didn’t need to explain further. Jack nodded with a little smile, which widened as Beth gestured that he could move his chair back.

Wordlessly, Bozer and Riley took up seats on the other side of the bed, and Patricia stood against the wall at the bed’s foot, as Beth, an eye on the monitors, busied herself updating Mac’s chart again.

The first of his senses to return was smell.

There’d been a very, very brief moment of panic and fear (what if Jack’s appearance had been a dream? Or, more likely, a hallucination? What if…what if he was back there and…), but it disappeared almost instantly as he smelled the scent of the three-in-one soap/shampoo/conditioner used in the Phoenix’s showers, and that light, yet distinct, sterile smell of the infirmary, and, he was quite sure (even if he was never admitting this out loud), just a hint of the hand lotion that Beth used to stop her hands from cracking.

The sensation of touch returned next, almost instantaneously.

He was comfortably warm. He felt clean. He was also, much to his displeasure, wearing a hospital gown. There wasn’t the uncomfortable sensation of an IV in his arm, or a cannula in his nostrils or an oxygen mask on his face.

That helped.

He could hear voices, familiar voices, though he couldn’t quite make out the words; they seemed fuzzy, or a bit distant.

Those familiar voices really helped.
Slowly, he opened his eyes, glad to find that the room wasn’t too bright.

He was greeted by a very, very welcome sight.

Bozer and Riley sitting on his left side, Patricia leaning (or leaning as much as she ever did, with her perfect posture and all) against the wall at the foot of his bed, Jack by his right side, and Beth standing behind the older man’s chair.

Mac smiled.

*I’m going to be okay.*

*Despite…despite what happened…I’m going to be okay.*

*I just know it.*

‘…Boze, there’s at least ten flaws in that argument.’

Bozer was attempting to convince Mac that he’d actually woken up several decades in the future, a la Captain America.

Thornton’s phone buzzed yet again, and she took it out and glanced at it, looking very serious and business-like.

Then, she addressed them, interrupting Mac, Bozer, Riley and Jack’s conversation.

‘I’m sorry, but I can’t hold oversight off any longer. We need to go for debrief.’

Beth immediately looked up from where she was preparing a new IV bag for Mac, and locked eyes with her boss, something fierce in her eyes and the tilt of her chin.

‘Mac’s *not* going. Tell oversight that he’s not going to be medically cleared for debrief for twenty-four hours.’

Jack, who was just about to stand up to follow Thornton out the door, albeit unwillingly, suddenly had the mental image of the rather stuffy and very dangerous and powerful members of oversight being scolded by the furious little doctor and covered in *Dora the Explorer* Band Aids.

It was both a highly amusing and highly disturbing image.

Thornton, meanwhile, nodded in understanding and agreement.

‘They had the sense to not order him in for debrief with us.’

She glanced at Jack, then Beth, then Riley and Bozer.

If oversight attempted to drag Mac through an exhausting and unpleasant and painful debrief within the next twenty-four hours, they were going to have a fight on their hands.

With another nod, she turned on her heel and swept through the door, knowing that Jack, Riley and Bozer would follow.

With a last glance and a couple of waves at Mac and a few sighs and complaints, they did.
As the door clicked shut, Beth finished preparing the IV bag and line, and looked over at Mac, gesturing with her head towards the door, with a soft little smile on her face.

‘For all practical intents and purposes, they haven’t left you since you got here.’

He returned that smile, and stared at her for a long moment. (It was probably awkward, but he found he didn’t really care.)

‘You didn’t either.’

It fell more on the side of ‘statement’ than ‘question’.

She looked into his eyes for a moment before she responded.

‘I…I couldn’t leave you.’

They were, he supposed, dutiful words.

Since she was the Phoenix’s doctor and he required medical attention, they were already true in that context.

But there was more than duty in her voice.

There was another silence, not uncomfortable, per se, but pregnant with something, then Beth held up the newly-prepared IV line and bag.

‘This has to go back in your arm, Mac, I’m afraid.’

He sighed and nodded, and she put down the bag and pulled a sterile alcohol wipe from her pocket.

He found that even though he didn’t want to watch the IV going into his arm, he also didn’t want to look away from her, and compromised by staring at the top of her head as she worked.

She’d braided her hair into some kind of elaborate style, almost certainly, he thought, to keep her hands busy, given that Riley’s hair was in a similar style and that there was a very long paperclip chain in a kidney dish on his nightstand right next to his Swiss Army knife, with a few loose paperclips here and there. (She’d probably put them there because she thought he might find the ready access to paperclips comforting in some way, and she really wasn’t wrong.)

He had a sudden desire to unravel the braided crown she’d made of her hair, partly to work out the pattern behind it, how the locks of her hair interacted to form that style, and partly so he could have his hands in her hair.

He pushed that desire away (it was very, very inappropriate right now), and was instead suddenly assailed by a series of memories.

Flashes of the 36 hours he’d been informed that he’d spent unconscious in this bed.

He remembered Jack singing (terribly, as expected, but also a lullaby, which was very unexpected – Mac hadn’t thought that Jack even knew any lullabies), and Patricia apologizing, and Bozer telling him all about how he was going to replicate that amazing not-birthday-just-using-you-as-a-guinea-pig eight-layered chocolate cake he’d made for Mac’s thirteenth as soon as Mac was well enough to eat a huge slice of it, and Riley describing her pretty elaborate plans for a new gaming rig that she wanted his help with.

He also remembered…
‘…In other news, today is Thanksgiving. My family will be gathering in Chicago for the usual feast at my parents’ house. My guess is that it won’t be much fun, what with me having died ten days ago. Hell, they probably just got done with my funeral. I wonder if they’ll ever find out what really happened. I’ve been so busy staying alive that I never thought of what it must be like for my parents. Right now, they’re suffering the worst pain anyone can endure. I’d give anything just to let them know I’m still alive. I’ll just have to survive to make up for it…

As Beth straightened up, the IV back in his arm, and moved the pole closer to his bed, Mac sought out her eyes and blurted out the thought, the realization, that had just crystalized in his brain.

‘You read to me.’ She stilled as soon as those words left his mouth. ‘You read me The Martian.’

Her cheeks pinked a little and she shifted a bit (he supposed that it made an awful lot of sense for her to react this way; reading to one of your patients would probably be considered crossing some kind of line, though it was very acceptable line-crossing by Phoenix perspectives), but nodded.

‘…Yes…I…I thought you could do with some of Watney’s spirit, thought it might help keep nightmares away or something like that, help you get better in some way.’

He smiled up at her, a broader smile than he probably should have had, considering what he’d just been through, but it’d come very naturally.

‘Well, I do have an excellent doctor looking after me, I’m sure I’ll be better in no time.’

She shook her head at him with a wry smile.

‘Flattery will not get you out of here any faster, Mac. You know that.’

*If my life was a romance novel, this would be the moment in which I say something witty about flattery getting me a date with said excellent doctor, which would naturally lead to me getting said date, and if it was a certain kind of romance novel, us making out in this infirmary bed and getting caught by Jack and Bozer and Riley and Patricia when they return from debrief.*

*But my life is definitely not a romance novel.*

He knew she couldn’t read his mind (despite the fact that from time to time, she claimed – like most of his loved ones - that she could see the cogs turning in his head – probably, he thought, because of his apparently-distinctive thinking-face), but somehow, she seemed to have some kind of inkling of what he might be thinking, because they ended up looking at each other for a moment.

A moment that bore quite a similarity to those moments from romance novels, as far as he could tell.

Then, it was broken by Beth stepping away and pulling out a bottle of lemon-lime Gatorade, which she handed to him with a rather firm look.

Obediently, the smile on his face not disappearing, he took it, opened it and had a sip as she spoke.

‘We need to get some food into you. Would you prefer dry toast or saltine crackers?’

He swallowed his Gatorade and looked up at her, affecting a hopeful sort of expression.

‘Any chance of me convincing you to let Bozer make me tomato soup and grilled cheese sandwiches?’

Mac’s absolute favourite comfort foods were tomato soup, prepared according to the Jackson family
secret recipe (which Bozer, of course, knew), and grilled cheese sandwiches.

His mother and grandfather had prepared those for him whenever he needed comfort or cheering up, and sometimes, just because.

Beth shook her head firmly with a sympathetic little smile.

‘Sorry, Mac. That’s probably a couple of days away.’ She raised an eyebrow at him. ‘You know that.’

He gave a little shrug and a smirk.

‘Never hurts to ask.’ He took another sip of Gatorade. ‘Toast, please?’

She shook her head, still smiling, then made for the door.

‘I’ll be back in a few minutes.’ She narrowed her eyes at him. ‘No escaping.’

*Ambivalence describes the state of having simultaneous conflicting reactions, beliefs or feelings towards something.*

*It’s true that I hate being stuck in the infirmary.*

*But I also really want to stay on her good side.*

*And not that I’m ever going to admit this out loud, but attempting to escape the proximity of a beautiful and intelligent woman, who is very much not evil?*

*I’m not that crazy.*

**MACGYVER’S RESIDENCE**

**LA**

Mac smiled as he took a bite of the first triangular half of the grilled cheese sandwich on the plate in front of him, having already drunk a third of a bowl of tomato soup.

He was sitting on a stool at the kitchen counter, and Bozer was humming to himself as he made a second grilled cheese sandwich. There was a stack of assembled but un-grilled sandwiches (a literal stack; it was a foot high and Mac’s best friend was assembling even more as the sandwich in the cast iron grilled) on the counter by the stove. Beth was sitting next to him, sipping on her own bowl of tomato soup, and keeping a careful eye on him (she’d been doing that practically constantly for the last three and a half days, since he’d woken up).

Riley was sitting on the couch, grinning proudly as she drank her own bowl of soup and watched Jack play a game on her laptop (she’d coded a game that allowed you to throw darts at Nikki’s face), the older man whooping occasionally and completely ignoring his bowl of soup, which was sitting on the coffee table. Patricia was watching while she drank her own soup with no small hint of amusement, and Mac quickly roughly calculated the odds of her actually playing the game (they weren’t half-bad).

The smile widening a little, he glanced back down at the second half of the sandwich on his plate, and nudged the plate towards the young woman beside him.
Beth looked down at the sandwich half, then back up at him, looking rather reluctant to take it. (Mac figured that she thought he needed the food, which was true, but Bozer was making a near-mountain of them, and this was getting cold, since he could only eat one half at once anyway.)

‘The last time I tried to eat both halves of a sandwich simultaneously, I was fourteen and had made an ill-advised bet with Bozer.’

With a little smile and no small amount of curiosity in her eyes, Beth took the sandwich half and bit into it, chewed and swallowed.

Then, she raised her brows at him.

