Wunderkind-Season 1

by JustAnotherWriter (N1ghtshade)

Summary

AU role reversal where Mac and not Riley is the one the team retrieves from the supermax.

Jack Dalton's DXS team is in serious trouble. Their last mission to Lake Como left his computer-genius partner Riley Davis with a near-fatal bullet wound, their analyst Nick Carpenter dead, his body never recovered, and a canister of a deadly virus in the hands of the Organization. Their only chance of fixing this might be a young former vigilante currently serving time for domestic terrorism. Someone known to the criminal underground as "the Phoenix", and to law enforcement as "Angus MacGyver".

Notes

I've had this AU on my mind for a while, and I finally got around to writing something about it for the MacGyver Appreciation Fortnight challenge on Tumblr. The response I got was overwhelming, so I'll be turning this into a full fic very, very soon!

Each chapter will be a rewrite of an episode as it would be in this AU. This will likely be a
very long project, so I'll probably post a chapter a week starting sometime this weekend! First chapter here is a teaser for what's coming.
**Teaser for 1.01**

“Do you really think he’s our best chance of stopping the Organization?” Riley asks, looking through the one-way glass at the young, skinny blond in prison orange, handcuffed to the table. Jack notices that she rubs her left shoulder reflexively. She’s still in PT for the bullet she took at Como. *I failed you, Ri. And I’m sorry. But now we have a chance to at least get revenge.*

“Patty thinks so. This kid’s got a serious reputation for thinking on the fly and coming up with crazy stuff that works. If it hadn’t been for a Google Street car in the wrong place at the wrong time, he’d still be pulling his vigilante stuff.” Jack looks down at the file in his hands. When Detective Greer, the arresting officer, had given Jack the file, he’d given the former Delta a sympathetic look. *Good luck with the guy. Hope you don’t plan on putting him with a team. Never seen anybody who was that fond of solitary.*

Jack thinks it’s funny that his team is basically totally made up of people no one would call team players. Jack considers himself a lone wolf for life. *Hey, relationships are messy.* His exception to that rule is Riley, a loner herself.

Riley’s a prodigy, a kid from a broken, abusive home with serious daddy issues and serious hacking skills. She made a name for herself by the time she was a high school junior, and was recruited by the CIA right after graduation. *If you call the ultimatum, “work with us or face jail time for what you pulled” a recruitment.*

She’d been a handful, driving every handler she had crazy with her rebellious personality and her penchant for going off-script on missions. Jack had been the first person to get her to fall in line. He’d been furious when he found out Matty Webber paired him with the crazy little hacker, but he’d quickly found not a dangerous punk but a girl looking for some stability and someone to respect. Jack had been able to fill that role, and he was proud to call himself Riley’s father figure.

They’d transferred from the CIA to DXS together two years ago, where they’d been teamed up with Nick Carpenter, top of his class at the NSA for analytics. Jack hadn’t liked the idea of taking a pencil-pusher analyst into the field, but it turned out that analysts could also be startlingly good interrogators. And then Nick took a bullet to the chest at Como and wasn’t as lucky as Riley.

Jack knows they were close, although Riley never wanted to admit it. *Now I know she thinks of me as a dad, cause the dad’s always the last one to hear about the relationship.*

They walk into the room, and Jack sits down, spreading the file on the table. Riley stands in the corner, watching. She’s been skittish since Como, and Jack can’t blame her.

The man across the table doesn’t look like he should be in here. Jack wonders what’s happened to this…this kid, behind these walls, because there are shadows behind those eyes that no twenty-three year old should have there. Jack’s only seen this in guys he was in the Sandbox with. The kid’s fighting a war in here, just to survive.

“Angus MacGyver,” Jack drawls, with an emphasis on the first name. “Sounds like a new special at Carl’s Jr.” He watches the boy flinch. *He’s probably taken a hell of a lot of flak for that from guys scarier than me.* “How’d you survive in here for two years with a hamburger name like that?”

“Solitary’s real good for keeping you alive.” His voice is a lot deeper than Jack expected. It doesn’t sound like it should belong to such a young-looking kid.
“I heard you like being alone.” Jack spreads out the file. The kid glances at the mug shot paper-clipped to it and then ducks his head. If possible the picture makes him look even younger. *He should have been going to college, getting drunk and dating random chicks, not spending his life in this hellhole.* “Looks like you liked working alone, too.” He spreads out the photos of torched gun-running warehouses, burning cars the police found drugs being smuggled in, and several men with gang tattoos tied up with…duct tape?

“I heard about you, for a while, when I was monitoring dark web chatter,” Riley speaks up. “They called you the Phoenix.”

“I wasn’t a hero, if that’s what you think. I did what had to be done.”

“You were a vigilante. And you sure as hell had a code. At least until that gun warehouse you blew dropped on the maintenance guy.” The kid flinches again, more noticeably. “You never killed civilians. And you turned yourself in as soon as they told you someone had died.”

Angus is looking him in the eyes now. “I thought the building was clear. I swear. I didn’t mean for anyone to get killed.”

“We believe you,” Riley says. “The people we work for have looked over the case again. They think there might be evidence to prove your bomb didn’t kill George Ramsay.”

The kid looks at her with so much hope it hurts. “It wasn’t my fault?”

“Hold on, Hoss, we said maybe.” Jack looks at him. “And…we have some conditions.”

“I thought so. No one does any good deed for free.” The bitterness in his voice stings.

“You used to.” Riley says.

“And look what it got me.” Angus laughs, but there’s no humor in it. “I thought it was helping.”

“By taking out gangs like the ones who killed your best friend’s brother.” Jack sees the kid startle. “Yeah, we did more digging than some minimum-wage cops could be bothered to. Seems like you started all this when Jeremiah Bozer was caught in the crossfire of two rival gangs downtown. He was just on his way to a coffee house cover band gig with his friends. Fifteen years old.”

Jack sets a picture of a smiling boy, surrounded by a taller one who looks like his brother, and a younger version of Angus, on the table. “Wanted to be a rockstar, just like his brother wanted to make movies, and you wanted to go to MIT.” Now Wilt’s working a minimum wage burger job, Angus is in a supermax, and Jerry’s six feet under.

Angus looks at Jack. “Cops tried to help, but the gangs have people in their pockets, and there are too many laws that stop the police from getting the information they need. There’s too much red tape. Things take too long. I can get them done fast and save lives.” He sighs. “Until one day I couldn’t.”

“We want to give you the chance to do that again,” Riley says. “We’ll help you prove your innocence. On one condition. Once you’re out, we’d like you to consider our employment offer. We’re a dark agency, US government but working under a cover. No one knows we exist. We operate at our discretion across the globe. And right now, we have a problem.”

“What kind of problem?”

Riley sighs and fidgets with the sleeve of her leather jacket. “We…I…lost a canister of a deadly virus three months ago. And now it’s resurfaced.”
Angus fiddles with his cuffs. “What do you want me to do about that? You think I have a death wish because I’ve got a life sentence?”

“Yeah, sort of,” Jack says.

“Well, I guess getting killed trying to save the world beats reading Crime and Punishment in solitary for the fifth time.” Angus suddenly stands up, the cuffs around his wrists unlocked. Jack flinches back out of instinct.

Angus tosses a small object onto the table. It clatters, and Jack picks it up hesitantly. It takes him a minute to realize it’s the paper clip from the dossier, now repurposed into handcuff keys. *When the hell did he snag that?* Jack’s beginning to think Patty’s dead on right about this Angus MacGyver being their best chance of stopping the Organization. *Who is this guy?*

“I’m in.”
Here, as promised, is the first full rewritten episode! I'm planning on doing one a week on Fridays, just like the actual show :) This one follows canon fairly consistently (because pretty much this entire episode is necessary to the rest of the season arc), but following ones will likely deviate a little more to a lot more ;)

101-The Rising

LAKE COMO, ITALY

A GREAT PLACE TO SPEND A VACATION...OR SELL A WEAPON OF MASS DESTRUCTION

Riley Davis steps out of the rented BMW, smoothing the skirt of her figure-hugging, shimmery black dress around her legs. On the pretense of pushing back her carefully straightened hair, she switches her comms live.

“Hey gorgeous, you clean up well.” **Nick Carpenter. Former NSA, top of his class in intel analysis...and interrogation techniques.** Riley smirks.

“I kinda miss my messy bun and leather jacket, though.” **Yeah, the glamorous life of the super-spy.** Riley’s never been too into this get-dolled-up-and-make-a-statement side of the business. But she can’t exactly crash a high-end gala in ripped skinny jeans and a frowzy ponytail. Still she’ll be glad to ditch this revealing gown as soon as possible.

“I miss that jacket too.” The way Nick says it, Riley knows he’s remembering certain times she’s worn it…

“Hey kids, I can hear you, you know that right?” **Jack Dalton. Former Delta Force, CIA, and my handler. And basically my dad.**

“Ok, we’ll save it for later,” Nick says, and Riley can hear the promise of an after-successful-mission celebration. **But first I have to go save the world. Because that’s my job.**

**Riley Davis. Hacker, CIA prodigy, now employed by a secret agency called DXS. Jack, Nick and I are the top team they have. Which is why we’re here tonight.** Intel places a major WMD sale going down at this gala, tonight.

Riley gracefully climbs the steps, handing over her handbag to the stern-faced guard at the door. After checking it, he hands it back, and Riley pulls out her phone, pretending to check for any messages.

*To them, it’s just a cell phone. To me, it’s everything I need to finish this mission.* Riley slips the phone back in her handbag and looks up at the tall, dark haired woman coming down the stairs.

**Patricia Thornton. One of the greatest minds in the espionage field. Which is why you’ve never**
heard of her.

“It’s good to see you again, Ms. Elcar,” Riley says, taking a champagne glass from a tray and sipping lightly.

“You really ought to give the art gallery a look, it’s quite impressive.” Patty glances around the room, then leans in. “That door.” She glances to one that’s guarded by two massive guys in suits, with comms clearly in. “I trust you can take it from here?” Riley nods, smiling, and moves away.

You know how hospitals have those rules about not using cell phones in the rooms because it might interfere with a machine? Well, the same is true of comms. If you’re able to properly modify your phone...

Riley walks past the guards, who are now bent over pulling their earpieces out, and into a small alcove. It’s fairly easy to find the hidden door. What’s less easy is the scanner.

“Nick, you said the blueprints were for a T-45 single-print scanner. This is a whole-hand model.” Riley can hear Nick typing frantically.

“He must have updated security. Riley, can you hack it?”

“Only one way to find out.” She jacks her phone into the system and gets to work. It takes longer than it should, but then the door slides open with a soft beep.

Inside there’s a small canister bathed in a blue glow. “Guys, it’s not a bomb. I don’t know what it is.” There’s a biohazard symbol. Most likely some kind of virus. I’ve heard some dark web chatter about something they found recently that’s some sort of ancient superbug. This might be it.

“Just get it and let’s go!” Jack says.

“Ok…” Riley lifts the canister carefully, and then the whoop of an alarm sounds. “Oops.”

“Oops like I just stubbed my toe, or oops like I accidentally started the zombie apocalypse?” Oh Jack.

Riley’s a little too busy to respond. Three guards burst in, and she dives behind a table before pulling off her heels and flinging one at the closest guy. He falls back, startled, and she takes him down with a hard hit before grabbing his gun and using it to knock out the other two. But there will be more on the way.

Riley dashes through the house, slipping the canister into her purse and tearing the slit in her skirt higher so she can move faster. She leaps over a railing and rushes down the hill toward the water.

“Jack! Start the boat!” He does, and she jumps in just as shots pepper the dock behind her.

Predictably, the goons behind them have their own boat, and the chase is on.

“You cut it kinda close back there,” Jack says, focusing on his driving while still somehow finding the time to scold. See? Dad.

“It wasn’t my fault we had bad intel on the scanner.” Riley jumps when there’s a ting and the engine starts coughing. “Shit, they hit our fuel tank.” She rips a chunk off the hem of her skirt. “Jack, turn us around.”

“Back toward the people with guns who want to kill us?”
“Just trust me!” Riley ties off the steering wheel and then she and Jack dive off the sides of the boat. She bobs to the surface just as an explosion lights up the night.

Jack’s still berating her for ruining yet another one of his phones as they walk back to the van.

“How didn’t you just put a waterproof case on it?” Riley asks.

“Because I didn’t know we were going swimming, genius.”

“It’s an L.A.K.E., Jack, maybe it would have been a good precaution?” She waits to hear Nick pop out and chime in, but there’s nothing. And then Nick steps slowly around the edge of the van, face tense.

“Nick?” There’s someone behind him, a face Riley recognizes from the briefings and her own facial scans at the gala. Kendrick. Works for a shadowy group that’s been termed the Organization. He’s in town to buy the WMD. Or I guess just steal it.

Jack pulls his gun on Kendrick, but then there’s another click and someone has a gun on Jack. Then bashes him over the head with it. He falls to the ground, silent.

“Hand over the canister, and we can all go home.” Riley assesses the situation.

First thing they teach you in spy school is to look past the obvious. Right now the obvious is that Kendrick will shoot Nick if Riley doesn’t hand over the canister, and if he does get it things will go very bad. But if I don’t hand it over, he shoots us all and takes it anyway. I can’t run, we’re surrounded. There are moonlight glints on gun barrels in the bushes on all sides. Second rule of spy school: You can’t save the world if you’re dead. Stay alive if at all possible.

“Ok.” Riley reaches out, holding the canister out to Kendrick.

“Thank you.” He takes it, smiles, and then turns and shoots Nick in the chest, point-blank. He topples over the guardrail and disappears.

“No!” Riley shouts. She’s dimly aware of a burning sting in her shoulder and then she’s over the railing as well and hits the water. She surfaces, gasping, but there’s no sign of Nick. And her shoulder is gushing blood into the still, dark water.

Ok yeah. I know you’re thinking, “if she’s the hero this isn’t looking good”. But really, I’m not…

THREE MONTHS LATER

LOS ANGELES

NOT SUCH A GREAT PLACE TO FORGET ABOUT THE PAST

Riley reaches the trailhead and pauses, hands on her knees, her heartbeat drowning out the driving beat of R&B from her headphones.

No matter what I do, I can’t stop seeing that night. Images of Kendrick, Nick falling, Jack dragging her out of the water and begging her to stay awake, it’s all a blur. But she does know one thing.

I failed. We lost the canister and it’s on me. She turns and breaks into a run again, gasping for air, legs aching. I wasn’t good enough.

She’s glad to notice she can make it all the way from her apartment to the trailhead and back without
having to walk any of the route now. *PT’s going well.* She hurries up the stairs and unlocks her apartment door, almost slamming it into her roommate in the tiny kitchen.

Her roommate, Samantha Cage, is Australian, an intelligence operative who’s currently contracting with DXS and needed a temporary place to crash. Riley needed someone to help out around the house while her shoulder healed, and it turned out to be a mutually beneficial arrangement.

Technically, Sam could have gotten her own place by now, and Riley doesn’t need help with reaching above her head anymore, but they’ve never really discussed the possibility of Sam moving out.

“Good run?” Sam asks, turning around from where she’s pouring corn flakes into two bowls.

“Yeah.” Riley takes her phone off her armband and heads for the shower. When she sees her still-prominent shoulder scar in the mirror, she flinches. *There’s no forgetting what happened.*

When she walks back into the living room, with her hair in a towel and her ancient, faded CIA training sweats on, Jack and Patty are sitting on the couch.

“What’s going on?” Riley asks, quickly pulling down the towel and rubbing self-consciously at her hair.

“You need to see this.” Thornton says, and clicks play on the tablet in front of her. Three people in biohazard suits, covered in blood, are begging for help. Riley cringes.

“Within ten minutes, every lab tech in that building was dead. CDC sent in containment, and they confirmed that this is the virus that was discovered in that Russian fracking incident you flagged.” Riley remembers. The dark web went crazy over it a few months ago...right around the Como job. She’d even thought this might have been what the canister was…

“We think this was a proof-of-concept demonstration. And that Kendrick is planning on selling the canister he stole rather than using it himself,” Patty says, her voice shaking ever so slightly. “Whatever he’s going to do with it, he’s going to do it soon.” She absently twists a lock of black hair. “We have no idea where the sale is going to be, and we’d like you to come in and try to help sort data from Como. You know it better than anyone. I’m sorry, Riley, but we’d like you to come in and try to help sort data from Como. You know it better than anyone. I’m sorry, Riley, but we could use your eyes.”

“If you’re not ready for this…” Jack says quickly.

“I’m ready.” *Anything to make sure Nick didn’t die in vain.*

“Before you go, there’s one other thing.” Patty slides a dossier marked with the LAPD’s logo onto the coffee table. Riley glances at it; it’s an arrest record.

“What’s this?”

“Our best chance of ending whatever the Organization has planned.”

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CALIFORNIA CORRECTIONAL INSTITUTION

NOT REALLY THE FIRST PLACE YOU’D LOOK FOR A HERO

Jack’s seen a lot of Patty Thornton’s crazy plans, but this one might top them all.

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rubs her left shoulder reflexively.

“Patty thinks so. This kid’s got a serious reputation for thinking on the fly and coming up with crazy stuff that works. If it hadn’t been for a Google Street car in the wrong place at the wrong time, he’d still be pulling his vigilante stuff.”

Jack looks down at the file in his hands. When Detective Greer, the arresting officer, had given Jack the file, he’d given the younger man a sympathetic look.

“Good luck with the guy. Hope you don’t plan on putting him with a team. Never seen anybody who was that fond of solitary.”

Jack’s certainly got a knack for working with people no one would call team players. He actually considers himself a lone wolf for life. Hey, relationships are messy. His exception to that rule is Riley, a loner herself.

Riley’s a prodigy, a kid from a broken, abusive home with serious daddy issues and serious hacking skills. She was recruited by the CIA right after graduation. If you call the ultimatum, “work with us or face jail time for what you pulled” a recruitment.

She’d been a handful, driving her handlers crazy with her rebellious personality and her penchant for going off-script on missions. Jack had been the first person to get her to fall in line. He’d been pretty much the first stable person in her life, and he was proud to call himself Riley’s father figure.

They’d transferred from the CIA to DXS together two years ago, where they’d been teamed up with Nick Carpenter. Jack hadn’t liked the idea of taking a pencil-pusher analyst into the field, but it turned out that analysts could also be startlingly good interrogators. And then Como happened.

Jack knows they were close, although Riley never wanted to admit as much. Just proved she thinks of me as a dad, cause the dad’s always the last one to hear about the relationship.

They walk into the room, and Jack sits down, spreading the file on the table. Riley stands in the corner, watching.

The man across the table doesn't look like he should be in here. Jack wonders what's happened to this...this kid, behind these walls, because there are shadows behind those eyes that no twenty-three year old should have there. Jack's only seen this in guys he was in the Sandbox with. The kid's fighting a war in here, just to survive.

“Angus MacGyver,” Jack drawls, with an emphasis on the first name. “Sounds like a new special at Carl’s Jr.” He watches the boy flinch. He’s probably taken a hell of a lot of flak for that from guys scarier than me. “How’d you survive in here for two years with a hamburger name like that?”

“Solitary’s real good for keeping you alive.” His voice is a lot deeper than Jack expected. It doesn’t sound like it should belong to such a young-looking kid.

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“Looks like you liked working alone, too.” He spreads out the photos of torched gun-running warehouses, burning cars the police found drugs being smuggled in, and several men with gang tattoos tied up with...duct tape?
“I heard about you, for a while, when I was monitoring dark web chatter,” Riley speaks up. “They called you the Phoenix.”

“I wasn’t a hero, if that’s what you think. I did what had to be done.”

Jack shrugs. “You were a vigilante. And you sure as hell had a code. At least until that gun warehouse you blew dropped on the maintenance guy.” The kid flinches again, more noticeably. “You never killed civilians. And you turned yourself as soon as they told you someone had died.”

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“Hold on, Hoss, we said maybe.” Jack looks at him. “And...we have some conditions.”

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“You used to.” Riley says.

“And look what it got me.” Angus laughs, but there’s no humor in it. “I thought it was helping.”

“By taking out gangs like the ones who killed your best friend’s brother.” Jack sees the kid startle. “Yeah, we did more digging than some minimum-wage cops could be bothered too. Seems like you started all this when Jeremiah Bozer was caught in the crossfire of two rival gangs downtown. He was just on his way to a coffee house cover band gig with his friends. Fifteen years old.” Jack sets a picture of a smiling boy, surrounded by a taller one who looks like his brother, and a younger version of Angus, on the table. “Wanted to be a rockstar, just like his brother wanted to make movies, and you wanted to go to MIT.” Now Wilt’s working a minimum wage burger job, and Angus is in a supermax, and Jerry’s six feet under.

Angus looks at Jack. "Cops tried to help, but the gangs have people in their pockets, and there are too many laws that stop the police from getting the information they need. There's too much red tape. Things take too long. I can get them done fast and save lives.” He sighs. “Until one day I couldn’t.”

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“What kind of problem?”

“We...I...lost a canister of a deadly virus three months ago. And now it’s resurfaced.”

Angus fiddles with his cuffs. “What do you want me to do about that? You think I have a death wish because I’ve got a life sentence?”

“Yeah, sort of,” Jack says.

“Well, I guess getting killed trying to save the world beats reading Crime and Punishment in solitary for the fifth time.” Angus suddenly stands up, the cuffs around his wrists unlocked. Jack flinches back out of instinct.
Angus tosses a small object onto the table. It clatters, and Jack picks it up hesitantly. It takes him a minute to realize it’s the paper clip from the dossier, now repurposed into handcuff keys. When the hell did he snag that? Jack’s beginning to think Patty’s dead on right about this Angus MacGyver being their best chance of stopping the Organization. Who the hell is this guy?

“I’m in.”

Mac shudders when the heavy doors to the cell block clang shut behind him. I didn’t really think I’d ever be leaving this place as a free man. But if he’d been responsible for the death of an innocent man, spending the rest of his life inside a supermax was only what he deserved.

But if they’re right, and I didn’t do it…

He’s not entirely sure who these people are, or if he can trust a thing they’re telling him. But they’re getting him out of here, and at the moment, that’s the most important thing. I can figure anything else out later. That’s what I’m good at. Improvising.

He ignores the yells coming from the hallways and the yard when he’s escorted out. He’s been doing that for the past two years, but it never gets easier. He shivers in spite of the warm California sun on his shoulders. If this goes right, I’ll never have to hear them again. Except in nightmares. He shakes off the thoughts when they step into a black SUV and the girl...Riley...takes off his cuffs for real this time. Admittedly, she immediately replaces them with a blinking ankle tether, but it feels a whole lot less constricting.

“I get that this is a lot to take in right now. But we’re on the clock and we need your help.”

“So your first choice was a man doing life for terrorism?”

He sees honesty warring with sympathy in her eyes. “Actually it wasn’t my decision. My boss thinks you’re the only one who can outsmart the Organization.”

“Really? That’s what these guys are calling themselves? It sounds like something straight out of a comic book.”

“We don’t know anything about them. We had to come up with a name.” She shrugs. “It wasn’t our brightest moment, I’ll give you that.”

The man, Jack, turns slightly in the front seat. “Riles, can you come up here?” She stands, bracing herself on the seats as they round a turn. Mac can hear Jack whispering to Riley when she sits down in the passenger seat. “Maybe you should leave those cuffs on him until we get to DXS.”

They could try. There’s enough in this van for me to pick the lock in about twenty seconds. There’s a paperclip on the floor, under a seat, and Mac picks it up, carefully twisting it into a key shape.

I’m outside. That’s a place to start.

The DXS building is imposing in a way that’s totally different from CCI. Mac’s used to the constant feeling of being trapped, of being afraid, of being not a person but a number. Of being rejected and hated and judged and feared and hurt. He knows what to feel about steel bars and concrete and mold and barbed wire.

This building is terrifying in a different way. Clear glass and so many windows. It’s not secure. But it feels like a trap just the same. Like another cage.
They’re met at the door by a woman in a severe black dress, her hair pulled into a tight bun.

The woman’s cold glare cuts him. *People like her are the ones you avoid on the inside. They’re cunning and you’re never certain if you’re on their good side or if you’re just useful for the time being.*

“I’m Patricia Thornton. Director of the DXS.”

Mac decides the best course of action is to be polite. “Thank you. For arranging my release.”

“Conditional release,” the woman says coolly. “You are still a convicted felon, and as far as anyone is concerned you are a dangerous terrorist. You are required to remain in DXS custody at all times, until your innocence is proven. Until then, if you do anything that could be considered insubordinate, or an attempt to escape from your handlers, you will be returned to California Correctional immediately.”

“I understand.”

“Before we allow you any further into our operation, you’ll be evaluated by our interrogator, Miss Cage.” A slender blonde woman steps up.

“If you’ll follow me please?” The woman has a strong Aussie accent. She exchanges a look with Riley, *do they have some kind of history? Friendship?* She leads him down a hallway into a white, cold room that reminds him too much of the places he’s been the past two years.

“Please, sit down.” He does.

“What exactly is this?” He asks, fidgeting with the paper clip he’s still holding.

Cage makes some notes on a clipboard. “A simple asset evaluation. Whether we should consider you a threat or a resource.” She glances at something. “Serving a life sentence for domestic terrorism, most of your two years so far in solitary. Interesting.”

“I’m not antisocial,” Mac says desperately. “It’s…”

“The only way to survive.” Cage sits down. “You’re not the only one with a checkered past, Angus.” She smiles.

“I prefer Mac.” He doesn’t really know why he tells her.

“I can see why. A pretty boy with a name that’s very, very likely to get repurposed…” She glances his way. “Solitary’s probably the only reason you’re sitting here. But it was a red flag on your file. I had to be sure.”

He nods. There’s something about this woman that makes him feel like she’s looking at his brain with a microscope. *But I don’t feel like she’s going to use it against me.* It sounds like this Cage has spent some time somewhere like CCI. Something that gives them something in common. *Or she’s a damn good interrogator who’s making me think she’s on my side.*

“And domestic terrorism and murder weren’t red flags?”

“I think you told the police what you believed was the truth.” Cage spreads out the file. “But we recently talked to a bomb expert with the FBI, and he’s of the opinion the explosion you caused didn’t kill the victim. So you’re not a murderer. Just a kid who likes making things go boom.” She smirks. “And in this line of work, that can be a very big selling point.”
“Do you think I’m dangerous, Miss Cage?”

“Yes.” She stares directly into his eyes. “But not for the reasons you might think. I think you like to break the rules. You have better ways to do something and you never ask permission to try your way. I think you like being smarter than everyone else in the room. But none of that makes you the killer people have said you are.”

“What happens if I say something to change your mind? Are you going to send me back to prison?” She likes me for now. But people always start out that way, and then when they know more they run. They don’t like who I really am. No one wants to take a chance on trusting me.

She gives him an unreadable look. “I think what happens to you now is up to you.”

The door opens and Riley steps in. “Sam, I’m sorry, but I’d like to have him come with us. We could use his help with the van.”

“Of course.” Cage stands. “And for the record, I don’t see a threat here. Just a lost, lonely, scared kid who made some mistakes.” Ouch.

Riley and Jack are waiting outside the room.

“So, you know how you got out of those cuffs with a paperclip?” Riley asks. “Think you can work your magic on a strongbox lock that caught a bullet?”

Mac nods. I’m actually not certain at all. But if I tell them that they might send me back.

“When we lost that canister, we also lost an agent. Nick Carpenter, our analyst.” Riley’s clearly holding down emotion.

“Nick was a little paranoid, I guess rightly so. He always kept his computer locked up in the van, in a special compartment, and he was able to get the computer inside before…” She trails off.

Jack picks up for her. “Unfortunately, when Kendrick took him, he shot out the lock so it couldn’t be opened. And trying to cut into it will set off a failsafe that burns anything inside.”

“I only need a Swiss Army Knife…” Mac realizes saying that was a mistake the second the words leave his mouth.

Jack frowns. “I don’t care what you did or didn’t do. I am not giving any weapon to someone with criminal charges, who I have never met before today.”

He might as well have slapped me in the face. Like I need to be reminded what I am.

“Then I’ll need a screwdriver.” They’re in a large, open room now, the only things in it are a blue van and a fully equipped computer desk.

The techs inside the van, pulling out pieces of it and putting them in boxes, stare openly at Mac's unmistakable orange jumpsuit.

Calm down. These people are staring because they don’t know why you’re here, not because of what they want to do to you. Still, Mac ducks his head, avoiding meeting eyes.

He finds what he needs inside one of the toolboxes in the van and begins tinkering with the strongbox lock.

When it pops open, he looks over his shoulder to see Riley grinning, Jack giving him a look of
grudging respect, and Thornton expressionless. When did she come in?

Riley pulls out the computer and logs in, then sighs.

“When Kendrick took Nick, Nick followed protocol and wiped the hard drive.” Riley looks at the computer. “But unless you physically destroy the hard drive, the information is still there. Just going to be a little harder to retrieve.”

Mac grins when Riley takes a hammer and smashes the laptop. She’s not afraid to get creative to get the job done. I like her already.

“I’ll scan it as read only. He’s always used my encryptions so I should be able to use anything I find.”

Riley puts the disk into the desktop tower and pulls a bag of potato chips out from under the desk. “What? I get hungry when I’m working,” she says. “Want some? They’re just salt and vinegar.” Mac shakes his head.

Riley pulls up video feed from some fancy event, and starts comparing it to a set of dossiers filling her screen. “There’s our man. Kendrick was at the gala.” Riley sighs. “That doesn’t help us track him though.”

“His watch,” Mac says without thinking.

“What?” Jack asks.

“Zoom in on his watch.” Mac glances at the dial. “He’s set it nine hours ahead. West coast US is nine hours ahead of Lake Como.” Jack and Riley are staring at him. What? Not everyone memorized the world time zones as a kid? Okay, that was a joke...I was a geeky middle schooler.

“So whoever he’s meeting is somewhere in that zone.” Riley does something. “I’m scanning all image feeds from any device connected to the internet in that time zone.” Impressive. She sits back, then jumps. “There. He’s in San Francisco.” She types rapidly. “And there’s another one of our buyers from Como who just came in at the airport. Benjamin Chen.”

“Nice sheet,” Mac says. This guy’s on multiple terror watchlists and he’s got a very, very big grudge against the US of A. Of course.

“So the deal is going down now?” Thornton asks. “That’s less time than we anticipated.”

“It’s a live feed. I can track him,” Riley says.


“And me?” Mac asks.

“We haven’t had time to fully vet you. This is a very, very high priority mission and I’m not putting you in the field with one of my teams until I’m certain you won’t turn on them.”

“You said it yourself, he’s our best chance,” Riley says. “And Cage cleared him.” She glances at Jack. “You keep complaining that we’re all gonna die anyway going after this thing, so why don’t we just take him?” Mac didn’t honestly expect the girl to stand up for him. No one does that. Not anymore.

“Well, if you’re all ‘going to die anyway’,,” Thornton says sarcastically, “you have nine minutes to
catch your plane.”

The jet is nice. As in billionaire playboy private jet kind of nice. When you’re used to four grey walls and a metal bunk, this is crazy.

“We can’t take you out on the streets in that jumpsuit,” Riley says. She grabs a large black duffel bag from under a chair. “I don’t think any of my clothes would fit you,” she smirks, “But you and Jack might be similar enough.”

She pulls out a worn Metallica t-shirt and a pair of jeans. “You’re a little shorter and thinner than Jack, but it’s got to be better than orange.”

Mac takes the clothes with a grateful smile. He’s more than ready to get rid of anything that reminds him of the supermax. I don’t care if these don’t fit at all.

SAN FRANCISCO

HOPEFULLY NO ONE IS LEAVING THEIR HEARTS ...OR BIOWEAPONS... HERE.

The hotel Riley’s tracked Kendrick to is massive. Riley’s running her facial rec software on the cameras, but this hotel uses hard-copy booking, and they haven’t joined the 21st century yet. She can’t find out what room Kendrick is in. He probably knew that when he chose the place.

She’s not sure what she’ll do when she finds the man. She wants to put a bullet through his chest like he did to Nick, but Patty gave standing orders to bring anyone they can in alive. They know next to nothing about this “Organization”, and damn, Angus was right, we need a better name for them, and having one of their operatives alive for Sam to interrogate would be a major breakthrough.

Thinking of Sam makes Riley’s gaze stray to Angus. He’s jittery and looks like a child in Jack’s slightly too-large clothes. She said he wasn’t a threat, and I believe her. Riley thought, from the minute she saw him in the holding room, that he wasn’t dangerous. But that can be a liability out here in the field.

Riley remembers the first time she killed a man, the guilt and pain she’d felt over it. But I had Jack to help me cope. He had to live two years with the thought that he might have killed a man, and it was killing him. She’d seen the unbelievable desperation in his eyes when she said they might be able to prove his innocence. It wasn’t just that he wanted to get out of there. It was that he wanted to know he wasn’t a murderer.

The thing is, nice guys like that don’t make it long out here. Riley knows that. Jack knows that. Nick learned the hard way. I don’t want to lose someone else on my watch. Riley wouldn’t ever say she’s a cold-blooded killer, but she’s done what she had to do to save lives. Innocent lives. If it came right down to it, would he freeze?

Her computer pings, there’s a match. Coming in, not leaving. “Kendrick’s here. But we’d have to search the whole hotel room by room. Unless you can charm Kendrick’s room number out of the grump, overweight man working the front desk, Jack.”

“Not happening.”

Angus speaks up for the first time. “I think I might be able to help. We don’t need to go to him. We can make him come to us.”
They’re all crammed inside the janitorial closet Mac broke into (with Jack’s visible disapproval) and Mac is grabbing things off shelves and dumping them into a mop bucket.

“Whoa whoa whoa Carl’s Jr., what are you cooking up there?” Jack asks, glancing into the slightly smoking pail. “That’s not gonna blow us all to kingdom come, is it?”

“It’s harmless. Muriatic acid, ammonia and tinfoil make a lot of smoke and no other byproducts. Where there’s smoke, this time, there isn’t fire. Just our missing virus and our evil goon.” Mac grins. He shoves the pail under the fire alarm and it begins to blare.

*You know how I said I was a geeky middle schooler? I was also the middle schooler who broke into the janitor closets and did stuff like this to get out of Mrs. Raffton’s fifth period English class. Guess I was always destined for a life of crime.*

The three of them spread out along the hotel balcony, watching the guests evacuate. The piercing blare of the fire alarm and the chaos of moving people make Mac nervous. He’s been in one riot and it was one riot too many. His hand brushes the scar on his stomach unconsciously. He’d spent two weeks in the infirmary thanks to some other inmate’s improvised knife.

He’s starting to feel a bit like he might pass out, but he can’t do that. He can’t afford to panic right now. If he messes this up for everyone they’ll send him back.

*Not that they won’t once this is over.* He doesn’t for a minute believe they’ll keep him. *It’s all an act to make me cooperate. I know better than to trust them.* But he might be able to think of a way out…

He should run now, while the hotel is in chaos. He’s in civilian clothes, and it would be a matter of seconds for him to disable the tether on his ankle that’s keeping tabs on his location. *I could disappear. Go somewhere new. Start over.* Now that he’s pretty sure he didn’t kill George Ramsay, he doesn’t feel guilty about wanting to run away from the past and the prison.

He feels slightly guilty about leaving these people, because while Jack may not like him Riley defended him. She might have even trusted him. *But that can only last so long. Everyone gets tired of me after a while.*

He’s about to slip into the chaos of the crowd when he hears Riley gasp. “Nick?”

Riley feels like she’s had another bullet rip through her chest. “Nick?” The young man below her glances up, and there’s no mistaking that face. It’s burned into Riley’s brain after she watched him fall over a guardrail to his death.

Except that now he’s here, in a hotel in San Francisco, standing next to the man who shot him. And then he runs.

Riley flings herself toward the staircase, shoving through the crowd of evacuating people. “Jack! Jack!” She shouts, and she can hear him yelling her name but there’s no time to stop. Riley’s heart is pounding, her legs are shaking. *What the hell is happening? How is Nick alive? Why is he with Kendrick?*

She crashes through a door into an alleyway just in time to see Nick getting into a car. He glances back at her once, and then Kendrick slams the door, the vehicle pulls away, and Kendrick turns and fires at her. Riley runs, but there’s a wall on each side of her and a chain-link fence in front. And Kendrick is coming fast. She glances at the fire escape beside her and there’s a one in ten chance she can pull this one off.
“Looks like our little game of hide and seek ends right here, Agent Davis,” Kendrick says, smiling evilly as he closes in. And then Riley’s using the rungs of the fire escape to launch herself at him. Her foot cracks squarely against his chin and he goes down before he has a chance to even realize she’s coming for him.

Jack bursts out of the door behind her, one hand on his gun, one dragging a frustrated and chagrined Angus along by the shirt collar. *Didn’t trust him enough to leave him by himself*. “What the hell just happened?”

“It was Nick. He’s alive.” Riley glares down at the unconscious Kendrick. “And maybe he can tell us how.”

Fifteen minutes later, Kendrick is tied up in the back of their van and Jack’s standing over him with a nail gun and a murderous look.

“Listen, you piece of shit, you hurt my friend here and I want nothing more than to kill you slowly and painfully. So if you don’t tell me what I want to know, that’s what’s gonna happen, you got it?” Kendrick glares at him.

Outside the van, Angus is standing with his hands in his pockets, shuffling, clearly uncomfortable with Jack’s aggressive display. And then Jack drives a nail into the floor of the van between Kendrick’s legs, and both Angus and Kendrick wince.

“It’s too late,” Kendrick laughs, the sound bubbling around the broken teeth and blood courtesy of Riley’s kick. “You’re too late to stop any of it.”

“Why is Nick Carpenter working with you? What did you do to make him cooperate with you? What did you threaten him with?” Riley snaps.

“Oh honey, you’ve got no idea what’s going on here. Threaten him?” Kendrick laughs again. “Try bribe. There’s a bank account set up for him under the alias Dennis Sullivan in the Caymans. Check it. You’ll find five million dollars there. Paid four months ago.” Kendrick’s bloody smile is unnerving.

“So the shot at Como was a blank.”

“He insisted on faking his death. Wanted to disappear quietly.”

“And me?”

“He wanted you unharmed. But he understood things might get messy. He was ready to accept a few casualties.” Riley feels a bottomless pit opening below her feet, and anything else Kendrick says is drowned out in a rush of blood in her ears. *Some casualties. To him, I was an acceptable loss.*

“Where is he going?” Jack’s cold fury seeps into every word.

“Like I’d tell you.” Riley’s computer pings and she glances at it.

“Did you get what you need?” Jack asks.

Riley nods. “Every phoneme in the English language.” Jack pulls out a roll of duct tape and slaps a piece of it over Kendrick’s mouth.

She pulls a phone out of his pocket. The only number on it is a “Dennis Sullivan”. Riley dials it and almost throws the phone across the van when Nick’s voice answers.
“I told you not to call unless it was important.”

Riley types frantically and the computer recreates Kendrick’s voice. “I took care of your friends. They won’t be giving us any more trouble.”

“Good. Don’t call me again. I’ll see you in New York.” There’s a low rumble Riley can hear before the phone cuts out.

“I couldn’t track it. Voice over routed through a cloaked IP. He’s somewhere in the city but I’ve got nothing beyond that.”

“What about the engines?” Angus asks. “There were airplane engines in the background. He was at an airport.”

Jack chimes in. “That wasn’t large jet engines. Those were small planes. A private airstrip or something.” Jack knows planes. He did a deep cover as a smuggler in El Salvador for six months, before I met him. Has a license and everything. He still has the “Fly By Night Air Service” sign from his hangar in his apartment.

“There’s one in San Carlos. About ten minutes away,” Riley says after consulting the all-knowing Google Maps. “I’m calling Patty now. She’ll ground all flights.”

There’s nothing more to be said. Jack guns the van, and Angus and Riley sit in the back with the again-unconscious Kendrick (Jack knocked him out before he drove off, and Riley can tell he wanted to do more than pistol-whip the man). Riley’s typing frantically, and Angus looks more than a bit shaken.

Jack can be a bit much sometimes. Okay, a lot much. But he’s just a papa bear. Kendrick hurt me, or he’d never have done half of that.

“Jack would never hurt any of us,” Riley says softly. Angus is actually shaking slightly. “I promise.”

“He doesn’t seem very fond of me.”

“He wasn’t fond of me at first either. But he would have taken a bullet for me from the day he was assigned to be my handler.” Angus just shrugs. And then Jack crashes the van through a gate and they can see a small plane about to take off.

Quicker than Riley can see, Angus has removed his ankle tether, flung open the supposedly locked van door, and is racing across the airstrip toward the retreating plane. There’s no way he’s going to be able to catch up...is there?

Jack hollers a curse, slams the steering wheel, and jumps out, but the kid’s shockingly fast and he’s not stopping anytime soon. Just before the plane takes off, he grabs the landing gear and is carried off with it.

“Where do you think Mr. Wizard’s going?” Riley asks, concern twisting her stomach. This would be the perfect chance for him to run. To disappear. I’m sure the Organization would love to get their hands on someone with his skills.

“Hopefully, to stop that plane,” Jack says. “If it’s anything else I’ll hunt him down and kill him myself.”

The jet banks into the sky, and Riley sighs. It’s all in his hands now.
There are very few things I’m afraid of, after everything I’ve seen. One of them is definitely heights. A very big one.

Mac’s currently clinging to the landing gear and wondering why he’s here.

Once I help them end this, they’ll send me straight back to prison for sure now, after I ran off like that. And here I am trying to help them catch their traitor agent before he gets away for good, and blowing my own chances of staying a free man in the process.

So he’s not sure why he’s risking his life, hanging hundreds of feet above the ground and terrified. He’s got to be crazy. His hands are sweaty, slipping on the metal.

I have to get inside or I’m going to fall. He’s shaking, freezing up. He catches his feet on the door to the landing gear and braces himself. Okay, step one done. Not currently quite as likely to fall and die. Now all I need to do is figure out a way to make this plane stop and land again.

Now he can see the electronics for the landing gear, and the hydraulics. He yanks a few wires out, and that should handle the automatic retraction, but he’s still got to disable the manual releases.

This would be a lot easier with my knife. Mac forces his numb, shaky fingers to start detaching the hydraulic line. He has to lean out away from the safety of the door he’s standing on, and the sight of the rapidly disappearing ground is unnerving.

Don’t look down. Then the hose comes loose, a spray of hydraulic fluid spatters his hands and Jack’s shirt, hope he doesn’t hate me for ruining it, and the plane begins to bank back toward the runway.

As soon as the wheels touch ground, Mac flings himself out of the plane, rolling painfully on the runway. He drags himself to his feet and runs toward the plane’s door, where Riley and Jack are already.

Why did you do that? Any of that? For them? He barely knows those two. Their cause has nothing to do with him. And yeah, maybe they’re trying to stop a supervirus that could kill everyone, but honestly at this point he’ll take his chances. Why am I not running away? And he still follows them into the plane.

Jack wants to put a bullet straight through Nick Carpenter’s skull. Honestly I wish the guy had actually been dead. It would have been better than this. Because right now that traitor has a gun to his baby girl’s head, and looks like he has every intention of pulling the trigger.

“If you want to shoot Jack, you’re going to have to go through me,” Riley says. “You already had me shot once. Shouldn’t be a big deal, right?”

Nick sighs. His finger’s on the trigger, and Jack’s internally begging Riley to move, even just a little, give him a clear headshot. He hears the hamburger kid come in behind him, but he doesn’t have time to focus on the guy right now.

And then Nick puts the gun down and hands it over. Jack sighs. He takes the gun from Riley but doesn’t tuck it in the back of his jeans like he usually would. Don’t trust Carl’s Jr. not to put one in my back if the opportunity presents itself. He’s honestly a little surprised the guy hasn’t run yet. We haven’t exactly kept him on a ball and chain.

“Why? Nick, why?” Riley’s voice is a strangled, betrayed whisper.

“Sometimes, it’s necessary to do hard things to make the world a better place. You used to believe
“Don’t pretend this was about ideology. This was about the money,” Riley says. “Kendrick already told us everything.” She bites her lip and stares at him. “Was everything a lie?”

“No.” Nick has at least the decency to look a bit ashamed. “We weren’t.”

“Yes, we were. You lied to me! I thought you died doing something good!” There’s so much pain in Riley’s voice. I want to kill him for what he did to her. She didn’t deserve it. Riley deserved so much better.

“I was never the hero. That was always your job, Riley.”

She turns away, and Jack sees the tears in her eyes.

“Where’s the virus?” Jack asks.

“Tear this plane apart,” Riley snaps coldly, as she begins patting Nick down. Jack starts working, and so does the hamburger kid. He’s surprisingly smart about where something could be hidden in the plane’s compartments.

Suddenly Riley stops. “It’s not here, is it?” She’s watching Nick’s face closely. “He’s not nervous. He already sold it.”

Five minutes later they’re outside, on a video call with Patty.

“So Nick’s alive and Chen and the virus are in the wind. Yeah, I know, this is bad,” Jack says.

“Bad? Jack, Bad is when you accidentally run over your neighbor’s dog! This is a disaster of Biblical proportions!” Patty’s fear is visible. “We have no idea where Chen is going to release the virus.”

“Yes we do,” Carl’s Jr. pipes up. “It’s going to be right here in San Francisco.”

“How do you know?” Patty asks.

“Dennis Sullivan was the San Francisco fire chief at the time of the 1906 earthquake. He died in the quake and so when the fires began the firefighters had no real authority to keep the situation in hand.”

Jack stares at him. How does this guy know so much random information?

Riley marches over to Nick. “It’s here, isn’t it?”

“No. His target is Tokyo.” Nick glares back at her.

“Nice try. Remember, you taught me everything about spotting lies in interrogation?” Riley snaps. “You trained me too well.”

“I suggest you all get out of here.” Nick says, shrugging. “You might stand a chance if you’re not in the immediate infection zone.”

“No one is going anywhere,” Jack snaps. “Especially not you.” Half of him wants to release the virus himself just to watch this traitor suffer. A bullet to the head is too fast and easy a death for
someone who did what he did to my girl.

Riley’s already hacking airport security cams. “The drop was here.” She’s pulling up images of a canvas-backed truck. “Chen drove toward the city. I think there’s still time to catch him.”

They commandeer a helicopter and Riley gets in beside Jack while they put the hamburger kid in back, cuffed to the handrail. They could have left him with Nick and the DXS tac team, but Jack has a funny feeling that he doesn’t want to let this guy out of his sight.

They fly over a small hill and there’s the truck, on the highway, headed for the city.

Riley climbs out of the chopper and drops onto the canvas back of the truck with her usual catlike grace. She slashes through it and drops inside, and bends down next to whatever’s inside.

“Jack, it’s worse than we thought. He’s gonna use an IED to send the virus airborne. It’ll kill millions.” Riley starts pulling apart something Jack figures is the bomb when he sees two guys climb out of the cab and start making their way back toward her.

“Riles, you might wanna hurry this up. You’ve got company.” She turns just as one of the men drops inside, and lands a decent kick before the other guy’s nearly on top of her. Through the large tear in the top Jack can see her taking on the two goons at once. One of them flies out the back in a few moments.

The other one is bigger, and he manages to sweep Riley’s legs from under her and pin her to the ground, hand on her throat. And then she flips up, impossibly fast, and her legs are around his neck. Jack grins, he taught her that move after she almost bought it in Cairo.

I wasn’t gonna see her get that close to dead again. He tries not to think about her pale face, the bluish lips, the way she wouldn’t breathe no matter what he did. That was four years ago. She’s not gonna end up like that today.

Riley kicks the guy out the side of the truck and then turns to the bomb.

“How’s it lookin’ down there, kiddo?” Jack asks.

“Like you might wanna get outta here,” Riley mutters. She’s following the wires with her fingers, muttering to herself.

“No way. It’s you and me, kid. I’m with you to the end of the line, remember?” She loves that cheesy line from Captain America. Mostly because she insists Jack is old enough to be Captain America, but still.

“There’s a lot of dummy wires here, Jack. You know how they tell you, at the Farm, how to decide between red and blue? These are all green. If I cut the wrong one it goes off right now.” She bends down, traces them again, and then clips one. There’s a sudden beeping through the comms. “Shit. It’s got two minutes on the timer and it just started.”

Angus reaches up from the back of the chopper to grab Jack’s arm, and Jack jumps and the helicopter sways a little. So help me if he tries to tell me to fly out of here I’m gonna knock him out cold. “I don’t have time for this, kid! I told you we might all die on this one, and I’m not leavin’ my girl here to save your skinny ass.”

Angus looks hurt, but there’s a hell of a lot of determination in his eyes too. “I can help her!”

“You know how to defuse an IED?” When the hell would he possibly have learned that?
“Please, just trust me! She's running out of time!”

Jack tosses the kid the handcuff keys. *What do we have to lose?* He’s not sure why, but something is telling him Carl’s Jr. here is trustworthy. And Jack has learned after two decades in the field to trust his gut on these kind of things.

Jack watches the kid jump down into the truck. *Bring my girl back alive.*

Riley’s heard the whole conversation over comms and doesn’t even flinch when Angus drops in beside her.

“What are you thinking?” She glances his way. “Because I’m not seeing a way this ends well.”

“We don't have time to defuse it. But maybe we can get the canister out.” Angus pulls one of his bent paperclips out of his pocket, and slips it into the rig holding the canister. The vial pops free, and Riley shoves it in her jacket.

“We have thirty seconds left!” *Yeah, we got the virus out. But that’s not gonna do anyone any good if we get blown up anyway.*

“I need your knife!” Riley doesn’t hesitate. *We’re gonna die anyway, right?* He rips out a section of the canvas, then attaches some of the tiedowns, all faster than Riley can even follow. “Hold onto me. Don’t let go!”

She does, and he kicks off from the floor, the makeshift parachute billowing over them. They fly out the back of the truck and Riley has just enough time to think, *dang this is cool, like the kind of James Bond cool I was expecting when I joined the CIA,* and then they hit the road and it’s way less cool.

Riley thinks her knees and elbows have a pretty decent case of road rash, but she didn’t land as hard as Angus. He came down first and she’s pretty sure when she fell on him she heard a rib crack.

Still, he rolls over to shield her with his own body just as the truck explodes. Burning shrapnel flies past them and Riley cringes. There’s a massive roaring in her ears and then, as it fades, she hears sirens and the slowing whip of helicopter blades.

She looks up to see Jack running toward them.

“Riley! You okay?”

“I will be.” She stands up, then frantically checks the canister in her jacket. No cracks, no leaks. All secure. She leans down to give Angus a hand to his feet, and he straightens up with one hand on his ribs.

“How you holdin’ up, Carl’s Jr.?” Jack asks. “Nice work back there, man.” It’s the closest Jack will get to thanking the kid for saving her. Because if he hadn’t been there, Riley would be blown to bits and the virus would have been unleashed on San Francisco.

She can hear the sirens getting closer, and Angus looks near-terrified. *Right. Last time something blew up around him he went to a supermax for two years.* “Let’s go, yeah? I don’t really want to explain to the cops why three people, one of whom is still on charges of domestic terrorism, are standing around an exploded IED with a canister of deadly virus.”

They all climb into the helicopter; Patty will sort things out with the authorities. Riley sits in the back, next to Angus, and as they take off she reaches for his still-shaking hand.
“Thank you for saving my life.” He smiles, just a little. *I like his smile. And I’d like to see it more often.*

Mac steps out of the car dropping him off at his house, feeling the odd, off-balance weight of the new ankle tether he’s been fitted with. Riley’s work, and supposedly tamper-proof, although if he wanted to he could probably take it off in about ten minutes.

*I really didn’t think this was going to happen.* He’d been fully expecting to be taken back to prison as soon as the chopper landed at DXS. After all, he removed his tether, disobeyed orders to stay with the team at all times, and was incredibly reckless. Yes, they saved the world, but people like Thornton tend not to like people like him who color outside the lines.

Instead, she greeted him with a frown and a new tether band. “I hear I have you to thank for preventing the apocalypse.” She took the canister from Riley. “Agent Davis tells me separating the canister from the IED was your idea.”

“There wasn’t time to risk anything else.”

“Still, it was an impressive display of thinking outside the box.” Thornton glanced at the others. “And that’s something we at the DXS put a high value on, whether it’s in our think tank operations or our field personnel. That doesn’t mean you’ll be given license to go off script whenever you want on missions, but it does mean that you’ll be accepted, with probationary status, as a member of this field team.” He could feel Jack’s groan and Riley’s smile. *I think I could learn to work with them. If Jack ever warms up to me. And stops making jokes about my name.*

He hasn’t been home in almost three years, and looking at the house, he feels a strange mixture of pain and happiness.

_After my dad left, I moved to LA to live with Grandpa Harry. Which is where most of the stuff that happened to me, good and bad, started._

LA is where Mac met Wilt Bozer, where Grandpa died, where Bozer’s little brother got shot. Where Mac tried to make a difference and ended up almost ruining his own life.

This was his grandpa’s house. He knows where the spare key is. But he knocks anyway.

“If you’re soliciting votes for mayor again, I already told you…” Bozer yanks open the door, cook’s hat askew and apron half-tied.

“Mac?”

“Hey Boze.”

They have a lot of catching up to do. And even less time than Bozer, who has to leave for work in half an hour, realizes. Mac’s new team is arriving any minute.

When the doorbell rings, he answers it, and Riley and Jack step through, followed by Thornton, who looks only slightly less severe with her hair down. She gives a pointed look at the tether still blinking on his ankle, and then a small nod of approval.

Mac introduces them, as agreed, to Bozer as Roger Preston, Dana Baumann, and Riley Daniels. All supposedly members of the legal defense team working to clear his name. Bozer immediately tries to flirt with Riley, but she shuts him down fast. So fast Mac can see that Bozer’s already thinking of ways to get on her good side. *He likes a challenge.*
“I’ve gotta go to work. I’ll catch you all later.” As soon as Bozer leaves, Thornton turns to the others.

“I’m afraid this isn’t just going to be a celebration of a job well done. I’ve been informed by Oversight that the DXS will have to disband. What Carpenter did exposed our covert operations and put us at risk. Effective twenty-four hundred hours we’re shutting down all operations and migrating all personnel.”

Mac shudders. *Without them employing me, without their resources put into proving I’m innocent, I’ll have to go back.* The others can all move on, find new jobs, new agencies. But Mac will be right back where he started. *I should have known better than to hope something good was about to happen.* And he’s just been getting used to the idea of life outside those walls again.

Thornton continues as if she didn’t just crumble his world in those few words. “We’ll be rebuilding from the ground up. A new cover, and a new name. And you’ll get to pick it.”

Mac hears Jack joke that it should be “The Three Amigos,” and he feels a sudden jolt of something unfamiliar. *Three? Does that mean I’m still part of the team?*

“Jack, that’s three men,” Riley says.

“Brush up on your Spanish!” Jack laughs. “Okay, what about Thunderstallions?”

Mac can’t help the small, half-hysterical laugh. *That’s ridiculous.*

“Why don’t you pick, Angus?” Riley asks. *Okay. Now I know for sure I have to be staying.*

It’s still taking a minute for the idea that they’d keep him, even when they didn’t have to, to process. *If they wanted to, they could have let my deal die with the old agency. This new one isn’t bound to honor any of the agreement. But they want me. They actually really want me.* He brushes a hand across his face to hide the probably visible tears. *Come on, it’s not worth getting that emotional about.* “I thought...I thought now that the DXS was gone I’d have to go back.”

“We’re not going to give up on you that easy, Carl’s Jr.” Jack hands him a box. “I think you’ve earned this.” Mac opens it and gasps. Inside is a thick red Swiss Army Knife. “You saved a lot of people out there with nothing more than your wits and a paperclip, and I think it’s pretty safe to trust you with this thing. If you wanted us dead you’d have let that bomb go off.” He’s smiling, and Mac realizes he’s actually joking a little. *Progress.*

“Wait,” Riley says, and there’s a spark in her eyes. “Why don’t we call it the Phoenix?”

Mac stares. *Seriously? You want to name our entire new agency after my old code name?*

“In the myths, the Phoenix rose from the ashes of its death stronger than ever,” Riley continues. “I think it’s more than fitting.”

“I’ll drink to that,” Jack says. “Hey Carl’s Jr., got any beer in this house?”

Mac grins as he walks to the fridge. *Rising from the ashes. Leaving the pain and mistakes in the past. I like the sound of that.*

Miles away, Nick Carpenter sits in the back of a secure transport, on the way to the Box. But he knows he’s never going to get there. He carefully twists two wires out of the band of his watch and sets to work on his cuffs. *The job isn’t over yet.*
“I’m out of bullets, Jack!” Riley yells.

“So am I, darlin’!” Jack shouts back. I’ve been out since at least ten miles ago. He’s not having a good day right now and a screaming headache from getting whacked over the head by their latest target is Not. Helping. “How much farther, Patty?”

“Two and a half miles left, Dalton. We need that asset alive.” He can hear the stress in her voice. That woman must dye her hair because the way she worries she’s gotta have more grey than me.

“And us too, right?”

“Don’t get insecure on us now, Jack,” Riley half-jokes, even as the jeeps full of guys who really want to kill them swerve into view behind them again.

“Okay, Carl’s Jr., if you’ve got some trick up your sleeve this would be the time to do it!” Jack yells.

“I’m working on it!” The kid’s wrangling around in the backseat with a bag of fertilizer and some kind of tubing, and a couple empty soda bottles. I’ve seen a lotta strange things in the backseat of a car. Hopefully this one gets us outta here alive.

Jack glances in the rearview mirror when he smells gasoline. The kid’s wiping his mouth on his sleeve and using the tube to siphon some kind of liquid into those bottles. He musta put a line into the fuel tank from back there.

“Hey, I kinda need some of that go-go juice to drive!”

“I’m not gonna use it all!” The kid snaps, then flinches, like he thinks Jack’s gonna get madder. “I need it if we wanna get those guys off our tail.”

“Whatever you’re doing, do it fast!” Riley yells as a spray of bullets peppers the back of the car, which has been armored with pieces of other cars courtesy of the hamburger genius kid.

“I’m doing it!” the kid kicks out something he put over the rear passenger window and leans out. Riley reaches over the seat to grab his belt because it kinda looks like the kid’s about to fall all the way out. He’s got half his body through there. Jack sees him flinch and glance at her, and then shake his head.

He flings one of the bottles and Jack hears a very loud explosion. “Hoo yeah! Did it work?” He asks.

“I think it just pissed them off!” Riley yells, flinching as more bullets strafe the car. Jack hears the kid yelp, but he can’t tell if Carl’s Jr.’s just scared or if he’s been hit. There’s another dull explosion, one Jack can see is off to the side of the road.

“You missed!”
“It’s kinda hard to aim when you’re swerving all over the road!” The kid yells as he slithers back through the window, face white, the shoulder of his shirt turning red. *Aw shit.*

“You got any more of those?” Riley asks.

“Nope, last one.”

Jack half-turns around. “You only brought one bag of fertilizer?”

“It was all they had!”

“Boys, stop yelling!” Riley has a hand to her comms, probably trying to hear Patty on the other end. “The DMZ is just past this turn! And it looks like border guards know we’re coming in hot!”

Jack can see the concrete blocks up ahead. And a lot of guys with guns aimed at them. “How are we gonna bust through that roadblock?”

And then a bloodied hand comes out of nowhere and grabs at the steering wheel. The car starts spinning around, pointing them back in the direction of the guys shooting at them.

“What are you doing?” Jack yells. “Let go of the wheel! We wanna go the other way, genius!”

“I’m improvising!” The kid yells. “Put it in reverse!”

“Do it!” Riley yells, then ducks, gasping, as bullets shatter the windshield and spray them all with broken glass. Jack does, and then they’re barreling backward at the heavy concrete, apparently counting on the armored rear end to survive the collision.

“Hang on, this is gonna suck!” the kid yells.

“It already sucks!” There’s a jarring smash, the kid gasps and yelps again, and then the car groans to a stop.

Jack hears the all too familiar sound of guns clicking, and someone yells, “Exit the vehicle” in Korean. *Granpappy was stationed over here in the fifties. Picked up a lotta useful phrases from him.* Jack vaguely wonders what the man would think if he could see that everyone’s still fighting over this place. He climbs out, and he hears Riley and the hamburger kid doing the same thing.

“I’m Jack Dalton, U.S. government operative, and this is Agent Riley Davis and...um...well, I call him Carl’s Jr. but he’s got a real name, it’s just stupid.”

“Jack…” the kid mutters.

“Just call the American Embassy and they’ll explain everything,” Riley cuts in. And then there’s a thumping from the trunk and the slightly lowered guns go right back up. Jack nods to one of the southern border soldiers and the guy walks over and opens the trunk, dragging out a tall, skinny guy with several tattoos who’s yelling a lot of random curses. *Yeah, most of what Granpappy taught me was stuff like that. So I could say it and Mom couldn’t know to whoop my ass for it.*

“That’s Python,” Jack says. “He’s got a real name too, but his I can’t pronounce. He kinda tried to melt down your nuclear reactors a while ago? And he’s into all kinds of cyber terrorism stuff.”

“Like hacking your military mainframe and stealing millions from your national bank,” Riley chimes in, handing over a hard drive. “All his codes and downloaded information is on this.” The guards take the hard drive and then point their guns not at Jack and team, but at the guys from the jeeps on
the other side. Outmanned, the North Koreans get in their vehicles and drive away.

Jack sees Carl’s Jr. tug at the bloodsoaked cloth on his arm, hissing softly when he pulls it away from his wound. *Damn, kid, that’s a lot of blood.* Jack reaches for him and the kid pulls back, watching Jack warily.

“It only grazed me. I’ll take care of it.”

“The hell you will,” Jack says, and then realizes that was the wrong thing to say because the kid just flinches more. “Aw man, I didn’t mean it like that, I just mean you don’t have to patch yourself up. Riley and I got you.” *I may not like the kid but I’m sure as hell not gonna let him bleed to death on my watch.*

Riley nods. “Okay, let’s follow them and I’ll take a look at this once we’re on our way to exfil, okay?” The kid nods slowly and they walk across the border together.

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**NICK CARPENTER’S APARTMENT**

**FINALLY NOT A GUARDED CRIME SCENE ANYMORE**

Riley has been sneaking into people’s houses since she was eight. *This is even easier than Mr. Forrest’s house. I’ve even got a key.*

Nick Carpenter’s apartment looks the same as every other time she’s been here, except that now it’s covered in those little yellow numbered tags. Riley’s seen a lot of them over the years, even in places she called home, but seeing them here is still a little jarring.

She walks slowly across the room to the kitchen counter, where there’s a picture of her and Nick in Kosovo. It was one of the few ops where they had limited enough bruises to take a nice picture together.

*Yeah, I know. Breaking into your ex’s apartment and searching it is pretty weird. Even for a spy. But I promise I’m not harboring any thoughts of fixing Nick. I just want to find him and put him behind bars where he belongs.*

She’s going through the drawers of his desk when someone else opens the door. Riley startles guiltily and sighs when Jack walks in.

“How did you find me?” Riley asks.

Cage steps into the room as well. “It wasn’t that hard, Riley. You have a key to his apartment, and you disappear for hours every time you come home from an op. And I know you’re not running because you don’t come home smiling like you do when you run.”

“Damn it. I had to have a mind reader as a roommate.” Riley sighs. Cage gives her the signature sorry-not-sorry shrug.

“Seriously, though, Ri, this isn’t healthy.” Jack crosses the room to her. “He’s not comin’ back.”

“I know that, Jack,” Riley sighs. “I’m trying to find a way to track him down.”

“You know we’ve got agents on the ground looking for him. We’ll get him back in custody.”

“I know him better than anyone,” Riley says softly, picking up another photo, this one from Bangkok. “Or at least I thought I did.”
“He was good at faking,” Cage says. “I didn’t know him, but I’ve seen the footage of him on ops. He could make anyone believe anything. He might even have fooled me.”

Riley gives the interrogator a lopsided grin. “Yeah, rub your human lie detector skills in my face now, why don’t you.”

“Just saying,” Cage replies.

“Yeah, she’s right, kiddo,” Jack says. “I might not have liked that you two were a thing, but I thought he was a stand-up guy. I really did. I trusted him.” He sighs. “And not a day goes by that I don’t ask myself why I didn’t see it, whether I coulda stopped you getting hurt. So I get this whole obsessive need for answers. But at some point you gotta move on.” He puts his hands on her shoulders and sighs. “You gotta make your peace with it. No one can change the past. All we can do is go forward.”

“Yeah.” Riley sighs, feeling defeat weighing her shoulders down.

“Hey, I’m gonna go down and wait in the car. If you want, I can pick up a pizza and swing by your place and we can watch Die Hard.”

“Just because that’s your go-to cheering up method doesn’t mean it’s mine,” Riley says and feels herself smiling in spite of the hurt. “I’ll be fine. Really.”

Jack leaves, but Sam stays in the apartment, turning over a box on the end table and looking at it, then glancing around the room. “If you want, I can help you look for anything the site techs could have missed.”

“Thanks, Sam, but Jack’s right. I’ve gotta let it go.” Riley sighs. “I can’t let him keep holding my life hostage when he’s not even here.” She shuts the desk drawer with finality.

“Oh, no investigations. Closure is good. But if you need to talk, I’m always here.” Cage smiles. “You’re not alone, Riley. I promise.”


“I’ll have some burgers and Cooper’s waiting when you get back.” Sam grins. She’s a self proclaimed wicked good cook, and she lives up to her reputation. Riley’s never met anyone who was as good at using the possibly slightly illegal barbecue grill on their third-floor balcony. She checks the phone screen again.

I didn’t really want to go back to Caracas, but hey...It’s the life.

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PAROLE OFFICER’S OFFICE

NOT THE MOST FUN PLACE TO SPEND A FRIDAY MORNING BUT IT BEATS A CELL

“Mr. MacGyver, I’m Lance Hammond, I’ll be your parole officer until the court determines you are no longer in need of one.” Mac shifts, the pressure of his ankle tether an uncomfortable permanent reminder of why he’s here.

“You’re certainly an interesting case. Domestic terrorism and murder charges, and yet you’ve got a
conditional release to be working for a think tank. The Phoenix Foundation.”

“Yes?” Mac doesn’t know where this is going but the sound of it isn’t great.

“Help me out here. I’m just trying to understand why a think tank wanted to hire you.”

“Maybe they liked my creativity?” Mac hedges. *I can’t tell him they actually appreciate the fact that I enjoy making things that blow up.*

Hammond shrugs, he doesn’t really seem all that interested in Mac’s life. *He just wants me to be another good mark on the statistics. Another reformed ex-con. That’s how everyone sees me. I’m not a person, I’m a label.* Mac may not be wearing an orange jumpsuit anymore, but the second anyone finds out what he was, they look at him just the same way they did whenever he was out on work details around civilians.

*I’m never going to not have that stain on me. No matter how much good I do, no matter where I go, I’m still always going to be the guy who was in prison.* He knows he’s lucky to have the job at the Phoenix. Finding work anywhere else would be nearly impossible. His record is ruined for life.

“I trust since your release you haven’t left the Los Angeles city limits?” Mac thinks about the gunshot graze he’s still sporting from North Korea and shakes his head.

“I assume you haven’t gone near anything that could be used as an explosive?” *Gasoline and fertilizer; crude but effective.*

“No.”

“And you haven’t touched any alcohol?”

“Not a drop.” *’I’ll drink to that. Got any beer in that fridge?’* Jack laughs.

“I’ve already interviewed your roommate, he seems to be a good influence.”

Boze drove Mac in, since Mac’s not legally allowed to drive right now and Bozer was already going to get something he needs to make new prosthetic masks for his attempts at becoming an independent filmmaker. So far, it’s not going that great, aside from the fact that his masks are even better quality than the ones he made when they were in high school, but the guy’s optimistic and Mac’s happy for him. *Maybe if I hadn’t shut him out, after everything with Pena, I wouldn’t have gotten caught and I wouldn’t be here now.* He’s pretty sure Bozer’s skill with masks is the only thing that kept him out of jail as the Phoenix when he was starting out.

Bozer can’t know about the job as a secret agent, for his own safety. *I learned the hard way that getting other people involved in this kind of life is dangerous.* Mac explains away bruises and other injuries saying he’s keeping up his parkour. Bozer doesn’t ask much, but he has said if Mac ever needs a mask, to come to him. *He probably thinks I’m still doing vigilante work on the side, even though I promised him those days were over. I can’t blame him really; the last time I told him that it was a lie, and he had to watch me get cuffed and shoved in a cop car.*

Bozer’s had enough hurt in his life already. He doesn’t need Mac bringing more trouble. *But it’s nice to live with him again.* Bozer is one of the few things from Mac’s past that doesn’t just hurt. *I know he feels responsible for what happened. Since it was his brother and all. But doing what I did was my choice.* But Boze seems genuinely happy now, even if he grouses about his burger job and can’t find a good film script to save his life.

*“Mr. Bozer has a steady income, several benign hobbies (Mac thinks about the small explosions he’s*
faked for some of Bozer’s films and barely stop himself from grinning), and you two have known each other a long time. I don’t see any reason to have concerns about him as your housemate.”

A phone rings, and Mac jumps. Hammond picks up his cell and glances at the ID before answering. Mac sees that it says “front desk”.

“Okay, I see. Yes. Yes we are. Tell him it’ll only be a couple minutes.” Hammond hangs up.

“Your lawyer’s here. Said something about some new evidence and needing to reschedule a court date.” Hammond smiles. “Let’s not keep him waiting, shall we?” He folds up the file. “I’ll see you next week, Angus. Try and stay out of trouble.”

Mac gets up, feeling slightly wobbly. I did it. I survived my first parole meeting. And I’m not on my way back to prison.

Jack, dressed in his “Roger Preston” suit and tie, is waiting downstairs. Mac shakes his hand and they move out of the bored desk secretary’s line of sight.

“We have a situation. We need you at the Phoenix right now.” Jack glances over his shoulder. “I sent Bozer home, told him I’d take care of you. He thinks it’s a court date like everyone else.”

“Ok.” Mac doesn’t like how close Jack is standing. Logically, he knows Jack won’t hurt him but he doesn’t like people to get this close to him. Especially not guys like Jack, who are a little too much like the memories of CCI.

It’s fine. You’re fine. Don’t show fear.

“How’d it go up there?”

“I’m not back in cuffs, so what do you think?” Mac’s defense mechanism has always been sarcasm. It hasn’t usually worked out so well for him, but he just can’t help himself. He probably should just keep his mouth shut, because Jack already hates him and this might make it worse. Why can’t I just learn to shut up?

To his surprise, Jack cracks a smile. “Lied to him, didn’t you?”

“How did you know?”

“Because you’re not the first person I’ve known who has parole meetings, believe it or not. And I know they don’t let you out of the country.” Jack shrugs. “Come on. Patty will have our heads on a platter if we’re late.”

As soon as the get out of the county building, Jack’s demeanor changes. He stops outside at a black GTO and unlocks it.

“Get in, kid. Don’t touch anything, got it?” Jack slides in on the driver’s side and starts the car. Mac starts to get in. “Uh uh, kid, kick your shoes off so you don’t bring those cigarette butts and gum in here with you.” Mac does, obediently. He wants to say something smart again, but for one thing nothing is coming to mind, and for another he thinks Jack will be more upset if Mac jokes about his car than about how his parole visit went. He sits down, so focused on trying not to get anything on the floor mat that he hits his head on the top of the door. Jack scowls at him when he sits down, rubbing his head gingerly. I gotta pay more attention and stop doing stupid clumsy stuff.

“Listen, Carl’s Jr., there’s ground rules for this car,” Jack says, pulling off his tie and tossing it in the back seat. “We don’t change Jack Dalton’s radio station. I don’t care if you don’t like Willie Nelson
or the Stones or Metallica. You kids and your disrespect for the classics is getting old.” Jack turns on the car and “Ride the Lightning” blasts out, so loud Mac is startled.

“How ‘bout a rule where we don’t talk about ourselves in the third person?” And damn it, there’s my stupid mouth running off without my brain again.

“Shut it with the smartass remarks, kid.” Jack puts the car in gear. “Rule two. Don’t tell me how to drive. No reminders, no warnings. I know what the hell I’m doing and I don’t need you getting all up in my face about it.” Mac nods.

“Rule three. Don’t bring hot dogs in my car. Ever. Actually nothing with mustard.” Mac wonders if there’s a story behind that one.

“And don’t you ever, ever grab the wheel in any car I’m driving, ever.” Jack’s voice has gone stony cold. “What happened in North Korea was uncalled-for insubordination. You do that again and I’m gonna recommend they take you off this team.” Mac flinches. The unspoken threat hangs in the air between them. If Jack reports me and says I’m not fit for the agency, I’m going back to prison. He’s suddenly very, very cold. Please don’t make me go back.

“I don’t want to do that, kid, but don’t give me a reason to, you hear?”

Mac just sighs and squirms a little lower in the seat. This is gonna be a long car ride.

THE PHOENIX FOUNDATION

NOT JUST A THINK TANK

Jack has never been so glad to get to work in his life. Why am I the one who had to pick up our little jailbird? He didn’t like even the idea of hamburger kid in his GTO. Nobody rides in my car unless I say it’s okay. It took the better part of six months for Riley to get her first ride in it. And yeah, I told her she gets the Shelby if something happens to me, but the GTO... The GTO was Pops’s car. The one the old grease monkey taught Jack to tear apart and put back together the summer before he joined the army.

That car is his baby, and he knows it’s kinda stupid and ridiculous but he really resents having to pick the kid up in that car. It feels like that’s giving him too much acceptance too soon. He literally just got out of a parole meeting.

Jack knows it’s equally as unfair to be judging the kid for a crime he probably isn’t even guilty of, but while Charlie Robinson, one of the EOD guys Jack was overwatch for and who now defuses bombs for the FBI, might be confident the bombing didn’t kill George Ramsay, there’s still the fact of the matter that the kid did make that bomb, and he did set it off. And all the other insane things he did as a vigilante.

The kid got us out of a jam, sure, but that was a one-time affair. And since then he’s been pulling stupid crazy stunts that I’m surprised haven’t gotten us all killed. North Korea was the last straw. The kid grabbing the wheel and being a literal backseat driver was too much. Jack feels a little bad for threatening to get the kid pulled off the team, but reckless actions like that are what get agents killed in the field. He’s not all that concerned with his own life, but he’s not letting Riley die on his watch. I messed up once, trusted the wrong guy, and she got hurt. I’m not gonna do that again.

“There’s an emerging situation in Caracas,” Thornton says as soon as Jack and the hamburger kid step into the War Room. There’s a newspaper clipping on the screen. Out of the corner of his eye Jack sees Carl’s Jr. pick up a paperclip from a bowl of them sitting on a table. The kid starts fiddling
with it, and Jack sighs. *That habit’s gonna get old real fast.*

“I’ve heard about this. A journalist who got kidnapped in Venezuela. It’s all over the news. Hashtag "HurryHomeHannah" is trending.” Riley says.

“Sounds like just another corrupt government trying to cover up some scandal,” Jack says. “What are we doing here?”

“There’s more to this case than the public is aware of,” Thornton says. “Our journalist is actually a deep cover CIA agent. Her real name,” Thornton pulls up an all-too-familiar picture, “is Sarah Adler. I’m sorry Jack.”

Jack hears Riley’s audible gasp.

“What was Sarah doing down there?” Jack doesn’t really have to wonder too much. *Sarah was a good agent because she always really believed in doing the right thing, no matter how dangerous.* He hasn’t seen her in over eight years, but she looks the same as ever and he can’t help the way his heart trips over itself at the thought of her in danger.

“Intel gathering. Observe and report,” Thornton says. “She was trailing a crime boss named Alfredo Barrios. He’s responsible for over a hundred and fifty deaths, many of them law enforcement, a few government agents.”

“And now he has Sarah.” Jack clenches a fist. *Good God. That man is a monster.* Jack has heard stories about Barrios that filter down through the alphabet agencies. None of them paint the guy as the sort you want anywhere near a friend.

“The good news is he likely doesn’t know who she is. Her cover of investigative journalist is sound. The bad news is, he knows she has information that could put him away for good. Before she was taken, Sarah contacted the CIA. She not only had photographic proof of Barrios being in Caracas, she had a copy of his ledger. She was about to transmit it to CIA headquarters when she went dark. And then this report came in.”

“Why isn’t the CIA pulling her out?” Riley asks.

“This was an off the record mission. Diplomatic relations with Venezuela are strained, and having an agent on the ground spying on one of their people could make it worse. Barrios has a lot of people in his pockets, people who are highly placed in the government and can make things very, very messy. The CIA has disavowed her.” Thornton sighs. “We are Sarah’s agency of last resort. If we don’t find her, no one will.”

“We’re going to bring her home,” Riley says, standing up. Jack looks over at her and sees the determination and sincerity in her face. *Riley may never have met Sarah, but she’d put her life on the line for anyone I call family.* Jack’s so proud of that girl.

Carl’s Jr. drops the paperclip he’s been messing with on the table. It looks a little like a Phoenix.

Riley taps at her laptop, making sure she’s wirelessly linked to Angus’s tether so her program will download. “This’ll send your real coordinates to Phoenix and make your PO think you’re still here in L.A.” Now that Angus has a permanent parole officer assigned they have to send all his travel records over as the data comes in. Riley was able to fudge the past two and a half weeks’ records, but she can’t rewrite real-time data and focus on a mission in-field. This program should solve their problem.
She’s recorded Angus’s typical movements over a five-day span and turned them into a rotating pattern that looks real. The program doesn’t just repeat the same sequence over and over, it varies the actions just enough to look like a normal person’s routine. She’s still working out the bugs of factoring in traffic speeds and detours, but she’s on the whole very happy with this. *I’m glad I got it working in time.*

She’s noticed that Angus seems more nervous than normal, and quieter. He’s not fidgeting nearly as much as he usually does. “Is everything okay?” *His parole meeting was today. Maybe it didn’t go well.*

“I’m fine.” Everything in his tone says the opposite.

“Did Jack yell at you?” Riley asks. He flinches.

“He didn’t exactly yell. Just...he said if I did something like North Korea again he’d get me taken off the team.” She can tell it’s an effort for him to say anything to her at all, but at least he’s being honest. That’s improvement.

“Jack’s got a history of saying things he doesn’t really mean. On one of our first ops, I froze, and I let a guy get away with an EMP. Jack was furious. He told me if I couldn’t get past the mental blocks and learn to do what had to be done, people were going to die. It took me a while to realize one of those people he meant was me.” She sighs. “Jack’s a tough love kinda guy. If he’s angry, there’s a good chance it’s worry that he’s too ‘manly’ to admit,” She smiles. “Once he knows you better that whole macho thing goes away and he’s a big teddy bear.”

“A teddy bear who packs two semiautomatics.” Riley finds a small laugh slipping out.

“Yeah, that’s the perfect description of old Jack.”

Angus still seems anxious when they get on the Phoenix jet, even though he’s been in it at least twice more since everything with Nick. He barely touches anything, and usually just sits down and stays put. Riley notices him wipe his hands on his shirt self-consciously before putting them on the armrests. *Like his past is some kind of physical contamination.*

She glances at the blinking light on his ankle and sighs. *I hate being the one responsible for anything that reminds him of his time inside. But it’s that or he goes back.*

She looks across the plane at Jack, who’s staring out the window with a faraway look on his face. *I can’t believe he threatened to get Angus sent back to prison.* She knows Jack was mad, after Korea. He’d been unusually quiet on the way back, not even bothering with his usual bad puns about flying. *Angus definitely broke every protocol. But he probably saved our lives by acting without asking. At the very least he kept us from getting captured and disavowed.*

She’s genuinely startled when Angus sits down in the seat across from her. She’s deep in thought, searching the news bulletins for anything that might give them a clue to Sarah’s location.

“Hey, what’s up?” Riley asks casually, continuing to glance through the documents. *Don’t push him for anything. He rarely wants to talk so coming over voluntarily like this is a big deal.*

Angus looks away, back over at where Jack is sitting. “What’s his history with Sarah Adler?” he asks quietly.

Riley sets down her laptop. Jack told her this story a long time ago.

“They were pinned down in Belarus. Thought they weren’t gonna make it out alive. And then Sarah
went off-script and broke cover first. She drew fire while Jack took out the hostiles she couldn’t get. She got hit three times and punctured a lung. Almost died on the way to exfil. And Jack swears she’s the only reason he’s alive. He got to go home and say goodbye to his dad before the old man died, because of what Sarah did. He was supposed to be the bait, and she didn’t let that happen.”

Riley sees Jack rub quickly at his face, across the jet, then glance away when he catches her eye. She gets up and sits down across from him.

“Jack, we’re gonna find her.” Riley twines her fingers into his. “I promise you, we’re gonna bring Sarah home.”

“Hell yeah we are,” Jack’s voice is a bit rough and choked, like he’s fighting tears. “She’s coming home, or I’m not.”

“I’ve been combing the reports for anything that could help, but no one knows where she’s being held,” Riley says softly. “I was hoping you could look them over, maybe she had some kind of signal she would leave? Some code you might know?”

Jack shrugs. “I’ll look. But it’s not very likely that she knew where she was going to be taken. And I doubt some hack reporter is going to notice a slightly misaligned fork on a dinner table or whether a coin was dropped heads or tails up.” He takes the laptop. “I think we’ll have better luck with Maria.”

“He’s walked over at some point, Riley’s not sure when. He can sure sneak up on a person when he wants to. She guesses that’s a skill he spent plenty of time perfecting as the Phoenix.

“One of my contacts in Venezuela.”

“Jack worked South America before I met him.” Riley explains. “And a little bit after too. I thought you and Maria didn’t exactly part on friendly terms though? That might be an understatement, given how bad Caracas got last time. Hopefully there aren’t still posted warrants for our arrest. She remembers how frustrated Jack was that the sketch artist who made the posted images had drawn his mohawk wrong.

“I’m sure she’s over it. It was four years ago. And anyway, she’s our best chance. Trust me, if there’s anything going on in Caracas, she’ll know about it.”

LOS AMIGOS BAR

CONTRARY TO WHAT THE NAME IMPLIES, THEY ARE NOT FRIENDLY

“I told you not to come back to my bar, Jack.” Maria growls. She stands over Jack, who’s lying on his back on the filthy floor, clutching his jaw. She’s likely got about two inches on him, Mac thinks, and at least seventy pounds. The woman’s built like a pro wrestler.

“I swear I didn’t mean to stand you up at that cantina!”

Maria rolls her eyes. “It was the shootout in my bar that I am angry about, not your lack of manners to a lady.” She rolls up one sleeve to show a dark scarred line above her elbow.

“I said I was sorry!” Jack scrambles to his feet, and Maria fists her hand in his shirt.

“You still owe me for that.”
“How much?” Jack asks. “Cause I don’t really have cash on me right now, but I can come back later…”

“Jack,” Mac says, nodding to his left. There’s a thin, nervous looking man leaning on the bar with a beer in his hand. Mac can just see the edges of a tattoo peeking out of his collar. It looks like the one Barrios’s men have in the photos they saw in briefing.

Jack sees it too. “Hey Maria, we just want to talk to that guy for a minute, okay?”

“Marco.” She glances at the skinny guy. “Do you want to talk to this gringo?”

Marco shakes his head, and begins to edge toward the door.

If he gets out of here they lose their chance of finding Sarah. We need a distraction. Mac decides to go for one that’s part of the reason he earned his old nickname as a vigilante. Everyone called me the kid who liked watching things burn. He upends a bottle and shoves it along the bar, leaving a trail of alcohol, then snatches a guy’s cigar and shoves it into the liquid.

Fire erupts instantly and Mac hears Maria angrily cursing in Spanish.

“Sorry!” Jack shouts. “This time it’s not my fault!” He ducks the haymaker Maria sends his way and reaches for Marco, but the guy darts past him and toward the door.

Mac goes after him but someone else is faster. He feels someone grab his arm, and he kicks out blindly, but there’s so much going on and the fire is distracting and his foot doesn’t connect with anything. Off balance, he pitches forward a little and someone grabs him.

There’s an arm around his throat, and Mac can’t breathe.

He’s back in the yard and some guy is choking him while two others trade off punching him in the stomach and ribs. He already knows at least one rib is broken. All because he didn’t move out of their way fast enough in the cafeteria. He can’t breathe and he’s going to black out and that’s not good. He needs to get away from them…

He blinks and he’s back in the bar with the fire and the angry woman yelling at Jack. He reacts on instinct and drives his elbow backward desperately, anything to break this grip. Thankfully, his angle is decent and the guy’s startled enough to let go.

Mac gasps for air and tries to make the world stop spinning and blurring. He can see Jack running out the door, probably after that Marco guy, but he can’t really make his legs move ust yet. And then he hears someone yell, and someone else grabs at his shirt, and he bolts, stumbling, panicking.

I have to get out. I have to get out.

Jack’s got the beginnings of another headache from Maria’s left hook and the pounding of his shoes on the cracked pavement is not helping.

He was a little worried about the hamburger kid, but the guy seemed to be holding his own decently well. And if they let Marco get away, their last chance of getting Sarah back alive is gone. If Marco tells Barrios there are people in town looking for him, he’ll decide Sarah’s too much of a liability.

Carl’s Jr. is kinda freaky fast. Jack supposes he shouldn’t be surprised, not after watching the kid run down a damn jet, but when the kid passes him and doesn’t even seem to be struggling, Jack shakes his head. That’s not even fair.
“You blew up half the bar with us in it!” Jack yells. He should be saving his breath for running but he can’t let that just go.

“I didn’t blow it up! I set it on fire! There’s a difference!” Hamburger kid shouts. They dodge a woman selling vegetables and jump over a couple crates of bananas.

“You’re gonna kill us before Barrios does!” The kid flinches. Jack doesn’t miss the sudden tension in his shoulders and back, and he’s sure there’s that hurt look on the kid’s face. Not that I’m gonna see his face any time soon, the way he’s running.

Still, they’re not really gaining on Marco. It’s obvious the guy knows the city like the back of his hand. He’s cutting through alleys and side streets, and Jack’s afraid with the growing crowds as they get closer to the center of the city, that Marco will disappear.

“Hurry up, old man!” Carl’s Jr. calls back.

“Oh, very funny!” Jack snaps, but there’s no real anger. This kid reminds him of Riles. Except even more defensive and challenging. He seems to be afraid of me. Which is kinda where I want him, but damn if it doesn’t hurt. The kid’s like a beaten puppy. And Jack’s always had a soft spot for anyone walking around with that much hurt in their eyes.