‘You can’t leave it there, you’ve got to tell me that story now!’

Swallowing his own mouthful of sandwich, Mac shook his head with a wry look.

‘I dug myself into that hole, didn’t I?’ She nodded sagely, and he drank some of his tomato soup before he continued. ‘Well, I guess I should preface the story by emphasizing that I was fourteen and Bozer was sixteen and we were a bit stupid at that age…’

Chapter End Notes

This was a rollercoaster to write, was it one to read as well?

I suppose if the X-Men reboots exist in this universe, Lucas Till must also exist. (Similarly, since CSI exists in this universe, so does George Eads.) Pretend that nobody has noticed the uncanny resemblance in this universe (unlike most of my other universes), please?

You could also consider the bet that Mac lost that he mentions to Beth as the bet that Bozer used to force him to ask Darlene Martin to Prom.

We’ve got one more episode left, before this story comes to a close (but not an end – every end is a beginning, remember?), and I’m pretty sure most of you can predict what’s going to happen…

Next episode: 2.22, Bobby Pin. Murdoc is back, and this time, it’s all personal. He’s after Mac, and of course, the best way to get to Mac is through the ones he loves…and Mac will do anything to protect his loved ones. Anything.

Again – please no spoilers for 2.02, Muscle Car + Paperclip. (Though – I’m always up to discuss just about anything MacGyver, if you’d like to have a chat about the ep, either say so in a review and I’ll PM you after I’ve seen the ep, or PM me in 24 hours – I’ll have seen it by then!)

Thoughts on 2.01, DIY or Die. I definitely enjoyed the episode, it was definitely the show we know and love! The take on what’s going on with Mac’s dad is definitely fascinating; I’m glad it’s going to be a (pretty big) storyline on the show. (I think Mac’s dad is going to turn out to be some kind of secret agent who had to leave to protect his son, which will make for something very interesting, albeit a bit cliché. Either that, or Mac’s dad is a bad guy and runs The Organization…which would be even more
interesting – that was actually the original plot for *Every End is a Beginning*…

Thoughts on Samantha Cage: I’m on the fence about her. I really do like her as a character (she’s badass, she’s got a strong sense of right and wrong and she’s not afraid to stand up for what she thinks is important, no matter what – be that sacrificing her career to save a friend and a teammate or calling out Jack) and I liked her in that episode, but I have some concerns about the direction they might be taking her character. I don’t want her in the field with Mac and Jack all the time (because they’re Mac-and-Jack – their dynamic is most of the framework around which this show is built!), and I have some reservations about her potentially becoming Mac and/or Jack’s love interest (I may well be reading this wrong, but a character telling another in their first episode that they never date people they meet at work feels like it’s setting up said character to change their mind…) Anyway – point is, I’ve got my reservations, but who knows? Maybe I’ll really like her after a few episodes.
Chapter Summary

Murdoc is back, and this time, it’s all personal. He’s after Mac, and of course, the best way to get to Mac is through the ones he loves…and Mac will do anything to protect his loved ones. Anything.

Chapter Notes

To the guest who wants me to write a Season 3, I’m very flattered, thank you, but there are no plans for that right now. (It’s a massive, massive commitment; writing this story took the better part of three months, and I spent almost every day during my one-month winter break writing it!) After Season 2 ends, I might write a Season 3 that goes AU from the end of Season 2 while we wait for Season 3 (assuming that there will be one). BUT I’m not going to stop writing in this AU; in the next few days, I’ll start posting Somewhere in the Middle, a series of one-shots that is the sequel to this story. Requests would be much appreciated!

And this is a day early mostly to celebrate the end of my research project, because I now have time to do things like post a day early!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

JACK’S CAR

ON-ROUTE TO SEE NATE

LA

Two days before Thanksgiving, Mac sighed internally as he stared out of the window as Jack drove them to their after-work appointments with Nate, his hands never ceasing in their motion as he toyed with a couple of paperclips.

It’d been almost three weeks since his ordeal with Dr Popovich and The Organization, and he’d been barred from active duty ever since.

(Yesterday, Beth had cleared him to return to normal physical activity – at least, normal for him - but he still hadn’t been cleared to return to missions yet. That was still a few days away, apparently, and hinged on getting approval from Beth, Nate and Thornton.)

He’d not been idle, however.

Far from it.

As soon as he’d been allowed, Mac had gotten to work.
Murdoc was out there.

The Organization was out there.

Both were completely obsessed with him.

Both, he was sure, would go after his loved ones to get to him.

*I’ve put them in danger.*

*I know, I know, Jack and Bozer and Riley and Patricia and Beth would all argue with me on that, and so would Matty’s team, and everyone else, if they knew.*

*I’ll concede that maybe, they’re not completely wrong.*

*You know, it’s not really your fault if crazy, vengeful, creepy people are crazily, vengefully and creepily obsessed with you and all.*

*But still…I feel like it’s on me.*

*I guess all I can do is defend them.*

And that was what he’d been doing.

Helping out with the protection details on Penny, his dad, the Penas, Valerie, Mr Ericson and Frankie (who was currently in Germany on a conference and meeting Felix’s family – some Interpol agents whom Thornton trusted and owed her big-time for something very classified were keeping an eye on the couple) as best as he could.

Improving the security systems in Riley’s, Beth’s, Jack’s and even Patricia’s homes.

Building mini-Tasers for Bozer, Riley and Beth to carry around with them at all times, for their protection.

He’d done a lot, but he feared, terribly, that it wouldn’t be enough.

As the paperclip in his hands took the shape of a heart (cliché, perhaps, but undeniably appropriate, he thought – besides, his subconscious didn’t care much for outside opinions), his phone buzzed, and Mac pulled it out, feeling a little stab of concern, just as he had whenever he got an unexpected message ever since Murdoc had escaped.

As he read the message, that little stab of concern became a gaping wound. His blood boiled as he was chilled to the bone at the same time, and he had to work hard to pull the mess of emotions the words on his phone screen triggered into a neat little box in his mind, so that he could focus.

*I swore I’d never fall again, but this didn’t feel like falling…Better pray her halo doesn’t fade away, MacGyver, this heavy-handed angel metaphor might be more than a metaphor soon…*

Jack had glanced over at his partner out of the corner of his eye as he’d noticed Mac pull out his phone, a question in his expression, and Mac simply swallowed and spoke, not really looking at his partner.

‘Left, now.’

Reading so much in Mac’s tone, in just those two words, Jack’s own face grew grim and set, and he immediately turned left without question and sped up.
Mac closed his eyes for a brief moment, then swallowed again and focused.

He had to.

He wasn’t going to let Murdoc…no.

He wasn’t even going to think it.

Jack glanced over at him again, so much concern and care and love on his face, in his voice.

‘Brother…’

Mac glanced back down at the text message on his phone.

‘He’s after Beth.’ The he didn’t need to be specified, of course. ‘You need the next right.’

Jack glanced over at his partner, a brief glance, but putting as much as he could into it. He sped up again.

‘Brother, we’re gonna make sure she’s safe, and we’re gonna get that SOB. I-‘

Jack was interrupted by Mac’s phone ringing.

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**BETH’S RESIDENCE**

**LA**

With a tired sigh and a little smile, happy to be home (it’d been a long day), Beth unlocked her front door and stepped inside. As she closed the door behind her, she happened to glance downwards as she put her keys back into her purse.

The bright red dot of light on her chest, just over her heart, caught her eye, and after the tiniest moment, just a fraction of a second, she dropped to the ground, putting herself well below the opening of the window through which the laser had come (out of his sight and that of his gun, safe, for now), heart racing, adrenaline pumping.

She knew what that laser meant and where it came from.

She also knew who had aimed it at her.

It had to be Murdoc, surely.

And because Murdoc was Murdoc, and he was, she’d been told in no uncertain terms, the best at what he did…that meant that she’d only escaped death because...

She swallowed, her fear and terror growing even stronger.

(She’d faced danger, life-threatening danger, before, but it hadn’t been like this in Aleppo…this felt so very personal, in a way that her experiences in Aleppo hadn’t.)

(That, she’d just discovered, made it much, much worse.)

She’d escaped death just then because Murdoc wanted Mac…or because he wanted him here when he…
She cut off that thought, and taking a shaky breath (she was safe for now, he couldn’t shoot her now, and Mac’s security system would keep him out of her apartment), she pulled out her phone and dialled.

Despite her situation, her hands were steady.

Her voice, not so much.

‘Mac…’

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**JACK’S CAR**

**ON-ROUTE TO BETH’S RESIDENCE**

**(VERY, VERY QUICKLY)**

**LA**

Mac answered, putting his phone on speaker.

‘Mac…’

He felt a rush of relief at hearing her voice.

She was alive, and, from her tone, he was quite sure, scared, but not so horribly scared that she might be in immediate, immediate danger, that Murdoc was standing right by her.

‘Beth, it’s Murdoc, he-’

‘I know, Mac. I…I’m relatively safe for now, I think he’s across the road from my building, and he hasn’t got a line of sight…’

Jack glanced over at the blonde, no small amount of relief in his own eyes, then turned back to the road, wordlessly taking the turn indicated to him by Mac, as the blonde spoke into his phone.

‘Jack and I are on our way, we’ll be there in ten minutes.’ Jack, just as wordlessly, pressed his foot to the accelerator. ‘Maybe less.’ Mac shot his partner a quick, grateful glance, then started muttering mostly to himself, thinking out loud. ‘We’ve got to get you out of there and to us, without him taking a shot…he’s not going to risk it if there’s lots of people and first responders swarming, too high a chance of him getting caught…you’re not his endgame, he’s not going to snipe me from afar, he’s determined to beat me man-on-man…’ He was definitely thinking out loud and not censoring himself in the slightest, or he would not say such disturbing things (disturbing because they all knew them to be true, not just because of their literal meaning) out loud, both Jack and Beth thought. Mac nodded, seeming to have settled on as much of a plan as he ever had, and spoke louder, clearer and more deliberately. ‘Beth, can you set off the fire alarm and trigger a building-wide evacuation? Err… preferably without setting your apartment on fire, but-‘

The doctor’s voice was a good deal steadier as she cut Mac off.

‘Baking soda and vinegar, right?’

There was the tiniest ghost, just a faint wisp, really, of a smile on Mac’s face as he replied.
‘Yeah, I’ve got a special ratio to produce maximum smoke…’

OUTSIDE BETH’S BUILDING

LA

Jack followed his partner as the blonde rushed through the crowd, searching systematically and yet quickly, as only someone with his brain could.

They found the Phoenix’s doctor, pale but still looking rather composed, very quickly, and the moment she was within reach, Mac pulled her into a tight hug.

The gesture was returned, just as tightly.

It was a gesture that Jack recognized very well.