But the fact remains that he could have gotten us killed. He’s going to have to learn to toe the line. This isn’t the kind of business where you can just run off and do your own thing without explaining. He’s used to the loner vigilante thing and he can’t do that anymore.

They round a corner, the kid’s freaky endurance finally starting to crack with a few panting breaths. Marco is just ahead, and he glances back over his shoulder. And then a somewhat familiar green car wheels around the corner, the door slams open, and Marco tumbles to the ground, clutching his nose.

Riley leans out the window, grinning. “Hey, you two done playing catch me if you can yet?”

“Thanks Riles.” She grins.

“Don’t I always have your back?”

Jack picks up Marco and tosses him in the trunk, ignoring the way the guy struggles against the zip ties Jack slaps on him. “Stay put, dude.”

Jack gets in the passenger seat and Carl’s Jr. climbs in the back.

“Roll the windows down, guys,” Riley says as she pulls out of the alley, waving her hand in front of her face. “You two stink.”

“Try not sweating next time you have to chase a guy for ten blocks,” Jack grumbles as he leans on the open window.

“Lean any further there and you might get mistaken for a bulldog,” hamburger kid says from the back seat. “Shut up, genius.”

ABANDONED HOSPITAL

NOW THEY’RE KILLING PEOPLE HERE INSTEAD OF SAVING LIVES

Mac stayed out of the way while Riley and Jack interrogated Marco. After what he saw of Jack’s
interrogation techniques back in San Francisco, with Kendrick, he doesn’t want to see more.

He’ll admit the methods were effective. Riley and Jack returned with a location, an abandoned hospital outside the city. And now that they’re here, he can tell they’re sure Marco’s information was accurate.

“It’s a black site,” Riley says.

“Black site?” Mac asks.

“Yeah. Lots of guards, lots of security, lots of secrecy, black site.” Jack says. “It’s got to be where they’re holding Sarah.” He shudders visibly. Mac’s not sure what exactly might be happening to the agent in there, but he’s sure it’s nothing pretty.

“Nice work,” Jack says as Riley pulls up cameras.

“What’d you do?” Mac asks. He’s curious, computers are the one thing he’s not great with. While everyone else in school was actually using their computers for what they were made to do, I was taking mine apart to see how it worked. Never figured that out though.

“I checked signal strength to find out which wifi network was theirs, hacked it, and voila, cameras are ours.” And then Riley freezes. “Jack, there she is.” She points to the lower right corner of the screen where two men are shoving a woman into a small cell. At least she’s still on her feet. Mac can’t tell how bad the damage is, but it doesn’t look like she’s seriously hurt. Which is good.

“Okay. So we know she’s in there, but that place is a fortress. How are we gonna get inside?” Jack asks.

“Riley, can you get us a satellite view?” Mac asks.

“Sure thing.” She pulls up an image and Mac points out a pale square at the end of one of the wings.

“There’s an elevator. Straight from the morgue to the alley. So patients don’t need to see the dead bodies,” Mac says quietly.

“So that’s our way in?” Jack says skeptically.

“It beats trying to shoot or con our way past the front door.” Mac shrugs.

“What you sayin’ about me, kid?”

“Nothing.”

“I’ll have you know I can take four guys with two bullets, and I’m more than capable of chatting up some hired muscle and getting a free pass.”

“Yeah, but do we want to risk it?” Mac shrugs. He knows he’s pushing Jack dangerously far, but this plan will work. And it will be a lot less bloody or dangerous. If we get caught... His mind is already creating terrible, sickening scenarios of what goes on in that building.

“Guys, we’re on the clock here.” Riley says suddenly. “I’m running scans on these guys’ faces through the cams, and I’m getting partial lip reads off them as well. Looks like Barrios wants a face to face with Sarah at his place in two hours.”

“Okay. We’ll try the elevator,” Jack sighs. “But you better be right about this, kid. Sarah’s life depends on it.”
“I’m right.” I sure hope I am.

The two slip through a loose space in the chain link fence around the building, with Riley shutting down cameras on that side to hide their movements. The elevator is right where Mac assumed it would be, but now there’s a new problem. About three inches of solid steel, bolted into the wall, covers the elevator door.

“Okay, what are you gonna do about that, kid?” Jack asks, and Mac can hear the skepticism in his voice. He’s waiting for me to fail, to screw up, so he can have a good reason to tell Thornton to send me back. The thought nearly sends his brain into a skittering panic, but he locks it down. Think, MacGyver. Do your job and you won’t have anything to worry about.

There’s an unattended car parked near the alley, and Mac has an idea. Thankfully there are jumper cables in the trunk, and the battery is easy to remove. Jack watches the whole process with a frown.

“How much change do you have on you?” Mac asks.

“You gonna find another way to almost kill me with it?” Jack really isn’t going to let this go easily.

I don’t think he realizes how much talking about me killing someone hurts. Yeah, sure, Jack and Riley said there was evidence that might prove he hadn’t actually been responsible for Ramsay’s death, but hearing that and living with the images from the crime scene photos for two years were not the same thing.

What I do is dangerous, and that scares the hell out of me. He was just a kid playing a game, really, until the news about Ramsay hit. And then he realized how dangerous it all really was. What kind of person willingly creates something that can hurt others? Mac’s tried to tell himself that’s how almost everything works. Scientists create new drugs with unknown side effects to try and cure diseases. Car companies roll out thousands of new vehicles every year despite the reports of recalls and hit-and-runs and drunk driving. Everything can be dangerous. But it still rings hollow.

If someone innocent dies because of what I do, I’m done. It doesn’t bear thinking about if that’s a member of his new team.

But Jack won’t stop reminding him of how dangerous it all is, like Mac needs to hear that. Every time I make something, I see Ramsay’s face in the morgue photos.

Mac takes the handful of change Jack gives him and sorts through it.

Arc welding is actually a really simple principle. Using electric current to heat and reform metal. He clamps one cable end to the door, the other around the handful of change, then presses the makeshift welder against the bolts.

I’ve always been really, really good at getting into places I’m not supposed to be.

Once he and Jack remove the metal plate, Mac pries open the elevator doors with his knife. It sure feels good to have this back. His Swiss army knife became basically an extension of him while he was working as the Phoenix, and he didn’t really realize how much he’d missed it until Jack gave him the new one.

There’s a bundle of cables descending into the darkness, and Mac swallows the nausea rising in his throat at the sight of the apparently bottomless pit and grabs onto them. “She’s down three floors, right Riley?”

“Yep.” He and Jack descend carefully. The elevator shaft is hot and stuffy, and Mac can feel sweat
dripping down his back and coating his hands. His fingers are starting to slip on the plastic-coated cable, and he swallows a scream when his grip fails and he slides several inches down the cable before catching on and stopping himself.

He’s glad when they reach their floor and he’s able to crawl out that set of doors, sprawling on the cool tile floor for a moment to get his breath back. Jack comes up behind him and gives him a none too gentle shake. “Come on, kid, we gotta step up the pace.”

They walk through a deserted morgue, *not creepy at all, right?*, and stare out the door at the end at the hallway.

“Okay, Sarah’s cell should be just at the end of that hall on your left,” Riley says over comms. *It’s still hard to get used to having a voice in my head out here. It was always just me and I had to know everything about the place before I went inside.*

“There’s a lot of guards between us and her, Riles.”

“I can cut the cameras, but I can’t hack people, Jack.”

“Can you turn off the power to the building?” Mac asks.

“Sure thing. But if they can’t see, neither can you.” Riley sounds confused and a little worried.

“Not necessarily,” Mac says, looking through the door at the cameras on the wall.

*I’ve never been a fan of the dark. Bad things happen in it. As a kid, my overactive imagination would populate my bedroom with the creepiest monsters I could imagine the moment the lights went out. And in prison...well...the monsters weren’t just in my imagination any longer.*

He waits until the guards have passed before slipping out and undoing the cameras. Jack’s chafing at the delay and he’s making sure Mac knows it, in frustrated, angry whispers.

“What are you gonna do, take their pictures?” “I don’t know about you, but I haven’t suddenly developed cat-like night vision powers, so what’s the plan with the lights, genius?”

Mac sighs. *If I don’t explain to him he’s just gonna keep complaining and I can’t think with him talking.* “The cameras are equipped with LEDs for night imaging.” He removes the light rings and then dumps out a bin of clothes, trying not to think about who they might have belonged to. “See if you can find another pair of glasses around here. They may not be pretty,” he holds up the glasses he’s just attached the LEDs to, “but they’ll work.”

Once they both have the glasses on, Jack radios out. “Hey Riley, cut the power.”

“Okay. Power down in three, two, now.”

The place goes black, and Mac hears a lot of angry, surprised Spanish yelling. He and Jack sneak through the corridors as quietly as they can. Jack takes out one guard with a well-placed hit, and then they’re at Sarah’s door.

“Let me go in first.” Mac stands aside and Jack enters, then there’s a faint scuffle.

“Who are you?” a woman whispers.

“Sarah! It’s me, Jack Dalton.”

“Jack? What the hell are you doing here?”
“Getting you out. Stay close to me.” Jack re-emerges into the hall with the woman behind him. She looks pale and washed-out in the green night-vision glow, and there’s blood showing black on her lip and cheek, but she’s not too badly damaged.

“This way,” Mac says, and Sarah startles. *I forgot, she can’t see like we can.*

“Who’s your friend?” she asks.

Jack sighs. “Uh, he’s not really a friend. You can call him Carl’s Jr., everyone does.”

“He’s kidding. My name’s Angus MacGyver,” Mac mutters.

“You were named after a cow?” Sarah chuckles.

“I see why she and Jack got along…

“That’s a little insensitive to say to the guy who’s trying to save your life!” Mac snaps back.

“How do you not like him, Jack?” Sarah asks. “He sounds like you.”

“Cut the get to know you and get out of there!” Riley yells. “They have a backup generator!” Mac turns and heads for the elevator shaft, but then the lights come on in a blinding explosion. He rips the glasses off and then ducks into a corner as bullets start flying their way. *I’m never gonna get used to being shot at!*

“We can’t get back out that way! Riley, get us another exit!” Jack shouts, then fires down the hallway just enough to give them a window to all duck into another door, leading to a stairwell.

“Get to the ground floor, and I’ve got you a way out.” Mac can hear odd noises of scuffling and a car starting.

They hurry up, Jack taking out three guys who were on their way down to help collar the escaped prisoner. Sarah grabs two of the men’s guns and follows Jack, helping lay down cover fire as they head for the lobby.

“Riley, there’s a lotta guys between us and the door! If that’s your way out I’d like a second opinion!” Jack yells, firing and then ducking behind the front desk again. Mac feels wood shrapnel rain down on him from a close shot and covers his head.

“Oh, you’re not going out the door!” There’s a massive crash and then their car slams through the wall, scattering bricks and enemy agents in all directions. “Uber for Dalton and company?” Riley yells out the window before pulling her own gun and firing on the remaining agents.

Jack, Sarah and Mac run for the car. Sarah yelps when a bullet clips her leg, but she keeps going, and they pile in as Riley slams the vehicle into reverse.

Mac breathes a shaky sigh. *We lived. Holy cow, we actually survived.*

Riley’s half-asleep in the back of the car, but she can hear Sarah and Jack talking up front. She thinks she might have a concussion after hitting her head on the steering wheel when she went through the wall, *airbags are there for a good reason, but if I didn’t disable them I’d have had a face full of stinky cloth and no clear line of sight to shoot*, and after the third time she swerved into oncoming traffic Jack insisted they swap places. He’s patched up Sarah’s leg, and she seems okay, other than a little pain.

“You didn’t have to come for me, you know,” Sarah says.
“I couldn’t just leave you there.”

“Thank you.” Sarah leans her head on the window. “I thought my luck ran out on this one. I really did.”


“We were political prisoners in Siberia for a month after Moscow, Jack.”

“Yeah, but we got out.”

“And you took a bullet to the shoulder and I lost a toe to frostbite.”

“Half a toe!” Jack says, like that’s somehow better. “Regardless, my point stands.” Jack laughs and swerves to miss a guy with a broken-down pickup who’s half in the middle of the road.

Riley winces at the movement and the sudden nausea. *Yeah, definite concussion.*

“Where are we headed?” Jack asks.


They pull over outside a crumbling but decently upkept apartment building. Sarah climbs out, wincing when she puts weight on her wounded leg.

“Let me go in first. I’ll make sure he knows you’re friendly,” She says, but she lingers when Jack puts a hand on her arm.

“You okay?”

“I’ve had worse.” She smiles. “Thanks for the field patch. You were always good at putting me back together.”

“That’s because you needed it too damn often. I never saw somebody get hurt in the field so often.”

“Then you never looked in a mirror, Dalton.” Sarah steps back. “I promise, I’m good. Let’s get that ledger and go home.” She walks away.

“You’re not over her, Jack,” Riley sighs longsufferingly as she gets out and joins him. “You keep staring at her.”

“Do not!” Jack protests, but his eyes are still glued to the retreating figure.

“It’s a little more cute than creepy, at least.” Riley says.

“It’s just that I keep thinking, you know, seeing her again after all this time, maybe the Big Man’s tryin’ to give me a little nudge, ya know?”

“Are you gonna ask her out again?” Angus asks, coming up behind both of them.

“If you’d stop trying to kill me every two seconds,” Jack says, and Riley watches Angus drop his eyes and shuffle nervously. *He’s uncomfortable.* She’s not entirely sure why, but if she had to guess, Jack’s insistence that the kid is going to get them killed is ripping open old wounds. *Two years with a murder charge probably messes up your mind a lot.*
Sarah re-emerges. “Something’s wrong. The door to my apartment is open.”

“Think Luis turned you in?” Jack asks.

“No, never!”

“You trust him?”

“With my life.”

Riley and Jack hurry through the door. Sarah is right. It’s partly open, and when Riley pushes it further, training her gun inside the room, she sees the mess inside. *Someone tossed this place.*

“Luis! Luis!” Sarah runs up the stairs.

“Sarah wait! Whoever it is might still...be here.” Riley stops dead at the top of the stairs, lowering her gun in shock. Sarah gasps, covering her mouth like she’s going to be sick. There’s an old man tied to a chair in the middle of the room, covered in blood and clearly dead.

Mac cringes at the sight of Sarah’s contact, tied up and bloody. He’s seen more gruesome deaths in prison. But the thought of being caught and tortured like this is still sickening.

“He wasn’t even a part of this. And they murdered him,” Sarah says, her voice a mixture of pain and anger.

“I’m sorry,” Jack says, and there’s genuine softness in his voice as he holds Sarah against him, a sharp contrast to the gun still in his hand. *Maybe Riley was right about him being kind when you know him.*

Riley goes to the window and looks down. “The wounds are fresh. This happened a few hours ago.” She pushes the drapes aside and Mac hears the faint squeal of sirens. *That’s a sound that never means anything good. Apparently I’m never going to have a career where those are a sound I’d rather go toward than away from.*

“Should we go? Those sirens, they’re coming for us, right?” Mac asks. *I don’t want to go to jail down here. CCI was bad but Venezuela would be even worse.* He can’t stop shivering even though the room is hot and humid.

“I still need the ledger.” Sarah runs back down the stairs and pulls a chair beside a counter. Climbing on top she removes a section of the door trim and pulls out a small flashdrive. “This is everything I have on Barrios. Every photo, every payment record, every front business, every memo.”

“Then let’s go. We got what we came for,” Riley says. “You and the ledger.”

“Take it. I’m going to stay and take Barrios down.” Sarah says. Mac’s getting a sinking feeling in his stomach.

“Listen, I get that you want revenge for what he did to your friend. But this ledger and your information can put him away for good,” Jack says quietly.

“You don’t understand. The only reason Barrios is still here is that he’s looking for me. If he finds out I escaped he’ll leave, go somewhere new and start over and do this again to someone else. I can’t let that happen.” Sarah opens a drawer, yanks out a false bottom, and pulls out a gun and an extra clip.
“Hey, if you’re going after Barrios, you’re not going alone,” Jack says. “I’m coming with you.”

“So am I,” Riley says.

Mac feels like the ground is falling out from under his feet. This is exactly what I hoped wouldn’t happen.

“I thought our mission was Sarah and the ledger,” Mac says nervously. They can afford to break the rules. But if I screw up I go back to prison. I can’t do this. I can’t. Thornton told me not to go off script on missions. If I disobey her she won’t care why.

“She’s right. If Barrios ghosts, we lose our best chance of catching him,” Riley says. “This is the closest anyone’s gotten in years.”

“Are you in or not, Carl’s Jr.?” Jack asks, and it’s clear from his voice what the right answer should be.

*I want to. You have no idea how much. This is what I’ve done all my life. Break the rules for the greater good. But you don’t know what it’s like inside. How bad it will get if I go back. If anyone finds out he’s been working with the feds, even temporarily, his life won’t be worth a plastic spork from the canteen. I won’t last a day in there if someone decides I’m an informer. “I can’t go with you. I can’t mess this up.” He hates the looks of anger and disappointment on their faces. They’re my friends. I didn’t want to let anyone down, but I can’t go back there. I can’t.

Jack looks like he’s about to hit Mac, but Riley stops him. “Jack, he’s got more to lose than we do.” She looks as disappointed as Jack, but at least she understands.

“I can make it back to exfil on my own. I’ll be okay. You go get Barrios,” Mac says weakly.

“Hell no, I’m not letting you go off on your own in Caracas. Riley will have to take you.” Jack sighs.

“But you’ll need her…”

“Just go to exfil. Take the ledger,” Jack says. “Sarah and I will get Barrios.”

Mac tries not to look at Riley when she takes his arm. He can’t bear the disappointment in her eyes. I’m so sorry. But I can’t do this.

Logically Riley gets it, she does. I spent time in three different prisons. Granted, they were all on foreign soil, and Jack broke me out every time, and I was never there longer than a week, but it’s scary.

She remembers sleeping with a makeshift knife, fighting her way out of a massive riot she started, and she still has a stomach scar from the woman who shanked her in the Mexico City jail. And I can only imagine what two years inside meant for him. Angus doesn’t talk about it, but she sees him flinch. And when Cage did his full eval, she came back to the apartment with shadows in her eyes and had more than two beers for the first time Riley’s known her.

She’d never tell me a thing, it’s all confidential, but she’s told me a bit about her own past. And there are very few things that shake Sam. But those memories would.

So she doesn’t blame Angus for backing out on them. But it still hurts a little. I thought we were family. And now she’s leaving Jack and Sarah to go out there on their own. They did that all the time before I came around. They’ll be fine.
She glances at Angus in the passenger seat. He’s not saying a thing, which is probably because he feels guilty. She could see it in his eyes.

“Hey, they’ll be fine. They got this,” She says, watching him twist another paperclip into a cross shape. “And we’ll be on a plane home and we can watch Patty ream Jack out for doing stupid stuff and making executive decisions without her. It’s kinda fun to…” She trails off.

_That beige car’s been behind us too long. This street’s not a main thoroughfare. They came into town and now they’re leaving. We picked up a tail._

“Hey Angus, get down. I think we’ve got a problem. I’m gonna see.”

She tests it by taking another turn, then another, both left. They’re going back toward the city, and the car is still on them. And then it’s joined by a jeep with far too many guns bristling out of the canvas back.

“They know we made them!” Riley says. And then bullets spatter the car. This one isn’t armored. Riley floors it, but the streets are rough. And this one gets narrower…

The car scrapes between two buildings and bursts out again, but the jeep’s gone around and is waiting for them. Riley makes a hard right and then the wall of a dead-end alley looms up.

She can’t go back and they can’t go forward. She pulls Angus down and both of them duck below the seats as bullets shatter glass and shred cloth.

“We’re not gonna make it to exfil!” Riley yells.

_This happened in Berlin. With Nick._ They’d been pinned down and taking heavy fire, and Riley caught a bullet to the leg before Nick took out the snipers.

Angus is shaking. Riley puts her hands on his shoulders. “Look at me. We’re going to make it out of here.” He nods. “But I need your help. You’ve got that crazy brain. And I’m out of ideas and I’m gonna be out of ammo if I just keep shooting back.”

Angus leans back and rubs his forehead.

“This car’s not going anywhere. But it can still help us get out alive.” He glances at her. “How good a shot are you?”

“Second best in my class at The Farm.”

“I’ve got an idea.” He kicks out the front glass and crawls over the hood, toward the stacks of crates and junk in the alley. “Pull out the backseat, I gotta get to the gas tank.” Riley crawls back and does so. Angus scrambles back inside a few minutes later with some empty milk jugs and a handful of dried red peppers.

He cuts the fuel line, and pushes in the car’s cigarette lighter. “Dump as much gas as you can in those containers!” He’s shredding the peppers with his knife, and when she’s got both jugs about three-quarters full, he dumps the pieces in.

“They’ve stopped shooting!” Riley says suddenly. _They probably think we’re dead and they’re coming to make sure._

“Good!” Angus grabs the jugs from her and puts on the lids, shaking them, then tears a small strip of cloth from the shredded seats, douses each one in gasoline, and tucks them under the caps. “You
might wanna cover your nose and mouth. And close your eyes when this goes off.” He nods to the
door. Riley nods, willing herself to stop shaking. *Bring your A game.*

They roll out of the car and Angus jumps to his feet, flinging both jugs over the heads of the very
shocked goons. Riley rolls into a crouch and gets ready to fire. *Dead center, Davis. Never settle for a
good shot when you can make the best one.*

She ducks as the world explodes in flame and a smell like Jack’s five-alarm-chili burning on the
stove. She hears gasping and coughing, and she pulls her own bandana up, shields her eyes and fires
on the guys stumbling and gasping.

“There’s more!” She yells, as the car whirls around the corner. She’s got two of these guys’ guns but
there’s a lot more of them than there are of her. And the kid doesn’t seem to know how to shoot.

“Here! Take this!” She grabs what Angus hands her without thinking, then realizes he’s pulled off
the doors of the jeep to act as shields. She crouches behind hers, waiting for a clear line of sight. And
the car comes into view, she shoots out the front right tire. The car careens into a wall and there’s a
massive explosion. Riley doesn’t look too closely at the chaos. *It was us or them, but it never gets
easier.*

“Nice work genius.” Riley tosses down the improvised shield.

“I’d prefer it if you called me Mac.”

“Of course,” Riley smiles.

“We can’t get out now, can we?” He sounds somewhere between worried and relieved.

“No. We missed the window.” She knows exfil almost always waits fifteen minutes more before
taking off, especially when it’s her and Jack’s team they’re picking up, but now they have a
legitimate excuse to not be on the way back to Phoenix.

“Where are Jack and Sarah?” Angus asks.

“I’ll give you directions on the road.” Some of the guys from the explosion are starting to get up.

Riley says nothing when Mac hotwires the goons’ jeep and they drive off.

*When we got out of Berlin, that was the first time Nick kissed me.* Riley shakes off the thought. *He
didn’t let me die before he got to do that.*

Mac holds up one hand, and Riley takes a second to figure out what he’s doing before she goes for
the fist bump. He’s smiling, his messy hair all over his face and his eyes still wide with shock.

*Nick never did that.* He was never the type to celebrate mid-mission. He’d flirt a little, yes, but not
grin or hug her or anything until they’d wrapped the job and were on the flight home. *Once we got in
the field, it was like we weren’t really friends again until it was over.* Riley wonders if she should
have seen it then. *The mission always came before me.*

Mac reminds her of Jack in a funny way. Jack, who picked her up and spun her around in a hug
when she disarmed her first bomb, even though they still had about forty Serbian terrorists between
them and exfil. Jack, who slapped her on the back or high-fived her when they managed to shake
tails.

*I like this. This is comfortable.* With Nick, the emotion seemed bottled up until the release of an after-
mission high felt like a necessity. This was easy and relaxed and friendly. *Did Nick do that on
BARRIOS’S COMPOUND

BASICALLY THE VENEZUELAN EVIL FORT KNOX

Jack and Sarah hunker at the edge of the fence surrounding Barrios’s compound.

“It’s like Fort Knox,” Jack comments. “How’d you get in there?”

“Barrios is a pig,” Sarah replies. “He likes lavish parties and beautiful women, so I slipped into a little somethin’-somethin’ and walked right in.”

“Somethin’-somethin’, huh?” Jack asks. Like in Hamburg? He’s sure she’s as gorgeous as she ever was, and some part of him wants to punch Barrios repeatedly because the guy didn’t even close to deserve to see Sarah looking her best.

Something scuffles behind them. Jack and Sarah both turn, guns drawn, ready to take on a guard, but it’s Riley and Carl’s Jr. who step out from the bushes, hands raised. They look plenty shaken, and both of them are sporting some bleeding scratches.

Jack lowers his gun. “What are you two doing here?”

“Trying to make it out alive.” Riley sighs. “We got made on our way to exfil. Got out, but barely. And now we’re too late to catch the chopper anyway, so we figured we’d come back and help.”

“We could use it,” Sarah says. “I’m not sure how we’re gonna get in there. He’s got a small army.”

“Then we’ll make one of our own,” Carl’s Jr. says, and all three of them turn and stare at him. Jeez, kid, I know you’re good at makin’ stuff, but you can’t just create an army outta twigs and leaves.

“I’m gonna need your binoculars,” the kid says, holding out a hand to Sarah.

“Am I going to get them back?” She asks skeptically.

“Probably not,” Jack answers because the kid’s already running off to smash the mirrors off their car. Damn it, kid, why is everything you do so destructive?

“I’m going to build a directional heat source,” he says when Jack raises an eyebrow at the assortment of random things he comes back with. “The mirrors will catch the sunlight, and the lens from the binoculars amplifies it so that...well, the short version is whatever I’m aiming it at is gonna catch on fire.” Why am I not surprised?

“And you’re pointing it at those ammunition crates,” Riley says. “Nice.” Jack sees the fascination in her smile. Whatever he did to get them out of that problem back on the way to exfil musta been pretty damn impressive.

“Once this happens it’s gonna happen fast, so we’d better be ready to move,” the kid says, sitting back and peering down at the compound, shading his eyes with his hand. “Riley, is the jeep still running?”

“Yep.”

The crates start exploding and there’s a scarily happy smile on the kid’s face. He enjoys blowing things up way too much.
“I’ve got eyes on Barrios!” Sarah shouts. “Heading for the east gate!” Riley plunges back through the brush and Jack follows, hearing the others behind him. They pile into the jeep, Riley driving, Jack riding shotgun, and Sarah and Carl’s Jr. in the back.

They bounce cross-country until they come out on the main road. A little black motorcycle is coming their way fast. Riley pulls the car across the road, but the motorcycle swerves, drives up a fallen tree trunk, and leaps the vehicle. Sarah shoots, but there’s no way she can hit something that small, going that fast, when the jeep is already in motion again.

“Get me beside it!” Carl’s Jr. yells from the back. There’s a ripping sound and Jack half turns to see what’s happening. The kid’s tearing off part of the top of the jeep.

“What are you doin’ up there?” Jack yells.

“Making something to tangle up his tires! Those bikes are fast but they’re not very stable,” Carl’s Jr. yells back.

Jack watches him pull off the chunk of camouflage netting and tie a couple wrenches from the toolbox to it. Riley guns the jeep and they pull up almost beside Barrios, and the kid flings his little net contraption as Sarah leans over and shoots at the tires. Jack’s not sure which does the trick, but all of a sudden the bike is flipping end over end and the rider is sprawling on the pavement.

Sarah jumps out and trains her gun on the fallen man. “Helmet off! Now!” She shouts, and Jack hears the cracking strain in her voice.

The helmet is shoved off to reveal a tangle of black hair and a long goatee.

“That’s not him!” Sarah shouts. “That’s not Barrios! Damn it!” She slams her hand against the side of the jeep so hard Jack winces. “He switched with someone!”

They’ve been chasing a decoy while the real Barrios had time to get away. There was another road out of the other side of the compound. He probably took it. And now he has a serious head start.

Sarah looks almost ready to shatter. “How are we gonna catch him now? He’s going to ghost.”

“He’s got to have a plan for getting out of the country if things go wrong,” Riley says. “I still have all your intel on him. Maybe something in here can help.” Riley pulls out her rig and boots up the ledger drive, searching the files for a few minutes before raising her hand. “Okay, Barrios has a few different front companies for his smuggling and money-laundering. One of them is a shipping business right here in Caracas. They’ve got a dockside address. He probably took it. And now he has a serious head start.

Sarah looks almost ready to shatter. “How are we gonna catch him now? He’s going to ghost.”

“Can we get there before him?” Jack asks.

“We have a jeep. We can go cross country, and he can’t risk it. Anything bigger than those motorcycles got toasted when your boy fried the ammo up there,” Sarah says. “Riley, get us a sat view and plot the fastest route.”

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BARRIOS’S SHIPPING BUSINESS

APPARENTLY EVEN CRIME LORDS HAVE BUILDING LEASES

The jeep screeches to a dusty halt behind a warehouse. There’s a lot of backup beeps from forklifts,
Spanish chatter, and seagull squawking, and it thankfully covers the movements of four people sneaking around a corner. Mac glances across the dock toward the dock workers and a cargo ship tied up and loading.

“This place is from the stone age,” Riley mutters. “No wifi, so I can’t hack their manifests or transport logs. They’re probably keeping everything on an offline desktop.”

_I might have gotten a C in high school Spanish, but working the streets taking down drug cartels forced me to brush up on it fast._

“That one’s bound for Mexico. Leaving soon, judging by the activity,” Mac mutters.

“That’s probably the one he’ll be getting on then.” Jack says. “How soon till we can expect him, Riles?”

“If he took the west road, I give us about eight minutes, tops.”

“Where does that road enter the shipyard?” Mac asks, a plan already forming. _Cargo nets, rope, pulleys, an abandoned crane..._

“Right about...there.” Riley points off to their right. There’s a gate that’s really just a passthrough, a v-shaped section of fence with another piece jutting into it. _Too small for him to ride the bike through. Perfect choke point._

Mac has done this kind of thing a dozen times. It’s almost muscle memory to tie the rope to the net corners, spread the net in front of the passthrough, and start shimmying up the crane’s neck to attach the pulleys. But this time he doesn’t have to carry the rope with him. Riley’s standing on the ground, and when he gets the block and tackle secured, she tosses him the end of the rope. He threads it through and then glances up. There’s a cloud of dust coming their way. He slides quickly down the crane and joins the others at the corner of the warehouse.

“Sarah, you’re up,” Jack says. She gets to her feet, wincing.

This is the part of the plan Mac hates. He’s pretty sure they could just snag Barrios as he comes through, but there’s the chance he’ll see the net and bail on them. He has to be focused on something else, something that will definitely draw all his attention. So Sarah.

The bike skids to a halt, and a man gets off, hanging up his helmet. Mac hears Sarah’s breath catch. _That’s him._

Barrios walks through the passthrough, and immediately Sarah steps out form around the corner of the warehouse. “Alfredo Barrios!” She shouts. “I’m here to make a deal?”

“The only deal I want is your body feeding the sharks,” the man snaps, but he’s stopped. _Come on, just a couple more steps, so you’re in the middle._

“What if I give you the ledger and you let me disappear?”

“Who’s to say you haven’t made a copy? Or shared it with your people already?” Barrios snarls. He reaches for the gun at his hip, and takes a couple more steps to steady his aim.

“Now!” Mac gasps, and he and Jack and Riley grab the rope and pull as hard as they can.

The rope slithers through the pulleys and the cargo net begins to lift. Barrios trips and tries to stumble forward, but his feet catch in the ropes and he’s tangled up as the whole thing lifts into the air. Sarah
rushed up and knocks the gun out of his hand, then slams it into the side of his head, knocking him out cold.

“Oh man, I can’t believe you actually made an Ewok trap!” Jack laughs.

“It’s a net snare... you know what, call it what you want. It worked,” Mac sighs. “Let’s get him in the jeep and get outta here before those dock workers realize we’ve got their boss.”

“Might be a little late for that, guys,” Riley says. Jack groans but he and Mac grab the unconscious Barrios, still tangled in the net, and run.

“Call Patty and have her send exfil, now!” Jack says.

“Ah…” Riley stops pulling out her phone as a black helicopter thuds overhead, shots cutting a clear path between them and the dock workers. “I think she already knows.”

Thornton herself steps out of the helicopter.

“Get in. We’ll sort this out on the way to Phoenix,” she says coldly.

“We went dark, shut down comms, how’d you even know where to find us?” Jack asks as they climb in. Thornton looks down at Mac’s ankle, where the tether is still blinking. *Aww crap. They’re so busted.*

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**THE PHOENIX FOUNDATION**

**THE WAR ROOM COULD NOW MORE ACCURATELY BE CALLED THE DOGHOUSE**

This is not the first time Riley’s seen Patty’s signature stare of you-did-something-stupid. *It’s not even the tenth time. Maybe twenty-fifth?*

“The mission, need I remind you, was Sarah and the ledger. *Not* Barrios,” Patty stands in front of them, her cold severity that earned her the nickname “Ice Queen” more than visible. “I expect such actions from you, Dalton. And even Davis.” Riley sees Mac cringing, trying to make himself smaller. *He’s scared to death she’s gonna read him the riot act and throw him out. But I’ve done so much worse and been allowed to stay.* But she’d like to reassure him as fast as possible because it’s starting to look a little like he might be sick.

“We ran into a few roadblocks. Didn’t make exfil,” Riley says. “MacGyver saved my life out there. It’s not his fault we went off script.”


“But I agreed with her, and I was the senior Phoenix agent on the ground,” Jack says. “So it’s really my fault.”

Mac’s looking at them with all the shock and wonder and surprise in the world. *He’s not used to having other people stick up for him. For having people who have his back.* That hurts. Riley knows what that’s like, but she’s had Jack for so long now the memories of that time in her life have started to fade. *He’s been alone for so long, with everyone turning on him, and no one he can trust. He doesn’t even know how to react to this.*

“And I picked up a tail on the way to exfil, rookie mistake,” Riley says. “So not getting Mac home when he was supposed to be is on me.”
“Excuse me, am I your high school prom date?” Mac asks, and he’s actually cracking a small smile. “‘Get me home on time’, really, Riley?” He shakes his head.

Riley can tell Patty’s struggling to keep an actual smile off her face.

“Regardless of whose decision it was, Alfredo Barrios is now in custody. We’ve avoided having to start pursuing him again, which is a definite win for us.” Patty sighs. “Somehow you people always seem to be able to completely mangle any operation, and still make it a success.”

“What can I say, we’re awesome,” Jack says, nudging Riley’s shoulder.

“On the record, there will be a debriefing and official reprimand. Oversight isn’t fond of deviation.” Thornton smiles. “Off the record? I would have done the same thing.”

She shoos them out of the war room, and the four of them congregate in the hall. Riley nudges Jack. “Now’s the time to say something,” she says quietly.

Jack is literally taking a step toward Sarah when someone comes down the stairs. A tall man whose face lights up when he sees Agent Adler. “Sarah! Oh my God, you’re safe.” Jack stops cold as the man hugs her.

“This is my fiance, Jeff.” Sarah says as she turns back to them. “Jeff, these are the people responsible for saving my life.”

Jack seems incapable of human speech, so Riley handles introductions. “I’m Agent Riley Davis, this is Agent Jack Dalton, and Angus MacGyver.”

“So you’re Jack. The Jack.” Jeff says “She used to tell me you were the best partner she ever had.” He hugs Jack, who stiffens and then relaxes into it. “Thank you for bringing her home.” He lets go and Sarah reaches up to hug Jack.

“I’m sorry,” she whispers, just loud enough that Riley’s trained to snoop hearing picks it up. “We just weren’t meant to be.” She walks away with her hand in Jeff’s.

Jack watches them go. “Damn. I guess I kinda thought she’d wait forever, you know?”

“Well, there’s always my mom…” Riley grins. When Jack met Diane, there had been instant chemistry, but with both Riley and Jack working for the CIA, the rules had been clear, don’t date your partner’s mother. Now that they’re at Phoenix, Riley has a feeling Thornton would look the other way, but Jack’s never tried to rekindle things.

It’s kinda weird, I guess, to wish your work partner would date your mom, but I wouldn’t mind having Jack as a real dad.

Jack rolls his eyes, but he doesn’t say no. Riley’s about to suggest they could totally run up to Portland for the weekend to see her, but then she sees Mac standing awkwardly in the hallway, shuffling and watching them like he’s waiting for a good time to talk to them.

“Hey, Mac, is everything okay?” Riley asks.

“I’m sorry. For bailing on you.” Mac stares at the floor, biting his lip.

“As long as you’re on this team, you’re family, kid. And sometimes family does stupid stuff, but that doesn’t mean we give up on them,” Jack says. He pats Mac’s shoulder, and Mac flinches involuntarily before accepting the touch. “Yeah, I’m disappointed, but I get why you did it.”
“You have no idea how many times I’ve disobeyed one of Jack’s direct orders,” Riley says. “It almost got me killed in Cairo, but he didn’t cut me loose then. And he’s not gonna get rid of you that easy either.”

“Hey, we don’t talk about Cairo…” Jack says.

“What’s Cairo?” Mac immediately asks.

“I just said we don’t talk about it, kid, you deaf?” Jack chuckles. “Asking about Cairo is the one thing that will guarantee I do kick you off the team.”

Mac chuckles a bit weakly, but he’s still kind of smiling. “Bozer’s gonna be making enough hamburgers for an army tonight, he always does when I get back from long-term stuff. You guys wanna come over?”

“Hamburgers at the hamburger kid’s house? Hell yeah I’m in,” Jack says.

Riley thinks of Sam at the house, getting ready to do her own grilling. “Can I bring a friend?”

“Um…sure.” Mac’s smile gets a little bigger. “Your family is my family, right?”

Mac’s not sure how he and Jack ended up out here in the driveway playing basketball. But if he had to guess he’d say it’s a joint effort by Riley and Samantha. Riley’s trying hard to push him and Jack together, and Cage is an expert manipulator.

Mac wasn’t sure how he felt when Samantha showed up with Riley. He hasn’t talked to her since the evaluation she did on him, because he can’t look her in the eyes. Not after what she knows.

“As we’ve previously discussed, your time spent in solitary was not an attempt to avoid contact with other people, it was a survival mechanism.” Cage’s voice is soft, kind.

“Yes, so can we move on?” Mac understands they need to compile the data on his past, but if they know this part they’ll look at him differently. He couldn’t bear Riley’s pity. Or Jack’s. And what if instead of pity it’s judgment? What if they decide he’s not strong enough for the field, if he can’t even fight off a couple guys in a cell?

“Unfortunately there are certain…requirements for passing a psych eval for field agent. Traumatic experiences aren’t an immediate disqualification, but I do have to prove that you’re handling any past trauma in a healthy way and that it won’t affect your performance in the field.”

“It won’t.” His fingers are itching for a paperclip, but he’s pretty sure that little habit will be something Cage immediately notes. The woman is like a mind reader, and she’s prying secrets out of him that he’s never told anyone. Which terrifies him.

“Avoidance is not a healthy coping mechanism, Mac. You have to talk about it at some point.”

“No, I don’t.” He tries not to let his mind go back to that place, to the fear and pain and those men’s voices and faces. He wants to erase it all. “Because nothing happened.”

“So you spent over a year of your two years in CCI in solitary because of ‘nothing’?” Cage glances down at her notes. “There’s no shame in telling the truth, Mac. Believe me, I understand. I’ve been there.” She swallows, and for the first time Mac sees that cool composure crack a little, and a vulnerable human being peek out. “And not talking about it does not help. I’m just trying to save you the pain of five years’ experience.”
“Well, I’m not you, am I, Miss Cage?” She sits back a little straighter and the mask is back.

“I can’t force you to talk about any of this, and I don’t want to. It won’t help you at all unless you’re willing to start healing.” She closes the file. “I’ve heard all I need to.”

“Are you...are we done? You can’t let me work here because I didn’t tell you what you wanted to hear?” He’s panicking. Cage said if he didn’t get cleared he wouldn’t be able to stay. Did he just get himself sent back to CCI? He can feel himself shaking, but he pushes it down and tries to remain in control. But he’s not in control. He hasn’t been in a long time. Everything in his life rests on someone else’s decision, and the only thing he can control is what he can do to help them make that choice. “If you need to clear me, I can tell you what happened.” Because that’s a thousand times better than having it happen again.

“The way you just reacted to even the thought of having to go back inside tells me everything I needed to know. And you just confirmed it yourself. There is more you’re not telling.” She sighs. “Someday, you’re going to want to tell someone, and I’m always here to listen.” She scribbles a phone number on a piece of paper and slides it to him. “I don’t see a reason not to clear you for the field.” He notices she writes something on her notes, and then crosses out a question. “I think you’ve proven you’re a valuable asset, and sending you back to prison doesn’t do anyone any good.”

Mac doesn’t tell her he saw the question she crossed out. “Past history of sexual assault.” She knows. He didn’t even have to admit it.

Mac knows Cage was just doing her job. But he can’t stop thinking about the raw terror when she stood up, when he thought she’d decided he was hiding too much from her. She manipulated me, forced me to admit that something happened, even if she can’t force me to tell her what. Her phone number is still on that paper, crumpled up on his bedside table. He can’t call her but he can’t bring himself to throw it away.

When she walked in, Mac couldn’t stop thinking she knows she knows she knows. He’d had to force his hand not to shake when he handed her a bottle of beer. But she’d just smiled and thanked him and introduced herself to Bozer as Samantha Ross. Like nothing ever happened. He knows she’s hiding too. But it looks so easy for her. She doesn’t flinch when Jack pats her on the back, she doesn’t back away from Bozer’s in-your-face conversation style. How does she do that? Did she mean what she said about talking helping? But he’s just not ready to face that reality yet. If I tell anyone, it means it actually happened. That I’m broken and ruined. That I’m even more damaged than they know.

Out here, at least, he doesn’t have to think about all that. All he has to think about is getting past Jack’s guard and winning this game.

Mac bounces the ball between Jack’s legs, darts around Jack, under one arm, then grabs the ball and tosses it into a perfect shot. It’s really just all physics. Trajectory, speed, spherical mass...took me a while to learn that not everyone sees the world in math equations.

“Hey, they teach you to play like that in prison?”

“Nope. Mission City Elementary’s basketball team.” Mac grins. I was never much of a sports guy. But Dad wanted me to try it. So I did. To make him happy. Guess making him happy didn’t work out too well. “A bunch of over-energetic kids who couldn’t be bothered to follow the rules sure made for some interesting games.”

“So you’re telling me you learned to play basketball with a bunch of eight-year-olds?”
“Yeah, but I can still beat you, old man.” Mac’s gotten the sense that Jack actually likes his sassy streak. *Maybe he respects someone who doesn’t just roll with the punches.*

“Sure, when you push off like that!” Jack moves in fast, clearly intending to grab the ball, and Mac pushes him away with a sharp dig of an elbow and a quick sideways twist. *Okay, that one I did learn inside.*

“Nine-eight, game point,” Mac grins, pushing back his sweaty hair. “Wanna quit while you’re behind?”

“No way, cause I'm gonna beat your skinny ass easy,” Jack retorts. “Only reason I let you get ahead is cause it ain't no fun to win when it's a massacre.”

Just as Mac’s about to say something equally smart, even though he’s not entirely sure what that's going to be yet, Riley walks out. “You two might want to get in here. Bozer and Sam are fighting over the proper way to sear a burger and I think my roommate might decapitate your roommate with the spatula.”

Mac laughs. *Bozer has no idea he’s squaring off with an actual secret agent.*

“Okay, so I'll just make it quick and painless, old man.”

“You wish, Carl's Jr.”

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**NICK CARPENTER’S APARTMENT**

**IT’S NOT WHAT YOU THINK**

Samantha hears the lock disengage and sighs. *I may have been out of the field a few years, but I do keep up with my skills.* Riley’s asleep, she crashed hard after coming back from Caracas. So hard, in fact, that she fell asleep at MacGyver’s place and Sam had to drive her home.

If Riley caught Sam here, she’d be furious. But something about this place made Cage uncomfortable from the minute she walked in.

For one, it was too clean. No normal guy has an apartment that put together. Heck, no normal person has a place this perfect. It’s a shell. A cover. *There’s no scattered papers, the cupboards were perfectly organized, the furniture was new.* It’s like Nick Carpenter was invented two years ago. *I should know how that looks.*

But the big thing Cage noticed, even on a brief examination, was that she didn’t see any evidence markers locating a stash site. *Every agent, no matter how new they are to the business, no matter what they do, has one.* A place where they can hide cash, important documents, sometimes a weapon, right in plain sight.

Riley’s is a false cupboard back, right behind the box of Rice Krispies neither she nor Sam will ever touch. She showed it to Sam when they first started rooming together. There’s five thousand dollars in cash, a burner phone, a set of papers for a person with Riley’s face and the name “Elizabeth Carlton” and a small Beretta.

Sam’s is currently a loose baseboard in the bathroom. She has the same amount of cash, a folding knife and a Glock, and three sets of papers. Two of them are fake names. One is her real one. The one she’d like to forget but can’t afford to.
She already knows forensic techs didn’t find any false drawers or wall cubbies. Not even a hollow book.

*Okay, so I might have looked through the evidence files a few times. But my best friend is hurting and I want to help her. And I know people like Nick too well. Something’s missing.*

She sits down in a chair to think. It’s dark in here, and she decides to take the risk of switching on a light. She hasn’t been a fan of the dark since Kathmandu.

The lamp doesn’t turn on. Sam pushes down the horror movie scenario jitters and tries again. Then she removes the bulb. There’s not even a faint hum of electric when she flicks the switch again.

Curious, Sam turns on her phone flashlight and kneels in front of the outlet. The plug comes out easily, no scrape of metal. *A fake.*

Sam undoes the screw with a fingernail and pries the cover off. There’s a hollow recess behind it and she reaches in, ignoring a juvenile urge to scream that her hand’s being bitten off. *That would only be fun if Riley was here.*

Inside are several passports. Sam pulls them out and sits on the floor in the blue glow of her phone flashlight, leafing through them.

They’re all for Nick, and they’re all fakes. But one in particular stands out.

*Alex M. Hunter.* Cage knows that name, she just doesn’t know why. But she’s going to find out.
OF ALL THE WAYS I’VE NEARLY DIED IN THE PAST FIFTEEN YEARS, THIS DOESN’T EVEN REALLY MAKE THE LIST OF TOP THREE WORST. IT MIGHT BE IN THE TOP TEN THOUGH.

“There are a lotta things on my bucket list,” Jack yells over the roar of flames. “Seein’ a Metallica concert live, finishing the Harry Potter books, goin’ on a real old-fashioned cattle drive from the family ranch, fighting with Vladimir Putin in space…”

Riley cuts him off over comms. “Putin? In space? How would that even…”

“It’s a bucket list! It doesn’t have to make sense, Ri.”

“Actually,” Mac can’t resist pointing out, “it kinda does have to make sense.”

“Not my point!” Jack yells back. “The point is, none of those include hanging out in a burning building that you set on fire!”

“Well I’m sorry I didn’t have time to think of a better plan! Maybe I would have if you hadn’t decided to barge into a Somalian warlord’s camp like an elephant and let them all know we were coming! At least this got them off our tail!”

“Yeah, because they know we’re gonna die and they’re not gonna waste bullets!”

It’s getting hotter and harder to breathe. Burning debris is falling, and Mac can feel it singeing his clothes and stinging on his skin. He tugs his t-shirt over his face, trying to avoid breathing some of the smoke. *Most fire deaths aren’t from burns, they’re from smoke inhalation.*

“Jack,” he gasps out, “Cover your face and bend over as much as you can.” Jack nods. That helps a little, but it’s not going to do them any good if they can’t find an exit.

“Patty, did you get the coordinates we sent?” Jack asks.

“I sure hope so, because if not this was officially the most unproductive risk we’ve ever taken.

Thornton’s crisp voice comes over the comms. “We’re targeting a drone strike. General Dolmar’s chemical weapons factory is about to be history.”

“Riley, is there a way outta here?” Jack asks, between coughs.

“Just hacked that aid organization’s database and got the blueprints. Stairwell up ahead!” Riley says. Mac sees it, and just as quickly sees the three oxygen tanks stacked inside.

“Jack! Get back!” he yells, and drags them both around a corner just as the entire stairwell explodes. His ears are ringing and aching, and he’s pretty sure there are going to be some burns on the back of one leg, but they’re both still alive. Although they won’t be for much longer unless they have a plan B.
“Was that stairwell our only way out?” he asks.

“Why? What’s wrong with it?” Riley asks.

“I think it would be quicker to explain what’s not wrong with it,” Jack mutters. He and Mac are now looking down at the twisted hunk of metal that used to be stairs, and the glare he’s giving Mac means he definitely blames him for this. Although I think it would be a first if Jack wasn’t blaming me for something that went wrong.

“What did you do?” Riley asks.

“Why do you always assume it’s my fault when something blows up?” Mac grumbles.

“Because it usually is, genius,” Jack says.

Mac can hear Riley typing. “So I think I found you an alternative. Windows, behind you, down the hallway to the left about fifty feet. Except there’s a catch.”

Mac glances down. Oh hell no. The world spins a little and Mac steps back because his knees are shaking and he thinks he might fall. We’re four stories off the ground.

He glances around the room. There’s a fire extinguisher on the wall, and he remembers seeing another one down closer to the stairwell that exploded. Thankfully, when he grabs it, it’s still functional, if somewhat hot. His hands are already singed, the pain he can deal with. Because getting burned alive or breaking every bone in his body jumping out those windows is going to hurt so much more.

“Unless you can find like fifty more of those, that’s not really gonna help, Carl’s Jr.” Jack looks skeptically at the two fire extinguishers.

“They’re not to put out the fire. They’re going to help us get out of here. Mac finds a stack of body bags in a corner, that’s not ominous at all, and grabs two, starting to duct tape the extinguishers to them.

If there’s one thing I’ve learned in my life, it’s that no one really knows how much time they have left. Whether it’s a twenty-year old falling off a roof that should have broken his neck, or a fifteen year old who was on his way to meet his friends when he got gunned down in a street. Life doesn’t have rules about who makes it and who doesn’t. So sometimes it’s up to people like me to give life a little nudge in the right direction.

Mac picks up one of the bags, wraps it around his back, and grins at Jack.

“Hell no. I’m not re-creating Wall-E.”

“Jack, this isn’t even on the same concept…” Mac sighs. “It’s this or wait for the fire to get us.”

“I hate you.” But Jack takes the other body bag. Both of them climb into the windows.

“Any last words?” Mac asks, feeling the beginnings of a hysterical laugh coming on. I’m about to voluntarily throw myself out of a fourth floor window. What am I doing with my life?

Jack shakes his head, and then they both fall backward. Mac knows he’s screaming, and he’s pretty sure Jack is too, but it’s hard to tell over the ongoing repeat of we’re gonna die, we’re gonna die going through his head, which now that he thinks about it sounds a little more like Jack’s voice than his own.
“Now!” He yells, squeezing the fire extinguisher’s handle and feeling the bag underneath him start to fill with foam. *Don’t flip over, don’t flip over.* And then the ground slams into him, and he feels all the air leave his lungs and at least two ribs crack on impact. He’s pretty sure his entire back is now a giant bruise. *I’m not gonna be able to walk right for days.* He struggles to get a little air back in his protesting lungs, feeling his chest heaving and straining the damaged ribs. If he had any air left in him, he’d be groaning, but it comes out as more of a strangled squeak.

Beside him, Jack is rolling over, also panting. “If you set fire to one more thing while I’m inside it, Carl’s Jr., I’m gonna kill you.”

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**HOLLYWOOD HILLS**

**THIS BUILDING IS NOT ON FIRE...YET**

Bozer still doesn’t think he’s used to seeing Mac walk through the door. *After they took him away I thought the only times I was ever gonna see him again there’d be bulletproof glass between us. Not that it doesn’t feel like there is.* Ever since Mac came back, he’s been different.

Bozer knows he’s not really the same either. *I’ve always felt like it’s my fault, everything that happened. Mac wouldn’t have done what he did if I’d never made friends with him. It was because of me, and Jerry, that he ended up in CCI instead of MIT.*

Sometimes Bozer feels guilty that, out of all of them, he’s the one who walked away undamaged. *Yeah, I’m flipping burgers for twelve hours a day, but at least I’m not dead or in prison for life without parole.* He listens to the people at work complain about shitty friend drama or problems with parents or a hike in gas prices, and he wants to tell them they have no idea what it is to hurt. What it’s like to watch your baby brother get lowered into the ground in a coffin. To watch your mom fall apart and drink until she doesn’t even notice you pour the rest of the whiskey down the sink. To watch the joy and enthusiasm fade out of your best friend’s eyes until all that’s left is a cold desire for vengeance. To hand him a mask and a hoodie and watch him climb out your bedroom window knowing this might be the time he doesn’t come home. To turn on the TV and see him cuffed and shoved into a police car.

But he doesn’t. Because for all he knows they have terrible stories too, stories that, like him, they don’t share. Because at work he complains about grease stains and traffic and slow wifi, and no one would ever know how much he’s lost.

It’s an act, and Bozer is good at acting. Mac never was. But it seems he’s gotten just good enough to hide the truth.

Because there’s some truth that’s hiding under the surface. Bozer is used to waking up to Mac’s nightmares, but in the past they were always screams of falling, or desperately muttering, over and over, “Dad, where are you? I can’t see you? Please come back, I’m scared.” And back then, Mac was always more than a little embarrassed that he’d woken anyone up, but he never refused one of Bozer’s hugs.

Now the nightmares are desperate, choking cries. “Leave me alone! Don’t touch me! Stop!” And when Bozer tries to wake him up, tries to comfort him, Mac shoves him away with so much fear and horror in his eyes that Bozer always feels chilled. There are no more hugs, no more friendly pats on the back and reassurances that Mac isn’t annoying. Now the nightmares usually end with Mac sitting alone at the firepit with a beer in his hand and not-so-well-disguised tears in his eyes.

*I’ve known Mac a long time, and I know better than to push him to tell me something he’s not ready*
to. It’ll only push him further away. But the fact remains that something that happened to Mac in prison has shaken him. Badly. And Bozer doesn’t want to jump to conclusions, doesn’t want to think of a possibility worse than an actual reality, but until Mac tells him he lies awake listening to the the sobbing screams and he knows, in a visceral way that sickens him, what’s wrong. Why Mac pushes him away instead of welcoming the physical contact. Why any touch only makes the dreams worse instead of pulling him out of them. Why he checks the lock on the bathroom door three times before getting in the shower.

But during the day, Mac’s his normal, geeky, smiling, inventive self, and Bozer can almost forget the nights. He knows it’s an act, at least some of it. Mac isn’t okay, and he can’t pretend forever. But some small part of Bozer selfishly wants him to keep on hiding. Because this way Boze doesn’t need to be reminded that all the nightmares, all the fear, all the pain, are because of him.

So when Mac comes in, smiling and...limping a little?...Bozer accosts him at the front door with a handful of ping-pong balls and some adhesive gum.

“Boze? What’s going on?” Mac asks, but he’s chuckling in spite of himself as Bozer sticks a ping-pong ball to his cheek.

“They’re for the CGI. For the space monster.”

Mac drops his duffel bag, and why does he keep pulling all these overnighters at the think tank? Are they working on the cure for cancer there? Probably, actually... and allows himself to be pushed in front of Bozer’s makeshift green screen. “A space monster? I thought I was playing a general last time. Why is there a space monster?”

“Of course there’s a space monster. Did you not read the rewrite? Seventeenth draft.” Bozer watches Mac’s limp grow more pronounced. “What did you do to your leg, man? Cause if that’s not gonna go away any time soon it’s really gonna mess up the motion capture for the CGI.”

“Fell asleep in a desk chair. Those things are not comfortable,” Mac says. That’s too easy... But Bozer brushes off his worry. The last time Mac explained away random injuries with simple, easy reasons, it was because he was running all over the city getting shot at and beat up by cartels. But now he’s on probation, and he’s wearing a tether 24/7. If he was off playing hero, his PO would know about it. And the guy hasn’t called or sent anyone to haul Mac off in cuffs again, so things must be fine.

Mac’s still on the topic of the space monster. “It’s CGI. Why can’t you just be the monster?”

“But then who’s gonna direct me? Use that big brain, Mac!” Bozer laughs. In all reality I could totally do it all myself. But dragging Mac into it all makes it feel a little more like the way things used to be. And for a little while, it takes his mind off the real world. “How about a bribe? You play my monster, I’ll make waffles every morning before I leave.”

“You already do that, Boze. Nice try though.”

“Okay, pancakes then?”

Bozer’s sure Mac’s about to crack. He only protests out of sheer stubborn humor at this point. They both know he’s going to do it. And then, in a stroke of perfectly terrible timing, his phone rings. Mac answers it and the smile on his face fades.

“Sorry, man, I gotta go.” He pats Bozer’s shoulder as he passes, and Boze can’t help but wonder what’s going on. The last time he acted like this was when he was the Phoenix. But that can’t be
Riley picks Mac up at the end of his street. She doesn’t miss the way Mac grimaces when he puts weight on his left leg, and there’s a small stab of guilt in her chest. If I’d managed to find them another way out, he wouldn’t have gotten hurt jumping out that window. Jack complained about a sore ass the whole flight home, but Riley could see Mac cringe every time he bent over. He cracked some ribs, and he’s probably got some really nasty bruises.

“Every time he almost gets killed on a mission, he comes out here to talk to his dad.” Riley says.

“Not gonna lie to ya, pops,” Jack’s saying, “I was freaking out. But the kid was fearless.” Riley sees Mac stop dead in his tracks. Jack never compliments him to his face. He probably thinks the guy barely puts up with him. But Riley sees the small smiles of pride on Jack’s face whenever Mac does something crazy clever.

And then Jack must hear their footsteps, because he stops talking and stands up to look over the headstone behind him. “Hey! You two gotta learn not to sneak up on people like that! I coulda shot you!”

“Nice to see you too Jack. Hey Gramps,” Riley says, knocking her fist on the headstone. I started calling his dad Gramps about a year after we met. And the third time Jack insisted it was rude to just wave at the headstone and sit in silence.

“Pops, this is the kid. Carl’s Jr.,” Jack says, and Mac groans.

“Does he have to introduce me that way even to dead people?”

“Say hi,” Riley hisses. I know it’s weird. But it’s Jack’s thing. So go with it.

“Hey, Mr. Dalton. How’s...life?” Mac asks, sitting down with his back against the rough stone beside Jack.

Jack sighs. “Sorry, Pops, he didn’t mean to be rude. Poor thing, he’s a genius when it comes to physics, but with metaphysics, he’s a little slow.”

“Riley said you come here a lot.” Mac’s awkwardly trying to make conversation, but Jack’s at least not shutting him out.

“Yeah. There’s not a lotta people you can talk to about classified missions, ya know? Pops can keep a secret.”

“Well, he’s gonna have one more to keep in a couple days,” Riley says. “Patty called. She needs us at the Phoenix ASAP.”

“Okay. See ya later, Pops,” Jack says, resting his fist on the headstone before walking away. Riley follows with Mac. He’s been pretty closed-off lately, not really talking to her or Jack beyond what’s necessary for the mission or responding to Jack’s ribbing. Maybe if I go first, he’ll be more willing to be vulnerable.

“You know, I’m actually jealous of Jack’s relationship with his dad. Like, the guy’s dead and they have better conversations than my family. They were close.” Riley shrugs. “My mom doesn’t know what I do for a living and my dad...well...” She runs her hand over the top of a headstone. Sometimes I think we’d all be better off if Jack’s dad was alive and mine was gone.”
“Um...that sucks. I’m sorry.” She can hear the unspoken question in his words. Why? What happened? But he’s too polite, or scared, to ask.

“I haven’t talked to my dad in years,” Riley says quietly. “He left when I was twelve, probably for the best. He used to hit my mom, and he basically ignored me. He’s tried to come back a couple times, but it’s always the same thing. He shows up, swears he’s changed, and then a week later falls down on my doorstep dead drunk and asking for a hundred bucks.” She sighs. “I’m done with him. He may not be six feet under, but he’s dead to me.”

“I haven’t seen my dad in a long time either,” Mac mutters, kicking at the grass. “He never even tried to come back.”

“Sorry I brought up bad memories,” Riley says, suddenly hating herself for her own pity party. I saw his file. He doesn’t even know where his dad went. Sam is very, very good, and despite the fact that Mac probably never outright admitted his father disappeared and never came back, she’d put together the pieces.

But whatever else Sam knows about Mac that isn’t in the file, she’s not telling. The only other thing she’s this closed-off about is her own past. So if Riley wants answers, she’s going to have to get them from Mac himself, or not at all.

Carl’s Jr. snaps up a paperclip the second they get inside the War Room. Jack ignores him and sits down, barely giving the carnage of exploded buildings on the screen a second glance. His nightmares of being trapped in a burning, exploding building have enough fodder already, thank you very much.

Patty seems completely unaffected by the images. “Over the past two years five government buildings have been blown up. The blasts have killed fifty-seven people and injured hundreds more. The most recent attack was traced to a group called Division 77.”

“I heard of them with the CIA,” Riley says. “I was doing some preliminary investigation of their dark web activity right before we transferred. They were just emerging as an international terrorist group for hire.”

“Well, they’ve been busy since then. And proved nearly impossible to track down. The FBI has, however, managed to trace their funding. And all that money leads back to one man.”

The next picture on the screen is arguable worse than the gutted buildings.

“Hedge fund manager Ralph Kastrani.”

“That guy has a punchface,” Jack mutters.

“My mom dated a guy like that once,” Riley says. She doesn’t, Jack notes, add that she punched him. Repeatedly. She broke three bones in her hand and was on medical leave for two months. Jack took personal time to come visit her. Which was when he met, and might have slightly fallen head over heels for, Diane Davis. Who thinks he’s a bathroom tile salesman and that Riley is their social media coordinator. Jack hates that he still remembers that Daltile carries twenty-six different colors of subway tile and that he can name all of them with the color and product code. That’s the most useless information I’ve ever learned for a cover ID. And very unlikely to impress a potential future girlfriend.

Not that that’s here nor there, Jack thinks. It’s too soon to be thinking about anyone after Sarah. But maybe I should do something before it’s too late.
“Dalton? Are you present or should we wait five minutes for your brain to catch up with your body?” Patty asks.

“I’m with you.”

“Kastrani recently fled the U.S., and four hundred and eighty counts of fraud. He’s hiding out in the tropical tax haven of Labuan, Malaysia.”

“Well, then why doesn’t the FBI just ask the Malaysian authorities to pick him up?” Carl’s Jr. asks. That’s actually a good question.

“We believe D77 has informants in the Malaysian government. If they get wind that we’re after their money man, they’ll move Kastrani and any operations, and we lose our best chance of bringing them down.”

“So this is a simple asset extraction then?” Riley says.

“There’s nothing simple about it.” Patty’s eyes are glacier ice. “D77 is stepping up their game. We know their next move will be big. Their last purchase was a bomb with the capability to destroy ten city blocks. And they usually enact their plans within a week of purchasing any weapons. We have six days to turn a financial paper trail into actionable intel.”

Riley nods.

The kid drops his paperclip on the table. It looks like a Celtic knot.

LABUAN MALAYSIA

HAVEN OF TAX EVADERS...AND MOSQUITOES

Most movies and crime shows make stakeouts out to be boring. They’re wrong. Stakeouts go beyond boring, straight into mind-numbing limbo. Especially when the person you’re watching is the most self-centered moron on planet earth.

Mac shifts wearily on the floor of the van. This is the third time he’s taken apart their one non-functioning walkie. He’s reworked the others so that they’re capable of functioning in the heavy Malaysian humidity without turning into little more than squealing ear torture, but this one has something else wrong with it.

Riley’s munching away at a bag of some kind of vegetable chips, but Mac doesn’t feel like eating. He thinks the little street vendor Jack insisted they stop at for lunch might have been selling spoiled meat. His stomach won’t stop churning, and the stuffy heat inside the van is not helping. It smells like grease and gun oil and sweat, and if they open the windows they’ll be eaten alive by the bugs swarming the trees that are hiding them from a direct view of Ralph Kastrani’s house. Which Mac thinks shouldn’t even be termed ‘house’.

Jack shakes his head. “Place looks like a Kardashian exploded.” It’s his turn to man the driver’s seat and keep the surveillance going. So far, they’ve gotten nothing more interesting than Ralph going for a swim, spending an hour on his computer watching what Riley has been able to determine are videos of fainting goats, and then reheating some kind of takeout meal from his fridge.

“Hey guys, Ralph just placed an outside call. To a US number.” Riley says. She switches the audio on on her laptop and presses record.
“Yo! Georgie! Man, you need to come visit me down here. Like seriously!”

“What are you talking about?” The voice on the other end sounds tired and fed-up. “You’re not on a damn vacation! This is an exile!”

“Exile? I got news for you, even if I wasn’t on the run I’d still be living down here! It’s like heaven, man! Good food, amazing weather, beautiful women…it’s the life! I’m bigger than Kanye!”

“You shouldn’t call me. It’s not safe, not with the heat on you. I don’t want to get caught up in this. Are you sure your place is secure?”

“Hell yeah it’s safe! I just fired my bodyguards and pocketed their salary.”

Mac leans against the side of the van. He looks down at the blinking light on his ankle tether and then sighs.

*My grandpa told me a long time ago that life’s not fair. But sometimes the reminders still hurt. This guy should be in jail. And here he is, living a millionaire’s life in a paradise. He launders money for terrorists, and he’s living like a king. I tried to help clean up the LA streets, and I’m one wrong move away from getting sent back to a living hell. He knows this kind of bitterness is only going to be trouble, but he can’t help his thoughts.*

*Let that kinda thinking get to you, and you’re going to become the monster you’re so afraid of. He can’t let that darkness in. He came so close, after losing Pena. So close to no longer believing in good, in heroes, in any kind of justice in the world. What happened to him wasn’t fair. But life’s just not fair. And some of us get to have a hand in bringing a little more of an even hand to the table.*

He can still hear Ralph’s voice over the surveillance radio. “I’m eating caviar for every meal! I’m brushing my teeth with foie gras!”

“Okay, that’s just gross,” Riley mutters. And just like that, Mac’s anger starts to slip away. *I may not have the kind of life anyone would want, but I have an amazing family.* He knows Ralph doesn’t have anyone like Jack and Riley. *He might have all the money in the world, but I still have something better.*

He pushes himself up and glances through the window of the van. “Ralph might have fired his bodyguards, but his security system is state of the art. But if that’s all that’s between us and him, I think I know a way to get around it.”

*One thing I learned when I was breaking into places was that the more high-tech the system, the more faith people put in it. Most people assume that if they paid a lot of money for a security system, it’s going to be hard to crack. And that’s true, up to a point. But the weak spot in any technology is the people using it.* Mac disassembles the backup computer and a small tablet and removes the wifi chips, lining them up inside a soda can he’s just cut apart. *And just like that, we’ve got a mini signal jammer. Which will make Ralph’s alarm go off. So he’ll put in his code. Which we can see.*

Sure enough, when the system squeals a warning Ralph doesn’t even pause his bragging. He tucks the phone against his shoulder and taps in the digits.

5673.

Riley, who’s still in the back on her laptop rig, rattles off the digits as Mac writes them down on his hand. He stops, smudging the marker on his hand. “Wh...how did you know that?”

“Bypassing security systems was a hobby of mine when I was twelve.” She shrugs. “I just used the
manufacturer override sequence to hack his system and get his code.”

“You couldn’t have just told us that in the first place?”

“It was more fun watching you take things apart.”

Mac looks at her to see if she was joking, but there’s only sincere curiosity in her eyes. *No one’s ever really interested in what I do. Bozer tried, but he didn’t understand and he’d go back to his masks while I rigged things to blow up.*

And his work going over people’s heads is by far the best case scenario. If he’s only misunderstood, it’s better than being bullied, ridiculed, or looked at with nothing but suspicion and fear.

He learned early that what he did scared people. When he burned down the high school football stadium, *and really that was more of a small nuclear meltdown,* everyone in town had looked at him differently, like people look at him now when they find out he’s an ex-con. Everyone knew he was dangerous. Everyone knew he was a disaster waiting to happen. *Maybe that’s why Dad left. Because I was too much of a problem.*

But Jack and Riley don’t think he’s a problem. They may not always understand what Mac does, but they appreciate it. Yes, Jack jokes every other day that Mac’s going to blow them all off the face of the earth, but it doesn’t bother him as much as it used to because he knows Jack doesn’t really mean it. That’s just becoming normal Jack. As is the terrible “Carl’s Jr.” joke. Mac’s beginning to think Jack’s actually forgotten his real name at this point.

“Now we just have to wait for him to go to sleep.” Riley leans back and picks up her headphones.

“It’s gonna be just me and Beyonce from here on in.”

“Do I seriously have to listen to this asshat all day?” Jack asks.

Riley gives him an unsympathetic smirk. “Actually he times his sleep to the American markets. So you have to listen to this asshat all night.”

Mac starts putting the computer he ripped apart back together, praying it works when he’s done. The last time he disassembled Phoenix tech for a mission, Thornton heard about it, probably from Jack, and told him replacement costs were coming out of his paycheck.

Just when Jack’s ready to throw caution to the wind, storm in that house, and knock the daylights out of that entitled bastard himself, Ralph shuts off his giant TV and heads for his bedroom.

Jack’s pretty sure it’s only going to take one field agent to grab this doofus, so he leaves Riley with the van, and takes Carl’s Jr. with him. The kid seems to be a hands-on learner and this is one mission he probably can’t mess up. *He’s got no experience with covert ops, and we’ve been dragging him all over the world. Shoulda started with milk runs like this.*

Granted, Jack’s very first CIA field mission went belly-up and left him running for his life in the Ukraine with only a backpack and a waterlogged walkie, but he’d had six months at the Farm to prepare him.

They get to the door and Jack’s about to kick it in when the kid stops him. “We don’t want to startle him!”

“Who’s the experienced agent here?” Jack snaps back, very unhappy with this newbie questioning his tactics. “This works fine for me every time.” Yes, he does usually end up chasing and having to
tackle his target, but that’s half the fun of extractions of unwilling criminals. And he doesn’t think old Ralphie’s gonna be able to outrun him any time soon. And if he runs it’s the perfect excuse to deck him.

“Let me try my way. Just try?” Carl’s Jr. asks.

“Okay, sure, whatever.”

The kid looks at the lock and pulls a paperclip out of his pocket. “I’m gonna need your sunglasses.”

“You’re gonna break ‘em, aren’t you?” God help him if he ever asks for my phone. “You’re replacing those, okay?”

“These aren’t even designer. They’re dollar store knock-offs,” the kid mutters as, just as Jack expected, he snaps off one of the earpieces.

“Yeah, well, they’re my favorite pair.” Jack watches the kid work, and a few seconds later the lock pops open. The security system trills softly, but stops as soon as Carl’s Jr. punches in the code.

“Go find his computer,” Jack says, and heads for the bedroom. Ralph is sprawled out with a sleep mask on, snoring. When Jack walks in, the guy shifts, mumbles something, and then sits up, looking in exactly the wrong direction.

“Huh? Who…” He pulls the mask off and sees Jack, immediately flails and falls off the bed, and runs. Jack takes off after him, grinning.

Jack stops grinning when he makes it to the living room and sees Ralph on the floor and Carl’s Jr. shaking out his hand and grimacing. “Hey, that was my punchface guy.”

“You’d rather have started chasing him down the street?”

“He wasn’t gonna make it to the street.” Jack snaps.

“Yeah he was with the way you were running, old man.”

Ralph groans from the floor. “Hey, I don’t know who you guys are, but could you shut the hell up? Goldilocks here just gave me a headache, and you’re not helping!” The kid gives Jack a wounded look. Guess you’re just a magnet for nicknames. Mine is so much more creative though.

“Yeah, well, I’m gonna give you a bigger headache if you don’t shut up!” Jack snaps, drawing his sidearm.

“Whoa, whoa, hey, cool it Jason Bourne!” At least I got a cool nickname. “Hey, whatever you’re getting paid, I’ll triple it.”

“We’re not here for money. We’re here for you.” Jack keeps the gun aimed at Ralph’s head.

“Just let me get dressed, okay?” The guy scoots backward, holding his cheek. Jack nods. He’d like to take Ralph and be gone, but he’s seen more than enough of this guy in his underwear, and he kind of wants to wash his eyes out with bleach after this mission is over.

The kid sighs when Ralph walks away. “How come I’m Goldilocks and you get to be Jason Bourne?”

“Because I’m just that cool, kid. So don’t complain about me calling you Carl’s Jr. again or Goldilocks is your new nickname, got it?”
When Ralph re-emerges from his giant walk-in closet, buttoning his shirt and grumbling about the bruise on his cheekbone, Jack grabs him before he bolts again.

“Now you’re gonna tell us how to find the people you work for.”

“Huh?”

“D77. We know you handle their finances,” the kid says.

“Yeah, but that doesn’t mean I know how to find them. I’m just the money man, dude. I don’t know what they do with it once they’ve got it.”

“Tell that to our interrogator when we get you stateside,” Jack mutters, grabbing Ralph’s arm. Cage will get the truth out of him.

“Hey, Jason Bourne, get your hands off me!” Ralph shrugs away. “This is custom tailored linen, man!” Ralph continued to grumble as Jack leads him out. “Hey, you guys want a boat? Or a house in Monaco?” And then there’s a sharp crack and Ralph gasps and stumbles sideways, red blooming across his shirt.

Jack drags him and the kid behind the planters in front of the house. Ralph is gasping for breath, eyes wide, hands clutching his chest.

“Please don’t let me die.”

“Sniper on your eleven o’clock!” Riley yells. Jack hears a shot that cracks over the comms and through the air, and then the bullets stop flying for a moment. There’s our window. He stands up to run for the van, but just then there’s another spray of bullets, this time from a different direction. He drops back behind one of the planters, cursing. The graze he just picked up isn’t that bad, but it’s gonna hurt like hell any time he moves that leg.

“I say we ditch this guy and bolt. You got the intel, right?” he whispers to the kid.

Riley must hear him over comms, because she shuts that idea down fast. “The data is going to take months to sort through without his knowledge. We need to get him and his intel to the FBI.”

“I think we can do that,” Carl’s Jr. says. “I’ve got a plan.” Oh no.

Ralph’s come to the same conclusion Jack has. “Does a doctor figure into this plan? Cause I just got shot!”

“Workin’ on it!” the kid yelps as another round of bullets rattles against the side of the house.

Jack can see that the second sniper is between them and the van, with a clear line of sight the whole way. If they notice Riley, they’ll start going after her too. “Riley! We can’t make it to you! Get outta here before they see you!”

“How are we gonna get out of here without your people?” Ralph asks wheezily.

“We’re gonna take your car,” Jack says, pointing to the white SUV parked in the driveway.

“No! That’s a custom ride, man! Do you know how much that cost?”

“Do you want to live?” Jack snaps back. He rushes across the yard and smashes in the driver’s side window with his elbow. There’s a sudden beeping chirp and he looks back to see Ralph holding something in his hand.
“Dude, I have the key!”

They all climb into the car, Jack driving, Carl’s Jr. and Ralph in the back seat. “Do you know how hard it is to get blood out of calfskin?” Ralph asks.

Jack’s always had a particular sore spot with guys like this. When you grow up scraping and saving to make sure you make it through one more winter without having to mortgage the ranch, when you join the army instead of going to college because your grandma’s cancer ate up the family savings, there’s not much room for sympathy for guys like Ralph. Admittedly, the guy has been shot, but Jack’s been there, done that, too. *Suck it up, buttercup. Sometimes life hurts a hell of a lot. So stop complaining.* “Can I just punch him now?” Jack snaps.

“Not while we’re being shot at!” The kid glares at him. Jack hits the gas and they burn rubber out of the driveway, speeding down the road until they make it to a freeway. Jack merges into the middle of traffic, hoping it will make the bright white Mercedes a little harder to track.

“Why are they trying to kill me?” Ralph yells. “This is your fault! Everything was fine until you showed up!”

“Yeah, well, too late to go back now,” Jack snaps. “Your best chance of stayin’ alive right now is if you tell us how to find D77.”

“What do you want me to tell you? That I put their money in merged growth accounts? That I never leave their money in one account for more than a year? That I stagger short-term investment schedules to ensure maximum growth?”

“That means nothin’ to me, Rudolph.” Jack shakes his head. *The only possibly useful part of that is the fact that he moves the money often.*

“I’m just a glorified accountant, man. I don’t know nothin’!” Ralph says, then begins to gasp. “And man, I don’t feel so good.”

Jack shakes his head. “Oh suck it up, Rodger.”

“It’s Ralph! And I think I have a right to complain, I just got shot!”

“I got shot too, do you see me complaining?” Jack snaps.

Carl’s Jr. looks up from where he’s started ripping apart pieces of the car to do...something smart. “You’re not suffocating on your own blood and a bunch of air in your chest, Jack. He has a sucking chest wound, I have to seal it.”

“Not helpful, kid! Stop taking his side!” Jack sighs. This is gonna be a long road trip. And that’s before the phone rings and he sees Patty’s name pop up.

“Hi Patty.”

“Riley just called me. Said something about a sniper and a change of plans? Please tell me you have Ralph and the intel.”

Jack takes a deep breath. *There’s usually no point in lying to Patty. She always seems to know when something’s not kosher. But I try anyway. Honestly, if I was her, I think I’d rather be lied to, cause what’s she gonna do about this from halfway across the world except worry? I’d rather just find out shit went down after everyone’s made it to exfil.* “Yeah, we do. Everything’s fine.”
“There’s blood everywhere!” Ralph moans from the backseat.

“That doesn’t sound fine.”

“Ralph just sorta got shot. In his shoulder, it’s fine.”

The kid grabs the phone from him. “Yeah, but the part of his shoulder that’s kinda his chest. But I think I can fix it.” Jack snatches the phone back and hangs up before Patty says anything more. *That was definitely not the most reassuring thing you could have told her. “I think I can fix it”? Really, kid?*

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*I’ve seen my share of life and death situations, and the key to living through them is not to panic. If you can take a minute and breathe, the solution is generally right in front of you.*

Mac pulls Ralph’s bloodied shirt away from his wound and examines it. He can honestly say he’s seen worse. “You’re lucky. The bullet missed your heart and hit your lung.”

“Lucky? Getting shot is supremely un-lucky in my book, Goldilocks!” Ralph is starting to wheeze in a way that’s all too familiar to Mac. *His lung’s collapsed and his chest is filling with air. In a hospital they’d treat this with a needle with a one-way valve. But I’ve never been much of a hospitals guy.*

Mac rummages through the car, finding a couple bottles of hand sanitizer in the center console. “Ralph, I’m gonna need your wallet.”

Ralph shoots him a both wounded and triumphant look. “I knew it! You’re just a couple of thieves.”

“No, I need it to save your life,” Mac sighs, already beginning to pull off the side of the door and remove some of the plastic seal. When Ralph hands it over, he pulls out the driver’s license.

*When you’re not near a hospital...or you can’t exactly explain to them why you have a bullet hole in your chest...a driver’s license vent seal can do the trick until you can find someone to patch it up better. Mac’s spent his share of time on a table in the back of a small nonprofit clinic in a Puerto Rican immigrant neighborhood. The former Army medic who ran it, Carlos Rivera, was grateful to the person who protected the neighborhood from drug dealers and traffickers, and was willing to patch up anything Mac came to him with and keep it off the records. *He told me that as long as I kept the neighborhood kids from coming to him with gunshot wounds, he was more than willing to take care of mine.*

I haven’t seen Carlos since...since I got arrested. Wonder if he moved back to Puerto Rico yet? The guy was always planning on it. Taking his wife and his two-year-old daughter back to his mother’s home and opening a clinic there. *I hope life treated him well. If anyone deserved a good life, it’s Carlos.* The man would drop anything, day or night, to help someone in trouble. He loved that neighborhood and those people and he’d do anything to make sure they stayed safe. He was one of the few people in Mac’s life he felt like he could genuinely trust.

“Dude, did you have to tear the door off?” Ralph asks, sitting up as the vent relieves pressure on his lungs.

Jack groans from the front seat. “After you get done saving his life I’m gonna kill him. I’m already dressed for a funeral.”

“Do you ever shut up, Jason Bourne?”

“I dunno, do you?” Jack asks. And then he turns on the radio and a George Jones song starts
Ralph immediately looks offended. “Don’t play country music in this car. It’s an affront to everything this vehicle stands for!”

“Yeah, well, I’m gonna keep playing it until you tell me how we’re gonna find D77.”

“They draw lump sums to a Cayman account! I don’t know any more.” Ralph leans back against the seat and Mac shifts to look out the back window. There’s a car behind them, weaving in and out of traffic so frantically that can’t mean anything good.

“Jack, I think we picked up a tail!” The warning isn’t really necessary, because the next second a spray of bullets smashes out the rear glass, they all duck on instinct, and Ralph starts screaming.

“Oh my god we’re gonna die!”

“Shut up or I’m gonna kill you!” Jack yells back, swerving in and out between cars like a crazy person. And then he jumps the car over the median and they’re driving into oncoming traffic.

“Car! Car!” Ralph yells, then falls back against the seat, groaning. “I don’t want to die listening to country music, man!”

The phone rings and Mac crawls into the front seat to grab it, because Jack is a little busy trying not to get them all killed in a head-on collision. “Riley?”

“Guys, I’m at the meet coordinates we agreed on if things went south. Where are you guys?”

“That’s a long story!” Mac flinches again as the car behind them gets another clear line of sight and begins shooting.

“Are those...bullets?” Riley asks. “Don’t even answer that. I’m coming to you guys.” She hangs up. *I guess she knows Jack too well.* Now they just have to stay alive long enough for Riley to come find them so they can disappear in a much less conspicuous vehicle.

Ralph is still panicking in the back seat. “We’re gonna die. We’re gonna die.” Mac tunes his voice out and focuses. They need a distraction, something to get these guys off their tail. And then he has an idea.

*Like Ralph, most people spend their lives focusing on the wrong things. Normally, that’s a bad habit. But it just might save our lives.*

Mac yanks the headrest out of his seat, slashes a tear in the leather, and then rummages through the glove compartment for paper. He shoves some of the paper into the slit in the headrest and then digs a lighter out of his knapsack.

“Are you making a bomb? Is that an actual bomb?” Jack asks. “Because if it is I think you might want to throw it right now, genius.”

“It’s not a bomb, Jack. the headrest is made of flame-retardant foam. It won’t burn, but it will smoke like crazy.” Sure enough, the inside of the car is filling with grey fog.

“Hey kid, we might wanna talk about short term goals cause I think you’re makin’ it easier for them to find us!” *Oh Jack. He always thinks I’m gonna get us killed. And you know, one of these days, he’s probably going to be right.*
It’s not like the guy chose the safest line of work in the first place. Mac’s heard stories, from Riley, of Jack’s fairly consistent near-death experiences, in the Army, as a Delta, in the CIA. The guy basically had a death wish. Until he met Riley. Ever since then, as far as he can tell from the stories, Jack’s been a lot more careful. Most of the truly insane stuff Riley’s told him is hearsay she’s picked up from his old Delta and CIA teams. Which means it’s probably also slightly exaggerated to impress her, but still. Having that girl in his life seems to have made Jack a lot more stable.

Mac leans out the window with the smoking headrest, and feels Jack grab at his belt to keep him from falling all the way out. Just like Riley did in North Korea. And just like then, Mac feels the same instinctive surge of panic. Get your hands off me! Let go! He knows they’re not going to hurt him, but there’s something viscerally frightening about anyone’s hands on his belt, his pants. He jerks back inside before he thinks about it, and the car fills with smoke again.

“What the hell?” Jack yells, and Ralph starts coughing. Get a grip. If you don’t stop freaking out, everyone in this car is going to die. He leans back out the window, steeling himself not to react to Jack’s grasp. The car behind them seems to be struggling to see through the smoke, and they’ve stopped shooting.

“Smoke screen! Nice!” Jack says.

“Oh, it’s more than a smoke screen. Can you get me closer to that truck?” Mac flings the burning headrest into the bed of a rattletrap pickup and slides back inside, willing his skin to stop crawling at the persistent feel of hands against his body. He shudders and when Jack glances at him with concern, coughs lightly, as if to blame the motion on smoke inhalation. He doesn’t know what he’s doing. It’s fine. It’s my own fault; if I want them to be careful around me I have to tell them the truth. And he can’t. He just can’t.

He takes a few deep breaths, coughing out the last of the smoke, and leans back. I’m okay. I’m okay. Jack once again misinterprets the action, this time as relief.

“Man, that was insane. I thought you were gonna get us all killed. I can’t believe that worked!”

“People are easily distracted,” Mac mutters. “They don’t stop to think of a reason for what they’re seeing. Those guys probably thought they shot out something vital and the car was on fire. They didn’t even think that if that was the case we’d be stopping or explode.” People always look for the easiest explanation. Like a car on fire rather than a headrest used as a decoy. Or relief and not warding off the beginnings of a panic attack. People don’t read too much into situations, and Mac’s never been more grateful for it.

“Well, you sure smoked ‘em!” Jack says exuberantly, smacking the steering wheel. I think the deadliest thing about Jack just might be his cringeworthy puns.

PARKING GARAGE

THIRTY MINUTES FROM EXFIL COORDINATES

“Hey Ri. We lost the guys tailing us, I think we’re in the clear for extraction. What’s your ETA?” Jack asks. That was officially insane. I’m not sure how we’re not all dead. But even I gotta admit that smoke trick was a pretty genius move.

“Uh, it’s gonna be a minute. I think I’m stuck in your guys’ mess on the freeway. There’s cars smashed up and cops everywhere, and my translator software’s telling me most of these folks are yelling about a car on fire and lots of shooting. I gotta find an alternate route.”
“Okay. We’ll see ya when we see ya.” Jack hangs up and turns around to Ralph. “Now all we gotta do is chill until my girl shows up with our ride.” Ralph, surprisingly, says nothing. No complaint, no smartass remark. What the hell?

“Oh no.” Carl’s Jr. turns around and starts crawling backward over the seat. He puts his ear to Ralph’s mouth and a hand to his chest, and then looks at Jack with undisguised fear, his eyes wide and face pale. “He’s crashing. We have about four minutes left before he dies on us,” the kid says quietly. “How much do you trust me?”

“Why?” Jack’s got the sinking feeling this is going to be another one of those things he’s going to wish he never knew was possible.

“We have to do surgery. Right now.” The kid’s climbing out of the car, then he throws open the passenger door and digs more hand sanitizer out of the glove compartment.

“Like now now? Like us doing this?”

Jack has done his share of field medicine. Maybe more than his share. But surgery...if it’s more serious than digging out a fence post splinter, that’s out of Jack’s wheelhouse.

“Yes, or he’s going to die.” There’s an earnest plea in the kid’s eyes. And against all his better judgment, Jack finds himself trusting him. Ralph’s dying anyway. What do we have to lose?

The kid rips open a seat, yanks out a handful of stuffing, and starts smearing hand sanitizer around in the back of the SUV. It looks almost like he’s done this before. Shit, he probably has. Jack’s pretty sure vigilantes don’t just go to the closest urgent care if they get injured. How many times has this kid had to patch himself up? Jack’s done self-surgery more than a few times, and it’s never pleasant. An unwelcome mental image of the kid curled up in the back of an SUV like this, biting down on a chunk of seatbelt while sewing up a gashed leg or side, flashes into his brain.

Sure, he’s a stubborn, crazy, unpredictable little pain in the ass. But he’s tough. And he’s got a good heart. Jack doesn’t think a guy who’s fully willing to do surgery on an insufferable jerk like Ralph in the back of a car to save his life would ever willingly blow up a building where there was anyone inside. Whether his bomb that day killed a man or not, he never meant it to.

Carl’s Jr. opens his knife and slathers the blade in hand sanitizer as well. “Good thing Ralph’s a germaphobe,” he mutters, and Jack wonders how many times the kid’s worked on himself without the benefit of a clean space or tools. He’s lucky he isn’t dead.

“I’m going to need to make a slit between his fourth and fifth ribs. And then I have to spread them apart. Jack, get me a seat spring and the tire jack.” He’s more than willing to do that. Watching the kid slicing into Ralph’s body is kind of gross. Carl’s Jr. doesn’t seem at all fazed. There’s a clinical detachment in his eyes and posture. Jack’s impressed. Kid coulda been a brain surgeon. Carl’s Jr. is smart, determined, and an all around pretty good guy, and Jack wonders what he’d be doing if Jerry Bozer hadn’t gone to his cover band gig all those years ago.

He could have gone to MIT like he wanted to. He could have probably got a full ride scholarship to any school anywhere. This kid could be building airplanes, or doing open heart surgery, or... Jack has a sudden mental image of Carl’s Jr. in the Sandbox, working EOD like the guys Jack used to be Overwatch for. He’d have been good at that. He doesn’t strike me as the type to take some cushy, big-money job. He’s got a drive to fight to save people, and that’s always gonna be part of who he is. Jack can imagine the kid becoming a cop, or a forensics tech, or even a government agent. Who knows? No matter what, we might still have ended up right here, together, about to save a guy’s life with stuff the kid dug out of an SUV.
Jack brings the kid the tools he asked for, and the kid gets to work, bending the spring and attaching it to the jack. The ominous creak of ribs as they start to move apart makes Jack’s stomach flip a little.

“I need to pump out the blood somehow.” The kid looks at him.

“Oh no. I’ll suck out snake venom, depending on where it is…”

“You do know that’s not really a good first aid solution for snakebite, right?” The kid asks. I don’t believe it. He’s in the middle of cutting a guy open and he stops to give me a perfectly sincere lecture on field medicine. “Never mind. I don’t need you to do that. I need you to go up front and turn on the windshield wipers when I say to.” He starts tearing apart more of the car until he reaches a long tube that seems to be what he’s looking for. “Jack, go!” He does.

“Okay! Turn it on!” There’s a wheezing sound and then blood splatters across the windshield like something out of a horror movie. Jack blinks.

“Yuck.” He climbs back out just as Ralph sits up, gasping. “Is that my blood?”

“Yup.” Carl’s Jr. looks like he’s about to fall over. He leans on the back of the car, half-laughing, half gasping.

“Are you a doctor?” Ralph asks.

“Not even a little bit.”

“Trust me, you’re better off not askin’ a lotta questions about him, Ralphie.” Jack mutters. Carl’s Jr. grins, shaking his hair out of his eyes, staring down at his bloody hands. “Nice work, kid.”

Mac wipes off his SAK, cringing at the blood left on the handkerchief, and shoves it back in his pocket. Ralph’s a little out of it, but he’s breathing as normally as possible right now and Mac can tell they have at least two hours left before they need to worry about anything. It’s sad when you can tell how long a person can survive without medical attention just by a quick look and listen.

Jack’s watching him, clearly impressed. Hell, he even complimented me. Jack’s not free with praise, especially not when it comes to me. “How did you know how to do that?”

“When you can’t exactly go to a hospital and explain you got shot trying to stop a drug shipment from getting sold, it pays to learn a lot of random medical procedures.” He hopes Jack will let that slide. Jack usually doesn’t question the details of something. He’s learned asking me about that usually just ends in a lot of science rambling. Jack pretends he asks because he’s dumb. But Mac can see the spark of interest in his eyes when he starts explaining chemical reactions or physics logic. He genuinely wants to know, but he doesn’t want me to know he’s interested, so I don’t start thinking he actually cares about me or anything. So he blows off my explanations as going over his head. Mac’s actually starting to like the guy. Not that he’d tell him that.

“There’s no way you’d have been able to do something like this on yourself though.” And this is not one of the times Jack plays dumb.

Mac sighs, feeling suddenly exhausted. “If someone would have known how to do this, Jerry Bozer would still be alive.” I wasn’t going to let another person die that way. “He had the same kind of chest wound, and he suffocated before the ambulance arrived.”

“Shit, I’m sorry, kid.” He can tell Jack is genuinely remorseful, that he really hated bringing up that bad memory.
“I learned everything I could about wounds like that. And every surgical procedure, every temporary first aid technique. So no one else had to lose a kid because of something like that.”

“Well, Ralph’s a lucky guy.”

The phone rings again. “You’re going to be late to exfil, aren’t you,” Thornton says.

“Yeah, but you can ask them to wait around, right?” Jack asks.

“I doubt your black ops team illegally operating in a foreign country is going to be very excited about ‘waiting around’. Especially since this is at least the fifteenth time in this year alone that you’ve bailed on exfil. But I’ll see what I can do.” Mac glances sideways at Jack. The idea of having a planned way of getting out of a situation is still new. He doesn’t think he’d remember they have exfil if Thornton didn’t consistently remind them that there are people who are waiting impatiently for them to wrap up their mission and arrive on time. It kind of puts a damper on improvising when you’re on a clock. But hey, I do some of my best work under pressure.

“Patty, you’re a gem. We’ll be there in thirty minutes, tops.” Jack hangs up as a van drives into the parking structure.

Riley rolls down the window. “You guys ready to hit the road?”

“Hell yeah,” Jack says. All Mac can manage is an exhausted grin. His hands are still shaking. I can’t believe I just did that. I can’t believe I saved his life. At the time it was all clinical, all just the memories of internet searches and library loaned medical textbooks. But now that he’s got the time to think about it, he realizes just how crazy it was. I did it because I had to do it, there was no other choice. He didn’t even think of all the ways it could go wrong, just how it could go right. And he did it.

Jack’s still a bit in shock over the whole ‘surgery in the back of a car’ thing. He’s moving on autopilot, picking up Ralph and slinging him over a shoulder, cringing as his own leg wound screams for attention. While Carl’s Jr. was finishing up with Ralph, Jack checked and cleaned his own leg with what was left of the hand sanitizer. It’s not a very big gash, he’s had worse from barbed wires on the ranch, he’s pretty sure. But it hurts like a bitch.

He slides the van door open. Thank God for small miracles. Riley made it to them, Patty will have exfil standing by, because as much as she gripes Jack knows she’s never going to leave him hanging with no way home, and in half an hour they’re going to be on the Phoenix jet with real medical supplies and some stiff whiskey, and he won’t have to listen to Ralph complain anymore. Sounds like heaven.

And then there’s a hum of an engine and a second car rolls into the parking garage. Shots echo in the concrete room and then there’s an ominous hiss as two of the van’s tires go flat. Riley rolls out and crouches next to Carl’s Jr., who’s ducking and brushing shattered glass out of his hair. “Change of plans! Run!” Jack yells, dragging Ralph backward.

“Elevator!” the kid yells, and they pile in. The kid’s slamming the up button repeatedly, and Jack, although he’s still exchanging fire with the guys outside, can’t help but grin. Apparently even geniuses resort to ‘hit it until it works’ sometimes. It makes him feel just a little better about his treatment of his DVR remote.

“Unless you want to be patching up a whole lot more bullet holes, you better think of a new plan. Cause these guys aren’t gonna stop until Ralphie here is dead.”
The kid looks at Jack as the elevator doors close.

“Well, we’re just going to have to kill him, then.” What the actual hell?

Riley isn’t sure she just heard Mac right. Neither is Ralph, apparently. “This might just be the blood loss talking, but I could swear you said you were gonna kill me?”

Mac doesn’t answer. He’s looking up and down the hallway of the floor they just got out on. “Looks like we wandered into some tax haven law firm. Should have everything I need.”

“Just tryin’ to figure out how we’re gonna get captain bleeds-a-lot past that front desk,” Jack mutters.

“Give me a second.” They duck out of the elevator and hide as best they can behind a fringe of potted plants. Riley hacks into the wireless and from there into the office mainframe. A couple minutes later she has everything she needs.

She strolls casually up to the front desk. “I just hacked your servers and found all the money your office hides for high-ranking government officials around the world. If you and your clients don’t want this splashed on the front page of every major newspaper, I suggest you go get your boss and tell her to bring her checkbook.”

When the secretary rushes off, Riley turns to the others. “Okay, coast is clear.” Mac’s watching her, looking just a bit nervous, but saying absolutely nothing. Ralph, on the other hand, has to open his mouth.

“Wow, you’re one hot badass spy chick,” he says. “Like a Bond girl.”

“Oh trust me, I’m way cooler than a Bond girl.” Riley grins. “I’m nobody’s sidekick.” They drop Ralph in a rolling chair and follow Mac to a corner office.

“Riley, I’m gonna need a ballpoint pen, some water, and eyedrops,” Mac says. Riley starts searching the office while he digs through the desk and pulls a lighter out of his knapsack and sets it in front of him. She finds what they’re after without too much trouble, coming back just as Mac sits up with a satisfied look and a small orange pill bottle in hand.

“What’s that?”

“Beta blockers. High blood pressure medication,” He says when Ralph frowns. “I’m not actually going to kill you, but this is going to drop your pulse so low it’s going to be almost undetectable. And then once D77 is convinced you’re a goner, we’ll wake you up.” Ralph looks unconvinced, but watches Mac mix the solution, convert the pen into a makeshift syringe, and fill it with the concoction.

Ralph continues to grumble as they limp their way down the stairs to ground level, Jack watching their backs and Riley covering the staircase ahead of them. Jack’s starting to slow down, it looks like he took a grazing hit to the leg. Riley’s going to give him hell for not telling her about that as soon as they’re safe and sound and off the ground here.

“So you’re not a doctor, but you’re gonna kill me and bring me back to life?” Ralph hisses to Mac, who’s half dragging, half carrying him.

“I’m not gonna kill you!” Mac insists. “I’m just gonna lower your heart rate and then as soon as we’ve got everyone convinced you’re dead, I’ll give you the antidote.”
“And you have this antidote, right?” Mac looks away.

“I’ll get it.”

“You don’t even have the antidote, and you’re not a doctor? You’re at least a scientist, right?” Ralph sounds like he’s on the verge of hysteria.

“Um...no.”

“Where did you learn this stuff then?”

“California Correctional.” Riley hears the pain in Mac’s voice. “Guy tried to break outta there by faking his own death with his heart medication, just like we’re going to. Saved up a couple days’ worth and did pretty much exactly what I just did. But he hadn’t taken his medication for a few days because of that, and that messed with his heart. When he dropped his blood pressure so drastically, it just gave out altogether.”

“He died?” Ralph squeaks.

Mac nods. “But you’re not taking any beta blockers on a regular basis, so you should be fine.”

“And you know all this how?” Jack asks.

“He offered to help me break out with him. I turned him down.” Mac sighs. “I wasn’t going to run if I deserved to be there.”

Apparently Ralph’s just now realized the full implications of what Mac just said. “You’re a convict?” Mac glances away from him, pain and shame clear on his face. “Dude, why didn’t you just run? I was facing ten years, and I wasn’t about to go in there, not after the stories I’ve heard. Is it as bad as everyone says?”

“Worse,” Mac mutters hoarsely.

“And you didn’t even try to get out when you could have? Man, I’d have blown outta there the second I had the chance.”

“I thought I killed someone,” Mac whispers. “I couldn’t run for the rest of my life with that on my conscience.” Ralph doesn’t answer that. To the guy’s credit, Riley thinks he might actually be a little bit impressed and ashamed of himself. **Mac is ten times the man you think you are. You ran from something you know you’re guilty of, to live off other people’s money in your own private paradise. Mac turned himself in for something he thought he did, and he spent two years in a living hell for doing the right thing.**

And then they’re out the door, and in the alley. They stay in the shadows until they’re able to blend in with the crowd on the streets. Jack takes over supporting Ralph so Mac can get his makeshift syringe ready, and that leaves Riley a moment with Mac.

Riley puts a hand on his arm. “Why did you tell him all that?” She knows how much he hates, hates, to ever have anyone know about his past.

Mac sighs deeply. “Because he’s scared. He doesn’t want to die. And I needed him to know I knew what I was doing.”

“Yeah, you told him the only guy you know who tried this died.”
“Because he had a pre-existing heart condition. As far as we know, Ralph’s heart is just fine.”

“That’s not the only reason, is it?” She waits until he looks up and meets her eyes. “You wanted him to know he’s being selfish. You wanted him to realize what he did when he ran away.” She’d call it bitterness, or just a simple desire to say ‘I’m a better person than you’, but there’s something more to it. Something kinder. “You want him to choose to help us. You want him to change.” Mac looks for the good in people. And that’s both painful and beautiful.

“Sooner or later that guilt’s gonna catch up to him,” Mac says quietly. “He has a chance right now to change that. He needs to take it.” Then he shakes off the moment and hands Riley the syringe.

“You’re the only one they haven’t seen. You’ll have to go out there with him. If D77 spots us anywhere near Ralph, they’ll know something’s fishy.”

Riley nods. “Hey Ralph, it’s showtime.”

Ralph looks very serious. Maybe for the first time since she’s seen him. He glances up at Mac, and there’s some sort of indefinite plea in his eyes. Like he’s looking for absolution. “You know, there’s one thing that’s funny about what D77 does with their financials. Sometimes they ask me to set up a shell corporation in a specific city. Which is weird, cause it’s a dummy corporation, so who cares where it is. Last week they asked me to set one up in Miami.”

Mac nods. “Thank you.” And now they really do have to go.

Ralph leans heavily against her as they limp out into a main square, Riley keeping her eyes open for D77 mercs. Ralph’s wheezing a little. “This is gonna work, right?” He asks, and there’s genuine fear in his voice.

“I haven’t seen Mac’s plans go wrong yet.”

“His name is Mac? Ralph looks honestly puzzled. “I thought it was Carl.” Oh Jack. “I just...I don’t wanna die. Like, I’ve been thinking. About what he said. About running away from stuff. And it kinda sucks. I don’t wanna run anymore. I wanna start over. Maybe have a family or something.” Riley ignores the way he pointedly looks at her when he says that. Stop flirting with me. You’re embarrassing yourself.

“Oh man, I gotta call my mom. I haven’t talked to my mom in years. I can’t die without telling her how I feel about her!”

And then Riley sees a glint of gunmetal. “Ralph, shut up!” It’s too late. The mercs are here, and she and Ralph just got spotted.

There’s not going to be enough time for her to get away without it being obvious she’s done something to Ralph. And if D77 suspects anything, they’ll put a bullet in Ralph’s head right here. Riley makes an executive decision. Mac said giving the injection close to Ralph’s heart would mean he needed a lower dose. I wonder if it works the same on a person who hasn’t nearly bled to death.

She plunges the needle into her own shoulder, injects the solution, and drops it with shaky fingers. “What are you doing?” Ralph yells.

“Making it look like you’re on their side!” Riley gasps, already feeling herself fading. “Grab my throat and make it look like you’re choking me!”

“How will that help?” Ralph protests.

I’m gonna need to give him the Cliff Notes version, cause I’m going down fast. “Convince them you were taken against your will, you escaped, I tracked you, and you just got the upper hand! They just
might let you live!"

She knows this is a terrible idea. But it beats both of them getting executed by D77. Riley feels herself falling. *You’d better be right about this plan, Mac.*

There’s no part of this that Jack is okay with. Carl’s Jr. as much as admitted his little trick might kill Ralph permanently, and Riley is out there without Jack backing her up. He can barely see her messy curls in the crowd.

But it’s not so easy to miss the D77 mercs. As soon as he sees them he’s ready to rush in, guns blazing, but he holds back. *Riley’s a good agent. She can do this. She’ll just get pissed if I rush in there to save her when she doesn’t need it.* And then he watches her jab the syringe into her own chest and Ralph puts her in a clumsy headlock. She slips to the ground just as the mercs run up and people begin screaming and rushing around chaotically.

“Riles!” Jack shouts. He’s about to rush headlong into this, caution be damned, when he feels a hand on his arm.

“Jack, if you go out there you’re gonna get yourself killed, and you’re not gonna be able to help her at all.”

“They’re not leaving with my girl!”

“Jack, there’s two of them, and they have guns.”

“So?” Jack’s running on pure adrenaline. He could fight an army of rhinoceroses if they were between him and Riley. Two guys isn’t bad.

“You can’t get through that crowd fast enough, and if you shoot you might hit one of the bystanders.”

Damn it, he’s right. Jack forces himself to calm down and think. Normally he’s not this insane, but that’s *Riley* out there in trouble and he just can’t think straight anymore.

These guys have the benefit of a panicking crowd and potential hostages. By the time Jack pushed his way through he would be noticed, the only person going toward trouble rather than away from it. And Jack’s a good shot, better than good, really, but he’s got only one bullet left in his clip, and he’s used up the rest of his backup ammunition, even if he doesn’t want to admit that to the kid and make him worry more. *I’ve made double headshots before. But these guys aren’t lined up and I won’t take that chance.* Jack’s more than willing to gamble with Ralph’s life, but not Riley’s.

He can hear, over Riley’s still active comms, Ralph explaining breathlessly. “You gotta believe me, man, I didn’t want to go with them! Do you think I’d give up this life for...for some kinda conscience? I’m living the dream here, guys! I am 100 percent still in this.”

The D77 man says something Jack can’t quite pick up.

“Look, I can prove it! I just killed this chick! She’s one of them, and she was trying to take me in, and I freaking killed her. Would I do that if I was on their side?”

The D77 agent bends down, and Jack holds his breath. And the man’s now-clear words chill him. “She’s not dead. Just knocked out. And I bet she can clear up this little misunderstanding, once we get her to talk. Both of you are going to see the boss. Right now.” One of the mercs picks up Riley’s limp body, *she looks so dead, good God, please tell me this isn’t permanent,* and the other shoves
Ralph’s bad shoulder, making him squawk. “Move it.” And then they’re gone.

Jack can’t keep the cold anger out of his voice when he turns to the kid. “This was your plan, and now they’ve got Riley.”

Carl’s Jr. is shaking slightly. “This wasn’t supposed to happen. She was supposed to walk away.”

“Well, she didn’t.”

“I was still hoping they’d leave her body. But it looks like that stuff didn’t work as well on her as it would have on Ralph.” He looks down at his hands and Jack thinks the kid might actually be crying. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry.”

Jack sighs. “It’s not your fault, kid. She made her choice. As much as I hate it, Riley’s allowed to make her own executive decisions in-field. I do that all the time.” And I’ve gambled with my own life more than she has. She needs me to trust her, and trust her instincts. “But she’s counting on us to have her back and get her out of this. You need to get that antidote ready and we need to find her. Got it?”

The kid nods, his hands are steadying out. “I’m going to bring her back, I promise.”

“There we go. Now what do you need to Miracle Max our way outta this?” And then the phone rings. Again. Patty has impeccable timing. And by that I mean the absolute worst.

“Please tell me you’re at least close to exfil.”

“We’re not. There’s been a change of plans. Ralph and Riley just got captured by D77, and Riley’s in a coma.” Jack blurts it all out and hopes futilely that she won’t ask questions. This is like the time he rushed the explanation of blowing up a jet in Kandahar, only ten times worse.

“What?”

“We’re gonna bring her back. But we have to go ‘cause she’s running out of time. Bye Patty,” Jack hangs up. “Okay, kid, let’s go make a miracle, huh?”

Mac’s got plenty of experience breaking into pharmacies. A few wires snipped and locks picked later, he has everything he needs to bring Riley back. Once they find her.

For once today, they’ve gotten lucky. The mercs didn’t take out Riley’s comms, and they can track her with them. Jack’s no Riley, but he’s able to use her rig well enough to track her signal. “I have no idea what all these commands are actually doing,” he admits as Mac follows his directions in the car he hotwired. “Riley made me memorize this in case something like this ever happened.” His voice is hollow and strained.

“We’re gonna get her back. She’ll be fine.”

“Your miracle pill better work.”

“It’s an injection of glucose and insulin, not a chocolate coated movie drug.” These Princess Bride references are getting old. Why does Jack feel the need to joke in life-and-death situations?

“They just stopped.” Jack says. “Next right and then park.”

Mac glances at his watch. “Good. I thought we might run out of time.” He thought he said the last part under his breath, but apparently he wasn’t quiet enough.
“What?” Jack asks.

“We have to give her the antidote within an hour of when she passed out.”

“And how long has it been?” The place they’re pulling up to is a flower store, probably a front business for D77 to operate out of.

“Forty-eight minutes.” Mac parks the car and watches the goons pull Riley and Ralph out of the trunk. Ralph is wobbly but on his feet. Riley’s still terrifyingly limp. What if I messed up? What if she dies? It’ll be my fault. Because it’s my drug that will have killed her. He pushes the thoughts away. At least if she dies I won’t have to worry about going back to prison. Jack will kill me himself.

“There’s only two,” Jack says. “I think I can take them.” And then the door of the building they’re walking toward opens, and four massive guys step out, with someone in between them who looks like they’re in a suit. Probably the ‘boss’. “Okay, I got four if you can take two.”

And then Mac sees the refrigerant tanks, probably for the large coolers a flower store generally has. “Actually, I might be able to take them all out.” Jack gives him the look that Mac has learned to interpret as ‘I have no idea how you’re gonna make that happen but it sounds good’.

Most people think they’re playing it safe. But the reality is that we live our lives surrounded by pretty deadly things. The refrigerant in an air conditioner can kill you in five minutes. But it can knock you out in less than two.

There’s a dumpster parked against the building, and Mac jumps in and starts digging through it. There’s some truth to the cheesy movie cliche that dumpsters are a vigilante’s best friend. But I never used them as hiding places. They were always more of a one-stop-shop for everything I needed to get out of a jam. He digs up some plastic bags, a couple soda bottles, a piece of wire, and some old newspaper.

“You’re digging through garbage now?” Jack asks, then grimaces when Mac hands him half the things he’s found. “What are you gonna do, save Riley and Ralph with raccoon scavenging powers or something?”

“Actually, kind of.” Mac grabs one of the refrigerant tanks and shoves it in a shopping cart, wedging the wire so any impact will release the gas. Then he starts cutting apart the soda bottles and wrapping strips of plastic around the edges. There’s a hose attached to the wall, which is fortunate, but makes sense given the flower store cover. Mac soaks the paper and shoves it into the necks of the bottles, then holds one of the makeshift masks up to his face. He hands the other to Jack.

“This was in a dumpster five minutes ago. You want me to put that on my face? Seriously?” Jack wrinkles his nose.

“Only if you like breathing.” Mac makes sure he has the syringe prepped and in his knapsack. “You ready?” Jack nods. And then Mac pushes the cart through the door, there’s a hissing noise and some angry cursing, and he and Jack wade into the middle of a fight.

Jack’s obviously taking out his stress and fear and anger on these guys. He’s hitting harder than Mac’s ever seen him fight.

This isn’t the Jack who enjoys a good bar brawl, or trades insults as fast as punches. This is a dangerous machine who deals out pain and death. Mac’s seen this before, when he watched Jack interrogate Kendrick. Riley’s his weak spot. He’ll kill without hesitation to protect her. And as much as that scares him, a small part of him hopes that someday, maybe, he can earn a similar place in
Jack’s heart. But to do that, he’s got to stay alive and bring Riley back safe.

Mac’s searching for Riley. He can see the white blur of Ralph moving toward them. There’s a guy coming up behind him, and Mac shouts. “Duck!”

Ralph ducks, and Mac slams a fist into the guy behind him, sending him staggering backward. It’s not as hard as Jack’s hits but it will get the job done. “Man am I glad to see you guys! You know, I thought you were gonna leave me here with these goons!”

“We thought about it,” Jack growls. “Now get outta here.”

“Don’t you want to know where the Bond girl is?” Jack grimaces but grabs Ralph’s arm. “She’s over there in that chair.” Another guy comes up and Jack slams a kick into his knee and another into his face. Ralph winces.

Riley’s sitting slumped in a chair, hands and feet tied up with duct tape, head on her chest. “Oh man, is she like actually dead?” Ralph asks.

“I said go!” Mac shoves Ralph toward the door. He does, Jack moving with him, taking out anyone in the way.

Mac shoves the needle into Riley’s arm. “Wake up, Riley, come on, please.” And then she sits up with a gasp and Mac yanks his own mask off and shoves it over her head, pulls out his knife, and starts cutting the tape holding her to the chair.

And then someone grabs him from behind, spins him around, and punches him in the ribs. The hit wouldn’t be that bad, but it lands squarely on one of the ribs that’s still recovering from that window jump. Mac gasps as he feels the already cracked bone snap.

The moment of pain and disorientation is all his attacker needs. The guy gets an arm around Mac’s neck and begins to choke him. He claws at the guy’s arm, but the man is wearing tac gear and it doesn’t make any difference.

It’s the second time in a month Mac’s gotten nearly choked to death. This is getting really old. He wishes Jack would show up, but he’s getting Ralph out. That’s the mission. So figure this out. There’s a metal table beside them, and Mac slams the guy’s hip into it. He startles enough to loosen his grasp and Mac flips him over his shoulder in a way he didn’t even realize he was capable of. Guess watching Jack is starting to pay off.

As if the thought summons him, Jack appears out of the billowing gas. “Is she okay?” is his first question.

“Yeah, she’s alive.” Mac tries to pick Riley up, but his broken ribs scream in protest and Jack notices. He grabs Riley in a bridal carry and limps toward the door, Mac following, choking and coughing on the poisonous air.

Ralph nearly brains Jack with a pipe when they stumble out the door.

“Whoa, Wreck-It Ralph, put that down, man! It’s just us!” Jack yells.

“I just totally, like, knocked a guy out, man!” Ralph is panting but he sounds ridiculously pleased with himself. “This badass super-spy stuff is awesome.” Sure enough, one of the D77 mercs is lying on the ground, sprawled out.

Mac collapses on his hands and knees as Jack carefully lays Riley down. She blinks up at him,
struggling to get her hands underneath her and sit up.

“Riley, are you okay?” Jack asks.

“Yeah. I was only mostly dead,” she says, grinning. “If I was all dead you’d just have had to…”

“Go through your pockets and look for loose change,” Jack and Riley recite in unison. If they’re back to quoting movie lines, they’re alright. Jack hugs her crushingly. “Good to have you back, Riles.”

PHOENIX TRANSPORT

EXFIL WAITED AFTER ALL

Riley’s not sure how coming back from the dead is supposed to feel. She’s a little wobbly, and a little nauseated, but other than that she feels...normal.

“Thanks for the help, Miracle Max,” she says as Mac sits down across from her on the Phoenix jet. He’s carrying the oxygen tank the medical staff gave him, to counteract the refrigerant poisoning, but he isn’t wearing the mask. The only person I’ve seen with more disregard for personal health is Jack.

“I’m sorry you had to do that,” Mac whispers. “That wasn’t the plan. I didn’t mean for that to happen.”

“It was my decision. Not yours. I didn’t follow the plan. If I died that was going to be on me.” Mac just sighs, fiddling with another paper clip that looks like he’s making a skull and crossbones. “Sometimes things like that happen in the field. You’re not the only one who can improvise, you know.” He just nods, and she looks up to see Jack standing in the doorway, his leg now wrapped in a white bandage. She gets up and walks over to him, feeling the unsteadiness in her legs.

“So...what was ‘mostly dead’ like?” Jack asks. “Did you see a bright light?” He’s trying to be funny to cover up how scared he was. Jack’s naturally an emotional person, especially with her, but this is different. This is him trying to accept that she made that call, that she put her own life on the line. This is him coming to terms with the fact that it could happen again, and they might not get so lucky.

“Jack, I wasn’t dead. I was just in a coma. I’ve been in comas before.” This wasn’t nearly as long as the one after Cairo. Or the one after Nairobi.

“Riley. C’mere.” Jack folds her into a hug and holds her close. She breathes in the warm smell of sweat and gunpowder and leather and sighs. It’s the moments like this that I would miss. So I’m gonna collect as many of them as I can, before time runs out. This job is a ticking clock. And someday the end of the countdown is going to get her.

But until then she’s just going to keep living one day at a time, and making sure everyone around her survives too.

Mac’s still hunched uncomfortably in his seat. He refused to let the medics near him to check his ribs and only accepted the oxygen when told it was either that or be sedated and forcibly given it the whole flight home.

“Let me see those ribs.” Mac’s curled away from her, but the pain on his face is evident.

“I’m okay.” And then another round of coughing strikes, and Mac cringes, curling up, tears shining
in his eyes from the pain.

“No you’re not. Now put on that oxygen mask and let me see.” Riley begins unbuttoning his stained, sweaty shirt while Mac leans back, still tense but sighing softly. She runs her fingers over the bruises, gently probing for damage the way she’s done on Jack and herself a hundred times. She briefly thinks of doing it for Nick, then pushes away that memory. *He didn’t deserve people who cared about him that much if he was only going to throw us all away, risk our lives, risk thousands of lives for his own ends.* She pushes down the bitterness. *He doesn’t even deserve to be in my head.*

Mac’s breathing evens out, he’s falling asleep as the oxygen takes hold and starts flushing out the last of the refrigerant. Riley locks the thoughts of Nick out of her head and focuses on the way Mac’s chest rises and falls under her hand.

*Breathe in, breathe out. Life goes on.*

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**Phoenix Foundation**

**There are significantly fewer mosquitoes here**

Mac walks carefully, favoring his still-healing ribs as he, Jack and Riley follow Thornton through the building. “Thanks to Ralph’s intel, we’ve arrested four D77 operators in Miami, and Cage is starting to interrogate them today.”

“Between them, the mercs and the ‘boss’ we brought in in Malaysia, and a full interrogation of Ralph, we should be able to round up the rest of D77 fairly soon,” Riley says. She’s back to her normal self. There’s nothing to indicate that two days ago she was basically flatlining in a Malaysian street.

“Actually, it’s no longer an interrogation. Ralph decided to cooperate fully.” Mac glances at Riley, and she smiles at him. *Telling the truth hurt. A lot. But it looks like it made an impression. So in the end it was worth it.*

Mac can hear Ralph talking before he sees him. “So I’m thinking Vegas. Or Miami Beach! Cause I saved that whole place from getting blown up. I’m sure those bikini girls are gonna want to thank me.” He’s got his arm in a sling, flanked by two very aggravated-looking men in suits.

Thornton cuts in. “Ralph, we discussed this. Witness protection means a new identity. No one can know anything about your past. Including saving Miami.” Mac can tell it pains her to say anything approaching a compliment.

“Yo, whoa, hot mama, I thought I was getting recruited by the CIA! Not going into witness protection.” Ralph looks genuinely disappointed. “Cause after getting a taste of the whole spy game thing, I realized I’m absolutely born to it! I got shot, I almost died in a car chase, I had to con a D77 boss into believing I was on his side, and I even knocked a guy out! I’m definitely top secret agent material.” Riley’s stifling a giggle.

“No, you are not getting recruited by the CIA. Or any other government agency. You’re lucky to be avoiding jail time,” Thornton says coldly.

“All right, okay, I guess I know when the government can’t handle my mad skills. They’re just afraid I’d show up Jason Bourne here, aren’t they?” He smirks at Jack. “Job security, am I right?” Jack rolls his eyes.

“But that doesn’t mean I’m not a changed man, ya know? I’ve seen the light, guys. From now on,
I’m gonna invest my millions in making the world a better place.”

Jack smiles properly for the first time in the conversation. “Hate to break it to ya, buddy, but you don’t have those millions anymore. All your money has been confiscated as evidence.”

“Man. Seriously? That’s like cruel and unusual,” Ralph mutters, looking more than a bit stunned.

“It’s not so bad. Starting with nothing, making it up as you go along,” Mac smiles a little. “I do it all the time.” Sometimes you have to hit rock bottom to realize what you really need in life. And to know that in the end it’s pretty simple. You just need good people by your side.

“I guess I gotta go, guys.” Ralph says. “But ya know, it was fun! Like, I’d love working with you all again, especially you, Bond girl.” Riley glares a laserlike killer stare at him. “I mean, aside from the getting shot and almost dying part it was fun.” He reaches for Jack. “Come on, bring it in Jason.” Jack goes stiff as a board when Ralph latches onto him, then starts walking away.

“Hey, give it back,” Jack holds out his hand. Ralph reluctantly hands over Jack’s wallet.

“Everyone needs a little seed money, ya know?”

“Hey, tell you what, I’ll give you twenty bucks if you let me punch you in the face,” Jack says.

“No way. This face? Priceless,” Ralph says quickly.

“How about forty?”

“You don’t have forty dollars!” Ralph chuckles.

“Hey, I think I’ve got an extra twenty,” Riley says, and Jack grins at her. Then they both start to laugh, and Mac joins in.

Burgers at Carl’s Jr.’s house are becoming a post-mission habit. Just like Sam bringing Australian beer because she says the American version tastes like piss. She’s currently on her second, and Jack can tell she’s feeling it, because she’s in the kitchen with Bozer right now, fighting him very uncoordinatedly over the burgers with his spatula, which is also becoming a tradition. Damn, that girl is such a lightweight. Jack honestly hadn’t expected her to be. He’s met a ton of petite girls who can put away liquor faster than a biker gang. Sam is not one of those.

But Cage drunkenly duelling Bozer over hamburgers isn’t even the oddest thing Jack’s seen this evening. Nope. The oddest thing is Carl’s Jr. sitting in one of the deck chairs, handwriting a letter with a pencil on actual physical paper.

“Hey kid, what you doin’?" Jack asks, sitting down in the chair beside him.

“Everything that happened...with Ralph, and Riley, it just reminded me how short life is.” The kid chews on the end of his pencil. “And that I don’t want to spend the rest of it wondering if I should have tried to talk to my dad.”

“So you’re writing him a letter? Come on, man, it’s the twenty-first century.”

“Not to my dad. He refuses to use technology.” the kid cringes. “Or at least that’s what I remember.”

Jack sighs. Kid’s got a laundry list of issues, but right up at the top are those abandonment ones. Cage’s compiled dossier reads like the profile of a Dickens protagonist. Mom died when he was five, dad left when he was ten, on his birthday no less. Grandpa died when he was sixteen, his best
friend’s kid brother was killed a year later, and then he got hauled off to prison for two years. Jack’s kind of surprised the kid’s as stable as he is. I mean, aside from blowing stuff up with cleaning products and chewing gum.

He half turns around as Riley steers Sam out of the kitchen and gets her sitting down next to the fire pit, avoiding random spatula flails along the way. Riley’s got a plain white envelope in her hand. “What, are you writin’ to your old man too?” Jack asks. What is this, a letter-writing party?

“Nope.” Riley hands Jack the envelope. “You’re the only dad I want to be hanging out with.”

Jack opens the envelope and pulls out four printed slips of paper. The name splashed across the top is unmistakable. *Metallica: In Concert*. In Austin, Texas. In a month.

“How...these things sell out too damn fast to ever get!” Jack can’t hide the shock. The one time he actually managed to be in the right timezone, with enough wifi to actually get tickets when they were available, he’d had to miss the concert because he and Riley got tasked with taking down a fringe group in Syria on the same weekend.

“There are certain advantages to the fact that everything happens online now,” Riley smirks and then raises her bottle.

“So let me get this straight, you illegally hacked ticket sales just to help me check off my bucket list?” Jack shakes his head. “Did I ever tell you you’re my favorite daughter?”

“I’m your only daughter, Jack.”

“Still my favorite.” Jack pulls her into a one-armed hug, and she yelps, trying not to spill her beer all over his arm.

“Hey, it wasn’t purely altruistic. You got me hooked on their music too. After five years of listening to you play it nonstop it’s kinda hard not to.”

*Four tickets. For our little family.* “You, me, Sam and Carl’s Jr.; that’s gonna be fun. And no way are we flying. This occasion calls for a family road trip.” Jack grins. *Guess I can cross that one off my bucket list too.*
Wire Cutter

104-Wire Cutter

PHOENIX RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT

THE ACTUAL THINK TANK PART

Mac is bored. Extremely bored. He doesn’t think he’s been this bored since tenth grade AP physics when he memorized the textbook cover to cover in the first three weeks of classes. He did the same thing in AP chem but at least there they had lab every week and got to occasionally blow things up. Physics was just Mrs. Donihue with her drony voice and her little rimless glasses and lots and lots of homework he wasn’t allowed to use shortcuts on. He almost failed the first test for using formulas that were easier but that the class hadn’t learned yet.

But at least physics on principle was interesting. And felt like it might be potentially useful one day. Now he’s sitting at a desk watching fifteen different charts on the longevity of automobile tires start to blur into one giant mess of colors and numbers.

I know plenty about the average automobile tire. I know that the rubber can be used to resole a shoe or create a semi-effective protective vest, the support wires inside provide enough metal to rig a decent snare trap, and that a flat can still be driven on if absolutely necessary as a getaway vehicle. I know how to avoid hydroplaning by utilizing vehicle weight and friction coefficients. I know the smoke from burning tires is thick enough to act as a distraction or to clear out a building. I know slitting them, laying them over a wooden structure, and nailing them down makes a fairly rain-proof roof. I do not for any reason need to know how long the average LA commuter’s tires will last. He’s sure that last statement will inevitably end with their survival hinging on this knowledge, because that’s just how his life tends to go, but at the moment, he’d rather take his chances.

As soon as Thornton found out he’d broken a rib on the Myanmar op, she’d grounded him for three weeks, no questions. It’s been one. And he thinks this might kill him faster than an injury in the field.

Working in Phoenix’s Research and Development division should be fun. It sounds fun. Except that Doctor Barstow, the head of R&D, has it in for him for some indefinable reason. Well, maybe the reason is that I came in and immediately picked up the synthetic polymer he was making for lightweight body armor, checked his chemical formulas, and told him he could reduce production time, increase material strength, and reduce brittleness if he changed his component ratios. Or maybe it was when I took half the fine motor robotics assembly apart to give the swing arm joint a 3.8 degree increased range of motion. Whatever the case, apparently Dr. Barstow would prefer to remain the unchallenged genius of Phoenix R&D.

After the third time Mac challenged one of the man’s suggestions, because there really was a much less complicated way to create an undetectable signal transmitter, Barstow had hauled him bodily out onto the loading dock, accused him of challenging his status, and pulled Mac off all three engineering projects Thornton had assigned him, for absolutely no reason. Mac had accomplished more on them in three days than Barstow had in two weeks.

It wouldn’t even be so bad if the lab assistant who’s in charge of the project, an assistant, that’s how low priority and mindless this project is, didn’t absolutely hate him. The guy’s one of the techs who was working on the van from Como the first day Mac was here, and he clearly remembers that Mac showed up in a CCI jumpsuit. Mac knows the guy told everyone in R&D within a day, because
instead of smiles he was met with cold stares, concern, or a flat-out clear desire to get as far away from him as possible. He’s heard one of the more vicious staff members whistling “Folsom Prison Blues” as he walks past the woman’s workstation.

Working with Jack and Riley, it was easy to forget how most people react to a former convict. Now every day, he’s reminded of it, whether it’s the snatches of music he hears over the server stacks or the innate fear he sees in the intern from CalTech who brought over the data files when he got reassigned. This is how it’s going to be for the rest of my life. The thought hurts, and he tries to focus on the mindless data entry to ignore it.

The rest of his team, plus Thornton, because they needed a third agent in field on this one, is in Ankara. And he’s stuck here crunching numbers on data about tires.

“Jack got shot in the leg, and he gets to go,” Mac grumbled when Riley said goodbye.

“Yeah, that’s because Jack annoys Patty mercilessly until he gets what he wants.” There’s the unspoken understanding that Mac cannot afford to be annoying.

He rubs his eyes and grabs a ruler to mark a pencil line under the next row of data. If he messes this up, he’s going to have to do it all over again. He’s so busy making sure all the rows and columns are accurate that he doesn’t see the person coming up behind the desk until they put a hand on his shoulder.

Mac jumps, and the rolling chair gets away from him. Before he knows what’s happening, he’s sitting on the floor, stunned and more than a little startled. Get up get up get up. He scrambles frantically to his feet, which only results in him slipping on the tile, grabbing for any support (which turns out to be the arm of the tech who accosted him, the arm that’s attached to a hand holding a steaming cup of coffee), and sitting on the floor again, this time with half the papers that were scattered on the desk, a jar of pencils, and worst, the full cup of coffee, dumped in his lap and all over the floor.

“I’m so sorry!” The girl apologizes, stumbling over her words and readjusting her massive horn-rimmed glasses as she reaches out a hand to him. “I just thought you looked like you needed some caffeine.” She smiles. “I’m Jill. Jill Morgan. I work over in forensics but I was there the day you cracked the van lockbox. It was amazing.” She looks at her hands shyly. “I like that you stood up to Dr. Barstow. He thinks he knows everything just because he has four Ph.D.s.”

“Well, it got me demoted to data entry, so I’m not sure how well it went.” Mac tries to maintain at least a bit of dignity as he stands up, picks up the soaked, stained papers, and sets the pencils back on his desk. “I’m going to go find a mop.”

When his phone rings, just as he’s returning to the desk with the mop, he fumbles it out of his pocket, lets go of the mop handle, and cringes when it smacks him in the head before clattering to the floor. Could today get any worse? At least Jill’s gone now. He’s made a big enough fool of himself in front of the only person in R&D who more than tolerates his presence.

Riley’s name pops up when he finally gets the phone out.

“Mac? Thornton wants to see you in the War Room.” Oh wonderful. Barstow probably ran straight to her the second she got back from Ankara and told her how much he hates me. Probably told her I’m an insufferable problem. He wipes suddenly sweaty hands on a dry patch of his jeans. He probably exaggerated everything. Or just plain made something up. His mouth is dry. If she thinks I was rude and insubordinate…
“Mac. Earth to Mac? I said she wants you now?”

“On my way.” He hands the mop off to one of the interns and rushes out.

He’s out of breath by the time he gets to the War Room. To his surprise, Jack and Riley are inside as well. *She’s not going to chew me out in front of my whole team, right?*

“Nice of you to join us, Angus,” Thornton says, then narrows her eyes. “Did you pick a fight with the coffee machine?”

There’s still coffee stains on his shirt and jeans. *Damn it. I should have just stayed in bed this morning.* “You know if you wanted to stay awake you should have drunk that, not tried to absorb it by osmosis, right?” Riley says.

“I wasn’t sleeping. I...” He searches for an excuse that won’t be embarrassing, but he can’t come up with anything that isn’t worse than what actually happened. “I fell off a chair, and the coffee kinda fell on me.” He’s about to explain that really, the whole mess with Barstow isn’t his fault, and then he sees what’s on the screen.

*Oh. Okay. Possible Russian nuclear bomb I can deal with. It might actually be less horrible than Thornton angry at me.*

When the distress call from Agent Bannister comes in, Riley feels a slight tremor of apprehension. Bannister was her training officer when she first came to Phoenix. The person who walked her through the different protocols and procedures, anything that varied from the CIA regulations. Bannister is the best of the best. She went alone in country in Russia a week ago to investigate an arms sale. Getting a risky call like this from her means something is very, very wrong.

“I’ve found conclusive proof that Sevchenko is stockpiling weapons.” Bannister looks worried but proud. *That’s a big win for us. So what’s wrong?*

“I’ve documented all the weapons I’ve found and sent the data file,” the agent says. “But I can’t determine what this is.” She points the camera at a large crate, taller than she is and at least ten feet long. “It’s giving off high levels of radiation, but I’ve tried to breach the casing and gotten nowhere.”

Patty temporarily mutes the call as Riley makes a subtle gesture, two fingers that means, *I have something to say privately.* It’s sometimes of utmost importance not to let an in-field agent know that the command group is having second thoughts, questions, or that an issue has come up. It’s only going to be a distraction.

“Yes?” Patty asks.

“I think Bannister should pull the intel she has and leave. We have a location, and we have evidence. If she gets caught there, Sevchenko will move everything and we’ll need to track him again.”

“We have to know what’s in that case, Davis.” Thornton’s voice is the kind you don’t argue with. “It could alter our understanding of how to proceed with the investigation.”

“But she can’t get in.”

“No. But we happen to have someone on staff who’s already proved to be an expert at opening impossible locks. Call MacGyver and tell him I want him in here ASAP.” Riley does.

She can’t help but giggle when Mac rushes in, hair messy, cheeks red, shirt and pants covered in
brown splashes.

“Nice of you to join us, Angus,” Patty says sarcastically. “Did you pick a fight with the coffee machine?”

“You know if you wanted to stay awake you should have drunk that, not tried to absorb it by osmosis, right?” Riley says. I really shouldn’t say anything smart. I shouldn’t. I know how it feels. But sometimes you just need to give the new kid a hard time. I would for anyone else. She knows Mac wouldn’t want to be treated differently because he’s an ex-con. So I’ll just act like he’s any other new recruit.

“I wasn’t sleeping. I...I fell off a chair, and the coffee kinda fell on me.” Riley barely suppressed a smile. I wish I could have seen that. It would have been hilarious.

Her own morning hasn’t been a bed of roses. She got up early to go for a run, but as soon as she got to the door, Cage was standing in front of it, arms crossed.

“What’s going on?” Riley just wants to go run off the last dregs of the nightmares.

“I couldn’t sleep well, last night.” Sam shrugs. “I got up to get water, and when I walked past your room your door was partly open. You had your headphones on, you didn’t know I was there. And you were running Nick’s photo through your entire digital scan algorithm.”

Riley’s fairly certain Sam is lying about not sleeping well. She knew something was wrong and she was watching me, waiting for proof.

“Don’t lie to me, Riley. This isn’t moving on.” Sam leans on the doorframe. “You’re not going anywhere until you tell me why you haven’t stopped searching for him.”

“I just...I know him.” Riley sighs. “Those in-field agents are good, but they didn’t work with him for two years. I know his patterns, I know his flaws, I know how he’s likely to cover his tracks.” She ignores the tiny voice in her head that says, You knew nothing about him. What if all those were lies too? What if he made you think you knew how to beat him, but it was all fake?

“You focus on your job. I’ll find Nick.” There’s a steely promise in Sam’s voice. “I know some people. I’ll make some calls.” Sam never talks about the past. Riley knows that her roommate is no angel. There’s enough in her highly redacted dossier to make Riley think she’s living with the Aussie version of Natasha Romanoff. Would they call her the Funnel-Web then? Just doesn’t have the same ring as the Black Widow. Riley won’t admit to how many times she’s had exactly this train of thought. Every time, that’s where my brain goes.

But the fact remains, Sam might be the best person for this job. With Nick gone dark, maybe the best person to catch an operative turned criminal is a criminal turned operative.

Riley’s grateful, because she really does need to focus. She’s been struggling to keep her mind on her ops, because she keeps thinking she should be out there, after Nick, bringing him in. Now, she’s actually able to focus on the issue at hand.

“Agent Bannister, this is our...technical consultant. Angus MacGyver.” Patty gives him a disapproving glower. You’re just not catching him on his best day. Riley watches him shift nervously, cheeks flushed now from embarrassment rather than exertion. “Give him the short version of what the problem is.”

“I’m attempting to breach this container. It’s giving off large amounts of radiation, and I need to get a look at what’s inside.” Bannister sighs. “The lock’s old, but it won’t break. And I can’t risk shooting
it off and alerting guards or creating a radiation leak.”

“Can you get closer to the lock?” Mac asks, and Riley can see him going into problem solving mode. The camera zooms in; it’s not like any lock Riley has seen before. But apparently Mac is familiar with them. “That’s a tube lock. Standard for high security during the 1960s. Used to be used in bike locks. Until thieves figured out how to beat them…” His voice trails off. “My dad was a bit of a delinquent in his day. Do you have a ballpoint pen?” The woman pulls one out of her shirt with a smile. She taught me that having that, and a piece of paper tucked in a pocket, could mean the difference between life and death. Bannister was a firm believer in tried and true methods of communication in-field. “Is it metal or plastic?”

“Plastic.”

“Then it may not work.” Riley sees him rub his forehead. “What model is your service weapon?”

Bannister removes the gun from her thigh holster. “Glock 9 mil.”

“Take out a bullet and get rid of everything but the shell casing.” She does. “Now load it, in reverse, into your backup clip. And you’ve got yourself a wrench.”

Riley watches as Bannister works the shell casing into the lock. There’s an audible pop, and then she swings the doors open and gasps.

“Is that…?” Mac asks, sounding more awed than scared.

“A Russian nuclear warhead. Yep.” Bannister is taking pictures of the warhead now, and they’re coming in to Riley’s data files as she does. And then the door bangs open and the camera falls to take pictures of the ceiling as there’s an exchange of gunfire.

Then a voice with a thick Russian accent shouts, “Who are you? Who are you?” And then there’s a single shot that spatters the screen with blood. A hand picks up the phone and a man’s face fills the screen, a thin face with cruel dead eyes. “Whoever you are, you should know that you’ve failed. And now, you’ve forced me to act. What I do now will be on your heads.” With that, the call ends.

Riley realizes she’s now sitting in a chair. She feels like all the air has gone out of her lungs. No. Carla can’t be dead. She can’t be. And maybe she isn’t. But the alternative is even worse. Mac is pale and shaken, pacing in the back of the room. And Thornton is frozen, facing the screen, something glittering sliding down one cheek.

Patty calls Jack; he’s still technically on injury leave and was supposed to be allowed to stay home after Ankara. But he gets to the Phoenix in record time when he hears what happened. Jack always highly respected Agent Bannister. He was grateful to her for training me.

When they’re all assembled in the War Room, Patty begins the briefing with a slightly shaking voice. Riley’s never seen the woman this emotional over the loss of an operative. She knows the two of them climbed ranks in the CIA together, and transferred to DXS at the same time. But it’s still hard to think that the ‘Ice Queen’ might have had someone she was close to, someone she cared that much about. She always said there was no room for caring about any operative. She gave up a long time ago with Riley and Jack. It never occurred to Riley that Patty might break her own rules as well. She always seemed like the kind of person whose rules you couldn’t break because they’d never broken them themselves. Like a parent who never smoked, ever, and tells you not to.

“The man who killed Carla is Vladimir Sevchenko. His family were powerful in the Soviet government. When the empire collapsed, they lost everything.”
“So he wants to go back to the USSR?” Jack asks.

“Jack, don’t start singing.” Riley cannot believe he’s making light of this situation.

“I wasn’t gonna!” He sounds genuinely surprised. “Oh damn it, I didn’t even realize I said it that way.”

“You’ve listened to that song too many times.” She’s surprised to find that she appreciates the slight distraction. *I feel like I lost a big sister out there. And if I keep thinking about it, I’m gonna go crazy.*

Patty doesn’t scold; it’s possible she’s as relieved as the rest of them to be distracted. “Agent Bannister was sent in to confirm the weapons stockpile and to see if she could track it back to Sevchenko himself.” She sighs. “And she did.”

Riley pulls up the photos. “She was attempting to identify this device when…” She can’t finish. Not with the look on Patty’s face.

“It’s definitely Soviet era,” Jack says. Jack knows Cold War weapons like the back of his hand. His grandpa apparently kept Korean mines in their house. *It’s a wonder Jack didn’t blow himself up.*

“Probably a dead hand device. Designed as a failsafe, in case we ever took Moscow, Moscow would take us.”

“A weapon that size would make an area the size of Texas uninhabitable for centuries,” Mac says, then looks at the rest of them, as if he didn’t mean to say that out loud. *I didn’t realize the science nerd was going to be a bomb nerd too.*

“But it doesn’t look like any warhead I’ve ever seen,” Jack says. “A lot of those components...they’re unique.”

“The Soviets had hundreds of secret programs.” Riley sighs. “They’re not all on record even with their own government files. Trust me, wading through their backlogs is its own form of torture.” She pulls up the pictures again. “It’s computer controlled, but before you ask, I have no idea what system it’s running. This has file name extensions I’ve never seen before. I think this is a proprietary system. One of a kind.” *Even if I was right there with it, I couldn’t hack it.*

“Zoom in there,” Mac walks up to the screen and points to a shadowy space in one of the photos. The half-opened crate almost hid it from view.

There’s something written in faded, flaking paint. Riley can’t believe he saw that at all. She types the Cyrillic letters into her translation software and waits.

“Zhar-pitisa. Fire-bird.” Now that she has a name to search, Riley can see what the government databases have on file. And it seems like today’s luck is starting to turn, because searching “Fire-bird” brings up a full file on a Soviet defector, Alexander Orlov.

Patty must know the name. “Orlov was the head scientist on a Soviet scorched-earth project, which we now know was codenamed “Fire-bird”. He defected to the United States and gave a full account of his work to the CIA. After which he dropped off the map entirely.”

“Not anymore,” Riley says triumphantly. “I found him. He’s in a retirement home...here in L.A.”

“If anyone can shut down the bomb he created, it’s him.” Patty sighs. “Go see if you can bring our Soviet scientist out of retirement.”
“Patty. You’re going in-country, alone?”

“I sent Agent Bannister in alone.” There’s a deep pain in Thornton’s face. “I’m going to bring her home, and I’m going to bring that bastard back in cuffs.” Mac knows she would never admit anything, but it’s clear she cared deeply for her. She said caring about your team is a liability. But obviously even she can’t always follow her own advice.

She’s willing to risk dying to bring down the man who killed Agent Bannister. That kind of loyalty is hard to come by. *If I went missing, was captured or killed, would anyone care?* He’s sure Riley and Jack would be sorry, and Thornton might miss his skill set from time to time, but would they bother to go get him? Or to bring his body home?

Bozer would, he thinks, but that’s different. It’s easy to say Bozer would, but he *couldn’t*. He’d want to, but there’s no way he’d be able to. Mac knows Bozer would move heaven and earth for him, but Boze doesn’t even know what Mac does. *And I wouldn’t ever want him to.* He risked Bozer’s life enough when he dragged him into his secret about being a vigilante. And he thought that was the craziest his life would get.

*If I want people to be willing to risk everything for me, I have to risk something too. I have to let them in.* But if he lets them see the truth, then they’ll only see how broken he is. They’ll see how weak he is. And then they’ll decide he’s not worth caring anything about at all. *There’s no win. There’s no reason they should ever be willing to risk themselves for me.*

Mac grabs a handful of paperclips and shoves them in his pocket before they leave the War Room. He’s going to need to distract himself, because as much as he’s trying, the thoughts won’t leave. *They see me as a charity case. They keep me on because it’s their good deed, keeping a poor lost puppy out of the dog pound.* They’re no different from the people in R&D, not really. They see a criminal in an orange jumpsuit too; the only difference is that they pity him instead of hating him.

Patty stops him on his way out the door. “I’d like you to go with Jack and Riley.”

“We might need your expertise. You’re no longer required to remain in the lab.” Two hours ago Mac would have wanted nothing more. But now he doesn’t know if he can bear to see the way Jack and Riley look at him.

Riley’s picking up her rig, Jack’s getting spare ammunition. Mac reaches into his own locker for a change of clothes, but all his hand hits is the cold metal. His go bag is back at the house. He didn’t think he would need it since he was stuck in R&D.

It didn’t take him long to get used to the idea of carrying spare clothes on a mission; as a vigilante he’d usually carried a backpack with something he could change into if anyone saw him and could have identified what he was wearing. A first aid kit isn’t too strange either, except that the Phoenix issued one has antidotes to several common poisons, a radiation exposure kit, and antivenoms specific to location of travel. Having cash, fake papers, a burner phone, and spare comms is a little odder.

It feels like he’s capable of disappearing in an instant. And maybe he is. *But where would I go? The only family I have is here.* He sighs. “Is there a chance we can stop at my house? It might be a good idea if I change clothes.” *Given Patty’s reaction, I don’t want to make a former Russian scientist we need to disarm a nuclear warhead think that we’re incompetent.*

“You can borrow my spares again,” Jack says. *See, I’m a charity case. They’re literally giving me clothes.*
“No, it’s okay then. I’ll be fine.” He looks down at the coffee spill, which is finally starting to dry. I’m not sure if it’s more humiliating to show up with stains on my clothes, or wearing someone else’s.

The drive is uncomfortable. Mac twists paperclips into the shapes of missiles and hammers and sickles. Jack’s driving, as usual, blaring a classic rock station, and Riley’s organizing the data Bannister sent before she was killed. Mac doesn’t usually talk to them, but this time even when they ask him questions he gives the shortest answer he can. They don’t really care what I think about this job. I don’t know anything about Cold War weapons like Jack, or computer programming like Riley. I’m dead weight on this mission and they probably don’t want me here. Why did Thornton even bother to pull me out of R&D?

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SHADY OAKS RETIREMENT HOME
HOME OF RETIRED ACTORS, MUSICIANS...AND SOVIET DEFECTORS

Places like this remind Jack uncomfortably of Grandpa Dalton. The old man had gotten dementia in the last two years of his life, and damn if that wasn’t the worst thing that could have happened to the guy. He’d always been so full of old war stories, and spoken both Korean and Japanese fluently. He’d always remembered every grandchild’s name, and that was a feat, since Grandpa Dalton had four children and twenty grandkids.

And then he started to forget. Little by little, the most recent things first. The newest great-grandchild’s birthday. His car insurance payments. And then there weren’t so many of the same old stories told at Thanksgiving and Christmas. And then a place like this.

Jack’s walked halls that smell like antiseptic and that indefinable “old” smell far too many times. He glances at the faces of each of the people sitting in wheelchairs or playing cards at tables or shuffling up and down the halls. One old man with a Vietnam War Veteran hat catches Jack’s eye, and he gives the man a salute. He was a Green Beret. The man returns the salute, his bent back suddenly straightening a little, his eyes shining, his trembling hand rising easily. Guys like him came home to anger and protest. Jack knows how much it can hurt to be treated like a war was your fault. It means something to him to be reminded some people are proud of him.

Jack shakes off the thoughts, but not before he feels Riley’s hand slip into his. She squeezes tightly, and Jack squeezes back. She’s heard the stories. When she first started experiencing the PTSD this job inevitably deals out, Jack sat down with her, made them both mugs of Bailey’s and hot chocolate, and told her about the Delta tours, and Myanmar, and Worthy. About never wanting to leave his house again. About the nightmares that followed him into daylight hours, things he’ll never really forget. She knows Jack sees himself in every veteran. In the man back there in the hall, with his worn cap and firm salute. In the homeless guys they pass on the street sometimes, people whose eyes hold shadows of the past and fear of the future. In the commercials on the radio encouraging families to talk to the veterans in their lives because of soaring suicide rates.

There’s a common bond, between those who fought. Those who’ve seen and done the unspeakable. Jack knows there are men who fight because they take pleasure in it, and that’s different altogether. There are always people, everywhere, who are cruel and take pleasure in pain. But he’s known far too many truly good people, people with families and dreams and hopes, who went off to war and never came home. Some days, I feel like I’m living for all of them. So I need to make my life mean something. It has to be worth it.

But they’re not here to visit with everyone Jack sees. They’re here to find the one man who might be able to help them stop World War Three and a whole lot more young men and women going off to
Riley pulls up the CIA dossier photo on her phone. “This is the most recent picture we have of Orlov.”

“That’s real helpful,” Jack says. It’s over forty years old.

“It’s all we’ve got.” Jack looks up; they’re close to what looks like a common room. There’s a TV blaring “The Price is Right,” and a nurse is arguing with an old man who appears to have been in the process of taking apart the TV remote. The man is shouting back, and his accent is unmistakably tinged with Russian. *That’s got to be him.* Jack moves forward, but at just that second the man stands up to try and pull the remote out of the nurse’s hands, and he catches Jack’s eye. And then his eyes move to the faint but distinctive shape of the concealed sidearm.

There’s still a trained Soviet agent underneath the crotchety old man stubbornly insisting on being allowed to watch what he wants. Before Jack quite processes what’s happening, THe man is grabbing something from behind the television, slashing through cables with... *oh hell no, he’s got a knife, this won’t be ending well...* and bolting for a door that leads out ot the parking lot.

There’s no point in stealth now. “Orlov! Wait! We just want to talk to you!” Jack yells, breaking into a run, but the man’s having none of it. He’s long gone.

As per usual, Carl’s Jr. takes off with that freaky fast running and beats Jack to the door. Which doesn’t open, which means the kid practically pastes himself to it like a Wile. E. Coyote cartoon. Splayed hands and face pressed sideways against the glass and everything. Jack would laugh if not for the fact that he wasn’t prepared to stop so fast either.

Jack feels the kid flinch and tense when he slams into his back, pressing him hard against the door, so much so that he gasps softly and struggles a little. *Sorry kid. That’s gotta be hell on your ribs.* He pulls back quickly, noticing vaguely that the kid shivers and seems to shake his head like he’s trying to forget something. “What the hell’s wrong with that door?”

Carl’s Jr. glances up. “He wrapped the hydraulic arm with that TV cord.”

“He’s an old you,” Jack says, starting to laugh. *There’s really nothing funny about any of this, but damn if he doesn’t remind me of the kid. Wonder if anyone like me ever had to put up with him.* And then his brain returns to the task at hand. Find Orlov. Defuse the bomb. Save the world.

*Just another day at the office.*

That door’s effectively blocked. Riley barely avoids laughing as Mac and Jack end up in a pile-up that could have come straight out of a Saturday morning cartoon. This job can be really insane and downright traumatizing, but some days it really does look like something out of the movies.

She’s already on the hunt for another door. Jack and Mac are right behind her. She’s trying to keep an eye on Orlov out in the parking lot. Out one of the windows she can see the man trying to jimmy open a car door with the same steak knife he used to cut the TV cord.

“Grandpa theft auto! I like this guy,” Riley grins. *Jack’s right. He’s the fifty years in the future version of Mac.*

Mac bolts past her, out an emergency exit at the end of the hall. She and Jack follow him, and they’re just outside when Orlov smashes the car door and appears to be attempting to start the car with the knife.
Mac rushes up and slides to a stop. Riley can hear him talking to the guy. “I respect anyone who’s trying to hotwire a car with a knife, but can we just…” Orlov spins around, slashing the knife at Mac’s chest. He jumps back, stumbling. “Whoa, whoa, hey, I just wanna talk!”

“Get away from me you KGB bastard!” Orlov makes another swing and Mac tries to back up, forgets about the curb behind him, and trips over it, falling onto the ground. Jack rushes up and pulls his gun.

“Put down the knife, Orlov.”

“The KGB was disbanded before I was even born,” Mac mumbles insultedly, struggling to his feet and wiping at the grass stains that have just been added to the mess he’s managed to make of his clothes today.

Orlov sighs. “You’re going to have to shoot me. I’ll tell you nothing.”

“Please, we’re not from the KGB. We’re trying to stop a bomb you made from being used.” Riley pulls up the photos on her rig. “We’re here about Fire-bird.”

“Zhar-pititsa?” Orlov mumbles quietly, and his eyes take on a faraway look. The knife clatters to the pavement and Jack relaxes his grip on his gun.

“Let’s go inside, huh?” Riley asks. Orlov leads them back inside, and Riley attempts to explain the situation to him as they walk. Jack slips his gun back into its holster before the front desk clerk decides to call him out on it. Riley’s sure the woman saw what happened outside, but she looks a little too spooked to say anything. As long as she didn’t call the cops.

Orlov’s room is covered in sketches. “That’s a fusion reactor,” Riley gapes at the technical sketches on the wall. This guy isn’t just a programming genius. He’s a real renaissance man.

“I wanted to give my country clean energy. But all the Soviets wanted was more bombs.” Orlov sighs. “I thought I could escape it all. And then you come and tell me that my work is in the hands of a madman.”

“But we can still stop it,” Riley says. “You created the programming language, right? So you’re the only person in the world who can shut it down.”

“But that bomb has already been activated.” Orlov takes Riley’s tablet and flicks through the images. “This script means that it is in standby. Knowing the programming language is only half the battle. To stop it now, we need the passwords.”

“Passwords?” Jack asks. “Riles, you can crack those, right?”

“On a fifty-year-old computer with a custom OS? Maybe if I had a year.”

“Why don’t you have the passwords?” Mac asks.

“You have to understand, the Soviets were paranoid. They did not want us to change our minds. The only person who had the passwords to Fire-bird was my handler. Victor Levkin.”

“Your handler?”

“Spies and scientists had different duties.” He glances from Jack to Mac and Riley. “Maybe like you. They have the brains, and your job is to protect them, isn’t that right?”
Jack frowns a little. “One, I think you’re kinda halfway insulting me, and two, you just watched the kid there trip over a curb, so what makes you think he’s the brains of this operation at all?”

“Because he is not the muscle,” Orlov chuckles slightly.

“So let me get this straight. We need to find your partner to get the codes to shut down this thing?” Riley cuts in. “Please tell me he’s still alive.”

“He is.” Orlov sighs. “I will need a phone.”

Jack reluctantly hands his over. “Why is it always mine, man?”

“Because I need mine for my job, and Mac’s is locked to only secure messaging and calls,” Riley replies. *I made sure to make Mac’s untraceable as well, just in case his PO decides to check phone records. Anything we don’t want him to know about will never show up. Including locations outside the greater LA area.*

They go back outside, Orlov typing away on the phone. “So where is this Levkin anyway?” Jack asks. “Because we’re kind of on a clock here.” He glances back at Orlov. “Hey, man, that’s the third Uber you’ve canceled! You’re wrecking my score. We don’t even need an Uber, we have a car!”

“We do not need to go to him. He will come to us. But not if he knows it’s me.” Orlov sighs, then sits down on the step. “Now all we need to do is wait.” Jack snatches his phone back and glances at Riley.

“Hey Riles.” She scoots a little closer. “Maybe it’s just me, but is this guy a little, you know…” He wiggles his finger beside his head.

“Maybe. I don’t know. But he’s our only lead on finding Levkin and stopping Fire-bird. So unhinged or not, we’ve got to trust him.”

Soon a black car pulls up outside, and a grey-haired man steps out. As soon as Orlov stands up, the man shouts “Nyet!” And scrambles back into his car to grab a gun.

“Hey, hey, none of that now!” Jack wrestles the gun away from him, only for Levkin to grab another from his belt. When Jack takes that, he bends down to pull one from his boot. “Hey, man, I like your style but we just wanna talk!” *That poor desk secretary is going to think she signed up to work in a mental hospital.*

“I won’t talk to you KGB!”

“Victor! They are not KGB!” Orlov shouts.

“And why should I believe you? Why should I believe anything you say!”

“Victor, you know me!”

“We haven’t spoken since 1991!”

“You stopped talking to me!” Orlov shouts.

“Because you treated me like I was stupid!”

“That’s because you’re an imbecile!”

Riley shakes her head. “Wow. It’s like someone put you two through a copy machine and you came
out all Russian and wrinkly.”

Jack glares at her. “Carl’s Jr. and I aren’t close to being that good of friends.” Now it’s Riley’s turn to look at him in disbelief. *If that’s his definition of friends...* She knows Jack likes to argue, a lot, and people have said he and Riley sound like a father and daughter arguing about her driving privileges, but this doesn’t sound like a friendly argument. It looks like these two are going to choke each other.

Riley steps in between. “I get that you two have your issues, but there is an actual nuclear warhead about to go off. And we’re on the wrong side of the world.”

“What is the right side of the world?” Orlov asks.

Jack launches into Iron Maiden’s “Mother Russia.” Riley cringes. As long as she’s known Jack, his singing skills have not been anything less than cringeworthy.

“Jack, please stop.” To his credit, he does.

“Riley, that’s classic Iron Maiden!”

“Well, I don’t want to hear you trying to sing it. And neither do they, I’m sure.”

“I swore I’d never go back,” Orlov says quietly. *I’m sorry we had to drag you back into the past you wanted to forget. But it’s the only way.*

They’ll take Orlov and Levkin and disarm the bomb. They won’t need Mac, he can go back now. He’d ask to take the Uber back if it wasn’t Levkin’s car. Maybe he can call Bozer to come pick him up, even though there are going to be a lot of questions as to how he ended up at a retirement home without transportation.

*I’m sure I can think of something.* But what it is, he can’t think of. *I’m good at improvising when it comes to mechanical stuff. But making up stories isn’t my thing. That’s Bozer’s.* Boze was always the one to cover for Mac if he was caught sneaking back into the house or had to explain why he’d missed a class or event, or why he couldn’t go to something because he was planning on going out as the Phoenix that night. *I miss that. I miss knowing he had my back.*

Orlov hesitates before getting in Jack’s car. “My hands are not as steady as they were. I will need someone to help me.” Riley nods, *she’s probably disarmed hundreds of bombs in her career. Of course she has.* “No, no, I need you to help me with the computers. It took me three weeks to program Fire-bird. I will need all the help I can get to shut it down.” Orlov taps Riley’s rig. “The system was not as...sophisticated as what you may be used to, but I like to think it is quite elaborate.”

He glances at Jack. “Don’t look at me, man. I was overwatch for EODs in the Sandbox, and believe me, those guys have my utmost respect, but there’s no way I’m capable of doing what they do. I’m a bull in a china shop when it comes to stuff like this. And I got the feeling that if I move wrong, that baby might go off in our faces.”

Orlov glances at Mac. “Who exactly is he?”

“That’s our technical consultant, Angus MacGyver,” Riley jumps in before Jack can say something smart. Mac’s grateful.

“What do you know about disarming nuclear warheads?” Orlov asks.

“Nothing,” Mac admits, fingers straying to the paperclips in his pocket. “But I...I knew a cop who
was part of a bomb squad. He taught me how to deal with the IEDs cartels set up in their neighborhoods. I know my way around wires and triggers.” He tries not to think about the crisp determination on Pena’s face as he showed Mac how to dismantle a makeshift shrapnel bomb in the kitchen of a boarded up restaurant. He would have told them I could do this. Pena had always said Mac would have made a good bomb tech, because when it came down to what could kill him, Mac was a good judge of the real issue, and he was steady as a rock when it counted. I might be a spastic golden retriever puppy ninety percent of the time, but that was one thing I could focus on. It was just another problem to solve.

“Then you are going to be my hands, Mr. MacGyver.”

Jack balks at that. “Whoa, whoa, whoa. We’re seriously going to put our lives, and the lives of millions, in the hands of a kid who tripped over a parking curb and spilled coffee on himself all in one morning?” The disbelief in Jack’s voice hurts.

“We don’t have another choice,” Riley says. “We have to leave now. There’s no time to assemble a Phoenix disposal team, and even if there was that’s too many people to take in-country. We have to travel light.”

“And we might need his improvisation skills,” Riley adds. “We don’t know what we might run into out there.”

Mac should be excited about this. Yes, if we fail we’re all going to die in a nuclear blast, but at least it would be quick. And this is something I’m good at; I still remember everything Pena taught me and everything that was in those books he loaned me. But there’s a massive problem with any out-of-the-country op right now.

If they’re gone overnight, this will be the second time he’s had to reschedule a parole meeting in the past month alone. Hammond could excuse the last one; Mac claimed a pre-existing meeting with legal counsel. This time, he doesn’t really have another good excuse. He can’t afford to have Hammond get suspicious.

This job is supposed to be keeping me out of jail, but if I’m not careful it’s going to send me right back. He shivers at the thought.

“Alright, I’ve called the Phoenix transport pilot. He’ll be standing by for takeoff as soon as we reach the airport.” Jack gets in the driver’s seat. “Hey, Carl’s Jr., hurry it up. You’re burnin’ daylight!”

Mac scurries to the car, and Levkin gets out as he does. Mac suddenly realizes the guy plans on using him as a human buffer between himself and Orlov. Great. Mac crams into the middle seat, good thing I’m on the skinny side, and tries to ignore the two angry Russians on either side of him. And I thought the ride here was uncomfortable.

Riley is seriously impressed with Orlov’s coding skills. Admittedly, he’s jumped up from his seat four times and excused himself to use the restroom, but the man is a genius.

This would probably be easier if she was more fluent in Russian. She’s got a passable knowledge, but mostly modern conversational stuff, enough to fool people on phones or at galas. She’s not as familiar with the technical language from the 1960s.

She rubs her eyes and stands up; she’s starting to get a headache from staring at the computer screen. Jack and Victor are sitting next to each other in the back and she can hear snippets of conversation.

“So you are to them a me?” Victor asks. “You watch their backs in the field, yes?”
“I sure do.” Jack’s smiling slightly. “No place I’d rather be, man.”

“Partnership...It is like marriage. It is all fine and cute at first. But then things begin to bother.” He glances at Mac, who’s making something out of his paperclips again. “Tell me that does not annoy you.”

“Yeah, it does, but that’s how we all know he’s thinkin’. Carl’s Jr.’s not a bad kid, for a kid.” Riley grins. Oh Jack. You sure like to insult Mac to his face, but you care so damn much. And if he wasn’t so terrified of you, he’d see it. She wishes Jack would drop some of the abrasive act and let Mac in. What’s bothering him? Is it that Mac doesn’t have the field training or the skill sets we do? Is he afraid of what will happen if Mac fails?

“Yes, but does he tell you everything he’s thinking?” Riley sees the doubt spread itself across Jack’s face at Victor’s words. And then Alexi comes out of the bathroom and immediately picks up his coding conversation where he left off. I think he’s just thrilled to finally be talking to someone who understands him. For the past fifty years he’s been unable to let anyone know how smart he really is. That must hurt. Riley’s had to hide her day job, but she can’t imagine what it would be like to give that up entirely. I need an outlet for what I do.

She keeps glancing back at Jack as Alexi continues. Jack, stop dwelling on what Mac doesn’t tell us. He keeps his secrets for a reason. She has a faint desire to punch Victor for even letting the thought of Mac betraying them enter Jack’s head. Just because your partner left, doesn’t mean Mac will do that to us.

Then her phone rings. It’s Patty.

“Patty. We have Orlov and we’re en route to Russia.”

Patty is breathing hard, sounding like she just got out of a pretty serious fight.

“Reroute to Serbia. That’s where Sevchenko is taking the bomb. And he’s moved up the timetable even more than we thought. He’s going to detonate Fire-bird in the next twenty-four hours.”

“How do you know this?” Riley has a sinking feeling she doesn’t want to know. Patty’s lessons on interrogation techniques were rather graphically brutal. No wonder she plays it cold. You can’t appear to have a heart and do what she does. But it’s sadly sometimes necessary.

“Let’s just say I’m my mother’s daughter. I’ll have the location of the courier soon.” She hangs up.

Riley turns to Alexi. “Change of plans. Fire-bird is in Serbia.”

Alexi glances at her. “We cannot disarm it yet. We need a chiget.”

“That’s the computer that talks to the bomb, right?” Jack asks, then scowls when everyone stares at him. “I’m allowed to know stuff too, aren’t I?” He’s such a nerd about things that can kill people.

“You are correct,” Victor says.

“I thought they were all destroyed when the dead hand devices were finished.” Jack continues.

“According to this they are,” Riley pulls up an article on them. “This is what they look like, right?” Victor glances at the picture and sighs.

“Only twenty-six men knew they existed, and now their pictures are on the internet for everyone to see.” He leans back in his chair, fingers drumming on the armrest. Mac glances over Riley’s
shoulder at the picture on her rig, and she can see the curiosity. *This is going to be difficult. I don’t think even our little genius can build one of these out of chewing gum and paper clips.* And if they don’t have a *chiget*, they can’t shut the bomb down. Riley’s rig can’t even be reprogrammed, not even if she knew the code. The new technology wouldn’t be able to interface with the fifty-year-old systems. *It would be too fast, probably set the whole thing off.*

“Even secrets get old, Victor,” Alexi says quietly.

“But not some secrets. Do not believe everything you read there. They were not all destroyed. There is one left. And I know where to find it,” Victor smiles.

“Where?”

“Zelenograd, outside Moscow.”

“Jack, call Patty back.” Riley’s already pulling up the new destination.

“Why me?”

“Cause I don’t want to deal with this,” Riley answers honestly.

Jack sighs, but he does it.

“Uh, Patty, we’re gonna need to take a slight detour.”

The coldly furious voice on the other hand makes Riley supremely grateful she let Jack handle this one.

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**MOTHER RUSSIA**

**IT’S JUST AS COLD HERE AS JACK REMEMBERS**

Jack’s expecting the hidden *chiget* to be squirreled away in some underground bunker, one of those damp, chilly places that’s all cobwebby and full of food stashes that are very unsafe to eat. *Learned that the hard way when Sarah and I holed up after Moscow. She always blamed me for why we got caught, and I can’t say I blame her, but I really did need to go find a bathroom.*

Instead, Victor leads them to a massive mansion of a place. “What is this?” Jack asks in surprise.

“A safe house. You hide them well enough, even Putin cannot find what is under his own nose.” Victor sniffs. “Hiding in caves gets you caught. Hiding where you can easily be found makes them ignore you.”

He walks over to a wall and takes down a framed photograph, of two men, one blond, one with nearly black hair, sitting at a table. The blond one looks familiar. “Is that…” Jack asks.

“Us. Fifty years ago,” Alexi says quietly. “You kept it?”

“Of course.” Victor sounds just a little insulted. “It was the right size to hide this.” He begins spinning the dial of an old safe, and it opens to reveal the small, boxy device.

“I can’t believe you kept one. Orders were to destroy them all,” Alexi whispers.

“Well, sometimes orders are stupid. Made by imbeciles,” Victor barks a small laugh, and Alexi smiles.
“You had your doubts too. Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I thought you were committed. You seemed so certain of what you were doing. And then you left, like that.” Victor snaps his fingers. “Not even a goodbye.”

“I was afraid, Victor!”

“So was I! As soon as you left they came to my home and took me away in the night. For days I knew nothing. I thought you had been captured, taken to Siberia. I thought you might have been killed! They asked me about you a hundred times and I told them nothing. And then I realized they did not believe me. They were going to kill me, Alexi. Because of you. So I took a chance and ran.”

There’s harsh emotion in Victor’s voice. “But what hurt worse than anything they did to make me talk was the thought that you did not trust me.”

I can’t imagine what that would be like. Jack’s been tortured for Riley’s location before, but always for a mission. Always knowing after it was over, they’d be reunited, that she was going to save the world if he just gave her enough time, if he held out for a few more minutes. Never because she ran off without telling him anything, leaving him to pick up the pieces and deal with the fallout of her decision.

What would it be like to lose your partner like that? Jack can’t imagine this job without Riley by his side. He can’t imagine going the rest of his life never hearing her criticize his singing or make fun of his leather cuff or just feeling her head on his chest when she has to remind herself they’re both still alive after a rough op.

Hell, he’s starting to feel the same way about Carl’s Jr. The kid’s as annoying as a scorpion in a boot, but he’s starting to grow on Jack. He doesn’t just roll over when Jack gives him a hard time, and despite all the defenses he’s put up to protect himself, Jack can tell there’s a kind, soft-hearted person underneath. He and I aren’t so different. We both project toughness because it’s the only way to survive.

“Um, we have a problem.” Riley’s holding up a frayed electrical cord. “This runs on Russian AC. And we’ve got no guarantees Sevchenko’s going to put that bomb anywhere near an outlet.”

“So we’ll need to make it portable.” Carl’s Jr. is studying the device. “Riley, I’m going to need your computer battery.” He reaches for the one in her hands.

“Hey, nobody cracks my rig but me. Use my backup.” Jack used to pick on her for having an extra computer at all times. And then her rig got shot out of her hands in Borneo and Jack stopped teasing.

The kid sits down and starts disassembling the computer and the chiget. “Let’s turn this thing into a chiget book, alright?” Is it technically a Mac, though, given his name? Jack’s about to make the joke but doesn’t. The kid’s been off all day. He’s been withdrawn and seemed almost afraid of Jack and Riley. What’s eatin’ him? Jack thinks maybe he should ask Riley. But she’s been acting weird the past week or so too. Turning away every time he walks up while she’s using her rig, like a kid who doesn’t want their parents to see what they’re looking up on the internet. But he’s pretty sure Riley’s current obsession is less embarrassing than it is dangerous.

I’d bet money she’s still hunting Nick. Jack’s starting to sympathize a lot with Victor. It’s tough to watch your team’s backs when they don’t think they can trust you with the truth.

Mac really hopes this works. When I was a kid, I wanted a computer. Instead of getting me one, my dad brought home three college-level books and took me to the junkyard. I built my first computer
out of a whole lot of random junk, and after two days it sparked out and almost burnt the house down. But they don’t need the chiget to last that long. Just long enough to disarm that nuke.

He disassembles the computer and begins the process of wiring Riley’s battery to it. This might take a while, since the computer wasn’t designed to run on battery power and he’ll have to make sure it doesn’t short out.

Alexi sits down across the table from him. The man has shadows in his eyes, the kind Mac knows all too well. *It’s that hunted feeling. Of being in a place where nowhere is safe and everyone is against you.* For Orlov, coming back to Russia is what it would be like for Mac to get sent back to CCI.

Mac starts talking, as much to distract himself as to distract Alexi. *Focus on the problems right here, right now.*

“What made you decide to defect?”

Orlov sighs and picks up a piece of loose wire in his hands, twisting it as he talks. “I watched a test. A different kind of test. With houses and lamps and televisions and mannequins sitting around a dinner table. And in the blink of an eye, gone. After that I could not see my work without thinking of my nephew and his family at their table. But they would never let me stop building bombs.”

In the background, Jack’s phone rings. He pulls it out and winces before answering. *Must be Thornton.*

“We’re close, Patty. Real close. Kid’s just workin’ his magic on this stone age laptop and then we’re good.” He hangs up. “Patty needs us moving. Like now. She’s got a line on Sevchenko’s courier, and she’ll have a location for us soon.”

“I’m almost done.” Mac can feel the pressure on him now. *If we don’t make it there in time it’s going to be my fault.* There are so many ways things can go wrong. And all of them end with him either incinerated in a nuclear blast or hauled back to CCI in cuffs. He’s not sure which option is more terrifying.

He glances at his watch for the fifth time. It’s still set to California time, so he can tell how much time is left before his parole meeting. *Less than eighteen hours.* And that has to factor in flight time. He’s already running the numbers in his head. *Phoenix jet travels 720 mph approximately. Flight time LA to Moscow, about 6100 miles, at that speed, a little more than eight hours. Flight time to Serbia will be another two. Flight time home from there will be nine. That means we have about eight hours to get this computer to work and stop the bomb.* They’ve already used up an hour and a half just getting to this place and working on the chiget.

*I wonder if I can still call Hammond and reschedule.* But what excuse is he going to be able to use? Last time Riley hacked the LA judicial records to fake the court date. This time they’re nowhere near her being able to jack into the network. *I could say I was sick...no, that won’t work, I’m a terrible liar and that’s an awful excuse.* He fumbles, nearly dropping the battery, and Jack glares at him.

*Focus on what can kill you now.* Pena’s voice strays into his head unannounced. *What can kill you right now?*

“The bomb,” Mac whispers under his breath.

*So that’s what you have to worry about first. Stop the bomb, then think about everything else.* Mac forces his mind back to the present, and the battery, and the man sitting across from him.

“So you left without telling Levkin anything?”
“I thought he would hate me.” Alexi glances at the other man, who is apparently debating the merits of various semiautomatics with Jack.

“Do you have a doorknob?”

“We were paired together by superiors. I thought he cared only to do his job and keep me safe. It was only when it was too late I realized he considered me a friend.” Orlov sighs. “And I have been too much of a fool all these years to tell him I made a mistake.”

He lied to the person who was the closest to him in the world. The person who trusted him.

Mac suddenly feels horribly guilty for keeping Bozer in the dark. True, if he tells his roommate what he’s actually doing for a living, it’s probably a violation of the espionage act. “I’d just go back to jail again. There isn’t one scenario of that reveal that doesn’t go wrong, not anywhere in the dozens he’s played out in his head on sleepless nights.

He finishes wiring the battery in and adjusts it carefully, closing the housing. “All done.” Riley moves to pick it up, then her gaze flicks to the window and she freezes.

“We have visitors. And I doubt they’re a welcoming committee.”

“Spetsnaz,” Victor spits. “They never forget an enemy. They must have recognized us at the airport and tracked us.” And then bullets start flying, glass shatters, and Mac cringes at the unfortunate familiar burn of something creasing across his shoulder. He throws himself behind the table, shuddering. “If we don’t get out of this, I won’t have to worry about a nuke or CCI. I’ll be six feet under the Russian tundra.”

Jack reacts the second he sees moonlight on gun barrels. He shoves Riley down, but she forces him out of the way and reaches up to grab the chiget. She yelps, and when she drops back down there’s a glass cut on her cheek and a tear in the arm of her jacket, but neither one is life-threatening.

Victor shouts above the gunfire. “We need to go through the rabbit hole!”

“Rabbit hole?” Jack yells back.

Victor stands up, firing expertly with his left hand while his right searches the bookshelf. When his fingers hit a particular volume, he pulls hard, and the whole wall shifts, revealing a reinforced metal door. He pulls it open, then runs back to them, dropping to the floor again and breathing hard. Jack can’t tell if he’s wounded or just winded.

“Alexi. We must go.” Victor grabs his partner’s hand and pulls him to the door, which he swings open. The two disappear inside.

“Riley! Follow them!” Jack lays down a few cover shots while he and Riley jump up and run for the opening. Riley races through, ducking as shots shatter the few still-intact window panes. Jack scans the room once more. Dammit, Carl’s Jr., where are you hiding?