(After all, he’d once been in love with his partner. He’d seen Sarah in danger – and she’d seen him in danger – more times than he could count, and he recognized that gesture, that moment of relief when you were reunited, safe and sound.)

Jack also noted that his partner kept himself firmly between the young woman and the building across the street, where they were all sure Murdoc had perched.

After a moment, the two younger people disentangled themselves from each other, and Beth managed a tiny little smile at Jack, who just smiled and nodded at her in return (with maybe the tiniest hint of a smirk, to lighten the mood and all), and they made their way back to Jack’s car.

Mac still kept himself between that building across the road and the Phoenix’s doctor as they walked, something that made Jack simultaneously feel a surge of pride and affection (because Mac was quite possibly the best man he’d ever known), and a surge of worry (because Mac’s self-sacrificing tendencies made all of his loved ones worry).

That, to be fair, wasn’t all that unusual for Jack as far as his partner was concerned.

He shook his head with a wry, small smile.

He was pretty sure that all his worrying over Mac had cost him a year or two off his life.

It was certainly costing him his hair. (The hints of grey touching his hair were growing stronger.)

But Mac had also made these last few years much, much better and more enjoyable, and Jack was quite sure that the future would be just as great (if not greater).

It was more than worth a few greys.

Mac, his head stuck through the open front passenger-side door of Jack’s car (Jack was in the driver’s seat, with Beth seated in the front seat), spoke very seriously.

‘Get back to the Phoenix, you’ll be safe there. Both of you.’

The last three words were addressed mostly at Jack, quite pointedly so.

‘Brother-‘
Mac pinned the older man with a look, doing his best to channel Thornton’s deadly stare with a hint of Beth’s narrow-eyed look that she had whenever she was very, very insistent that they do as she said.

‘You can’t come with me, Jack.’ He paused for a moment, then he adopted a very sardonic expression, full of dark humour, and stage-whispered to Beth, reaching for something to lighten the mood a little. ‘Any minute now, I’m going to get a phone call and-’ Mac’s phone rang, and the wry little smile on his face widened a tiny bit. He answered, putting it on speaker and straightening up. ‘Just like clockwork.’

His face grew serious as soon as he’d finished speaking, no longer reaching for humour.

Jack put his own phone, on which he’d been updating Riley and Thornton back at the Phoenix, who’d also patched in Matty, on speaker, so that they could hear the conversation as well.

Murdock’s voice, as they’d all expected, rang out. Mac’s face immediately darkened and grew very set. He swallowed as the assassin spoke.

‘Not bad at all, MacGyver. Not bad at all.’ Murdock gave a dark little chuckle. ‘Well…you almost made up for it with that little trick you just pulled, but I was a little disappointed that you didn’t know who I’d target as soon as I’d escaped. I haven’t tried to kill her yet, and they do say that variety is the spice of life…and bad guys always go for the love interest.’

Mac swallowed again, glancing quickly at Beth and Jack, then looked away again and stared at his phone as he responded.

‘I thought you were above such simple, obvious clichés, Murdoc.’ Mac glanced over at the building across the road. ‘Cut to the chase, Murdoc. We both know what you want. And how you want to get it.’

Murdock made some kind of disappointed clucking noise.

‘Oh, MacGyver, don’t you have any appreciation for drama? For artistry?’ Murdoc paused for a moment, then when he spoke again, his voice was more business-like. ‘You know the drill. I’ll send you your first set of instructions in five minutes. Tell your little friends to stay out of it.’ His voice grew creepier again. ‘Or…maybe there might be a little boom at Miss Parker’s favourite diner…or little Annabelle Pena’s favourite Chuck E. Cheese…or…well, you get the picture, MacGyver.

Mac’s eyes darkened and grew even more set, as he glanced at Jack, whose own expression was very grim and who was looking pointedly at his phone, as if Riley or Thornton or Matty could see his face. Beth was clutching the edge of her seat so tightly that her knuckles were white, a protective anger on her face, anger at what this man was doing to Mac, what he was threatening him with, as she glared at Mac’s phone.

The blonde swallowed and responded.

‘In high definition, Murdoc.’ He paused for a moment, hauling his rising, burning anger into a box in his mind. Right now, he needed to focus. ‘You’re not getting away with this. I’m not letting you.’

The assassin laughed.

‘Oh, you are just so adorable, MacGyver. Such the righteous hero…’ His voice grew business-like again. ‘Four minutes ‘till you get your instructions. Remember, come alone.’ That disturbing note returned. ‘Or else.’
He hung up before Mac could respond, and Mac stowed his phone in his pocket with a bit more force than required.

He, Jack and Beth all stared at one another in silence, all three with eyes full of emotion, before Thornton’s voice broke the silence, a hint of restrained anger and also worry in it, clear to them all, since they knew her so well.

‘Mac, we’ll deal with the bombs.’

She didn’t need to specify who the *we* was; they all understood that to mean the Phoenix and Matty’s team.

Matty’s voice continued, the anger and the worry in there more obvious than it’d been in Thornton’s voice.

‘Go get that SOB, Mac.’

Mac nodded, grim-faced, then managed to give a small smirk.

‘That’s the plan, Matty.’ He thought for a moment, then addressed Beth. ‘Can I borrow all the bobby pins you’ve got on you, and your hair tie? And your hand lotion, if you’ve got it.’ The young woman nodded immediately, a little jerkily, then pulled a tube of hand lotion out of her pocket and her hair tie out of her hair and handed them to Mac, who gave her a tiny smile in thanks, and then started pulling the bobby pins out of her hair. Mac addressed his partner next. ‘And Jack, can I have your wristband?’

Jack simply nodded and unwound the strap of leather and handed it over. He forced himself to give a half-smirk and pointed at the blonde.

‘I expect that back without a mark on it, brother.’

Mac managed to roll his eyes.

‘It’s not as if it’s in top condition anyway, Jack.’ That was true, with their line of work, of course Jack’s wristband got a little banged up. ‘But I’ll buy you a new one if it’s so important to you.’

Jack nodded seriously.

‘I’m holding you to that, brother.’

Mac and Jack stared at each other for moment, something unspoken passing between the two of them. There was a question of sorts in Mac’s eyes, and Jack simply gave a little nod, a single, sharp, resolute action.

A silent promise, on Jack’s part.

The promise that if anything happened to Mac (if he didn’t come back this time) that Jack would protect Mac’s family, the people he loved so, so dearly, with everything that he had.

Jack would do it anyway (they were his family too), but he also knew that the promise, the reassurance, would allow his partner to focus, to go do what he had to do without niggling little doubts, as unfounded as they were.

Allow Mac to focus, so that he would come home and render Jack’s entire promise moot.

Mac returned the little nod, with a matching little smile, then reached out and took the bobby pins
that Beth was holding out to him, staring at her face for a slightly-long beat as he took them, as if he were memorizing it.

(As if he hadn’t already.)

Then, he closed his eyes for a moment, then opened them, put the bobby pins in his pocket and took a step away from the car.

He stared at Jack and Beth for another moment, then addressed them all, Jack and Beth before him, Bozer, Riley and Patricia back at the Phoenix, Matty patched in.

‘I love you guys.’

Beth closed her eyes, her fingers tightening on the seat again, and her face scrunching up a little, as if she were willing herself not to cry.

There was conspicuous silence from Jack’s phone.

Jack was the only one who could find his voice, and he looked up at his partner, trying to put everything into his eyes and his voice.

‘We love you too, Mac.’

With a last little smile and nod, Mac turned and walked away.

Jack and Beth watched him disappear into the crowd, then, on autopilot, the doctor closed the car door, and Jack turned his key in the ignition, also on autopilot.

The former CIA agent shook his head.

This was too much like Tahoe. Way too much like Tahoe.

Still, maybe that wasn’t a bad thing.

Tahoe had been terrible.

But Mac had walked off, just like he had just then…and he’d come back.

Alive and relatively unharmed.

If this went down like Tahoe…

Mac would come home.

And that was the most important thing.

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PHOENIX FOUNDATION HEADQUARTERS

SOMEBWHERE IN LA

As Jack hung up, Bozer swallowed and turned to Riley, deep worry in his eyes. He exhaled a little shakily, and Riley reached out for his hand, took it and squeezed gently.

‘Taking tokens from the mentor/pseudo-father figure and the love interest, dramatic exit…’ Bozer
sucked in a breath. ‘That’s…it’s just too much like the hero going off to die heroically for my peace of mind.’

Riley squeezed his hand again, more firmly this time, and spoke resolutely.

‘No, it seems too much like those scenes when the director tricks the audience into thinking that the hero of the movie’s going to die heroically, but he somehow defies the odds and returns unscathed.’

Bozer stared at her for a moment, then gave a jerky little nod and plastered a little smile-smirk on his face.

‘And finally, finally, finally actually gets together with the love interest.’

Riley managed a small snort at that.

‘Yeah, though I’m hoping for no dramatic making-out immediately after the reunion, ‘cause…eww.’

Thornton, who’d been conversing with Matty on her phone in the corner, walked over and looked both Bozer and Riley in the eye, her expression a good deal softer and gentler than usual.

‘We have faith in Mac.’ It was ever-so-slightly an order, but mostly just a reassuring statement of fact. Both younger agents nodded resolutely. With an answering nod, she tapped her phone a couple of times, then tapped the screen twice. Matty, Lil and Viv appeared on the screen, all with very set, serious expressions. ‘And we do everything we can to tilt the odds in his favour and help him.’ She looked up at the three women on the screen, then back over at Bozer and Riley. ‘Murdoc had some way of finding out about Doc. He’s been tracking Mac, yet we didn’t notice. We know The Organization was keeping serious tabs on him, we know they know about Doc. Murdoc had ties to The Organization before; we need to see if there’s still a link…’

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**JACK’S CAR**

**ON-ROUTE TO THE PHOENIX**

**LA**

Jack glanced over at the young woman sitting beside him as he pulled up at a red light, noting that she still looked as if she were about to cry.

There were tears welling up in her eyes, and she let a couple fall, before closing her eyes, taking several deep breaths, which grew stronger and less shuddery with each breath, then opened her eyes and wiped away her tears, her calm doctor’s focus appearing on her face.

As the light turned green and he turned his attention back to the road, Jack offered the best reassurance he could.

‘He’s come back from this sort of thing before.’ He paused for a moment, the tiniest of smiles growing on his face. ‘And Mac will fight with everything he’s got, which is a lot, to come back to us.’

A matching little smile appeared on her face.

‘I know.’
'…We’re not going to be able to get them all on our own, Hetty. We know the locations of at least two, and we know there’s got to be more…'

Matty spoke very seriously into her phone.