Then he sees him, and he bites off a frustrated curse. The kid’s not going to make it to the door without help. He’s terrified, hunkered down in a corner, shaking. Dammit. Jack flings himself back into the storm of bullets, firing out the window indiscriminately. The shots die down for a fraction of a second, the Spetsnaz goons apparently startled enough at the heavy return fire to hesitate.

“Hey! Carl’s Jr., don’t just sit there! Let’s go!” The kid stares at him, eyes wide with shock. “Now!” He drags the kid to his feet, hearing him hiss as Jack’s hand apparently clamps over a bullet graze. He can feel the sticky wetness under his palm.
Carl’s Jr. follows him blindly, but they make it to the door. The gunfire has died down. *Most people would think that was a good thing. It’s not. Anyone who’s been in Tac Ops long knows that after laying down heavy fire like that, they’re going to breach. They’re going to see who’s still alive after the barrage and finish them off. And chances are they’re in the house already.*

The door leads into a small storeroom. Riley is stuffing the *chiget* in her backpack, and Victor’s just opened the door to a small tunnel.

The kid looks around the room, and then his eyes light up in that “I’m about to break something” look that Jack’s learned to both fear and respect. He grabs an alarm clock off the shelf, a couple paperclips from his pocket, and holds out his hand. “Jack, I’m gonna need your phone.”

“What?” Jack’s already given his phone to one mad scientist today. *Not again.*

“I need it or we’re all gonna die!”

Jack wants to argue but he’s seen this kid do too many crazy things. “You break it, that’s comin’ outta your paycheck.”

“I just need the battery.” Carl’s Jr. proceeds to crack the back off his phone, pull out the battery, and then hand it back to Jack.

“Dude, why didn’t you just break yours?”

“Because I might have to call my parole officer!” The kid snaps, but Jack can tell he’s actually genuinely worried. “We might not get back in time for my meeting!”

“If we don’t get that bomb shut down in time, your parole hearing will be the least of your problems!”

“Guys! Focus! Evil Russian military dudes with guns, trying to kill us?” Riley snaps. “Levkin and Orlov are already in the tunnel, and I think we oughta join them!” Jack will agree with that, seeing as there’s a sudden heavy pounding against the reinforced door. *That old lock won’t hold up forever against assault rifles.*

The kid grabs two bags from the floor and hands them to Jack.

“Flour?” Jack asks. The kid just nods, and then all three of them are in the tunnel. Jack hears Carl’s Jr. behind him, and it sounds like he’s ripping the bags open. “Unless this plan ends with me eating a whole stack of pancakes, I don’t like it!” Jack shouts.

“Just shake them! Get the dust in the air!” The kid’s coughing, stumbling behind him, but Jack can hear him doing something with that alarm clock. Then they’re at a door Jack drops the empty flour sacks and follows Riley outside. The kid wedges whatever gadget he made from the clock into a corner.

“Close the door!” He gasps, hands on his knees, still coughing.

“What did you do?” Riley asks, shoving at the rusted hinges.

“The high concentration of powder in the air is highly flammable.” And then there’s a low roar. *Damn. He rigged that clock to spark and ignite the powder.*

That’s at least the fifth time something he’s touched has caught fire and/or exploded. Jack’s laughing...until they round the corner and see Victor sprawled against the wall, groaning and
bleeding from a head wound.

“Levkin! What happened?” Riley leans down next to him.

“They knew…” He shakes his head, mumbling. “They knew about the safe house. They were waiting. They took Alexi.”

Riley looks up. “Without him, we can’t stop Fire-bird.” Jack feels his stomach drop into his shoes. Great. I can’t wait to explain this to Patty.

The flight to Serbia is tense. Victor stares off vacantly into space in a way Jack’s sure has more to do with guilt than his mild concussion. Riley fiddles with the edges of the bandage on her arm and struggles to make sense of what she knows of Orlov’s programming. Jack watches Carl’s Jr. glance at his watch, and then at his ankle tether. He’s terrified. Of getting put back inside because of something that isn’t even his fault. No wonder the kid’s been off his game all day. I forgot tomorrow…wait, is it today now, damn these timezones…was his meeting. Jack suddenly feels guilty for yelling at him and making fun of him. Geez, I just didn’t know. They’re all on the clock for that bomb, but Jack has the feeling Carl’s Jr. is watching a clock counting down to a fate worse than nuclear obliteration.

Thornton doesn’t look happy when they all get off the plane in Serbia. “Please tell me someone can explain why you have the computer and lost the only man who knows how to use it?”

“I…” Mac doesn’t want to admit it, but this is his fault. He stopped to argue with Jack, or they would have been closer and maybe they could have helped Victor. I was so worried about my own problems I lost sight of the things we had to worry about right then. I forgot to focus.

“Well,” Jack begins, and Mac’s sure he’s going to get blamed, and even though he was about to say it himself it’s so much worse coming from Jack. “It was my fault, Patty, I should have been watching…” I don’t believe it. He’s taking the blame for me? Why?

“Actually it was my fault.” Victor steps forward. “Protecting Alexi was my job, and I failed him.”

Thornton cuts them all off. “I don’t really care to hear a full debrief, right now. Can we get him back?”

“Maybe.” Riley hauls out her rig. “Thanks to Victor, we have one of their phones. These guys were communicating using encrypted messages. And now we have the encryption key.”

Thornton hands her a small red flash drive. “Then maybe you can decrypt this. It’s been giving our techs at Phoenix headaches.”

Riley plugs the drive into her computer. “Okay, I’ve got date, time, minimum safe distance, and…bingo! Coordinates!”

“Please don’t say ‘bingo’ again,” Jack mutters.

“Okay, these are for a US Army base,” Riley says. “That must be where he’s planning to detonate the bomb.”

“I’ll call them,” Thornton says. She steps off and paces as she talks to the camp commander. When she comes back, her face is grim. “They don’t have any reason to believe the bomb is on their base. The only trucks in and out were thoroughly searched, their perimeter fences haven’t been breached, and no security alerts were triggered. Every building’s access points are accounted for. They’re still
evacuating the base, and EOD will do a sweep, but they’re certain Fire-bird isn’t there.”

“Fire-bird isn’t a scalpel, it’s a sledgehammer,” Jack says. “Those bombs were designed to do a maximum of damage to any surrounding area. It won’t have to be on the base to wipe it off the planet.”

Riley zooms out on her satellite view. Mac leans over her shoulder to look. It’ll be somewhere no one would stumble on it. Somewhere abandoned... There’s a factory, overgrown and ramshackle, in the top right corner. “Riley, zoom in there.” She does. And then Mac spots the truck. “That’s it!”

When they find the warehouse, Mac watches as Jack and Thornton scope out the situation. “Bomb will be on the top level, to maximize the damage,” Jack says. He sure knows a lot about them. Guess his fascination with cold war weapons and three years as an EOD overwatch paid off. It’s rare that Mac finds someone who actually understands the same things he does. Maybe Jack’s not so keen on geometry and physics and biochemistry, but at least they have a common fascination with things that explode. It’s something.

“There’s a lot of guards at that door,” Riley mutters.

“We cannot just walk through the front gate,” Levkin adds.

“No, but maybe we can drive.” Mac glances from them to the truck still parked down at the bottom of the hill, empty bomb crate swung wide open.

He wasn’t exactly counting on Jack telling him and Riley to get in the bomb container. That thing was leaking a lot of radiation when Bannister scanned it. Some was the bomb but there’s still gonna be a lot on the container, right? Mac’s not super familiar with all the logistics of radiation exposure, but he’s pretty sure hiding in a crate where a nuclear bomb was stored isn’t great for his health.

They’re supposed to be quiet back there, but Mac can’t help asking Riley about how good an idea this is. “Is hiding in a radioactive box safe? I don’t wanna become a real-life Schrodinger’s cat.” Riley actually laughs at his geeky joke. Well, this is about the only situation in which it really makes any sense.

“We won’t be in here long. It probably just means we’ll have to do a full decontamination at exfil. And anyway, potential radiation exposure totally beats a bullet in the head. This metal should protect us a little.”

And then they’re crashing through the doors, there’s a lot of yelling in what Mac guesses is Russian, and there’s no more time to talk. He and Riley tumble out of the crate and run for the stairs to the top level. Mac cringes at the gunfire all around them. I really hate being shot at!

Mac glances up. He can see the bomb, and even more importantly he can see Orlov, tied to a chair in the middle of the room. They’re shooting all around him. He knows Jack, Thornton and Levkin won’t return fire, not when they know the bomb must be up there, but the people shooting down at them could easily hit Orlov.

There’s a rolling cart like a mechanic’s ‘creeper’ on the floor nearby, and a chain hoist that at one point must have lifted machinery on an assembly line. Mac has an idea. “I’m gonna get Orlov out of the crossfire. Be ready to pull when I say, okay?” She nods. He ties the chain to the creeper and carefully pushes himself forward, hoping to avoid being noticed. As soon as he’s close to Orlov’s chair, he rolls off the small platform, shoves it into the back of the chair, and tugs on the chair legs to make sure it topples over. Orlov falls onto his back, and Mac yells.
“Okay, now!” She yanks on the chain and Orlov slides back toward her. And then Mac sees the two guys coming up the stairs. “Riley, behind you!”

Riley doesn’t even flinch. She grabs a barrel from a stack beside her, rolls it down the steps, then wipes off her hands dramatically.

Mac flinches as another spatter of bullets ricochets off the crates he’s hiding behind. *I already got shot once, I don’t really want to do it again.* Even though it’s just a graze, the wound still hurts. *How am I gonna get myself out of this one?*

And then three shots ring out and the assault on his hiding spot ends. Mac looks up, gasping, to see Jack kneeling beside Riley, gun in hand. *He just took them all out with three shots. And I counted at least four guys.*

“Did you just Donkey Kong those guys?” Jack asks Riley, as Mac stumbles back to them, still in shock that he’s alive and not currently as full of holes as Bozer’s pasta strainer.

“I guess I’m picking up a few pointers on improvising,” Riley winks at Mac, then starts undoing the gag in Orlov’s mouth.

As soon as the man can speak, he’s struggling to stand. “Sevchenko is insane. He wants me to build more bombs for him. He has the materials. You have to stop him!”

“We will.” Thornton’s joined them now, with Victor behind her. “Has he already armed Fire-bird?” Orlov only nods. “Then your priority is to shut it down. We’ll handle Sevchenko.” She and Jack stand up and fire together at the remaining mercenaries, who retreat further into the warehouse. And then two go down, and Sevchenko dives out a window to the roof.

“We’ve got him! Shut that down!” Thornton yells, and follows him.

Victor reaches for Alexi and wraps the man in a crushing hug. “I thought you were lost, old friend,” he whispers.

“I knew you would come for me.”

*Ordinarily, I’d be all for the dramatic, emotional reunion. I’m kind of a softy at heart, even if I’d never admit that to literally anyone. But right now I’m on the clock in more ways than one.* He glances at his watch. Eleven hours left. And the bomb’s countdown reads fifteen minutes. *At least I can tell which problem will kill me first.* “Can we disarm this bomb first, and then worry about reunions?”

“Yes, yes.” It looks like Orlov has temporarily forgotten the situation, but now he’s clearly back in his scientist mindset. “In order to connect the chiget, we must remove the faceplate of the bomb.”

Riley looks at him, apparently confused, and he continues to explain. “The plate was designed to be a failsafe. If anyone attempted to remove it, to use a chiget to shut down Fire-bird, the bomb would explode immediately.” He glances at Mac. “You will need to carefully detach the plate and prevent the wire soldered to the back from losing connection with the bomb’s trigger. If it does, we will not live long enough to regret it.”

*I’ve seen device failsafes like this before. Usually bombs hidden in boxes. Removing the lid breaks the connection between the wires, and the bomb explodes. The Merida cartel had a nasty habit of sending those to police officers’ families.* He doesn’t think about the news reports of excited kids running out to see what the delivery men left and opening the containers.
He and Pena had defused their share of those. They were always personal for Alfred, he had a two-
year-old daughter and Mac knew that every time another child was killed by one of those bombs,
Pena saw his own child in that obituary.

He learned to defuse those bombs in minutes. They were his specialty. Mac kicks around the
warehouse floor for something conductive and malleable. Pena used to use gum wrappers. He never
bought any gum that didn’t have real foil on it, and he always kept a pack in his pocket. He’d been
trying to quit smoking because of his little girl, and Mac couldn’t remember a time he hadn’t seen the
man chewing a stick of gum, folding up the wrapper and putting it in his pocket.

“What are you looking for?” Riley asks.

“Something to conduct electricity. A piece of foil, anything I can slip in behind that plate and keep
the current going from the computer to the trigger.”

Riley rummages in her backpack and pulls out a handful of foil-covered mini peanut butter cups.
“Would a candy wrapper work?” She unwraps one of the candies and offers it to Orlov. He shakes
his head, and she pops it in her own mouth. “I can’t help it, I can’t do low blood sugar on missions.”

Mac’s never been more thankful for his partner’s snacking habit. He rolls the thin sheet of foil into a
makeshift wire, then pulls out his Swiss Army knife and finds the screwdriver. He takes a deep
breath before sliding it between the faceplate and the bomb’s housing.

You can do this.

Jack watches Sevchenko crash through the window. Oh no you don’t. He runs toward the shattered
glass, but Patty beats him there, throwing herself through the opening, rolling to her feet and bracing
her stance on the sheet metal, and rattling off two shots at the fleeing figure. Jack slips out the
window just as Sevchenko stumbles, clutching his shoulder, and disappears into a clump of
shrubbery.

Patty slides down the roof to land gracefully on her feet, her long billowing black coat making her
look a little like a vampire. Jack follows. Hopefully Sevchenko doesn’t have a getaway vehicle
hidden back there, because if they lose him again he can’t imagine how Patty will take it.

“Patty, I’m runnin’ outta ammo.”

“Doesn’t matter. I just need you to cover me!” she says, sharply.

“And I thought a corner office made you soft,” he grins, just to rile her up. “This is just like old
times.”

“What old times would those be, Dalton? Cuba?” Patty smirks.

“Nah, Cuba was way worse.” He shakes his head. “But you could run faster back then.”

“Oh yeah?” And then she’s gone. Jack shakes his head. Best way to make sure Patty’s at her best is
to get her mad. He’s worked with the woman a long time, and he knows how to push her buttons.
And she knows how to return the favor. We make a pretty good team.

When he first joined DXS, Patty was a field operative, and she helped introduce Jack to the DXS
operating procedures. She’d worked with him and Riley for over a year before getting promoted to
Director. If anyone deserves that corner office, it’s Patty. She’s loyal, hardworking, smart, and
unflinchingly determined to get the job done.
Jack fires off a couple more shots, to keep Sevchenko’s attention on him. And then another shot cracks the air, Sevchenko collapses to the ground, and Patty steps out of the trees with her gun trained on the fallen man.

She digs the heel of her boot into his wounded shoulder and the man groans.

“Do you know why I’m here, Anton?” she whispers, and there’s a hiss like a coiled rattlesnake behind her tone.

“You should leave. If we don’t make it to the minimum safe distance, we’ll all die.” Sevchenko’s eyes are darting frantically.

“You’re not going anywhere. And you know why?” Patty snaps. “Do you remember an agent you shot? The one who found that bomb? She was my agent, someone I cared about, someone who had a family waiting for her to come home, and you killed her, you bastard!”

Her normal composure is slipping away, giving Jack a glimpse of the depths of emotion hidden under the surface. Her cheeks are scarlet, and more concerning, her finger is tight on the trigger of her gun. “You shot her and now I’m going to return the favor.”

Jack moves before he’s aware of it, gently swinging her hand to the side.

“Patty. Patty. Killing him won’t bring her back.”

She looks at him with tear-filled eyes. “I know.” One tear slides down her cheek. “But how do I ring her mother’s doorbell and tell her that her daughter is dead and the man who killed her got to live?” Her hand quavers slightly, but she pushes Jack aside and points the gun again at Sevchenko’s head. “I can’t.”

“Please, don’t.” The man’s good hand is raised, and there’s absolute terror in his eyes. “Don’t do this.”

“Patty. Don’t become him. You’re better than that.” Jack whispers, because he knows how this feels. To stand over the person who destroyed something you cared about more than your own life, and to have the power over their life and death. It’s an awful thing. And it can turn the best of us into monsters.

Patty sighs, then hands her gun to Jack. As he takes it, he realizes the safety’s been clicked on. She just wanted to see him squirm. But he’s not sure he really believes that. Because everything in Patty’s voice and eyes said she had every intention of putting a bullet in that man’s skull.

A single shot echoes from behind them, and for the second time Jack feels his heart plunge to the ground. No. Not one of my kids. No. He takes off through the bushes at a dead run. He couldn’t care less if leaving Patty with Sevchenko means she ends up snapping the guy’s neck. If he’s the reason one of those kids is hurt, he’ll want her dealing with him and not me.

Riley works the chiget out of her backpack, but her eyes are glued to where Mac is carefully removing the bomb’s faceplate. Mac’s hands are rock steady. He might be able to trip over his own feet on a regular basis, but when it comes down to life and death situations, Riley realizes she’s more than willing to put her life in his capable hands.

And then there’s a metallic clatter as the plate falls to the floor. Riley flinches, bracing herself for the explosion, but nothing happens. Mac stumbles back, gasping. The thin strip of foil is holding in place, keeping the current flowing. The bomb is still stable, for now.
Orlov hurries to her. “I need to connect the chiget.” Riley looks down, and then cringes.

“Bad news, guys. This keyboard’s toast.”

“I think I can fix that.” Mac’s already rushing around. “Keyboards are really simple. They just complete circuits when you press a key down.” Riley nods. She may be a programmer and hacker, but the basic hardware knowledge of how a computer operates is still something she’s highly familiar with. “So we just need something else to complete the circuit.”

He grabs a gear, an angle brace, and a metal hook. “I’m going to attach a wire to each of these, and then one to your hand, Dr. Orlov.”

“And I will complete the circuit and become one with my machine!” The enthusiasm in both their faces is infectious. If it weren’t such a serious moment Riley would want to take a picture. Those two are such nerds.

“Miss Davis, I will need you to read the computer. My old eyes are struggling,” Alexi mutters, looking down at the keyboard.

“Of course.” Riley’s fairly confident she can do this without messing up. The fate of your whole team and thousands of other people only depend on it. No pressure, right?

She starts reading line by line.

“Victor! I need the first password!” Alexi says. And then several things happen at once.

Levkin bellows the password. A guard on the floor stirs, lifting his gun. And then Levkin throws himself between the gun and Orlov, there’s a sickening pop and thwack, and the man sinks to the floor with a bullet in his chest. Riley doesn’t hesitate. She pulls her own gun and shoots the wounded guard between the eyes.

“Victor!” Orlov shouts, rushing away from his computer to kneel beside his fallen friend.

“There is still...the job to finish...” Levkin gasps out, and Orlov stands, wiping away tears. That’s the worst part about having friends in field operations. There’s no time to grieve, or to try to help them. The mission always comes first. But she can’t imagine having to leave Jack to die while she tries to save the world. I think I’d rather the bomb just killed me if anything happened to him.

“Mac, take care of him.” She can’t leave the bomb, as much as she wants to. And neither can Orlov.

Riley tries to ignore the still echoing gunfire in her ears and focus on reading off each line of code. Mac’s sitting on the floor, holding onto Victor, listening as the man recites the passwords and scribbling them on the dusty floor with his finger.

Suddenly Orlov sighs in frustration and stops typing. “There’s no time!” There’s a little more than a minute left on the timer now. “It takes too long. I cannot finish disarming it.”

Riley feels a strange detached numbness. I’m going to die. I’m going to die right here right now. She looks at Mac and Orlov and Victor, and at Jack who’s just rushed up the stairs. There’s no one I’d rather die with. She looks at the bomb’s computer one last time.

“Wait! How many digits did you use for the year?” She yells desperately.

“Two. Why does it matter?” Orlov whispers defeatedly.
“Because we can trick it! Use the Y2K glitch against it!” Riley’s computer nerding started when she heard all the grownups talking about how the computers would all shut down when the new year happened in 2000, and how everything would descend into chaos when it happened. She’d been curious about something that could apparently disrupt all of life as they knew it, and admittedly a little disappointed when no digital apocalypse occurred. I wanted to know if I could ever do that, if I wanted to. So I taught myself how to beat the computers that controlled everything. Because if I could control them, it was at least one thing in life I could say that about.

The light is back in Orlov’s eyes. He types desperately, as Riley watches the seconds tick down. 10, 9, 8, 7, 6, 5, 4…

There’s a blinking lights, digits flash, and then nothing happens. Riley sags against the bomb housing. *Now it thinks this is 1916, not 2016. We just bought ourselves a century.*

“Couldn’t handle the turn of the century,” Jack mutters. “Good job, Riles.” She rushes to him and nearly collapses into his arms. *We did it.*

Orlov kneels next to Levkin. “It’s over. We’re alive. We have to get you to a doctor, we did it, we’re safe.”

“No, it is too late for me.” Victor sighs and covers one of Alexi’s shaking hands with his own bloodstained one. “Our last mission. We finished it together. Vsye vmystye.” And then his head rolls to the side. Mac looks up desperately, his hands and shirt covered in blood. And then Riley does start to cry.

She’s got it together by the time their exfil team arrives, and she and Jack and Mac walk out of the building together. Patty’s off talking to someone who’s handcuffing Sevchenko.

“I can’t imagine losing a partner like that,” Riley whispers. She reaches for Jack’s hand. “Especially if you wasted years of your lives hating each other over lies.” She can tell he’s giving her that ‘what now’ look. It’s like being a kid when your parents know you did something wrong, and that you’re going to fess up, and they’re waiting patiently. “I was still looking for Nick, and I’m sorry. I know you said to let it go, and I tried, but something about it was bugging me. And then right before all this, Sam made me talk to her. She promised to search for him if I would stop.” Jack sighs and hugs her a little closer.

“She’s a good friend, Riley. And she’s a good operative. So let her do her job, and trust she’s gonna get it done.” She nods.

Riley can see that Mac’s working something over in his head. “I-I….” He shakes his head and starts over. “At the safe house, I thought you were going to leave me behind.” He looks down at his shoes. “I knew Thornton said the mission came before the agents; and…” *He still thinks he’s the expendable one.*

“Listen, Carl’s Jr., that ain’t happenin’, got it?” Jack says. “We don’t leave our people behind. And if it wasn’t for you that nuke woulda probably incinerated a decent chunk of the Balkan countryside by now, so stop thinking you weren’t needed on this mission. And we’ll still be able to get you home in time for that parole meeting of yours.” Mac cracks a smile. “But as long as we’re all on the topic of full disclosures, kid, I gotta tell you, your fashion sense sucks.” He waves his hand vaguely at Mac’s clothes, which still have visible coffee stains under the blood. “Cause that coffee accent is just not working with the green.”

“Yeah? You try wearing nothing but orange for two years and see if you still care about what colors match. And on the topic of things that suck, so does your singing, old man!” Mac retorts, finally
sounding less like he’s stuck in permanent panic mode and more like his usual snarky self. “You butchered Iron Maiden.”

Riley grins. Another ally. Yes! “Trust me, never go to a karaoke night with him.”

Jack gives them both an insulted stare. “What are you talking about? My karaoke brings the house down!”

“But not in a good way.”

“I will have you know I am the karaoke champion in four states, one Chinese province, and three small European countries.” He puffs out his chest. “I can prove it!” He begins dancing erratically, counting out a beat before launching into the opening lyrics of Salt ‘n Pepa’s “Push It”.

“What did salt and pepper ever do to you?” Mac asks, laughing.

“It’s Pepe, man, get it right! Of course you can’t tell good karaoke if you can’t even pronounce the name of the band!” Riley shakes her head. Victor was right, partners can be incredibly obnoxious. But you just kind of end up loving them anyway.

Mac doesn’t look at his watch once on the flight back home. Granted, that’s because his watch, along with the rest of his clothing, is a radioactive hazard, but that’s a bit beside the point.

He’s had to borrow Jack’s clothes after all. He and Riley both had to go through a full decontamination before reboarding the Phoenix jet, since they’d been inside the bomb crate and then near the bomb itself for an extended period of time. Since Mac’s go bag was still sitting on the end of his bed at home, and the decon techs had stuffed his old clothes in a bag for immediate disposal (not that he would ever have been able to get the coffee or blood out of them, so it’s not a huge loss), he’d had to break down and accept the ones Jack offered. But this time it doesn’t feel so much like I’m a charity case. It feels more like I’m family.

Now that he knows he’ll be home in time to make his parole meeting, there’s a weight the size of that Fire-bird bomb lifted off his chest. But it’s only been replaced by a new one. He didn’t realize it was so obvious until Jack sits down across from him and startles him so badly he drops the paper clip he was bending.

“What’s eatin’ ya, kid?”

Mac fumbles with the paper clip. He’s not sure what he’s making, his fingers are shaky and clumsy. He swallows hard. “Victor.”

“I know. I’m sorry. There was nothing we could have done, though. And I think he died happy. That counts for somethin’, right?” Jack puts a hand gently on Mac’s shoulder; the unexpected contact is startling, but not uncomfortable. “You know, that’s how I wanna go out, when the time comes. Dyin’ on the front lines, savin’ the people I care about. I don’t wanna waste away in some hospital, or go senile an’ forget everyone I ever loved.” He sounds like he’s almost forgotten Mac was there. “I wanna go down fightin’.”

“It...it’s not just that.” Mac’s struggling to articulate what he means, what’s been eating at him since the warehouse. He can barely put words to it. A longing? A question? A fear? Victor sacrificed everything for Alexi, even after he felt like he’d been betrayed. Even after all that hurt, he still cared so much. Is there anyone who’d do that for me? Would you?

“Kid, I know how good you are at doin’ the impossible, but even you can’t always save everyone.
And that’s just the job. I’m sorry, but you work here long enough, you gotta learn that sometimes there’s no perfect ending.”

“Believe me, I know.” Mac sighs. “I think you’re right. I think that’s the death Victor would have wanted.” He shakes his head. Don’t say anything more. You’ll sound like a child who’s begging for attention, thinking no one loves them. You’re pathetic.

“Doesn’t mean it gets easier.” Jack scoots closer, rubbing a thumb in circles over Mac’s shoulder blades. “Losing guys in the field isn’t supposed to be easy. When it gets that way, it’s time to quit.” He sighs. “I should know. I’ve watched a lot of good men leave and never come back. And I keep askin’ myself why I deserve to live and they didn’t. An’ all I can figure is I got somethin’ left to do. Maybe that’s protectin’ Riley. Maybe that’s making sure that genius brain o’ yours doesn’t get blown outta your head out there in the field. I don’t know. But I’m sure as hell gonna make every day count.”

Mac leans into the gentle comfort. In his own way, Jack’s promising to be there.

LOS ANGELES

THE TRAFFIC HERE IS TERRIBLE

Riley gives Mac a gentle thumbs-up as he climbs out of the car. Thank God we got home in time for his parole meeting. They’d flown in with forty-five minutes to spare, but the traffic snarls on the way to Mac’s parole officer’s building almost made them late anyway. We cut it awfully close this time.

Sometimes, she thinks Thornton forgets that Mac has these obligations. Riley could tell how worried and on-edge he was for the whole mission, afraid they wouldn’t complete the objective in time. He might have been more worried about his parole hearing than the countdown on that bomb. She’s going to have to do something. Either bring the investigation to a head or figure out which missions he can go on.

Riley wants to call Charlie Robinson herself, because the FBI agent had sounded positive he could prove the warehouse bomb hadn’t killed Ramsay. But if she pushes too hard, and it gets back to Thornton, she’ll be in trouble. Thornton has some long game in mind, I’m sure of it. Riley knows the woman is usually ten steps ahead of everyone else. Whatever she has in mind, she’s making everything work toward it. Including keeping Mac’s fate hanging in the balance.

Riley doesn’t like the thought that Mac’s just a pawn in some scheme Thornton has. But she can’t be sure that’s not all any of them are. And then her thoughts stray to Bannister, and Thornton’s reaction when the woman was killed. She pretends not to care. Because she has to. She can’t afford to let emotion drive her decisions; too much rests on them. But she can find people who will care, and let them do it. She’s allowed Riley and Jack to stay together, and now she’s put Mac with them. Maybe in her own odd way, that’s her way of saying she cares about him. Making sure he’s with people she knows will break the rules and love him.

She’s not entirely sure what to do with herself. Patty told her to go home and rest, but she just crashed for the entire nine-hour flight and she feels fine. Physically, she’s ready to go. But emotionally, she’s still back in that warehouse watching Victor die, except that in the dream that repeated itself over and over on that long flight, it’s Jack’s face staring up at her, Jack’s hand, the leather cuff covered in blood, reaching up to brush a stray curl of hair out of her face before it falls back limp.

She didn’t lose Jack. Not today. But Alexi lost Victor, and in her dreams she’s felt just a little of the
pain that must be. Riley’s got an hour to kill at least. And the nursing home’s not too far away. *Phoenix transport probably dropped him off there already.*

Thankfully there’s a different desk clerk working today. Riley’s pretty sure the woman who was there yesterday, *has it really only been a day? It feels like a lifetime,* would have called the cops as soon as she saw Riley. Or anyone else from that altercation, for that matter.

Alexi is exactly where they found him last time. In a chair in front of the TV, watching “The Price is Right” and fumbling with the remote. She sits down next to Orlov. “Is this seat taken?”

“Miss Davis?” There’s suddenly so much light in his eyes. *I never met either set of my grandparents. I never had anyone to visit in places like this.*

“Is this “The Price is Right”?” she asks.

“You know it?”

“It’s my favorite. Mind if I watch with you?” She moves to sit on the arm of his chair, and he smiles at her. Her slender brown fingers twist around his wrinkled, cold ones, and for a short moment, everything that was broken and lost and gone forever is whole again.

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**CANBERRA**

**NOT ONE OF THE MOST POPULAR PLACES TO SPEND A WEEKEND VACATION**

The sea breeze here is so different than the sea breeze in LA. Sam savors the faint tang of salt on her lips, the dust and heat mixing with the ocean air in that familiar smell that means home in a way that makes her eyes water. *It's only the dust on the wind.*

Gus knows her the second she walks into his bar. “Hello, Deborah.”

“I don’t know who you think I am, Gus. The name’s Samantha Cage.” She knows he knows it’s a lie. There are too many memories. A girl with longer, beach-waved hair, with short dresses and killer heels. Drinks at this bar, with people who were about to disappear.

“I’m sorry. You look like someone I used to know. Someone I thought was dead.”

Gus pours a vodka, mixes in a tiny bit of strawberry and lime, and hands it over. He still remembers her regular.

“You never forget a face, isn’t that right, Gus?” She asks. The smell of the alcohol burns her nostrils, but not because of the strong vodka. It’s because this smell so often preceded the tang of blood in the air. Sometimes the stains of it on her hands. Sometimes its taste on her lips.

“Some say it’s a gift. Some say it’s a curse,” Gus says noncommittally. He rapidly shifts shot glasses behind the bar, hands moving nervously. She’s seen those same hands expertly wield a tactical knife; Gus was always known for being old-fashioned when it came to interrogation techniques.

“I’m looking for this man.” She slides “Alex Hunter”’s passport across the bar.

“He stiff you at poker?” Gus asks.

“No, bad breakup. He’s got something that belongs to me and I want it back.” *It’s not strictly the truth. But Gus never expects the truth from anyone who walks in here. He only expects to get paid.*
“The name’s not familiar. But the face…” Gus holds the photo up to the light. “This one skated through Melbourne a couple years ago. Never could prove anything, but one of my lieutenants ended up in a body bag that weekend.” He hands back the photo and shrugs. “If he shows his face down here again, he’s gonna have a belly full of my blades before you even take off from LAX.”

She doesn’t let him see the faint chill that shot down her spine when he named her location. Her eyes stay cool and focused.

“I’d prefer him alive. There’s something he knows that I need.”

“You know, if you’re not Deborah, I’m gonna be asking for payment upfront. I don’t know Samantha Cage. I don’t know if she’s good for the cash.”

“Oh trust me, she is.” Sam moves her purse enough for him to see the bills inside.

“That’s a lot to drop for a ‘bad breakup’. You must want him back pretty badly.” Gus takes the money and frowns. “Hate to ask this much of an old friend though. You know, there’s still people in the market for a negotiator.”

“I think you have the wrong woman, Gus.” His eyes flick from the scar on her left arm to the small brown spot in her right eye. She knows he knows. But for both their sakes, they still need to pretend.

“Alright. I had a little job in mind, but if you’re not Deborah there’s no sense in sharing.” He pockets the wad of bills. “It was a job that had all her earmarks, though.”

“I told you, that name’s not ringing a bell.” She stands up. “Thanks for the drink. But I’m actually allergic to strawberries.”

She doesn’t look back. If he wanted to shoot her, he would have. She walks away, her footprints soon covered by a faint shifting layer of reddish sand.
Toothpick

105-Toothpick

LISBON, PORTUGAL

THIS HAS OFFICIALLY BECOME A FIVE-CHIP-BAG STAKEOUT

Riley yawns. Even the bag of Taquitos she’s munching on isn’t doing much to keep her from dozing and starting awake every few seconds. She hasn’t slept properly in three days.

It all started when Sam woke her up at an ungodly hour going on about someone named Gus, but what she had to say was worth it. One of her old contacts had tracked down an “Alex Hunter” renting an apartment in Lisbon. Apparently that’s one of the aliases Nick had on a faked ID hidden in his apartment. Riley had been slightly upset that Sam hadn’t told her she found a stash of IDs, but it’s hard to blame her. I’ve been a very unpleasant person to be around when anything about Nick comes up.

Patty took some convincing to let Riley and Jack follow up on the lead. She finally gave in provided Jack never let Riley out of his sight and the two of them promised not to take off in some sort of cross-continent chase if the Lisbon lead didn’t pan out or Nick bolted.

Riley just can’t shake the feeling that she’s going to be the one who has to bring Nick in. It’s got nothing to do with wounded pride, or at least that’s what she tells herself, and it seems to be true enough. Yes, Nick hurt her deeply; his betrayal was more a stab to her than anyone else in the agency, but Riley’s not here for revenge. She’s here because something tells her Nick won’t be caught by anyone else. Lisbon is where we first admitted we cared about each other as more than partners. Nick is either taunting Riley, or he’s leaving her clues. Almost like he wants her to follow a trail. I’m not going to play his game, but we can’t afford to ignore any lead we get.

They’ve been sitting around waiting for him to show up at this slummy apartment for over two days now. It’s so long that Jack has started retelling the same stories over, apparently oblivious to the fact that he told her the same exact thing in the same exact words yesterday. I feel like I’m caught in a time loop.

“So I told him, if you’re gonna put those suckers up, you’d better be ready to use them. And you know what? He did! He popped me right between the eyes, almost broke my snooter. But you know what I did?”

Riley chimes in almost mindlessly. “You laid him flat on his back with a busted jaw, and the brother-in-law said he hadn’t seen so much blood…”

“Since his dog tangled with a muskrat in their pond!” Jack finishes with a laugh.

“I’ve heard that story at least ten times.” Riley leans her head on the glass. “I’m starting to wonder if this is a waste of time.”

“When is the two of us spending some quality father-daughter time together ever a waste?” Jack asks. He swats lazily at a fly that at some point came in and no one has bothered to shoo out a door yet. Riley’s going stir crazy enough to consider naming the little guy Pablo.

“Father-daughter time is going fishing together. Or Die Hard marathons and pizza. Not sitting around
in a hot car that smells like chili powder and chickens and staring at an empty apartment.” She sets the Taquitos on the dashboard. “I’m getting ready to give up.”

“Riley Davis? Quitting?” Jack glances at her in mock wide-eyed surprise. “I think the world might be ending.”

“Come on, Jack, we’ve been here over two days. Something isn’t right. If he’s living here he should have come back by now.”

“He might be staying over someplace.” Riley sees Jack falter as he says it. "Don’t worry about hurting my feelings. Nick betrayed his country, stole a deadly virus and tried to unleash it on the world, and was okay with having me killed. So him possibly moving on with another girlfriend is the least of my issues with him.

“Maybe. I say we give it until noon and call it quits,” Riley says. “We can let another surveillance team take over.” Patty sent one, they’re on standby in case Jack and Riley need backup, or have to leave for a mission.

Jack reaches into the bag of Taquitos and Riley slaps his hand. “Hey eat your own...whatever those are you bought.”

“They’re disgusting.”

“Yeah, well, these are mine.” She rolls up the top of the bag and shoves it as far out of Jack’s reach as possible in their little rental compact car.

She glances up at the apartment and the curtains move for just a split second, revealing short blond hair. “Jack! That’s him!”

They pile out of the car and dash up the steps, Jack barely pulling to a halt in the hallway before kicking in the door. They both burst into the room, guns raised and aimed at the tall, slender figure with his back to them.

“Nick Carpenter! Put your hands in the air and turn around!” The man does… It’s not him. Riley feels the live-wire energy go out of her body in a moment. She drops her gun.

“Who are you?”

“Are you Riley Davis?” The man asks.

“Why do you want to know?” Jack asks. “And you didn’t answer our question.”

“I’m Tomas Ferreira. I live down the street. Some guy who looked a little like me came up to me yesterday and paid me four hundred American dollars to come here today.”

“Nick made us.” Riley feels stupid. He’s a trained operative. He was watching the street and when he saw the car with people in it he probably got spooked. And he might even have recognized us. She thought they’d covered their tracks well, a different car and location every day, moving every few hours, even leaving the car and taking up other vantage points. But apparently it didn’t work.

“He also asked me to give you this.” Ferreira holds out narrow white envelope. “He said you’d know what to do with it when the time came.”

Riley examines the envelope carefully. No visible wires or triggers, no powders or chemical smell. Seems safe to open. She carefully dumps the contents onto a table. A small brass key clatters, nearly
falling to the floor before Riley scoops it up in her palm. *What the hell?*

Back outside, at the car, she sits down on the front fender, which becomes a slow, defeated slide to the ground near the tire.

“He’s always three steps ahead of us. Damn it.” She should have known better than to hope this would be any different than any of the other leads the field teams have been chasing. *But I really thought this might be different.* She’d been hoping Sam’s mysterious contacts might have more accurate information. *She doesn’t really explain much about who they are and I’m not sure I want to ask.* Sam will talk about the past when she’s ready.

Riley’s phone rings and she scrambles to her feet, digging it out of her dusty back pocket.

“It’s Patty.” It’s a video call, and she flips the phone sideways and leans back on the car. Jack pokes his head over her shoulder to see.

“I’m sorry to cut your stakeout in Lisbon short, but we have a situation. I’m already sending the backup surveillance team to your location.”

“Don’t even bother. The apartment was a bust. Nick already made us and skipped town. Left some cryptic message and a key with his non-evil twin,” Jack says. Riley nods. *Thank you for that. I don’t think I’m up to explaining.*

“I’m sorry. But that’s going to have to be tabled for later. We have a pressing emergency situation in Berlin.”

“Okay, shoot,” Riley says, handing Jack her phone and grabbing her rig to take notes as Patty briefs them. In-field briefings are fairly common for them, since they’re one of the top Phoenix teams and tend to be deployed often. Riley’s gotten the logistics of them down to a science. *Well, except for the time we were on that Alaskan crab trawler, but that was a whole different story and that storm was an exceptionally bad one.*

“For two years, agencies here and in Germany have been trying to prove that Eric Wexler, head of the German branch of the defense firm Wexler Aerospace, has been selling weapons to terrorist groups. But he’s covered his tracks well. Until three days ago when his assistant, Katerina Wagner, came to Interpol with evidence she’d uncovered that could prove Wexler’s guilt. She was assigned a case agent who was supposed to rendezvous with her and escort her out of the country to a safe house. Katerina was in contact with Agent Anders and had been setting up a plan to leave Berlin. Today, Anders sent her a ticket for a night train to Frankfurt and instructions to meet him at the station.”

“I’m guessing there’s a problem somewhere in there?” Jack says.

“Agent Anders was found dead in his hotel room. TOD placed it at four hours ago. Katarina’s ticket was sent two hours later.”

“So it’s a setup.” Riley cringes. “And we can’t contact her?”

“One of the first things Anders told her to do was dump all her tech. She’s been contacting him via a dummy email on public access computers.”

“So we can’t call her, and she’s probably been told by Wexler’s people that she won’t be emailed again, so no one can warn her this is a trap.”

“Exactly.”
“You’ll rendezvous with MacGyver in Berlin. I’m en route to Frankfurt to find whoever is waiting for Katerina. You’ll be on that train, and I need you to keep Wagner alive. We don’t know if Wexler is going to have people after her on that train.”


“Does my tie look okay?” Bozer asks for the fifth time, craning his head to see his reflection in the rearview.

“No, man, for my pitch! You can’t have forgotten already?” Mac shifts the stack of folders and the laptop he’s holding. No, you have left me no possible way to forget that you were contacted by an independent studio to give an in-person pitch of your “Galactic Blitz” script. You’ve been talking about it for the past four days. Bozer’s been submitting his work to any studio he can think of. He’s spent about forty dollars in postage already, and there were envelopes all over the kitchen table with addresses in Burbank and Atlanta, and with such widely varied studios as Warner Brothers and others that Mac’s never heard of and is fairly positive are internet scams, despite Bozer’s insistence to the contrary.

So when “California Dream Studios” called and asked for a full creative brief and pitch, Mac was, he has to admit, a little surprised. He’s still not sure it’s not all some massive scam, but if it isn’t, this might be the break Boze needs. Not that “Galactic Blitz” is ever going to be more than a C movie with, if it’s lucky, some kind of cult classic status in a few years, but the way Boze lights up whenever he talks about it reminds Mac of when they were still kids shooting stick-sword fight scenes on a VHS camcorder in Bozer’s backyard. Before everything went so wrong.

Hammond doesn’t seem to be in a good mood today. His grip on his coffee mug, coffee at three p.m., this can’t be good, and there’s a deep furrow between his eyes.

“Everything on your reports is checking out,” Hammond says, closing a file. “Your projects at the Phoenix Foundation, your activity, your phone records, everything is...well, perfect.”

“Why does it sound like you don’t like that?” Mac shifts in his chair. Riley said one of the things that happens when people have agency-built covers is that their records are too clean. Sometimes that’s how the Phoenix finds enemy agents. Riley built the first software to track multiple kinds of records at once and find anomalies. Maybe the same goes for ex-cons who end up having their records modified because they’re going on missions all over the world.

“Something about it bothers me.” Hammond fixes him with an icy stare. “Angus, what are you really doing?”

“Exactly what’s in your records.” Mac tries not to crack. Maybe someone at the Phoenix should train me to handle interrogations. Because that’s what this feels like.

“This pattern is extremely regular for days at a time occasionally, but then it becomes more natural. It’s almost like you go on autopilot some days.”

“I’m a creature of habit, what can I say?”

“You wouldn’t be tampering with that ankle monitor, would you?”

“No!” Mac sits up straighter. “I wouldn’t even know how.” Wait, that might have been the wrong
thing to say.

Hammond sighs. “I don’t really have any concrete reason to put a flag on your record. Yet. But I am going to be keeping a closer eye on your activity this week.”

Mac’s phone rings. Hammond glowers at him. “You kids and your twenty-four hour a day distractions.” He’s probably barely five years older than me. And he’s one to talk, his phone goes off all the time during their meetings. It’s silenced, but Mac’s seen the man’s pocket light up when he stands and paces around. I guess I frustrate him into doing that a lot.

Mac wishes he could will the phone into silence. It can’t be Jack or Riley or Thornton or Cage. They should all know I’m in my parole meeting. If it’s a telemarketer I’m going to scream. He should have remembered to shut his phone off before this, but he was just so glad to actually be in town for the day before this meeting that he got sloppy. I’ve had too many close calls. Last week Riley was rushing me here from the airport.

The phone stops ringing, which is a relief. And then it immediately starts again, the consistent jingle of the old-phone default chime sounding deafening in Hammond’s tiny office.

“Mr. MacGyver, will you please do something about this?” The man’s face is strained, his words clipped. “Turn that phone off or I will confiscate it myself.”

Mac fumbles the phone out of his pocket, mentally cursing whoever it is who’s seen fit to interrupt him and piss off his already none too friendly parole officer. The caller ID is for the Phoenix. Thornton’s personal line.

“It’s work. I really should take this.” Hammond glowers at him, but nods.

I wish he’d leave, or let me leave, in case it’s something really critical. Mac can’t talk about anything to do with the Phoenix’s real work around Hammond. If he knew where I’ve been and what I’ve done…

The voice on the other end is Thornton, and she sounds beyond angry. There’s no raised voice, just a cold, calm fury. “When I call you, MacGyver, I expect you will answer me within a reasonable amount of time.”

“I’m in my parole mee…” He was trying to sound apologetic but apparently Thornton took it as making excuses. He cringes when she cuts him off.

“I don’t care if you were in a meeting with the President of the United States! Phoenix calls are going to have to become your top priority, if you want to remain a consultant.”

But if I want to stay out of jail I also have to stay on my PO’s good side! Mac can feel himself spinning into a panic, and he can’t do that right here, right now. I have to keep Thornton happy, and I have to keep Hammond happy, and right now I can’t do both.

“I need you in the air to Berlin ASAP. I’m sending an agent to pick you up. They should be arriving in five minutes. You’ll be briefed on your way to the airport.”

“But…” Mac trails off. I have forty more minutes left of this meeting. I can’t just leave. Thornton hangs up and Mac turns around to see Hammond glaring daggers at him.

“I’m sorry, it’s work, something happened and they need…”

“Save the excuses.” Hammond’s voice is icy. “Since you seem to think everything else in your life
should be more of a priority than this meeting, I see no reason to continue it. I’ll see you next week, Angus.”

Mac doesn’t like the look on Hammond’s face when he walks out the door. *Did I just do something incredibly stupid?*

He can’t stop shuddering, and it’s clear that the agent who comes to pick him up can tell he’s worried. The man gives him a sympathetic smile, a folder of papers with the photo of a woman clipped to the outside, and a phone and set of earbuds. “Thornton’s wants you to video-call as soon as you’re ready so she can give you a full briefing.”

Mac tries to calm his shaky breathing before turning on the video chat. Immediately, Thornton’s face pops up.

“I’m sorry about your parole meeting, but this is an incredibly time-sensitive mission.” Mac nods, unable to speak. *If Hammond wasn’t suspicious before, he is now. He didn’t believe my excuse, and it was even kinda the truth for once. He’s going to be monitoring where I go and he’s going to see it’s going to get too perfect again and he’s going to start asking questions and I’m not going to be able to tell him anything and he’s going to send me back.* He realizes he’s blanked out when Thornton snaps, “MacGyver, did you hear a word I just said?”

“I—I’m sorry, no.” He blinks and rubs his forehead. *Could this get any worse?* He’s pissed off his parole officer and now Thornton too.

“You need to focus! I told you this mission has a clock on it.” He sighs and nods. “That packet you’ve been given has everything you need to know about Eric Wexler and Katerina Wagner.” Thornton says crisply. “You’ll be joining Dalton and Davis in Berlin. Your job is to keep Ms. Wagner alive.”

Something’s off with Carl’s Jr. when Jack picks him up from the Berlin airport. The kid’s jumpy and shaky and he’s made about a dozen of those paperclips he’s always got into the same thing, a pair of handcuffs.

“What’s eatin’ you?” Jack asks when he opens the car door.

“Nothin’.” The kid shrugs, but he’s not getting off the hook that easy. It’s Friday. Again. *Damn it.*

“Hey, did we make you miss your parole meeting again?”

“Got pulled out early,” the kid mumbles. *Patty must have called him in the middle of it.* Aw crap. Jack can’t imagine Mr. Stickler for the Rules parole officer was too happy about that. And Patty definitely wouldn’t take *wait* for an answer. *We’re gonna get that kid in trouble by trying to help him out.*

“It’s done. Don’t wanna talk about it,” the kid mutters, sounding like a teenager who got sent to the principal’s office and has to explain it to his parents. “We got someplace to be in a hurry, right?” Jack sighs and stomps the gas.

The train station is a crowded, dim mass of movement inside. Jack can’t see anyone who looks like Wagner in this crowd, but they only have seven minutes to departure time. She’s probably already on the train, hiding away somewhere.

“It would be easiest to just stop the train and get her off here,” the kid suggests. “I’d only need a couple minutes to sabotage the engine.”
It seems like an easy way, but Jack’s been in the business long enough to know that the easy, obvious way tends to go very badly wrong. “That’s a no-go. It’s possible Wexler has men already on the train or at the station. If anything seems off, we could blow the whole op. We have a plan, and we’re going to stick to it. I know improvising is your schtick, but let’s not do that unless we have to, okay?” But unfortunately that leads the kid into another question. Does that brain of his ever shut off?

“If he wants to finish her off, why not just wait until she boards the train and kill her in her room? Why go to the trouble of posting a man in Frankfurt?” Damn, the kid makes good points. Jack’s noticed that people new to the espionage field really do tend to ask good questions. They still look at the world through practical, normal-human logic. It’s kind of refreshing. Because sometimes there’s an incredibly simple solution to something that has been needlessly overcomplicated.

“I guess that’s what we’re here to find out.” He’s right. The logical thing would have been to take her out right here in the station before she even got on the train. But we’re missing something.

They board separately, Jack slipping on less than a minute before the train leaves. It allows him to get past security quickly, they don’t notice the gun in his belt or the extra clip in his boot, because he’s making a fuss about hating European public transportation, and generally being what these people expect as the stereotypical loud, annoying, entitled tourist.

He and Riley and Carl’s Jr. regroup at the car that Katerina’s cabin is supposedly in. Riley knocks.

“Katerina Wagner? Wir sind amerikanische Agenten, hier um dir zu helfen.” Riley’s German is near-perfect, apparently she took it in high school because she was going through a World War II obsession phase.

No one answers. The kid works his magic on the door, and they’re in. It’s kind of disappointing; since we got him I haven’t had one good excuse to properly drop-kick a door in. The compartment is empty.

“Are you sure this is hers?” Jack asks.

“According to the passenger manifest I hacked, yes it is.” Riley glances around the room. “But I think we can still find her without having to physically search the whole train.” She grins. “Free wifi is a hacker’s best friend. Minimal security, everyone links up to it automatically. Every cell phone and computer camera on this train is about to become eyes for us. As soon as I start running my facial recognition software, we should be able to track Katerina down.”

Carl’s Jr.’s poking around at something in the sink. He grabs his knife, pulls out the tweezers, and tugs something out of the drain. Eew.

“Looks like she cut and dyed her hair,” he mutters. “She went a lot lighter. Risky but smart.” There’s almost six inches of a small strand of hair hanging from the tweezers.

“But that’s still brown,” Jack argues.

Carl’s Jr. nods. “I could smell the peroxide bleach when we came in. That’s only used if you’re going lighter toned. And judging by the fact that I don’t see streaks of color in the sink, or used dye packets in the trash, she didn’t change colors completely. Just bleached her hair out a lot.” Jack wonders how the kid knows so much about changing hair colors. Did he ever do that to try and hide?

“There she is!” Riley’s facial rec has a hit. Sure enough, the nervous-looking woman at a table alone
in the dining car has short-chopped, pale blond hair. *Kid was right on.*

It’s a matter of minutes to make it to the dining car. Thankfully, Katerina is still there, staring glumly out the window.

Riley slides into the seat across from Katerina as Jack and Carl’s Jr. take up positions at a nearby table. Jack’s covering the front entrance to the car, and the kid’s got his eye on the back. “Hello Katerina. My name’s Riley Davis and I’m here to help you.” Katerina starts to get up, but Riley stops her with a hand on her wrist. “You need to hear what I have to say.”

“I think you’re mistaken. I don’t even know anyone named Katerina Wagner. I’m Isobel Anders.” *Wexler booked her ticket under that false name. The email said it was a precaution so she couldn’t be tracked. It was a good way to make her believe the lie. People always think the more complicated something is, in the spy game, the more likely it is to be legitimate.*

“The reason I know who you are is that I’m with an American agency. The Phoenix Foundation.”

“May I see your I.D.?” Katerina is clearly unconvinced. *She has good reason to be skittish.*

“Well, it’s not exactly the kind of place that goes around handing out business cards.”

“How convenient.” Katerina stands up again.

“You need to hear what I have to say. Because listening to me, right now, might be the only thing that’s going to save your life.”

Katerina stops moving, glancing back down at Riley. “I need to call someone.”

“Agent Anders?” The woman’s face goes white. “I’m afraid he’s dead.”

“No.” It’s a barely breathed whisper, only audible over Riley’s comms. Katerina sits down hard, all the fight taken out of her.

“Wexler killed him. Two hours *before* his people sent you this ticket. There is someone waiting at the end of the line for you in Frankfurt, and they are going to kill you. And I don’t want to let that happen.” Riley smiles, just a little. “Do you trust me?”

“You don’t look like an agent.”

“What is an agent supposed to look like?” Riley asks, smiling.

“I don’t know. A tight suit, a gun, less...like a teenager.” Jack shakes his head. *Riles’s fashion sense does kind of break the mold for what people expect from a female spy.* Her ripped out skinny jeans, oversize hoodie, and clunky black combat boots don’t have the sleek sexiness of a big screen heroine’s black catsuit or slinky dress and heels, but Jack would put his girl up against any of those fictional heroes any day.

“Well, it’s a whole new world.”

Patty surveys the train station.

A man with a serious face, pacing nervously, gets her attention. When he reaches into his jacket, she pushes her own long coat back, feeling for the gun tucked in her belt. *I just need to see the weapon...* and then a little girl in a pink skirt races across the platform from a train that just arrived, and throws herself into the man’s arms, and his whole face changes. He hands her the jointed wooden horse he
pulled out of his coat, and Patty relaxes.

When you’ve been in the field as long as I have, you start jumping at shadows. Seeing danger where there is none. A normal life like that...that’s out of the question for me now. But Patty can’t honestly say she regrets her choices. I wasn’t born for that kind of life. This is who I am.

She continues walking the station until she notices a woman sitting on a chair, a briefcase beside her. There’s a faint watermark W in the leather. Wexler logo.

The woman looks like any other executive office desk secretary. Grey suit, severely parted and pulled-up hair, permanent half-smile to greet guests, and comfortable shoes for long days at a desk. But she still stands out to Patty. There’s a telltale bulge under her jacket. It’s mostly hidden by a teal-and-white scarf; no one who hasn’t had Patty’s extensive training and experience would see it.

She sits down next to the woman, pulls her gun, and slides carefully across the seat. Wexler probably thought Katerina would be caught more off guard by her than by some stereotypical tac-gear goon.

“Komm mit mir und sei still,” She whispers. Come with me and be quiet.

“Why should I do that?” the woman asks in English. My German accent has never been quite convincing enough.

“Because my twelve friends are easily offended,” she replies, digging her gun into her side. “And when they get angry, they get loud.”

The woman stands up slowly, and then her foot flicks out, kicking the briefcase to the side. It could be just an accident, nothing more. But Patty’s used things as simple as a pencil wrong way up in a jar at a store, or a salad fork and dinner fork in the wrong positions at a gala. Everything is communication in the field.

She wasn’t alone. Patty barely has time to react before a bullet catches her shoulder, spinning her around and laying her flat on her back in the station, staring up at the stars through the glass roof. She struggles to her feet, shoulder aching. Bulletproof vests are great, but getting shot still hurts like a bitch.

The woman is running, her practical shoes now serving more than their original purpose of keeping her comfortable at her desk. She’s already at the doors and running out. Patty tries to force her way through the suddenly panicked mob of people in the lobby. Shots fired in a public place sets everyone off. They knew what they were doing. For a moment she wonders if the plan to take Katerina down might have been followed by a random shooting to make everything look accidental. I wouldn’t put it past Wexler. He’d do anything to cover his tracks.

By the time she reaches the door, a black car is squealing off well down the road. Patty sighs and puts away her gun, pulling her coat around her and melting into the shadows as sirens blare and police lights shatter the night calm.

She walks rapidly but casually down the street, stopping only when she’s a good four blocks from the station. She ducks into a late-night internet cafe and pulls out her phone. Anyone casually seeing her will probably assume she’s on a video call with family members.

She calls Jack. Riley was running point on this, she might still be talking to Wagner. And MacGyver’s had enough of her calling him today. I feel badly about pulling him out of his parole meeting. But this op has his skill set written all over it. Too many variables, too many unknowns. We
needed someone who can improvise. And she’s never seen anyone who does that better than Angus MacGyver.

Jack picks up instantly. “Patty, we have the package in hand. We’ve made contact.”

Patty doesn’t waste time “The op’s blown. They know you’re there. And they’re going to be coming for you. You need to move. Now.”

Jack hangs up and glances at Carl’s Jr. The kid’s eyes are wide. “What does that mean, the op’s blown?”

Jack wants to scold the kid for listening in on phone conversations, but this is not the time. “It means Wexler knows Katerina has backup. Now he’s going to make his move fast. We just lost the element of surprise.” Jack walks over to Riley and taps her shoulder lightly. “We gotta go.”

“What happened?” Riley’s already standing, Katerina looks too terrified to move.

“Patty got made in Frankfurt. Wexler knows we’re here for Katerina.”

Riley pulls up her rig. “If he’s got agents on this train, we need to know now.” She types rapidly. “I’ve got eight signals. Those people all got a text message at the same time, right before Patty called,” Riley says. “Those must be Wexler’s men.”

“Where are they?”

“Scattered throughout the train. But there are none between us and her cabin right now.”

“Then that’s where we’re going.”

“Why are we going to my room? If they bought me the ticket they know where I will be!” Katerina gasps.

“Because that way we can predict their movements.” Riley says. “If we tried to go past any of them to hide, they’d notice and start searching the whole train. This way we know they’ll all be moving toward your cabin, and we can take them out as they come.”

“We need to go now. Walk and talk,” Jack says, covering them.

“Talk?” Katerina asks.

“Tell us why Wexler would send eight operatives to take down one civilian.” Jack doesn’t like this. That’s too strong of a force to send out for something like this. He’s got to have more planned than just killing her.

Katerina opens her cabin door with shaky fingers.

“I just hacked their phones. All eight’s messages roughly translate to ‘do whatever you need to but bring Wagner alive.’” Riley glances at Jack. “That definitely confirms what we thought earlier. He wants something from her.”

Katerina sits down on the small bed, shaking. “You can’t think of any reason Wexler wants these men to capture and not kill you?”

The woman continues shaking and says nothing. Riley takes Jack’s arm and pulls him aside.
“She’s terrified. Jack, I don’t think she’s going to be very receptive to anyone with a gun around her right now. She barely trusts us as it is and she’s got good reason to be skeptical. Let me talk to her alone.”

_She’s right. Anyone who doesn’t know me thinks I’m scary. Even little kids. Which is always a disappointment._ Jack’s presence at family reunions always struck fear into the hearts of the younger members of the Dalton clan...until he did something stupid and reassuring like putting a toy sand pail on his head like a hat, or making a whistle out of a blade of grass. Now everyone actually runs to be the first to tackle-hug Uncle Jack when he shows up. _I always let them pretend they can take me, but lately Jessie and Matt and Amy have actually been practicing the moves I taught them and it’s starting to feel a little more real_, and he hasn’t yet missed a year of the now-traditional water gun duel with Colton and Luke and Evan. _I may or may not have taught them some tactical tricks..._ He pities the normal person who ever decides to have a water gun fight with one of those three. He’s taken to calling them his mini Delta squad.

But grass whistles and water gun wars are not only out of the question right now, they’re not likely to make Katerina any more trusting. _I need to leave someone with her as backup anyway, in case these goons find her before we find them._

“Okay. You make sure she’s safe. Carl’s Jr. and I will be doing some recon.” Their one advantage now is that Wexler’s guys have no idea who Katerina’s backup is.

“They just switched off their cell phones.” Riley sighs. “I can’t track them anymore. But I can show you where I last saw their signals.”

“Then it looks like we’re doing this the old-fashioned way.” Jack tugs the kid along behind him and they head for the first car Riley pointed out.

Carl’s Jr. is new to this. He’s going to need a few pointers. “I’m gonna teach you something about spotting trained operatives. These guys all got on the train as passengers. They’re going to be trying to blend in. But there’s some things you just can’t hide. Look for military-issued watches, and tac boots. And people who are hyper-alert, like they’ve had too many cups of coffee.” The kid nods silently. _He’s like one of those kids who just stood there and sucked in everything a teacher or parent said like a sponge._

The car is full of people, but all of them seem more or less ordinary. Most are asleep. Some are mothers trying to calm fussy children, or people reading or working on laptops or tablets. Nothing is setting off Jack’s spidey senses.

The kid carefully pushes open to door to another passenger compartment as they pass it, and after making sure the occupant is asleep, snatches an electric razor off the sink.

“Hey, ya kleptomaniac, put that back,” Jack hisses.

“I need it,” the kid mutters back, already pulling out his knife and beginning to remove the guards on the front. _Great. And now he’s breaking it. I’m gonna end up having to pay for this, aren’t I?_

Jack glances ahead but doesn’t see anyone suspicious in the next car either. _It looks like they’re heading toward the front of the train instead, cause they certainly didn’t get past us. Wonder why?_ He decides they’ll do better to check on the guys coming forward from the back. _I don’t like that they went to the engine area. I think we need to get Katerina off this rust bucket. Because they have a plan and it’s not the one we thought._

They stop at Katerina’s cabin on the way back through. The kid’s been playing with that shaver the
whole time, taking it to pieces. He asked for Jack’s phone once, but Jack refused him point-blank. *I mean, I did ask him if it was essential to everyone’s survival, and he said not exactly, so I didn’t think it was really necessary.*

When Katerina answers the door, she immediately asks if everything is safe to come out now. Jack shakes his head.

“That might be a while, darlin’.”

The kid hands her the shaver. “Just in case. If they end up making it past us and into the compartment, use this on them.”

“You want me to shave them?”

The kid actually laughs a little. “Not exactly.” He switches on the razor and there’s an electric crackle.

“You made a taser,” Katerina says, sounding faintly in awe. *Oh honey, that’s not even the tenth coolest thing I’ve seen him do this month.*

“I’d have made it portable, but Jack wouldn’t let me take his phone battery again.”

“Why are you blamin’ me for this? For the last time, take your own damn phone apart if you want something from one.” *I already know he can’t, that phone is as much a tamper-free item as his tether. He tries to mess with it and he’s going to get in serious trouble.* The kid explained that after they got back from Serbia and Jack was griping about needing to get a new battery from the Phoenix’s “genius bar”, their own private version of a Best Buy geek squad. But it’s still fun to tease. And Jack is living for the day when the kid’s gonna be off probation and have a phone he can break if he has to. *Although God knows he’s probably still just gonna ask for mine.*

Jack pulls Riley out into the hall while Carl’s Jr. explains his makeshift taser. “What’s the story? Any idea why these guys need her alive?”

Riley nods, lowering her voice. “Katerina set up a failsafe email containing her proof to be sent if she never reached the US alive. Anders, the real Anders, told her to do that. But by the time she did and sent him confirmation, Wexler’s people had killed him and were in control of his email. She’s the only one who can delete that email. Wexler wants her alive so he can force her to scrub it.” Riley stops, shuddering. “Her family is in Frankfurt. Her mother, her brother, his wife, and a six month old baby. Agent Anders supposedly promised to get them all out of Germany safely.”

“Let me guess. In the same email where he promised to meet her in Frankfurt and sent her a train ticket.”

“Yes.”

“So Wexler knows about her family, and very likely has them already.”

“I sent a text to Patty the second I found out. She’s en route to the house now. Maybe we’ll be lucky and Wexler hasn’t taken them yet.” But he knows she doesn’t believe that. *The second Patty was taken down in Frankfurt, Wexler would have made his move. He’d have had men watching the house, just like they are here on the train.*

As soon as Riley and Katerina lock themselves back in, Jack calls Patty.

“Hey Patty, please tell me you secured Wagner’s family.”
“I’m working on it. Don’t let her take any calls or hear anything about this. Wagner isn’t a trained operative. If she finds out Wexler has her family, she’ll cave. But as long as she doesn’t know, he needs them as a bargaining chip. So you have to keep her in the dark.”

*He already has them.* Jack can’t help but feel that this supposedly simple mission is going horribly sideways. And then he sees two men in dark clothes pushing their way through the car ahead. “Those are our guys, kid.”

Jack’s got a nearly foolproof way of dealing with goons in close quarters like this. He’s used it so often he’s even got a name for it. This move was officially christened “Uncle Joey and three shots of moonshine” three years ago.

“That chick in the dining car was totally checking you out,” Jack slurs, wobbling against Carl’s Jr’s grip as they stumble into the car.

“Oh yeah?” the kid answers, way too loudly.

“How shoulda asked for her numbeerrrrrr.” Jack sways and grabs for a handle.

“So you’re going back?”

They have the goons’ attention now. “Hey guys! Hot chick in the dining car. Dummy here didn’t get her number so she’s fair game!”

“Hey, I’m gonna go back…” And then Jack lets go and stumbles forward, but it’s not a stumble, it’s the setup to a massive left hook that lays one guy flat on the floor. The other lunges in, but Jack trips him, and the kid actually finishes the job with an elbow to the back of the head.

“Nice work,” Jack says, watching him straighten up.

“I had to know how to knock guys out fast. When there are ten of them and one you you can’t afford to have anyone get back up.”

Jack starts to continue, but then Riley’s voice comes through the comms. “Jack. They found us.” He can’t leave her with no backup, she didn’t bring her gun or even her tactical knives on this one. It didn’t seem necessary. Riley doesn’t carry unless she has to.

“I’m on my way. Hang tight.” He turns to Carl’s Jr. “Okay, kid, time to split up. I’ll meet you in the luggage car once I have Katerina and Riles.”

“What do I do if I find any of these guys?” the kid asks, wide-eyed.

“I’m giving you permission to improvise now,” Jack says with a wink.

Patty is furious. With Wexler, for turning out to have been a traitor this whole time, and for going to such lengths to hide it. With the second killer in the train station. And with herself for not seeing everything sooner.

Thanks to her contact at Interpol, she knows that the two agents watching Katerina’s family are dead, and that her mother and her sister’s family are missing. The only way she can find them now is to get their location from Wexler.

*He’s not just going to hand over the address. But I have a plan.*

She walks into Wexler Aerospace’s Frankfurt office like she owns the place. She’s sure Eric will be
here. He wanted Katerina brought here, and now that she knows he needs her to delete that email, she’s sure he would have wanted to see confirmation in person.

The desk secretary tries to stop her, but the woman’s ineffectual protests don’t mean a thing. Patty quickly scans the building map and decides the main conference room is her best bet. According to the last intel they had, a French components manufacturer is working on brokering a deal with Wexler. That would be the most likely meeting place.

She can hear voices when she walks up to the doors, and the second her phone IDs one as Wexler’s she storms inside.

“This is a private meeting!” Wexler protests.

Patty doesn’t waste time. She fires a single shot into the wall screen, and the room instantly erupts in shouts and screams. The overpaid security guard at the door finally realizes something is wrong and lunges for her, but she takes him down easily with an elbow to the throat, never breaking her eye contact with Wexler.

“Now it is. Everyone out. Except you.” She trains her gun on him.

“You’re going to take me to where you have Katerina Wagner’s family. Now.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Katerina Wagner. Your assistant. You sent eight men to capture her on a train. A bit much for one civilian, don’t you think?”

“My assistant? She’s in danger?” His wide-eyed innocence isn’t fooling anyone.

“You’re going to have to be much more convincing if you want anyone to believe you.”

“What agency do you work for?” The man snaps. “I assume you’re here with the full support of Interpol and the German government?”

Patty says nothing.

“Let’s see what the BND thinks. They respond to my silent alarm in ninety seconds. Which means you have thirty left.”

Patty lets her face fall, just a little, at the same time she shifts the tiny device in her left hand. He needs to believe I gave up. That I’m going to leave him alone. “Believe me, next time i come back, it will be with evidence and handcuffs.” She forces herself not to react to the gloating smile he gives her as she leaves the room.

He bought it. Patty smiles, and switches on the combination tracker and bug that she planted in Wexler’s jacket.

Wexler’s calling someone already. “We have a problem,” he whispers. “Wagner has protection.” Patty watches Riley’s sophisticated program begin hacking the man’s phone and tracing the call. If all goes as planned, in a few minutes she’ll have the location of Katerina Wagner’s family.

Riley listens to the footsteps fade away down the hall as Mac and Jack leave. We’ve got this. She’s seen worse odds a dozen times over. But Katerina hasn’t. And she is terrified.

“They’re just going to leave us here?”
“I’m a fully field trained agent.” Riley tries not to let the woman’s mistrust get to her. *I know I don’t seem like a super-spy. But I’m every bit as skilled and competent as Jack. I’ve been trained for situations like this.*

“You don’t even have a gun!”

“No.” Riley doesn’t particularly like using them. *Relying on a weapon can make you sloppy, and it’s one of the easter things to have taken away and used against you. Knives are harder to grab and wrench away, with the sharp edges, but it can still happen. And in any case, Riley doesn’t have hers on her. “I don’t need one.”*

“But what if those men have them?”

“Then I’ll figure something out.” Riley’s really beginning to appreciate Mac’s haphazard planning methods. *It goes against everything I was ever taught, but going into a situation with no plan means you don’t have to worry when things inevitably go wrong. You just keep doing what you were already doing, making it up as you go along.* She will admit she still likes knowing at least a general idea of how an op’s going to go, but she’s never been a color-coded-notes person and this method of field work has its appeal.

*Life is messy. So maybe we have to be a little messy to get the upper hand.*

“I don’t understand. Why all this trouble for me?” Katerina asks.

“Because people like Wexler work hard to make sure no one knows their secrets. When the truth comes out, their whole life comes crashing down.” Riley understands that kind of life better than most. *Everything most people know about me, even my own family, is fake. If anyone ever found out who I really am, they’d be shocked. I have two lives. And they don’t mix.* Except for Jack and Mom. They met, and they really seemed to like each other. But that ended messily, they haven’t seen each other since Riley moved to LA. *I don’t know if I could handle my two worlds crashing together like that. It would be wonderful, but it would make the compartmentalizing so much harder.*

“I thought he was a good man. I thought I could trust him,” Katerina whispers.

“It’s not your fault. What he did...there was nothing you could do about the kind of man he let himself become.”

“I answered his phone calls, I set his meetings, I knew everything about him. I should have known.” She looks down at her hands. “I should have stopped him sooner.”

“You’re going to stop him now.” Riley takes Katerina’s cold, shaking hands in her own. “Sometimes that’s all you can do. I had a partner, someone I trusted, with my life. And he betrayed my entire agency, tried to have me killed, and almost unleashed a deadly virus. But I’m going to find him, and I’m going to bring him in.” *Okay, so I’ve been lying to everyone, including myself. I’m not giving up on this search. It’s too important to me. I can’t stop until he’s been caught.*

Riley hears footsteps in the hall. She walks carefully up to the door, puts her ear to it, and holds her breath, hoping it’s just someone on the way to the bathroom. But the footsteps stop at the door. And then the pounding begins. “Jack. They found us,” she whispers into her comms.

“Aufmachen!” Someone shouts.

“What are we going to do?” Katerina whimpers. She curls away from the door, hands clenched into tight fists.
The pounding on the door continues. Riley braces herself. She listens as the man steps back, and the second he throws all his weight against the door she releases the lock. The man falls to the floor, and Riley’s about to snap her boot into his face when there’s an electric crackle and Katerina stands up, shaking, the makeshift taser in her hand.

Riley’s suitably impressed. For the shaking, cringing mess she was seconds ago, Katerina has lightning reflexes. “Nice…”

“Behind you!” the woman shouts. Riley spins around, and there’s another man in the doorway. *Shit. Teaming up on us.*

She’s face to face with the second goon. But there’s one thing he’s not going to expect from her. She slams her forehead into his nose, and he stumbles backward, clutching at the sudden spurt of blood. Riley kicks out his knee and then puts him in a headlock on the floor.

“Don’t move.”

There are more footsteps. *Ah, damn it all.* Riley stands up, shaking back her escaping hair, ready to fight. *Bring it on. But it’s only Jack.* “Man, am I glad to see you!”

Jack steps over the two bodies in the doorway. “Nice headbutt, Riles.”

“You saw that?”

“From the end of the train car. Great form. Doesn’t even look like you have a concussion.”

Riley grins and punches his shoulder. “I learned from the best.”

“Okay, that’s four accounted for. Carl’s Jr. and I took down two, and looks like you didn’t really need all that much help here.” He smirks. “But I still think our best bet is to get you off this train, darlin’.” He reaches for Katerina’s hand. “We’re clearing a route to the back. Hopefully baby Einstein figures out a way to get you off this thing that doesn’t kill you.”

They keep up a steady pace as they make their way through the passenger cars. Jack sees a door half broken off its hinges in one sleeper car, and grins. *Kid’s been busy.*

They shove open the door to the baggage car, and Katerina and Riley duck inside. Jack pulls up the flashlight on his phone, glancing around. Riley’s the first one to say what he’s already thinking.

“Jack, where’s Mac?”

Mac’s trying to follow Jack’s instructions. *Watches, tactical boots, too much coffee. Got it.* He hasn’t really seen anyone yet that he thinks could be Wexler’s men. Everyone in this car is asleep. *I wish I was.*

He’s tired and a little jet-lagged. Which is probably why he doesn’t notice the guy in a blue polo and khakis, with a buzzcut, shifting ever so slightly in his seat. And then he’s being slammed sideways into a wall.

Except it’s not a wall, it’s the door of a compartment, and he falls inside with the guy half on top of him. He panics instantly. *Get off me, get off! No, no, no, I can’t be on the ground!* He tries to get to his feet but the man slams an elbow into his ribs. Mac flinches at the pain. His side is still tender from Myanmar.
The guy grabs him, pulling Mac to his feet, and shoves him backward into a wall. He arches his back so his head won’t hit and possibly knock him out, but the force still drives the wind out of him.

*One thing I learned fast, inside, was not to let them hit your head. You get concussed, or worse, knocked out completely, and you’re dead meat.* He gasps for air and the man slams a fist into his stomach. Mac doubles over but lurches sideways, breaking the man’s grip long enough to throw himself toward the bed, where there’s an open suitcase. He grabs a can of spray deodorant and fumbles at his pocket for his knife. *I’m never going to be able to beat this guy with brute force. But hopefully he won’t see this coming. Or see much of anything for a while.*

The man hooks a foot around Mac’s already unsteady legs and he falls to the ground. There’s the same instinctive surge of panic. *No, get up, you can’t stay down.* The man reaches for his throat and Mac jams the hole punch of his SAK into the deodorant can and aims the hole at the man’s face.

It would have worked, except that the can was nearly empty. Only a thin hiss of white fog wisps out. The man knocks Mac’s hand aside and brings his boot down, hard, on Mac’s chest. He can’t help the strangled scream as he feels at least two ribs crack. *God, it hurts so much. I can’t breathe.* His brain is a swirl of panic that’s pushing out any rational ideas about how to get out of this one.

The man pulls a gun, and in the split second he has left to figure out how he’s going to live through this, Mac snatches the toothpick from his knife and jams it into the gun’s firing mechanism. The man pulls back, shocked, and Mac forces his aching body to move. *Yeah, it hurts, but at the moment I’d still rather be alive and in pain than dead.* He slams into the guy’s legs, and the man falls backward, his head making a sickening crack when it collides with the wall of the compartment. He doesn’t get up.

Neither does Mac. He collapses on the floor where he fell after throwing himself at the guy, and lays panting, his chest burning. Everything hurts so much. *Get up. It doesn’t matter how much it hurts. If you don’t get up you’re dead.* He pushes himself to his feet, letting the soft keening whimper slip out since there’s no one in the room to hear.

He staggers back through the car, trying to keep looking for the rest of Wexler’s men even though the haze of pain that’s fogging up his mind. *Keep walking. Keep moving.* He stumbles, clutching at the edge of a seat to keep him upright, and his ribs sear with pain. He turns the soft scream into a forced laugh and stumbles on again, praying anyone who’s seeing him thinks he’s just drunk.

He wobbles around a corner and a hand grabs him and pulls him into the shadows. *No, no, I can’t do this again.* He flings a sloppy, uncoordinated punch at the person holding him, but his hand is instantly blocked. *I’m going to die.*

“Whoa, whoa, Carl’s Jr., it’s just me!” Jack steps out of the dark recess. “Damn, kid, you look like you went ten rounds with Andre the Giant!”

“Felt like it,” Mac manages to wheeze. His ribs are constantly searing with pain now. “I took care of him though.”

“Good for you.” Jack looks like he’s about to clap Mac on the shoulder but thinks better of it. *Thanks for that.* “We’re all meeting up in the back of the train. Riley’s got Katerina and I was coming to find you.”

“What’s the plan?”

“Well, we were kinda hoping you would be able to help with that one. We’d kinda like to get Katerina and the rest of us off the train in one piece.”
Mac’s brain is skipping through options but every time he tries to latch onto something, the pain gets in the way. He stumbles and Jack catches him before he makes a truly humiliating face-plant into the carpet.

“Sorry, my pal here just had a few too many,” Jack apologizes as Mac accidentally grabs an elderly woman’s shoulder for support instead of the back of her chair. The woman mutters something angry and then promptly goes back to sleep.

“How bad is it, kid?” Jack asks when they step out of the passenger car into the open air space between.

“I’ll manage.” Mac’s ribs have gone beyond painful into downright agony. They’re probably broken, not just cracked.

“I didn’t ask that. I need a damage report.”

“Lots of bruises, couple cracked ribs, nothing I can’t power through.” I have to, or we’re all dead.

“Good. Cause I need you to focus on finding a way to get our package off this train.” Right. Escape. Okay, come on, MacGyver. What have we got? Baggage car...cargo door, net webbing to hold items in place...homemade toboggan? He and Bozer used to use an old truck hood to slide down the hill behind Grandpa’s house. That was before it got built up into houses. Same concept.

“I might be able to make a sled out of the cargo door and lower that onto the tracks.” It’s beyond risky, but if they pad it with some of the luggage, and Jack can get mad at me for stealing random people’s stuff for my inventions again, it should be safe enough.

And then he hears angry voices from behind them, and three men shove their way through the door. “You two! Stop!” Don’t need any training at all to know these are the bad guys.

“I’ll take care of them! Go!” Jack shoves Mac toward the baggage car. “Get Katerina out of here.”

Mac stumbles, missing Jack’s support. He didn’t think it was possible for his ribs to hurt any more than they already were, but with all his weight on his own body again, and no help moving, the pain is like a hot knife being stabbed through him. Don’t pass out. Come on. You’ve handled worse.

He barely avoids falling off the train entirely when he jumps the gap between the last passenger car and the baggage compartment, and the landing jars every bruise and damaged bone. He bites off a whimper and staggers into the car.

“Mac!” Riley’s shocked gasp tells him he really does look as bad as Jack described.

“I’m fine.” He can’t afford to let Katerina know how bad it is. She’s scared enough. No sense in making it worse.

I’m going to get her out of here. He just has to disassemble a sliding door, drag it to the back of the train, tie it to the railing, and get all four of them on. All with broken ribs and so many bruises he can barely move without feeling one. Easy peasy. Mac pushes the door open, staring out at the swiftly disappearing ground. I feel like we’re going a lot faster than we should be.

He’s straining on his toes to reach the rollers on the door, trying not to do more than silently cry at the pain, working as much as he can while Riley and Katerina try to find a suitcase solid and steady enough to use as a footstool, when the door opens. Thank God. Jack can come take over.

“Ms. Wagner.” That’s not Jack. Mac glances over to see one of the three men who’d been after them.
walking up. Where’s Jack? Is he safe? Did they hurt him? Knock him out? Kill him?

“Come with us if you want to live.” The man says. “Or you can stay, and die, with everyone else on this train, when it crashes in Frankfurt.”

“Never.” Katerina spits at him.

“Then the hard way it is.” He pulls up his phone. “Maybe you would like to watch your sister die. Or her precious little son.”

No. No. Thornton hasn’t given us the clear signal yet. Wexler still has Wagner’s family. Katerina screams. “No! Not Kurt! You couldn’t!” The man dials a number. There’s a long moment that it rings, echoing in the utter silence in the car. And then a woman’s voice answers.

“I’m sorry, your hired gun cannot come to the phone right now. Please try again in thirty years to life.” That’s Thornton!

The moment the goon hesitates is all they need. Mac grabs the handle of a suitcase and drags it down, knocking the gun out of the man’s hand. It flies out the open door and disappears into the night.

“Knife!” Riley yells. Mac can’t get out of the way fast enough, and there’s a sharp burning pain across the arm he throws up to protect his face. And then he sees a dark blur fling itself in front of him and Riley’s grappling with the man. She shoves him back into the luggage pile, but he pushes back and Mac sees him swipe the knife at her chest. She steps back easily, but that open door is right behind her. The man sees it at the same time Mac does and swipes again, a messy stroke that’s only intended to back her up. A few more like that and she’ll be falling to her death.

Mac glances around desperately for anything he can use to help. There’s a case of emergency supplies on the wall, and it gives him an idea. The trains have small explosives to warn anything behind them of danger on the tracks. Maybe Mac can use that to help Riley.

He smashes the glass with his elbow, grabs out one of the small disks, and prepares to throw it. “Riley! Flashbang!” He shouts, knowing she’ll instinctively cover her eyes and ears.

He flings the small explosive at the floor, and it goes off in a burst of light. The guy’s stunned just long enough for Riley to grab his arm, spin to the opposite side of him, and kick him out the door.

Mac rushes to look out after him, but he’s already long gone. We’re definitely going too fast. There’s no way that sled idea will work at this speed. We’d all die.

Jack bursts in, panting. “Took care of them.” He looks at the others’ faces. “What’s wrong?”

Riley sighs. “The train’s been sabotaged. Wexler gave Katerina two choices. Come with him or die with everyone on board.”

Patricia Thornton parks her car outside the small, unassuming house that Wexler’s call traced back to. Somewhere in there are four innocent people and God knows how many guards. Wexler sent eight men on a train for one civilian. He likes overkill.

It’s a challenge. And there’s nothing that puts Patricia Thornton at her best like a challenge. She still loves the field. There’s a part of her that will always wish she’d never accepted the Director’s position; that she still spent her days on stakeouts and in firefights, and staying one step ahead of death. Part of me wishes I was still part of Jack’s team. She’s watched Riley come into her own as a
capable, competent agent, and she’s watched Jack go from an overalert soldier with the shadows of too many wars in his eyes to a loveable goof who pretends to be so much dumber than he is. *He thinks he has us all fooled. And if that makes him happy, I’ll let him believe it.*

And now there’s Angus. Patty had her reservations about recruiting him. *With everything surrounding his father...* But Angus hasn’t even seen his father in years, and he grew up to be a completely different man. *He may be a criminal by record, but that boy is a hero.* She’s glad she gave him a chance. *I was strongly advised against it. By everyone who knew who he was, and quite a few who didn’t.* Even Dalton questioned her decision, and he’s certainly not at the clearance level to know anything about James MacGyver. *But it’s a gamble that paid off.*

Angus isn’t ready to hear the truth yet, not with all the baggage he’s carrying around with him. But when the time is right, she’ll tell him everything.

Patty slips close enough under the cover of darkness to peer in through a small window. The four Wagner family members are in the back of the house, the adults seated in stiff-backed dining room chairs, the baby on his mother’s lap. There are two men in that room. Patty counts another at each of the two entrances, one on the stairs, and two patrolling the remainder of the house.

*This should be interesting.* The house is an old one, a maze of nooks and corners. *I can take most of them out fast and silently, without the others even seeing it.*

A cellar window is easily forced with her tactical knife. She slips in, wincing as her grip on the sill stretches her bullet-bruised shoulder. She drops to the floor and moves to the stairs, listening for the footsteps of the two patrolling guards. When they pass, she shoves up the trapdoor and slips into the house.

She’s little more than a shadow, everywhere at once, striking and moving back out of sight before any of the remaining guards can react. The front door guard is the first to go. Then the man on the stairs. The two patrols get suspicious, but they’re out cold before they have a chance to do anything about it.

Now it’s getting tricky. She has to take out all three guards in the room with the hostages at once. *I hired an improviser on purpose. But he’s not here. So let’s see what I remember from his father.*

There’s a bottle of rubbing alcohol in a cabinet in the bathroom, and bleach under the sink. *Mixing those to make quick and dirty chloroform is one of James’s signature moves. It’s dangerous, and very risky, but it will get the job done.*

Patty grabs a towel and soaks it in a thin stream of water from the sink, then pours the bleach in a dishpan. *I don’t have much time left. Sooner or later they’ll realize that the rest of the guards aren’t checking in.*

She grabs the alcohol and the dishpan and hurries to the hostage room. She dumps the alcohol in, shoves the pail into the room, and covers her face with the towel, tying it tightly over her nose and mouth.

There are several angry shouts, followed by choking. Patty rushes in, taking advantage of the confusion to knock out all three of the guards, who are already starting to get dizzy and stumble. She pulls out her knife and cuts all three of the stunned hostages free. “Go, get to fresh air!” She shouts. She’s about to follow them when she hears a phone ring, on one of the fallen goons.

She grabs blindly for it, eyes stinging, but doesn’t answer until she’s outside, where she can breathe. “I’m sorry,” she pants. “Your hired gun can’t come to the phone right now. Try again in thirty to
life.” I’ll blame the slight giddiness on the minor chloroform inhalation.

Once she can breathe and speak normally again, she pulls out her own phone and calls Jack.

“Wagner’s family is accounted for.”

“At least something’s going right.” Jack’s voice sounds strained. “Patty, we have a problem.” She sighs and grips the bridge of her nose. *Damn it, Dalton, why did I know this was coming?* Working with Jack is the ultimate proof of Murphy’s Law.

“They’ve sabotaged the pneumatic brakes and the onboard computer. This train is going to crash into the Frankfurt station. You have to get them to evacuate it. Now.”

“And our witness?”

“She’s safe. And in very capable hands.” Jack sighs. “We’re about to find out just how smart Carl’s Jr. really is.” Patty hangs up and leans against the side of the car. *This is going to take a miracle to end well.* But she’s seen Mac literally bring someone back from the dead. *If anyone can pull this off, it’s him.*

*Well, saying this isn’t good is the understatement of the year.* The engineer is on the floor of the engine with a bullet in his skull, and the whole console is trashed. Jack stares at the gaping hole full of wires. “They didn’t just sabotage the onboard computer. They ripped it right out.”

Riley sighs. “I was hoping I could hack into what was left of the system. But I can’t hack a hole.” She pulls out her rig anyway and opens it. “We had two hours left before they increased our speed, so…”

“Please tell me this isn’t going to actually come down to a kids’ math problem about two trains that leave the station at the same time?” Jack asks. *I never thought those stupid worksheets would have any real-world application.*

“Thirty minutes,” Carl’s Jr. cuts them off. *Holy crap, did he just do all the math in his head?* 

“Got a plan, kid?”

“You told Thornton to evacuate the station?”

“Yeah.”

“Then we minimize casualties. Get everyone to the back of the train. We can decouple the occupied cars. The train will still crash but without anyone on board.” He picks up the PA system’s phone. “Katerina, we’re going to need your help.”

Jack, Riley, and Carl’s Jr. move through the cars, knocking on doors and waking sleeping passengers, as Katerina repeats, over the PA system, instructions in German and English to move to the back of the train, and not to forget their phones. Riley’s going to use the signals to make sure everyone is accounted for.

Jack is nearly clocked in the face by one compartment door as it swings open. The teenager who stumbles out is clearly half asleep. And half dressed.

“Hey, go back inside and put some pants on.” The teen gives Jack a blank look. “Hey Riley, how do you say ‘go put on some pants’ in German?” Her answer is something he knows he’ll never be
able to pronounce. *The only part of that I might be able to say is Hosen.* So he tries that. The kid nods, darts back in, and re-emerges holding pants.

*Good enough.* “Okay, go on. Follow them.” Jack continues knocking on doors.

It takes surprisingly less time than he expected, and with a little less than fifteen minutes on the clock, they have all passengers in the rear three cars.

Riley snaps her rig shut. “All passengers checked against the manifest and accounted for. Besides the eight goons Wexler sent.” She smiles.

Jack watches as Carl’s Jr. steps up to the edge of the car and shoves a lever forward. *How in the name of sanity does he know how to work a train?* Jack’s not even sure he wants to know. *He’s probably gonna tell me he read about how to do it.* The kid says that like it’s supposed to give everyone more confidence that he’s capable of pulling off the miracle of the day. *I don’t know how many times the response to “is this gonna work” is either “the physics of it is sound’ or “I read a lot of books in solitary”.*

But apparently the kid knows less about trains than everything else, because even though he’s shoving the lever as far as it will go, the cars are still firmly hooked together.

“Wrong lever?” Jack asks with a grin. *Can’t not take the opportunity.*

“No!” Carl’s Jr. snaps. “It’s just not working.”

“Why?” Riley asks. “Shouldn’t the lever be a failsafe?”

“Most European passenger trains use Scharfenberg couplers. Those are fully automated, they have electrical and pneumatic controls. When Wexler’s men sabotaged the pneumatic brake systems, they also jammed the couplers. So it looks like we won’t be doing this the easy way.”

“Please tell me there’s a hard way,” Jack mutters.

“There is a hard way. It just sucks.” The kid rushes back into one of the other cars. He pulls a pipe off the wall, snatches up some rust from the outside edges of the car, and begins scraping at the armrest of a seat with his knife.

“Go find me an emergency flare,” he pants.

“What are you makin’?” Jack has the unsettling feeling that like most of the kid’s inventions this one involves fire. *No wonder they called him the Phoenix.*

There’s a flare in a compartment near the door, and Jack grabs it. The kid seems to have finished whatever he was doing with the chair. He and Jack jump back to the occupied car and he bends down next to the edge of the small platform, staring down at the coupler. “Okay, so how’s rust and metal scrapings going to help us decouple a train?” Jack asks. *He likes to assume everyone’s gonna be as smart as he is. Guess when you spend that much time alone you get used to not needing to explain anything to anyone.*

“Magnesium from the chairs and iron oxide will burn at an extremely high temperature. Enough to cut through steel. Get back, it’s going to spark a lot.” The kid strikes the flare and sets it to the end of his pipe contraption, then shoves the blazing metal down toward the coupler.

*It’s actually working.* Jack watches the flame slice through the metal. And then the fire goes out and the kid pulls back the pipe with a muffled curse.
“What happened?”

“Ran out of fuel. And it didn’t cut all the way through.” He jams the pipe into the still-molten gap. “Maybe I can pry them apart.” He strains at the metal but nothing happens. “This isn’t working!”

Jack can hear the desperation in the kid’s voice. And then Carl’s Jr. flings himself onto the other car. The one that, as soon as these break free, is going to smash into the Frankfurt station at two hundred miles an hour.

He’s fully prepared to sacrifice himself to make sure everyone else gets out of this alive. If Jack had any remaining doubts that Carl’s Jr. is fit to be out here in the field, they’re gone. He’s putting everyone else’s safety above his own. Jack instinctively knows that he and Riley are in very good hands. He doesn’t have to worry about this kid recklessly endangering their lives. I’ve got no qualms about going back in the field with him. If he survives this op.

The kid’s struggling. He’s trying to put pressure on the lever but if Jack had to guess, he’s got cracked if not broken ribs, and probably too many bruises to count. He’s not gonna be able to do it. And even if he does, he’s going to be trapped, alone, left to die. I’m not gonna let him die alone.

I’m not gonna let him die alone.

He steps forward to jump to the other car.

“Jack!” Riley yelps, grabbing his arm.

“I have to help him. He can’t do it alone.”

She nods. “I know. I wasn’t going to ask you not to go. But I’m coming too.”

“But Katerina…”

“I’m not leaving you!” Riley shouts. “I’ve already contacted Interpol agents, they’re three minutes out. She’ll be fine.” She looks back at the people in the car. “Katerina, if we don’t make it back to this car, the agents will pick you up as soon as these cars stop. They’ll track your location from my rig and come get you.” She hands the woman her computer. “Now I’m gonna want this back when I see you in Frankfurt, got it?” Her eyes are slightly misty.

“Okay.” Katerina says, but her own eyes are glimmering. She knows this is probably a one-way trip.

Riley turns back and takes Jack’s hand. And then they jump.

The kid nearly falls off the train when they land next to him. “What are you doing?”

“Helping you.”

“No! Go back! I can do this!” He shoves desperately at Jack’s shoulder.

“I’m not goin’ anywhere.” Jack shoulders the kid aside a little. “Move over and let me help. You’re too scrawny to pull apart a wet paper bag, let alone a train.”

Riley laughs, the sound nearly hysterical. She’s terrified. But we’re at least together.

Carl’s Jr. glances up at Jack. “When this splits we’re going to have two seconds to jump to that other car, and if we don’t make it we’re gonna hit the tracks at two hundred miles an hour.”

That’s not great odds. But I’ve seen worse. Maybe they’ll live after all. Jack throws his weight into the lever, and there’s a straining groan of metal. Come on. Come on!

The metal snaps, and the sudden release of tension on their lever throws the kid off balance. He
pitches forward, heading face-first for the blur of metal underneath them. Jack reacts on pure adrenaline, snatching the back of the kid’s shirt and yanking him back against the end of the car they’re on. But the decoupled section is already disappearing behind them. *We missed our window.*

*And now we’re on a train heading straight for a very painful stop.*

They lean against the back of the car, all three shaking as the adrenaline slips away and the realization that this is it, this is the end of the line, sets in.

“Well, it’s not really how I imagined seeing Frankfurt, but I can’t think of anyone I’d rather do it with.” Jack takes Riley’s hand and claps Carl’s Jr.’s shoulder. “Always thought I’d die somewhere tropical, but as far as it goes, train crash isn’t a totally uncool way to go.”

“We’re not gonna die. At least I hope not.” Carl’s Jr. starts struggling to his feet. “I think I can stop the train.”

“Well then why in the hell didn’t you do that in the first place?” Jack asks, standing as well.

“Because it’s really risky and dangerous and it might derail the train and kill everyone on board.” The kid stumbles toward the engine room. “Most trains like this are diesel-electric. Diesel engine powers an electric motor. If I reverse the polarity, I might be able to make the axles spin backward.”

“Like slamming a speeding car in reverse,” Riley says.

“Yeah, if the car weighs hundreds of tons and is going over two hundred miles an hour.”

“Okay, so how are we gonna do that? Those wires sticking out of the console?” Jack asks.

“Um, not exactly. The only way to access the hookups is under the train.” They step into the engine room and the kid points to a panel in the floor. “Can you help me get that up?”

“Whoa, whoa hoss, are you sure you’re in any shape to go crawlin’ around under this thing?” He can barely stand.

“Nope. We’d all die.” Riley starts, but Jack and the kid both cut her off.

“I’m going.” The kid slides down through the hole. Jack can see the tracks whizzing by underneath, and sparks from the wheels. *If he makes one mistake he’s going to get shredded.* “It’s going to get bumpy. Get to the farthest car in the rear and brace yourself. It might not slow down enough to save the engine.”

Jack grabs Riley’s hand as the kid disappears under the engine. “Come on, let’s go.”

They find seats in the rear car and hunker down, like protocol on an airplane or helicopter going down. *I’ve done that a few too many times. But train derailment is a first.*

Unfortunately, that idea and the slight edge of hysteria lead to only one coherent thought. “I’m goin’ off the rails on this crazy traa-ain,” Jack sings out.

“Jack, shut up.” Riley’s clutching his hand in a death grip.

And then there’s a horrible screech that puts Jack’s singing voice to shame. The train jolts brutally and Jack and Riley are slammed back and forth against the seats. Jack can’t tell if one or both of them are screaming. He might be. He can’t hear over the wheels grinding against the track. But they
are slowing down. And then the whole thing literally grinds to a halt. Jack staggers to his feet, gasping. *He did it. He actually did it.* Riley hugs him, throwing herself at him and clinging for all she’s worth.

The train starts moving backward, then stops with a jerk. Jack falls backward into the wall, and Riley stumbles against him. Jack takes off at a run for the engine. *Please don’t be dead. You saved our lives. Please don’t be dead.*

“Hey kid!” He yells into the hole. “You did it!” There’s no answer. Riley covers her mouth with her hand. “Hey! Carl’s Jr.!” Jack slides down into the hole. Everything he touches is hot, scorching his hands and legs as he slides along underneath. And then he sees, ahead of him, a pair of shoes. And a body that isn’t moving. *No, no, no.*

He grabs the scorched, soot-stained shoes, and tugs. The kid’s body moves easily, and Jack slides him until he reaches the hole. “Riley, help me!” He pulls the kid until Riley can reach in and grab under his arms and lift him out. Jack struggles through after him. Riley’s leaning over the kid, brushing his singed hair out of his face, *God that smells awful*, and feeling his pulse.

“He’s still alive.”

Jack collapses against the ruined console. And then the kid coughs weakly and grimaces. “Ah-guh.” He tries to roll over and curl up, but starts to shudder from pain, clenching his teeth. Jack leans over him, assessing the damage.

Carl’s Jr. is scratched and bruised, his clothes and hair are singed and there are black soot marks and angry red burns all over his face and hands. But he’s started laughing almost hysterically.

“Welcome to Frankfurt, old man.”

Everything hurts. Mac tries to sit as still as possible on the uncomfortably hard bench in the Frankfurt train station. The cops are still sorting everything out, but Thornton is here now, and she’s handling it. Which is good, because Mac feels like he might pass out any second. He didn’t know it was possible to hurt this much. The bruise, the cracked ribs, and the dozens of burns, of which the ones on his back and legs are making sitting not so fun, are all vying for being most painful. He thinks the ribs are winning. *I’m never gonna be able to breathe normally again if this happens every other mission.*

The doors open and three Interpol agents walk in, flanking Katerina Wagner, who is still clutching Riley’s rig. The woman’s eyes go wide when she sees the four people standing behind Thornton.

Katerina rushes to the older woman and clutches her tightly, chattering in German. Mac forces a small smile. *This is why I keep doing this job. Why it’s worth the pain.*

Jack glances at Mac. “Geez, kid, now you look like you lost a fight with Andre the Giant and Thomas the Tank Engine.”

“I didn’t lose.” Mac shrugs then hisses, regretting the movement. “The guy’s knocked out and the train’s stopped.”

“Yeah, well, you can’t even sit up straight, so I’m not sure I believe you. Come on. Let’s see.” Mac reluctantly undoes the top buttons of his shirt.

“Oh, okay, but it’s really not…” Jack’s horrified stare makes him glance down himself. *Oh shit.* There’s a black and purple bruise spreading across most of the center of his chest in the vague shape of a
“Did he kick you?”

“More like...uh...stepped on me.” Mac winces and tries to turn away.

“Man, do you know how lucky you are to be alive?” Jack asks, catching Mac’s shoulders. “I’ve seen that happen to guys in the field, and if your ribs get snapped off they can puncture a lung, or your lungs could have just collapsed from the pressure.” Mac can already tell what Jack isn’t tacking onto that sentence. I’ve seen guys die from that.

“I’ve talked to Thornton about doing some more field training with you,” Jack says, fingers gently skimming the imprint of tac boot tread. “So once you’re feeling up to it, it’s gonna be you and me and a floor mat, every morning until you can beat guys like that in your sleep, got it?” Mac grins a little in spite of himself.

I’ve seen guys die from that.

“Okay.” He sees the older man breathe a small sigh of relief. I guess if it makes him happy. And really, he wouldn’t mind if they’d like to give him something for the pain...

The kid falls asleep in the car on the way to the Phoenix jet. The EMTs, when he finally agreed to let them near him, gave him some pretty strong painkillers. He’s still wincing and grimacing in his sleep, but at least that horrible strained tightness is gone from his muscles. That had to kill with cracked ribs and bruises everywhere.

Jack doesn’t have the heart to wake him. So instead, he picks the kid up and settles him in a seat gently. He’s had enough broken ribs to know what will be the least painful position. He’s adjusting the kid when a cracked and scorched piece of plastic and metal falls out of his back pocket. Guess he wrecked his phone anyway. Jack picks it up. He’s gonna be upset. Jack would be ready to gloat about this if he didn’t see the genuine fear the kid has about losing or wrecking that thing. Good thing it wasn’t his ankle monitor that got fried. That at least was protected by his boot. His phone was smashed right up against one of the railings under the train.

Jack hands it to Riley and she shakes her head. “That’s not salvageable. I might be able to remove the SD card if it didn’t get too badly scorched, but I’m not sure.”

Jack sighs, glancing at the kid who’s now breathing softly, huddled under a blanket. He shouldn’t have to spend every day in fear of screwing something up and having that parole officer on his ass about it.

Jack glances at Patty. “Hey, do you think you might be able to do the kid a favor?”

PAROLE OFFICER’S OFFICE

NOT FOR MUCH LONGER...

Jack follows Riley up the steps to Lance Hammond’s office. Thank goodness Patty’s got a soft heart under all that ice. She’s seen how badly the kid’s been struggling, and how reluctant his PO is to work with him. Maybe she just agreed to this so that we could have a better chance of rescheduling
around missions. But I think she really does care.

Jack straightens his “Roger Preston” tie and prepares to get into character. I’m really not supposed to use the cover any more than necessary. Just in case someone gets suspicious and starts doing some real digging. Backstopped covers are good, but not that good. But this is totally worth it.

Jack shoves the door open and walks inside, Riley behind him. She looks scary. Her hair has been straightened, and she’s wearing a black pencil skirt and a fitted red blouse. She looks a hell of a lot like Patty right now.

“You can’t just barge in here!” Hammond leaps to his feet, red-faced. “I am in the middle of a confidential meeting!” The kid in the chair, a boy probably only a few years younger than Carl’s Jr., looks terrified.

“Well, you can cut your meeting short, or I can leave and start putting together my harassment suit against you.”

“What?” The man’s jaw goes slack, he looks like a landed bass.

“My client informed me that you have, without reason, questioned his actions and whereabouts, and that you threatened to take action to have him sent back to prison, when he has clearly been following the conditions of his release perfectly.”

“George, please leave.” The kid in the chair jumps up and bolts. Jack leans on Hammond’s desk, enjoying the fear in his eyes. Don’t like it when the tables are turned, do you?

“I swear I did no such thing. I merely pointed out that there were certain...anomalies...in the reports.”

Riley rests her hands on the back of a chair. “Did these anomalies violate any conditions of his release?”

“N-no.” Hammond looks suddenly shaky. Just a grown-up bully who likes watching other people squirm. He has power over them, and he likes it. Jack doesn’t know how the kid came in here every week and hasn’t snapped yet. “I promise, I had no intention of this being viewed as harassment.” Of course not. You just wanted to scare a kid who can’t get away from you.

“Mr. Hammond, your client will be reassigned while we determine whether it’s worth the trouble to sue you.” Jack grabs a mint from the man’s desk as he leaves. “If I see you again, it’s going to be in court.”

“And believe me, if he sues you, he’ll take you for all you’re worth,” Riley says, the faintest of smiles slipping on her face as she closes the door.

Jack grins at her as they walk down to the car. “Man, I love this cover.”

“Don’t you become the one with a power trip,” Riley chuckles. “He’s gonna be so glad to never hear from you again.”

“Hopefully that means he’ll never want to think of Roger Preston again,” Jack says. They climb into the car, where Carl’s Jr. is waiting in the backseat. His eyes are a mix of hope and terror.

“Well, you’re never gonna have to see that guy again,” Jack says, grinning. “Riley, you hacked his court assignment, right?”

“New parole officer, coming up,” Riley says. “As far as she knows, there was a system glitch that
resulted in a bunch of incorrect assignments kicked out by a computer with a virus in the court system. I checked her out, she seems like a pretty laid-back PO. Not another Hammond.”

The kid sighs and leans back against the seat. “I don’t know how to thank you guys.”

“Just keep doing what you do out there and we’ll call it even,” Jack grins. “Consider this a thank you for Frankfurt.”

They pull up to a small brick office. Riley’s been on the phone for the past few minutes, pretending to be an overworked and underpaid secretary who has to clean up this bureaucratic mess. *She really can become almost anyone she needs to be. Patty trained her well.* She hangs up.

“She knows you’re on your way. This is just a quick meeting to get you in her books. You shouldn’t have any problem with this.” She smiles.

Mac still can’t believe they went through all this trouble to fix his problem with his PO. *They didn’t have to. I could have made it work.* But he’s getting the feeling that this team would move heaven and earth for each other. And now he’s actually a part of it. *It feels too good to be true. I can’t get too attached. When I get attached I get hurt.* But it’s hard not to care. And not to feel like this is a family.

He climbs the stairs to his new PO’s office. This building is older and shabbier than the one Hammond worked in, but it looks more cheerful, with a couple chaotically growing potted plants making a jungle in the lobby, messy paintings on the wall, each sighed with a crimson P.P., and a sixties-looking flowered couch in the hallway across from the office instead of plastic chairs.

Mac knocks timidly on the old-fashioned frosted-glass door. *I still can’t believe they risked wrecking Jack’s cover, and Riley hacked the LA court system, just to make sure I didn’t have to get treated like I’m a nobody every week.*

A young woman with dark hair pulled up in a ponytail and neon-pink sneakers mostly hidden under her grey dress pants opens the door. “Hello, Mr. MacGyver, I’m Penny Parker. I’m your new parole officer.”

BERNE, SWITZERLAND

THIS HOUSE IS NOT SO NEUTRAL

A woman in a blue dress rings the doorbell of a massive mansion nestled on a quiet city street. Anyone passing would have seen only another one of the many socialites, businesspeople, or lawyers who frequent David Baum’s home.

No one would have noticed the small Glock pistol tucked into the woman’s purse, or the knife concealed in her narrow cream flats.

The door is opened by a man in a crisp black suit. “Mr Baum’s been expecting you.” He leads her into a massive lobby decorated with ornate furniture and several paintings that have been floating around the art black market for a while. Baum has no qualms about flaunting his connections. No one dares to challenge him.

The black-suited man disappears through a massive panelled door and returns a few moments later. “He’ll see you in his office.”

The woman walks in. The room, like the rest of the house, showcases Baum’s expensive taste. But
the central feature of the room is the mounted bear’s head on the back wall, its mouth bared in a fanged snarl. Below it, Baum leans back in a chair, his own fleshy face resembling the bear’s predatory one.

He opens a desk drawer and removes a crystal decanter. “Care for something?” The woman shakes her head and he pours himself a glass. “Maybe you’ll feel differently in a few minutes.” He takes a sip from the glass and leans back in his chair. “Would you like to explain to me why you’ve blown your cover and Eric Wexler is currently behind bars?”

The woman shrugs, tapping one toe on the red-and-gold carpet. “He didn’t want to share the profits anymore.”

“Then you should have come to me. Omnus takes care of its own problems. You know that.” Baum leans forward, setting down the glass and steepling his fingers.

“He no longer wanted to share with me. He was still, as much as I know, loyal to you.”

“And yet you dumped all of his records for the CIA and put one of our best suppliers out of business.”

The side of the woman’s mouth turns up in a small smirk. “What can I say? I like breathing.”

“Such bravado coming from someone of your rank. I should have you killed.” The man snaps. “You lost us Wexler. And millions in profit. Just to save your own skin.”

“Maybe. But I think you’ll forgive me when you see what I’ve brought you.” The woman smiles. Her hair is no longer blond, the way it was a few hours ago. It’s as red as blood. As the blood she’s gambling will still be in her body in five minutes.

“You should hope so. Because if it isn’t, protective custody will not be enough to save your family. I know them. I know their faces. And if you do not deliver, they will never see tomorrow.”

“Oh, they will live. Because I can get you what you were willing to sacrifice almost everything for two months ago.” She smiles. “I can get you the Phoenix.”

“Carpenter made me that promise when he joined us. And they found him. And changed everything in their system.”

“They’ll never know I was even inside. Unlike Carpenter, I have a flair for subtlety.” The woman who a few days ago called herself Katerina Wagner smiles and holds up her phone. “I’ve gotten access to their systems. You were right, Agent Davis’s relationship with the mole had compromised her. She trusted me enough to leave me alone with her computer long enough to plant the virus. Once Carpenter breaks the codes, the Phoenix is ours.”
106-Wrench

PHOENIX TRAINING ROOM

THEY’RE NOT JOKING WHEN THEY SAY BECOMING AN AGENT IS BLOOD, SWEAT, AND TEARS.

Jack slams his fist into the punching bag one more time, then shakes out his hand. Beside him, the kid’s doing the same thing, but moving a lot more gingerly. Thankfully, the medical assessment when they got back from Germany revealed that his ribs weren’t broken, just cracked and bruised. He’s awfully lucky. And by Monday he was back at the Phoenix, despite Patty’s insistence he could take a week off. At least she didn’t send him back to R&D. Apparently that didn’t go well for him. It’s been a week and a half, and Jack swears he’s never seen anyone bounce back this fast from such clearly painful injuries.

He hopes it’s just that Carl’s Jr.’s still young, and a quick healer to boot. Sadly, it’s probably just that he got good at hiding how much pain he was in. Jack’s pretty sure the kid’s taken similar damage, maybe even worse, given some of the things he’s said, as a vigilante. And then he had to go home and hide it from everyone but his best friend. From what Sam’s picked up from her interviews with the kid, Bozer’s mother was probably too drunk most of the time to notice when something was wrong with the kid, but Boze’s sister would have gotten suspicious easily.

And for a while he was still going to high school, and after graduation he had a day job in a mechanics’ shop and took a couple college classes from Western Tech on the side. How the hell did he do all that when he was going out and getting shot at and beaten up on a consistent basis? And none of the family, his professors, classmates, or co-workers ever noticed. From the way Carl’s Jr. reacts to being injured, it’s clear this is nowhere near his first time. He’s lucky to still be alive. But that doesn’t mean Jack wants to keep depending on that luck. Because one of these days it’s going to run out.

Jack hadn’t really thought about how much danger the kid was in out there with them on missions until he stumbled off that train covered in bruises with a boot print in his chest. Jack had sort of taken for granted that a former vigilante who’d spent two years in prison could handle himself in a fight. But that was against random street thugs, guys with no real training. Out in the field, they’re going up against mercenaries with special ops level skills, and grabbing some dirt and throwing it in their face isn’t always going to be enough.

The fact remains that Carl’s Jr. is an amateur. And in this line of work that’s liable to get him killed. He doesn’t have Jack’s years of CIA, Army, and Delta training that makes him react to any attack on instinct. He doesn’t even have Riley’s CIA Farm experience. And the next time they go up against hired guns like Wexler’s, he might be outmatched.

He’s barely had time to recover from Germany, to be honest, but they could be going back in the field any day, and Jack does not ever want to see the kid come home with that level of damage again. I thought I was going to be able to watch his back enough that this wouldn’t be a concern. But the more we put him in the field, the more it seems like the right move is to split up sometimes, to let him do his thing while Riles and I do ours. Jack had fully expected to have to watch the kid like a hawk
so he didn’t run or do something to sabotage them. But now he knows that’s not gonna happen. I can trust him to go off on his own and actually do the job. But not if he’s gonna get killed first.

Jack figures they’re warmed up enough. He and the kid are both sweating and Jack can feel the slight buzz of rising adrenaline. You don’t get any warmup in the field. But we’re starting slow.

“Since you’ve never even had entry training, like a normal operative, we’re going to start with the basics.” And so you don’t kill yourself trying harder moves on damaged ribs. The kid’s a tough one, Jack will give him that, but it’s clear he’s starting to hurt. But the thing about field training is that you learn to fight when you by all rights should be giving up and dying on the ground.

“Jack, I know how to fight.” The kid throws the gloves on the ground and stares at Jack from under the fringe of messy, sweaty blond hair.

“You may have learned how to scrap in prison, Carl’s Jr., but trust me, a two-bit drug lord and a trained Somalian merc are two different things.”

“They go down the same if you kick out their knee.”

Jack sighs. “Yeah, but sometimes these guys have a little more protection. Which means you gotta learn more ways to beat them. And I don’t mean whipping up some gadget from a lightbulb and a paperclip. A lotta times, surviving in the field comes down to muscle memory.”

He has to admit he’s not prepared for the kid to suddenly close the distance between them and swing a kick toward the side of Jack’s leg. He’s really glad his own muscle memory does kick in. That would have been embarrassing. He grabs the kid’s ankle and flips him on his side.

He tries to ignore the soft grunt of pain when Carl’s Jr. hits the floor. It’s your own damn fault, kid. “What was that about?”

“I fight my way. And it works.” He grabs Jack’s arm and pulls him down, driving an elbow against the side of his head. Damn. I didn’t see that coming.

“Okay, fine, kid.” Jack knows he shouldn’t want to just one-up the kid, but his pride is stinging a little because if this had been a real fight that kid just might have beaten him. “If that’s what you want to do, then you’re gonna prove to me that you can win that way. But this time I’m gonna be ready for you.” Jack shrugs his shoulders and drops into a fighting stance. “Come on, again.”

He’ll admit the kid isn’t an easy mark. He fights dirty, of course he does if he learned inside. He bites, claws, and struggles like a pinned wildcat. Once he uses a wall to flip over behind Jack and pin his arm.

If I lose to this hamburger kid, I’m gonna be a walking joke. The thought gives Jack a new surge of adrenaline and he breaks the grip choking him and rolls over, pinning the kid’s hands and digging a knee into his sternum.

“Okay, I gotcha, kid. Tap out already.” He’s chuckling until he sees the look on Carl’s Jr.’s face.

His blue eyes are wide and terrified, and they have that thousand yard stare Jack knows too well. He’s gasping for breath, struggling weakly to throw Jack off, and close to hyperventilating.

“N-no, get off me!” the kid yelps, breathless and panicky.

Jack does. This might be a training exercise designed to make sure the kid survives the field, but it’s not going to do anyone any good if he has a panic attack right here and now.
Carl’s Jr. is shaking, rolling over, and Jack doesn’t miss the way his fingers clutch the waistband of his pants in a death grip. Oh man. He guesses he should have expected as much, a pretty boy like that in a supermax with a bunch of lifers, but he’d been pushing the thought out of his mind. And the kid had never acted like anything had happened…

Showing weakness could have got him killed in there. He’s not gonna change any time soon. No wonder Carl's Jr. liked solitary so much.

“Hey, man, I didn’t mean…” Jack reaches out a hand to help the kid to his feet and he bats it away, flinching. Jack stutters to a halt, the half-finished apology hanging in the air between them like steel bars.

“I-I’m gonna take a shower.” The kid shudders, his whole body cringing away from Jack. Aw, shit. Jack watches the tenseness thrumming like a live wire through the kid as he walks away.

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**NICK CARPENTER’S APARTMENT**

**IF YOU’RE GOING TO BREAK YOUR OWN PROMISES, TAKE A FRIEND**

“Don’t judge me,” Riley mutters as the lock disengages. This is almost as fast as if I had my key. Jack had taken hers after the last time she promised she wasn't going to come back, so she wouldn't be tempted to come back just because she had easy access. Unfortunately, that doesn't prove to be much of a deterrent to covert operatives.

“Does this look like my judgment face?” Sam asks.

“Well, you’re the one who told me you’d handle this…”

“And he left the key for you.” Sam glances sideways at her as Riley pushes the door open. “Something about this is all wrong. If he’s running, why leave you clues like this?”

Riley goes straight for the small box on the desk, and tries the key from Lisbon. Not that one I guess. “I don’t know. I was hoping you might have some kind of idea.”

Sam runs a finger through the dust that’s forming on the kitchen countertop. “Either he’s trying to drag you into his game, implicate you somehow, or he’s asking for help. In over his head.”

“You didn’t see him in San Francisco,” Riley mutters. She tries the key on two other small boxes. Why didn’t it ever strike me as odd before that he liked little lockable boxes so much. What normal person has this many? She tries desk drawers, an antique dresser, Why didn’t I ever notice his strange taste in furniture, and a file cabinet. Nothing.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“He was insane. It was like I was talking to some kind of brainwashed robot.” Riley shudders at the memory of the cold look in Nick’s eyes. He didn’t care that I got hurt. He didn’t care that the virus he was going to unleash would have killed millions. There was something horrifying in that blind dedication to the Organization. I never thought Nick was that kind of guy.

“Could he have been threatened? Something to do with his family?”

“I don’t think so.” Riley’s been to see Nick’s mom. She went after Como. Granted, they’d had to sell her the cover story that it was a car accident on a business trip, but still, Riley hadn’t noticed anything unusual. The woman seemed safe and as comfortable as a widow who just lost her only child could
be. She hadn’t seemed unusually skittish or acted like she was being harassed.

Riley flops down on the couch out of habit, fingers automatically moving to the loose edge of fabric on the arm. “Sam, do you think I’m crazy? Or stupid? For not giving up?”

“No.” Sam leans on the counter. “I think you’re being a good operative. But I think you’re treating it like just another mission so you can lie to yourself about how personal it is.” She walks over to sit down next to Riley, gently taking the key from her hand. “[What Nick did hurt you. More than it hurt anyone else at Phoenix. And you’re trying to prove, over and over, that you can be objective and distant and do this job. And I don’t think that’s a lie. But I think you want to be objective. You want to distance yourself from it, treat it like any other mission. Because you don’t want to admit that you got hurt.”

Riley sighs and leans her head back against the couch. **Damn it, she said it better than I could have ever fumbled my way through.** Because it’s so much easier to do this. It’s easier to compartmentalize, to see Nick as the enemy, as a rogue agent to be hunted. If she looks into his eyes and sees someone she used to think she loved, how is she supposed to do this job? **I want to believe I was fooled because he was a good operative. Not because I let my personal feelings compromise me.** And more than anything, she wants to forget about it. Nick isn’t an ex. He’s a target.

“You know, you don’t always have to be Riley Davis, the unshakeable secret agent. Sometimes you can just be Riley Davis, the girl who got her heart broken.” Sam sighs. “I get that it’s hard sometimes to be a woman in this job. I know what it feels like to have people underestimate your skills, think you’re overly emotional. But the people who really matter in your life already know how strong you are. You don’t have to keep pretending nothing fazes you.”

Riley nods. “Do you think I should take a break?”

“I think what you have here is a dead end and a good reason to step back for a while.” Sam puts the key in her pocket. “I’m just gonna hang onto this so you don’t have to see it.”

“Thanks.” **I couldn’t ask for a better friend. She might pull all my secrets out of me without my knowledge, but she sure does it for all the right reasons.** “Want to go get coffee so I can complain to you about my shitty ex?”

“Sure.” Sam stands up and brushes her hands over her black jeans. “I already have one thing about him I hate. His house is a dust pit.”

Riley laughs. **She doesn’t have to know I’m going with a few ulterior motives of my own.** Sam might talk about needing to deal with the demons in life, but it’s clear she has more than a few of her own. **She talks an awful lot about not needing to be okay all the time, but she’s never let down her guard with any of us.**

Sam’s past is a black ink spill of redacted dossiers. The first real information on her shows up when she was recruited, under unclear circumstances, to an Australian intelligence agency. And her official documents have that too-pristine feeling that they’re all part of one of the best backstopped cover IDs Riley’s ever seen.

She did some digging, when they first became roommates. When a few things Sam said set off the little alarm bells in her head. **It’s a shame Nick didn’t do that.** From what Sam’s told her, and the stack of IDs she uncovered, Riley can tell Nick has been living a double life. Or maybe a quadruple one. **Where was he really going on all those weekends off? When he didn’t offer to take me along?**

But she needs to stop letting her mind go down that trail. Because Sam is enough of an enigma to
keep her occupied. And now that she’s giving the whole Nick thing a bit of a rest, maybe she can start getting Sam to be a little more forthcoming about her past.

The strangest part of this, to Riley at least, is that Cage doesn’t have a digital presence at all. It’s not just that she’s not a fan of social media and has no accounts anywhere, not even one of those embarrassing childhood MySpace ones that apparently everyone ever forgot to delete. *I once found a serial killer through his* . Prior to 2012, there isn’t a trace of Sam anywhere on the web. Not one speck of a digital footprint. Not even a stray selfie capture in the background. *Either she was fantastically good at not being seen, or someone scrubbed her entire existence.* And Riley’s inclined to assume the latter. *Someone went to a lot of trouble to make sure Samantha Cage didn’t exist until they wanted her to.*

Riley’s tried to find out who went dark around the same time Sam was recruited. *If she was any kind of rogue agent or assassin for hire, there should be a trace that ends in 2012.* But she’s coming up empty. If Cage ever was anything like that, she didn’t advertise her services on the dark web. *She might have relied on word of mouth.* And there’s plenty of chatter on some older Australian networks about a few different people who seem to have stopped working around that time. But Riley can’t be sure if any of them are Cage. There’s a “fader” who from most of the chatter sounds like a man, a con artist who specialized in ‘acquiring’ unique musical instruments for unscrupulous collectors, and someone touted as a ‘negotiator’. The terms of that particular job are vague, but Riley’s guess is that this was someone a company or individual might hire to make a problem go away. Someone who would contact a whistleblower or someone who could reveal some scandal, offer to buy them off, and very likely, if all else failed, kill them. *Cage is an expert manipulator. Could that have been her?*

Riley knows just enough to wonder. And maybe any sane person would decide that living with someone who’s only ‘existed’ for four years is asking to be murdered by some crazed serial killer. But nothing about Riley’s life choices can be considered sane.

She’s thought about asking Patty. Who must have Sam’s full, unredacted file, because she certainly wouldn’t hire her without it. *Patty would shut that down so fast I wouldn’t know what hit me.* But that’s not the real reason. *She’s going to tell me when she’s ready to tell me.* And against all the logic that says it’s a mistake, Riley would trust Samantha Cage with her life.

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Jack’s phone is buzzing with messages when he steps out of the locker room shower. *Damn it, why does someone always text me when I can’t answer?*

He’s kind of glad the kid was long gone by the time Jack finished destroying a punching bag. *How do I look him in the eyes after that?* Jack knows that some part of him knew, all along, what had happened to the kid in prison. But he’d never, ever, expected that he’d end up triggering a flashback like that. He still feels sick.

*I would never, in a million years, even think about hurting him. Especially not like that.* Jack’s seriously regretting losing his cool and letting his wounded pride get the best of him. *I just wanted to prove to him he was wrong, for once in his life.* It’s not even like he’s actually that frustrated with the kid anymore. Jack just doesn’t know how to lose or be wrong, and someone else paid for it.

Jack doesn’t even know how to apologize for this. *Sorry I was a complete idiot and forced you to remember being horrifically violated?*

He picks up his phone, glancing at the string of messages. It’s not, as expected, Patty asking why training was cut short and their consultant left the building without a word of explanation. It’s not even Riley fessing up to breaking into Nick’s apartment, again. *Sam texted me when they left the*
He grins when he sees the name that popped up on the messages. *Swiss.* It’s Charlie Robinson. The last EOD tech Jack was overwatch for in the Sandbox, and currently the person who’s trying to prove Carl’s Jr. isn’t a terrorist.

**Jack, I’m working a case in L.A. Want to catch up over a beer tonight?**

**Is that vigilante kid still working with your team?**

**Just got permission from the LA field office to bring in consultants on this. I’m coming over to Phoenix now.**

Jack rapidly types back.

**Yes we still have the bomb nerd with the silly hamburger name. What’s going on?**

Charlie’s two-word answer is enough to shake Jack.

**The Ghost.**

Jack’s heard of this guy. He wasn’t operating when Jack was still in the Sandbox, but some of his friends who were still there came back in the past couple years, and they had stories of a bombmaker who used risky builds, unusual components, and liked to watch his victims suffer.

Rumor had it the guy was U.S. based, selling his bombs to anyone who would buy them. No two are the same, but there’s always a signature. A video camera used to capture an image of the victims in the final moments of their lives.

The Ghost is sadistic. And if one of his devices turned up in L.A….There are at least two more that no one’s found. The Ghost’s other signature is working in a pattern of three. He asks for prices that end in the number 3, concludes sales on dates that end with a 3, and always creates three bombs for his customers. A decoy, a main explosive, and a failsafe.

Jack’s seen a lot of bomb makers in three years as an EOD overwatch. He’s seen people who were threatened into carrying bombs into crowded buildings. He’s seen people who truly believe that they’re carrying out some kind of holy war. He’s seen people who just want their city or their homeland to be left to itself. He’s seen a lot of reasons drive a person to create something that will kill anyone around it. Fear, anger, passion. But none of them scared him as much as this Ghost.

*He kills because it gives him some kind of sick pleasure.* Jack doesn’t understand what drives a person to that point. What makes someone find pleasure in causing someone else pain.

*The same kind of people who’ve got that poor kid so traumatized he’s terrified of me.* Jack’s never seen the kid lose it like that, and he’s seen him in pain, scared, and even drugged up on painkillers. But to his knowledge, Carl’s Jr.’s never had a flashback like that.

*What else is gonna set him off?* Jack’s got a pretty good idea that being pinned to the floor with someone on top of him was what triggered this incident. *That doesn’t take a genius to figure out.* But now that he thinks about it, Jack realizes there’s a lot more times the kid’s probably had less severe flashbacks. He’s seen that haunted stare before, he just didn’t realize what it was.

*When he almost got choked to death in that warehouse in Myanmar. Every time Riley or I grabbed his belt to keep him in the car.* He remember Mac barely undoing his shirt enough to show Jack the
boot bruising in Frankfurt. *He never showers with me after training, or after a mission.* Jack didn’t really think anything of it until now. He often has the locker room to himself and most people leave in a hurry anyway once he starts warming up with Metallica or Iron Maiden. *What? The acoustics are great.* But now it strikes him as odd that the kid always waits until Jack’s done before he takes a shower, making some excuse about cooling down, or about needing to call Bozer and tell him he hasn’t fallen off the face of the earth.

*How have I not seen this the whole time?* Jack wonders how often he’s run into the kid accidentally, congratulated him roughly after a success, said something offhanded that hurt. *Damn it.*

He wants to go back to the training room and punch something again. Or better yet call Patty down and go a few rounds, because he’s the one who needs a good thrashing. *That kid needed someone who wasn’t gonna hurt him more, and all I’ve done is give him a hard time.*

Riley’s sitting in the car with Sam, both of them finishing the last of their coffees and laughing about the time Sam set her own training officer’s car on fire.

“He said it was a real-world simulation. So I did exactly what I would have done under the same conditions in the field.”

“What did he do?”

“He passed me for the training, but my pay was docked my entire first year to pay for a new vehicle,” Sam grins. “Worth it though. The look on his face was priceless.”

Somehow Riley just can’t imagine that Sam, this fun, playful prankster, was ever some sort of cold blooded killer or international criminal. *How do I reconcile that with the girl who just decorated my apartment for Halloween with the most over-the-top display I’ve had in years, puts fake spiders in the shower, and couldn’t stop laughing when the scarecrow’s head fell off and rolled into the kitchen?*

But all Sam’s records paint a far different picture. *There’s no reason to redact a file given to another covert agency if the only things in it are past training.* Missions wouldn’t be mentioned in detail, but Sam should at least have academic records, next of kin, something that makes her seem more like a real human being and less like someone who could have been manufactured at a moment’s notice. *I’ve been watching too many sci-fi movies with Jack.*

Her phone buzzes. *Think of the devil...* Jack’s text is short and to the point. **Phoenix. New job came up.**

“What’s that?” Sam asks.

“Jack. He said something’s going on at Phoenix.”

“Consider us there.” Sam stomps the gas, and swings her Mini Cooper out of the parking space and into traffic with the practiced ease of someone who has years of pursuit driving training.

Jack doesn’t text again with any more details, which is odd. Usually Riley has half a mission briefing on her phone by the time she gets in, if Jack’s there before her. At the very least he often gripes about Patty taking the opportunity to remind Jack of what he’s not allowed to do within the parameters of the mission.

*Something’s eating at him.* The last time he was this uncommunicative was after she took a knife to the stomach in Bogota when they got split up and she was captured. *He’s worried about something,*
or he feels guilty. She’s not sure if he’s still thinking about what happened to Mac on the train. Jack had showed up to her apartment the night after they got back, at three a.m. Riley hadn’t said a thing, just put on a pot of coffee, and let Jack sit on the couch until he told her he’d had a nightmare about the kid getting killed. “It would have been my fault,” he’d said, staring into the depths of his coffee mug. “I told him to go alone. If he died, that would have been on me.”

Riley knows how much Jack takes the safety of everyone on his team. Sometimes he worries too much. But how do you tell a parent not to?

Jack and Mac are both waiting in the War Room when Riley gets there. But Jack looks incredibly uncomfortable. He’s actually sitting properly in one of the chairs, rather than on the arm or the back of it. And Mac has made at least a dozen tiny paperclip sculptures; they’re laying all over the table in front of him. They all look like hands.

“What’s going on?” Riley asks immediately.

Patty glances up from the tablet she’s holding. “We’ve just been pulled in as consultant partners with the Los Angeles FBI field office.”

“Working on what?” Riley pulls up her rig and logs into the War Room’s closed system, ready to pull up the briefing the second it loads.

“Hello, Jack.” She jumps when she hears the unfamiliar voice; she’s not used to having more than their team in a briefing. Someone’s standing in the door. It takes a blink and a few seconds to recognize him. Charlie Robinson?

“Good to see ya, man.” Jack’s already across the room and pulling the newcomer into a massive bear hug.

“Charlie?” Riley asks. “What are you doing here?” She’s met Jack’s former EOD tech a few times, but it’s been a while. Especially since he got his promotion with the FBI and got permanently placed in Washington.

Maybe he has the evidence to prove Mac didn’t kill Ramsay. But from the serious look on his face, Riley’s pretty sure that’s not the case. Consultants...FBI...wait, is he the reason we’re here? Are we working a case with him?

“Got called out to the field office for an investigation I’ve been heading up, and some unusual circumstances have come up. It’s the first big lead we have on a major new player. Heard of the Ghost?”

Riley nods. The past couple of years, there’s been a ton of chatter on the dark web.

“Well, he left us a little surprise in one of the suburbs today.” Charlie frowns. “As far as we can tell, he’s working with a cartel, but it’s been a while. Especially since he got his promotion with the FBI and got permanently placed in Washington.

Maybe he has the evidence to prove Mac didn’t kill Ramsay. But from the serious look on his face, Riley’s pretty sure that’s not the case. Consultants...FBI...wait, is he the reason we’re here? Are we working a case with him?

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“Well, he left us a little surprise in one of the suburbs today.” Charlie frowns. “As far as we can tell, he’s working with a cartel, but I’d like to confirm that. And I hear you have someone on your team who knows an awful lot about how the LA criminal underground operates.”

“Yes. If you wanna know about cartels, or things that go boom, Carl’s Jr.’s your man.” Jack’s voice sounds wrong, a little forced. And he doesn’t look at Mac when he says any of this. What happened with them? Did Mac do something to piss Jack off? But she’s not really sensing anger. It’s more like they’re uncomfortable looking at each other. Like there’s something they know that they can’t go back from. Something that changed the way they think of each other. It reminds Riley of the way she and her mom avoided each other when Riley came home with her first tattoo.

Whatever it is, it can wait. Right now, we’ve got a bomb and a dangerous killer to deal with.
“So this is the kid I’ve heard so much about.” Charlie glances at Mac. “He looks even younger in person.” Riley flinches just a little. *Please tell me you’re actually taking his case, and him, seriously.* She knows Mac doesn’t look dangerous. And it’s all the more reason to keep him from having to go back to prison.

Mac continues fiddling with his paperclips, glancing up at Charlie momentarily. *Damn it, you’re not making a good first impression. Mac, you want him to like you. He’s the only person who might be able to make sure this conditional release turns into actual freedom.* She tries to cover Mac’s apparent apathy with a question. “What did you find?”

“LAPD’s had two deep cover cops working at a gym that fronts for the Los Diablos cartel. When they showed up to open the place this morning, something about it bothered them, and they noticed the door had been rigged with a trigger, and called in backup. At first glance it seemed like simple cartel territory rivalry. But when the bomb squad showed up to defuse it, their scanners picked up a video feed going out on a special frequency. They contacted the FBI field office and confirmed that it matched the Ghost’s signature. I was in Sacramento already, working on a briefing for local field teams, so I came as soon as they called me.”

“So what do you need us for?” Jack asks. “Not that I’m not glad to see you, but…”

“I know the Ghost. But I don’t know the cartels. And there’s a secondary bomb with the Ghost’s that obviously cartel work. If I let LAPD bomb disposal in on this we’re going to get into a jurisdictional nightmare and I can’t afford any red tape right now.”

“Why bother to hire a professional bomb builder if you’re going to do the work yourself?” Mac asks, apparently actually interested now. *I know what he really wants to ask. Why does an FBI agent want to work with someone convicted of terrorism and murder?*

“I’ve been looking over your file. A lot. And the minute this came up you were the first person I thought might be able to help me. You were a major thorn in the cartels’ sides for over three years. You learned their patterns, anticipated their moves.”

“It’s been two years since…since that. They’ve probably changed. A lot.” Mac sets down a paperclip in the shape of a police car.

“But some things are still the same. And better yet, you have a reputation for being able to think on the fly. A lot of bomb disposal techs are only able to do what they’ve been trained to. And since the Ghost likes testing new materials and builds in each of his designs, it would be nice to have someone on site who might be able to think ahead of him.”

“But…I…” Mac bites his lip. “You know I went to prison for building a bomb that killed a man, right?”

“I do. Because I’m the guy trying to prove someone set you up.” *Right. Mac wouldn’t have known Charlie from Adam. We never actually mentioned him by name when we said we had someone on the case.*
Mac’s eyes widen almost comically. “You really don’t think I did it?”

“At the very least I don’t think you intended to. It doesn’t fit your usual pattern. And I’ve tracked a lot of bomb makers long enough to know how to figure out a pattern.” Charlie shrugs.

“But you can’t prove anything.” Mac glances away. “So I might as well have done it. And even if it was an accident, he’s still dead.” It’s true. We might be able to prove Mac wasn’t intending to kill Ramsay, but if his bomb did it, he’s really no better off than he was before. Riley’d finally gotten so fed up with the lack of progress she’d risked talking to Patty last week. She was willing to help Mac get a new PO, so I figured she cared a lot more than she let on. Patty had told her pretty much the same thing. Charlie had been easily able to prove that a kill like that wasn’t Mac’s pattern. Enough to convince her she was making a good choice in hiring him. But proving the bomb itself didn’t kill Ramsay accidentally is harder. They might be able to successfully clear Mac of murder, but terrorism is going to be a harder charge to shake.

“I need evidence, and the LAPD is giving me the runaround,” Charlie says. “But everything in that warehouse was incinerated. They shouldn’t have been able to ID the body as easily as they obviously did.” Wow. Way to make it both reassuring and creepy. Riley doesn’t know how the man talks about this with such calmness. Wonder what kind of hell he...and Jack...lived through in the Sandbox? What have those two seen?

Charlie turns back to Patty. “Thank you for agreeing to loan out your team. I promise I’ll take good care of them.” He grins. “This time, Dalton, I’m pulling rank on you. So get your ass outta that chair and let’s hit the road.” Jack groans.

“I’m never gonna hear the end of it, am I? Be honest with me, the real reason you asked for this team was to give me grief.”

“I could have just borrowed your bomb nerd. But you’re right, payback’s been a long time coming. And revenge is gonna be sweet.” Charlie grins as he starts to follow Mac and Jack out the door.

Riley pulls him aside. “Charlie, did you tell him everything?” I just have to ask. I have to know.

“Yes.” Charlie’s face is blankly confused. “Why?”

“I just...I thought by now you’d know more.”

“I’m an FBI bomb squad tech working a case that was never assigned to me, for an agency that for all intents and purposes does not exist. And there are limits to what I can request because of the case being labeled as a terrorism charge. I’m calling in favors and exploiting loopholes and doing whatever I can.”

Riley sighs. “It’s just...it’s been rough for him.” Mac needs to be able to put this in the past. And as long as he still has that conviction hanging over him, he can’t do that.

“I can imagine.” Charlie glances pointedly at Mac’s blinking ankle tether. “Believe me, Miss Davis, I’m doing the best I can.”

SUMMIT FITNESS CLUB

THESE GUYS WERE SELLING A LOT MORE THAN PROTEIN POWDER

Mac’s disarmed a lot of bombs. At least one for every year he’s been alive. But this is the first time he’s actually had the right protective gear. And he hates it. How does anyone do anything in these
suits? He feels ridiculous and even worse, he feels slow.

Pena would have grinned. “Working fast gets you dead fast,” he used to say. But Mac’s always relied on his quick reflexes and an ability to grab whatever he needs from around him. In this suit, it would take him a day just to get a screw out of the door handle, if he happened to need one.

He can’t breathe in this suit. He knows that’s not actually true, but it feels like it. He’s already too hot and his legs and arms feel like they’re encased in concrete. But he knows better than to ask Agent Robinson if he can take it off.

_I’m pushing my luck as it is._ He can’t believe he lost it that badly in the training room this morning. _That was stupid. Get a grip._ He can’t let the past wreck his future. _You mess up, you go back. So don’t mess up._

Mac fumbles with his helmet, unable to figure out how to attach it to the rest of his gear. He jumps when Charlie takes it out of his hands.

“They’re a little tricky at first. Let me do it.” He expertly positions the helmet and attaches the connections.”

Mac feels more like he can’t breathe than ever, but he’s just going to have to push through it. “Thank you. For everything, Agent Robinson.”

“Please, call me Charlie.” The man holds out one gloved hand. “I don’t think we were properly introduced back there. Cause I already know your given name’s not Carl’s Jr.”

“No. It’s Angus, but I go by Mac.”

“Goes without saying naming you after a restaurant chain was one of Jack’s ideas.” Charlie grins, Mac can just barely tell through the helmet. “He gave everyone in the Sandbox dumb nicknames. Mine ended up being Swiss.”

“Why?”

“Well, first he called me Swiss Family Robinson. And then he decided that was too long.” He shrugs. “He called me that for two months. And then I saved his ass in Kabul and told him if he wanted me to do it again, the nickname had to die.” He chuckles. “He still writes it on my Christmas card though.”

Mac’s never really thought of Jack as the kind of guy to send Christmas cards. _After what he said about my letter to my dad, that’s the last thing I would have expected._ But now that he knows Jack a little better, it does make sense in a way. For as much as he pretends to be an unattached lone wolf, Jack cares an awful lot about people.

_Am I one of those people?_ Mac glances at the bomb. Figuring out how to make something not explode was always so much easier than trying to figure out people. “Okay, what do you need me to do?”

“You’ve got experience with the cartels’ work. I can’t get a look at his bomb until I get it out from inside theirs.” Charlie kneels down next to the crude device. “I need you to walk me through disarming this one. Or you can do it yourself.” He shrugs. “That’s up to you.”

Mac kneels next to the bomb, taking in the build at a glance.

“Cartels might do pretty sloppy work, but mark my words, it’s effective. Just because they’ve got
Mac studies the device. “Looks like they already hosed it down to fry the electronics.” There’s water on the plastic covering a white powder packed in under a the guts of a cell phone.

“They did that when they first found it because of the electronic trigger. Took out the wireless signal at the same time. Unfortunately, they didn’t realize that signal was important until one of their guys who’d been an EOD got a look at the scanner. He’s the one who told them to call it in.” He sighs. “They weren’t trained on how to deal with work like this. If the Ghost had waited a week, I’d have been here doing what I was in Sacramento and this would have been a hell of a lot easier. We might already have the guy in custody.” While he talks, Mac carefully cuts into the packaging and removes a bit of the powder. He pulls off his helmet to sniff it carefully.

“This looks like Merida work. Petin was their specialty, made from the heart medication. Risky, but they had the facilities to make it. For a while, they were making as much money selling black market bomb components as they were selling drugs.”

“I’m guessing you changed that.”

“Actually, it was my mentor. Alfred Pena.” Mac quickly shuts down the memories and goes back to the bomb. “The trigger’s already been destroyed, but there could be a manual failsafe.” He carefully pulls the waterlogged cell phone away from the rest of the bomb. This is almost too easy. Cell phone triggers are pretty standard for cartel work. But this one doesn’t look like it was connected to anything. Why place a trigger if you’re not going to use it? Something about this doesn’t sit right with Mac. Maybe someone just made a mistake. Cartel thugs don’t usually have engineering degrees. But the last time he had a gut feeling this bad about a bomb, Pena died.

“Are we good?” Charlie asks.

“As good as we’re gonna get.” Mac sets the phone aside, and cuts through the tape to remove the petin bomb. Inside is a small white box.

“That’s a 3-D printed polymer. Now this, this is the Ghost’s work.” Charlie says quietly. He carefully pries up the lid. Mac hears a soft beep. “Oh shit,” Charlie gasps.

There’s a small vial of something inside, and red digits counting down from a minute. It’s a setup.

Mac doesn’t hesitate, they can’t afford to. He shoves the bomb into the helmet he never put back on and races outside. There’s a manhole a few feet from the door. He rushes to it, pulls it up, and drops the helmet and bomb inside.

“Dumpster!” He gasps, and Jack and Charlie, both of whom have been staring at him like he’s insane, spring into action. Thank God for military training kicking in. They’ll at least follow orders in a crisis situation. “Tip it over the top and run!” Mac yells. They do, and they barely get far enough that it could be considered safe before there’s a loud roaring bang and all three of them are flung onto the pavement.

Guess that bomb suit was useful after all. Mac’s bruises and ribs are complaining, but it would have been so much worse without that protection. He glances at Jack and Charlie, relieved to see that they’re mostly undamaged as well. Jack has a long raw scrape on one arm, where his t-shirt didn’t protect him from skimming the asphalt, but he pushes himself to his feet with only a mild grimace.
Charlie looks back at the smoking dumpster. “I didn’t have much time to get a good look, but I’ve never seen anything quite like that before. That bomb wasn’t made to be triggered remotely. And I didn’t see a timer.”

“What do you mean?” Jack asks.

“The Ghost’s device wasn’t going to go off until someone came to disarm it. The real target wasn’t the Los Diablos. It was whatever bomb tech was unlucky enough to come up against it.”

Mac shudders as the realization sinks in. “This was a trap. He was hunting you.”

“Hey, take it easy, kid. He had no way of knowing I was going to be in the neighborhood. This isn’t personal. But you are right about one thing. He was after the bomb squad who would have come to disarm it.”

“If they hadn’t had someone who knew what they were dealing with, they’d be dead.” Mac shudders.

Charlie begins pulling off his suit. “They would have taken this back to their lab, more than likely, to investigate the components and see if there were links to other bombings, given the cartel involvement. When they took it apart in there, God knows how many people it would have killed.”

“And it would have destroyed their equipment.” Mac’s starting to see the big picture here, and it scares him. Someone wanted to make sure that it would be a lot harder for the LAPD to respond to other bombs in the city. From the briefing Charlie gave them on the way, he already knows the Ghost likes doing more than one thing at a time.

I couldn’t understand why you’d want to get caught, put everyone on alert. But this... It makes sense in a strange way. I’ve done similar things. Left a trap that was clearly a trap, gotten everyone distracted from what I was actually doing. He tries not to think about how often that was his and Pena’s go-to tactic. We have to find him before it’s too late.

“I traced the wireless signal. It came back online as soon as you triggered that second device. It’s streaming to a location right here in LA. Over in Westlake.” Riley’s still a little jumpy. If Mac hadn’t thrown that bomb into the manhole, we’d all be dead. Charlie can’t be certain what was in that vial, but whatever it was would have taken out everything in a hundred-foot radius, he says, based on the blast they saw.

“Okay, let’s go.” Jack slides into the car. “He won’t be waiting around long. If he was watching, he saw them figure out how to beat his bomb.”

“No he didn’t.” Riley grins. “When Mac shoved it in that helmet, it lost visual of what was happening. For all the Ghost knows, they didn’t know what to do with it and got blown up. But he’s going to figure out soon enough when it’s not splashed all over social media and the news channels.”

If Riley didn’t have complete faith in Jack’s driving after five years, she’d worry he was going to kill them before the Ghost does. Mac, in the backseat, keeps getting flung side to side as they go around turns and looks vaguely sick. Good thing you haven’t had to sit with him in a cargo truck with faulty brakes on mountain switchbacks. Riley’s still not sure how they survived that one.

The building in Westlake is an unassuming little apartment over a pawnshop. Riley follows Jack and Charlie up the stairs. The two move in a rhythm born of months spent together. They don’t even need to discuss tactics. Charlie scans the door for potential triggers while Jack prepares to breach it, sticking some small device under it that must be a camera scope of some kind.
When Charlie shakes his head, Jack prepares to kick in the door. “He’s in there,” Charlie whispers. Jack nods, then throws his whole body weight against the door. It rattles but doesn’t fall. *Oh no. This isn’t just some crappy cheap apartment door. He reinforced it.*

“Damnit!” Jack shouts, and his second kick shatters the door part-way off its hinges. He and Charlie slam into it together and it goes down hard. But they’re already too late. The window is wide open and whoever was in the room is long gone.

Just in case, Riley clears the small kitchen and bedroom with Jack, but no one is inside. *But he didn’t have time to grab this.* There’s a computer sitting on a table in the box of a living room, and when Riley opens it, it boots up. *It was only in sleep mode. We got lucky.*

Riley shoves aside a newspaper that’s spread out haphazardly over the table, covered with coffee cup rings. *This might be the break we need.* She starts typing, only to realize the keys are freakishly warm and the keyboard is smoking like she’s been typing too fast in a Superman cartoon.

“Is that supposed to be smoking?” Jack asks.

“No.” Mac yanks the laptop out of Riley’s hands and begins prying the keyboard cover off.

“Wait, what if that makes it blow up?” Jack yelps.

Mac continues tugging at the cover until it pops off. “Plastic explosives,” he mutters.

*Oh no. There was probably some password he entered somewhere in the system. So the computer would self destruct if anyone other than him got access.* It’s way more effective, and deadly, than a password protection for the computer itself. Passwords can be hacked. You can’t hack exploded, melted silicon.

“You don’t think it’s going to explode if I plug into it, right?” Riley asks. “If you can’t save the computer I’m at least going to download what I can.”

“It’s probably safe.” She plugs in her own rig and starts the cloning process. But it’s going to take a while. There are huge video files on the Ghost’s laptop and downloading them takes time.

“Shouldn’t we be getting outta here?” Jack asks. “I’d rather not die in LA, man. Like, even Frankfurt would have been better. Dying in Westlake’s gonna suck on an obituary.”

“Nobody’s dying!” Mac shouts. “I can disarm this. But we have to go outside.” They rush down the stairs, Riley stumbling awkwardly next to Mac since the computers are connected. *At least if this goes off it oughta take me out instantly.* As Jack told her once, “I’m not afraid of dyin’, I just don’t want there to be any pain.” She can agree with that.

Mac sets the computer on the hood of a car and glances down the street. A garbage truck is lumbering along, coming their way. “Jack, stop that stinky thing!” They rush down the stairs, Riley stumbling awkwardly next to Mac since the computers are connected. *At least if this goes off it oughta take me out instantly.* As Jack told her once, “I’m not afraid of dyin’, I just don’t want there to be any pain.” She can agree with that.

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“Hi long have we got?” She asks nervously.

“Based on the rate the smoke’s increasing, less than a minute.”

The world slows to a crawl. She can hear Jack yelling, “Hey, stop that stinky thing!” And the truck driver’s cursing at someone. And then Mac comes running back with some kind of liquid in a hubcap. The smell registers just as he starts pouring it over the keyboard.
“Wait, you’re adding fuel to a bomb?” Riley yelps.

“Plastic explosives are partly made from gasoline. Diesel fuel will dissolve it enough to remove the trigger,” Mac pants, pawing through the now-stringy putty and pulling out a thin wire.

“That’s impressive work,” Charlie mutters, and Riley can see the respect in his eyes. “Risky, but impressive.”

Jack jogs up, shaking his head. “You do realize we had to tell him he’s gonna have to call the Phoenix to claim damages, right? Patty’s gonna be pissed.”

“Not as much as she would have been if we’d lost this intel.” Riley’s computer is over halfway done cloning, and it looks like the Ghost’s laptop is in good enough shape for her to get most of the data off. “Nice work, Mac.”

She paces like a caged tiger while the computer finishes its download. We need to hurry. Charlie says the Ghost likes all his work finished in one day. And it’s past one p.m. now. She should be hungry, but she’s gone past hungry to the point where she feels like she can keep going indefinitely on the granola bar she ate before breaking into Nick’s and the coffee with Sam. That feels like forever ago. It really was just this morning?

Mac’s sitting on the front step, head down. He’s probably in shock. Nearly died twice in one day. That’s par for the course in this business, but sometimes she forgets he’s new to it. He fits in so well. Sometimes I feel like it’s been a lot longer than a couple months. Working with Mac feels right. Like they’re supposed to be this trio. Riley on the computers, Mac improvising their way out of tough spots, and Jack watching both their backs. It’s seamless. It never felt like this with Nick. She didn’t realize how much better a team could be until she saw it right in front of her.

“Hey, thanks for saving us again. Sorry I yelled at you while you were doing it,” Riley says, sitting down beside him.

“I get it. You were scared.” He shrugs, but Riley sees something run down his nose and splash to the concrete. He’s crying?

“Mac, it’s over. We did it. We’re gonna track him down and catch him with what I found on there, and we’re gonna make sure he doesn’t do this again. And it’s thanks to you.” She rests one hand gently on his shoulder. “You’re a hero, you hear me?”

He glances up at her, and his wide eyes are glassy with tears. “No. No, I’m not.” He sniffs. “Alfred Pena taught me that trick. He’s still saving me even when he’s been dead for three years.” A single tear trails down Mac’s cheek. “He saved my life so many times and I couldn’t save him.” More tears splash onto the hot concrete.

Riley leans back against the step. I’m surrounded by people who have so much pain in their pasts. And all I can do is be there when they want to talk. If they want to talk. She’d thought once that the hardest part of her life as an agent was going to be keeping secrets from other people, people she loved. It’s not. The hardest part is when people you love keep secrets from you. And that’s certainly not something unique to the life of a secret agent.

“Alfred Pena?” She saw that name in Cage’s dossier on Mac. But it’s familiar for some other reason she can’t pinpoint.

Mac’s silent for a few moments, and then he glances at her again, and something in her face must convey that she’s safe to talk to, because all of a sudden he starts talking and can’t seem to stop.
“You know how I told you, when we went to Russia, about the cop who taught me everything I know about disarming bombs?” Riley nods. “That was Alfred.” Oh man. That’s why his name’s familiar. Riley remembers seeing the news stories about a rogue cop supposedly killed by a bomb he made. I guess that’s not the whole story. And then an even more horrible thought comes to mind. Like mentor, like kid. Another misunderstanding, another assumption of guilt. At least Mac only ended up behind bars, not dead.

“He was like me. Spent his days defusing bombs on the job, spent his nights breaking up cartel work. Ran into each other taking down the same shipment one night, and he kind of took me under his wing. We stopped a lot of bombs together.” Mac sighs. “He was the best there was on the squad. And then I got him killed.”

“Mac, whatever happened, it wasn’t your fault.”

“He told me to get out. He knew things were going to go wrong.” Mac sniffs and swipes his hand over his face, then turns away from Riley.

He’s too young to be carrying around so much guilt. No wonder thinking Ramsay dying was his fault tore him up so much. He already thought someone else died because of him. “Mac, it wasn’t on you.”

“Yes. It was.”

LOS ANGELES
2013

“Hey kid, are you with me?” Alfred waves a hand in front of Mac’s face.

“Yeah. It’s just...it was a long day.” Greg, one of the head mechanics at Weathers’s Auto Repair, smashed his hand up in a chain binder, and Mac’s been doing his own work and Greg’s for the past three days. It pays well. But it doesn’t leave him much time to rest. “I’m good.”

“Los Diablos aren’t messing around. You need to focus or you’re gonna wind up dead.” Pena shakes his head. “And do something about that mess you call hair. They let you work on gears and motors with that hanging in your face?”

Mac chuckles. What a dad. Ever since he started letting his hair grow out, Pena’s been giving him grief about it. Mac pulls what he can back into a small ponytail at the back of his neck. One stubborn chunk refuses to stay put and falls over one eye. He grins at Pena cheekily.

“This better?”

“One of these nights I’m gonna pin you to the ground and take a pair of scissors to it myself,” Alfred grumbles, but Mac can see his grin, white teeth glimmering in the dusky light.

“You could try, old man.” Mac chuckles.

They slip as quietly as they can through the alleys. There’s been a lot of action on Los Diablos’s turf recently. The cartel’s moved into the protection racket as a side job, and one of the smaller neighborhoods is actually fighting back.

They’re being organized by Carlos Rivera, a former Army medic who opened a clinic in the neighborhood. He’s helped Mac out of plenty of jams before, patching him up when something’s too
serious to be dealt with at home. Carlos is a good guy; he genuinely cares about this neighborhood and keeping it safe. But that’s made him a target.

Carlos texted Mac this afternoon saying Los Diablos gave him an ultimatum. Leave them alone or suffer the consequences. He’s taken his family to stay with a friend, and he’s lying low at a neighbor’s house. But he’s refusing to close down the clinic.

Mac tried to convince him keeping it open was dangerous. But Carlos won’t take no for an answer.

_Those people need my help. Every day. I can’t leave them to suffer because I’m afraid for my own life. It’s not right._

Mac admires the man’s bravery. Carlos was military, he knows what it means to sacrifice your own safety to keep others alive. But Carlos can’t help anyone if he’s dead.

“If they’re going after him, the logical thing would be to target the clinic,” Mac tells Pena.

“Everyone in that neighborhood knows that’s Carlos’s passion. He’d rather die than close it down.”

They approach the clinic from the back. There’s a window partially forced open, and Pena checks it for triggers before he and Mac shove it up the rest of the way and drop inside.

Pena groans. “I’m getting too old for this.” He rubs one shoulder ruefully. “My wife keeps saying I need to find a safer line of work.”

“Is safe even in your vocabulary?” Mac chuckles.

“I know, but my little girl, she’s turning three in a couple days. And I’d like to get to see that. I’d like to watch her graduate, go to college, you know?” He sighs. “There’s a position in evidence cataloguing opening up.”

“You? Behind a desk?” Mac mock-gasps. “Who are you and what have you done with Alfred Pena?”

“I’m a father,” he replies, suddenly serious. “I’m just another man who wants to watch his family grow up.” He smiles and claps Mac’s shoulder. “And as for all this hero and save the world business, I think I’m going to be leaving it in pretty capable hands.” Mac’s glad the clinic is dark so Pena can’t see the blush heating his face.

They make their way slowly through the clinic, watching for tripwires or any other triggers. When they reach the front lobby, Pena holds up a hand.

“Under that chair. Second from the door.”

It’s an unassuming lump. Totally invisible from the front door. And wires stretch over to the knob.

“Doesn’t seem to have any kind of remote trigger,” Pena whispers. “It’s only going to react to the door. Or to being disarmed.” Los Diablos have a reputation of making their devices hard to defuse.

The bomb is a complicated mess of wires and tape. There are a lot of redundancies. “Okay, hand me the bag.” Pena pulls out a pair of pliers. “Hold these for a second, will you?” Mac reaches for them, but that’s the exact second his overworked body decides it’s a good time to yawn. He fumbles with the pliers and they fall to the floor with a clatter that, in the silent office, is deafening.

_He takes much too long to pick them up because he doesn’t want to see the disappointed frown on Pena’s face. So much for being a worthy successor._
But when he handed over the pliers, there’s genuine concern in the man’s eyes. “You really haven’t slept much, have you?” Mac shakes his head and muffles another yawn.

“I’ve got this one. You go watch our six, okay?” He rests one hand on Mac’s shoulder. “This is nothing I couldn’t do in my sleep.” Mac laughs at the horrible slight pun. “I don’t need you fumbling around and getting us both killed, klutz.” Mac grins. He’s always been on the slightly clumsy side. He guesses it comes with the territory of having legs that seem too long for your body and hands too big for the rest of you. It’s gotten a lot better since Pena taught him ways to focus and control his breathing and movements, but every once in a while if he’s tired or his concentration breaks, he reverts back to what Pena called ‘the golden retriever puppy on crack’.

He finds a spot to sit on the fire escape of the next-door building, a condemned apartment complex. This neighborhood is in rough shape, but Carlos has never stopped seeing the potential and helping make his dreams a reality. A couple weekends ago he and a group of the neighborhood kids went around and asked business owners if they could paint over the gang graffiti on their walls. From here, Mac can see the gecko and vines painted on the little grocery store and a swirl of red, gold, and teal on the front of a family restaurant. The colors start blurring and shifting. He blinks and presses his cheek a little further into the rough brick, hoping that’s going to be enough to ground him.

Mac doesn’t want to fall asleep, but he was up until two doing homework for his physics class, and then he spent twelve hours at the shop today. Someone has to look out for the Bozers. Wilt has film school and all the hours he has to put into shooting and editing eat up a lot of the time he could be at his restaurant job. And his sister’s so smart, she shouldn’t have to be putting work before her last year of high school. She wants to be a paramedic. She’d be so good at it. She’s got such a soft, caring, calming side, and Mac’s seen it more and more lately as Mama Bozer’s cirrhosis is getting worse.

She’d be the first to say Mac should be taking college classes full time, not worrying about balancing a class load and a full time job. I could have gotten a scholarship. I could have done anything I wanted. There’s enough money left over from Grandpa’s savings that he could have at least paid his way for a couple years through anything a scholarship wouldn’t cover. But he can’t leave Wilt and Deja. They’re family. And family shouldn’t just bail on one another.

He’s not sure when his eyes closed, but all he knows is that when they open again it’s because sirens are screaming and lights are flashing. What the hell?

He doesn’t know if they set off some kind of alarm, or if the cartel thugs did, or if someone happened to see them climbing through the window and called it in. But the police are here. And he can’t see Pena. Mac knows he should run, before someone decides to sweep the scene and sees him there on the fire escape. But he feels frozen. He huddles down as small as he can in a corner and watches.

A tall man with a severe face climbs out of one of the cars. He pulls out a bullhorn and shouts, “You’re surrounded. Come out with your hands up.”

Pena yells back, muffled by the closed windows. “I can’t. There’s a bomb in here.”

Mac can’t hear the exchange between the officer with the bullhorn and the man below him. He’s too panicky. There’s a loud buzzing in his ears and he feels like he’s falling.

“I’m going to ask you one more time, exit the building now!” The man shouts.

Mac can’t hear Pena’s reply. He can barely think. This can’t be happening. It can’t be. This isn’t real. But it is. He’d known this could happen to them any time, but now that it actually is he’s lost. It
doesn’t feel real.

There’s so much chaos down below. Mac can see people fanning out, looking in through the windows. There’s all kinds of chatter down there but it’s just a blurred roaring in Mac’s ears. He can’t tell what anyone is saying, he can’t even tell if he’s been seen. He doesn’t even know if he cares. Everything is blurry and shaky and he might fall, but he can’t tell.

“It’s over, Pena. Come out with your hands up! This is your last warning!” And then Mac sees the man below him training a sniper rifle through the window.

There’s no answer. Mac knows Pena must be in the middle of the process. He can’t talk or even move wrong at this point, or the whole thing will go off. He just needs a few more minutes. They should give him that. They should.

The officer outside gestures to two men fully geared up. That’s the go sign. He’s going to have them take Pena out. This is escalating too fast, this isn’t right. But everyone’s on edge since the last La Ola bombing took out three officers at a warehouse. No one’s taking chances and too many of the cops are trigger happy and out for blood. There were rumors that La Ola had a dirty cop on their payroll. And now, to these cops, it looks like that’s been Pena the whole time.

“No!” Mac’s voice has finally kicked in, but it’s too late. A shot cracks through the night, and less than a second later there’s a dull roar and an inferno that flings back anyone close to the building. Officers are thrown over the hoods of cars, Mac throws his arm up to deflect a spray of glass and grit, and the world is all heat and ringing and shock.

Run. Or you’re going to get blamed too. Mac hates everything about this. This is so wrong. Pena can’t be dead, he can’t be. It’s all my fault. I wasn’t there to help. And I couldn’t even stay awake and keep a lookout like he asked.

Mac stumbles across the roof, half-blinded by the afterimage of the explosion burned into his eyes. He doesn’t go home. He goes to the spot under an overpass that he likes, the one he’s got a spare backpack stashed in, and curls up there.

I don’t deserve to go home. Pena’s dead, and it’s my fault. I might as well have killed him.

Mac doesn’t fall asleep. He just stares out at the city lights and wonders when everything went so wrong.

Carl’s Jr. jumps when Jack sits down next to him and Riley. The kid rubs frantically at his face, but there are tears dripping down and he’s not going to be able to hide it that easy. Jack doesn’t dare touch him, not after this morning, so he settles for talking instead.

“Hey, you okay?”

The kid sniffs. “If I say I am you won’t believe me, will you?”

“Not when you’re sittin’ there leakin’ like a busted pipe,” Jack says, trying to sound lighthearted. “We’re all still alive, you did good.”

“Not good enough,” the kid mutters dully. “I didn’t save Pena.”

“The cop you used to work with.” Jack saw the report Cage had made about Carl’s Jr.’s vigilante years. Alfred Pena. LAPD bomb squad, until he died in what the reports called a bombing he orchestrated. But the kid said he was trying to disarm it. Cage doesn’t have much surrounding the man’s death. Jack guesses she didn’t want to push too far. This kid’s got so many jagged edges and shattered pieces. He’s so fragile. And everyone but Jack has recognized it and treated him more carefully. I went and in typical Dalton bull-in-a-china-shop fashion scared the hell out of him.
“He taught me all of this. And I messed up and he died.” There’s a fresh trickle of tears, and the kid’s getting all snotty-nosed and sniffly too. Damn it, why does he have to be a messy crier? He looks so much like a little kid, lost and scared. There’s no way on earth I can even pretend to hate him. Jack sighs.

“Hey, listen, I know how it feels to think you’re walkin’ around with some good men’s blood on your hands, okay?” God knows Jack’s lost enough buddies out there. And every time I asked myself two things. Why didn’t I do more to save them, and why wasn’t it me? “And I get that this is bringing up a lot of memories for you. Wanna call it quits for the day? I can run you back over to the Phoenix.”

“Charlie still needs our help.” The kid whispers. “Alfred wouldn’t have ever forgiven himself if someone died because of him. Because I was too upset to do my job.” He scrubs the back of his hand over his face and Jack feels like crying himself at how small and vulnerable the kid looks. “I still want to help.”

Riley’s computer chimes, and she jumps to her feet, breaking up the moment of emotion. “Cloning’s complete.” She grabs her computer and starts combing through the files. Jack leans back against the step, watching the kid get his crying under control as Charlie hangs up his phone and walks over.

“Field office wants anything we can send them. They’re going to send a full forensics team to comb the apartment and they’d like those cloned files as soon as possible.”

Riley glances up at them. “Sending now.”

“Any luck with those files on your end?”

“Not yet. There’s a huge backlog of video files, even one from today at the gym, but I can’t find anything about any job in the past two months. There are emails older than that, but I’ve cross referenced them with Charlie’s files and they’re for the Shanghai and Rio bombings. Which already happened.” Riley’s got that look on her face that says she’s run up against something she doesn’t understand. “I’ve got access to his bank records, and there haven’t been any deposits in the past month. The only thing recent is a withdrawal of five million.”

“He always asks for payment in advance,” Charlie says. “There should be a deposit for this job.” He’s doing that thing where he cracks his knuckles when he’s worried. That used to drive Jack crazy in the Sandbox. Charlie would do it whenever they cleared a town too easily, or if they were driving a stretch of road that was known for having IEDs planted. He’s more worried than he’ll admit.

“None of this makes any sense,” Jack mutters. Why is he taking money out? For components to build the bombs?

Riley stops typing. “I’ve got something. He owns a warehouse under a shell corporation. Not too far from here.”

“Let’s go. Chances are he’s already packing up shop,” Charlie says. “He knows we’re onto him. He’s going to move up his timetable, so we have to get ahead of him.”

Jack follows Riley’s directions to the warehouse. The place is a ramshackle dump. Looks like minimal security. “I’ve got a bad feeling about this,” Jack says as he and Riley step out of the car. And then a massive explosion flings them to the ground. This is getting old!

Jack shakes off the buzzing and ringing, and the memories that are clawing at his mind. A tipped humvee in the mountains. Fire all around him. The guy next to him with his neck snapped and face
half burnt. Blood staining his uniform. Legs pinned under a warped dashboard. Sand and sunlight and fire.

He scrambles to his feet. Riley. She was on the side of the car that took the brunt of the hit. Jack leaps over the ash-covered hood. Riley’s scrambling to her feet, and the side of her face looks like she got too much sun, but she seems mostly intact.

“What happened?” She yells.

“He probably saw us coming and torched it!” Jack shouts back. I’m not gonna be able to hear normally for days.

“Damn it.” Charlie slams a hand on the hood of his car. “We just lost our best lead.” The building is burning so hot that Jack thinks it might be best to get the cars out of the way. “What’s that smell?” he asks.


“How’d you know about TATP?”

“Pena told me about it. He said if I ever came across that smell I should get the hell out of wherever I was. Because they don’t call it the Mother of Satan for nothing.” He shrugs. “One of the cartels tried to synthesize it once. Blew their building worse than a meth lab explosion.”

“It’s incredibly risky to make. Wonder if he just made a mistake?” Charlie says, shading his eyes and looking up at the flames.

“At just the time we showed up? I doubt it. And I might be able to get us answers.” Riley’s typing rapidly. “Most of the video cameras on the adjacent buildings got torched, but one of them had instant wireless cloud backup. I’m hacking it now.”

The others gather around as she pulls up an image on her computer. It’s a set of freeze-frames, that just manage to capture a door at the back of the warehouse. And less than a minute before the explosion, a figure steps out. Riley stops flicking through them and presses play.

A stocky man, his face half-covered with a hood, steps out. He breaks into a shambling, limping run, and the hood falls back from his face. Jack feels his stomach turn over a little. Half the man’s face is a mask of shiny, old burns.

And then he turns and glances back presumably as the explosion happens, and the less damaged side of his face is visible for a fraction of a second. Jack hears an audible gasp from behind him and turns to look.

Carl’s Jr. stares at the retreating figure on the camera, a disbelieving whisper slipping out. “Pena?”

Mac feels like the whole world just fell out from under him. He shudders, collapsing against the side of the car. The hot metal under his hand shocks him back into a sort of awareness, but everything still feels fuzzy. His ears are still ringing from the explosion, maybe that’s it? He stares at the freeze-frame on Riley’s computer, willing himself to have made a mistake.

He’s just on my mind, that’s all. I can’t stop thinking about him, and now I’m seeing him everywhere. But the figure on the camera is unmistakably Pena. Mac’s seen that face too often to forget.
“Mac, he’s dead.” Riley’s trying to reason this out, but she can’t, because he’s not dead, he’s right there. And he’s tried to kill them, to kill Mac, three times.

“No. No, that’s him.” Mac takes her rig, praying one last time that he’s wrong. He’s not.

“How is that even possible?” Jack asks. “He died in an explosion over three years ago.”

“No one ever found a body. There was nothing left to find at the scene.” Mac shrugs. He feels so detached that telling them what happened doesn’t even hurt. “I got a call from a doctor I knew that was dealing with a protection racket, and he’d been threatened. Pena and I went to his clinic and found a bomb someone left for him. I...I wasn’t at my best, so he told me to go watch our backs. And I fell asleep.” He shudders. “Someone had sent an anonymous tip to the LAPD that there was a break-in at the clinic. When they showed up, Pena was already too far into disarming the bomb to leave. If he had, it would have gone off.”

“But they forced him to?” Charlie asked.

“He tried to tell them to get back, that there was a bomb.” Mac sighs. “The officer in charge of the team thought Pena was setting up the bomb and had him shot. He hadn’t finished disarming it and the whole place blew. Two of the officers died later from injuries.”

“Oh man.” Mac can see the genuine sympathy in Jack’s eyes.

“Everyone thinks Pena was a cop gone bad. There had been rumors floating around that there was someone dirty on the bomb squad, someone taking money from the cartels, and Pena became the scapegoat. No one but me knew what really happened that night, and obviously I couldn’t come forward. That officer covered up any evidence that Pena had actually been trying to disarm the bomb, and got himself painted as the hero.”

“What was his name?” Riley asks.

“Who?”

“The man who killed Pena.”

“Carlton Ames.” Mac’s never going to be able to forget seeing that man’s face in news interviews. Watching him drag Pena’s name through the mud and villify the one man who was anything close to a father Mac had had in years.

“The newspaper,” Riley gasps. Mac can’t tell what she’s thinking, but she’s started typing frantically. “I think I just figured it out. This wasn’t a job. This was personal.”

“What do you mean?” Charlie asks.

Riley holds up her computer, open to an LA news site. “Ames is going to be honored for his service to the department. Today, at City Hall, at 5 p.m. Pena must have seen it and decided to get revenge.”

“It’s four now.” Jack jumps into the car. “Let’s go!”

Mac sits in the back of the car. Jack’s still driving like a maniac, but he doesn’t even feel the sharp turns. Was I wrong about Pena all along? Was he really getting paid off? But Mac just can’t reconcile that with the man he knew. What happened? Why is he doing this? He feels sick, but not from Jack’s driving. That man was my world. I trusted him. He was the closest thing I had to a father, after everything. And he turned out to be a criminal.
This can’t be happening. He’s going to wake up and this is just going to be some terrible dream. But no, it can’t be. His fingers are scorched from the hot car metal. He’s aching and bruised from taking that fall when the first bomb went off.

*This is actually happening.* He can’t think or feel or do anything. *What do I do now?* Then Jack slams the car into park and they scramble out into a mob of civilians surrounding the steps.

“We’re never gonna find him in this crowd,” Jack mutters.

“He’s going to be counting on that,” Mac says dully. “He liked...likes using distractions. The bomb isn’t on any one of these people either. It’s going to be hidden in plain sight.”

“Podium?” Riley asks.

Charlie shakes his head. “No. LAPD does sweeps of all public events like this, especially with the recent bomb activity. They would have had dogs all over this. The bomb had to be brought in later.”

Mac looks back at the car. *Pena liked using vehicles as cover.* Whether it was setting them on fire and rolling them toward guys shooting at them, or just hiding behind them, the man took advantage of them whenever he could. And Mac can’t stop thinking about all those “trojan horse” box bombs they disarmed together.

“He brought it in a vehicle. Riley can you get a satellite view?” She pulls up an image. Mac scans it, looking for anything out of the ordinary. And then he sees it.

“That’s the second Channel 8 news van parked here. And it’s on the wrong side of the building.”

“That’s our guy!” Jack says. He pulls his gun. Mac’s voice catches in his throat. He wants to say, *please don’t shoot him, he’s my friend,* but the fact remains, that man who just tried to kill them, that’s not Mac’s friend anymore. *What happened?*

Mac follows Jack and Charlie to the van. Charlie moves toward the front and Jack flings open the back doors. There’s a scuffling sound and Mac catches one brief glimpse of Pena’s face as the man looks back at them from the front seat. *Please, whatever might be wrong, you have to remember me. Please remember. Please don’t do this.* And then Jack leaps up into the back, there’s an audible click, and Mac’s world narrows to Jack’s horrified face and the pressure plate under his foot.

“Jack!” Riley screams. Mac vaguely realizes Charlie’s running up to them.

“He had a car,” Charlie gasps. “I winged him, but he’s long gone.” *It doesn’t matter, not right now. Jack’s going to die if we don’t do something.*

Mac feels sick and shaky and lost and terrified. *I can’t lose someone else today.* He feels like Pena died all over again, because this Ghost isn’t the kind, caring man Mac remembers. *Everyone I care about, everyone who cares about me, they get hurt, or they disappear. I’m not going to lose Jack too.*

“I’m gonna get you out, Jack.” Mac whispers.

Jack’s standing perfectly still, but there’s a slight tremble in his legs. “Go on, get outta here.”

“No way. You go kaboom, I go kaboom, okay?” Mac glances up at him.

“We have seven minutes left until the ceremony starts,” Charlie whispers. He’s looking all over the outside of the van, and when he opens the lockers next to the wheels he grimaces. “This is bigger
than we thought. Riley, you have to go get as many people out of the area as you can.”

“I can’t leave Jack!” Riley shouts.

“You have to, baby girl,” Jack whispers. “Those people don’t deserve to die.”

“Neither do you!”

“I’ve got two of the smartest bomb nerds in the world workin’ on this. I’ll be fine.” Jack gives her a shaky grin, and she runs off, shoulders quivering.

Mac takes a deep breath. Calm down. What can kill you first? He hates that it’s Pena’s voice talking him through this. You did this! This is your fault! But then he hears Jack. “You got this, kid. I know you do.”