‘I believe I still owe you for Phnom Penh, do I not?’ There was a pause. ‘Of course we’ll help you, Miss Webber. I will have Miss Jones and Mr Beale contact Miss Ho immediately, and alert Mr Hanna.’ Hetty seemed to come to a realization of sorts. ‘Oh, and I know of another team who can assist…’

A couple of minutes later, Matty hung up. She turned to face Viv and Lil, who were speaking with Nell and Eric from NCIS. (Sarah, Charlie and the rest of the team were already out in the field; Charlie had just disarmed the bomb that Murdoc had planted under Penny Parker’s favourite diner.)

She muttered mostly to herself.

‘There’s a whole team of people like Mac out there with ties to Homeland.’ Matty shook her head, still a little surprised by the revelation, something very rare for her after all she’d seen and done. ‘A whole team of Baby Einsteins…wrangling them must be impossible…’

PHOENIX FOUNDATION HEADQUARTERS

SOMEWHERE IN LA

Lil addressed Thornton, Bozer, Riley, Jack and Beth, who were all variously sitting and standing in the war room.

‘I know how Murdoc found out about you and your…umm…relationship with MacGyver, Dr Taylor; he’s been hijacking Organization intel, apparently without their knowledge.’

Jack swore. Beth looked up for a moment, then returned to staring at the paperclip bowl. Riley was too engrossed in her work on her laptop to react. Bozer just looked concernedly between the three of them. Thornton nodded.

‘He’s not working with The Organization.’

That was a relief.

She and Matty shared a brief relieved, yet still concerned, look, for a moment, as Lil nodded, then Viv spoke up, momentarily looking away from her laptop screen.

‘Nell, Eric and I have found a good proportion of the bomb sites, we think.’ She turned back to her laptop and tapped her earpiece, turning her attention back to coordinating the teams disarming the bombs. ‘Sam, you and Callen are heading to Venice Beach next. Team Scorpion, you’ve got a site in Pasadena…’

Riley, just then, practically jumped out of her seat, supporting her precious rig in one hand.
‘I’ve got it.’ She typed on her laptop, one-handed, for a second, then tapped the big screen, pushing Viv, Lil and Matty to one half, bringing up an abandoned factory on the other half. She turned to Thornton, Jack, Bozer and Beth and pointed at the photo of the factory. ‘That’s where he’s luring Mac.’

Beth stared at the picture of the factory for a moment, then seized the bowl of paperclips and put it on her lap, starting to work on a paperclip chain without a word. Jack and Thornton exchanged a glance, as Riley started speaking quietly to Lil and Matty. Bozer’s expression grew ever-more concerned.

It was Thornton who spoke, drawing all of their attention.

‘Jack and I will go back-up Mac.’ She turned to Riley, Lil, Matty and Viv. ‘We’ll wait for your word.’

They all knew that they had to wait until they were confident that they had all the bomb sites, or until they were completely certain that Mac had Murdoc sufficiently distracted. (Thornton had no idea how they were going to determine that, but if anybody could find a way, it’d be Riley.)

(He also knew, just as Jack did, that if they couldn’t get all the bomb sites or get eyes on Mac and Murdoc in a timely fashion, they faced a hard, hard choice. They’d have to make a call, and she knew the call that they’d make…well, Mac would be furious at them. It was possible that he’d never forgive them, not completely.)

(But he would be alive.)

(They could live with that.)

Bozer and Riley looked over at Thornton somewhat sharply, and her words finally seemed to shake Beth out of the rabbit hole in her mind, as the doctor looked over at their boss as well. Thornton shook her head very, very sternly, and all three younger Phoenix employees turned to Jack appealingly.

Jack, too, shook his head, uncharacteristically stern, as Thornton spoke, voice as stern as her expression, yet with something more in it, some kind of gentleness or affection, all the same.

As if, perhaps, she’d made someone a promise.

‘You three are to stay here.’

‘Where it’s safe.’

All three of them looked a little inclined to argue with Jack (headquarters, here, had been attacked last year, after all, and besides, they worked for the Phoenix, just as Jack and Patricia and Mac did, and if they were going to face danger, then surely they could too…), but after a moment, they all nodded.

Riley briefly wondered if Mac, Jack and Patricia had some kind of contingency plan in place, some plan they’d put in place to protect them if it ever came to it. The thought simultaneously caused a rush of affection for these people whom she’d added to her family (the family that had, once upon a time, included only her mom) and a touch of anger, because how could they enact this doubtlessly self-sacrificing plan without even telling them? She’d nearly lost her mom, she’d lost Jack once, she couldn’t possibly…She cut off that thought, not wanting to even think it, and turned back to trying to get eyes in the factory. (It was proving nigh impossible, but she was not going to give up.)
Meanwhile, Bozer rushed out of the room at a sprint, and he returned a couple of minutes later, as Lil was briefing Thornton and Jack on the layout of the factory.

He was holding a very small drone, about the size of a small bird.

‘Super-stealthy surveillance mini-drone. Me and Mac and Riley have been working on this. It’ll let us be your eyes from here.’

Riley smiled, as did Jack, as the older man took the drone from Bozer. Thornton inclined her head, then spoke.

‘We’re leaving in ten. We’ll be in the armoury until then. Bozer, can you talk Jack through the set-up of the drone over the phone?’

Bozer simply nodded, and without another word, Jack and Thornton swept out of the war room.

For a long, long moment (at least, it felt like a long moment), Riley, Bozer and Beth stared at one another, sharing a glance full of worry and concern.

Then, Beth removed the paperclip bowl from her lap, and placed it on the table again, and stood.

‘I…I should get back to the infirmary.’

She slipped out of the war room without saying anything else, as Riley turned back to the screen to talk with Lil and Matty, and Bozer started writing down some notes on the set-up of the mini-drone on the high-tech whiteboard at the back of the room.

Maybe they couldn’t be there, couldn’t go, but they were still going to do everything they could to help.

To make sure that Mac came home.

ABANDONED FACTORY

SOMEWHERE IN LA

Mac worked his Swiss Army knife, the corkscrew attachment exposed, into position, manoeuvring it with his left hand as he tried to free his right wrist, which was caught in some kind of vice that was pulling him towards a loud device that disturbingly was best described as the love child of a meat grinder and a wood-chipper.

He’d managed to dodge part of this particular trap (the other half would have trapped at least one of his ankles on the other side of the room, which would have made this even harder than it was, not to mention far more painful), but hadn’t managed to evade it all.

Mordoc was far too good.

The factory was labyrinth-like and full of traps.

He’d evaded quite a few, yet had gotten caught by a couple, though he’d managed to escape.

He felt, rather than heard, that click that he’d been working towards, and with no small amount of relief, pulled himself free from the vice and flung himself away from the meat-grinder-wood-chipper hybrid, mere feet away from its jaws.
He rolled along the floor to disperse some of his momentum from his half-jump, and came to a stop in a crouch, eyeing the corridor beyond the doorway in front of him.

*At this point, it goes without saying that it’s booby-trapped six ways to Sunday, to borrow a phrase that my grandfather was rather fond of.*

He stood carefully with a sigh, eyeing off a section of the floor that just didn’t look right, then looking up at the ceiling.

*Just as I suspected…*

He unbuckled his belt and removed it from his belt loops, forming it into a loop in his right hand instead.

*Sor ry, Beth, but this is going to be way beyond normal physical activity, even for me.*

*I’ll buy her a pie to try and make up for it, don’t worry.*

*Or, more accurately, several pies.*

*If today keeps going like it’s been going, it’s definitely going to be a several-pies kind of situation.*

Just as he was about to start down a staircase, Mac stopped in his tracks, recognizing a very familiar substance under his fingers where they rested on the hand rail.

He raised his hand, which now had grease-tipped fingers, then turned back to the staircase, examining it closely.

Then, after a moment, he stepped back and grabbed a handy rag lying nearby, and pulled out the tube of hand lotion he’d ‘borrowed’ from Beth, and squeezed a generous dollop onto the rag.

Carefully, making sure to keep his weight off it, he started rubbing the metal of the staircase with the lotion-covered rag, smiling grimly as grease and oil came off easily, revealing the full extent of Murdoc’s tampering, just as he’d suspected.

He got up, looking around as he tried to find another way down.

There was no way he was using the staircase; its structural integrity was highly questionable at best.

A little grin-smirk full of dark humour (that dark sense of humour, that ability to find light in the darkness, that had kept him going through so much) appeared on his face as he gazed up at the pulley system that carried hooks that had presumably once carried something else around the factory.

A little earlier, he’d passed and successfully avoided a trap that he was quite sure would have delivered him, trussed up like a turkey, to Murdoc using that system.

*My grandfather always used to tell me to take the weapon that somebody’s pointing at you and turn it into your best defence.*

*Now, he was talking about dealing with Donnie Sandoz and his gang, but the principle applies here.*

*M urdoc wanted to use this against me.*

*But I’m going to use it against him.*
He pulled Jack’s wristband out of his pocket, as well as the near-empty tube of hand lotion, and quickly cut it apart, exposing the shiny, metallic inside of the tube and unfurling it to make a reflective surface. He pulled out his belt again, and quickly attached Jack’s wristband to it, then looked up at the pulley system, calculating the speed of the hook that had just gone past him.

The system was really rather loud. It made a constant, grinding, clanking kind of sound, and that would definitely be to his advantage.

With a nod, having judged the speed and done the necessary calculations, Mac put the cut-up hand lotion tube between his teeth (Beth’s lotion smelt very nice, but admittedly tasted pretty awful), and prepared to toss the rig he’d made out of his belt and Jack’s wristband onto the next hook.

*I know, I know, I kind of did the same thing last time…but most people don’t look up, and I know Murdoc’s not most people, but he didn’t look up last time…*

*I usually hope that people learn, since learning is great and all, and you know, if bad guys learnt their lesson, we’d have fewer bad guys.

*But this time, I hope Murdoc didn’t learn from our last encounter.*

Murdoc, pacing along a section of gangway that ran high above the lowest, basement level of the factory (the drop was at least four stories), his attention split between many of the screens that were in front of him, showing, variously, surveillance footage around and outside the factory, as well as certain locations in LA (he was currently before a screen that showed Santa Monica Pier), turned as a glint, something shiny, caught his eye.

He turned to face it, took a couple of steps forward, as was natural, reflexive, then laughed out loud as he recognized the cut-up lotion tube and stopped in his tracks, at least ten feet away from the distraction.

He wasn’t going to fall for that again, that was for sure.

‘Oh, *cute*, MacGyver. A lovely little reference to our last meeting, but really, did you expect it to work twice?’