“We have to find the trigger,” Charlie says. “There’s got to be wires under the pressure plate.” He pulls out a small multitool from his pocket and tugs at a red wire barely visible.

“Wait!” Mac grabs Charlie’s hand. “It’s another trap!”

“What are you talking about?”

“Pena...he liked to say thinking something was simple was the surest way to die. And every time we worked together, he had a backup plan. And the camera, where’s the camera?” Charlie looks at him, wide-eyed as he realizes his mistake. He’s as panicked as I feel. And if you panic you make mistakes, and you die. Mac gives the ghost of Pena in his head a grim smile. You made one mistake. You taught me how to beat you.

Jack’s legs are turning into jello. This isn’t the first time he’s been on a pressure plate. But it never gets easier.

This feels like the Sandbox all over again, watching Charlie fish out the wire. Okay. Just clip the right one, and we’re home free. It’s a gamble every time, but Jack always feels like it’s one worth taking. Everyone takes more risks in life than they think. Mine are just more obvious. And Riley’s getting people to safety. Hopefully getting herself out too. She’s as much a self-sacrificing idiot as I am. But hopefully she’ll be busy long enough...

And then Carl’s Jr.’s jumping in the way, pulling Charlie back. “Wait!” Jack cringes. He’s right. That would have been too easy. There’s a failsafe somewhere. He feels sick. If the kid hadn’t stepped in, we’d all be confetti.

“Jack, see if you can see a camera!” The kid’s glancing up at him, looking both absolutely terrified and insanely determined. Jack glances around, then sees a small lens tucked into the wall, behind some sort of air vent.

“Found it.”

Mac hands in his Swiss Army knife. Jack takes it almost reverently; it’s like an extension of the kid’s hand. Like Jack’s gun or Riley’s computer. Letting someone else touch it, especially someone the kid clearly has trust issues with, is a huge act of faith. He’s letting me in. Telling me I’m important to him. Jack wants to hug the kid then and there. If they wouldn’t all die if he moved, he would. Instead, he opens the screwdriver attachment and carefully removes the air vent. A screw pings to the floor and all of them flinch. He can’t tell exactly what’s packed around that camera lens, but it can’t be anything good.
“Okay, what am I looking at?” Jack asks.

“A secondary bomb. Rigged to the first one. Disarm the pressure plate, the vent bomb goes off. That’s a bolt fuse,” Charlie says. “It has to be pulled straight out, or that secondary device goes off.”

“So, like operation?” Jack grins shakily. Never was much good at that game.

“Yeah, but you’re not gonna pull it out yourself. Your hands are shaking too much,” Mac says.

“There’s a rig for removing them but it would take too long to get one,” Charlie says. He’s cracking his knuckles again.

Mac looks pretty much unfazed by that. “We’re gonna rig something to pull it out.” He starts scrounging through a nearby dumpster, pulling out a frayed extension cord, some tape, and the string from the opening of an onion bag. He flips over a battered shopping cart and comes running back, carrying the random trash.

“Jack, wrap the tape around my knife and use that to secure the extension cord to it, but leave six inches sticking out. Then wrap that, counterclockwise, around the fuse, and put the wrench on the bolt. Do NOT step off that pressure plate.” Jack nods. He follows Mac’s instructions to the letter.

“Now run the end of the cord through the handle of that locker.” He does. “I’m gonna need some distance to make this work.” Mac steps back, and Jack can see all the fear and heartache in his eyes. Kid’s been through hell today.

Listen, whatever happens, it’s not your fault, okay?” Jack asks. I'm not letting him walk around with someone else's death on his conscience. That ends today. “None of it was your fault. Not Pena, not Ramsay. And I won’t be either.” For all the times I’ve joked that he’s gonna be the death of me, he’s really been the one keeping me alive. “It’s not your fault.” He wants to be sure that’s burned into the kid’s brain. There are no guarantees it will be, but Jack’s gonna do the best he can.

Maybe he had a lousy deadbeat of a father and his mentor turned out to be a psycho criminal, but he’s always gonna have me. Jack closes his eyes as the kid runs the cable over the cart tire like a pulley. Please don’t let me die. He needs me.

There’s a rattle and the bolt falls to the van floor. Jack sags in relief, and then hears Mac yelling. “No! It’s not safe! Don’t move yet!” The kid is running, flat out racing, to get to him. He grabs up his knife and reaches for the pressure plate wire, cutting it. “Okay, now you can move.” Mac sinks into a boneless heap on the van step. Charlie sags against the open door, and Jack drops down, sitting on the defused plate.

“Thanks, Mac.” The kid stares at him. “Yeah, I know your name. Don’t give me that look.” This is at least the fifth time the kid’s saved his life. I think he deserves to not have to listen to me joke about his name anymore. “But don’t make me regret it. Or I’m gonna start calling you McMuffin.” Mac chuckles weakly, leaning on the side of the van. Now that it’s all over I just can’t be serious anymore.

“Could you maybe think of something not food-related?”
“Hey, you’re talking to the Wookie here. Always thinkin’ with my stomach,” Jack says, and growllaughs. “And speaking of my Wookiness, I’m pretty sure I owe you a Wookie life debt like three times over at this point.”

The kid sighs, and it sounds wet and teary. “Hey, you’re not gonna start cryin’ again, are ya?” Jack asks. He slides down to sit on the step next to Mac.

“No. Like you said, we all lived.” Mac’s shoulders shudder softly. “I just...It’s been a long day, you know?” Jack nods, expecting the kid to clam up as per usual, but he keeps talking. “I...I didn’t think...I thought Pena was...well, he was everything my dad wasn’t.” He’s barely talking above a whisper now. “And...and I kept thinking of him...and I forgot about you. And then you almost died because of him.”

“No, it’s okay.” I mean, I’ll probably have nightmares for a month, but it’s fine, right?

“No, it’s not. But it will be.” The kid looks up at him. “You’re still alive. So it will be.”

Jack normally smacks people on the back after a job well done. It’s just something he learned from Gramps, Pops, and every other good ol’ boy who came out to the ranch. When he rode out his first bucking colt, lassoed his first calf, made county whip cracking champion; it was just the way you showed someone you were proud.

With Riley it’s devolved into a playful cuff on the back after a job well done. It’s just something he learned from Gramps, Pops, and every other good ol’ boy who came out to the ranch. When he rode out his first bucking colt, lassoed his first calf, made county whip cracking champion; it was just the way you showed someone you were proud.

But his hand stops inches shy of Mac’s back. If I hit him, he’s gonna panic. Maybe he won’t curl up in a shivering ball like he did in the training room, but he’s going to remember. Even if he works hard not to show it.

Instead, Jack pulls his hand back and makes a fist, holding it out toward Mac’s own shaking hand. The kid gives him a confused look, and Jack just raises an eyebrow. And then slowly, Mac’s fingers curl into a fist, and he holds up his hand. Jack’s fingers brush against his, and in that moment, they start to laugh. The hysterical, uncontrollable laughter of knowing you cheated death one more time.

“I’m sorry. For this morning.” It feels like a lifetime ago.

“You didn’t know.” Mac shudders. “Like you said, it’s gonna be okay.”

Yes, yes it is. Jack tips his head back and laughs, just as Riley comes dashing around the corner, gasping and possibly crying, but smiling. Everything’s gonna be just fine.

It’s been two hours and Mac can’t stop shaking. He still can’t believe he did it. Whatever else Pena might have done, he taught me well.

“Sure you can’t stick around?” Jack asks, as Charlie climbs into his car.

“Nope. Ghost got away again. So my training in Sacramento is as urgent as ever.” Charlie sighs. “And thanks to you, Mac, I’m gonna be able to tell them a lot more about him. Sure you don’t want to come with me?”

“Yeah.” Mac doesn’t think he could stand there in front of dozens of officers and talk about Pena without breaking down. This morning, he was a ghost to me in one way. Now he’s another one entirely. And neither is what Mac would have wanted. Or what the Pena he remembers deserved.
Charlie glances from Mac to Jack and Riley. “Hopefully the LAPD will be a little more willing to cooperate with my investigation after we saved City Hall and a couple dozen of their officers. After what I saw out there today, there’s no doubt in my mind that you didn’t kill Ramsay. All I have to do is find a way to prove it.” Charlie smiles. “And I’m not quitting until I do.” He drives away and Mac is left standing with Jack and Riley.

Riley sighs. “I don’t know about you, but I want to go home and get this smoke smell out of my hair.”

“Jack doesn’t have enough hair to worry about that,” Mac says, glancing at Jack as he says it. “We’re okay. Jack’s still alive. He doesn’t even want to think about any alternatives. Jack can’t die. I can’t lose him. He lost his father, he lost Alfred twice over. Jack’s not going anywhere if I have anything to say about it.”

“Hey, do you want to walk back to your place?” Jack chuckles. And that reminds Mac of something he needs to do.

“I can’t go home yet,” Mac whispers. “There’s someone I have to see.”

They drop Riley off at a bus stop, at her insistence, and Jack drives Mac into a small, run-down residential neighborhood.

“What’s this all about?”

“Pena’s wife. She’s going to hear about all of this. And it’s going to hurt.” Mac’s watching a little girl playing out in the front yard with a broken doll. “She had to move in with her father when Pena died. I always wanted to go see her, tell her I was sorry. But I didn’t think she’d want to talk to the person who was the reason he died.” He holds up a hand to stop Jack. “I know what you’re going to say. But I’m the one who called him and asked for help that night. I’m the one who fell asleep. And I know I can’t go back and change it. So I guess maybe closure is a little more important than avoiding being hurt.” But he can’t make himself get out of the car. “How do I tell her that this whole time, the man she thought died a failure survived, but became everything people claimed he was?”

“Because that man out there isn’t her husband.” Jack sighs. “I’ve seen guys like this. Watched one of my buddies’ EOD techs get caught up in a bomb he couldn’t defuse fast enough. Piece of shrapnel went through his helmet. And when he woke up in the hospital two months later, this kid who I never heard cuss out anything, not even when he dropped a humvee toolbox on his foot, swore like a drunk Texan every three words and wouldn’t stop making crude comments about the nurses. Somethin’ gets broken in their head and they might be livin’, but they never came home.”

Mac sighs. He pushes open the door and walks up to the house, knocking gently. “Maria Pena?”

A worn-looking woman opens the door. “If you’re another Jehovah’s Witness, you can leave right now.”

“No, my name’s Angus MacGyver. I...I knew your husband,” Mac whispers. “And any minute, someone’s going to call and tell you everything you thought was a lie.” She’s starting to get angry, but he pushes on. “He...he was a vigilante. So was I. He saved my life more times than I can count. He was a good man. And...he didn’t die when that bomb went off. But part of him did. Whatever you hear about him, whatever anyone says, I want you to know he really was a good man. And he loved you and Annabelle.”

The woman breaks down sobbing. “They called. Already,” she says. “I sent Annabelle outside so she wouldn’t have to hear. She deserves to remember her father as a good man.”
“Yes she does.” Mac whispers. “Could I talk to her?”

Maria only nods. Mac walks over to the table where Annabelle is arranging a set of mismatched small dishes. She looks so much like her father. The same little frown when she’s concentrating, the same careful movements. Mac swallows and sits down across from her.

“Hi, Annabelle.”

She looks up. “I don’t know you.”

“No, I know. But I knew your dad.” She clutches her doll to her chest. “Hey, is there something wrong with her?”

“Her wings don’t work.” Annabelle suddenly loses her shyness. “She’s broken.”

“Maybe not.” Mac gently reaches for the doll. “May I?” When she hands it over, he can see the rubber band that held the wings and made them flap has snapped. “Could I borrow your hair tie?” She pulls it out and hands it to him, staring wide-eyed. A few twists later, the wings flap perfectly.

Annabelle clutches the doll to her chest. “Did you really know my dad? Wasn’t he a police officer? When I told Mama I wanted to be one for Halloween she cried. But she let me get a shirt that looked like his, do you like it?” She tugs on the stiff blue button-down that already has grass stains on it. She probably hasn’t taken it off since she got it.

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Annabelle clutches the doll to her chest. “Did you really know my dad? Wasn’t he a police officer? When I told Mama I wanted to be one for Halloween she cried. But she let me get a shirt that looked like his, do you like it?” She tugs on the stiff blue button-down that already has grass stains on it. She probably hasn’t taken it off since she got it. Mac knows all too well what it feels like to want to hold onto any bit of a parent you can. I haven’t been able to part with Dad’s leather jacket all these years later.

“Yes I did know him. And he was one of the best men I ever met; and you look so much like him, Annabelle.” Mac leans back in the very-much-too-small chair. “You want me to tell you a funny story about him?” She nods. “Okay, well, he’d just met me, and he liked to tease. So one day, he decided to start telling me I had to cut my hair…”

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ARlington, Texas

Jack didn’t miss this concert

Jack’s ears are ringing for the third time in days. But this isn’t because of a near death experience. Honestly, he’s never felt so alive. The pounding drums and screaming guitars are vibrating through him and he can feel every note.

“This is awesome!” He shouts. Beside him, Cage is yelling the lyrics, off key, in her Aussie accent, so he’s got to talk over both her and the band onstage. Guess love of Metallica is like a universal thing.

“Hey, I had to keep you alive so you could cross this off your bucket list!” Mac yells back over the music.

“Okay, how ‘bout we make a deal then?” Jack yells back. “You don’t let me die till I’ve crossed everything on that list off!”

“Even Putin in space?”

“Hell yeah!” Jack shouts back. “Cause knowing you you’ll find a way to make it happen!”

“Either that or you’re just going to end up being immortal!” Riley laughs.
Jack turns his attention back to the stage, watching the lights and the smoke and the pure aliveness of all of this.

_There’s nowhere I’d rather be right now._ Maybe that bucket list could use just a little tweaking here and there. Because spending time with this little family he’s accidentally adopted along the way is the best reason he can think of for wanting to live through one more day, one more mission.

_Not my time to ride the lightning yet._

Chapter End Notes

107 is the next chapter, and fair warning now, it is VERY dark. That's the one that's earned this story its tags and warnings.
I'm pretty sure most of you reading already know what's coming in this chapter, but I'm going to reiterate it. This one is very dark. This chapter is what the rape/non-con warning tag for this fic is for and there are also a couple mentions of suicide. There are two scenes that I will mark at the beginning and end with ###, they're the more involved parts so if you want to skip them while reading there will be a clear note of it. This chapter was very hard to write, so I don't expect it will be easy to read either. (You're also very very very welcome to come yell at me for this one on Tumblr @thethistlegirl...)

107-Can Opener

BOSNIAN STORAGE YARD

EVEN INTERNATIONAL TERRORISTS HAVE FRIENDS

Mac’s trying to stay low, avoid the people shooting at them and get as far away from this disaster as possible. We followed our target straight into a trap. Unfortunately, crouching while running makes his already somewhat sketchy coordination worse.

Before he really realizes what happened, he’s rolling on the ground, legs in the air, flailing like a turtle that’s been flipped upside down. He can feel grit under his cheek and palms, and he can taste dust, and all of a sudden it’s his first week in CCI and someone shoved him in the yard and he tripped and before he knew it he was on the ground.

I have to get up. Now. If I’m on the ground I’m easy prey.

He remembers yelling and shoes in his face, his ribs, his back. Being forced down until he was inhaling bone-dry dust and could taste it on his tongue when he opened his mouth to scream.

He scrambles to his feet, shaking and gasping, and then someone shoves him back down, pinning him to the dirt. No, no, no. I have to get away. I can’t let them hold me down. No, no, no. He punches and kicks and yells until someone slaps a hand over his mouth, and then he bites and someone shouts and pulls their hand away.


Riley is holding her ribs, and Jack has what’s going to be a pretty impressive black eye. Mac huddles against the side of one of the crates, still shaking. They weren’t going to hurt me. They knew if I stood up I’d get shot. But he can’t forget the feeling of hands on his arms, hands on his body...he shudders.

“Mac, you okay?” Riley’s kneeling in front of him, when did she get there? He doesn’t remember seeing her move.

“I...I’m fine.” He can’t afford not to be. More bullets ping off the crates, and he winces.
“You’ve got some idea for getting us outta here, right?” Jack asks. “Cause I just used up my last clip.”

Mac glances at a forklift sitting behind them. *Fuel tank, moveable...* He just needs a spark. “Jack I need the sat phone!”

“Oh not again!” Jack groans, but he tosses the phone to Mac. “This better be good.”

“Oh, it will be.” Mac’s got something else to think about now. He’s fine. He has to be fine. He pulls the battery out of the phone and some foil candy wrappers, courtesy of Riley and their five hour stakeout, make a decent small flame. He tears a strip of cloth off his shirt, lights the end of the rag, and quickly hotwires the engine, opening the fuel tank and jamming the end of the smoldering cloth inside. The machine lumbers off, controls tied down with more scraps of his shirt, and he and Jack and Riley take cover as a massive explosion rains chunks of metal and debris all around them.

When they stand up, two of the terrorists are either unconscious or dead, and the rest are fazed enough that Jack’s able to steal one of the incapacitated men’s guns and force the others to lay thiers down. It doesn’t take long for the rest of the Phoenix tac team to arrive to finish cleaning up the operation.

Mac’s dreading the conversation that’s coming. Not the one about the phone, which is becoming a fairly standard addition to post-mission debriefs; he thinks Thornton might be keeping a list of “most interesting ways MacGyver has destroyed Phoenix property”. That’s nothing compared to having to explain what happened when he fell.

*I thought it was getting better.* He was hoping that mistake in the training room with Jack would be the last of it. *I have a team who has my back. Nothing’s going to happen to me now.* Admittedly, he’s functioning on three hours of sleep in the past thirty-six hours, so he’s struggling to even think straight, but still, that was bad.

And his team couldn’t help but notice. “What was that back there?” Jack asks. “You almost dislocated my shoulder!” Mac can tell he’s trying to scold, like it’s any other thing Mac’s messed up on a mission, but he’s doing a terrible job of hiding the concern and...is that pity?...in his eyes.

“I-I’m not the most...um...coordinated person to begin with.” He thinks maybe that should already be painfully obvious, after his numerous collisions with door jambs and corners, the amount of times he’s tripped over his own feet, and the lab equipment he’s managed to break, and the one chair he’s fallen off. “And...and that wasn’t great in prison.” *Congratulations to the winner of the Understatement of the Year award.*

Jack and Riley only nod. He can see them clenching their fists, the muscles in the sides of their jaws tightening, the almost perfectly in-sync hard swallows as they brace for what’s coming next. *They’ve been working together so long it’s like they’re actually related.*

“I...if you fall down, it’s over. You can’t be on the ground.” He shivers. “They’re like a pack of dogs. Once you’re down, you’re dead. Or worse.”

*I had a dog when I was a kid. Some mutt I found in the woods. I named him Archimedes and I trained him and everything. I loved that dog. And the one thing Grandpa Harry always said when I was first starting to train him? Never let a dog get on top of you. Don’t ever let them think they’re the alpha. Same goes in prison. Except in there, there’s about a hundred guys ganging up on you, and they’re not nearly as easygoing as ol’ Archie. I should know.*

Jack sighs. “I’m sorry we scared you.”
“Not your fault.” Mac can’t expect them to know everything that’s going to set him off. He can’t expect them to somehow prevent him from falling, to know that the smell of chewing tobacco will make him remember the guy with the missing teeth and cruel laugh, to avoid ever saying “sweet thing” the way Kirby used to (he barely avoided cringing when Riley said it while looking at pictures of Jill’s kitten). They won’t know if he doesn’t tell them. And telling them means he has to relive it all.

It’s gonna get better. It will. I’m safe, I’m not there. It’s over.

MAC AND BOZER’S HOUSE

RIGHT NOW IT LOOKS A LOT MORE LIKE SOMEONE’S COLLEGE DORM

Bozer opens the fridge, sniffs the milk, and sighs. Mac was supposed to be getting groceries while Bozer was gone at that film convention all weekend. And the same carton of badly curdled milk, dated a week ago, is sitting inside. He thinks there might be mold now.

If he tells me he got distracted with one of his science experiments, I’ll tell him he left one growing in the fridge. The thought of the joke should make Bozer smile, but the humor only gets the barest twitch of his lips. Mac’s always forgetful, but there’s something else going on too.

Bozer can’t remember a time when his so-smart-he’s-dumb roommate didn’t practically need sticky notes glued to his head to remember everyday tasks like taking out the trash or buying fresh groceries. There’s a yellow post-it on the bathroom mirror that says “brush your teeth” like they live with a ten-year-old. Another one on the front door says “lock up when you leave.” and a green one underneath that, in Mac’s handwriting instead of Bozer’s, says “don’t forget your key”. Bozer’s always laughed at Mac’s ridiculous ability to get lost in his own head. He’s just so full of book smarts that the common sense stuff gets pushed out. But Bozer’s always figured that’s what he’s around for.

If it was only the forgetful spells, Bozer wouldn’t do more than make Mac dispose of the gross milk mess and then give him a halfhearted lecture on why they actually need edible food in this house. But it’s so much more than just that.

Something’s wrong with Mac. Not only did he have the worst nightmare he’s had in weeks last night, but he’s still doing that thing where he drops off the map for hours or days with no good explanation. He didn’t answer Bozer’s text about the amazing reaction to “Monster from the Moon”’s screening for two days. That’s utterly unlike his supportive, if sometimes critical of great art, roommate. Boze doesn’t like the picture this is painting.

He’s either somehow gone back to vigilante work, or there is something extremely sketchy about that think tank. Mac always claims his random absences are work related; sensitive projects that needed him to keep a constant eye on them.

There’s a very large part of Bozer that desperately wants to believe it’s the truth. That wants to believe Mac’s not in danger. But when his best friend comes home with pain he can hide from everyone else, but not the friend who’s known him the better part of his life, and when there’s a scrap of paper with what Boze thinks might be Bengali on it shoved in the pocket of a pair of pants Boze checked before throwing into the washing machine (it’s habit after the time Mac absentmindedly shoved one of his science projects in there once and the washing machine literally exploded), Bozer just can’t be sure.

There’s no way he’s some kind of globetrotting spy or something. That only happens in movies. There has to be a normal, logical, real world explanation. But if there is one, Bozer can’t think of it.
Mac wanders into the kitchen, hair more of a mess than usual. He’s yawning and blinking, which isn’t normal on good days but has sadly become the regular after bad nights. Mac’s normal is being that annoying person who jumps out of bed instantly awake and ready to go run ten miles or whatever.

Boze decides not to comment on the dried streaks of tears on Mac’s face or the fact that he sat outside the door for half an hour last night and in between listening to Mac cry, tried to decide if it was a good idea to go in or not. By the time he told himself he’d give Mac one more minute and then he was going in there, the crying had stopped and Mac seemed like he might be going to sleep. Bozer hadn’t wanted to disturb that, so he’d left.

He knows better than to try and ask Mac point-blank for the truth. His friend will just shut down and push Bozer even further away. But maybe there’s something in his room…

Mac eats as quickly as he can and bolts for the door. “I’ll see you tonight,” he says, and Bozer feels sick to his stomach at how normal this is. How much like a regular day it seems. *He has no idea that the second he leaves I’m going to start arguing with myself.*

Bozer puts it off as long as he can. He washes all the dishes, cleans out the refrigerator, even vacuums the floor (and has a mild attack of disgust when he finds the entire colony of ants gorging themselves on spilled popcorn under his chair). Anything to keep himself busy.

He cleans out the firepit, gets out his computer, and sits on the deck trying to focus on editing the color balancing for his next short film (the film festival he wants to show it at is in two weeks and he hasn’t done nearly enough work…) but his mind can’t focus on the colors and shapes on the screen. He finishes two frames in an hour. Once again, he conscripted his roommate for this film, and he can’t help but be distracted by the few close-ups where Bozer can see, even if no one else would notice, where he’s used his insane makeup skills to hide a bruise that stretched from Mac’s cheekbone to his jawline.

*If he’s hiding something, maybe I don’t want to know. Maybe I should be happy in my ignorance.*

*If he’s in danger, I have to help him.*

*Maybe he doesn’t want my help.*

*Maybe he needs it.*

*What could he even be involved in? He’s gone at all hours, sometimes days at a time, he comes home hurt… Those circumstances are painting an ugly picture in Bozer’s head. Who’s hurting him like that? And why? He can’t imagine that Mac’s going anywhere unusual, his PO would probably prevent that, but what if whatever this is looks legitimate? What’s happening to him?*

Bozer’s never felt guiltier in his life. Not even the time Mr. Mercer caught him palming candy in the corner drugstore. Not even the time he and Mac accidentally set fire to the assistant principal’s car. But when he finally stands in the hall with his hand on the doorknob of Mac’s room, he hates himself.

*I don’t trust him. I should, but I don’t.* He knows all the places Mac’s likely to hide things he doesn’t want anyone else to find. *I taught him most of them.* There’s nothing inside the pillows, nothing jammed between the headboard and the bed, nothing tucked in behind the backs of the drawers. Bozer puts the room back to rights and sits down on the bed, sighing.

*Maybe I was wrong. Maybe I’m letting that overactive imagination get away with me.* This is too
much like some cheesy movie plot. Nothing is wrong. Sometimes real life is just strange. Mac is always super focused when he works on stuff. He probably isn’t required to stay at the Phoenix, he just forgets he’s got a home when he’s wrapped up in something. And he’s clumsy. Maybe he just trips on things a lot.

Bozer’s phone rings. The number’s not familiar. But the voice is.

“Is this Wilt Bozer?” Penny Parker, Mac’s PO, has an unmistakable voice. Bozer sort of wanted to cast her as the voice of a teenage telekinetic in his new animation project.

“Yes.”

“You’re listed as Angus MacGyver’s housemate and emergency contact. I thought you should know he’s violated the terms of his parole. He’s going to be sent back to prison.”

Bozer drops the phone. He’s too shocked to hang up. He’s too shocked to cry. He just sits there on the floor of Mac’s room, hugging his knees to his chest. I was too late. I should have done something sooner. I should have said something sooner. And now it’s too late.

PHOENIX FOUNDATION

FOUR HOURS EARLIER

Mac doesn’t like the look on Thornton’s face when he walks into the War Room. It’s not often he sees her seem like she’s lost control of a situation. But right now, she looks like the world has spun out of her hands, and she’s standing and watching it fall apart around her.

Jack and Riley look as confused as Mac feels.

“Hey Patty, which one of your cats died?” Jack asks. The joke, and a horrible one at that, falls flat.

Thornton glances at each of them, but she stops when she gets to Mac, and her eyes look oddly shimmery. Mac’s only seen this when they watched Bannister get shot in front of them. “Remember that bomb Mac and Charlie dealt with, the one the cartel modified? We weren’t able to retrieve much of the Ghost’s device, but the FBI took the petin-based one back to their field office. And they’ve matched the petin to over a dozen other bombings that have taken out either rival cartel bases or, more recently, a lot of police officers’ homes. And it all comes back to this man.” Thornton pulls up a photo on the screen. “Joaquin “El Noche” Sancola, the head of the Merida cartel. Ever since he was arrested, his lieutenants have been targeting more and more law enforcement officials. Two DEA officers, one FBI agent, and five police officers, and their families.” Thornton flicks rapidly away from the gruesome images. “Each time, a message is left graffitied on a nearby wall.” She flips to a photo of black paint, streaked and dripping but clearly reading ‘Release El Noche’.

“So what’s this got to do with us?” Jack asks.

“After Agent Robinson turned in his report, the FBI realized we have an asset with a strong knowledge of the Merida cartel and their methods.” She glances at Mac. “They’re not-so-politely requesting that we share resources for an attempt to take El Noche down.” They’re calling me an asset. Like I’m another piece of Phoenix property to be loaned out on a whim.

“And you said no, right?” Jack asks.

“It’s a bit more complicated than that, Jack. The Phoenix Foundation is allowed to exist and work independently of normal agency channels, but we still answer to federal authorities. After everything
that’s happened with Carpenter and the transition from DXS, we’re on shaky ground with the Washington suits. And with the Ghost incident, they’re questioning our actions operating on American soil. We’re one wrong move away from everyone in this building being tried for violation of the Espionage Act.”

“So you’re selling Mac out to keep the Phoenix afloat?” Jack asks. “I’d rather see it all go under today than do that to one of our own.” Mac’s stomach is churning, hands shaking too badly to even start twisting a paperclip. But hearing Jack say that...he feels a little safer.

“You know me better than that.” Thornton sounds hurt. “I wanted to tell them in no uncertain terms that our agents, not assets, agents, are ours to place in whatever operations we choose.” She sighs, and Mac hears a problem coming. “But the fact remains, I don’t have the final control of this decision. Oversight does, and his opinion is that cooperating with the FBI in this case is the best option. When I pushed back, he said I could greenlight the mission or step down from the job. He thinks a show of good faith is the only thing standing between the Phoenix and a mandated order to shut down operations.”

Jack looks like he’s ready to punch something. Or someone. “Mac’s not some piece of agency tech the FBI can sign out of the lab for the weekend. He’s an agent. He’s part of my team. Where he goes, we go.” If I have them watching my back, I’ll do anything. Mac can’t say he’s comfortable being treated like a loaner vehicle at Weathers’s shop. But he’s used to people treating him like a number. Like property. I’ll do the job and get the government off our backs, and things can go back to the way they were.

“Believe me, I told Oversight that. But his job is to remain detached. To see what’s best for every agent, for everyone the Phoenix protects.”

“What’s the mission?” Riley asks. Mac can tell she’s trying to break the tension. But the look on Thornton’s face only gets more distraught.

“No one’s been able to find the location of El Noche’s main compound in Mexico. If we can find it, we can take down all of his lieutenants and break up his manufacturing at its source, rather than just stopping drugs coming into the country. But the only person we have access to who has its location is El Noche himself.”

“Why don’t they just send in an interrogator? Sam could get that information out of him in an hour, tops,” Jack says. He’s pacing the room like a caged wolf, and when he stumbles against one of the chairs he kicks its leg angrily.

“Director Franklin, and I’m using his words, ‘doesn’t trust Jedi mind tricks’.” Thornton sighs. “He prefers old fashioned methods. Like tracking someone to their hideout. He thinks it’s more trustworthy.”

“But Sancola’s in a Texas supermax,” Riley says. “You can’t follow someone if they’re in prison.”

“Which is why Director Franklin wants MacGyver to break him out.” It takes a moment for the implications to set in. Break him out...and go in undercover to do it.

“Wait, hold on a minute. Bishop’s one of the most secure facilities in the country. No one’s ever broken out of it. Ever,” Jack says. “Pops used to say it was the only reason he felt safe with our ranch in walking distance of that place.”

“I know. It’s an impossible task. But we do happen to specialize in the impossible.” Thornton sighs. “Mac, do you think you can do this?”
I’m not going to let more innocent people, more children, die, just because I’m too afraid to face my own demons. But that’s not the only reason he knows he’s going to say yes. If he’s being honest, it’s not even the biggest reason.

Jack’s perfectly willing to watch the Phoenix disintegrate rather than see Mac forced into this. But Jack’s not the one whose freedom hinges on the Phoenix existing, on it continuing to provide him a valid workplace. If we don’t do this, if someone gets angry about it and decides to dissolve the Phoenix, I’m going back to prison forever. This isn’t permanent. I can go now, and come back, or I can wait and risk going back with no one to pull me out.

“I’m not comfortable with this,” Riley says hesitantly.

“None of us are. But Oversight has put us all in an impossible position,” Thornton says.

“This is one step shy of blackmail,” Jack growls. “The kid can’t say no. This shouldn’t be legal.”

“Do you want to tell that to Oversight’s face? Because if you do, you’ll be the one doing twenty to life, and Mac’s going to go back inside without anyone watching his back. I’m trying to salvage a bad situation, Jack, I suggest you trust me.” Thornton takes a deep breath.

“If I can get access to the prison security systems, I should be able to get Mac and Sancola out pretty easily,” Riley says. “The hard part’s going to be getting El Noche to trust you, Mac.”

“So let me get this straight. All Mac has to do is go back to prison, convince a drug lord whose cartel he used to help bring down that he can be trusted, and then break out of a prison no one’s ever escaped before?” Jack’s voice is skating on the edge of a yell.

This is falling apart. Mac appreciates how much his little family will defend him, but their hands are tied. And if they fight back, they’re only going to make this situation worse. “I’ll be fine. I’ve got this.”

“You’ve done two years. You know what you’re doing, right?” Thornton asks. I only survived that long by making sure I kept getting put in solitary. For this plan to work, I can’t do that. Mac swallows hard.

“Yeah. I can do this.”

Riley feels like the time she got captured and when she wouldn’t talk, had her head shoved underwater repeatedly until she could barely breathe even when it was over and Jack pulled her out. There’s the same blurred buzzing in her ears, the same haziness in her eyes, the same feeling of helpless panic. She has no control and someone else is deciding all their fates.

But she has to push it down and get a grip. If I can’t do my job, that puts Mac in even more danger. She needs to focus.

Patty’s regained her calm composure. Riley could see the cracks in her mask earlier, she’s as afraid for Mac as the rest of them, but she can’t show it. She’s got even less room for fear and concern than the rest of us. Seeing Patty scared made Riley terrified; to push her over the edge it has to be awful, but now that she’s back to the Ice Queen everyone at the Phoenix is familiar with, Riley feels a little safer. She’s not going to let something bad happen. Riley’s always thought of Patty as an irresistible force. She’ll fix this. Somehow.

But the next thing she says pushes Riley’s head right back underwater. “I’m going to be flying out to Washington this evening, to see if I can stop this ridiculous power play. Oversight may not be willing
to go drive a hard bargain, but I’m going to try. Riley, you’ll be heading up this mission. I think it’s about time you got a taste of what the other side of the desk feels like.”

“Better be careful. I might like it so much I steal your job.” Riley chuckles, but she knows it sounds fake. *I don’t want to do this. We can’t send Mac back. Not after everything I’ve seen. And I can’t be the one who okays it.*

Patty rests a hand on her shoulder. “I know this is a lot Riley. But you’re capable of handling it. And if I don’t go and fix this mess, it won’t be the last time we have a situation like this.” She glances quickly at Mac, who looks like he’s physically shaking.

“I know.” Riley doesn’t want to do this. But her situation is a thousand times better than Mac’s. *I’m not the one going back into a place where I’m trapped with hundreds of people who could turn on me at any second.*

“Call me if it’s urgent.” Patty picks up a stack of files from the desk. “Or when it’s over.” She marches out of the room, her heels clicking on the floor, and Riley has no doubt in her mind that Patricia Thornton is going to leave that meeting with her demands met.

She can feel Jack’s eyes on her. When she looks up, he’s watching her with a combination of sympathy and respect. She takes a deep breath and steels herself to do what has to be done. There’s a large folder on the table, she picks it up and flips it open. Patty’s detailed anything she’ll need to know about this mission.

They need to make sure Mac is sent back legitimately. So Patty’s arranged for a stock of highly volatile chemical ingredients to go “missing” from the R&D lab, and for someone to report the theft to the police. They’re probably making the call right now. And those same chemicals will be found in Mac’s personal locker, thanks to an ‘anonymous’ tip.

After this is over, there will be an investigation, it will be noted that Mac’s ID card wasn’t used to access the lab when the chemicals went missing, and that someone else set him up to take a fall. Riley wonders if there will be an unfortunate scapegoat. She hopes not. Hopefully it will become something that fades into the back of everyone’s mind as an unsolved case, like the food coloring in the locker room showers prank of 2014. Except that this is so much more serious.

When Mac leaves, Riley lets herself fall apart. She looks at Jack, almost wanting him to be angry with her instead of looking at her with quiet sympathy. “I don’t think I can do this.”

“She’s no one more qualified. You’re smart, you’re a good agent, and you’re perfectly capable of supervising a field op.” There’s some of that fatherly pride in his voice, even though it’s being drowned by a near-parental fear for Mac’s safety.

“It’s not about whether I can. We’re sending Mac back to prison, and we promised him we’d keep him out of there. It’s not fair.”

“I know, Riles. I know.”

*I can’t do this.*

Mac’s sitting in the lobby, probably waiting for the police to arrive. Riley walks out to sit with him. He’s twisting a paperclip into the shape of a key, but it’s not going well. His hands are shaking, his whole body is shivering slightly, and he finally drops the paperclip on the floor in frustration. Riley takes his hand and wraps her fingers around his.

“I’m so sorry they forced you…”
“I’m the only person who can do this.” It sounds like he’s trying to rationalize Oversight’s decision to himself. Riley’s past rationalizing this. *That man has no right to sit in his shadowy secret office and decide the fate of people he’s never even met.* He might have Mac’s file, but he’s never seen Mac work in the field. He’s never seen Mac flinch when someone puts a hand too low on his back. He’s never seen Mac cry because he blames himself for the death of a friend. He can’t possibly understand what he’s doing to a more-fragile-than-he’ll-admit, traumatized and deeply wounded person. *Oversight doesn’t know Mac at all.*

“No, you’re not. Jack could have gone...”

“Jack could go and get himself shanked in three days. He doesn’t know what it’s like in there.” Mac shudders. Riley knows what he means. Jack’s abrasive personality would make him a marked man, and without a gang or cartel backing him, he’d be a lone wolf and a major target.

“Jack spent two weeks undercover in a Chinese detention facility. He can handle himself.” She knows Jack would trade places with Mac in a heartbeat, even if the risk was ten times more.

“It’s less of a risk to send me. It won’t be questioned. I already have a reputation and in there, that’s half the battle. Someone El Noche’s never heard of, he’ll be suspicious of. He didn’t last as long as he did on the streets by being a trusting man.”

Jack joins them; his face is suspiciously damp. “Hey kid, I got your back, okay? We’re gonna find a way to get me in there and I’m gonna look out for you. As long as you got Jack Dalton looking after you, you’re in good hands, okay?”

Mac just nods.

And then there are cars pulling up outside, and officers walking into the Phoenix lobby. And Mac has to go. Riley watches the officers snap on the cuffs, and when Mac’s led out the doors, with half the Phoenix staff staring and probably already gossiping, she can’t bear the broken look on his face. *How is he ever going to come back from this?*

She sits down in the War Room, at the table that Patty always uses. This feels wrong. This isn’t Riley’s place.

The plan is simple. Mac knows enough about El Noche and his cartel from his days as the Phoenix. So he knows the man is power-hungry and will jump on any chance to gain more control.

If Mac sets himself up as a person for hire, claiming to work for a cartel Cage and Riley are backstopping a cover for, he can explain why he was blowing up rival cartels’ warehouses and shipments. Their fake cartel has no members in Bishop Correctional, and if El Noche calls out to confirm Mac’s story, Riley will intercept it and tell him enough to make him believe the nonexistent “Corona Roja” cartel is not only a legitimate player, but also about to go belly-up. Which gives Mac the perfect cover to convince El Noche he’s ready to change employers.

It’s a major risk. No one in the cartels, and especially no one in prison, likes someone who changes allegiances to protect themselves. If this goes wrong Mac’s going to wind up dead.

When the door opens, she looks up. It’s Jack. She should tell him to get in his car, to start driving for Texas, to pick up the ID with the name “Frank Morris” from his apartment stash, but the words are stuck in her throat. Jack reaches for her, and she wraps her arms around his warm solidity. She wants to cry, but what good will that do? *I’m going to do whatever it takes to bring Mac home. I’m not leaving here until he comes back.*
Mac leans his head back against the bus seat, willing himself to stop shaking. They’re almost to Bishop, and he has to do this right. He has to.

When the police came and cuffed him, he couldn’t bear to look at Jack and Riley and Thornton. He knew he didn’t do anything to deserve it, but it doesn’t feel that way. *There’s no feeling innocent after you’ve been guilty once. You’re always going to look at gates and bars and barbed wire and handcuffs and know that’s where you belonged. You’re not just marked to the rest of the world. You’re marked to yourself too.*

The whole experience is just as humiliating as it was the first time. Some of it is even worse, like being strip-searched when he’s booked, because he wants those hands far away from him. Before, he didn’t know what fear like that even was.

The bright orange prison uniform makes his skin crawl. Putting on that jumpsuit, he feels like the king in that old storybook grandfather had, the one who believed he was wearing the finest robe ever seen when in reality he’d been duped and it was only empty air. Everyone’s staring like they can look right through the cloth. Like he’s already naked.

He stumbles over the last step off the bus. *Stupid. Clumsy. Now you already look weak. This is a terrible start. He flinches when someone whistles. At the new "fish". At him. He shouldn’t but everything’s going wrong already and he’s lost control of the situation. He hates himself for not being able to just keep it together. *This is why they kept coming after you. They knew you’re an easy target.*

The guards walk him through the yard, *catcalls, whistles, hands, stay away from me, no, go away, leave me alone!*, the cafeteria, *stares, whispers, more hands, always more hands*, the halls, *shouts, words I can’t unhear, promises I want to forget exist*, and to his cell.

He doesn’t have a cellmate. Mac could cry with relief. *Just lock the door behind me and leave me here. Forever. He doesn’t want to go back out there, to keep running that gauntlet of hands and eyes and voices until he makes a mistake, until he slips up and it’s too late.*

But he has to. He takes a deep breath and looks around him, shuddering. It’s too familiar. The bunks, the small barred window, the drinking fountain and toilet in the corner.

It seems like no time at all and it’s time to leave, time to eat. He’s not hungry, he doesn’t want to go down there, doesn’t want to eat the garbage that passes for food, but he needs to start scoping out the other prisoners. Start deciding how he’s going to make his move.

*To win El Noche’s trust I have to prove I’m worth recruiting.* Mac knows his reputation precedes him. But he’s known for being a guy who fought against the cartels. Somehow, he has to turn that into someone willing to join forces with a drug lord and help him escape.

*Prison’s a lot like middle school was. Except with more muscle-bound bullies and somehow even worse food selection.* Everyone bands into cliques, except for the few loners who keep their heads down, stay on the outside, and just try to make it through another day unaccosted. Mac’s never, ever, been one of the fortunate ones with a friend group. Not in middle school and not in prison.

The cartels are immediately obvious. Groups of five to ten men, clustered around tables, angrily eying other similar groups. Mac’s able to pick out some of the gang tattoos at a glance. *Los Diablos,*
Merida, Rios. There’s another set of three who might be members of some rough-and-tumble MC, judging by the calloused hands and the permanently grease-stained nails. There’s a few other groups that seem to have merged by convenience, and then the loners. Mac finds a table by himself and sits down.

The Los Diablos and Merida have been at each other’s throats lately, and he’s sure the rivalry has extended into here. It looks like the Los Diablos’s inside boss is a brute of a guy with a beefy face and a wolf head tattooed on his neck. Great. If I want to make an impression on Sancola, I have to tangle with him.

One of the two men sitting at the table behind him begins coughing raspily. He’s old, which catches Mac’s attention immediately. It’s rare to see guys over sixty in places like this, at least not for long. The man pulls out an inhaler, but it’s clear it’s not working.

Mac knows the surest way to get yourself killed or worse inside is to make yourself visible. But he also knows he needs someone he can trust, someone who can give him information on the situation in here. And someone like this guy knows all the ins and outs of the place. It’s the only way he’s survived so long.

“Out of medicine?” Mac asks, and his voice is doing that stupid thing where it starts cracking a little because he wasn’t sure he wanted to talk.

“No, stupid thing just won’t spray,” the man wheezes.

“May I?” Mac takes the inhaler and starts disassembling it. It really is like middle school all over again. When he took apart his desk partner Cathy Kirke’s inhaler for her in science class because the smoke from the experiments set her asthma off, and hers did the same thing as this guy’s. She was all grateful and she started sitting with me at lunch. And then some of the other guys got jealous, because she was one of the girls everyone wanted to know, and they made my life miserable. So he’d started avoiding her, and he wonders if she even remembers him now.

He breaks the tine off one of the sporks and inserts it into the inhaler’s mechanism, just like sticking a piece of a tongue depressor in Cathy’s, and hands it back. The man takes a grateful breath and stops coughing.

“Thank you.”

“No problem. I’m Mac.”

“Ernie.” There’s no knowing if that’s his real name or not. “What you goin’ around doing nice things for free for, huh?”

“Maybe I’m just a nice person.” Mac shrugs, people are starting to look his way. Please ignore me.

“Nobody in here’s ‘just a nice person’, Ernie says bitterly. “What do you want? Contraband? I’m the librarian, so you’re outta luck if you were lookin’ for drugs or smokes.”

“How about information?” Mac counters. It’s not like I actually was just doing it out of the goodness of my heart. He learned a long time ago that that kind of action was only going to get him killed. “Those men,” he points to El Noche and his cronies, “what’s going on with them?”

Ernie gives him a sharp stare. “You want advice, new kid? Stay far away from them. Stay away from everyone.” He turns back to his food and Mac sighs. So much for getting good information. It looks like Ernie’s method of survival is exactly what Mac’s used to be. Keep your head down, stay out of everyone’s way. Pretend you know nothing. Don’t become important to anyone. If you don’t
have friends, you don’t have enemies either. You can’t have one without the other in prison.

Mac can’t eat anything, and it’s not just because the tasteless brown blob on his plate turns his stomach. *I know how to survive in prison, but I don’t know how to make an alliance.* It was always too risky to try.

Someone brushes up against him as he’s carrying his tray back to the line, and he’s about to apologize and duck when he feels the hand on his thigh. He cringes away, holding the flimsy plastic meal tray in front of him like it’s some kind of shield. He pushes his way to the farthest side of the line from whoever just touched him, hoping they don’t decide he’s worth following. Maybe it was just an opportunist who took advantage of running into him. *If they’re actually following me I don’t stand a chance.*

He can’t breathe normally until he’s back in his cell with the door closed behind him. *Most people assume the barred cells are just to make sure people stay inside where they belong. I’ve always thought maybe it also keeps the monsters out.* But that’s no guarantee of safety. He should know; he shared a cell with one of those monsters for a month. *What if they put someone in here with me?* He shudders at the memories of being trapped in a locked cell, backed into corners or up against the door.

Mac curls into a small huddle on his bunk. *How am I going to survive this?*

Sending the kid back inside doesn’t sit right with Jack. Not even when Riley tells him there’s already a plan in place to get him in Bishop as a guard, to give Mac someone friendly in there with him.

Mac tried to pretend he was okay with it. Tried to be the damn self-sacrificing hero. *He doesn’t know that getting Phoenix out of the hole we dug ourselves is about way more than giving in on one mission.* Jack can’t stand that Oversight is dragging Mac around like a dog on a short leash.

*He knows Mac can’t refuse.* And it makes Jack wonder how many more times that’s going to be taken advantage of. *If Oversight asks for another favor like this I’m quitting.* He’s sure Riley will feel the same. Two can play that game, and he’s sure Oversight won’t want to lose the top team, *not bragging, that’s just a fact,* that Phoenix has in the field.

He wishes he’d tried that already. Because the look in Mac’s eyes when the cops showed up and took him away…

The kid was terrified. There was plenty of shame and a little anger and a lot of sadness, but there was one thing Jack could see for certain. The kid had the same look on his face that he did when Jack pinned him in that training fight, or when he tripped over his own feet out there in Bosnia. He’s going back to his own personal hell.

Jack’s had no illusions, from the beginning, about what could have happened to Mac. And after their training, he’s certain. But even then, it was all in the past, all something Jack could be furious about but couldn’t blame himself for.

But if anything happens to Mac now, that’s on Jack. *I’m not letting him out of my sight.*

He flashes his ID to the guard at the entrance gate. *Frank Morris, formerly worked at San Quentin, transferring to work in a more remote location after some...incidents.* His cover has a reputation for being unnecessarily violent with prisoners, and for taking bribes of multiple kinds in exchange for favors. Nothing can be proven, but there’s plenty of speculation.

He reports to the office to pick up his gear belt, and as he does glances around. The tiny from is drab
and grimy, and the men inside who are also signing in look harsh and dangerous.

“Damn, man, you really like working,” the desk clerk says when Jack signs out his gear. “Day shift
every day this week?”

“Gotta pay the gas bill for my F-350,” Jack mutters, leaning a little on the desk. “Eats fuel like you
wouldn’t believe, but hey, it’s Texas, so go big or go home, right?” He’s trying to sound like the
guys he knew who moved in down the street as the neighborhood started getting built up. Guys who
thought Texas ranch life was all about big trucks and fancy boots and nights down at the bar. Pops’s
truck was an ‘82 Chevy held together with wingnuts and prayer, We wore steel-toed boots and not
pointed ones, and when you have to get up at four a.m. for stock feedings, you don’t have much
gumption to hit up the local watering hole till midnight. Jack’s got no patience for the people who
romanticize the life of the small farmer. You complain about your 9-5 in an air conditioned office
and think farms are some sort of rural paradise. He’d like to see them actually try to milk a cow like
Old Mooly, who swatted Jack in the face with her filthy tail every time he tried to milk her after she
lost her calf and wouldn’t let any of the other cows’ babies near her. Or work from before sunup to
past sundown because if you don’t get the hay off before that little black cloud becomes a
 thunderhead, you’ve got to pay for feed all winter or sell off the stock. It’s not cute, or idyllic. It’s a
 hell of a hard life.

“Well, I oughta be getting my gear. Don’t want to get fired on my first day.”

He’s working hard to keep the natural Texas accent that wants to slip back in his voice in the dust
and heat sounding like a fake Californian attempt at it. He’s trying to ignore the little reminder in his
head that “Californian imitating Texas accent” only brings one thing to mind, the night they were at
Mac’s house and the kid got a little more drunk than usual and started repeating everything Jack said
and trying to do it in his voice.

The morning shift guards are trickling in. Jack walks back to the desk. “I’ll take Yard duty if that’s
available.” Most guards hate working the Yard, there are too many fights to break up, and sometimes
it turns into dangerous full-on brawls.

It’s also where Mac’s most likely to run into Sancola. Jack figures if anything goes down, it will go
down there. And if something isn’t right, he’d like to be close enough to keep things from getting
truly messy.

“Hey, fresh meat doesn’t get to choose positions.” The desk worker grumbles. “You go where I put
you, Morris.” Jack clenches a fist to keep himself from punching the man in the face. “You’re being
assigned to block D.”

That’s nowhere near the yard, or Mac’s wing. Jack wants to reach across the desk and shake the guy
by his collar. Instead, he storms out of the office.

Someone taps him on the shoulder, and he spins around ready to start swinging fists. It’s another
guard, shorter than Jack and maybe a couple years younger. “If you want the Yard position, I’ll
cover for you in D.” It’s both reassuring and concerning. Obviously no one’s going to have a serious
problem with guards trading assignments. Which is good for Jack, but if any guards have any reason
to want to go after Mac, it will be all too easy for them to work something out.

There have always been rumors about Bishop. Jack remembers seeing cars full of sign-carrying
protestors drive past the ranch on the way to the prison every year. Bishop’s remote location meant it
tended be the dumping ground for not only the worst offenders, but also the guards who were less
likely to toe the line. There were plenty of rumors about unfathomable brutality. He’d heard there
were some reforms, but on the whole, news from home still tells him no one wants to live anywhere
near a Bishop guard’s house.

Jack heads for the yard, where inmates are starting to trickle out for the morning. He catches a glimpse of Mac’s overly long, sandy hair, and tries to keep an eye on him. Just stay out of trouble, kid. Mac seems to be doing just that, keeping to a mostly empty corner of the yard where he’s walking back and forth in a careful line. Jack can see the pent-up energy in him, the kid wants to run but he can’t.

It’s not long before El Nacho and his goons show up. They’re everything Mac hasn’t been, brash and loud and pushy. Almost everyone gets out of their way. Everyone but a tall guy and a couple of others with the Los Diablos insignia on the backs of their hands. Damn. Maybe I’ll be dealing with the less fun aspects of the Yard today already.

Mac must have seen the same thing, because he starts wandering toward the Los Diablos guys. Their leader is currently bench pressing what looks like easily three hundred pounds. Mac walks past and deliberately scuffs his feet in the dirt, raising enough dust that it drifts into the man’s face and chokes him. He drops the weights angrily and stands up.

“Watch what you’re doin, ya little punk.”

“I was just walkin’.” There’s a sullen edge in Mac’s voice that Jack remembers from their early missions. Skating the edge of being outright insubordinate.

“Walk somewhere else.”

“Why, is it your yard?” And then the man’s fist flies out of nowhere and Mac’s on the ground, scrambling, staggering back to his feet.

Don’t let him knock you down. Jack’s got years of fight training that tell him that, but he also can’t forget what Mac said in Bosnia. “They’re like a pack of dogs. They get you on the ground, you’re dead. Or worse.” But it’s three against one...And then the big guy waves off his henchmen with a grin. He’s so sure he can take Mac by himself, he’s getting cocky.

Jack knows the kid can take this guy if he can find half an opportunity. He’s almost good enough to take Jack down, and this guy definitely doesn’t have Jack’s CIA and Delta honed skills. But he does have a big size advantage. And he’s drawn first blood. There’s a stream of red trickling from Mac’s lip and nose. Jack radios for backup. He’s tempted to go in there right now, danger be damned, but Mac must have had a reason for starting this thing.

Jack wants to yell at him to remember what Jack taught him about fighting a bigger guy, but the kid’s clearly panicking, fighting on pure instinct and fear now. He gets tripped, going down hard, but when the guy brings down a boot, he rolls fast to avoid it. Jack can’t help but see the bruise the kid had after Frankfurt. Guess he learned something from that op.

When Mac stands up he swings a clenched fist that Jack can already tell is going to miss this guy’s face by a mile. But apparently a solid hit wasn’t Mac’s intention. He’d grabbed a handful of sand from the ground, and as his hand comes up he flings it into the guy’s face.

The El Diablos’s leader stumbles backward, cursing in Spanish. And at the same second his two cronies rush Mac. Okay, that’s enough. The kid’s already struggling, he’s not going to win this fight.

“Hey!” Jack shouts. “Break it up!” And then Mac yanks the weights off one end of a rod and the end flies up, smacking one of the goons in the face.

Jack’s actually impressed. Until the other guy lays into Mac, sending him sprawling. Jack tackles
them both down, and pulls Mac out of the way. On the pretense of punishing the kid for starting the fight, Jack shoves him into a wall, well out of the way of the brawl that’s finally being broken up. Out of the corner of his eye Jack can see El Noche and his men lying down and spreading out their hands, eyes on Mac as Jack drags him away.

“Did you have to pick the biggest guy in the yard, kid?”

“He’s been making trouble for El Noche.” Mac spits out a mouthful of blood. “Hoping he lives by ‘the enemy of my enemy is my friend’.”

Jack sighs. “You can’t make friends with El Nacho if you’re in the infirmary with ten broken bones.” Mac just nods. Jack gives him another halfhearted shove and watches the kid walk away. *I’ve got such a bad feeling about all of this.*

Riley’s been undercover in prisons before. She’s been captured and put inside them. But watching Mac inside that supermax, there’s a whole new level of fear churning in her stomach.

Riley’s training made her dangerous, kept her safe on her undercover stints, at least for the most part. There’s a lot about being inside that scares her, that’s given her some of her worse nightmares. But she can’t even begin to imagine what Mac’s gone through.

*I don’t think I’d be able to go back after that.* She pushes the thoughts aside and keeps her eyes focused on the security feeds she’s watching. After Mac started a fight in the yard yesterday, with Bishop’s top ranking member of the El Diablos cartel no less, he’s been in more danger than ever. So far, the El Diablos guys haven’t run into Mac again, and it seems like they don’t have a lot of allies in Bishop, but things could get ugly anytime.

Cage perches on the end of a chair. When Riley called to say she wasn’t coming home, Sam showed up in the War Room an hour later with blankets, tea, and a quiet, sad smile. *What did I ever do to deserve a friend like her?*

“Hey, Ri, get some sleep. I can watch this for a while. I know enough about your tech to not kill it.” Riley knows she should listen. She’s been fading in and out for the past hour. Everything’s blurry, and she might make a mistake.

“Okay. But if something happens, anything, wake me up.” Riley’s not sure she *can* fall asleep, not when her mind is racing with the million things that can go wrong. She can’t hack the prison’s records remotely, which means she’s going to have to walk Jack through assigning Mac to the same work detail as El Noche once the desk guard leaves. But so far the guy’s a stickler for the rules and hasn’t gone far enough from his desk to make that work.

She can’t even make sure Jack’s assigned to the right wing to protect Mac if anything happens. The prison’s computer systems aren’t networked, and apparently guard assignment is done via a paper sign-up sheet that goes around every Monday.

Her brain is filled with chaotic images of bars and barbed wire and grey walls, and when she finally drifts into an uneasy doze, her dreams are an endless maze of walls and doors with no way out.

Sam shakes Riley’s shoulder, and the movement startles her awake, so badly that she slides off the chair to the floor. “I think something’s wrong.”

Riley’s instantly on her feet. “What, what?”

“There’s a lot of red on that schematic now. And I clicked into the door lock systems and got notified
the access has been locked out.” No, no, no, no! Riley types frantically. There’s a fine line between getting back the access they desperately need, and setting off alarm bells with whoever’s just patched up the system. *Someone like me wanted to make sure someone like me didn’t get access.*

She glances at her watch. Jack’s shift is just ending. She waits until he’s likely outside and then calls him.

“Jack, I’ve lost access to the controls. They did a system-wide update and patched the hole I was using to backdoor access. We have cameras but nothing else.”

“Shit.” She hears something that sounds like Jack either slammed a car door or kicked the side of it. “That just torpedoed the whole op. And he’s got El Diablos pissed at him now too. I think I could pull him out, if you’ve got the cameras we could avoid the guards, I could get him outta here.”

“I know, I know! But I can’t just pull him out, Jack! I could if he was in there under an alias. But if we break him out under his real name and we don’t get El Noche, he’s going to add an escape to his record and it will all be for nothing.” Riley’s run this scenario a dozen times. *We can’t just go and tell the prison authorities they have a federal agent undercover in there, Phoenix doesn’t legally exist. And if we pull Mac out early, it’s going to be noticed.* She has no doubt Oversight won’t approve the work release again unless Mac gets this job done.

“How is he gonna break out without you opening the doors?”

“I don’t know.” She sighs. “We can worry about that in the morning.” She wonders if Mac will sleep at all tonight. She doesn’t think she can. *Is this how Patty feels every time we go off script in field?* She suddenly has a much greater sympathy for the woman, and a much better understanding of the typical post-mission rants.

Jack calls her before his shift starts. “Ri, what’s the plan?” He sounds exhausted, like he hasn’t slept either.

“We need to assign Mac to the same work detail as El Noche. And somehow, you have to get a message to him that I’ve been locked out of most of the system.”

“Only that, huh?” Jack asks, and then Riley hears the whole tone of his voice change. “Hey sweetheart, I gotta go to work now. Call you later, baby.” He hangs up and Riley sits down in her chair, fingers drumming nervously on her laptop’s case.

Mac leaves his room, along with a group of others, and they head for the showers. Riley loses camera visual as soon as he’s inside there. She swallows down a sudden sick churning in her stomach. *Mac, please be careful.* He’s so vulnerable in there and she can’t even watch his back from a distance.

When her phone rings she jumps and knocks it off the arm of the chair. She grabs it up and answers quickly. “Jack?”

“I got tired of waiting for you to give me the go sign for all clear on the desk guard. So I might have slipped a little something in his coffee.” Jack laughs breathily. “Guy didn’t realize he’d gotten one iced mocha with an extra shot of fast-acting laxative.”

*Oh Jack.* Riley has to admit, he’s three steps ahead of solving their problem. *I’m not doing a good job of running this op.* Everyone else is having to solve the problems for her. That’s not good. *This is why I belong in the field. I’m still better at taking orders...and occasionally breaking them...than giving them.*
“Okay, are you inside?”

“Yeah.”

“Switch over to a video chat, let me see the monitors.” Jack gives her a decent view of his face. “You need to turn the camera around.” He angles the whole phone.

“That better?”

“I guess.” He doesn’t really need to be able to see her if he can hear the instructions. *He really does act just like a dad sometimes.* She knows he knows how to switch between selfies and regular images, *he takes enough selfies on ops*, but he’s trying to make her laugh, or at least smile. *Jack, you’re the best.*

“Okay, you’re going to need to open the computer database program, so you’ll have to bring up the desktop.” There’s a muffled mumbling, and then Jack exclaims excitedly.

“Ha! That was so stupid. His password was ‘jail’.”

“It was in sleep mode. You could literally have just hit any key.” She glances at the blurred screen image on her phone. “Top left corner, file that says ‘work detail’.” Jack clicks on it, and then brings up the Excel spreadsheet inside.

“Oh, search for Mac’s name.” Jack finds it, he’s been assigned to a painting crew. “Now click that box that says 268, right next to his name.” Jack does, and the line highlights. “Hit control X.” The edges of the little square flicker, the familiar black and white line appearing. “Now keep scrolling until you find Sancola’s work detail, and when you see it, click the number box next to the first empty line and press control V.” She watches while Jack does exactly that, and breathes a sigh of relief when it’s done.

“Wow, being a hacker’s not so hard,” Jack says. “You might as well take that desk job right now, cause it looks like I won’t be needing you to hack things anymore.”

“Being able to change an entry in Excel does not make you Alan Turing.” She’s actually smiling a little. *Maybe we can get this to work. Maybe it will be okay.*

Jack hangs up, and then Riley goes back to watching the cameras. “Sam? Have you seen Mac come back out?” Sam shakes her head and Riley feels a growing dread push out any lightheartedness from Jack’s antics. *Did El Diablos track him down? Is he laying in there bleeding out on the floor?*

“Wait, there he is.” Sam points to a figure that has Mac’s longish hair but not his confident stride. This person is limping, badly. Riley wonders what’s happened. *How seriously is he hurt?* And then someone barely brushes against him and he flinches, curling in on himself in terror. And she *knows.*

She’s not going to make it to the trash can in the corner. But then someone’s moving it in front of her while she crashes to her knees, throwing up what little is in her stomach. The acid burns her throat and she can’t tell if the tears in her eyes are from the pain or from the agony of knowing what just happened to Mac.

“I let this happen. It’s my fault,” Riley whispers, coughing and shuddering.

“Riley. You’re doing everything you can.” Sam whispers, resting her hands on Riley’s shoulders and rubbing her thumbs on the back of her neck. “You can’t control everything that happens out there.”

“I know,” Riley sighs. *But my best isn’t good enough.*
Mac hates a lot of things about prison. The cafeteria is terrifying, so is the yard. But the showers are the worst.

When he first ended up inside, he’d thought it wouldn’t be that bad. He’d played basketball in elementary and middle school, and for one year he’d run track with Bozer in high school, because Boze had to stay after school to practice anyway and he’d convinced Mac to try it. I figured it wasn’t going to be all that different from a school locker room. Slimy and smelly and none too clean. Maybe some dumb joking or smart remarks about someone’s body. Probably infested with all kinds of nasty bacteria and fungus. But it’s all that and so much worse.

He shivers, not so much from the chilly room as from the contact of other bodies against his. It’s bad enough when things like this happen in the cafeteria, when there’s at least the flimsy barrier of clothes between them. Now that he’s naked, there’s no telling himself it was an accident, that the contact was unintentional. Don’t touch me. Leave me alone. He’s hypersensitive to every brush of someone’s arm against his, the purposeful collisions from someone behind him that leave him stumbling away on the verge of a panic attack, the blatant reach of hands roaming him, hands that he can’t push aside without risking angering their owners and bringing on something even worse. I just want to get out…

Someone grabs a handful of his hair and spins him against the wall, laughing. “Look at what we’ve got here, boys. Pretty little fish.” It’s too late to hope they don’t notice me. Mac resorts to the only defense he has left, fighting back with everything he’s got and praying the guard on duty is a decent enough human being to break this up.

“He, let me see.” That voice is horrifyingly familiar. Fred Connors. One of La Ola’s enforcers, who’d been in CCI with Mac. He’s probably the reason I didn’t die in there. But he’s also the reason Mac wished he was dead more times than he could count. Once word got out that Mac was the Phoenix, the vigilante who’d landed plenty of cartel thugs in that supermax, he’d had a target on his back. He has a lot of scars to prove it. But when Connors tracked Mac down, he didn’t come to kill him. He wanted something even worse. And the sickest part of the whole thing was that the man had liked it so much he’d ordered the other cartel prisoners to keep their hands off Mac or he’d come after them. In here, being safe always comes with a price, and it’s always relative.

Mac tries to turn his back and duck, but the man grabs his hair and yanks his head back painfully, staring down into Mac’s face with a grinning leer. Mac shudders. He feels even more exposed with his neck bowed back and the man’s fingers tightening against his scalp. Mac glances up through tear-filled eyes to see the man’s face.

“I thought that was you, pretty boy,” Connors whispers, letting go of his hair and backing Mac against the slimy concrete wall; pinning his hands easily when Mac tries to throw a punch. “I never forget a face. Or a body.” Connors was transferred in the first four months I was inside. I guess they sent him here. And after him, everyone knew what Mac was. Everyone wanted the same thing. And they took it.

Mac begins shaking. He should fight back, he should try to get away, but he’s freezing up, terrified. Move, you have to get out of here. But his body won’t respond.

The only thing left to do is escape inside his head. He learned how to do that a long time ago. He barely feels the hands slamming him against the wall anymore as he starts reciting the periodic table in his head, calculating the trajectory necessary for a thrown object to reach the right velocity to break a window on a fourth floor, estimating the amount of fertilizer it would take to extract enough nitrogen for an explosion strong enough to collapse a warehouse.
He barely feels the hands, but he knows they’re there. He’s aware of what’s happening but it’s all
distant, through the haze of math equations and stoichiometry he’s desperately shoving into his mind.
*You have to ignore it.*

He knew how to ignore bullies in school. How to ignore people who tried to talk to him on the street.
How to not have to think about what happened to him over and over at CCI. But he was getting used
to not needing those defenses, and now some of the pain and fear break through. He pushes them
away.

*The force of gravity creates a velocity of 9.81 meters per second squared directly perpendicular to
the surface of the earth.*

He hears someone talking, a voice moaning and laughing.

*The normal chemical composition of air has 20.95 percent oxygen. Humans only use five percent
when they breathe. So in a sealed room that’s 10 feet by 10 feet by 10 feet, a human can survive
about half a day, when you factor in the increase in carbon dioxide.*

*It hurts.* He forgot how much it hurts.

*Noble gases. Argon, neon, helium, xenon, radon, krypton…*

And then it’s over. There are no more hands, no more pain, and Mac shakes himself out of his head
and back into reality, collapsing weakly to the ground.

Mac pushes himself up, trying desperately to get to his feet, shaking. All he can see is the faint
spreading pool of blood and other fluids on the wet concrete. All he can smell is mold and sex and
blood. All he can hear is the dull rush of water, the fading laughs, and a few crude comments. *If I
don’t get up someone else will come…* It hurts, it hurts so much, but he can’t stay on the floor,
especially here in the showers.

He’s too late. There are hands on his shoulders, pressing him down onto the cold, slimy floor. He
hasn’t cried yet, hasn’t broken, but at the thought of it happening again, how many are in here?
*Five? Seven? Ten?* he begins to sob silently, tears dripping down his cheeks. It’s the same as it’s
always been. He’s weak and defenseless and trapped. This is all he has to look forward to in here.

Then suddenly the hands are gone, and a pair of dark, bare feet move quickly past him. Dimly, over
the roaring in his ears, Mac hears punches being thrown and angry shouts.

“Leave that kid alone.” Mac can’t tell who’s talking, only that it’s a voice he doesn’t recognize. He
takes advantage of the others’ distraction to push himself into a corner, pulling his legs to his chest to
protect himself as much as he can. He can’t stand up, it hurts too much.

He cringes when someone walks up in front of him. “Easy man. I’m not gonna hurt ya,” someone
says, and he looks up to see brown eyes that don’t look hungry and a concerned frown. *That guy
was sitting by Ernie in the cafeteria.* “You need to watch your back,” the man mutters. “You’re a
prime piece of fresh meat in here, kid.”

Mac hates to owe anyone anything. Especially inside. *It’s almost worse when someone helps you,
because then they can ask you for a favor and you can’t refuse.* He at least wants to know who he’s
dealing with. Maybe he can get the information to Jack somehow and they can find out if this man
can be trusted. “Who are you?”

“You can call me Darwin,” The man says. “Do yourself a favor, kid. Find someone to cut that hair.”
He shrugs. “Or find a way to make it into solitary. You’re a nice guy, and nice guys don’t make it in
here. Consider this payback for helpin’ Ernie. Now we’re even and I don’t owe you nothin’.” And then he’s gone and Mac’s got to get up. He’s got to get out of here. He almost leaves but he feels horrible and dirty and he has to get this filth off him or he’s going to have a panic attack right here right now and that can’t happen.

He’s painfully aware of every single thing, his senses feel hyper-stimulated. It’s just the adrenaline dump. Fight or flight. Except he didn’t do either. He froze. Maybe if I can’t even stand and fight, I deserve whatever happens to me. He knows that thought is poison, it almost killed him the last time. But he can’t make it go away.

He focuses on the things that might ground him. The rough, cold, slimy concrete under his feet. The pounding, hissing spray of the water through rusty, rattling showerheads. Even the pain is steadying. Because it means he didn’t want this. He wouldn’t willingly let someone hurt him. I didn’t ask for it. I didn’t. I didn’t deserve it...

He can’t stop shivering. The lukewarm water washes away the evidence of what happened, but it can’t erase the memories. He still feels filthy and miserable and used. He dresses as fast as he can, but the catcalls and jeers as he walks back to his cell make him feel like he’s still naked, vulnerable and exposed to every hungry leering stare. Everyone knows what happened. Word travels fast inside. That’s how it was at CCI. He’d been hoping that after the first time, he’d be able to avoid the few people who’d seen. It hadn’t been the case. Within hours, everyone knew what had happened to him, and couldn’t leave his cell without being reminded of it by some taunt or stare.

And he’d been naive enough to think the guards might protect him. He knew there were some who were cruel, who took the job because it gave them an excuse to harass people who couldn't escape them. But he’d hoped they’d be easy to spot.

He learned fast that those kind of guards were a dime a dozen. Others were too bored, or considered breaking up violent fights above their pay grade. Some were afraid. Some were bought off.

There were plenty of decent guards. But there were also plenty of monsters. And Mac had the misfortune of becoming a target. It was like middle school all over again. The pretty boy with the funny name got kicked around by everyone. The jocks, the popular kids, the smart kids who felt threatened, the punks looking for someone to vent anger on. He’d found safety among misfits for a while back home in Mission City, but misfits in middle school didn’t get shanked in the cafeteria.

He’d been ready to give up, ready to kill himself, before he got in a fight with one guy who’d decided to get his go at the new kid, slammed the guy a little too hard into a wall and knocked him out, and gotten himself put in solitary. And realized that was probably the only way he was going to survive in there.

When the cell door slams behind him, Mac curls up on his bunk, buries his face in the mattress to muffle the sound, and cries. The taste of fabric and sweat is too familiar. I should have known better than to assume I was ever going to be anything more than this. Anything better.

###

Jack watches the rows of inmates filing past him on the way to the yard. He needs to find Mac; hopefully the kid’s figured out that the Yard is Jack’s post now and the place to come to talk to him. Jack’s scanning the dozens of people here, watching for the familiar face. But when he sees it, it doesn’t look so familiar at all.

“Mac?” Jack whispers under his breath.
The kid looks like a dead man walking. He’s moving stiffly, cringing, and there are dark bruises scattered across his face. His arms around the wrists are purple with visible handprints. *Oh kid, what happened?* He knows Mac was in at least one more fight, in the cafeteria earlier, but he didn’t think it got this bad...

Jack can’t help how scared he is for Mac in here. The guards like to gossip, and he’s already heard enough horror stories to make him sick.

Just this morning, one of the guards was talking about something that happened in the showers. Jack didn’t hear more than a few sentences before he excused himself from the break room, claiming he was still fighting off a hangover; he certainly looked haggard enough. He’d nearly been sick in the shoddy, filthy bathroom. *And Mac lived with that horror every day for two years.* If it makes Jack sick just to think about it, he can’t imagine what being back in here is doing to Mac...

Mac’s hanging back, away from most of the other inmates. Jack can’t tell if he’s trying to get enough time to talk to him alone, or if he’s afraid of everyone else. He’s starting to think it looks like the latter.

Jack’s suspicion is confirmed when the second he whispers, “Hey Mac,” the kid flinches like he’s been hit. Jack grabs him and pulls him out of line, trying not to break character for either of them because that’s only going to make this whole mess worse, and Mac *whimpers.* Jack feels a rush of ice water down his spine.

“What the hell is going on?”

“Hey kid, you hurt?” He hisses.

“I’m fine.” Mac shivers, cringing away from Jack. Jack remembers the training fight, the way Mac panicked when Jack pinned him. There’s the same anguished fear in his eyes now, but a thousand times worse.

“My God. Mac…” Mac shakes his head, shivering, refusing to meet Jack’s eyes.

Jack hasn’t felt this sick since...since he watched those D77 goons carry Riley off. No, maybe this is even worse. Because even then he knew they were going to be able to kick the asses of every single person who laid a hand on his little girl. But in here, Jack can’t do a thing about the men who hurt his boy.

Jack’s sure someone’s wondering what he’s doing dragging a random inmate out of line. He should make it look like he’s got some kind of problem with Mac, the way he roughed him around in the yard. But he’s got the feeling that if he pushes Mac any further, the kid’s going to shatter and fall apart at Jack’s feet.

So he does the next best thing. Even though it makes him physically sick. He presses Mac back into the wall. “Stay here,” he whispers, and then walks back to where Davison’s guarding the hall.

“Hey man, can you cover for me for a few?” He nods back at Mac. “I’d like a few minutes alone with that one, if you know what I mean.” He wants to punch the knowing smirk off Davison’s face. *My God, I can’t believe I’m doing this.* But he has to get Mac safe.

“Come with me.” Jack pulls Mac around a corner, out of view of the security cameras.

“How did you…” Mac begins to ask.

“You don’t want to know.” Jack leans against the wall, legs suddenly rubber. “Oh Mac.” *I’m sorry is too weak, too shallow, for this. It’s more ‘I failed you when you needed me the most and if I have to spend the rest of my life begging you for forgiveness it’s better than I deserve’.*
“It’s okay.” Mac shivers and rubs his arms.

“No, no, there is nothing okay about this. You shouldn’t be here. They shouldn’t be able to look at you, let alone touch you.”

“It’s nothing I can’t handle.” There’s a dead, cold calm to Mac’s voice that’s more frightening than tears would be. He’s shutting down. Jack remembers how stiff and restrained Mac was when they first met him. He was just starting to heal. Starting to trust. And now it’s ruined. “I can do this. Please, I can finish it.” Mac’s voice is desperate. “I’ll get the job done.”

“Mac, about that, Riley lost her access to the doors. She can’t help you break out.” The kid’s eyes go terrifyingly wide and teary.

And then he takes a deep, shuddering breath. “It’s okay. I’ll figure it out. I have to.” He sighs. “I’ll figure out what I need to get out on my own and I’ll let you know. Somehow.”

All this because Oversight can’t grow enough of a backbone to stand up to a few government bigwigs. Jack sighs. “Okay. Okay.” Because what choice do they have?

“At least tell me who it was.” Jack might be able to take care of them. Discreetly, of course, but things happen in prison…

“Connors. Freddie Connors.” Mac’s shoulders shake, a shiver rippling through him.

Jack nods to Mac. “We’re gonna fix this. Go on. Try and keep your head down. Just stay alive.” He wants to cry, watching the kid limp away. I’m right here and I feel like I’m a thousand miles away.

Jack can’t wait for his shift to end to make the call. He tucks himself in a broom closet, prays no one hears any of this, and calls the Phoenix. We have to help him. We have to get him out of here. Because this is a living hell, and he’s surrounded by devils.

When the phone rings with Jack’s name on it, Riley already knows what he’s going to say. She’s known since she saw the security feed of the hall outside the showers, the way Mac was limping and cringing and flinching. But some part of her needs to hear it from Jack. Because unless she does the thought is just going to float there, known but unformed. It’ll haunt her until this op is over.

“Jack.” She doesn’t need to say more.

“They raped him, Riles.” Jack’s voice is harsh and hurting and broken, and those cold, honest words hang in the air between them. “Those fucking monsters.” Riley feels detached, lightheaded, like she’s on autopilot. There’s a strange feeling that everything in the room is moving away from her, getting smaller.

I okayed this. This was MY op. Never mind that she wasn’t the one who originally suggested the plan. “We can’t leave him there. We have to pull him out.” She doesn’t care how. They’re getting him back. They have to. I should have listened to Jack as soon as we lost the system. “I’m going to call Patty. Maybe she can make Oversight listen to reason. We can’t leave him there. We can’t.”

“He says he can finish this.”

“He hasn’t even met Sancola yet! And now he has this against him!” As much as Riley hates to think of it that way, what happened to Mac will be seen as a sign of weakness. How are we supposed to convince El Noche that he’s worth hiring now?
“Not necessarily,” Sam says. She’s standing to the side, her tightly pressed lips the only indication of emotion. “Do you know who did it?”

“Some piece of shit named Connors,” Jack mutters.

“Show me his file.” Cage begins to look it over. Riley can’t bear to see the man’s face in his mug shot. That monster treated Mac like dirt.

Sam’s lips are quivering slightly, but she looks a bit victorious when she looks up from the screen. “Connors is a top lieutenant in the La Ola cartel. A cartel that El Noche’s people have been crossing paths with recently, like El Diablos. Mac could pose as an informant.” Riley doesn’t like the sound of that. “It’s obvious Mac and Connors have history. If Mac goes to El Noche and offers to flip on Connors and La Ola in order to get out of this situation, El Noche might jump on the chance.”

“Or he might decide he’d like to have what Connors is getting for himself.” Riley shudders. There’s too much risk. I can’t justify this. Mac is hurting and scared and we need to bring him home before it gets any worse.

“I think there might be a way to pull this off.” Sam glances at Riley, and there’s a world of pain and understanding in her eyes. “I’m going to need you all to trust me. Mac won’t need to pretend he’s in the pay of our faked Corona Roja cartel anymore. He’s going to need to pretend he was working for La Ola.”

_We’re not prepared for this. I could fake anything we needed to know about Corona Roja, but we can’t pretend to be a real cartel. If El Noche asks any questions, has any information, Mac’s a dead man._

Some part of her whispers that Mac would rather be dead than back behind bars permanently. Which is what will happen if he can’t pull this off. She dials Patty’s number with shaking hands, but when the woman answers, Riley can’t speak. She hands the phone to Sam and runs out of the War Room, ignoring the stares as she races to the first empty conference room, curls into a corner, and begins to shake. No, no, this can’t be happening.

She wants to wake up. She wants to wake up and for everything to be fine and Mac to be right there next to them, smiling, teasing Jack, setting things on fire. _But this isn’t a dream. It’s a nightmare and none of us are going to be able to wake up._

The laundry room is a chaos of steam, air so full of lint Mac feels like he’s breathing in fabric, and the chemical smell from detergent. He’s not sure how he’s still on his feet. Yesterday feels like a lifetime ago, but also like it was only seconds. _Time does funny things in prison._ He skipped out on his work detail, claiming to be sick. He was, he could barely get off his bunk without crying in pain. He guessed the guard who came to collect him had heard what happened, because he let it slide. One of the few people in here who might still have some human empathy left.

He can see Sancola working busily a couple machines down. He should go over, try and get closer, but as soon as he does, he’s committed to this. _And there’s no backing out._

Jack managed to find him this morning, and told him about Cage’s suggested change of plans. It’s a risk, a huge risk, but at this point the only things El Noche might want from Mac are information, or…he doesn’t let himself think too much about anything else. Now that it’s happened, it’s almost like the fear’s gone, at least for now. _Can’t go back. So who cares if it happens again?_ He knows the next time someone comes for him, he will care, it takes more than one incident to go back to the level of desensitized lethargy he’d had in CCI, but he doesn’t feel like watching over his shoulder every
second. I’m already ruined. And everyone already knows. Staying safe doesn’t really matter anymore. All that matters is getting the job done and getting out of this place. If he even can. He told Jack what he needs to break out, it should all be available from supply closets.

He moves down to the next washer and pulls a handful of clothes out, shoving them in a bin. “Aren’t you the one they call El Noche?”

“And you’re that La Ola enforcer’s little bitch, am I right?” Mac flinches, but tries not to let it show.

“He likes having his people to himself. If I stick with him, I stay safe. But the thing is, I hear La Ola’s losing ground in here fast, and to your people. You’ve been able to buy yourself a pretty nice life, and a lot of influence. I’d rather stay alive than stay with La Ola.”

“An opportunist.” El Noche grins. “I can’t tell if I like you or not, pretty boy.”

Mac forces a smile to match the other man’s. “I hear you’re looking to take them out of business permanently. I could help with that. And make you the most powerful cartel leader in California.”

“Hah. Strong words coming from a pretty puta like you. My men could snap you in two like that.” He snaps his fingers.

“All I’m asking in return is a place to lie low for a while. I did a little work with La Ola before I got busted.”

“So I’ve heard. More like did a little work to stop them.” El Noche frowns. “Why should I trust a guy who’s well known for crossing gangs and cartels? And blowing their merchandise sky high?”

“Because I was taking out the competition.” Mac lowers his voice. “I started out with La Ola. They wanted to branch out, start selling more than coke. I figured out a way to synthesize a new strain of heroin. Four times more potent than normal. But I got greedy, figured why split the profits with La Ola’s people when I could have it all? Biggest mistake I ever made.”

Most of that’s totally fake. But the cartel does have it in for me. Connors just figures I’ll be less fun if I’m dead. And it’s not like El Noche can just go up to one of their guys and ask them to confirm my story. It’s a risky plan, but it’s all they have.

“So I blew the warehouse I was using to cook it. All my gear, all my notes, everything gone. It’s all just up here.” Mac taps his head. “I figured a guy with that kind of knowledge could put a decent dent in the west coast market. Now anyone who wants it needs me alive; it’s pretty good as far as insurance policies go, and it’s probably the only thing that’s kept La Ola from taking me out. Connors is keeping me alive for his people, he just wants a little extra on the side.” Mac keeps his shrug casual. “It’s better than being dead.”

“So why go to all the trouble of destroying other cartels’ warehouses and shipments?”

“Supply and demand, brother. And I needed some raw materials.” Mac grins. “I kept a lot of what was in those buildings for myself.” He shrugs, palms out. “Hey, setting up shop isn’t cheap and I needed ready-made product to sell. Unfortunately, the cops have it now. But given a place to work and the right tools, I could definitely do it again.”

“So you’re offering to work for me? How do I know you won’t turn on me like you did on La Ola?” Sancola has stopped working, standing across from Mac, arms crossed, a wall he’s going to have to find a way around.

“Because trust me, I’ve learned that this isn’t the kind of business you want to go alone.” Mac
glances behind him ruefully. “I need to get La Ola off my ass.”

“In more ways than one, I’ve heard.” El Noche frowns. “How do I know you can deliver what you promised?”

“I’ll get us both out of here, and then you can decide for yourself if I’m smart enough to make what I say I can.” Sancola laughs.

“I thought you’d say something like that. Not too easy to be running heroin from inside a cell.” His eyes go flat and cold. “I’m not interested. If it sounds too good to be true, it usually is. Guys like you, they make trouble for guys like me.”

Suddenly, there’s a commotion at the far end of the room. The three El Diablos guys from the yard are coming. And the whole place has mysteriously cleared out. Mac knows a prison hit when he sees one, and this is definitely it. The question is, which of us are they coming for?

“You should run, puta,” El Noche says coldly.

“They already want me dead, might as well die fighting.” Mac grabs a couple towels from the cart. I’ve got an idea.

_It’s a pretty simple weapon that’s been in use since the middle ages. I’m just adding my own take on it._ He balls up a wet towel and wraps a dry one around it, grabbing the ends, then sprinkles in a handful of powdered cleaner. _A little powdered bleach will add some sting. And now I’ve got a pretty decent flail._

The big guy, the one who tangled with Mac before in the yard, bellows and rushes them. Mac swings the flail and knocks the small shiv out of his hand before catching the guy’s face on the backswing. He stumbles into the side of one of the dryers and goes down hard.

Sancola’s slamming another man’s wrist against a wall, trying to knock another handmade knife out of his hand. Mac wraps the towel around the third man’s arms and pulls, and when the guy gets overbalanced and falls to his knees, Mac kicks him in the face.

El Noche’s managed to take down the guy after him, and as soon as he does, both he and Mac run for the door. _That went...better than I expected._ The guards outside seem more than a little confused to see them leaving in one piece, but they can’t outright question it. Mac makes a mental note of their faces, he needs to steer clear of guys in Los Diablos’s pockets.

The next two days terrify him, time stretches out to an eternity and every single minute he’s in danger. It seems El Noche used his influence to get his work assignment changed. Even if Mac could somehow get in contact with Jack, he can’t move again, that would make El Noche suspicious. And Mac is still stuck working in the same place three people tried to kill him. Thankfully they don’t come back. He figures they’ve got more issues with El Noche than with him.

It doesn’t mean he isn’t still a target. Some guy in the yard tries to shank him, probably a cartel member, and he gets into two more fights. It’s over the stupidest things, like walking too close to someone else. But in prison, anything is an excuse to get violent, to let off steam. Even to kill.

But having people who want to kill him isn’t even the biggest problem on the growing list of problems he has. He feels eyes on him every single moment. _Everyone knows what you are._ At least his biggest problem is now in solitary. It seems Connors got himself busted for having an illegal phone in his cell, and Mac doesn’t think too long about how that happened. _Jack’s trying to protect me the only way he knows how._
Still, Mac spends most of his time in his cell. He’s a bit surprised when there’s a knock on his door and he sees Ernie through the slot. The man holds out three books. “Thought you might want something else to think about than these walls,” he says quietly, and Mac nods gratefully, taking the books from him. Some people who know what happened understand. He’d guess another reason Ernie’s made it this long is that he learned to give in occasionally. He knows exactly where Mac’s been.

The books help, but Jack still hasn’t come back with what Mac needs, and he’s not working the yard anymore. Mac has no idea where to find him. If Jack doesn’t bring me what I need, I’m not sure how I’m going to do this. I wasn’t sure I could break out with Jack and Riley’s help. Now… What will happen if he can’t do this doesn’t bear thinking about.

He’s ashamed of how much he startled when the door opens unexpectedly. Please don’t let it be someone who bribed a guard to get me alone. “Looks like you’ve got a new roommate,” a guard Mac’s never seen before mutters. And then El Noche steps into the room.

“It seems my enemies are none too happy at being bested,” he says calmly. “They’ve managed to recruit three of the larger and more dangerous gangs to their side, all to take care of the two of us. So I suppose we should stick together if we want to live.”

“My offer to get us out still stands,” Mac says. “But now I have more conditions. Your nice little world is starting to crumble, so you need me.” El Noche gives him a pointed glare.

“What do you want, puta?”

“I want half the cut of the profits we make from my work. And I want a guarantee of safety. I can’t set up shop in the States again. If you get me out of the country, we can go into business together. I guarantee you won’t regret it.”

“You get me past these walls, my men will take care of the rest.” El Noche’s eyes are cold. “So we have ourselves a deal, puta? Are you going to get me out of here, or am I going to have to make you pay for lying to me?”

Mac looks him directly in the eye. “Trust me. We’re walking out of here free men tomorrow night.” Since he doesn’t have Jack’s help anymore, he’s going to need some time.

If I don’t make this work, if I can’t find a way to salvage the situation, they won’t need me. I’ll be here for the rest of my life. The thought makes him shiver. I can’t survive in here, not that long. He’s got enemies now. Too late to do what I did before and disappear. The only way he makes it out of this alive is if he escapes with Sancola. He’ll worry about what to do after that when they get there.

Sam just needs some air. That’s all. She’s not crying. She’s not. I’m not. But when she woke up from a faint, half-awake doze, it was to the memory her own screams in her ears, and the cruel laughter of the first of many who’d seen her as only good for one thing.

Over time, she taught herself to stop caring. To use her attractiveness to her benefit, to make everyone underestimate her and then strike. Sex had become a weapon. Like everything else about her. But that doesn’t mean the memories don’t haunt her.

Jack called them this morning. Apparently someone decided to report that he’s been spending a lot of time with a particular inmate. He’s been moved to F block, and he hasn’t been able to find someone else to switch with. It seems the other guards aren’t too friendly anymore, and he thinks it’s because the desk guard knows who brought him his coffee the morning it was spiked.
He’s not going to be able to get back to Mac, to get him the supplies he needs. Mac is completely alone inside the prison, and he probably doesn’t even know that. She can’t bear to think of him sitting inside his cell, waiting for help that never comes. Every day he’s in there, he’s more at risk of being killed. He made himself a target to try and do the mission. But if we can’t make it work, he’s trapped inside with a lot of people who want to kill him.

Mac’s worked his way into this crazy thing she’s started to call family. He’s like a little brother. And all this... I can take a lot. Anything that happens to me, I deserve. But he doesn’t. If anyone gets hurt it should be me. And yet she watches her family go out there and risk their lives, day after day, while she sits inside an office.

There’s a target on her back; going out with the team would put them at even more risk. If Jason Tennant ever finds me, he’ll kill me and everyone else I care about. When she left behind Scorpion, she knew she was signing her death warrant. It was a miracle she survived the first hit on her. She won’t live through the second. No one leaves Scorpion alive.

She hasn’t wanted to leave Riley. After Jack called, her roommate sat down in a chair, said nothing, and cried silently. Sam waited until the girl pulled it together. She’s right about one thing. She’ll never have Thornton’s job. Riley isn’t emotionally detached enough for the desk. She cares about everyone so much. That’s a good thing. Sam would never want to watch Riley become like her. Cold, distant, mistrustful. It wouldn’t suit her. She’s a spy, but first of all she’s a human being.

It’s only at times like this, when her emotions find cracks in the iron walls Sam’s learned to build around them, that she remembers she too is a human being. It’s happening more often now. She’s got the feeling she has Riley and Jack and Mac to thank for that.

Once Riley got her emotions back under control, Sam excused herself. Riley doesn’t argue at all. She should get out of there too, for a little while, but she won’t leave while Mac’s in danger.

But there’s someone else who must be worried sick about MacGyver too. We’re so focused on the mission sometimes we forget the real world owns part of us too. Sam’s the one who always assesses all the connections, who understands the human element of a case. So she hasn’t been able to get Wilt Bozer off her mind.

In all likelihood, he feels the most guilt over this. Because Wilt’s brother died, Mac became a vigilante. Which is what got him arrested in the first place. Bozer’s walking around with the thought that Mac is in prison because of him.

The house looks sad somehow. Maybe it’s just the sheets of rain that started falling as soon as Sam drove into the Hollywood Hills neighborhood, or maybe it’s the fact that she’s here alone, when every other time the place has been alive with Mac and Jack and Riley and sometimes even Thornton.

She ducks under the small overhang of the roof and knocks hesitantly on the door. “Wilt?” There’s some shuffling. “It’s me, Sam.”

The door opens and Bozer, in a t-shirt, sweatpants, and a pair of beat-up blue slippers, blinks at her. “What are you doing here?”

“Thought you might be glad for some company. It’s a big house to rattle around in all alone.” She folds her arms against the chilly, damp breeze and taps one foot. “Can I come in?”

“Sure. It’s a bit of a mess. Got a film festival coming up and I haven’t finished editing my footage yet.” He shrugs.
“Anything I can do to help?”

“Ever adjusted color balances frame by frame?” She shakes her head. “Didn’t think so. I can show you how it works though. If you want.” She follows him into the living room. “You want lunch? I was gonna make burgers.” His face falls. “I keep making too much food for one person, so if you want to help me eat it up...there’s no room for more leftovers in the fridge.”

“Sounds good.” She sits down in a chair in the living room, avoiding looking at the deck and firepit. There are too many memories of Mac out there. This whole house feels like him. I can’t imagine what it’s like for Bozer.

“What’s the film?” She asks, glancing at the computer, paused on a frame of a figure in silhouette against a lit window. It’s just an outline, but the features and posture are unmistakably Mac.

“Well, I’m really torn between ‘The Assassin’s Vow” or “Love and War’,” Bozer calls from the kitchen. “The whole premise is this international hitman who falls in love with the person he’s been sent to kill and ends up protecting her from his boss. He dies in the end, it’s pretty tragic.” Sam swallows. No prizes for guessing which one of those characters is Mac.

“We had to do the whole falling in love scene in silhouette because the only person I could find on short notice to play Catherine was Mrs. Simmons, and she’s like twenty years older than what I had in the script.” Bozer says. “I’ve got most of the editing for that part done, but everything else…”

Having to see Mac’s face, knowing he’s gone and for all Bozer knows never coming back, is torture. Sam doesn’t know if she can sit here and watch him work. Especially not if he makes it to that tragic ending. If things go wrong, Mac’s going to be dead for real. Sam already has enough memories of gruesome endings, and now in her dreams all those bodies have Mac’s face. If he makes one wrong move in there, he’ll die, alone and scared. She remembers that feeling. Water rushing in through broken windows, legs pinned under a smashed dashboard, cold and darkness and blood and pain and fear. She was fortunate. Mac might not be.

“What are you really doing here?” Bozer’s question startles her out of the darkness in her head.

“I just thought you’d want some company.” She waves off the beer he holds out; she doesn’t want to remember clinking bottles with Mac and the team to celebrate another success.

“I thought you guys were done coming now. I mean, you were Mac’s lawyers and now he’s back in prison and he’s probably never getting out.” The burger is almost charred to an inedible brick, a far cry from Bozer’s normal cooking.

“We’re not going to stop being your friends. We’re doing everything we can to bring Mac back home.” She sighs and glances at the computer.

“You think there’s any chance?” Bozer asks, and she can hear him squashing the hope in his voice. After everything life has thrown at him, he’s learned not to be optimistic. She reaches for his hand, and the two of them sit there, the ones on the outside, the ones who can do nothing but wait and hope.

“I think Mac would say there’s always a chance.”

Mac’s running out of time. He promised El Noche they’d be free tonight, and now it’s the morning and he still has no plan. He didn’t sleep last night, partially because his brain was going over every conceivable possibility for using what he has in the cell and what he can find around him, but mostly because of his new roommate.
Sancola’s threats terrify him. Not so much because Mac’s afraid the man will kill him if this doesn’t work, but because when he said he would make Mac pay, there was a hungry glimmer in his eyes. And he won’t stop calling Mac “puta”. He knows all too well that it’s just the Spanish term for a whore. *If I don’t deliver, he’s going to get something else he wants from me.*

And then the buzzing fluorescent light overhead flickers, and Mac has an idea. Not a good idea, but an idea. *And if it doesn’t work we’re dead anyway, so at this point screw it, we have to try.*

Mac knows he’s more of a marked man than ever, and he has no control over who he might run into in the halls. It feels like a much higher stakes version of running from that bully Donnie Sandoz and his cronies. So purposefully colliding with a guard so he can steal the man’s radio is terrifying. But he needs a battery for this to work.

On his way back from his work detail, he passes a guard coming through a narrow section of the hall. When he stumbles and catches his shoulder against the man’s chest, he’s flung back into the barred entry with an arm across his throat, and for a second everything about his plan goes out the window and he just wants to get away.

He struggles slightly and his fingers find the radio, tugging as carefully as he can. He doesn’t hear a thing the guard says over the roaring in his own ears. *Please don’t let me get caught.*

The guard’s so busy being angry with him that he doesn’t notice he’s missing his radio, and Mac’s able to walk away, shaking, tucking the radio out of sight. When he’s back in his cell, he pulls it out and tries to muster up as much enthusiasm as he can. “We’re getting out of here tonight.”

“With a radio?” Sancola asks.

“Battery. And I’m gonna need salt. We already have water.” He grins, and this time it feels a little more genuine. *If I wasn’t so afraid of what happens if I screw up, this would actually be fun.*

Now he just has to wait for food to come. But they can get to work in the meantime. Mac hates to ruin the books Ernie gave him, it’s clear from the tattered covers and taped pages that they were probably the man’s favorites. He takes note of the names on the covers. *A Tale of Two Cities,* Elie Weisel’s *Night,* and the one that surprises Mac most, a well loved copy of *The King’s Fifth.* Maybe they can replace the books after this is all over.

He pulls the lid off the toilet tank and starts tearing out pages from the books and soaking them. “We need to seal up all the openings in the room. Window, air vent, top of the door.” They get to work quickly. Mac hopes no one notices how dark the room is getting.

Ernie comes back, apparently just to check on Mac, while they’re covering the vent. Mac apologizes for the books, wincing at the almost physical pain in the man’s eyes, and hands him a small folded piece of paper. “Last door on the left,” he whispers, and the man shakes his head.

“It’s never going to work, kid,” he whispers. “Trust me. I’ve been here twenty-seven years. There’s no way out. You’ll only make it worse.”

“Please.” Something in Mac’s voice must be enough to convince him.

“Okay, your funeral, kid.”

They’ve just finished sealing up the door when a guard comes by with their meal. The food they bring is a tasteless block of ground-up cafeteria leftovers. *Yay. And I thought Grandpa Harry’s meatloaf was disgusting. It’s got nothing on Nutriloaf.* Mac’s very, very familiar with the prison food. *It tastes like shit, but they add a lot of salt to try and cover that up. And right now, that’s going*
“to come in handy. He shoves the gross block into a sock.

“If you wanna take a piss, it’s now or never,” he says, shrugging at El Noche. “So unless you want
to hold it until we’re out…” The man shrugs and gets up. Once he’s done, Mac shoves the sock in
the water tank and then starts squeezing it into the toilet bowl.

Sancola sits on the edge of his bunk and watches.

“Are you making soup in the toilet?”

“Actually, I’m making hydrogen.” Mac grabs the radio off his bunk. “The salt and water form an
electrolyte solution and the battery will cause electrolysis, and split the water molecules into oxygen
and hydrogen. And hydrogen is extremely flammable.”

“What did you just say?”

_The more worried I am, the more big words I use for whatever I’m doing. It always drives Jack
crazy_.… He can’t think about Jack right now. “The water and salt are going to react with the
electrical current from the battery and the gas will collect at the ceiling, because it’s lighter than air.
And it likes to go kaboom.”

El Noche glares at him. “You’re going to blow up the cell, with us inside it?”

“That’s the plan.”

“You’re crazy, _puta_.”

“We have to get the door open somehow.” Mac starts pulling a string out of the mattress.

“You were always the _loco_ one. Liked fire too much,” Sancola says. “My people had plenty to say
about you and how you always managed to get away from them. Only reason I trust you now. But if
you cross me, you will be begging me to kill you when I’m finished with you.” Mac shivers and
keeps working the string loose.

They’re better off waiting until it’s late. The best bet is to go right as shift change is about to happen,
since the guards on duty will be tired and less likely to respond rapidly. There’s no real sense of time
in here, but Mac knows that the guard at the end of their hall goes for a smoke every hour, like
clockwork. He counts each time the faint smell drifts back to them, and when he knows they have an
hour left, it’s time to go to work.

He and Sancola move the bunk bed from the corner so it’s directly under the flickering light, and
Mac climbs up to get to work. He can smell the hydrogen in the air, it’s collecting nicely just like he
wanted it to. He holds his breath and pulls the cover off the light. As soon as he gets hold of the
wires he needs, the bulbs blink out and the room goes utterly dark. Mac swallows down a surge of
panic. _He needs you to be able to help him escape. He’s not going to attack you here in the dark._

Mac carefully positions the wires and attaches his string, then climbs down, eyes adjusting to the sim
light filtering in. He wads up a couple of the leftover book pages and hands them to El Noche. The
man frowns at him, and Mac realizes he’s failed to explain something again.

“I’m going to spike the air pressure in here. Either these go in your ears, or blood comes out.” He
pulls the mattress off the bed. “Wrap this around your head, and get under there.” He grabs his own
mattress and follows, clutching the string, shivering at the way his body is pressed tight against
Sancola’s in the small space. _This is going to go really well, or really badly_. He pulls the string and
ducks. There’s a massive bang, a burnt smell, and when Mac peeks out from under the bunk the door
is laying in the hallway. One door down. Only about a hundred more to go.

Alarms are already blaring. He and El Noche scramble out and start running down the hallway. Mac can hear the guards yelling behind them.

“What’s the plan now, puta?” Sancola asks. “All the doors are locked!”

“Not this one.” Mac pulls open the door that Ernie, thankfully, did leave the small piece of paper in. And they run.

At least until they reach the next locked door, which has voices behind it. No, no, no. Mac tries to turn them around, but the bars behind them slam shut as well. They’re trapped, and there are voices on the other side of the door, and they’re getting closer. Mac presses himself back against the wall.

We’re done. It’s over.

The door opens, and he swallows hard. Maybe, just maybe, they’ll be lucky and the guards will run through and not notice the two people pressed in a shadowy corner. When is my luck ever any good?

He can see that El Noche is holding something sharp in his hand. Mac doesn’t know what it is, doesn’t care. We can’t take that many guys at once. He just hopes that blade isn’t meant for him. His thoughts play out in slow motion, the guards shouting as they find the two, Sancola cursing as he stabs the makeshift knife into Mac’s stomach, punishment for failure.

The guards suddenly fall back. “They’re in the kitchens. Come on.” Mac wonders dimly if Jack’s created a diversion. “You stay here in case they double back.” He peeks around the corner. There’s only one man left, walking slowly and uncertainly toward them. Sancola moves past Mac, holding his shiv, and as the guard takes another step Mac sees the man’s face in the flashing red lights. It’s the guard who let Mac off the hook for work duty. “No!” He shouts, shoving El Noche’s hand aside. He tackles the guard into the wall, slamming him up against the barred door behind them. He’s out cold. Mac fumbles on his belt for his keys. Hurry, hurry, hurry.

“What did you do that for?” El Noche hisses.

“Let’s try to get away without killing anyone. They’ll never stop hunting us if we do.” He doesn’t deserve to die. Mac’s pretty sure he’d have done the same if it was any guard, though. No matter what they’ve done to me, I don’t want to kill them. He holds up the keys. “Follow me. I have an idea.”

When they get to the laundry room, Sancola grabs Mac’s arm. “What are you doing?”

“Getting us out. Trust me.” He fumbles through keys until he finds the one for the door. “You have to do exactly what I say.” There’s a work roster sheet hanging by the entrance and Mac snatches the paperclip off it. Might come in handy.

He saw a window near the dryers when he was working. It’s barred, but he thinks he can fix that. We still need a way up. He shoves over a shelving unit and begins removing the shelves, unscrewing the ends with the paperclip he found. When he’s done, it’s a passable ladder. El Noche stares at it skeptically.

“We’re three stories up. That won’t be long enough.”

Mac shoves a handful of sheets into the man’s hands. “Tie these together, tie the end to this pipe, and set them over there.” Sancola nods, and Mac begins scrounging through the chemicals that were on the shelves. When he finds a couple bottles of rubbing alcohol, he grins. Thought I remembered those were there.
“What are you so happy about?” El Noche snaps. “The guards will find us soon, and there’s no way out of here. Only more hallways.”

“I don’t have time to explain everything. You’ll just have to trust me.” Mac rolls over one of the large trash cans that hold dirty laundry and dumps everything in it onto the floor. “Go find a fire extinguisher.” When the man comes back with one, Mac takes it and hands him the lid to the can. “Hold this on.” Thankfully it’s a CO2 type. At least something’s going right.

Archimedes, the mathematician, not my dog, once said, give me a lever long enough and I will move the earth. Granted, Ol’ Archie wasn’t taking into account the relative tensile strength of steel bars and a wooden mop handle, but I think he might be onto something. Mac shoves the lid on the trash can and El Noche holds it still while Mac sprays the contents of the fire extinguisher inside. As soon as he’s done he pushes the lid off, just a little, and starts pouring in the alcohol.

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It’s a process called chemical embrittlement. Or in normal person speak, freezing the metal until it will snap. Mac’s mixture is ready, and he dips the end of the mop into it, spreading the liquid along the bars. It works fast, and when he forces the mop handle against the steel, the ends of the metal snap free and the bars clatter to the floor. Mac kicks out the window and leans through the hole.

“Hand me the sheet rope.” He tosses it out, angling it so the fabric falls down into the Yard.

“This is your genius plan, puta? We’re still going to be inside the yard.”

“Oh, we’re not going down.” Mac grins, feeling slightly hysterical at how close they are to freedom. “Bring the ladder.” They scramble onto the roof, pulling the ladder up just as the guards put their heads out the window.

Mac rolls onto his back, panting, shaking with relief when the guards buy the rope decoy and run off. It’s raining slightly, and the mist feels good on his face. Now we just have to make our way to the guards’ passthrough and we’re free. He scrambles to his feet and leads the way across the rooftops.

It’s a long way down. Mac tries not to think about it, but it’s hard to run along the top of the passthrough without thinking about what will happen if his clumsy side gets the better of him. The prison shoes have slick, gripless soles, and the roof is damp and slippery. He catches himself on a particularly bad stumble and shivers. Don’t get yourself killed now, after all this.

The drop to the ground is terrifying too, and Mac thinks he might have twisted an ankle. Now, he’s following Sancola, heading for the prearranged meeting spot were the others from the Merida cartel who will get them out of the country are waiting.

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“Okay, I got you out, like I promised,” Mac pants, resting his hands on his legs. He’s still sore from days ago, and running hurt. “Now you’re going to take care of things, right?”

El Noche smiles and whistles, and several men burst out of the trees. Mac feels a gun shoved against the small of his back.

“What’s this?”

“I have friends. Who tell me things. Things like, for instance, the story you telling me was all lies. You were never in business with La Ola. I’ll admit, it was a decent lie, but within an hour I knew your story was a fake.” He smiles. “But you weren’t lying about being good enough to get us out. So I decided you might still be useful.”
Mac shivers, cringing back away from the fierce gleam in Sancola’s eyes. There’s no point in lying and trying to salvage the story now.

“And I believe you will continue to be if...properly motivated.” He nods to the man behind Mac. “I think your life is a good enough motivation to help me, eh?”

“Like you said, I’m an opportunist,” Mac shrugs, trying to play it cool. “If helping you helps me, I’m all for it. You don’t need that gun, I’m a reasonable person.”

“You have plenty of guts. I like it.” El Noche grins again. “But you see, I don’t trust you that much.” And then there’s a sharp, sudden pain, and Mac’s world goes black.

The second the alarms go off, Jack feels a small smile tugging at the corners of his mouth. That crazy kid actually did it. Jack’s been worried half out of his mind about Mac. I couldn’t get back to him with what he asked for. He probably sat there waiting and hoping. Maybe he even thought we bailed on him after everything.

Jack can’t wait for this to be over so he can reassure Mac that nothing’s going to make Jack decide to leave.

When Riley calls him back to report that the last security cam footage of Mac showed him and El Noche climbing out the laundry room window, Jack can barely contain a big ol’ Texas “Hell Yeah”. He’d probably have shouted if it weren’t for the fact that he’s trying to avoid any of the other guards noticing him and pulling him into a search party. He heads for the woods closest to where Riley’s sat feeds are showing Mac and Sancola heading on the roofs.

By the time he convinces the gate guard he’s joining up with a search party already combing the woods, Riley’s lost sat view of Mac. Jack hurries to his last known location and follows a churned up trail of footprints through the brush and trees.

He calls Riley back when he reaches a clearing. “I’ve lost the trail here. Are you sure you can’t get sat view?”

“All the cover is throwing our thermal imagers.” Jack starts walking in circles, and the something on the ground catches his light and his eye.

That’s blood. Jack’s seen it too many times not to know it on sight. And there are fresh tire tracks as well, probably made after the light rainshower that happened earlier in the day. “Riley, I’ve got blood. And tire tracks.” He snaps a picture and sends it her way, and he hears the sharp intake of breath. “Think you can figure out what kinda car they belong to?”
He can hear Riley typing. “Those are pretty standard issue tires, Jack. There’s multiple sedans they could be on. I can narrow it down a little, but not much. And there’s hundreds of cars crossing the border. I’m monitoring every road south of the prison.”

“I’m goin’ after him, Riley. I can’t leave him with them.” Jack shudders at the thought of what those men might do to Mac. If they leave with him now, if they get away, Jack may never see the kid again. And if he does, Mac will be a shell of who he was. If that’s not the case already. “Give me whatever you’ve got and I’ll try to track him down.”

Jack’s already heading back toward the parking lot and his truck. At least he has a full tank of gas. He’s in the driver’s seat when his phone rings again. Riley. Please be good news.

“Jack, we have a car headed toward the border with a taillight flashing a pattern.” That has to be Mac. Jack sighs with relief and leans his head on the steering wheel. “I got them crossing the border a little more than two minutes ago. They’re tapping out an SOS.”

“Send me their location.” Jack turns the truck’s engine over and pulls out of the parking lot. He’s never going to sign out tonight. It doesn’t matter, after this op’s done he wants to bury Frank Morris six feet under the Texas sand.

His phone pings with a moving marker, Riley’s got her sat tracking enabled now. “We’ll get you a tac team en route.”

“I don’t have time to wait for them. I’ve gotta find him. Keep me posted on where the car’s headed.” Jack floors the pickup, cutting through the late night...or is it early morning now? traffic.

He should be tired, he’s been awake almost twenty-four hours at this point. But he’s as wired as if he drank three espressos back to back. Mac is in danger and that’s all that matters right now. He thinks he could keep going indefinitely, until he finds a way to bring the kid back home where he belongs.

An antelope darts across the open highway, and Jack brakes just enough to avoid it, feeling the back end of the truck shimmy. He knows he should be careful, he can’t help Mac if he’s dead, but something tells him the longer Mac spends in El Noche’s hands, the less likely they are to get him back alive. And even if they do, he might be broken beyond repair.

MEXICO

THIS SECRET COMPOUND ISN’T SO SECRET ANYMORE

Mac really, really hopes someone saw the signal he was making with the taillights. The SOS is pretty universal, almost anyone who sees it should have at least called it in. He can’t help but wonder how far away help is. Once they crossed the border it was out of the American police’s hands, but maybe Riley’s been listening in on radio chatter. Maybe she was able to find out at least where they crossed, maybe find them on a camera...

He knows he fell asleep at some point, he just hopes he kept sending the message long enough for someone to find them. The trunk of the car he was stuffed into was so dark and stuffy, he couldn’t help passing out after a while. Now they’re on a bumpy road that banged his already abused body against the car and woke him up. They’re probably getting close.

Then the car slams to a stop and the trunk opens, El Noche and a couple new faces grinning down at Mac. They grab him before he can start moving and drag him out of the trunk, adding some new bruises to the collection he already has. And then a fist slams into his stomach and knocks his breath out of him, and he’s dragged up the steps and into a very, very nice house, only to be flung into a
chair, struggling uselessly as someone duct-tapes his wrists to the arms.

“I hear you’re quite good at making bombs,” El Noche says, prowling around Mac like a cat toying with its captured prey. “As a matter of fact, some of my men are quite familiar with your work.” He gestures to a tall man with a gun and half his face horrifically scarred. “That’s a talent I’d very much like to put to use.”

“I’m not going to help you kill people,” Mac hisses around the pain in his stomach. “Your men are killing families. Children. I’m never going to be a part of that. So if that’s what you want from me you might as well shoot me now.”

Sancola bends down, hands on his knees, studying Mac’s face. Mac glares back with all the determination he can muster, and it must back up his words, because El Noche finally stands up with a sigh. “Well. I was actually prepared to forgive your little lie and offer you a new deal, after everything I just saw you do. But if you don’t want to take it, then I suppose that’s up to you. But before you decide...I don’t think we made the terms of our earlier agreement clear,” El Noche purrs. “I like you, Angus. I do. So I’m not going to kill you. But I think our little deal implied that whatever you’ve done for La Ola, you’ll do for me.” His hand slips down Mac’s cheek and neck, one finger tracing his collarbone. “And since you lied about making their heroin...it seems there’s really only one thing left of that bargain.”

Mac thrashes and tries to pull away. “That wasn’t what we agreed to!”

“Seems to me a little bitch like you should be happy about this arrangement.” El Noche says, a cold sneer in his voice. “I thought you were the sort to do anything to survive. Was I wrong?” He gestures to a man carrying a large gas cylinder. “Do you know what this is, puta?”

Mac nods. He can see the label. “Nitrogen gas.”

“You are not the only one who knows how to use chemistry. I actually got this idea from you Americans and your love of waterboarding.” He smiles cruelly. “Inhaling pure nitrogen won’t kill you right away. It’ll poison you slowly. I hear it feels a bit like drowning.” Without further warning, a mask is slapped over Mac’s face and someone drives their fist into his stomach, forcing him to gasp out the breath he was holding. His frantic inhale sucks in nothing but nitrogen.

His lungs are burning, his body reacting instinctively to the lack of oxygen by thrashing and struggling. He can hear laughter, and then the mask is pulled away, leaving him shaking and gasping for air, feeling like he’s choking on liquid in his lungs, and tears streaming down his cheeks.

“That was just a taste,” El Noche whispers, grabbing Mac's hair and yanking his head back to stare down into his eyes with a cold glare. Mac fights off a surge of absolute panic. No, no, no. He doesn’t want to be reminded of how much like Connors this man is, but there’s no help for it. “There’s more where it came from. Ready to make a deal, puta?”

“Ready to do this.” Mac spits in the man’s face. El Noche steps back, rubbing a hand across his cheek.

“Hmm. Feisty little bitch. I like it. But I’m afraid I’d have a little too much fun breaking him, and he might not be so useful to us afterward. Perhaps another time.” El Noche turns and walks to the door. “I’ll come back when he’s feeling more...cooperative.” Mac gasps for air, panic making his breathing even more of a struggle than the nitrogen is. “And then I will show you just how long I can make a minute last.”

I can’t do that again. I can’t. Please, no. But there’s nothing he can do as the mask is slapped back
on except struggle and pray he passes out quickly. But he doesn’t. They slap him awake every time he starts drifting, until he can’t tell whether he’s awake or trapped in a nightmare.

###

He’s too weak to fight back when they take his clothes, when they drag him through the building, when they tie his hands and leave him naked and struggling for breath in a shadowy bedroom. Get out, get out, get out. His brain isn’t functioning, it’s just screaming in pure terror. Because if no one got his message he’s going to be here for the rest of his life. And there’s no escape into solitary this time. He thought going back to prison would be the worst thing that could happen. But this is a thousand times more terrifying. There’s no escape. They can do what they want and no one will even try to stop them.

He blames the pathetic little whimpers that escape on the poison still flooding his lungs. They’ll take what they want, whenever they want, and I won’t be able to stop them. He can barely move his hands, let alone create a way to get himself out of this situation. He shivers. The room isn’t cold, it’s actually stuffy and humid, with flies buzzing lethargically at the shuttered windows. That small sound magnifies itself into a roaring in his ears. Every seam in the quilt underneath him is pressed painfully clearly into his unprotected skin, and he can feel the change of material from rough to soft in the various patches.

The hypersensitivity that his body reacts to panic with usually saves his life. He’s able to see tiny details, things other people might overlook, things that can save his life. His hands don’t shake, and he’s capable of building things almost by touch alone, as he’s done too many nights to count. He can hear someone coming, someone who could find them, sometimes even before Riley’s surveillance equipment can.

But now it’s just going to make this a living hell. Usually he can escape, use the part of his brain that’s rational and not instinctive to overpower the part that feels and hurts and begs for it to stop. But now all those formulas, all that knowledge, is swirling together in a misty haze. There’s nothing solid enough to hold onto. The only real things in the world are the things he’s so painfully aware of.

The screech of the door opening sends a blade of pain through his skull and a spike of terror into his heart. His vision is blurring, fading in and out, but El Noche is memorable. He’s no longer wearing the neon orange prison clothes. He’s changed into a dark robe, open to show a bare chest, and just that detail is enough to push Mac’s already painful, difficult breathing into a wheezing gasp.

The man walks up, trailing his fingers up the length of Mac’s body as he passes the bed. The touch burns like wildfire. When he reaches Mac’s cheek, the man brushes it softly with the back of his hand, then tangles his fingers in Mac’s hair.

“You should consider yourself lucky. Plenty of my men wanted a chance at the pretty little gringo.” El Noche’s laugh is terribly unsettling. “But they know not to touch what belongs to their boss. Unless I give them the word.” He leaves the threat unfinished, but the cruel gleam in his eyes doesn’t need interpreting.

Jack, please, get me out of here! Mac’s not sure why the first thought his mind has for protection is Jack. Jack’s barely even started using Mac’s name and not calling him something stupid. And the last time he promised to help Mac, things fell apart and he wasn’t there. He didn’t save me then. Why should he do it now? But the thought remains, even as El Noche turns toward him with that predatory grin. Jack, help me!

###
Jack’s been driving like a bat out of hell all night. He’s fairly sure the suspension on the truck is shot, he ran over an armadillo and those things are almost as bad as a roadside bomb. When it hit the undercarriage he instinctively swerved and threw one arm out to protect the phantom EOD tech in the passenger seat. Charlie, brace up! We’re gonna roll! He could smell the heat and dust and scorching metal and rubber. He could almost see Charlie’s startled face as the humvee crashed onto its side and began to slide.

The flashback only lasted seconds before Jack realized he was in a different desert, on his way to save a person with a very different mentality about things that blow up. But he doesn’t feel any less determined to bring that kid home safe too.

He’s following the blinking dot on the map, which stopped just a little after sunrise. And Riley’s sat views confirmed it wasn’t just a drop and switch of vehicles, there’s a large compound at that location. She’s got the tac team en route, and her ETA matches Jack’s almost exactly. They should beat him by ten minutes but speed limits are for those not rescuing their partner from death or worse.

He follows Riley’s reroute that takes him to the tac team’s location rather than the car and the compound. He wants to go straight to Mac, but it would be suicide. Still, he’s the first one breaching the doors, the first one clearing rooms. The team takes down the cartel members the find as fast and silently as possible; they don’t want this to turn into some kind of hostage situation or get Mac killed. Because if there’s any indication of something wrong, Jack knows the first person to pay for it will be that defenseless kid.

There’s a chair in the main room with slashed duct tape on the arms and a pile of torn orange and white prison clothing beside it. But there’s no sign of Mac. Jack feels a mounting fear at the sight. What’s happening to him?

He starts clearing a whole wing that appeared to be empty. Some instinct is telling him to check it, and he’s rarely been wrong. Come on, Mac, please be here.

And then Jack hears it, a low voice from a room in the hallway. “Let’s see about that minute now, shall we, puta?”

Jack doesn’t hesitate. He kicks open the door, puts two bullets in the guy standing over his partner and rushes to Mac. There will be time later to worry about whether El Noche’s injuries are fatal or not. Right now, Jack’s priority is the shaking, cringing, naked kid on the bed. What did that monster do to him? He hopes desperately that he was in time to keep the worst from happening. If he’s too late again...he’s failed Mac once this week already, and he can't bear the thought of doing that again.

Jack kneels by the side of the bed, hoping to appear less threatening. “Hey, Mac, kiddo, it’s time to go home.” His hand brushes against Mac’s arm and the reaction is instant.

“Get off me! Go away!” Mac wails, shoving desperately but uncoordinatedly at Jack’s hands with his own bound wrists. And then his voice breaks and he begins sobbing uncontrollably. “No, leave me alone. Please.” The last word is a drawn-out wail of anguish and desperation.

“Hey, buddy, calm down. It’s just me. It’s Jack.” He knows trying to touch or worse yet restrain the kid is going to just set off more and more panic. All he wants is to grab Mac up and get him out of this house, out of this whole country right now, but he can’t do that while the kid thinks Jack’s just another person trying to rape him.

Damn it. Damn every single one of them who brought him to this. Jack’s seen the kid wounded, scared, and heartbroken, but never once has he seemed so defenseless. So shattered.
Jack tries to ignore that he can see every scar, every bruise, every mark left on the kid’s body. Instead he focuses on catching Mac’s eyes.

“Hey, Carl’s Jr, come on. You know me.” He swallows back the tears that threaten to choke him and the sick feeling in his stomach. “I’m not gonna hurt ya.” He lets a little more of the Texas twang slip into his words.

“Go ‘way.” The kid’s curling up, clearly trying to protect himself.

“I’m not goin’ anywhere.” Jack sighs, running one hand through his hair and barely stopping himself from ripping it out. “We don’t leave each other. You go kaboom, I go kaboom, remember?” That moment feels like a lifetime ago.

Something in those words gets through to the kid, because he finally properly looks at Jack, blinking and shaking his head.

“Jack. You came?” The confusion and disbelief in his voice hurts.

“Yeah, buddy. I’m always gonna come.” A slightly quivering lower lip is all the warning Jack gets before Mac bursts into tears and clutches Jack’s shirt, burying his face in the older man’s shoulder. It’s such a sudden reversal from his earlier panicked struggles that Jack feels himself flinch a little, before he puts his arms awkwardly around Mac’s back and holds him close.

Jack’s surprised to see this much emotion from the normally stoic kid, but he’s scared to death and it looks like he’s been drugged. He’s gasping for air, his breaths are rattling and sound thick and difficult, and his pupils are blown wide.

He cuts the rope off Mac’s wrists and wraps the kid up in the threadbare quilt that was on the bed, making sure he’s decently covered before anyone else from the Tac team shows up. He’s been traumatized enough for one week. He doesn’t want to think about what’s going to happen when Medical insists on looking him over. Jack picks Mac up carefully, cradling him against him close enough that the kid can feel Jack’s solidity and warmth. Jack is willing to admit to himself that he needs the contact almost as much as Mac does. He needs to hang onto the proof that Mac is alive, that they have him back, that Jack can protect him again.

He doesn’t worry about the unmoving body on the floor or the tac team clearing the rest of the buildings. He can’t leave Mac. So he carries the kid outside and sits with him on the steps while the chaos spins on around them. He pulls out his phone and shoots a one handed text to Riley, holding the kid tight with his other arm. Got Mac. Safe. He’s alive, at least. That’s something.

When a medical tech comes up with a tank of oxygen and a mask, Mac begins to shake, turning away and burying his face in Jack’s shoulder. Jack waves the man back, holding Mac tight, helping the kid ride out the waves of trauma and fear. “Mac, it’s gonna be okay, but we gotta get you some fresh air in there, okay?” It takes at least ten minutes for the kid to accept help, even when the medic replaces the offered mask with a less constricting cannula. Mac doesn’t seem to want anything on his face, and he keeps pawing at the tubes every time they brush against his skin a different way. Jack has to keep a gentle grip on his hands to keep him from pulling the whole thing away.

Jack hates getting up at all to take the team leader’s debrief, but as the senior member of the group, he has to be there for it. Apparently Sancola survived Jack’s shots, he’s in critical condition but a medical team is en route to take him in for surgery...and questioning if he survives. The team rounded up most of the known cartel lieutenants in this sweep, although there are at least three unaccounted for. The warehouses of drugs in the back of the property are being cataloged and seized as evidence. Jack makes note of all of it, but leaves it to the team commander to relay the information.
to Riley. He has to get back to his kid.

Mac huddles, still wrapped in the blanket, on the steps where Jack left him. It’s so hot outside that the flagstone path in front of the house looks wobbly, but he hasn’t stopped shivering since Jack found him in that bedroom. Jack kneels beside him, trying to catch the downcast blue eyes.

“Mac…”

“Don’t. Don’t say you’re sorry. Please.” Mac’s voice is hoarse and shaky.

Jack sighs. “I was gonna say, let’s go home.”

Riley can’t stop pacing the helipad. The Phoenix chopper is due back any second now, and she needs to see, with her own eyes, that Mac is still with them. She sees Sam standing near the door, waiting patiently except for a repetitive tapping of her foot. The low thrum of blades cuts the still air, and then the black helicopter rises into view.

Riley steps back as it lands, blades whipping her already horrifically snarled hair into an insane mess. The rotors whine to a stop and people start stepping out. Williams and his tac team emerge, and then she sees Jack, supporting Mac with an arm slung over Jack’s shoulder.

Mac looks like he’s been through hell and back. It’s not just the bruises, it’s the shattered fear in his eyes. He’s swaying on his bare feet, wearing Jack’s extra clothes for what must be the fifth time, and shivering in spite of the heat.

Riley knows better than to rush forward and hug him, even though it’s all she wants to do. She waits for Mac and Jack to come to her. But the second they block the tac team’s view of her, Riley bursts into tears.

“I’m so sorry,” Riley says softly. “We should never have put you in there.”

“It’s done,” Mac whispers. “I finished the job.”

Sam steps up, taking over when Riley’s tear-choked voice betrays her. “It is over. And I promise, you don’t have to go back. We’ve already brought up formal proof that you couldn’t have been responsible for the theft. Your parole’s being reinstated as we speak.”

When Riley called Patty to tell her the op was over and Mac was coming home, the woman sounded like she might have been crying. And a few minutes after Riley hung up, she received a message from a encrypted address labeled “Oversight” that informed her that Mac’s case was being taken care of and his work release would be reapproved within the hour. I still want to kill whatever faceless drone Oversight is, but at least he fixed this mess. They shouldn’t have to explain why Mac is no longer in a supermax; the entire escape will be dealt with and Sancola will turn up in the closest hospital, apparently wounded in a single-person escape attempt.

The medical team who was on standby is coming up to them now. “According to Agent Williams’s report, Technical Consultant MacGyver sustained serious injuries on the operation,” a young, sharp-faced nurse says to Jack. “We’d like to take him to the infirmary right away.”

“I’m fine,” Mac whispers, trying to wave them off. “I just want to go home and sleep. It’s not that bad.”

“I’m sorry, Mr. MacGyver, but protocol for a situation like this is running a full-spectrum infection test after any sexual assault incident that happens on an official operation.” the nurse’s clinical voice
makes Riley shudder, but it’s somehow better than pity would be.

“I don’t…” Mac’s voice trails off.

“Please, let them do this.” Riley feels sick at the thought of tests coming back positive. *What will happen to him then?* He certainly won’t be cleared for field work, at least not for some time, even if it’s something treatable. And if it’s not...she can’t bear the thought of watching sweet, joyful, enthusiastic young Mac wither away. She knows that’s a highly unlikely outcome, there are treatments that can at least put off the worst, but still, it sickens her. Her body moves on autopilot when they follow the medical team off the roof.

She feels even sicker when they can’t go into the exam room with Mac. By this point he’s almost zombie-like, following orders with a deadness in his eyes that scares Riley. She almost wishes he’d fight back, refuse to go with the medical team, beg to have her and Jack, or at least Jack, there with him. But it’s like he’s surrendered to something inside. Something dark and hopeless.

Riley can’t drink coffee. She can’t sit still. If something terrible has happened, if he’s going to get sick, if...the thoughts are spinning around her head and making the room whirl. *If something happens to him, it’s my fault.*

She doesn’t realize she said it aloud until Jack puts his hands on his shoulders. “None of this is your fault, Riles.”

“I okayed the op. Against every concern I had. I put him in there. And then…” She takes a deep breath, forcing herself to calm down. Mac has enough to deal with. He doesn’t need to know that what happened is hurting her too.

Sam leaves, she’s got the interrogations of El Noche’s henchmen to do, and Riley has the feeling the woman’s going to be taking out her anger there; there was a dangerous gleam in Sam’s eyes when she got up. Riley paces. Jack tears off his fingernails down to the quicks and tosses the scraps in the general direction of the closest trash can.

When Mac comes out, he still looks lost and bewildered, still empty.

They sit with him while he waits. Riley asks before she puts a hand on his shoulder, and after a long minute he nods softly. She sits in silence, feeling the shudders that course through his body and make Riley think he just might shake apart in her hands.

It feels like days before the doors from the lab side of the infirmary open, and a white-coated doctor, who Riley recognizes as the kind but firm Jessica Grey, steps through, the stereotypical clipboard in her hand.

“Mr. MacGyver, please come with me.”

He struggles to his feet, clearly panicking. Jack stands with him. “It’s gonna be okay, kid. Whatever happens. We’ve got you.”

“I don’t want to be alone,” he whispers, and Riley’s heart shatters.

Doctor Grey glances from Mac to the others, clearly aware of the situation. “If he gives permission, I can tell him with you here. You’re his field team, there are reasonable allowances. Mr. MacGyver, are you willing for me to share the results with you with your team present?”

He nods, and the doctor must know that’s as good a response as she’s going to get. “We’ll be waiting on some of the test results for a while,” she says. “But we’ve done initial screenings and we’re optimistic. There’s no sign of any current active infection, which frankly, given the situation, is
a miracle.” Riley collapses into sobs, feeling Jack’s arms around her.

“We’ve contacted Bishop to get permission to do a test on Connors as well,” Doctor Grey continues. “That might take a few days to complete, but we’ll report the results as soon as we get them.”

“Thank you.” Jack lets go of Riley with one hand and gives the woman a warm, firm handshake. *Maybe, just maybe, we’ll survive.*

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**RILEY AND SAMANTHA’S APARTMENT**

**IT’S TOO LATE FOR ANY SANE PERSON TO BE AWAKE**

Sam’s surprised when her phone rings, startling her awake at one a.m. She’s instantly alert, though, years of experience in the intelligence community and beyond meaning anything like this could mean the difference between life and death, and seconds count.

The number calling isn’t the Phoenix, and it hangs up before she answers. She doesn’t recognize it, and rolls over to go back to sleep. *Drongos. I hate American telemarketers.* Her phone is supposed to be unlisted, since it’s Phoenix issued, but somehow that never seems to be successful.

And then it rings again, same number. Sam answers, voice curt until she hears the soft, broken sound on the other end of the line. She instantly drops the coldness, because she recognizes that voice. *Mac.*

“Mac? What do you need?”

She hears him swallow hard, gasping for breath. “Nothing. I’m sorry, I’ll leave you alone…” *He’s going to hang up.*

“No, no, no, it’s okay…” All she gets is the humm of static.

Sam knows that desperate, confused grief all too well. She also knows how it might end. She thinks briefly about waking Riley, bringing her along, but decides against it. Riley hasn’t really slept since this mission started almost a week ago. She’s dead on her feet. And she’s grieving, blaming herself, tearing her heart apart. Sam doesn’t want to give her another thing to add to her list of things she could have prevented had she done things differently. *Someday, she’ll understand that there’s no easy way out. Missions go wrong. People get hurt. And it’s no one’s fault but the people we go there to put away.*

She leaves a note for Riley on the kitchen table, after sparing a glance into the girl’s room to see her sleeping restlessly but at least apparently deeply. *She’s hurting so badly.* Sam knows she’ll be needed, a lot, in the coming weeks. And she’s more than willing to be a shoulder to cry on. For anyone who needs her. And right now, that anyone isn’t Riley.

She breaks four speed limits on the way to the house. *I can’t leave him alone. Not after everything.* She knows he has Bozer there, but Bozer can’t really understand, and Mac’s reaction to calling her was anything but good. *He doesn’t want to bother anyone. He doesn’t want to be a problem.* She’s heard those same words pound in her head on the worst nights, in the darkest hours, when the only solution she could come up with was to make it go away forever. To be gone. *I’m not going to let him slip away.*

She doesn’t knock, because when she gets to the house she smells woodsmoke. She already knows where Mac will be. She walks around, stumbling over a mechanical lawn sprinkler and a gears-and-rebar rain gauge and windsock combination, and steps into the flickering light. Mac’s sitting on the edge of the firepit, staring into the flames. She taps the side of the house to let him know she’s there,
and he jumps to his feet, startled.

“You’re here?”

“What else do I have to do at one in the morning? Mind if I join you? It’s a little chilly.” He nods slowly, and she steps into the spreading warmth, rubbing her arms and sighing.

“Why did you come?” he asks, poking the embers.

“You called.”

“I said I was okay. I’m fine.”

“No, you’re not. But that’s okay. I’m not fine either.” She sits down. “Having trouble sleeping?”

He only nods.

Sam hands him a Tim Tam; she always keeps a stock of her childhood favorites in the pocket of her hoodie. “You don't need to talk till you're ready.” They sit there watching the night sky. Stars whirl overhead, a bird Sam doesn’t know the name for yet trills. And Mac watches the dying embers of the fire and cries silently.

“They all know I’m broken,” he finally whispers. “They all know. It’s not about what...what happened...this time. I’ve had worse. But now they know.” He sniffles and wipes his face like a small child.

“I think they already knew.” Sam says softly. “But I know one thing for certain. No matter what, they are always going to care about you. Nothing you can do, nothing anyone can do to you, will destroy that.” Because if I could, I would trust them enough to tell them everything. And I know they wouldn’t chase me away.

She wants to tell him everything. About The Scorpion. About Deborah. About Brisbane. About a river and a car and a black site prison. About a second chance. But for her, talking about the past isn’t any kind of redemption, any kind of closure. It’s only a risk to the people she cares about the most in the world.

So she sits there in silence and lets him talk and yell and cry and finally, finally, fall asleep, leaning just a tiny bit against her shoulder. She pulls the blanket over him and sits there watching the sun rise.
Try telling that to the nightmares

He can’t get away. He’s surrounded, trapped, he can’t escape. The hungry eyes in the sea of orange around him aren’t even human, they’re feral and desperate. He tries to pull away, but there are hands on his arms, hands on his legs, hands on his body, they won’t let go, he’s crying and begging but they just won’t stop...

Mac gasps, shoving away the sweat-soaked sheets tangled around his body and legs and scratching frantically at his skin, scrubbing away the feeling of grasping, violating fingers. It was just a dream. I’m safe. I’m not there anymore. It’s not real. But it was real. It happened.

It’s the second time he’s woken up sobbing in the past four hours. That’s an improvement over last night at least. Yesterday morning he woke Bozer up at three, screaming and crying and begging the monsters in his nightmares to leave him alone. He shouldn’t have to deal with all this. I’m a mess.

He struggles to his feet, bracing a hand against the wall because his legs are shaking and weak and aren’t quite doing enough to hold him upright. I need to get that feeling off of me.

He’s sweating; he should take a shower, but he hasn’t been able to do that since Bishop. The sound of the running water the one time he tried sent him into a panicked flashback that ended with him curled up in a corner, where Bozer found him crying and shaking nearly half an hour later. He hadn’t asked any questions, but it was clear from the look on his face when he made Mac a mug of hot chocolate and practically forced him to drink it, fussing the whole time about how badly Mac had been shivering and how cold he was, that Boze is well and truly aware of the truth. How could he not be? When he touched you you yelled at him to leave you alone, to please stop, that you didn’t want it. He’s not stupid.

Mac carefully avoids looking at himself in the mirror. He already knows he looks like shit. His hair is greasy and dirty, his skin is striped with dried sweat, and his cheeks are hollowed out, wrists and ankles fragile, collarbones and ribs sharp and distinct. He’s been out for almost two weeks and nothing has changed. I’m falling apart. And what for? That wasn’t even close to the worst I’ve had it. He’s told himself that over and over. It was one time, and not that bad. I dealt with this and worse before, what’s different now?

Every time he tries to eat something more substantial than a granola bar, he throws up. He sleeps less than three hours a night, and any sleep he gets is restless and haunted by nightmares. It was one time. I’ve had so much worse. What the hell is wrong with me?

For a while he wondered if the test results from medical were wrong, if he was sick after all. But that
wouldn’t explain the nightmares. He hasn’t been this bad since...since the first time it was more than one guy in the same incident. He’d woken up half his cell block with the screaming nightmares for a week then. But this wasn’t even close to that bad and anyway, I’m used to it by now. Why am I falling apart?

Maybe because I thought it was over. When I was in CCI I knew it could happen again, any time. So after a while I just surrendered to it. Or got myself put back in solitary. And then I got out and I thought it would be over. But it wasn’t. For the first time in a long time, with that team, I actually felt safe. And then they sent me back and I got hurt all over again. He knows he shouldn’t blame his team, it wasn’t their fault, their hands were as tied as his. But some days that’s harder to remember.

It’s the only explanation he has for this that makes any sense. He needs explanations. He needs to be able to solve the problem, to fix this, to be okay again. If I can’t, then I’m no good to anyone. And I’ll go back. He can’t do that again. He can’t. So I have to be okay, now. But the more he worries about what will happen if he can’t cope, where he’ll be sent if he can’t go back to work, the sicker he feels and the less he sleeps.

He can tell it’s bothering Bozer, and Jack and Riley and Patty when they stop in. They came over a lot at first, but now it’s tapered off, when they saw the way he cringed away from all of them, the fear in his eyes. They probably can’t stand to look at me. They think I’m weak and pitiful. They shouldn’t have to be around someone who only makes them upset. They should just leave me alone. He hasn’t called Cage again since that one night. I didn’t think about it, or I wouldn’t have called her at all. I can deal with this. I can’t ask them for help.

Over and over, his team has promised to be there, to listen, to help, but they can’t understand. They don’t know what it’s like. And even if they could, they can’t help. They can’t make things go back to the way they used to be. He’s never going to be able to look at Jack or Riley or Patty or Sam and not know that they know.

And every time they see me, they’ll see everything, they’ll know exactly what I am, what I’ve always been. They’re never going to forget. It’s never going to be the same. He knows they want to help, they want him to talk, but he can’t stand the pity in their eyes. I didn’t want anyone to ever find out how much of a mess I am. That I’m too weak to protect myself.

Mac shakes himself back out of his thoughts and forces his mind back to the problem at hand. He has to get this sticky sweat off him, or he’s never going to be able to go back to sleep. He has to sleep. If he can just sleep maybe this will get better. I just want the nightmares to go away. I don’t want to feel their hands anymore. He already knows taking any medication will make it worse. The Phoenix doctor gave him an anti-anxiety medication that’s supposed to help him sleep, but the one and only time he took it he still had the same horrible nightmares and he couldn’t wake himself up. He was trapped in that awful room with Connors until Bozer heard him thrashing and came in and shook him awake. I’ve never reacted well to anything like that. The cold medicines his dad and Grandpa Harry had always insisted would help only ever made him hyperactive or gave him terrible, twisted fever dreams. At this point I’d try almost anything if I thought it would help, but nothing will.

He’s supposed to be going to a therapist, too, but they can’t send him to a civilian one and he can’t stomach the thought of going back to the Phoenix yet. So he keeps putting it off. He doesn’t want to talk about this to a total stranger. He doesn’t want to talk about it with anyone.

He soaks a washcloth at the sink and carefully pulls his shirt over his head, scrubbing desperately at his skin like he can scrub away the monsters that worked their way underneath it. Like he can scrub away the ghosts of the hands clutching at him.

There are dozens of raised red welts on his skin where he scratched at the feeling of hands. They
sting when he rubs the washcloth over them. The pain is familiar, in a way. He knows what’s there, so he can see the faint pale lines crossing below the welts, marks that are over three years old now, some more recent. *Just another thing I never want them anyone to see.* Mac is all shattered pieces and broken, jagged edges.

He leans on the sink and lets himself cry. He just wants to trust someone, but that’s not safe. *Everyone leaves eventually. You need to solve your problems yourself because no one else is going to solve them for you. No one is going to want you if they see how weak you are. If they find out what you’re doing to yourself, they’ll pity you even more.*

Mac drags himself back to his room, curls into a ball in his bed, and cries himself to a restless sleep.

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**THE PHOENIX FOUNDATION**

**IT DOESN’T FEEL LIKE IT SHOULD**

They don’t talk about the hole that hovers in the War Room. The very Mac-shaped hole.

Riley can see how much everyone’s affected. Jack paces restlessly, he spends hours in the training room and his knuckles are permanently bruised. Patty actually brings her coffee mug into the War Room with her, there are sharper lines in her frown, and she’s taken the glass bowl of paperclips off the coffee table.

Riley saw on the news last night that some ‘anonymously’ leaked footage of the conditions in the Bishop supermax is being brought forward to pressure a full investigation into the facility. She doesn’t even feel proud of herself. *It’s too late for Mac.*

She can’t forget what he looked like when he stepped out of that helicopter. He was *broken.* Jack had told her everything afterward, and she’s glad he put two slugs in Sancola’s chest. Even if that bastard did survive. *I guess he doesn’t deserve a quick death anyway.* Usually Patty at least requires a debrief and mandatory assessment after Jack does something like that, but this time she just let him walk out of the War Room after he finished telling her how the op ended.

Riley had to sort through the tac team’s evidence photo file, and what she saw will haunt her. She can’t imagine what it was like for Jack to be there in person. Somehow the picture that sickens her the most isn’t the knife-frayed rope Jack cut off of Mac’s wrists, or even the nitrogen tank. It’s the pile of tattered orange and white clothing dumped next to a chair with duct tape hanging from the arms. *Oh Mac.*

He’s not holding up too well either, and it’s breaking her heart to watch that downward spiral. She wants to be there. She wants to hold him and comfort him and tell him he’s not broken beyond repair, not ruined. But she sees the fear in his eyes when he looks at them. *It’s our fault. And he knows it.* Every time they’re on his front step he has to remember. He can’t look Riley in the eyes, he shies away from Jack involuntarily, and he barely acknowledges that Patty’s in the room.

*Maybe he’s better off without us.* She wants to tell herself that’s not true, but she just can’t sell that big of a lie. *We put him back inside. We let him down. We failed him.* It’s only fair if he never wants to see them again for the rest of his life.

The story they throw to his PO is that Mac is working from home, helping run computerized simulations of weather pattern effects on crops. Parker has bought the excuse so far, but Riley’s not sure how much longer they can continue to stall. *Is he ever going to want to come back after this?* It hasn’t gotten any better. Riley’s dark web searches to try and hunt down the last remaining
members of the Merida cartel ended with her discovering that El Noche’s surviving lieutenants are offering a three million dollar bounty on Mac. Dead or alive. As soon as Riley found out about it, they double checked to be sure all Sancola’s assets had been frozen, but the cartel didn’t just have the one compound. All the money and drugs there were seized, but there are probably two dozen other smaller sites in Mexico and the States. There’s no way for the Phoenix to find them all.

She’s sure it’s not the first time a cartel has put a bounty on Mac’s head. But the others probably all knew him as the Phoenix. And by the time they learned who he really was, he was already in prison. It’s a wonder he wasn’t killed in there. She can’t help wondering if and when this will come back to bite them.

She and Jack are both sitting almost rigidly in the chairs. There’s no smiles, no laughs, no joking, no Jack sitting on the arm of Riley’s chair and ‘accidentally’ falling on her, no Mac making his funny paperclip designs.

Patty’s shoulders seem a little less stiff when she walks in with a tablet. She looks more tired, more open, more human than Riley’s ever seen her. She gives Jack and Riley a sad glance.

“I’m sorry to put you both back in the field so soon. But we have a serious situation.”

Jack sits up a little straighter and clears his throat. “Who do I have to shoot? Just point me in the right direction.” Patty’s lips twitch. Jack means every word of that. He’s hurting, and Jack’s way of fixing things is to go hunt down the people responsible. Riley pities whoever it is they’re going after. Jack is a good agent, he won’t kill wantonly, but he’s also not going to make things any less painful than they need to be.

“In 2008, a Turkish diplomat was killed in Dubai. In 2010, a Ukrainian businessman in his own home. In 2013, a Masad operative. And there’s a whole file more of hits that we can confirm trace back to this man.” A blurry, half-visible picture of someone with dark hair and pale skin flashes onto the screen. “We have no name, he’s known only by his CIA file number. Suspect 218.”

“I can try searching for his trace on the dark web,” Riley says. “I have to be doing something. Maybe it will take my mind off Mac.

Patty shakes her head. “The CIA has been hunting him for years. He uses unconventional means to contact the people who contract with him. Never the internet. Sometimes he sends handwritten letters. He has only one pattern. He likes to contact his victims before killing them.” A series of short phrases pop up onscreen. Why is a raven like a writing desk? Time and tide wait for no man. The pipes, the pipes are calling… Riddles and song lyrics and short cliche phrases.

“So he likes to taunt his victims?” Jack asks. There’s a clear anger in that tone. He heard what people said to or about Mac in Bishop.

Patty gives him a sharp look, the kind that says, don’t make up your mind to take him down with a double headshot right now. “We’re not sure what it is, exactly. If it’s some sort of gloating, if it’s a game, if it’s clues. No one has ever survived to tell us. And today, my CIA contact informed me that they have reliable proof that S218 is here, in Los Angeles.”

“So what exactly are we doing? Just hunting this guy?” Jack asks. “If the CIA’s already on him, what are we gonna do?”

“This is CIA agent Rajit Patel, one of the head analysts on the S218 case.” Patty pulls up an image. “In the past twenty-four hours, he stole several classified government files and went dark. The CIA intercepted communication between him and S218 to the effect that he was planning to the
information to S218 in Los Angeles. The CIA isn’t sure who else is working with Agent Patel, if anyone. So my contact has asked the Phoenix to trail him to his meet and intercept.”

Riley nods. *We can do this.* She’s actually grateful for a field operation. It’ll be a welcome distraction. Sitting around here with nothing to do but think about how badly she screwed up their last mission has been torture.

Patty catches Riley’s arm on her way out. “You know what happened wasn’t on you, Riley.”

“It was my op.”

“It shouldn’t have had to be. I’m truly sorry for putting you in that position.”

“**You did what you had to do.**” Riley can’t blame Patty. Her intervention in Washington got the Phoenix back out from under the FBI’s thumb. Riley’s not sure how she managed that and doesn’t think she really wants to know. *But we **won’t** have to loan Mac out to anyone.* She can’t imagine what the consequences could have been if Patty hadn’t succeeded. *What if they decided to drag Mac back into the field right away? What if they’d asked for him now?* There’s no way Mac is anything close to field ready.

“I just want you to stop blaming yourself.” Patty sighs. “I know that’s almost impossible to ask. Believe me, I know.” Riley just nods. “But that wasn’t on us. That was Oversight’s decision, and I will be having strong words with him about it. I’ve already made it clear I disagreed with his methods in that operation, and there will be a meeting.” Her fingers clench tighter on Riley’s shoulder, and then when she notices Riley’s pained grimace, she relaxes, dropping her hand.

“I know.” *But there’s a whole world between knowing and accepting.*

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**HIGH END ART LOFT**

**JACK HATES BLACK TIE**

“Really? Of all the places to make an exchange, he’d come to an art gala?” Jack asks. He fiddles with his tie. “I’m gonna shoot him in the knee just for making me come to a place I have to wear a tie to get into.”

“You don’t get to complain until you’re wearing heels,” Riley jokes.

“Hey, I could use the tactical height advantage,” Jack responds. “I don’t see any tactical advantage to this noose around my neck.” *Except that maybe I deserve a real one.* Jack’s temporary joking mood dies as he’s painfully reminded who isn’t here.

He knows Mac would tease him endlessly about the tie, about this whole penguin suit. And Jack would bite back by saying it looks like the only way the kid’s ever going to have a fashion sense is when the Phoenix outfits them for missions.

*You try wearing **nothing** but orange for two years and see if you still care about what colors **match.**”* Jack can’t forget the kid’s comeback to the last time Jack made a smart remark like that. Mac spent *two whole years* in a place like Bishop. Jack watched less than a week and it almost destroyed him.

*I thought I understood. I thought I got it, after that time he flipped out on me in training. But that was nothing.* Jack’s nightmares are haunted by the memories of Mac in that compound, battered and naked and terrified. *If I’d been a little later, if we hadn’t been able to find him...* It doesn’t bear
Jack pretends to be interested in one of the colorful paintings hanging on the wall. It looks like a small child got into a dozen different cans of paint and went wild. Patty steps up beside him, delicately gripping the stem of her champagne flute. *No wonder there’s always alcohol at these things. You’d have to be drunk to want to buy that.*

“You know, my three year old nephew can paint better than this,” Jack mutters.

“I believe that’s a Chardin.”

“Looks like a ‘piece o’ Chardin’ to me,” Jack says. He expects Patty to move away again, but she doesn’t. Instead, she takes his arm and steers him to a quiet corner near a painting of a woman that’s all smeared with bloody red stripes. Jack looks away from it quickly. The painting’s illusion is so good he swears he can actually smell the coppery tang of drying blood. *Get it together, Dalton.* He knows the beginnings of a spiral, he’s been there before, when they lost Arnie in the Sandbox, when Cooper got hit... *The kid’s not even dead. Get a damn grip.*

“Jack,” Patty whispers. “You know what happened out there, it wasn’t your fault.”

“Yes it was. I got impatient. Didn’t wait for the guard to just leave on his own. If I hadn’t been breaking into that office I could have been there. I could have gone as soon as Riley lost visual.”

“And you could have blown both your covers, started a riot, and gotten yourself and Mac killed.” Patty looks directly into his eyes. “I know that what happened was terrible. But no amount of self hatred is going to undo it. And a good field agent has to be able to move on. You’re compromised, Dalton. You’re focusing on all the wrong things. You didn’t even see Patel come in.” She nods toward the man standing near the door, nervously taking a large gulp from his champagne. “You and Riley both are struggling. And I understand. But you need to focus on the mission. Sooner or later you both need to realize that the only way out is forward.”

“Keep an eye on him, guys,” Riley says. “Jack, Patty, he’s coming your way. Anyone he interacts with could be our man.” She’s following at a discreet distance.

“Got him.” Jack moves away from Patty, pretending to admire a statue made of gears and cogs and bike chain. *Damn, Mac would love this. Except he’d take it all apart to make some kinda freaky tracking device and piss off the artist.* Jack grins at the thought of an incensed creative arguing with a very determined and different kind of creative genius. *I’d pay good money to see that. Only reason I’d ever buy that pile o’ junk.*

Patel seems nervous, clearly searching the crowd. He doubles back after reaching the far wall. “Riley, he’s heading back your way.” Jack leans on the wall, and an elderly woman snaps at him for having his shoulder too close to a painting frame. *Well, excuse me for trying to save lives, lady.*

“I lost him,” Riley whispers. “Jack, I don’t have visual.”

“I lost him,” Riley whispers. “Jack, I don’t have visual.”

“No, Jack. He lost us.” She sighs. “He must be in the corner we can’t cover.” *Because we’re down an agent. Because a four-man team turned into three.* Jack swallows back the thought that this is his fault. *If I hadn’t left Mac alone, maybe he wouldn’t be so damn traumatized. If this guy makes the exchange, and someone dies...* He shakes his head and walks faster. *Like Patty said, it’s not on you. But he can’t make himself believe that.*

Riley’s voice drifts over the comms. “I have him. But I think he made the exchange. He’s not
wearing his jacket anymore.”

“Damn it,” Jack curses. Of course.

“I have Patel on the move,” Patty says. “He’s leaving.”

“His contact is still somewhere in the building,” Riley whispers. “I’ve got security feeds of all exits and no one matching our mark’s description has left yet.”

“Fan out. Cover the exits, search the crowd.” Jack can see Patty’s crimson dress as she moves through the crowd, pausing next to a twisted metal mask pinned to the wall with rebar.

They’re on the clock now. Their target has his intel. God only knows how soon he’s going to put it to use. Jack scans the crowd. Most are slightly tipsy, overly wealthy socialites, here to make a point and prove they have modern tastes. He’s looking for someone who’s trying to hard to blend in, and in a crowd like this that’s hard. Everyone’s wearing their own kind of masks. Everyone is pretending for the crowd.

Then Jack’s attention lights on a single figure leaning casually against a corner, staring up at the bloody-looking painting in fascination. Jack watches a strangely delighted smile creep across the man’s narrow features. That’s a little odd. Most of the other patrons have seemed, if not outright revolted, at least shocked by the painting. This man seems to love it. Maybe he just has the same taste as the artist. But in Jack’s experience, the kind of people who love to see blood are usually the ones who are in the business of drawing it.

There’s something about the way the man moves. Jack’s seen that stance, it’s the natural motion of someone who at any second is prepared to brace themselves, draw a gun, and fire. “I got him.” Jack starts to move in, and the man glances his way. Oh crap. He’s been made. The man begins to dart through the crowd, bumping into several annoyed admirers of a small statue that looks like a lot of interconnected blobs. “He’s on the move!”

The man beats Jack into the hall by a wide margin. Art lovers are so rude sometimes. No one wants to move and let Jack through.

When he gets to the hallway, he can hear Riley and Patty’s heels clicking behind him. There’s a muffled angry yell as someone, probably Patty, stomps on someone’s foot to get them out of the way. See, the heels were a way better tactical advantage.

“Stairwell!” Jack yells, and runs to glance down. Their guy’s practically parkouring down, leaping from the outside of one landing to the next.

“Don’t just stand there!” Patty shouts. “Go get him!”

Jack breaks into a stumbling run, damn, I hate slippery dress shoes, but he already knows he doesn’t have a prayer of catching this guy. He’s three floors below Jack already.

“Jack! Don’t touch the railing!” Riley shouts, and he automatically jerks his hand away. There’s a sizzling sound and a yell, and Jack looks up to see that she’s jammed the small taser from her purse against the metal. Their target crashes to the floor, sprawled out on the white tile.

Jack practically gallops the rest of the way down. If he broke his neck, I’m gonna be pissed. I need another punchface guy right now. But when he reaches the ground level, not only is their target still alive, he’s not even there.

There’s no sign of the guy, no blood, nothing. How’d he survive a fall like that and stay uninjured
“Hey Patty, he’s gone,” Jack calls up. He can already hear the two women descending the stairs, heels clicking in rhythm. He races to the exit door and looks out, but the sidewalk is deserted, and shining his phone flashlight into the bushes only rouses a stray cat.

“Where did he go?” Patty asks as Jack turns around.

“I don’t know. It’s like he vanished.”

Riley starts sorting through the bits and pieces of phone on the floor. “There’s enough left that I might be able to create a copy of his data. And hopefully piece together his last few communications.”

“He knows he’s been made and he’s going to want to skip town fast. He’s going to make his hit now,” Patty says. “You need to hurry.”

Patty watches the shattered remnants of her best field team gather around the remains of the phone. It’s not the first time she’s seen tragedy rip a close-knit team like this apart. But she doesn’t know what will happen if she loses these ones.

She never, ever wanted Angus to get hurt. Oversight can be petty and cruel. He has a problem with James, so he takes it out on his son. There’s no way in hell Oversight was unaware of the risks of sending Mac back to a supermax. He’s vindictive. Most of the time, he’s a reasonable man, but when it comes to the MacGyvers…

There’s really no room for her to push the envelope. The case was a success, Mac came back alive, and Oversight can write it off as a win. If Mac never comes back to the Phoenix, it won’t be. She can’t believe, all human emotion aside, that Oversight was willing to risk losing one of their best agents over a petty grudge. What if Mac had refused the assignment? What if he had been a less honorable person and run? He could have. Patty’s not such a fool as to believe the boy can’t slip his tether and bolt if he really wants to.

He’s staying because he wants what Jack and Riley have. Patty can see it. She can see the longing looks he gives them in the War Room when they’re not looking his way. When they get back from a mission and can’t stop laughing at each other’s dumb jokes. He just wants a family. And now Oversight has seen fit to take the little scrap of it he had away. He had to know that would drive a massive wedge between Mac and the Phoenix. And its agents.

Riley picks up an SD card and plugs it into the reader on her rig. “There’s enough left to salvage some of the contacts and messaging.” She sighs. “But it’s all been heavily encrypted. It’s gonna take me a while to crack this. I could work faster on the Phoenix servers.”

“Then let’s get back there.” Patty walks briskly out the door. “Whoever he’s after doesn’t have much time left.” Somewhere out there, someone who may not even know they’re being hunted is about to die. She wonders if losing the phone means S218 never got to send his customary text. What are those? Little cruel jabs? A calling card? Some kind of twisted mind game? She’s never seen anything like it, and it chills her.

The Phoenix is still a whirl of activity when they arrive. It’s never not busy. All through the night, analysts are scouring international communications for possible threats, team leaders are coordinating missions happening around the globe, and the ever-present army of paperwork pushers are keeping the records that ensure Phoenix will still be allowed to function.
Patty’s pleasantly surprised when Jill Morgan shows up to the War Room with three cups of coffee. The girl’s been a little off since Mac got arrested. Patty has the feeling she knows the whole thing was a setup, because she works the lab next to the storage room Mac had supposedly taken those chemicals from. She knew he didn’t do it. But Oversight wouldn’t let her make any complaint until the op was over. Patty has the feeling Jill was angry with her. It’s not really my fault. But I can’t let her see that I’m questioning Oversight’s decisions.

“Thank you,” Patty tells the girl, and Jill gives her a small nod. She’s a good agent. She balances her duty and her heart well.

“I’ve got something!” Riley’s shout pulls Patty and Jack to her side. “The most recent message was a text.” Riley pulls it up. “Where seldom is heard a discouraging word.”

“Home on the Range?” Jack asks. “That’s a weird one…”

“It was sent to a private cell number…” Riley stops typing. “Oh my God. It’s Mac’s phone.”

Mac curls on his bed; he’s exhausted and he just wants to sleep but every time he closes his eyes he sees their faces. He sees Connors, and Sancola, and the others. All the others. And he can hear them, he’s tried listening to music but that doesn’t help because the voices are inside his head and he can’t get them out. He can’t think straight anymore, and the more tired he is the more scrambled his mind gets, which means he can’t sleep…he wants to scream or cry or anything. He’s miserable and he hates this and he wants it to be over.

His phone buzzes once. He barely glances at it. It’s not Jack or Riley or Cage or the Phoenix. It doesn’t matter. If he doesn’t answer the others’ texts they worry. Once he had his phone on silent and didn’t hear Jack’s text, and twenty minutes later the man was at the door of the house knocking frantically.

He’s got a physics book open on the bed, but he can’t focus on any of the problems long enough for that to distract him. His vision keeps blurring. He’s never been so exhausted in his life. But he just can’t sleep.

He turns the paperclip he’s holding over and over in his fingers. He can’t even bring himself to shape it into anything. What would I make, anyway? The only things in his thoughts are those cruel faces and hungry eyes and brutal hands.

He can hear Bozer rattling around in the kitchen. He came home in the middle of the day today, telling Mac he’d quit his job at Tony’s. He’s worried about leaving me here alone. Mac feels terribly guilty that Bozer quit the restaurant over him. I told him he could go back, that I’d be fine. But he won’t listen. Bozer shouldn’t have to put his whole life on hold for Mac. It’s not fair. And yes, he said Tony was holding the place for him for a couple weeks, in case he changed his mind, but it’s still not right. He shouldn’t have to worry about me.

If anything, Bozer coming home has made Mac feel worse. Not only does he have another thing to feel guilty about, he has to worry even more about accidentally giving everything away. I’m so tired I can’t think straight. If he asks me something about the Phoenix, or what happened to me, I might end up spilling the whole truth.

“Hey Mac, I got supper ready,” Bozer calls through the door. “I made those chicken burrito things you like.”

“I’m not hungry.” He is, but if he eats anything he’s going to be sick. I just want to be okay again, is
that so much to ask? He wants to be able to eat, or sleep, or take a shower. This is miserable. It won’t get better until he’s able to rest, and he can’t rest because it’s getting worse…he can feel the salty burn of tears running down his cheeks. And to top it all off, now I’m getting dehydrated too, tears shouldn’t hurt that much. He hates the way his brain starts kicking out random information designed to make him even more upset.

“You haven’t eaten all day. And don’t tell me you ate while I was gone. Because nothing in that kitchen was touched.”

“I can’t.” Mac’s too tired to lie or argue. “It just makes me sick.” He can hear Bozer sigh.

“Listen, I respect that you want some space right now. But I’m not gonna let you starve yourself to death behind a locked door. You can’t keep doing this to yourself. If you don’t start at least talking to me, I’m gonna call someone. Because you’re scaring me, Mac.” There’s a shaky stammer in his voice and Mac knows him well enough to know Boze is crying.

He stands up, even that takes so much effort, I just want to sleep, and stumbles to the door. When he pulls it open, Bozer is standing there with a plate of food, a glass of milk, and a clearly damp face.

Mac can easily notice the shock and misery when Bozer sees him. I know I look like shit. You don’t have to remind me.

He reaches for the plate but Bozer shakes his head.

“The way you look, you’d drop the whole thing on the floor.” He walks to Mac’s desk and sets down the plate and cup. “Now listen, I am not leaving until you get some of that in you.” Mac sighs. He’s not lying. Bozer has the same stubborn streak as the rest of his family. He’s going to force Mac to eat if necessary.

“Okay.” Mac sits down heavily, he feels like he might just face-plant into the plate from exhaustion. I wouldn’t even mind if I could actually sleep there.

“Listen, Mac, you gotta start talking to me.” Bozer crouches next to the chair, staying eye level with Mac. “You know nothing you can tell me would ever make me stop caring about you, right?” Mac nods and swallows past the lump in his throat. What about “I’ve been lying to you for weeks and letting you think I’m not in danger”? “You can tell me anything. I won’t judge you, I won’t think less of you for it. But you have to tell someone and stop keeping this all bottled up inside. It’s killing you.”

Mac can’t stand it anymore. He can’t keep looking into those honest, pleading, caring brown eyes and lie. “Boze-”

The doorbell rings, and it shatters the moment. Mac blinks. What was I about to do? He glances at Boze and he can watch the hope die back into a resigned acceptance. He knows the time to tell him anything just came and went. “Can you…” he asks wearily, unable to even form a full sentence anymore. He can’t deal with this. He hopes it isn’t one of the team. They’ll be just as pushy as Bozer. I just want to sleep…

He pushes himself out of his chair the second Bozer leaves, stumbles to his bed, and lies back, closing his eyes. Please, just an hour. That’s not too much to ask, is it? He can feel himself going under into blackness, and the faces and voice are still there, but he’s so exhausted that they’re blurry and out of focus.

His phone vibrates. Damn it. Just that much is enough to startle him awake, and the vaguely peaceful feeling is gone. He’s going to strangle whoever this is, if he doesn’t just start crying first. I just wanted to go to sleep! Mac grabs up the phone and glances sleepily and angrily at the sender’s name.
Jack? Jack hasn’t texted him for a while now. He should answer, or Jack will come over and pester him and then he really won’t get a chance to sleep. He hopes whoever was at the door was at the wrong house.

**Mac, someone’s coming for you. Get out of the house now.**

The text sends an immediate spike of adrenaline into Mac’s blood. He’s exhausted, barely functioning, and jumping at his own shadow, but his survival instincts are still intact. And then from the kitchen he hears Bozer.

“Um, it’s not really a good time. He’s been...sick. I’ll go see if he wants to talk to you, Mr…”

An unfamiliar voice that sends a sudden chill down Mac’s spine answers him. “Oh, you can just call me Kurt, all my friends do. And any friend of Angus’s is a friend of mine.”

*It’s too late. He’s already here.*

He texts Bozer, fingers flying. Not my friend. NOT SAFE. GET OUT NOW. He doesn’t have time to wait for Bozer to respond.

He rushes out into the hallway. Bozer’s just looking up from his phone, face stricken. Behind him, a man in a long black coat, *is he wearing Boze’s George Washington mask?* is pulling out a gun.

“Look out!” Mac grabs Bozer’s arm and drags him behind the couch, just as two gunshots thud into the wall behind them. Boze yelps.

“Stay down!” Mac crouches, thinking.

“Do you have your phone?” Mac gasps.

“No, I dropped it when you tackled me!” And mine’s still in my room. We can’t even call for help. What are they going to do now? There are footsteps, the guy’s coming around behind, he’s going to cut them off from getting out. Mac glances at the coffee table. If he can just reach that bowl... Mac nods to Boze. “When I say, run for the door.”

“You’re gonna do something dumb to stall him, aren’t you?” Boze asks breathlessly. “No way, Mac. If we’re going, we’re going together.”

Mac sighs. And then there’s movement from the corner of his eye. He grabs for Bozer’s hand, and pulls him toward the door, because Boze wasn’t lying about staying if Mac stays. There’s another shot, and Mac *hears* the bullet whine past their heads. They won’t make it to the door. He pulls Bozer behind the kitchen counter, and two more shots shatter bottles on the windowsill. Boze yelps again.

“Call 911,” Mac whispers, gesturing to the landline phone on the counter. He’s kept it; Grandpa Harry always insisted landlines were never going to be improved upon by the cellphone, and it’s more a memory than anything now. But it still works.

Boze reaches for the phone, and then a shot shatters the entire thing, sending plastic and metal showering down. Mac risks a glance over the counter. The guy’s coming, and he’s coming fast. He grabs a couple of the bottles from behind him and throws them. It doesn’t do much, but it does push the guy back a little. They’re running out of time. He glances around. What do I have? Paper towels, a couple full wine bottles, Bozer’s box of grilling supplies... Yes!

He grabs the bottle of lighter fluid, pulls off the top, and shoves some of the paper towels into it. He hands Boze the wine bottles and his knife. “Open these and pour out about a third!” Boze nods.
mutely. Mac flicks the grill lighter and sets the end of the paper towels on fire, flinging the bottle of lighter fluid into the middle of the room. There’s a loud hissing roar as the flames go up, and Mac thinks he hears an angry yell. *Good.*

Boze has the bottles open. Mac quickly dumps in some of the kitchen chemicals and shakes them before shoving the corks back in. *I used to make my own bottle rockets when I was a kid. Granted, I’ve never done it with a wine bottle before, but it’s on the same concept.* He grabs a broom from the corner, pulls the rest of the paper towel off the roll, and hands another one to Bozer, pointing. Boze gets the idea and starts working on it.

Mac tapes one of the bottles to the paper towel roll, slides it onto the broom handle, and glances over the counter. The flames are dying down, and he can see the vague outline of the person behind them. He aims, but a shot ricochets off the counter and he flinches. The bottle goes wild, smashing through a window.

“Boze! Is that next one ready?” Boze hands the empty cardboard tube over wordlessly. The guy’s coming toward them, they’re running out of time...Mac frantically tapes on the bottle, shoves it on the broom, and takes aim. The shot hits true this time. There’s a grunt, and then a yell as the would-be killer topples out the back window and over the porch railing. Mac jumps up and pulls Bozer after him. *We can’t stay here.* He barely glances at the still burning living room as they run out the door.

The whole neighborhood is awake now. Lights are on, people are yelling, it’s chaotic, but a kind of chaotic that’s oddly reassuring. *People know what’s happening. We’re a little safer now.* Mac can’t imagine this guy showing himself in the middle of the street. If he even survived the fall.

They cut through Mrs. Schwartz’s backyard and knock on the door. It takes her a few minutes to answer, and when she does she’s holding her late Marine husband’s World War II revolver. Mac and Boze raise their hands simultaneously. The stooped little lady with her hair in pink curlers is no one to mess with. According to Bozer, she once threw a can of green beans at him when he accidentally rode his bike onto her flower garden. Apparently she hit him too.

“Are you both daft? Knock on a body’s door with all that shooting? I could have killed you,” she snaps.

“I’m sorry, but we need a place to go,” Bozer says.

“I should have known it was you two making trouble,” she mutters. And then the anger slips away and a concerned grandmotherly look appears. “Come inside. Now, before someone sees you. What happened?”

“Break in,” Mac mutters breathlessly. *We need a cover story fast.* “Someone decided to rob the house. Guess they thought we weren’t home.”

“Y’all had your lights on,” Mrs. Schwartz fusses, tucking the revolver in the belt of her robe. “He was probably one of those punks all hopped up on whatever the kids are smoking now.” She clicks her tongue. “They don’t know what they’re doing when they’re on all those drugs.”

“Yeah, probably,” Mac says. *She’s already making our story for us.* Sometimes he forgets most people don’t see the world the way he does. They look for explanations that make sense to them. They see drugged up robbers, not contract killers. But Mac would bet anything that’s what this man was.

“I think you two could use a drink. I’ve got something in the pantry,” Mrs. Schwartz says, walking away. The moment she’s out of earshot, Mac collapses against the wall, Boze right beside him.
Bozer’s panting, shaking. “You okay?” Mac asks.

“No!” Bozer yelps. “Someone just tried to kill us! To kill you!”

Mac nods, leaning his head back. “He’s probably a cartel hitman. After me for everything I did as the Phoenix.” He catches Bozer staring at him with painful curiosity. “I’m so sorry, Boze. You weren’t supposed to get dragged in.”

“I was into this from the day Jerry got shot.” Boze stares at him. “But Mac, you gotta tell me the truth. Are you doing this vigilante stuff again?”

“No!” Mac gasps. “It’s not technically a lie. I promised you I wouldn’t.”

“That’s a little hard to believe when you’re gone all the time and then you got busted for breaking parole three weeks ago.”

“That was a mistake, Boze. A prank gone really wrong.” Mac sighs. I hate that cover story, but it’s all we have. “And I work a lot of nights at the Phoenix because of the science projects. Sometimes they’re too delicate to turn over to anyone else.”

“Yeah, because heaven forbid anyone else be smart enough to do Angus MacGyver’s work for him so he can go home and sleep.” Mac will let Bozer have the anger. It’s the least he deserves after almost being killed in his own home by someone who came for Mac. “Mac, if you say you’re back into that, I promise, I won’t be pissed. Well, not a lot. But I can’t help you if you don’t tell me the truth.”

For the second time that night, Mac wants nothing more than to admit everything. To have Bozer actually understand. But then Mrs. Schwartz comes back with two glasses and a bottle of whiskey, and he can’t say anything in front of her. She might be ninety-three, but she’s no closer to deaf than she was at twenty-five. And the words on the tip of his tongue get bitten back again.

Jack breaks every speed limit on the way to the house. He curses the LA night traffic in the most colorful language he knows, and lays on the horn so often he thinks he might wear it out.

“Jack, yelling won’t make us go faster,” Riley says. “You’re making it harder for me to work.”

“Well excuse me for worrying about Mac!”

“I’m worried too!” she snaps, and when she looks up Jack sees tears in her eyes. “But right now we have to focus on helping him! I’m trying to see if I can ID our suspect from the loft security cameras!”

A text buzzes, and Jack, since the traffic is absolutely crawling, glances down at it, praying it’s Mac. It’s not. It’s Patty. Team rounded up Patel. Doesn’t know anything about S218. Set down jacket on bench and left. Never saw face.

“Damn it!” He smacks the steering wheel. “He’s not answering my texts.” Jack’s sent almost two dozen at this point. Yeah, I’m texting while driving. It’s probably less deadly than having a hitman who knows everything about you on his way to your house.

“It doesn’t mean he’s…” Riley trails off, letting the thought just hang there in midair. “Jack, take the next right.”

“What?”
“I found an alternate route. Maybe it’ll get us out of the traffic.” She looks terrified, eyes wide in the neon glow of brakelights. Jack feels guilty for yelling at her. *None of this is her fault.* He takes the turn, and they race down a series of side streets. Jack prays there aren’t any cops watching these roads tonight. He can’t afford a speeding stop.

When they get bogged down behind a late-night semi truck convoy, Jack pulls out his gun and lays it across his lap. “I’m gonna be ready the second we get there.”

Riley stares at him. “We’re supposed to be lawyers! You can’t just run in there guns blazing!”

“I can if he’s about to die!”

A text lights up his phone screen. The number is one he doesn’t recognize, but the first words are, *It’s Mac. Safe.* Jack screeches the car to a halt on the side of the street and opens the full message. *Bozer and I are okay. Whoever it was came to the house but we got away. I don’t know where he is. Borrowed neighbor’s phone to tell you.*

Jack sighs, sagging back into the seat, feeling like someone just dragged him through the dog door. All of a sudden he’s wrung out and exhausted. Granted, Mac saying they’re fine means next to nothing, but Bozer is there with him and Jack’s pretty sure Mac’s roommate will make sure Mac actually takes care of any injuries.

It doesn’t mean he’s any less determined to get to the house as fast as he can. Riley finds them a few more cutoffs, that on a normal day would increase drive time but on a city Friday night actually help.

There are red and blue lights flashing when they get to the house, police cars and even a couple fire trucks parked up and down the street. *Someone called the cops.* Jack was fully ready to go in there and say *to hell with secrets, I’m making sure Mac is safe and nothing else matters.* But if he goes bursting in in tac gear now, he could get Mac in even more trouble.

It’s weird to be hiding from the police here. Jack’s used to avoiding authorities on covert operations but this just feels so wrong. He shouldn’t have to do this. This shouldn’t be happening. *Mac should be safe here. In his own house. Out of the field. This isn’t fair.*

Riley hacks any security cameras in the neighborhood and downloads the footage, before wiping it. *It’s a shame to have to screw up their investigation. But if this guy’s connected to the Phoenix, they can’t find out.* The agency doesn’t legally exist, not as a covert operation, and they can’t risk threatening Mac’s conditional release if the cops get suspicious that the think tank really is only a cover. Not after what Jack saw back there at the Bishop supermax. *I’ll grab that kid and go on the run with him for the rest of my life before I’ll let him go back inside.*

Jack shoves his tac gear and Riley’s into the hidden compartment below the back seats and then drives up to the house. Thankfully none of the officers notice until he’s pulling into the driveway.

One of the officers steps up to the car as Jack parks. “Sir, I’m going to have to ask you to leave. This is an active crime scene.”