At that moment, Mac let go of the pulley system (he’d strung himself up, relatively out of sight and definitely not with his legs dangling down, with the aid of the rig he’d made and some not-insignificant contorting and acrobatics – he was *really* going to feel that tomorrow), and landed practically on-top of his nemesis, knocking Murdoc to the ground.

The blonde smirked.

‘Well, since you still didn’t look up…’

Murdoc’s face darkened as he realized that Mac had scored a point, and kneeed him in the stomach, a move that the Phoenix agent managed to half-dodge.

Mac responded by jumping up, to prevent Murdoc from pinning him to the floor, as the assassin, still on the floor, then took a swing at his shins, forcing Mac to grasp the railing behind him and jump up to avoid the sweep of Murdoc’s legs. He used that to his advantage, and kicked out hard at his nemesis as the other man got up, forcing Murdoc to take a few steps back into the railing on the opposite side.

The two of them stared at each other for a long moment, both with assessing gazes, trying to work
out what the other would do next, and how to counteract that, and then how to counteract the inevitable counter-attack.

As if they were playing chess, always trying to be several moves ahead of their opponent.

Then, they both moved at once, Mac going for the knee that he knew Murdoc had been shot through in Tahoe, Murdoc taking a swing at Mac’s kidney region.

Both of them dodged out of the way, and the fight began in earnest.

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PHOENIX CAR

ON-ROUTE TO THE ABANDONED FACTORY

LA

‘...We’ve got another site. Sam, Callen, this one’s yours…’

Thornton (who was driving – she’d refused to allow Jack the keys to the nondescript Phoenix car- neither of them wanted to risk using Jack’s car, since Murdoc would be more likely to recognise it should he glance at a surveillance camera feed or the like) and Jack glanced at one another, as Viv’s voice rang out over their comms.

They were all locked in a race against time.

The two of them in the car and Riley and Bozer at the Phoenix. Viv and Lil and Matty at Matty’s team’s headquarters. Nell and Eric at NCIS’s Office of Special Projects. Sam, Callen, Charlie, Sarah and the rest of Matty’s team, plus Team Scorpion, out in the field.

And Mac, whom they all knew would be fighting for his life by now.

Jack’s hands tightened into fists as he swore under his breath.

They were running out of time.

They all knew that.

He and Thornton couldn’t do anything (they couldn’t drive faster and rush to the site - in fact, right now, they were driving fairly slowly, normally, and taking a circuitous route), not until the analysts were quite sure that they had all the sites.

(Well, they could, as undesirable as the outcome would be, as much of a Sophie’s Choice as it was. If it came down to it, they’d have to make a call…and as awful as it sounded – as much as Mac might hate him afterwards – Jack knew what he’d decide if it came down to it.)

And there was only so fast Riley and Viv and Lil could work, only so fast that the field teams could disarm all the bombs.

No, Jack knew, deep down, that it almost-certainly hinged on how much time his partner could buy.

How hard he could keep going.

How long he could stay alive.
Jack believed in his partner.

Believed absolutely in Mac.

But he was also keenly aware of the younger man’s mortality.

He’d nearly lost him enough times to know that very, very well.

He stared out the window for a moment, then closed his eyes and muttered under his breath.


‘Come on, brother, come on…’

ABANDONED FACTORY

SOMETIME IN LA

Murdoc smirked darkly at the man he’d sworn to kill, with no regard for payment or the cost of carrying it out. He currently had Mac pinned up against a railing on the gangway, his hands trapped and bent back slightly, so that the railing dug uncomfortably into his lower back.

The two of them were surrounded by broken screens and damaged surveillance equipment, a legacy of their overall stalemated fight.

‘Oh, MacGyver…you’re so predictable.’ Murdoc affected an almost-childlike pout. ‘You’re so boring.’ His expression darkened instantaneously. ‘It makes it so easy to play you.’ The assassin scoffed and shook his head. ‘Love. You’ll do anything for love.’ That last word was said with much scorn and disdain. ‘Your greatest weakness, your fatal flaw, isn’t greed or lust or hubris…but love.’ The assassin scoffed again and made a face.

Mac’s own eyes hardened, and he retorted.

‘If you’re going to suggest being like you as an alternative, I’d rather take what I’ve got, weakness or not.’

As he spoke, having finally managed to get himself and Murdoc into the right positions with his constant struggles, Mac slammed his foot into the side of Murdoc’s knee and flung the man off him with great effort, and as Murdoc’s eyes darkened further with controlled rage, Mac bent and seized a broken computer monitor off the floor and smashed it over the head of his nemesis.

PHOENIX CAR

ON-ROUTE TO THE ABANDONED FACTORY

LA

‘…No sign of anything else…’

‘…Matches everything we’ve managed to dig out about what he purchased…’

‘So we’re agreed?’
Viv and Lil made noises of assent over their comms, then Riley’s voice, loud and clear, rang out.

‘Jack, Thornton, we’re pretty sure we’ve got them all. You’re good to go.’

Jack and Thornton exchanged another glance as she put her foot on the accelerator, intending to cover the last half-mile or so to the abandoned factory as fast as possible.

They both knew that there was a chance that the analysts were wrong.

That this could, almost-literally, blow up in their faces.

If they hadn’t gotten all the bombs, Murdoc could set off any one they’d missed.

Probably kill far too many innocent people.

But it was a risk (a small risk – Riley and Viv and Lil, and Eric and Nell, were so good at what they did, after all, and they had a lot of faith that Mac was keeping the assassin occupied) that they had to take.

They couldn’t, just couldn’t, leave Mac without back-up for so long.

Before the Chrysalis Incident, Thornton might have done it.

Might have decided that the greater good and the big picture were more important than her agent (even though, if he hadn’t made it home safe and sound, she’d also never have forgiven herself).

But now, with the risk as small as it was, with the fact that it was Mac’s life at stake…well, she told herself, Mac had given so much for so many, given so much for the greater good and for good in general, and gotten not much in return…the world and the greater good owed him, at least a little.

She pressed a little harder on the accelerator.

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**ABANDONED FACTORY**

**SOMEBEWHERE IN LA**

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Mac looked down at the assassin, who was hanging from the gangway by the fingertips of one hand, the railing having given way during their struggles. Murdoc’s right arm hung by his side, limp as if it’d been fractured by the force of the kick that Mac had dealt the other man. The assassin looked down at the dark floor below him (they were up about four stories), then looked up at Mac, something imploring or pleading in his eyes. Something fearful and *human*.

His fingers slipped incrementally.

That look in his eyes grew ever more scared.

Ever more human.

Mac regarded him for a moment (Murdoc had fooled him before, but…he couldn’t let him fall, couldn’t let anyone die like this, even Murdoc, even after all he’d done…not when there was that *look* in his eyes), then reached into his pocket to put away his Swiss Army knife and crouched to help the assassin up.
Mere seconds later, their positions were reversed, Mac hanging from the ledge (though with both hands), Murdoc looking down at him, shaking his head and clicking his tongue disappointedly.

He held up his (perfectly fine and completely unhurt) right arm and waggled a finger at Mac, as if lecturing him. Or telling off a wayward child.

‘You’re never going to get anywhere in this business if you stay so soft, MacGyver.’ Murdoc leaned down a little towards him, smirking. ‘Boy Scouts don’t last long in our world.’

Murdoc punctuated that by bringing a foot a little closer to Mac’s right hand. It was a slow, deliberate, menacing action that made his intent quite clear.

*I know what you’re thinking. I’m the hero of this story, and it’s really not looking very good. Yet again.*

*But don’t worry.*

*I’ve still got an ace up my sleeve.*

*In this case, almost-literally.*

Mac smirked right back up at his nemesis.

‘You know, I was a terrible Boy Scout. I got kicked out after six months.’ His smirk widened. ‘But I learnt a thing or two. Like always be prepared.’

Quick as a flash, as he spoke that last phrase, Mac withdrew his right hand from the ledge, relying on his left to keep him from falling to his death (or, at least, falling to very serious injury) and tipped the bobby pins he’d tucked into the cuff of his shirt while he’d put his Swiss Army knife back into his pocket into his hand with a little motion of the wrist and some sleight-of-hand. He tossed the pins at Murdoc’s eyes, and as he’d hoped (*knew*), the assassin moved reflexively, stepping back about a foot, and closed his eyes for just a second.

That was enough.

With great effort, ignoring the twinging pain in the back of his left shoulder, Mac pulled himself up and pressed his advantage. Murdoc had now recovered from his momentary shock, and his expression had contorted into a snarl.

*I know it doesn’t look it, but that’s actually a good thing for me.*

*It means he’s not in control anymore.*

*It means he’s angry. Really, really angry.*

*And that means he’s more likely to make a mistake.*

When Murdoc rushed at him, Mac watched carefully, did some calculations in his head, and then, acting based on some combination of the results and instinct of some sort, dodged out of the way and grabbed Murdoc’s arm, using the man’s momentum to swing him around for a moment, before kicking him hard in the stomach away from him.

Murdoc reeled into a section of still-intact railing, and recovered quickly, pulling himself back into a standing position and walking back into the middle of the gangway.

He and Mac eyed each other off again for just a moment, and Murdoc finally reached for the gun that
he’d had in a holster this whole time (Mac had tried and failed to get it off the assassin multiple times during their fight, hoping to toss it somewhere out of his reach, thinking that Murdoc might eventually lose his patience and decide to just shoot him – he knew that the assassin was determined to best him man-on-man in an even fight, but he’d also vowed to kill him, and Mac figured that eventually, the latter would win out).

Three gunshots rang out.

Murdoc fell to the floor, clutching at his right shoulder as he dropped the gun and blood bloomed on his left calf and right thigh.

Mac stared at Jack and Thornton, standing in the doorway that led onto the gangway, over his nemesis’s prone body for just a moment, before grinning in relief (the grin of someone who’d just cheated death), an expression that Jack returned as the blonde walked forward and kicked away Murdoc’s gun, sending it falling four stories down to the floor where it landed with a clatter. He stepped over Murdoc, pointedly ignoring the look on the assassin’s face (that snarl was almost as haunting as Murdoc’s slight, horrifyingly-calm smirks – he knew he’d have nightmares about those again, and he didn’t want to make them worse), and as he neared the doorway, Jack flung his arms around him and wrapped him into a very, very tight hug.

Mac returned the gesture for a long moment, resting his head on Jack’s shoulder and closing his eyes for a beat, then looked up again, noticing the mini-surveillance drone flying around, very close to the ceiling.

He raised a hand and waved with a little smile, and the drone (which Bozer was doubtlessly piloting from back at headquarters) did a little loop-de-loop in response, which made Mac’s smile widen. Then, after a moment, he gave a little smirk and addressed his partner teasingly.

‘Thought he was the one trying to kill me, not you.’

(It really was a very tight hug.)

Jack made some kind of strangled sound that was probably meant to be a laugh, then after squeezing Mac a little tighter for just a second, he let go and smirked right back at his partner.

‘You dissing my hugs, brother? ‘Cause everyone knows I give the best hugs of our whole team.’

With a rather soft, affectionate smile (because making light in the darkness was sometimes the only thing that kept them going, and he was so grateful that all of his beloved team understood that so well, and that they all tried to make things just a little bit lighter for each other), Mac snorted and raised an eyebrow.

‘Yeah, Boze might have something to say about that. And if it turns out I’ve got cracked ribs, Beth’s not going to happy with you.’

Their eyes both fell on Murdoc, whom Thornton had knocked out with a perfunctory knock to the head with the butt of her gun, and restrained securely. She was now working on field dressing his wounds.

Both of their expressions grew darker, angrier and more fearful, for a moment, before Jack reached out and clapped a hand on his partner’s shoulder, deliberately forcing something light into his tone.

‘I’m not gonna like her when she’s mad, am I?’
Mac, too, managed a wry little smile.

‘Why do you think I like to try and stay on her good side?’

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**PHOENIX FOUNDATION HEADQUARTERS**

**SOMEBWHERE IN LA**

Murdoc had been captured.

He was alive and largely well.

Nobody had been seriously injured or killed. (Riley, Bozer, Thornton, Matty, Lil, Viv, Charlie, Sarah and everyone else who’d chipped in – he was going to be buying a lot of boxes of thank-you chocolates – had indeed gotten all the bombs.)

That, however, did not mean that everything was going smoothly for Mac.

Beth, arms crossed and with a very firm expression on her face, stared up at him, eyes resolute.

Mac sighed and ran a hand through his hair, as Jack, Thornton, Bozer and Riley were reduced to simple spectators, all getting the sense that they shouldn’t intervene, not in this, even Thornton. Mac glanced at the screen in front of him, which showed Murdoc, shackled to a cot and in a set of scrubs, in the room next door.

He had absolutely no objection to giving Murdoc the medical care he needed. Sure, Murdoc was a very evil man, but he was a person and he did have rights. Injured and captured, he was entitled to medical attention just like anybody else.

If that was being denied, Mac would, despite everything, fight for that for his nemesis.

(Were their positions reversed, Mac knew Murdoc would never do the same for him.)

(That was what made them different, just like the simple act of saying *thank you*.)

No, he simply had an objection to Murdoc receiving medical attention from this particular medical professional.

‘…Someone else could do it. Wilson-‘

‘-Is a medic, yes, but he’s not a doctor.’ Beth gestured to the injured assassin on the screen. ‘He’s still got two bullets in him. Wilson doesn’t have surgical training; I do.’ She gestured to the live timestamp on the screen. ‘And it’s 11 pm and we’re the only ones here.’

Mac just stared at her for a moment, then looked down for a beat, before speaking, voice very small and full of *something*.

‘He…he tried to *kill* you.’

As he looked up again, Beth let her doctor’s demeanour drop, allowing the fear and touch of anger that she felt to show in her eyes and on her face, and forcing a wry little smile onto her lips as her expression softened all the same.

‘I…I’m not exactly happy about it either, Mac.’ He gave a little nod in response to her attempt to try
and lighten the mood a bit. Her expression grew more serious. ‘But I took an Oath. I can’t break it.’

He looked into her eyes for a heartbeat, knowing that she was right, then nodded.

‘You’re not going in there alone.’

That slightly-wry, dark-humoured expression returned to her face.

‘Oh, I had absolutely no intention of doing that.’

And with that, she crouched down to rummage through the bag at her feet, checking to make sure she had all the necessary supplies, and as she did, Jack stepped over and clasped Mac’s shoulder, whispering quietly into his ear.

‘Want me to handle this, brother?’

There was a lot in his voice. Mostly concern. Mac briefly wondered if Jack’s offer was to protect him from Murdoc, protect him from the mind games that they all knew Murdoc would try and play on him, or if it was to stop him from doing something he’d regret to Murdoc in response, to spare him the guilt he’d feel for doing that something.

Mac glanced between the captured assassin on the screen, the young woman crouching on the floor, very much in doctor-mode now, and his partner.

‘No, I’ve got this, Jack.’ He paused for a moment. ‘But thanks.’

Jack just squeezed his shoulder again in response, and took a step back, as Beth looked up and nodded at him, then stood, picking up her bag and stepping towards the door.

He followed her out.

Murdoc turned his head, a very slow, deliberate, almost dramatic action, as they entered, and looked Beth up and down, again slowly and very deliberately, then smirked up at Mac.

‘My, my, you do know how to pick them, MacGyver.’ He looked the Phoenix’s doctor up and down again as she took up a position by his legs, examining his injuries carefully and just as carefully ignoring his words. ‘I mean, Miss Taylor’s not quite got Miss Carpenter’s knockout looks, but you do seem like a man who appreciates more subtle beauty—’

Mac cut off the assassin, voice terse and clipped.

‘Dr Taylor is giving you medical treatment, Murdoc. Show some respect.’

Acting as if the entire conversation was just polite small talk about the weather or the like, Beth held up a couple of syringes into Murdoc’s field of view.

‘This is a local anaesthetic.’

Then, she focused back on her work, carefully injecting one syringe into Murdoc’s calf and another into his thigh.

The assassin, meanwhile, ignored her and smirked up at Mac again.

‘Oh, my mistake. Dr Taylor’s clearly very smart, too…’ He raised an eyebrow. ‘…and she’s got clever hands…’ Beth was now cleaning Murdoc’s wounds, steadfastly ignoring his words. ‘My, my,
MacGyver, found the whole package, haven’t you?’

He looked her up and down yet again in a way that Mac really, really, really did not like, the expression on his face best described as a leer.

*And for the record, it’s not because of my feelings for her.*

*Well, not just.*

*That kind of creepiness, coming from somebody like Murdoc…well, that’d be disturbing no matter whom he was leering at.*

*That it’s her just makes it worse.*

He knew, very well, what Murdoc was doing.

He knew the assassin knew very well that Beth was a doctor, and he also knew that many horrible things though he was, Murdoc was no misogynist.

He was doing all of this just to push Mac’s buttons…and admittedly, he was succeeding.

As Beth waited for the anaesthesia to kick in, carefully examining Murdoc for any other injuries as she did so, swabbing a couple of scrapes along the way, the assassin looked her over again, that leer firmly in place, then turned his head slowly to face Mac again, and smirked.

‘It’d almost be a shame to kill her…if I were ten years younger…’

He trailed off, the smirk widening a little, something dark and cruel and triumphant rising in his eyes.

Mac’s hands, by his sides, curled into fists, and he dug his nails into the heels of his palms, fighting to keep the rest of himself calm.

Murdoc’s smirk widened just that tiny bit more and he raised his eyebrows, that horrible look in his eyes growing sharper.

At that moment, it took every ounce of self-control that Mac had to prevent him from throttling his defenceless, injured, shackled nemesis to death with his bare hands.

It took reminding himself that he would never be able to live with himself if he did.

It took reminding himself that his grandfather would have been ashamed of him, that when his dad said he was proud of the good man his son had grown up to be, it would no longer be true, even if his dad never knew it.

It took reminding himself that Riley might look at him with that same horror she’d had in her eyes after she’d shot Horn, and that Bozer might well fear his best friend’s darkness for the very first time.

It took reminding himself that Thornton would look at him with rare, open sadness in her dark eyes, that Matty would be disappointed, in the way that she’d just express by a single look that said so much, not by her usual not-subtle-at-all scolding, that Jack would look at him with sadness and grief and disappointment and maybe, just maybe, a tiny little hint of fear.

It took reminding himself that he could never, ever face Beth again if he killed one of her patients in front of her.

Most of all, it took reminding himself that that was not the man he was.
He let himself close his eyes for a moment, took a deep breath, in and out, then another. He let his eyes fall on Beth, who was now carefully, calmly, cutting an incision in Murdoc’s calf to remove the bullet embedded there, for a moment, then unclenched his fists and looked the assassin dead in the eye, sending him a silent message.

You’re not winning, not in any way, shape or form, Murdoc.

I won’t let you.

I won’t.

The second that the door to Murdoc’s prison closed completely, Beth rushed into the nearby bathroom, and a moment later, Jack, Thornton, Bozer and Riley (who’d stepped out of the surveillance room as Mac and Beth had stepped out of Murdoc’s room, her job done), and Mac, heard retching sounds.

Riley glanced at Jack, Thornton and Bozer, and wordlessly gestured with her head towards the bathroom door. After another moment of the four of them looking at each other in silent communication, she walked over to the bathroom, pushed open the door and stepped inside.

Meanwhile, Mac swore and punched the nearby wall, hard, breathing hard in anger, before leaning his head against the wall and beating it with his fist several times.

In all fairness, Jack looked like he was a hair’s breadth away from punching a wall himself, Thornton’s eyes were clearly angry, and Bozer had clenched his fists by his side, pacing up and down a section of the corridor and muttering about how a character based on Murdoc was going to die horribly in his next movie. Riley, when they’d been in the surveillance room, had been swearing like a sailor as the four of them watched that horrible scene.

After a couple more breaths, Mac calmed a little more, and stepped away from the wall. Jack wordlessly laid a hand on his shoulder, and Mac gave a little nod in acknowledgement and thanks, before making his way down the corridor to a vending machine. He fed it some money and returned with a bottle of lemon-lime Gatorade, and knocked on the bathroom door. Riley opened it, and he handed her the bottle. The hacker managed a little smile and a nod of thanks, then the bathroom door closed again, and Mac slumped into a sitting position on the floor, leaning against the wall.

Without a word, Jack and Bozer both sat down beside him, Bozer reaching out to pat his arm and Jack his shoulder.

Patricia looked down at the three of them, then locked eyes with Mac, something a little sorry and sad and soft and affectionate in her dark eyes.

The blonde managed a wan little smile for his three friends, then returned to staring at the floor, running a hand through his hair.

After a beat, Thornton gave a little nod, perhaps slightly awkwardly and stiffly, then slipped back into the surveillance room to keep monitoring Murdoc.

About an hour later, Mac, flanked by Jack, Bozer, Riley and Thornton, watched as Matty, Sarah, a six-foot black guy whom Matty had borrowed from the FBI but none of them could ever remember the name of, as well as Gonzales’ team (who’d just returned from tidying up the last of the mess that Murdoc had left with that trail of bombs), escorted Murdoc off the premises and to prison.
As they hauled the assassin out of his makeshift cell, mostly prone and cuffed securely to the gurney he was on, the five of them watched very closely as Beth quietly briefed one of Gonzales’ team on Murdoc’s injuries and what kind of care he’d require (she’d send a more detailed email to the prison medical officers later).

Mac held his arch-nemesis’s eyes as the other man was wheeled down the corridor, still smirking, as if he was sure they’d meet again.

The blonde took a few steps forward, and spoke fairly loudly, letting his voice carry, his tone resolute and certain.

‘You’re wrong, Murdoc. Love isn’t a weakness. It’s a strength. And I believe you know that, deep down.’

Murdoc stared at him for a moment, then started shaking his head, and then laughed.

‘Oh, MacGyver…still such a Boy Scout.’ He laughed again. ‘Whatever helps you sleep at night, MacGyver. Whatever helps you sleep at night.’

As Murdoc and the rest of his escorts turned the corner, Matty paused just before she rounded it, and turned to face Mac.

She made eye contact with him, then smiled slowly and nodded, pride in her eyes.

He nodded and gave a little smile back in acknowledgement, and then she too rounded the corner and was gone.

*Love isn’t a weakness. It’s a strength.*

*I know that, as sure as I know the Laws of Thermodynamics or the 97th digit of Pi.*

He glanced around at Jack on his right and Bozer on his left, Riley beside him, and Patricia on Jack’s other side, and Beth, standing by the door to Murdoc’s former prison, typing up that email to the prison he was being sent to on her tablet.

*In fact, I think it's probably my greatest strength.*

*My grandfather always did say that without a big heart, my big brain was never going to do much good.*

*And as you know by now, my grandfather was pretty much always right.*

Five minutes later, Beth cornered Mac as he stepped out of the bathroom, intending to head to the war room where Jack, Thornton, Bozer and Riley were tying up all the loose ends.

Her arms were crossed and she had a very firm expression on her face.

‘Infirmary, now.’

Her tone brooked absolutely no argument.

She’d waited until Murdoc had been removed, knowing that he’d never have allowed it while the assassin had been near, but now that he was gone, Mac was getting the medical treatment he needed. Immediately.
It was only then that Mac finally noticed, finally felt, the soreness in his arms and shoulders (and honestly all over his body), that steady, throbbing pain in his left shoulder, and the slight ache in his right hand from where he’d punched the wall.

He simply followed her obediently to the infirmary.

Mac, seated on an infirmary bed, quite suddenly (he wasn’t completely sure where the urge had come from) reached out with his right hand to take Beth’s left, to still her just as she was about to turn away to grab a pair of gloves and some sterile alcohol wipes, having just finished her initial, cursory examination of his injuries.

Both of them stood there for a beat, staring at their joined hands. Mac noted the beginnings of a bruise forming across the knuckles of his right hand, and very suddenly had the feeling that he really shouldn’t touch her, not after what he’d done (or tried to do or wanted to do) with his hands.

He tried to pull away, but she held on, providing a gentle, insistent resistance to his attempts, then, after studying his face for a moment, brought her right hand over to clasp his as well, first probing as gently as she could for any signs of damage beyond the soon-to-be-bruising, that caring, yet professional, clinical look on her face, then simply holding his hand within hers, expression softening to something very tender and a little sad.

Mac glanced down at her hands clasping his for a moment, then looked up at her face. A very random thought danced across his brain, that old saying about cold hands and a warm heart. He couldn’t help but think that that saying was very, very wrong; her hands were a comfortable warmth on his.

After a moment, he swallowed and looked back down again, half at the floor, half at their joined hands.

‘I…I wanted to kill him. Just then. Wanted to wrap my hands around his throat and…’

He swallowed again and trailed off.

Beth just nodded.

‘I can’t say I’m surprised, Mac. He knows exactly how to get to you.’ That was said very matter-of-factly, though also with more than a tinge of sadness and sympathy. Her right thumb started moving across his hand in a figure-of-eight pattern. It was very soothing, comforting in some way, and he was quite sure that she was doing it unconsciously. She looked very seriously up at him, meeting his eyes, her own very resolute. ‘Mac, I…I believe that you’re a good man. A very good man. One of the best I’ve ever known, or maybe even the best. I don’t believe that…’ She shook her head, almost to herself. ‘…I don’t know that because I don’t think that you have those feelings, but because you didn’t act on them. Because you stopped yourself, and because you feel so guilty now.’

He just stared right back at her for a moment, then looked down at the floor again and swallowed before speaking again, his voice very soft and ashamed and a little scared.

‘I…I didn’t before.’ He swallowed again. ‘When…when I had to go undercover as Murdoc—’ She knew about that, had ever since the day of Murdoc’s escape, and she’d known every detail, everything awful about that whole experience, since that day. Except this. He couldn’t bring himself to tell her about it then, but now, he just had to. ‘…I…I didn’t stop myself. I…I did it. I tried to strangle him and…’

His voice just gave out.
Beth gave a little nod, continuing to trace figure-eights across his hand, still unaware of the action.

‘My point still stands.’ A moment of wryness, of an attempt at dark humour, flickered across her face. ‘He obviously survived the experience without being worse for the wear.’ Her expression grew simultaneously softer and more resolute. ‘You stopped. Caught yourself. And you obviously feel very guilty about it, still.’ She paused for a moment. ‘And I know there’s more to the story. What did he do to you, Mac?’

She spoke very certainly, with a note of something a little bit demanding in her voice, a note of insistence that he tell her the full story. (He hadn’t wanted to mention Murdoc’s taunts earlier; it’d felt a bit like trying to justify himself, trying to defend himself for something that he still thought was, at best, an indefensible mistake. A regret to carry for the rest of his life.) It made him smile, just a little bit, before it fell away again as he spoke, looking down and into the distance. Into the past.

‘He threatened my dad.’

When he looked up at her again, Beth was shaking her head with great sympathy.

‘Oh, Mac…I’m so sorry.’ Her eyes narrowed and that fierce, protective anger of hers that he’d found that he’d become oddly fond of was clear on her face. ‘Murdoc is an asshole.’ He actually gave a half-chuckle at that. It was so succinct and yet so true and so outside of her usual vocabulary that it was just strangely amusing. She quirked an eyebrow at his reaction, then, a moment later, her expression grew more serious again. ‘We’ve all got both light and dark within us. What matters is the part we choose to act on. That’s who we really are.’

He stared at her for a moment (he knew all of this, really, deep down, but it always helped to have somebody else say it). The softness and certain faith and knowledge (that absolute sort of faith and knowledge and certainty that one had in things like the Laws of Thermodynamics or gravity or the fact that the Earth was a near-sphere) in her eyes was remarkably comforting.

And then, it hit me.

He raised an eyebrow at her, a teasing note in his voice.

‘You stole that from Sirius Black!’

Beth affected an innocent expression.

‘I would never! I’m…Sirius.’

She couldn’t maintain her overly-innocent expression any longer and grinned rather sheepishly as he groaned at the pun, then smiled at her.

‘Thanks, Beth.’

She patted his hand with hers, a smile on her face, then let go and turned to grab a pair of gloves and some alcohol wipes.

Beth’s right.

Or, rather, Sirius Black was right.

We all have light and darkness within us. And what matters is our choices.

In the same way, there’s light and darkness in every moment. Even the ones that seem as dark as
black holes.

You can still find the light.

You can choose to search for it and hold on tight.

And that’s how we get through those seemingly-as-dark-as-a-black-hole moments.

MACGYVER’S RESIDENCE

LA

A few hours later, after a lengthy debrief, because oversight was very keen to get everything in order since Murdoc had been involved and all, Mac, Bozer, Jack, Riley, Beth and Patricia all sat around the fire pit, eating the entire contents of Mac and Bozer’s fridge, freezer and pantry (except for Bozer’s ferociously-guarded Thanksgiving supplies), despite it being 4 am.

Absent-mindedly, Mac reached out and picked up a packet of chocolate chip cookies, putting down his plate, which had a half-eaten cheese and mushroom omelette whipped up by Bozer on it. He opened the packet and took one, then offered it to Beth, who was sitting to his left. She took it, and pulled out a couple of cookies and stuck them into the tub of vanilla ice cream she was eating, then passed the cookie packet to Bozer and Riley, sitting next to her. Riley, in the middle of chewing a large bite of her extremely extravagant and extremely tall sandwich, took one, then Bozer grabbed a couple and eagerly dunked them into the dregs of milk leftover from the giant bowl of Honey-Nut Cheerios he’d just polished off. Riley then handed Patricia, who was elegantly eating leftover Chinese takeout with a pair of wooden chopsticks, the cookies. Their boss didn’t take one herself, but did hand the packet to Jack, who was sitting next to her and on Mac’s right side, wolfing down bacon and eggs and toast. Jack took a couple and crammed half of one into his mouth along with some bacon, which earned a few looks of disgust, and then handed the packet of cookies back to Mac, who’d by now gotten through the rest of his omelette, being extremely hungry.

He took a second cookie to add to the other one, and ate both of them slowly, lost in some kind of nebulous web of thoughts in his mind.

Then, suddenly, something crystallized out. Something very, very clear. Some sudden and very urgent urge.

He looked up at his friends, looked around the circle for a moment, then spoke.

‘I…I wanted to kill him. Back at the Phoenix.’ Beth absent-mindedly put her ice cream tub down by the fire, and reached out and lay her hand on his forearm in comfort. Jack put down his fork, loaded with bacon, which had been halfway to his mouth, and clasped Mac’s shoulder, his expression not surprised in the least. Riley put down her sandwich and swallowed, while Bozer, who’d been reaching for the cookies, withdrew his hand. Mac was very relieved to note that there wasn’t judgement or fear in their eyes. None at all. Patricia put down her chopsticks and gave a little nod, something soft and sympathetic in her eyes. Mac stared into the fire for a moment, then looked back up at his friends. ‘But…I wouldn’t have. I’d have stopped myself, even if I’d tried.’

That was spoken very vehemently, very certainly.

He looked around at the five of them, and saw in their eyes that though they’d all feared for him, worried what it’d do to him if he had tried, they had never, ever believed that he would have killed
Murdoc. There was some kind of combination of faith and certain knowledge in their eyes, with a spectrum, a continuum from faith to knowledge, going from Bozer to Jack to Beth to Riley to Patricia.

Beth squeezed his forearm reassuringly, and Jack patted his shoulder, as Bozer reached out and grabbed the packet of cookies and tossed it at his best friend.

Mac caught the cookies and gave a little smile, which was returned by the others. He reached into the packet and pulled out a cookie and took a bite, the smile widening as everyone returned to their food, except Beth, whose ice cream had melted into cream.

She stared at the puddle in the container for a moment and made a face, then muttered half to herself. ‘I really wish I had some liquid nitrogen right now.’

Mac, who was probably the only one who’d heard her, chuckled, his expression a little sheepish all the same, and just held out the cookies to her, making a mental note to make liquid nitrogen ice cream at one of their regular family dinners sometime soon.

With a last half-pout at her no-longer-ice-cream, Beth put the tub aside and took a cookie with a smile.

*Chocolate chip cookies solve a lot of problems.*

*A surprisingly large number of problems.*

*Off the top of my head, I can think of at least six uses for them that don’t involve eating them.*

*Actually…wait, make that seven.*

Variously lying down, lounging or sitting on the deck, around the still-burning fire pit, they all watched the sunrise, calm, quiet and content.

Then, Bozer grinned.

‘I’m totally making this the ending to my next movie! Just picture it, guys! After a long, long mission, our heroes return home and watch the sunrise together, symbolizing the end of a dark period and the beginning of a new period of *amazingness*…’

Riley raised her head off Bozer’s shoulder and punched him in the arm.

‘Way to ruin the moment, genius.’

Sitting on one of the deck chairs, Jack smirked.

‘She’s not wrong, Boze.’ He cocked his head to the side. ‘But hey, it’d be a pretty awesome end scene, gotta give you that.’

Patricia, sitting on the other deck chair, quirked an eyebrow and shook her head wryly, as if to say *no comment.*

Lying on the deck with his knees up and his head pillowed on his interlinked hands, Mac shook his head fondly with an equally-fond smile, as Beth, sitting on his right side, resting her back against his bent legs, grinned in amusement.
Mac turned his head to face his best friend.

‘There is something to be said for symbolism, Boze.’

Not long after dawn, Beth curled herself up on the deck, pillowing her head on her jacket and arms, and fell asleep very quickly.

*I suppose if she hadn’t learned to sleep almost anywhere at almost any time, no matter what was going on in her life, she’d probably have a myriad of sleep-deprivation associated health problems, given her job.*

Without really thinking about it, Mac shrugged out of his leather jacket and draped it over her torso, pointedly ignoring Jack, Bozer and Riley’s resultant smirks and the look (it was almost a twinkle) in Patricia’s eyes.

*To be fair to them, we’re probably long past the point where knowing smirks are appropriate.*

*See, I admitted it!*

*Okay, okay, in all seriousness, they’re my friends, my family, and this is what friends and family do.*

*But still…it’s called a private life for a reason.*

Not long after Beth had fallen asleep, Patricia checked her phone and then stood, a slightly apologetic look on her face.

‘I have to go; duty calls.’ She gave a small smile. ‘But you all have today and tomorrow off.’ Her expression changed a little again, becoming something stern and fond. Almost, perhaps, a maternal sort of look. Or, at least, as maternal as she could be. ‘You’re not to be back at the Phoenix until after Thanksgiving. Get some rest.’

And with that, she swept off the deck, through the house and out the front door.

Bozer gave a cracking yawn, which was followed moments later by Riley’s equally-big yawn, and then the young couple exchanged a glance, a silent conversation of sorts passing between them, before Riley got up and offered a hand to Bozer to help him up. Bozer took it and stood, covering his mouth with his free hand as he yawned again, and gestured inside with his head.

‘We’re gonna try and get some shut-eye, maybe watch some movies to try and wind down first… whaddya say to *Zootopia*?’

The last question was directed to Riley, who just nodded, suppressing another yawn of her own, and the two of them walked inside, still holding hands and still yawning.

Jack and Mac watched them go, then, as Jack suppressed a yawn of his own, Mac gently picked up the young woman who was still fast asleep on the deck, bridal-style, arranging her so that her head rested on his shoulder. Beth stirred, then seemed to realize, still asleep, that she was very safe and in very good hands, and settled back into a deep sleep.

Jack did his best to not react to that soft little smile on his partner’s face, and instead picked up Beth’s jacket and shoes, then opened the door so Mac could carry her inside.

The blonde laid her down gently on the couch, then grabbed Jack’s football snuggie off the back of
the couch (it had migrated to Mac’s, along with Jack, during his recovery from his ordeal at the hands of Dr Popovich, and unlike Jack, it hadn’t migrated back to Jack’s place yet), and draped it over her, taking back his jacket in the process.

Jack, meanwhile, had put Beth’s shoes by the door that led out onto the deck and hung her jacket over the back of the armchair. He watched his partner’s actions for a second, the tenderness that he saw there making him smile, then he turned away and walked to the kitchen to grab two bottles of beer out of the fridge.

He held one out to Mac as the blonde shrugged his jacket back on, with a look on his face that was half smirk and half grin.

‘It’s five o’clock somewhere, brother.’

Mac shook his head (it was 7:14, which meant it was not exactly 5 o’clock anywhere), but took one of the beers anyway, and he and Jack made their way out onto the deck, and leaned against the railing, looking back inside the house.

Wordlessly, Mac opened his beer with his Swiss Army knife, then reached out to open Jack’s, and they clinked their beers together in a silent toast and each took a swig.

After swallowing, Jack gestured with a point of his beer bottle at the young doctor asleep on the couch.

‘She’s not gonna be happy with you when she wakes up, brother.’

Mac had several pulled muscles in his back, shoulder and arms and a slight muscle tear in his left shoulder. He was supposed to be resting.

Mac lifted his right shoulder in a half-shrug and took another swig of his beer, then spoke after swallowing.

‘A, it wasn’t far. B, she’s not very heavy either. C…well, if there’s any time of year to have to buy an apology pumpkin pie…’

Jack just took another drink from his beer to hide his grin.

His partner, even if he probably didn’t quite realize it yet, was totally gone over this woman, in Jack’s humble (or maybe not so humble) opinion.

Having seen Mac’s heart broken three times, and all three times by his crazy evil ex-girlfriend, no less, that made the older man very, very happy.

Maybe he and Bozer would get to write their Best Men speech after all.

(There’d been moments over the last couple of years when they’d wondered if Mac would ever be able to really let Nikki go, after all.)

Jack personally thought that the odds of that particular speech getting written and delivered were pretty good.

Still, it never hurt to give a little nudge.

Particularly to somebody like Mac, since left to his own devices, Mac would probably move at some glacial pace.
Kid was really hopeless with women.

Jack reached out and socked his partner lightly in the arm, then looked quite seriously at him.

‘Promise me you’ll ask her out before Christmas, man.’

Mac met his eyes, and nodded immediately, before looking back inside and over at the couch, a soft little smile on his face.

‘I promise, Jack.’ Then, he turned around, which seemed to take some effort (Jack really got that whole not-wanting-to-let-her-out-of-your-sight-after-someone-tried-to-kill-her feeling), and stared out into the distance. Jack turned to join him, as Mac spoke. ‘Remind me to go wake up Boze if he’s not up by noon, so he can brine the turkey.’ Mac’s expression grew rather wry. ‘Otherwise, he’s going to go ballistic on Murdoc for ruining Thanksgiving, and I’m not sure if Murdoc would survive that.’

Jack gave a chuckle and clinked his beer bottle to Mac’s.

‘Will do, brother. Will do.’

Tomorrow is Thanksgiving.

That’s a time, as the name suggests, for being thankful.

For giving thanks.

And this year, I’ve definitely got plenty of people to express my thanks to.

I’m going to be buying a lot of boxes of thank-you chocolates.

Of course, I’ll make sure that Patricia’s will be her favourite, soft-centred dark Belgian chocolates.

And I think I’ll give Matty a box of cheese Danishes, though I’ll have to make sure Jack doesn’t get his hands on them.

Speaking of Jack, I owe him a new wristband and probably a month’s worth of beer. At least.

And of course, it goes without saying that I’ll help Riley out with her new gaming rig, and Bozer’s really been hoping for a Thermomix, but we don’t really have space for one...though, I’ve got a couple of ideas on how to make it work anyway.

I definitely owe Beth a new tube of hand lotion, and four pumpkin pies.

And I’d like to buy her dinner. And flowers, of course – my grandfather raised me to be a gentleman, most of the time, anyway. And take her bowling. Or to the arcade to play Whack-a-Mole; I’m 95% sure that she likes Whack-a-Mole. Or maybe to a drive-in, or to play mini-golf…

Okay, okay, I know, I know. The last one’s pretty much because I’m really good at mini-golf.

Can you blame me, wanting to show off a bit for her?

Anyway, that’s not the point.

The point is, though my life isn’t easy and I’ve had a lot of trials and tribulations, I’ve got a lot to be thankful for.
A lot of thanks to give, to a lot of people.

Mac smiled slowly as he took another sip of his beer, reaching out and putting an arm around Jack’s shoulders.

It’s going to be an excellent Thanksgiving.

Chapter End Notes

And that’s the end! But not THE end; every end is a beginning, remember? Now that this is done, Somewhere in the Middle will start posting! (Requests/prompts are very, very welcome and greatly encouraged!) The first chapter will go up Monday night, my time (that’s very early Monday morning for Americans), and the summary is as follows: Giving Thanks, set post-2.22, Bobby Pin. It’s Thanksgiving! Bozer’s a man on a mission, Mac might have to buy every pie in LA County, Jack feels very paternal, and everyone has much to be thankful for. (It picks up about 5 hours after Every End is a Beginning finishes.)

The lyrics that Murdoc sends Mac are from Beyonce’s Halo. The food scene when they’re all sitting around the fire pit is loosely inspired by the shawarma scene in The Avengers. I wholeheartedly believe that Bozer would be extremely dangerous to anyone who messed up Thanksgiving by ruining the turkey, and firmly headcanon that Mac’s grandfather sat there and gave him instructions on how to woo women properly when he was like 12, which Mac half-heartedly listened to, probably sitting there, rolling his eyes internally and thinking that girls couldn’t possibly be as interesting as explosions.

Also, at about 200,000 words, this is about twice as long as anything else I’ve ever written. It’s been an incredible labour of love and THANK YOU SO MUCH for sticking with me to the end, and for all of your lovely reviews/comments/follows/favourites etc. Seriously – THANK YOU and so much love for you all!

Signing off for now,
TheGirlWhoRemembers.

Thoughts on 2.02, Muscle Car + Paperclips: Now that was an episode! I personally enjoyed that more than DIY or Die; as you all know from reading this story, I of course love Jack and Riley’s relationship, and I really wanted them to deal with Riley killing Horn in Season 2 and I think they did a really good job. I liked how they dealt with Cage in the episode (it’s a bit odd that they’re reverting to Cage now, isn’t it, considering that Mac, at least, called her Samantha/Sam in DIY or Die?) and I think I’ll wind up liking her as a character. Also, Lil and Jill are the same person, aren’t they?

End Notes

In other news, I’m so glad they had another Mac voice-over, for the first time in ages, in
Cigar Cutter! I’ve missed them! (Which I bet is pretty obvious…)

Anyway, what did you all think?

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!