Jack pulls out his Roger Preston ID; *thank goodness I keep that in the car.* “I’m Mr. MacGyver’s lawyer. The station called me and said something happened. I got here as fast as I could.” Jack shrugs. “I’ve got a vested interest in making sure my client is safe and that this investigation goes well. And that nothing gets twisted into something it’s not.” *That’s actually a real worry for me. He doesn’t want anything about this case to turn Mac into the one who did something wrong. He’s not going back again.*
The officer looks somewhat confused, but doesn’t question it. “According to Mr. Bozer, this was a simple break-in gone wrong. Apparently the burglar picked the wrong house to rob, didn’t realize people were home, and when things went badly made a break for it.” Wow. Bozer might be having a hard time breaking into the film business, but he’s a hell of an actor. Because there’s no way that’s what happened. But apparently Boze spent enough years working with a teenage vigilante to have a seamless habit of lying to the authorities. If keeping him in the dark wasn’t an absolute necessity, I’m starting to think he’d make a decent agent.

“I still want to make sure everything’s okay. My client’s been through enough hassles, I don’t need him getting made out to be the villain here.”

“I assure you, Mr. Preston, no one thinks Mr. MacGyver is anything but the victim here.” Jack flinches at the choice of words. He’s so much more than just a ‘victim’. But Jack doesn’t dare argue. Although that would suit my lawyer cover awfully well. The important thing right now is that he sees that Mac is in one piece.

He leaves Riley in the car. No sense in pushing the limits with the cops. The officer escorts him to the door, and Jack cringes at the smell of smoke and charred wood. What happened here? Was there a bomb?

Mac and Bozer are standing in the charred, smoky living room. Both of them look pale and shaky. Bozer sounds like he’s on the edge of hyperventilating.

“Jack?” There’s everything from confusion to relief in Mac’s voice. Good thing I told Boze from the start that I hate the name Roger and go by Jack.

“Police station called me, said something was going on up here. I came as soon as I could.” Jack walks over and places a hand gently on Mac’s shoulder, then turns to Bozer. “Looks like a war zone in here.”

“It felt like one,” Bozer mutters. “I never thought it would be that scary.” His hands are shaking. “Mac set the place on fire and then knocked him out the window with a wine bottle.” Boze glances nervously at Jack. “They’ll call that self defense, right? I can make a statement or something…”

“It’s gonna be fine.” Jack can’t guarantee that, not by a long shot. But if this is in any way related to Mac’s job, the Phoenix will find a way to cover it up.

“Whoever he was, he was a professional,” Mac says. “He had gloves. And by the time I got out in the hallway, he had one of Bozer’s masks on.”

“I got a good look at his face though,” Bozer says. “I did a rough sketch and gave it to the cops.” Impressive. Jack makes a mental note to have Riley dig that out of the LAPD case files.

Mac sighs. “I don’t know anything more about it. He could have been hired by anyone I’ve crossed.” If this were anyone else we’d have a hell of a lot of explaining to do. But Mac’s already made so many enemies that this is actually something they probably expected to happen sooner or later. The thought makes Jack sad.

“You do know you can’t stay in this house until this guy’s caught, right?”

Bozer nods. “I’ve got a sister in San Diego.” He glances at Jack. “But Mac can’t leave the city, can he?”

“Not if he doesn’t want to violate his parole terms.” Jack forces down a hysterical laugh. The amount of times he’s broken that already… “I’ve got a place where he can crash. Make sure he’s not
“breakin’ any rules.”

“Thank you.” Mac takes Jack’s hand, it’s the first time he’s sought out contact since that awful day in Mexico.

Jack studies the kid carefully. Mac looks terrible, up close and in person. He’s lost weight he definitely couldn’t afford to; the kid was already as skinny as a starved coyote when they first brought him in. There are deep shadows under his eyes from sleepless nights, and he just generally doesn’t look healthy. Jack’s seen him go downhill, but he hasn’t realized until now just how bad it really was. He hasn’t spent a lot of time with Mac lately. It was pretty clear the kid wanted some space. I figured the best thing was to let him have it.

And if Jack’s being honest with himself, doing what’s good for the kid is only half the reason he’s been avoiding him. This is on me. I was in there with him. I should have protected him. Every time Jack sees the kid flinch or shudder he knows if he’d done his job that wouldn’t have happened. I was there to protect him. And I failed him. It would serve Jack right if the kid slammed the door in his face and never wanted to see him again. I didn’t do this to him, but I couldn’t stop it. So it might as well have been me.

“Boze, if they’re done here you should pack up and go now.” He steers Mac toward his room, whispering, “get your go bag.” Mac stumbles along on autopilot. He digs the bag out from under his bed, and Jack sees that on the desk by his bed there’s an uneaten plate of food and a glass of milk. Mac grabs his phone and the bag.

It seems like the police still have a hundred questions, and they want Mac and Bozer to come down to the station. Jack notices the kid’s hands are shaking. He’s not scared of whoever was after him. He’s not scared of whoever was after him. He’s scared of being locked up. Even when Mac has done absolutely nothing wrong, he’s terrified of being anywhere near anything that reminds him of prison. Jack tries to negotiate, and in the end the most senior officer agrees that Mac can tell him anything right here at the house, now, and only Bozer has to come to the station.

It takes close to another hour before they’re allowed to leave. Mac’s swaying on his feet, and Jack carefully guides him out to the car, stowing his bag in the trunk.

“Where are we going?” Mac asks sleepily.

“Phoenix. We’ll figure out what to do once we have you there and safe.” Jack puts the car in gear and they drive away. Mac slumps in the backseat, clearly exhausted, but he doesn’t seem to really fall asleep the whole drive.

Patty meets them at the doors. Her formerly perfect bun has come undone, loose hair straggling around her face, and she’s wearing what looks like her go-bag backup clothes, a pair of cargo pants, a loose t-shirt, and a Phoenix tactical jacket.

“I’ve got a secure room ready,” she says. “I’m glad you’re safe, Mac.” Jack can hear the shockwaves of relief in her voice. I forgot to tell her when I got the text. But Riley probably did. Jack forgot every protocol in the face of his worry. The only other person that’s ever happened with is Riley.

The ‘secure room’ is a cold, impersonal grey box, with plated walls, two chairs, and a steel table. One of the interrogation rooms, repurposed. As soon as Mac’s inside, Patty nods to Jack, and he turns to follow her.

“Riley, I gotta go give Patty a situation report. Stay with him till I get back, okay?” I’m not leaving him alone in a locked room. Jack can’t miss the desperate longing in Mac’s eyes as the magnetic
door closes behind him. Mac wanted Jack to stay.

Mac keeps drifting in and out. He hasn’t really been coherent since the police showed up. He kept repeating his answers and he’s pretty sure the cops thought he was drunk. Bozer helped. For a moment he panics, wondering where Bozer is, then remembers he’s at the police station and then he’s going to drive to Deja’s house.

He can’t really remember where he is. The room is square and cold and grey…no, no, no. He’s not back in prison is he? Did he say something wrong? Did the police think he was the one shooting at someone? I don’t like guns. I don’t have one. Did I tell them that?

He sits down too hard in the chair on one side of the metal table that looks like it’s tilting. Wait, is this a dream? He thinks he remembers this scene from a movie. Am I going to wake up? He tries pinching his arm, but he can’t really feel himself moving his hand, even though he can see it. Wow, this is weird.

There are two Rileys sitting across from him. He doesn’t know how that happened. But it doesn’t have to make sense if it’s a dream, does it? The Rileys are saying something, talking at the same time. But it sounds kind of blurry. He shakes his head hard until he sees just one Riley.

“Mac, what happened?” He’s not sure what she means until he looks down, where she’s looking, and sees the dozens of raw little scrapes on his arms, probably from the glass when he and Boze were sliding around behind that counter. I didn’t even notice.

“We have to clean that up.” Riley stands. “I know Patty’s orders were to stay here, but I think she’d agree that keeping you safe also means keeping all the blood inside you. I’m gonna walk you down to medical, okay?”

Mac cringes away from her. “I can do it myself; I just need a first aid kit. It’s not bad. I just…I can’t have anyone else touching me.”

“I get it, Mac, I do, but you’re in no condition to be trying to take care of yourself right now. Look at your hands.” I know they’re shaking. But please, please, don’t let anyone touch me.

“Please, I just…not after everything.”

“Okay, I promise I won’t even touch you. But if you won’t go to medical at least let me help you get them clean. Please.” She looks rattled. Her own hands are trembling slightly. She was afraid.

“I’m coming right back,” she says, and gets up and knocks on the door. Someone opens it and lets her out.

Mac huddles further into the chair, shaking. It’s cold in here. It’s really cold. And it smells wrong. He wants to go find Riley. He pulls on the door handle, but the door won’t open. Oh no. He is back in prison. Maybe he was just dreaming about Riley, or maybe she was here trying to help make it easier. But she’s gone and he’s locked up again. At least he’s alone.

He doesn’t actually make it back to the chair. He just collapses in the corner by the door. It doesn’t sound like prison, no one is yelling. How did he get put in solitary again already? Is it because he keeps getting in trouble?

The door opens, and there’s the two Rileys again. When he blinks it’s just one. She’s holding something…first aid kit. Oh right, she went to go get that.
“Where are we?” He asks.

“We’re at the Phoenix, Mac. Are you okay?”

“Yeah. ‘M just tired,” he manages to slur out.

“Are you sure there’s nothing worse? I’d better get a good look at whatever’s going on,” she says. Mac doesn’t have the coherent thought to argue with her. He just can’t.

“Mac, what’s going on?” Riley asks quietly. “You... you look awful.”

“Can’t sleep,” Mac mutters. “See them. Hear them. Feel them.” He blinks and shakes his head, talking about it isn’t good. He doesn’t want to think about it.

“Oh Mac.” Riley stops wiping stinging antiseptic cloths over his arms and puts a hand on his shoulder. “I’m so sorry.”

“Why ‘re you sorry?” he mutters.

“Because we left you alone in there. I should have seen what was happening. I should have sent Jack to come find you.” Mac looks up and he sees the same pain in her eyes as he feels. “All of this is my fault.”

“No, ‘s not.” Mac reaches for her blurry, doubled-up hand. “Happens. You couldn’t stop it. You can’t always save me.” He feels something wet on his hand. He doesn’t think he’s crying, but when he looks up, it’s Riley’s tears. He reaches to give her a clumsy hug and misses, but she leans her head on his shoulder and it’s good enough.

“And you’re certain Mr. Bozer is unaware of the real situation?”

“He believes it’s someone from Mac’s past. He’s staying with his sister in San Diego until this blows over.” Jack’s absolutely furious that every indication is that this man is collecting on El Noche’s bounty. It’s our fault he’s in danger. If they hadn’t sent Mac back to prison... Jack is never going to stop hating everything about that mission.

“Good. I’d like to keep MacGyver here under protective custody until we’ve apprehended this man.”

“Patty, all due respect, but your safe room is nothing more than a cell. And the last cell he was in…” Jack stops, shuddering. “My apartment is secure. I can take him there, and bring him back to the Phoenix with me. I promise I won’t let him out of my sight.”

“I see your point.” Patty sighs. “It’s not ideal but there are extenuating circumstances. If the situation deteriorates, I need you to promise me you’ll bring him back here.”

“Understood.” Jack stands up.

When he opens the door to the safe room, Riley meets him.

“Hey, Ri, I’m gonna be taking him back to my place.” Jack moves to walk past, but Riley stops him, putting a hand on his chest and pushing him back slightly into the hall.

“Jack, he’s not sleeping. Like, he’s basically forcing himself not to, because he gets such awful nightmares.” Jack sighs and rubs a hand over his face. How much worse can today get? It’s not even technically ‘today’ anymore, it’s ‘tomorrow’ at this point. “Don’t say anything unless he brings it up. I just didn’t want you to be shocked,” Riley says quietly. Well, it’s a little late for that. Jack looks
past her shoulder to the boy nodding off in the chair. How long has this been happening? How long has he been having that much trouble sleeping? Mac shivers as his head nods down against his chest, then jerks awake with a startle that nearly sends him out of the chair onto the floor.

Jack gives Riley a sad glance and walks in. “Hey kid, you ready to hit the road?” Mac looks at him, confused.

“I’m taking you back to my place. I promise, no one knows about it that I don’t want knowin’.” He gives Mac a weary smile. “You look as beat as I feel.” Mac’s barely staying on his feet when they walk out to the car. He leans his head on the window as soon as they get inside and Jack sighs. It’s not fair.

When Jack gets back to his apartment, he checks the door carefully before unlocking it. They’ve had enough surprises tonight. He pulls Mac inside and then shuts and locks the door behind them. He knows it’s not really going to keep out a determined assassin, but it makes him feel better.

Mac looks like he’s scared to touch anything, moving carefully around the chairs and other furniture. It’s painful to watch. “Listen kid, what’s mine is yours. Just don’t take apart my toaster or set the microwave on fire, okay?” Jack actually wouldn’t care at this point. Anything that would make him smile would make me happy. Plus, knowing the kid, he’d actually make it work better.

At this point it’s nearly three a.m., and Jack is exhausted. He doesn’t know how Mac’s been surviving, barely sleeping every night. “Come on, I’ve got a spare room.” It’s not much, it’s a converted office space, but Riley slept there a lot when she was having nightmares after Como, and Jack never bothered to change it back. What do I need an office for anyway?

He gets a clean pillowcase for the kid and turns down the bed while Mac changes in the bathroom. He kind of hoped the kid would take a shower too, he smells like smoke and three-day-old sweat, and it was getting pretty rank in Jack’s car. But he’s not going to criticize right now. Mac doesn’t need it.

“If you need anything, my room’s right off the living room,” Jack says. “Get some rest, kid.” He leaves Mac to curl under the blankets and crashes into his own bed, falling asleep almost as soon as his head hits the pillow.

It feels like seconds later that something wakes him up. He grabs the gun from his nightstand and tiptoes into the living room, fully prepared to shoot an intruder. Tonight has him keyed up and on edge.

But the sound isn’t coming from the windows or the doors. It’s coming from the guest room. Jack lowers his gun and tucks it into his sweatpants, then carefully, quietly opens the guest room door, trying to ignore how the soft gasps from the other side are shredding his heart.

Mac is sobbing. His shoulders are shaking, his hands clenched in the sheets.“Mac, Mac, it’s just me. It’s Jack.” He doesn’t dare touch the kid. This is too much like that compound.

Mac rolls away, clutching the blankets around him in a death grip. A pitiful whimper slips out and Jack cringes.

“Mac. It’s okay. It’s okay.” Jack’s heart clenches. It reminds him of when he was twelve and Roy, their cattle dog, ran into the road and got hit my a car, then dragged himself under the chicken coop. Pops said Jack shouldn’t touch the wounded animal, but Jack knelt by the edge of the coop and tried to talk the dog into coming out. He kept telling Roy it was okay, he was going to be fine, he just had to let Jack help him. He even tried coaxing the dog out with food from the kitchen.
Jack tries not to think about how that story ends. With Pops going out the next morning and dragging the stiff, mud-caked body out to the pasture knoll to bury the dog where he loved to watch the cattle from. He wouldn’t let me help. For years, Jack had believed that if he’d just tried harder, been more reassuring, maybe Roy would have come out. That maybe there was something he could have done.

That guilt died off in the face of the losses Jack saw in the Sandbox. But now he remembers it full force. Mac reacts to trauma like a wounded animal. Run away to heal or die. The kid’s been on his own damn near all his life, and he’s learned the hard way that no one will help him.

“Mac, it’s okay. It’s okay. I’m here.” Jack rubs angrily at his watering eyes, he can’t afford to get teary right now and upset the kid more. Mac curls up, breathing shakily, making himself as small as he can. “Come on, kid, wake up. You’re safe now. No one’s gonna touch you again.”

Mac gasps, jerking upright and panting. “Jack?”

“Hey, good to see you back, kid.” Jack sighs, rubbing a hand over his stubbly face. “You’re safe. You’re at my place, okay?”

“Did I wake you up?” He asks. Jack just nods. No point in lyin’ to him. He’ll see right through it.

“I’m sorry. I should be over it. I don’t know why I can’t just forget.” Mac sounds angry, but not at Jack. Not even at the monster who’s the reason for all this. He’s angry with himself for not being stronger. He’s so damaged that he actually thinks it’s his fault that he’s got PTSD. That he’s still traumatized. “I used to be able to make it okay.”

“You don’t have to make it okay, Mac. You’ve got us to help you. You don’t have to do this alone.” Mac shakes his head, a few tears trickling down his cheeks. “I know we made some mistakes. Hell, I made a ton. But we’re here for you. You don’t have to shut us out and try to fix this yourself.”

“I can’t…” Mac whispers. “I can’t do that…”

“Mac, you gotta tell us what’s wrong, or it’s never gonna get better.” Jack gently wraps his arms around Mac, pulling him close. The kid sniffs and tries to push back, but when Jack releases his hold Mac doesn’t fling himself away. He just sits there shivering. And then he leans against Jack and begins to cry.

“You promised,” Mac sobs, clinging to Jack’s t-shirt like a hurt child. “You keep promising you’ll be there, that you’ll always keep me safe. But you said that before and they hurt me anyway. You couldn’t help me in prison. You can’t always be there to save me.” There’s not a day goes by that I don’t think the same thing, kid. That I don’t wonder how I’m ever gonna look you in the eyes and promise you anything again. “I’m scared, Jack. I don’t want to be alone again.”

“Listen to me, Mac. I know I let you down. And I know I’ve got no right to ask you to trust me again. To trust any of us again. But I promise you that never again am I letting someone hurt you. They will have to step over my cold, dead body to get to you.” Jack gently places a hand on Mac’s back, and when the kid doesn’t fight the touch, he begins to rub gently, soothingly. “You are never, ever going to set foot in prison again as long as I have anything to say about it. Even if we have to go on the run for the rest of our lives. Like in The Fugitive.” Jack grins, giving it a moment. “You’re always complaining my movie taste is too old for you. What, that one didn’t even merit a laugh?”

Mac looks up and gives him a shaky smile. “I was gonna suggest Catch Me if You Can, we’d have more fun.” Jack tries not to cry at how damn young the kid looks, with his teary eyes and messy hair. He reaches down and brushes some of the blond mess out of Mac’s face.
“Well, since you mention it, and since it doesn’t look like either of us is going back to sleep soon, want to go watch it?”

Jack makes them both hot chocolate, plain, because the kid doesn’t need any alcohol messing with him right now, and they curl up together on the couch. Jack keeps his distance, but as the kid starts drifting he inches closer and closer to Jack until he’s curled up against him, everything but his hair covered by the Navajo blanket Jack usually keeps on the back of the couch, and one hand twisted in Jack’s shirt.

Jack leans over and gently rests one arm around Mac’s shoulders. He doesn’t flinch, just huddles a little closer. Jack feels his own eyes slipping closed, and he drifts off to the muffled drone of the TV and the kid’s quiet snores.

Riley says nothing when Mac and Jack arrive at the War Room in the middle of the afternoon, both yawning. Mac actually looks a bit more alert and coherent than he did yesterday, and that’s all Riley cares about.

“What’s the progress?” Jack asks.

“I’m working on getting that facial rec sketch from the LAPD.” She leans over her rig, sighing and rubbing her forehead. She’s been working on this since noon.

Jack cuffs her shoulder, and there’s a mock scolding tone in his voice. “What, you haven’t hacked that yet? You broke the NSA when you were what, seventeen?” I love that even when we’re in the absolute worst situations, he always tries to make me feel better. She knows that after five years working together every tensed shoulder muscle, every unconscious rub of a stiff neck, is telegraphing her stress levels.

Riley rolls her eyes at him. “The NSA was one system, and it was up to date. LAPD is twenty, and they’re dinosaurs. I’m teaching myself Fortran, and if you had any idea what that was you’d be as frustrated as I am.” She goes back to typing, filtering through case files from twenty years ago mixed in with things from twenty-four hours ago. This sucks.

It takes almost an hour longer until she gets the right system, the right access codes, and the right file. She stands up and turns around to tell Patty and Mac and Jack, and then smiles.

Mac’s sitting in one of the chairs, Jack perched on the arm of it, honestly I don’t think he understands the correct usage of furniture. Mac is sleeping soundly. Mac’s got his head leaned over against Jack’s side, and Jack has one hand combing gently through Mac’s hair. For the first time since Bishop, Mac actually looks relaxed, like he’s accepted that he’s safe with them. Jack looks up at Riley, and she gives him a small, sad nod. All she wants to do is let Mac sleep until he’s caught up on all the rest those nightmares stole from him. But if they don’t want him sleeping six feet under the ground, they need to catch this guy.

“I’ve got the sketch.” She tries to whisper, but Mac, still nervous and wired to respond to the smallest sounds, jumps awake, blinking. Riley pulls the sketch up onto the screen, and the quality is stunning. Wow, his roommate’s got serious skills. She won’t even have to do much cleanup to make it scannable through her facial rec software.

“Bingo. That’s our guy.” She starts pulling all data, and then stops when a second match from a different database appears. Two. Three. Six. Eight. More.

“Probably each one of those aliases corresponds to a past hit,” Patty says.
Riley’s already running each of the names. “We’re in luck. Looks like one of S218’s aliases, Kurt Walczak, rented a car at LAX two days ago.”

“All rental cars now have lo-jack. Can you track it?” Jack asks.

“Already on it. Looks like it’s at a junkyard in Sun Valley.”

“Alright, let’s roll,” Jack says. Mac stumbles to his feet. “Oh hey, whoa there hoss. You’re practically sleepin’ on your feet. You’re not comin’. He’s tryin’ to kill you, in case you forgot.”

“Which is why I should be there. I can’t ask you all to be put in danger while I’m sitting here safe.” He moves toward the door. “You shouldn’t have to risk your lives for me.”

“Hey listen. Hold on a minute here. Did you hear nothing I said last night?” Jack asks, walking over to Mac and carefully placing his hands on Mac’s shoulders. “There is no way in hell we’re letting you be put in danger like that again. Sometimes the best way we can watch your back is to keep your back somewhere safe, okay?” His voice drops, Riley can barely hear it. “Listen. I promised I’d keep you safe, and I meant it. If something happened to you again on my watch, it would kill me. Don’t do that to me Mac.”

Mac lowers his head, fight suddenly sapped out of him. “Mac, it’s okay. We’ve got this,” Riley says softly. “This is what being a team means. We protect each other. We’re family.” We let him go alone into that supermax. The least we can do to make up for it is to protect him now. “You can be in on comms the whole time. Quite frankly I don’t think we’ll find anything. This guy’s a professional; he’s too good to have just left a lo-jacked car to lead us right to him. But we might be able to find some lead.”

Mac nods, swallowing hard. “Okay.”

Riley wonders if he’ll be asleep again when they get back. I’m glad we got him back. Because the Mac she just saw is the Mac she knows. He’s a long way from okay, but for the first time in over two weeks, seeing him doesn’t make Riley’s whole body freeze with guilt and dread. She can only pray the worst is over, the way it seems to be.

When they arrive at the junkyard, it’s quiet. It’s Saturday, apparently the owners here give their employees the whole weekend off. But the place is eerie with the soft creaks and groans of rusted metal heating and cooling as the sun moves.

The car is parked suspiciously visibly, by itself in the middle of an open patch of sand. Riley pulls up thermal grid on her rig before they go any closer. Sat views show only her, Patty, and Jack in the yard. There’s no one hiding behind the cars or in the surrounding buildings.

“Clear.” She moves forward, only for Jack to put an arm across her chest.

“Let me do an explosive sweep.” There’s that look in his eyes he gets when he’s remembering the Sandbox. She nods, and he walks slowly up to the car, bending down to look under it, looking through the windows at the door handles. He finally gives Riley and Patty a nod. “It’s safe. There’s a phone inside, and a diplomat’s pouch.” He opens the door, and reaches in. “Here’s the phone Ri. Go ahead and work your magic.”

This has all the feelings of a setup. He likes leaving his victims messages. He likes taunting them. He likes playing games. “I think we should grab what we can find and get out of here. Now.”

Patty nods. “Jack, grab that pouch and let’s go.” Jack pulls open the door, and reaches inside. At the same second, the phone rings. She answers it, fingers shaking.
The voice on the other end has an eerily happy tone. “Oh, it’s such a pleasure to finally meet you face to face. Or, well, as close as it gets. You know, you’re legends. The three musketeers, if you’ll pardon the analogy. But the thing is, the musketeers need their D’Artagnan, and I just don’t see him here.”

“What do you want?” Jack growls.

“Oh, I thought I made that abundantly clear. Your little jailbird.” The man chuckles. “You actually named your whole agency after his alter ego? Color me impressed. I guess he’s just very good at endearing himself to people. Well, except for the people who asked me to kill him.” There’s such a chilling casualness in his voice.

“Why should we do a thing you say?” Riley asks. Her fingers move toward her rig, she’s got to cut comms with Mac. He’s hearing all of this. He’s going to be panicking.

The next second, a bullet pings off the car inches from her fingertips, shattering her rig. “Now, now, let’s not spoil the fun, my dear.” She glances down and sees a red dot in the center of her own chest. There’s one tracking on Patty and Jack as well.

“What are you doing?” She thermal cleared the junkyard. Unless he just arrived...

“Oh, haven’t you ever heard of remote sniper rifles? They’re actually quite a feat of engineering. Micro-calibrated barrels, rapid-strike firing pins, laser guided sights to account for target movement...” The man laughs. “And when you have three of them all wired to a single remote, well, things get fun.” She can hear the smile in his voice. “Each one’s just waiting to put a bullet through your spinal column if you get...frisky. So guns on the ground, please.” Riley, Jack and Patty slip their weapons out of the holsters and lay them in the dirt, slowly.

“I hope Angus is listening to this,” the man continues. “So that he’ll know that if he doesn’t agree to my deal, all your deaths will be his fault.”

“Mac, don’t you dare,” Jack snaps. “You stay right where you are. We’re fine.”

“Oh, how perfectly lovely. You’re all willing to die for a little criminal. Do you even know what he’s done? Do you actually think you can trust him?”

“Don’t try and play mind games with us,” Riley snarls.

“I’m willing to trade your contracts for him.” The man’s voice becomes a wheedling sing-song. “Oh, you didn’t think I’d come all this way for one measly three million, did you? Jack, be a dear and look in that diplomat’s pouch.” Jack opens the zipper shakily. There’s three folded photos inside. Jack and Riley’s CIA dossier images, and Patty’s official ID. “You see, I don’t really need the money, but I do like a challenge. And you three, well you have quite the reputations. People are willing to pay plenty to make you disappear. But honestly, facing MacGyver again is all the challenge I want. So if you’re listening, Angus, meet me at the south entrance of the junkyard in fifteen minutes, and they all walk away. So do we have a deal?”

“You’re bluffing,” Patty says. “Mac, don’t listen to him. He’s going to kill us anyway.”

“Oh, no, Patricia, you see, I’m not in the business of lying to people. I’m a man of my word,” the man’s voice says mockingly. “You’ve been a spy too long, you don’t trust anyone anymore.”

“Mac, you stay there. That’s a direct order.” And then Patty gasps, falling backward into the dirt, blood dripping from her shoulder.
“Now Patricia, I need you to behave.” The voice is still chillingly cheerful. “Don’t worry, it’s just a through and through. It’s going to heal up very nicely. In fact, if MacGyver makes his deadline, you’ll probably be able to get it treated in time that it won’t even leave much of a scar. And if he doesn’t, well, a scar will be the least of your worries.”

Mac can feel himself drifting off in the chair. He’s got Riley’s rig mirrored to the War Room screen and he can see the sat view of the junkyard now. She’s doing a thermal scan. He feels himself relax even more when there’s nothing there. Jack checks the car for booby traps, the opens it. He pulls out a phone and hands it to Riley, then reaches into the back. Then there’s a ringing sound.

Mac reaches automatically for his own pocket before realizing the sound is coming through the comm feed. When Riley answers, the voice on the other end is eerily familiar. *I’m never going to forget it.*

Mac listens to the whole conversation in a blur. When he loses Riley’s sat feed in a burst of static, he panics, until he hears her shouting at the man again. *I can’t let them die for me.* Jack and Thornton are telling him to stay. Logically, he knows he should. *There’s no way he’s going to let three lucrative contracts walk, just to get me.* It’s a game.

But if they die and he lives, what is he going to do? They’re family. Mac would take a bullet for any one of them. And maybe, just maybe, this guy’s got a big enough ego to make a mistake. A mistake Mac can exploit. If he’s there, he might be able to find a way to save them all.

He doesn’t for a minute believe this S218, whoever he is, will hold up his end of the bargain. But he does know that if he doesn’t go, he’s signing Thornton and Riley and Jack’s death warrants.

He’s not technically allowed to be driving; he doesn’t even have a valid license. But Riley’s Jeep is still in the parking lot, and he knows where she keeps the spare keys, she’s picked him up for work often enough.

When he gets to the junkyard, in eleven and a half minutes—thanks to the built in navigation system Riley upgraded to find the fastest routes (if sometimes slightly illegal) while driving—he can see the three clustered around the abandoned rental car. Riley and Jack are on their feet. Thornton is sitting with her back to the car, pressing a hand to her shoulder. He heard the shot over the comms as he was leaving.

He parks the Jeep and gets out, glancing around the junkyard for any sign of movement. “Okay, I’m here.”

There’s a softly whistled few bars of “Home on the Range”, some slow clapping, and then someone emerges from behind one of the cars. The tall slender figure from the house, but this time wearing his own face, not a dead president’s. “Now, before we continue, I must insist you lay down any weapons you’ve brought.”

“I don’t have any weapons.” Mac pulls his jacket off and drops it to the dirt. The man’s eyes follow it, and Mac cringes at the glimmer in them. *You’re just jumpy from the prison. You’re seeing that kind of desire where it isn’t.* “Now you can let them go.”

The man laughs, that same eerily chilling sound. “The deal wasn’t that I’d let them go when you got here. The deal was that I would let them go when I had you.”

“Then go ahead and shoot me.” Mac lowers his head. *I’ve been close to dead so many times. I thought it would stop being so terrifying. But now that I’m actually standing here, I’m just as scared*
“Oh Angus,” The man smiles. “There’s no need to look so resigned. I’m not going to kill you.” He shrugs casually. “I think you’ll be much more entertaining alive.” He licks his lips, and the small movement sends a chill down Mac’s spine. “I heard about your reputation, MacGyver. I had to see if you were as good as they say. You know, there’s a problem with being too good at your job. It starts to get boring. And you, you sounded like a challenge. Something to knock the rust off the old brain. I thought it would be such an honor to be the one who finally put you in the ground.”

“So why change your mind?” Mac’s stalling, looking around. Clearly, the man didn’t realize that he still has his knife. And there’s a forklift over there, a hydraulic line… If he doesn’t want to kill me that gives me an advantage. Granted, I might piss him off enough to change his mind, but it gives me time to think of something.

“Really, it’s your own fault. Setting your own house on fire? Wine bottle rockets? Who does that? When you turned out to be so damned hard to kill, I called some old friends. Friends who might know more about you. And it seems you have a reputation for more than just making things that explode.” That smile is demented.

Mac carefully works the knife out of his pocket and opens the blade. As the man opens his mouth again, Mac flings the knife, and a spray of pressurized fluid bursts out. He snatches his knife back and runs.

He tries to push out the thoughts pounding in his head. Maybe he just means that I have a reputation for improvising. Maybe he wants my skills, like El Noche did. But he just can’t force himself to believe that lie. I know exactly what he wants. And it’s not just me jumping at shadows anymore.

“Oh Angus, this will be fun,” the man says, voice echoing off the metal. “Do you know why I chose a junkyard of all places, to meet you?” Mac ducks behind a car, panting, lungs burning. He’s running on adrenaline, but that can only do so much when he’s been sleep deprived for days and hasn’t eaten properly in over two weeks. He’s tired and he’s going to run out of energy soon. Whatever he’s going to do, he has to do it fast.

“Have you ever read the short story, “The Most Dangerous Game”? the man continues. “I read it in my English class. Oh, I hated the class, and the teacher was insufferable, but that story… it was one of the first pieces of literature I could actually relate to.” He laughs. “My teacher had… she called them concerns… about my essay, but she shouldn’t have. I understood that story perfectly.”

There’s a semi truck parked between two rows of smashed cars. Mac scrambles inside. It’s dusty and there are mouse nests in the seats, but the radio is intact, and he’s got the beginnings of a plan.

“There was something about the idea of a fair fight, the struggle of the hunted thing to survive, that was simply… mesmerizing. I realized then that it was so much more elegant to give one’s victim a fighting chance. To give them the opportunity to defeat me.”

Mac rips out the radio, I saw a lot of street punks do stuff like this when I was the Phoenix, maybe I was more curious how they did it than mad, so sue me… and jumps out of the car. He’s made too much noise, the footsteps and voice are coming closer.

“But you’re the first one who’s actually managed to come close to winning my little game. So I thought I’d offer you a sporting chance. This place, well, if your reputation is to be believed, you have everything you need.”

Those guns he’s using are sophisticated. But what he’s using to control them isn’t. It’s just a basic
radio frequency controller. And if you’ve ever driven past another car and gotten a burst of static, you’ll know that another, stronger radio can play havoc with a weaker transmission.

There’s a large compactor up ahead. Mac grabs the radio and props it inside.

Weathers’s shop used to have a scrapyard out back. Smashing down the unrepairable cars was always my job. Mr. Weathers used to say I enjoyed it too much. Maybe I did. But I learned an awful lot about car compactors. Weathers’s was always breaking, and it seemed like every time he used it, Mac had to fix some part of the controls’ wiring.

He pulls out some of the wires, connects them to the radio, then presses the compactor’s on button. Music blares out, and Mac’s vaguely aware that the station was tuned to classic rock. Jack’s gonna love telling this story later. He’s never gonna stop going on about how Led Zeppelin literally saved his life.

But the radio is going to draw the killer right to him. Mac runs off again, but he’s taken a wrong turn somewhere and he’s hit a dead end. He’s about to scramble up the stack of cars blocking his way when the music shuts off and he hears the telltale click of a gun.

“I said I wouldn’t kill you. I didn’t say I wouldn’t shoot you,” the man says, clicking his tongue. “If you don’t stop running, I’m just going to have to make sure you can’t. And I know you won’t enjoy it nearly as much as I will.”

Mac reaches for a long scrap of metal lying up against one of the cars. This guy seems to like to talk, if Mac can keep him distracted...His fingers are groping blindly for the rusted pipe while he tries to keep his eyes on this man’s.

The assassin lifts his gun casually, and a bullet pings off the pipe, sending it spinning out of Mac’s reach. “Oh, no, no, no, that just won’t do.” He smiles again. “Now that’s no way to treat someone who told you they’re not going to kill you.”

Mac sighs. Looks like I’ve hit the end of the line. But maybe this guy’s actually crazy enough to hold up his deal and let the others go. “Okay. I’m coming.” I got away from one psychopath only to end up in the hands of another one. He’s not sure if this man will be better or worse than El Noche. But if it saves Riley and Jack and Thornton...

“There’s a good boy. Oh, we’re going to have so much fun, Angus.” And then Mac sees the three red dots scattered on the man’s chest.

He can feel the slow smile on his face. “You might want to look at that controller.”

The man does, and his triumphant smile morphs into a disbelieving glare. Jack and Riley emerge from behind the cars, Jack with his gun aimed straight for the man’s head. Riley’s holding her backup rig and grinning. “You know, those fancy rifles of yours really are nice. I think I’ll keep them.”

“Drop it,” Jack snaps. The man carefully lays his gun on the ground, eyes glancing from it to the one Jack has a few inches from the assassin’s temple. Jack winks at Mac. “Turns out you can hack a lot of stuff if you’ve got a Riley on your team. Nice touch with Zeppelin, by the way. Led us right to you.” He chuckles, and then glances from Mac to Riley to the guy he’s got at gunpoint. “Led? Get it? Come on, nobody thought that was punny?”

“Jack, you know how I feel about your puns.” But Mac’s laughing anyway, at the sheer relief of being alive and safe and with his team looking out for him. Maybe they weren’t there before. But
“I called for backup, they’re en route,” Riley says, as Jack pulls their mystery man’s hands behind his back and cuffs them.

It only takes a few more minutes for a full tac team to arrive, but it’s a few minutes too long for Mac. The man won’t stop staring at him. “You know, I’m actually impressed, Angus. No one’s ever beaten me before. Hell, no one’s ever survived me before. I look forward to matching wits with you again.”

“You know his name, but we don’t know yours,” Jack snaps. “You wanna talk about something, start spilling some of your life story instead of taunting the kid, or you’re gonna get my gun clocked into the side of your head, and I won’t even feel bad.”

“In this business, you pick up a lot of names,” The man says. “But if I had to choose one, I’ve always been partial to...Murdoc.” He gives Mac a cheerful wink.

Mac can’t stop watching Murdoc’s eyes as the tac team leads him away, and the possessive desire in them sends a shiver down his spine. What have I just done? Who is this man, and what did I do to make him decide he wants me?

LOS ANGELES

POPULATION...A LOT...MINUS ONE PSYCHO KILLER

Jack can tell the kid’s almost asleep on his feet again. No wonder, after the day he’s had. Jack’s still a bit in shock that they’ve all emerged mostly in one piece. Medics confirmed that Patty’s injury was just a through and through, she actually won’t need to be held overnight. She seems fine, aside from being angry she wasn’t able to help catch Murdoc. Riley’s holding up well too, sadly this is far from her first “held at gunpoint by a psycho” situation. She’s mostly mad about her rig getting blown to hell. She’d actually threatened to fight Jack for the privilege of punching Murdoc if he got out of hand.

Jack’s glad they’re apparently okay. Because he’s not. The second he and Mac were alone, the kid practically crumbled. “He didn’t want to kill me, Jack,” Mac had whispered, and there had been undisguised horror in his eyes. “He...he...” The kid hadn’t had to say anything, Jack knew. He’d seen it too.

“Yeah, but we got him. I’m not letting him near you again, okay? Nobody is gonna do that to you again.” Jack had pulled the kid into a half-hug, nothing over the top because the kid was still shaky and tense, and Jack still doesn’t want to push him too far. But Mac seemed grateful.

Now they’re on their way home to Jack’s, because even though Murdoc is behind bars, the kid’s house is a disaster area and Jack’s not letting him go back until they get it fixed up. It started to rain just before they left the junkyard, and there’s a certain peacefulness about the wet city streets, the rain running down the windows, the consistent slish-thump of the windshield wipers. Mac’s nodding off with his head against the window, so when he jerks awake, Jack’s a little startled.

“Jack, can we make a quick stop first?”

“What is it with you and asking to make detours in my car?” Jack asks, but he grins. “Yeah, sure.”

“Turn left up here.” Mac’s directions lead them down a few side streets until he asks Jack to pull into the parking lot of a hipster cafe.
“Okay, kid, I know you’re a little weird, but what are we doing here?” Mac doesn’t answer, just walks to the side of the building and kneels down next to the wall. There’s a faded graffiti painting of a guitar, that’s clearly been touched up several times with colors that didn’t match the originals showing through the chipped paint. There are some sooty burnt out candles, sunbleached fake flowers wilting in the rain, and a guitar pick tucked into a gap in the brick wall.

“What’s this?”

“Memorial for Jeremiah Bozer. Wilt’s brother.” Mac sighs. “Jerry died because of the cartels and their wars. I’m not going to let that happen to Wilt.”

“He couldn’t have a better person watching his back.” Jack bends down, putting a hand on Mac’s back. The kid’s shoulders are shaking, his breaths hitching.

“What if I’m too late the next time? What if he pays for what I’ve done?”

“Mac, everyone’s at risk, every day. It’s not your job to save everyone.” Jack sighs. “That’s just something you have to learn in this job.” He was more terrified than he’ll admit when he saw Mac driving Riley’s car to the junkyard.

“I thought we were all dead anyway. I was hoping he’d be smart enough to know that too. For a genius, he can be kinda dumb. But Jack can’t bring himself to care about that. Mac has a good heart. He really cares about people. He’s a good kid.”

“Come on, we’re gettin’ all wet out here,” Jack says, tugging gently on Mac’s arm. “I don’t need you gettin’ sick and givin’ me some crud. I got some leftover five-alarm chili in the fridge if you’re feelin’ like supper.”

“Is it as old as that Chinese carryout you tried to convince me was edible when we got up this morning?” Mac asks. “If it has mold on it, I’ll pass.”

“No mold. I only made it last week,” Jack says. “Trust me, that stuff’ll chase out any chill.” Mac’s genuinely starting to shiver now, shaking from more than tears. “Let’s get you home.”

The second they get through the door, Jack sends the kid off to the bathroom to change. His jacket kept him sort of dry, but his pants are soaked from the knees down and his hair is dripping. He grins when he hears the shower start.

“Good, kiddo. He’s pretty sure he knows why Mac was avoiding actually getting cleaned up, and it’s a weight off his shoulders he didn’t even know was there to see that the kid’s getting past that fear.

He pulls out the chili and reheats it, and he’s even managed to not burn garlic bread in the oven broiler he never uses by the time Mac’s done showering and changing. The kid eats like he’s starving, two bowls of chili and three pieces of the bread. Jack can’t help but grin. Mac looks all of fifteen in the oversized hoodie of Jack’s he borrowed, with his hair wet and frowzy, shoveling down food like there’s no tomorrow.

He starts yawning halfway through the second bowl of chili. When he trips over Jack’s too-long sweatpants and almost falls on his way to put the bowl in the kitchen sink, Jack shakes his head and steers the kid toward the bedroom, dropping off the bowl on the way. “I’ll clean up. You get some rest.”

Mac tries to protest, but it’s cut off by an even more massive yawn and Jack chuckles. “See, what did I say. Go to bed.” Mac gives him a pouty kid look, but crawls under the covers. Jack feels a twinge of pain that someone this young has already been hurt so much. None of this should have happened to him. He shouldn’t be carrying all this pain, all this trauma. He’s just a kid. But Jack’s seen boys even younger in the Sandbox. He’s even watched them die.
Sometimes the world isn’t fair. Sometimes it hurts the people we care about most. It likes to beat down the kindest, the gentlest, the most vulnerable and defenseless. And that’s why Jack does what he does. To try and tip the scales a little toward the side of justice. Toward protecting the innocent, the vulnerable, the people the world tramples on.

Mac’s already asleep, breathing softly, hands curled against the pillow. Jack ruffles the kid’s hair. “Sleep tight, kiddo.”
This chapter deserves a note, since it deviates almost completely from the original! I didn't think there was any way Mac, after the events of 107 and 108, was going to be sent on a field mission that landed him in a Latvian embassy under siege. So I came up with this instead! It keeps some elements of the original mission, but it's pretty much a new episode, so I hope you enjoy it as much as the others...

109-Chisel

PHOENIX REC ROOM

MORE THAN ONE FRIENDSHIP HAS BEEN LOST OVER PING-PONG

Cage’s eyes are cold and determined when they meet Riley’s over the top of the net. “You’re going down.” She tosses the ball into the air and then smacks it with her signature spin serve, the one Riley’s spent literal months trying to figure out how to return.

And I thought playing with Jack was bad. Riley at least gets the paddle on the ball this time. Still, it goes wild.

“Six-one,” Sam says triumphantly, whipping her ponytail out of her face as she catches the ball Riley throws back and prepares for another death serve.

It’s times like this I can actually believe she was some cold-blooded assassin. It’s not Cage’s competitiveness or even her obvious skill at seemingly whatever she does. It’s the way using her mind games to win seems to come naturally to her. Sam is making an effort to play for fun. Riley can see that psyching out her opponent, playing to win, is second nature. Sam has to work to relax that cold calculation.

Sam smashes over the next serve, but by some stroke of sheer luck Riley’s able to return it properly. This time she’s able to land the ball just out of Cage’s reach. It’s the first point she’s made since Sam let her start with the serve.

“Ha. Prepare to meet the famous Davis backhand,” Riley grins evilly. Jack swears whatever she does must break the known laws of physics. He’s threatened to have Mac come down and watch them and explain how Riley manages her particular brand of float serve. “Like he’d ever help you beat me,” was the only comeback Riley had to that.

She’ll be glad to see Mac around the Phoenix again. He’s due to come back on Monday, he had the three weeks of paid sick leave to recover from Bishop, and he insisted on coming back when that was up. She worried at first, but it will probably actually be a good thing for him to go back to work and get his mind off the past. Bozer decided to spend the whole week with his sister, since apparently she was pissed this is the first time she’s seen him since last Christmas. Mac’s been staying with Jack all week, and the two of them are going on a camping trip this weekend. Jack’s not getting signal, she knows because she tried to text him this morning.
Sam’s attempt at returning Riley’s serve sends the ball off the tip of her paddle into the corner of the room. Riley grins. “You were saying?”

Cage narrows her eyes. “It’s not fun to win by a slaughter. I’m just letting you feel good about yourself so you don’t decide to play another prank on me.”

“Oh come on. I was just testing your field skills.” Riley will admit that shaking copious amounts of pepper into Sam’s jar of overnight oatmeal was a bit juvenile. *But she started it, hiding everything from my half of the bathroom cabinet on top of the fridge.* She’ll admit, she appreciates Sam’s efforts to cheer her up and get the old Riley back. *Nothing’s the same after Bishop.* “You smelled it before you even opened the lid.”

“And had to eat your disgusting fruit pebbles for breakfast. Seriously, how can you even eat something that sweet?” Sam smashes Riley’s next serve back faster than she can even follow. *I knew I went too high.*

“You’re one to talk about weird food, you make fairy bread all the time.”

“I don’t eat it for breakfast!” Riley’s not sure she’ll ever get used to seeing Sam butter slices of bread and cover it in her Christmas cookie sprinkles. *There won’t be any of them left by the time I start making cookies to decorate.* Although, now that she thinks about it, there are only a few weeks left until Christmas. She’s been too preoccupied to think about something happy like that. *Maybe I should start baking.* She’s got both happy and sad memories of the holiday, but all the recent ones are good, and she’s more than hoping for more this year. *Our little family just doubled.* She’s got to think of some way to make this Christmas really special. It will be Mac’s first in two years that he hasn’t been in prison.

She blames the fact that she *totally* flails at Sam’s next serve on her preoccupation with holiday planning. *Will my apartment be big enough? Should we ask to have it at Mac’s place? Is Jack going to make his grandma’s bourbon pecan pie again this year?*

“So when are we actually going to talk about that letter?” Sam asks, and Riley’s jerked out of her happy thoughts of tree decorating and trying to keep her gift for Sam a secret (she’s not sure how long that will last, maybe two days?). The deceptively small piece of paper is burning a hole in Riley’s sweatshirt pocket. It was slipped under her door this morning, the handwriting on the front painfully familiar. *Only Nick Carpenter wrote his ‘y’ with that funny squiggle off the tail.*

The letter was short, just a request to meet in two days at a little diner the two used to enjoy getting breakfast at after missions when they got back early in the morning. Nick had promised to explain things.

“I don’t know what to do about it.” Riley stretches and barely manages to get the ball back on the table. “It sounds like a trap. But if we can catch him, maybe it’s worth the risk.”

“He said to come alone. He’ll know if you bring backup.” Cage expertly returns Riley’s latest trick shot. “But if he wanted to take you out, it’s obvious that he knows you still live at your old place. He could kill you any time he wanted.”

“Really reassuring, Sam.”

“I’m just saying, there’s something odd about it all. He’s asking to meet somewhere public. It doesn’t sound like a hit to me.” She shrugs. “If I were him and I wanted to take you out, I’d set up a sniper nest on the building across the street. Or rig your door with an explosive.” *There’s no way she wasn’t a black hat at some point in her career.* Apparently planning a hit is absolutely second nature
to Cage. “I think he wants to give you something. Information, some kind of message, I don’t know. He left you that key in Lisbon, and there’s one just like it drawn at the bottom of the paper, right?”

Riley nods. “But what could he possibly want to tell me? He’s working for a dark agency that wants me and everyone I care about dead, and he had me shot. For money.”

“Maybe there’s more going on here than we know,” Sam suggests, tipping her next hit just over the net.

“Maybe I can find a way to slip a tracker on him, get him to lead us back to the whole Organization.” Riley’s serve bounces just shy of Cage’s paddle and the ball rolls across the floor. “Point!”

“That’s illegal!” Sam shouts as she runs after the ball.

Riley chuckles. “We’re a clandestine government organization, I’m pretty sure it’s fine.”

“No! Your serve can’t go off the side like that. If you’re going to call that a point, it has to come off the end.”

“Oh well, it was worth a shot. Thought maybe Australia had different rules.” Riley smirks. “Doesn’t the ball spin backward down there?”

“Ha ha, very funny.” Sam’s face suddenly changes, the smile slipping away. “Have you told Jack about it yet? Because I think he might object to you agreeing to meet your crazy ex alone.”

“I tried. He’s not getting signal. He and Mac are somewhere roughing it. But Nick wants to meet tomorrow morning, so hopefully it’s over before Jack comes back and I can ask forgiveness rather than permission.”

“You know, if I didn’t know better, I’d think you actually were his daughter,” Sam laughs. “Won’t he be pissed?”

“Oh probably. But I’ll catch him in a good mood. Jack absolutely loves camping. He’ll be so relaxed when he gets back that I might even escape the trademark Jack Dalton lecture.”

“Don’t jinx it,” Sam mutters, and then another spin serve flies over the net and Riley dives after it, dignity be damned. I want to win, darn it!

LOS PADRES NATIONAL FOREST

ABOUT AS FAR FROM A SUPERMAX PRISON AS YOU CAN GET

Mac honestly can’t remember the last time he’s been camping. He remembers that his dad took him once, didn’t he try to teach him how to build a fire? Mac doesn’t remember exactly, he’s not sure what memories of his dad are real and what ones he made up listening to his friends talk about what they did with their families. But he thinks this one was real because usually the ones where there was yelling are the real ones. He thinks Dad might have been mad at him for not figuring out how to start a fire with the sticks and rocks he gave him. He remembers shivering all night in his tent, not allowed to come over to Dad’s perfect, nice fire, because Dad said if he couldn’t figure something out in the real world, there were consequences.

That was when he was...seven maybe? Dad never took him again. I always figured he was disappointed in me and didn’t want to have to watch me fail at everything he tried to teach me. He didn’t like it when I couldn’t figure something out. Most of Mac’s real memories of his dad are about
learning to fix something, or make something. Sometimes, he did it right, and those are good memories. But there are quite a few where he made mistakes. He learned back then that making mistakes was unacceptable. He hasn’t forgotten that, at least.

He went camping with Grandpa Harry a couple times after he moved in there, but only in the backyard, because Harry’s COPD was getting bad even then and he needed the oxygen tank. They’d lay out on blankets in the yard and look at the stars until Mac got sleepy and then they’d go up on the porch and make a fire in the firepit, and Grandpa taught Mac how to do it with his knife and a piece of stone. He can do it right now. Maybe if Dad could have seen him then he’d have been happy.

He’d said as much to Jack, and the man’s reaction startled him. Jack seemed shocked that anyone would punish Mac for not knowing how to do something right the first time. “Kid, that’s not how anyone’s supposed to learn. How did he teach you?”

When Mac explained being given instructions and then handed some sticks and rocks, Jack actually growled. “He set you up to fail. That’s not how I’m gonna teach you anything out here. The only thing you learn how to do that way is get frustrated.” Jack had taught him every step of his way of building a campfire, explaining any time Mac needed more information and letting him try until he figured it out.

He’s started the fire every night he and Jack have been up here. This is the second morning he’s woken up to birds singing and air that smells like leaf mold and pine trees instead of smog and cigarette smoke. He could get used to this. Even in his little secluded neighborhood, he always smells the city. Out here, there are no people. Birds and rabbits and lizards don’t care about anything Mac’s done or where he was in the past.

He can hear Jack rolling over beside him, the sleeping bag scritching against the floor of the tent. Jack insisted he didn’t want to bring an air mattress, not even when Mac demonstrated that he could rig it up to work on solar power so they wouldn’t need to be anywhere near electricity. Mac thinks he’s just trying to keep up the tough guy act, but he can tell Jack’s getting stiffer each morning. Maybe I can find enough loose leaves to shove underneath his side of the tent that it’ll keep him off the ground a little.

He’d been nervous about sharing a single tent, he wasn’t at all sure how he would react to being that close to someone else, even Jack. And he didn’t want to bother the older man with his nightmares. But aside from one on the first night, he’s been sleeping soundly. And it feels safe and comforting to hear Jack breathing next to him. He never thought he’d feel safe in a closed space with anyone like Jack, ever, but he does.

“Hey kid, you ready to get up and face the morning?” Jack mumbles, rolling over and rubbing his eyes.

“I’ve been awake for the past ten minutes.” Mac jumps up, he’s finally gotten his energy back, at least partially, and it feels so good.

“Kids,” Jack groans, rolling over. “Wait till you get to be my age, you won’t be jumpin’ around like a jackrabbit after a night on the ground.”

“Oh, you mean when I’m seventy, old man?” Mac shoots back, grinning as he starts rolling up his sleeping bag. He doesn’t want to find an unpleasant creature inside it tonight waiting to surprise him. Jack found a small toad in his shoe yesterday morning.

“Pretty much the first thing you learn as a Texas ranch kid is to dump your boots before you put
them on. Don’t wanna find a scorpion the hard way.” Mac’s honestly surprised at how much Jack’s been trying to teach him all weekend. He’s showed Mac how to set up the tent to make sure it’s out of the way of any possible rain washouts or mudslides, how to catch a fish about four different ways, and how to clean them, and what plants are edible and some general guidelines for identifying poisonous ones.

I’m surprised he’s put up with a city boy like me. Sure, Dad was always into camping and roughing it, as a matter of fact the last present he got Mac, the one that Harry had to give him on his tenth birthday, was a book on wilderness survival and a compass. But then Mac moved with Harry to LA, and there was a big difference between surviving the city middle school and the Mission City woods. Mac’s gotten very, very good at making it in the alleys of LA and the halls of a supermax prison. He’s forgotten most of what Dad taught him about the woods.

Jack starts poking up the banked embers of their campfire to make breakfast, which if yesterday was any indication is going to be bacon and fire-heated toast with coffee in the little tin mugs that scorch your hands if you hold them too long. Breakfast is the only meal they make with food they brought from home. The rest of the day, Jack insists they eat off the land. Yesterday they went fishing, and Jack surprised Mac again by not threatening that they’d go hungry if Mac couldn’t figure out how to catch a fish with his bare hands. Today, Jack’s going to show him how to make a rabbit snare. Mac’s not sure if it’s technically legal to be hunting like this, but Jack reassured him that for one thing, they’re so far away from civilization that he doubts anyone is going to bother them, and secondly this counts as Mac’s mandatory wilderness survival course.

“Count yourself lucky. When I was taking this at the Farm, they threw us out in the woods with nothing and told us to last a week. And when I say nothing, I mean nothing.” Jack’s grin is the wide one that Mac can never decide is just pure humor or means he’s managed to pull the wool over Mac’s eyes one more time about the espionage world. “Quite a few new trainees got the privilege of seeing Jack Dalton’s bare ass. ‘Course, that was cause I was beatin’ them all back to the base camp.” Mac decides when he gets back to civilization he’s going to ask Riley if that’s really how CIA training goes.

Jack hands Mac the frying pan full of strips of bacon. “Try not to burn that, now. I like it just crispy on the edges.” He nudges Mac’s shoulder playfully.

“Are you sure knowing how to cook bacon is an essential part of wilderness survival?” Mac asks. Jack’s in such a good mood right now, he finally seems to be losing that black cloud of guilt he’s been carrying around since Bishop. Mac’s trying to encourage the lightheartedness whenever he can.

“Bacon is one of the essentials of life, kid.” Jack messes around with the camp percolator and dumps in some coffee. He takes the pan from Mac. “Since you clearly don’t understand the sacred art of bacon cooking, why don’t you just leave that to me?”

Mac grins. They’re probably better off leaving any cooking to someone who isn’t Mac. Harry used to swear Mac could burn water trying to boil it. It’s a good thing he lives with someone whose literal job is making food.

He’s digging out the mugs from their backpacks when he hears it. A rustling, crashing noise. Bears? Mac doesn’t think they’re supposed to be out in November, but maybe it smelled their cooking? He turns back to Jack, who already has a hand on the gun hidden in his belt.

“Jack? What is that?”

The second he hears the crashing, Jack’s on his feet, hand on his trusty sidearm. That’s not a bear or
any other wildlife for that matter, he can tell by the step cadence that it’s human. Whoever it is is in a hurry. *Running away from something? Running toward something?* There are plenty of trails scattered around up here, but this person clearly isn’t on one.

“Mac, get over here.” The kid does, his eyes glued to the spot in the trees where the sound is coming from. He’s shaking slightly, and glancing around them. He steps behind Jack, then grabs up the frying pan of bacon Jack abandoned on the fire. He slides the slightly burnt slices of meat onto a plate then holds up the pan like a weapon.

Jack can’t help grinning, despite the fact that they’re facing the unknown. “What are you gonna do with that, kid?”

“It works in movies,” Mac pouts slightly. “What? These things *hurt!* Boze accidentally hit me with one in the kitchen a couple times.”

Jack shakes his head, keeping one eye on the treeline, the other on his partner who resembles nothing so much as the heroine of one of those animated movies his five year old niece loves. *Maybe his new nickname should be “Rapunzel”. He even has the hair for it…*

Jack’s surprised at how quickly he’s arrived at the ‘laugh in the face of danger’ stage of working with Mac. It took almost six months before he started cracking jokes with Riley when they were in the middle of life and death situations. Granted, that was because it took almost three months for her to stop acting like he was a parent she didn’t want micromanaging her life, but still.

The crashing gets louder and Jack returns to seriousness in an instant. He trains his gun on the treeline. It’s probably nothing. Probably a lost hiker. But after that “Murdoc” guy, Jack is jumpy. *Anyone could be after Mac, trying to collect on El Noche’s bounty.*

Someone bursts out of the trees into the clearing, stumbling a little but clearly checking the area, with the kind of precision Jack’s come to associate with government operatives. It’s a woman, on the short side, wearing a much the worse for wear tactical shirt and cargo pants.

The woman is panting, blood dripping from a gash on her forehead into her eye, her dark hair falling loose from a ponytail, damp and tangled with twigs and leaves. And she’s holding a gun.

This isn’t how Jack expected today to go. Not by a long shot.

“Drop your weapon!” Jack shouts, and she carefully lowers her gun to the ground, raising her hands. Jack doesn’t lower his weapon. “Who are you?” The woman reaches into her shirt. “Hey! Don’t move!”

“I’m just getting my ID.” She reaches her hand slowly into the pocket of her jacket and pulls out a wallet, tossing it to Mac. He catches it, opens it and nods to Jack.

“I’m Federal Agent Denika Burkhart. We were transporting a prisoner and he escaped.” She looks down at her hands. “He killed my partner and two other agents, and I’m going to bring him in.”

“Hey Mac, let me see that.” Jack examines the ID. It looks legitimate. The photo hasn’t been tampered with, and the card has the special watermarks and metal tracing that Jack knows are standard protocol for official IDs. It looks like she’s telling the truth.

That takes one problem off their hands, but it leaves them with a whole new one. If this Agent Burkhart is right, there’s a criminal somewhere in these mountains dangerous enough to take out an entire FBI team.
Jack’s about to suggest they get the hell out of here when the kid decides to speak up. “Can we help you?” Jack glances at Mac, who’s still absently holding onto the frying pan. He looks concerned, but not full-blown terrified. “My partner and I are government agents too.” Jack wants to beat Mac over the head with that pan; maybe it’ll knock in some common sense. Just because she’s from an agency doesn’t mean she has the clearance to know about Phoenix. I know he gets that we can’t tell normal people, but we can’t just go willy-nilly spilling to random other agencies’ people either.

“You don’t look like it. Mohawk here, yes. You, blondie, not so much.” Denika has her head cocked curiously. “Unless whatever agency you work for issues kitchen utensils as standard tac gear.”

“Actually, he’s a technical consultant,” Jack mutters. It’s too late to backtrack. It’s clear this woman would have made him for an operative anyway; the way he was holding his gun and his response to the situation probably gave him away. But I wasn’t gonna take chances. Not with Mac’s life.

“Phoenix agent Jack Dalton. This is Angus MacGyver. Goes by Mac, usually, but if you feel like it you can always call him Rapunzel.” Mac glares at him. That’s for blowin’ our cover, genius. “We’re not actually one of the official agencies…”

“I’ll take any backup I can get.” She snatches her ID as Jack tosses it back. “If you’re willing to help me, I’d be grateful.”

“So what exactly did my partner volunteer us for?” Jack asks. “I’d like to know what I’m about to risk my career and piss off my boss for.” We’re not authorized to just pick up a mission like this. But if someone that dangerous is out there, it’s irresponsible to let the situation get worse. Our job is to save lives and stop problems. Patty might be mad, but she can’t blame us for doing what has to be done.

Denika sighs. Jack can see her shoulders shaking slightly, he can’t tell if it’s controlled tears or shivering. California doesn’t have the kind of winter weather some places do, but it’s chilly. And she looks like she went for a rather unplanned swim. Ho nods her over to them, and she carefully picks up her gun, crouching by the fire and rubbing her hands together. “It was supposed to be a standard sting operation, taking out an emerging threat before it became a major problem. Our target, Rufus Carsen, is a home-grown terrorist. He has a whole secret compound somewhere in these mountains, and he was recruiting his own militia. We first found out about him through an announcement he made on the dark web, calling anyone ‘who is tired of corruption and enslavement to bureaucracy’ to join his cause.”

“Oh geez.” Jack’s seen enough of those kind of situations. Usually these guys are ex-army or espionage, disillusioned with the system. But that’s almost better than the nutcases who assume because they have a cause they’re invincible. A normal civilian like that is unpredictable. “What’s his background?” Jack asks.

Agent Burkhart takes a deep breath; Jack wanders over to the backpacks, digs out a coffee mug, and offers her some. She accepts, holding the mug gingerly and sipping while she talks. “His father was Special Forces. Killed in an unsanctioned operation twenty years ago, they weren’t allowed to even bring his body home because the whole mission was disavowed. Carsen was fifteen years old, and he started his anti-government rhetoric then. Had his own website, distributed flyers at his school. When he was seventeen he smashed out the windows of the local police station and assaulted two officers trying to arrest him, and he was sent to juvenile detention for six months. He disappeared after that, turned up five months ago. Apparently he’s been living off the grid this entire time.”

“A kid managed to stay hidden for almost twenty years?” Jack shakes his head. “That’s hard to believe.”
“According to his family, he and his father were real survivalists. He knew Special Forces level tactics for long-term situations. But you’re right, he wasn’t alone. It appears he found his way to a man he considered a mentor, a Jonas Taylor.”

“Jonas Taylor...wasn’t he behind the Colorado Springs bombing and the Denver anthrax scare?” Jack remembers hearing a lot about those cases when he was CIA.

“Yes. And he’s the one who trained Carsen. When Taylor died, he handed over the mantle to Rufus.”

“Doesn’t mean anything good.”

Denika shakes her head. “No. We were having trouble finding his location, he didn’t reveal it in the emails. He didn’t reveal any details, he wanted to get proof that whoever was asking to join was legitimate before he did that. All we could tell from the postings was that he was somewhere in the Pacific time zone. Which left a lot of ground to cover.” She stops, and Jack waits, letting the agent get a grip on her emotions. “We caught a break when we captured one of his men two months ago at a failed bombing in Portland. He was able to tell us that Carsen conducts meetings with potential supporters at a separate location from his main compound. He gives them a task to complete, a proof of loyalty, before he lets them into the main operation. The Portland bomb was our informant’s test; he never found out where the compound itself was. So we decided to set up a sting, take Carsen when he was vulnerable, away from most of his support.”

“Smart. These guys are paranoid, taking advantage of it was a good move.” Mac’s twisting a stem of grass while he listens. It looks vaguely like a house.

“We had one of our agents posing as a potential recruit. The raid went exactly as planned and we were transporting Carsen under secure guard for questioning while the rest of our team cleaned up the site and looked for intel.” She sighs. “But it wasn’t enough. He knocked out the guards in the backseat, strangled the driver, and the jeep rolled off the trail and into the river. He somehow slipped his cuffs and got out. By the time I got the rest of my team free, he was gone.” She clenches her fingers around the handle of the mug. “And it was all for nothing. Everyone else was dead.” Denika takes a deep breath, and Jack sees the shimmer in her eyes. “This was my first real operation; I just got full agency status. The agent who’d been training me was driving that jeep, and I couldn’t save him. And now I’m the only one left to try and bring Carsen in.” She looks at Mac. “I don’t even know if I can do this. Your help means the world to me. I want to see that man rot for what he did to Ross. And the others.”

Mac watches Agent Burkhart check her gun, accepting Jack’s kit to clean water and dirt out of it. She can’t be much older than me. He wonders what it’s like to decide on this life, rather than simply take it as the best possible option. She could have done anything. And she chose to become an agent.

He’s never really thought too much about what life would have been like if he’d made a different choice all those years ago. If he’d decided not to take the law into his own hands, and instead decided to help stop criminals the legal way from the start. What if I’d become a police officer? Or joined some federal agency? Would I have even considered that? He honestly doesn’t know. I probably wouldn’t have thought I could do it. He wouldn’t have wanted to leave the Bozers. If I hadn’t gotten caught I might still be trying to finish a college degree and working overtime at the garage.

He’s never had what could be considered a normal life. He doesn’t think the suburban family and the white picket fence were ever in his future, no matter what choices he made. I’m not the kind of person who gets a life like that. He’s too willing to sacrifice for doing the right thing. I’d have stayed
a vigilante. Or become a cop. Or joined the Army. Mac’s always seen himself as the expendable one, the one who should get hurt so no one else has to. I don’t have a family to grieve losing me, now I don’t even have anyone who depends on me for support.

But whether that would have been his choice or not, he’s got no other option now. If he wants to stay out of prison, he has to live a life that means he lies to some of the people closest to him. At least the only person he really has to worry about now is Bozer. I don’t have family, like some people do. I don’t have to go home like Jack and tell a mother and sister and cousins that I can’t explain why I wasn’t answering phone calls for three weeks, because they think I just work at a think tank. I don’t have to explain to my mom, like Riley, why I can't make it to her house for her birthday.

He guesses he’s lucky. He could be spending the rest of his life in a concrete box. But he’s still going to be just as alone as if he served the rest of his sentence in solitary. I’m lying to my best friend. I’ll never be able to have a real family, have a normal life. He can’t even tell himself he could quit this someday, when or if his name is ever cleared. I have a record for life, and I made so many enemies. No one I cared about would ever be safe.

He doesn’t feel like eating, even though Jack insists they’re going to need to have plenty of energy for this. They have miles of terrain to cover, and they only know that Carsen will be heading for his main compound. Which judging by the direction of travel Denika said he was taking, is north of them, deeper into the uncharted territory.

Agent Burkhart had lost Carsen’s trail a couple miles back from Mac and Jack’s camp, and when she’d seen the smoke she’d decided to investigate, to find out whether Carsen had set up a camp. She’d been following a blood trail, but it had disappeared. Likely the man took the time to stop and bandage any wounds to avoid attracting attention.

Jack says he thinks he might be able to pick the trail up again. He’s familiar with the kind of training Carsen’s father would have given him, and he knows what to look for that would indicate an intentionally covered trail. Mac hopes he’s right. Trying to find this man out here in the forest is like looking for a needle in a haystack. A needle with lots of dangerous friends. If Carsen reaches his compound before they catch him, he’ll pack up the operation and move. It could take months or years to track him down again.

Mac can’t help but wonder what he volunteered them for. He let his mouth get ahead of his brain again, and now he and Jack are going to be running straight into what could be a world of trouble. But he can’t stand the thought of letting Agent Burkhart down. She lost someone important to her. No matter what, she needs to make it right. He knows all too well what that feels like. How he stood at Jerry Bozer’s graveside and made a tearful promise to Wilt that someone would pay. How he tore apart Los Diablos’s LA operations after what happened to Pena.

What would I do if that were Jack? If we went on one of those ops and I came home and he didn’t? What if I was the only one who walked away? If he lost Jack, or Riley, or God forbid both of them, he’d hunt whoever was responsible to the end of the earth. He knows exactly how much Denika wants to get this Carsen back in cuffs.

She slides her gun back together with practiced ease, slipping it into her thigh holster with slightly shaking hands. Denika rubs her glasses clean as well, shuddering when the rag comes away bloody, and brushing at the cut on her forehead, wincing. Mac offers her the first aid kit.

She pulls out the package of antiseptic wipes and starts dabbing at the cut, hissing when the cloth touches the open part of the wound.

“I can’t see what I’m doing.” She glances at Mac.
“Let me.” He takes the cloth from her and sits next to her, taking her cheek in one hand as gently as he can to turn her face toward him. The whole left side is streaked with drying blood, and it’s pooled in the hollow below her eye. She’s fortunate that’s the only injury she walked away with, but she was in the passenger seat and apparently the jeep rolled onto the drivers’ side. Jack’s asked at least four times if she has any injured ribs, until she finally got frustrated and pulled the hem of her shirt to show a seatbelt bruise but no noticeable internal damage. She’ll admit she might have a cracked one, after Jack’s prodding earned him a muffled curse, but nothing she can’t work on. She reminds me a little bit of Riley. And a little bit of me.

Mac tries to be careful, wiping away blood and dirt and then covering the gash with antibiotic cream before closing it with a few butterfly bandages. “It doesn’t looks bad,” he tells her; now that he can see it clearly it’s just a little less than an inch long. Head wounds always bleed so much that they look horrible.

“Thank you.” She readjusts her glasses and blinks. “That’s much better.”

“I’m surprised your glasses are still in one piece.”

“Oh, they’re not. This is my backup pair.” She pats a pocket of her tac vest. “My other ones are in about four pieces at the bottom of the river. And I think they’re what gave me that cut.” She shrugs. “I have to have them. I can’t shoot if I can’t see, and contacts irritate my eyes. A couple of my instructors gave me a hard time about it, since glasses can get lost or be used against you if you’re not careful. But Agent Ross stuck up for me. He always wore glasses too.” A bittersweet smile crosses her face. “He said we were gonna prove them all wrong.”

“We’re going to get Carsen back.” Mac knows he has no right to make that promise. But he can’t help himself. I can’t let her down. And besides, he has the strange feeling that if she doesn’t have witnesses, when Denika finally finds Carsen, she’s going to kill him.

SOMEWHERE IN THE LOS PADRES NATIONAL FOREST

APPARENTLY EVEN IN THE MIDDLE OF NOWHERE TROUBLE FOLLOWS JACK

They strike camp, but they don’t pack anything along with them aside from the first aid kit, some emergency food supplies Jack brought in case trying to survive off the land didn’t go as planned, water and of course Jack’s gun and extra ammo clip. What? Who knows what we might have run into out here? Never hurts to be prepared. He also notices that the kid shoves some of the fishing line, a tent light, and a few other odds and ends into his backpack. Jack won’t complain; he’s seen Mac create anything they need out of literal garbage. If he thinks this stuff might come in handy, Jack won’t argue with him.

The kid’s clearly better at his little inventions than at wilderness survival, even though he’s a quick learner. Jack’s not surprised, given what the kid’s told him about his deadbeat dad’s teaching methods. What kind of a monster leaves their own son to half-freeze to death at night because he couldn’t learn how to build a campfire on his first try? Jack wants to cry at the surprise in Mac’s eyes every time Jack’s patient with him, every time he shows him every step to a process, every time Jack doesn’t scold for something gone wrong, just laughs and says they’ll try again. That’s a horrible thing to be surprised about. It seems like Mac genuinely fears being punished for not knowing something.

If I ever meet that miserable excuse for a parent I’m gonna sock him in the jaw. And then maybe shoot him in the knee for good measure. Jack can’t imagine how anyone could walk out on a sweet kid like Mac. That man must be out of his damn mind.
Jack shakes off the thoughts of meting out justice to an unattainable party, and focuses on dealing with the monster they can catch. Agent Burkhart told them she lost Carsen’s trail outside their camp. Jack doubts it’s a coincidence. The man probably smelled the smoke and decided to avoid confrontation, especially if he’s unarmed and injured. At least that means he’s trying to run rather than fight back. He was probably taking the fastest route back to his compound before he came across the camp. Jack’s suddenly incredibly thankful he and Mac didn’t stumble across Carsen’s militia out here. We could have run right into the compound, or a patrol, when we were hiking yesterday. The thought is disconcerting.

He can see the imprint of Denika’s standard-issue boots in the occasional bare patches of ground. They’re alone until a point where a stand of several gnarled trees juts into the path, roots sprawling in all directions. There’s a second set of larger prints, military tactical tread. The kind of stuff Jack’s very familiar with seeing on bases and in surplus stores.

“See this?” Jack’s doing it as much for Denika’s benefit as Mac’s. Obviously she didn’t get this as part of her training. FBI slackers. “The tracks veer off the trail here.”

“I know,” Denika says shortly. “I was trying to pick them up again when I saw your camp.”

“Well, that was your first mistake. When you’re dealing with Special Forces, the obvious is always a decoy.” Jack points to a smear of dark red that’s almost invisible on branches above their heads. “He used the trees to get himself a good distance from the trail without leaving any marks to follow. If he’d known you were still alive and on his trail, he’d probably have waited around and ambushed you, but my guess is, he’s pretty seriously injured and he’s going to ground. He just wanted to avoid our camp, didn’t want to risk confrontation with an unknown amount of people, so he must not have a weapon.” He glances at Denika. “Unless he got one of the agents’ guns?”

She shakes her head. “The agents he took out were wearing tamper-proof holsters. They didn’t have their guns drawn, so it wouldn’t have been easy to just grab them, and he got thrown from the vehicle before it went in the river. All three of the agents still had their weapons on them when I...” She stops talking.

“Keep your eyes peeled for damaged branches or blood on the trunks.”

Mac finds the next tree a few minutes later, with an almost unnoticeable twig snapped off and laying on the forest floor, the end of it still clean and sappy. They’re onto the trail again. All three of them are going to have stiff necks at the end of this, Jack decides after a few more minutes of searching the trees.

The kid’s searching almost frantically, head moving rapidly between scanning the trunk and branches. There’s a near-desperate quality to his search, which surprises Jack, because out of all of them he would have expected that to come from Agent Burkhart. She’s the most emotionally invested.

“Check the ground as well, even if he didn’t break branches there might be blood drops,” Jack says, and when Mac immediately looks scolded and starts staring at the leaves, Jack realizes exactly what’s wrong. He thinks he’s being tested. This is just like the fire, or the fish. He wonders if Mac’s miserable excuse for a parent tried to teach him to track too. Wouldn’t put it past the man to have left a nearly invisible trail and then punished him for not being able to follow it. Mac talks about his dad’s “lessons” so casually, like it must be something every kid has growing up. Like anything about that was normal.

Jack makes it a point to get close enough to Mac that he can say something without Agent Burkhart noticing. “Kid, this isn’t a test. You don’t have to worry about what happens if you don’t always
notice something.” Mac just goes back to scuffing leaves.

“It’s not a test, it’s worse,” he mutters. “This is the real thing and if I mess up he gets away.”

“Listen, kid, it’s not on you to get Carsen back, okay? We didn’t lose him. We just offered to help. Well, you did. Which is way more than anyone should expect of us. You’ve got no obligation, understand?”

Mac nods, just a little; Jack knows it’s all he’s going to get from him. Kid beats himself up for not being perfect. Who wrecks a child like that? Jack’s parents always told him to do his best, but when his best wasn’t good enough that was never made out to be his fault. It was a live and learn experience. I know the kid wants to reconnect with his dad, but I’m not sure how comfortable I am with him being around someone who was so harsh. Mac doesn’t need more reasons to feel like he’s inadequate or worthless. It’s not like they have to worry about that anytime soon, the guy never responded to Mac’s letter. Not that Jack expected someone who literally fell off the face of the earth thirteen years ago to suddenly start responding. He shakes off the anger. This isn’t the time. Focus on the problem you can fix.

About half a mile further, there’s a large branch snapped off, blood staining the leaves on the ground, and scuff marks. Jack pulls his gun. “He got too weak to stay up there. Tried to come down and made a miscalculation. He’s getting sloppy, so he’s probably slowing down. Might not be too far ahead of us now.”

The trees are thinning out, and Jack can hear rushing water. They must have hit another tributary of a river or something. Running water’s a good place to set up a base camp near. Maybe his compound’s on this fork. The one thing that is absolutely essential to a survivalist is ready access to water that is at least simple to purify.

“I’ve got tracks. And blood.” Denika nods to a patch of moss. There’s a lot of open ground here. Why did he cross something guaranteed to leave a trail...

Jack doesn’t have another minute to wonder about that. He hears a faint whistling noise and ducks just enough that a swung branch connects with his shoulder rather than his head. His gun drops from instantly numbed fingers, and he hears himself yelling, sounding like it’s coming from somewhere far away. Denika swings around to fire, but Jack feels himself pulled back, cold sharpness against his neck. The jagged edges feel like shattered glass. He must have grabbed up a piece from the accident before he ran.

Denika’s staring in dread, but Mac’s barely looking at him. He’s glancing sideways, at the trees around him What’s he doing? He’s moving only slightly, but it’s clear the motion is purposeful. But his attacker’s too focused on Denika and the immediate threat, or he doesn’t think the kid’s worth worrying about. Come on, Mac, do something brainy.

Behind Jack, a rough voice hisses, “Put down the gun or I’ll slit his throat.” Denika glances from Jack to the unseen attacker. “I swear to God I’ll do it!” She carefully sets down her weapon, raising her hands.

He figured out he was being followed. And he waited around to ambush us and get the upper hand. Get his hands on an actual weapon. And maybe a hostage as well. Jack chokes on the smell of gunpowder, smoke, and sweat emanating from the man behind him. He knows having a federal agent in his hands would be a huge bargaining chip. Or make a major statement if he killed them. Maybe he even wants to do an interrogation. That would be the smart move, find out how the Feds were tracking him. It’s what Jack would have done. I should have seen this coming.

And then Mac yells. “Duck!” Jack throws himself forward on instinct, grabbing his gun as he rolls. The shock of him moving so quickly seems to have startled Carsen. As does the branch to the face moments later.

But he doesn’t give up. The man grabs for Jack, and both of them roll, fighting for a grip on the gun. Jack’s briefly aware that Denika’s grabbed hers back, but she can’t shoot while the two of them are grappling. Jack gets his gun arm free just long enough to fling the weapon back toward the trees, but Carsen’s rolling him again and the momentum carries them onto the riverbank. Jack can feel ground giving way underneath them. Undercut bank.

Jack feels them both going over the edge. Aw shit. He twists so the guy he’s holding hits the chilly water before he does. If anyone’s neck gets snapped, better his than mine.

“Jack!” There’s a desperate shout coming from somewhere nearby. The kid’s probably panicking. I’ll be fine. It’s just damn cold.

He starts swimming for shore, but it’s slow going with one one hand, and then Carsen starts struggling. The guy’s not big or brawny, but in the water he doesn’t have to be. He’s trying to get Jack’s head under, and when the current keeps sweeping the riverbed gravel out from under Jack’s feet and stopping him from standing, Carsen might succeed.

Jack feels the guy shove his head down, and he grabs blindly at the hand doing it, bending the thumb backward. Even though it’s muffled by the water he can hear Carsen’s yell of pain. Thought he might have broken his thumb to get out of the cuffs. But the guy doesn’t give up. He keeps forcing Jack’s head down, and as much as Jack thrashes to push him off, the current seems to be against him as well. He bucks like a Texas bronco, and that shakes Carsen loose enough that Jack’s able to gasp in a breath of air before the water slams him back against the gravel river bottom.

Then there’s another hand on Jack’s shirt, this one pulling his head out of the water, and he glances up to see the kid clinging to a tree branch, chest deep in the water, trying desperately to keep Jack from being dragged any further downstream. He’s got loops of the fishing line wrapped around his waist and a jutting branch on the trunk, stopping him from getting pulled into the current. It’s clear the line’s cutting into him painfully, but he lets go of the branch and grabs Jack with both hands, pulling desperately.

Jack turns and grabs Carsen’s head, smashing the guy’s nose into his knee. Blood instantly stains the water and the man stops struggling, going limp and deadweight. Jack gets one hand on the tree and one fist in his waterlogged captive’s shirt.

He tosses Carsen unceremoniously onto the bank, where Denika trains her gun on him as the man rolls groggily to his side. Mac stumbles up after him, shivering, arms hugged tightly around his body. Jack puts his hands on the kid’s shoulders and begins briskly rubbing at him. He’s not feeling any too warm himself, but at this point he’s used to it. It beats the hell out of jumping into the Moskva River in January.

“I was fine, kid, you didn’t have to come get me.”

“He was literally holding your head underwater.” Mac glances up at Jack. “I wasn’t gonna let him kill you.” Jack sighs and puts his arm around the kid’s shoulders, pulling him up against him.

“Thanks, Mac.”
Mac can’t get warm. He sits shivering and miserable while Jack and Denika wrangle their captive into submission. When the man’s hands are tied up with tight loops of fishing line and he’s gagged with a strip of Jack’s shirtsleeve, Jack drags Carsen to his feet. “Looks like your little jaunt just got you the murder of three federal agents tacked on your rap sheet.” Carsen just glares at him.

Mac struggles to his feet. He just wants to stay curled up here against a tree trunk with a blazing fire until he’s dry and warm again. But that’s not going to happen. The next best thing is to get back home as soon as possible. He rubs his hands up and down his arms, missing the contact with Jack’s warmth.

Mac’s spent his entire life in California; he’s never been a fan of the cold. It only reminds him of the few times Dad took them on vacation somewhere. He doesn’t remember any of the times with Mom, only the ones after. Like when they went to North Dakota and it snowed, and Dad dragged Mac with him and his friends while they went hunting. He was trying to teach Mac to track, to anticipate an animal’s movements and predict where it would be. Mac didn’t learn much about tracking, but he learned not to just nod when Dad asked if he understood what he was telling him. Because Dad always asked questions, and if Mac didn’t know the right answers, there was a lot of yelling. Dad always got madder when Mac lied about knowing something. But he got mad when Mac didn’t understand, too, so there wasn’t really a good option. Being cold still reminds him of trudging through that endless snow, trying not to sneeze and scare the deer even though his nose was really runny, wishing they could go back home because his feet were cold and wet.

They aren’t too far from camp, which means not too far from at least getting something dry to wear. It’s at least half a day’s hike back from there to civilization and Riley’s Jeep, but it’s doable. He’s ready to be home; he feels grimy and sweaty and he just wants to take a hot shower for like an hour and be warm again. I can’t imagine doing a week of training in conditions like this. Or two weeks. He’s definitely established that he’s a city boy.

When he hears the low roar of an engine, he mentally kicks himself. I should have known better than to assume things were turning around. That’s always when they get exponentially worse.

“Cover,” Jack hisses, dragging the uncooperative Carsen into a stand of trees. “Don’t move or I’m gonna hit you with this,” he hisses, waving his gun at the man. Mac crouches behind a tangle of briar bushes and tries to stop shivering. It’s even colder when he’s not moving and in the shade.

A muddy ATV barrels by. There are two men on it, a driver and someone behind him, holding a semiautomatic that looks like the ones in the Phoenix tac room. There’s another following close behind with the same setup. All four men are dressed in a combination of military fatigues and ghillie suits, with shaved heads and bandannas around their necks. There’s a symbol printed on the bandannas that looks like a lightning bolt. Mac doesn’t recognize it, but Denika clearly does.

“They’re members of the Soldiers of Liberation. Carsen’s militia.” Mac could have guessed that. These guys look like the kind of people he knew to stay far away from in prison. Dangerous, fiercely loyal to a leader, and killers with nothing to lose. The kind of people who respect no authority but their own. Guys like this were willing to shank guards.

“Looks like they’ve missed you, Colonel Sanders.” Jack whispers as they watch the two ATVs pass by. Carsen growls something unintelligible and then stops when Jack waves his gun menacingly.

“With them looking for us we’re never gonna make it off the mountain,” Denika mutters. “They must have realized Carsen never made it back from his meeting. They’re gonna start combing the mountain and it’s gonna take a lot of luck to get down without getting caught.”

“They have vehicles, they’ll have to stick to the trails, right?” Mac asks. “There’s a lot of forest that
isn’t cleared.”

“Trust me, once these guys realize they’ve lost Carsen, they’re gonna fan out. Start doing grid searches. Especially if they find the wrecked car.” Jack shrugs. “That’s the problem with homegrown militias. They usually have military grade training. I could probably get us past them but I’d rather we find a way to contact for exfil. Patty’ll have our asses for this, but she’ll get us out.”

“All our sat phones died when the car crashed,” Denika says.

“They’re probably just waterlogged, I might be able to dry yours…” Mac trails off at the look on Denika’s face. “What?”

“I threw mine out. I only took what I needed from the wreck, I was traveling light.” She’s not a salvager like me. Sometimes Mac forgets most people don’t see the possibilities in the world the way he does. He’s gotten used to Riley saving candy wrappers and fried electronics for him, or Jack carrying around paperclips and string and even a smashed roll of duct tape in his tac vest.

Mac’s own phone is at home. He didn’t want to risk losing or damaging it on the trip. Besides, he knew they probably wouldn’t get signal. “Jack? You got your phone?” It might be too much to hope it’s in working condition after that unexpected swim.

“I had it in a fully waterproof case,” Jack says. He glances at Mac, then Denika. “Seems like every time I’m around this kid, something happens to my phone.” He pulls it out. “But I’m not getting signal up here at all, Mac. Haven’t been for the past two days.”

“If I could get my hands on some wire…” Mac studies the phone. If he can boost the signal, get an antenna…

“You gonna take it apart again?” Jack sighs, but hands the phone over. “Have at it, kid, if it gets us outta here in one piece.”

“I’m not gonna do anything to it until I find something to make an antenna with.” Mac hands the phone back over. “It’s safe unless we run into something with wire.”

He doesn’t know where they’re going to get that; it isn’t like a city where there’s a dumpster in every alley. Just another reason I’d rather be stuck there than in the woods. I can’t make a phone out of a spiderweb and some leaves. He quickly digs through his backpack, but there’s nothing there that will give him the wire he needs. Not even the tent light.

“It’s a dilapidated shack, one that looks like the next good storm will blow it over. It doesn’t look like it was ever that sturdy to begin with, probably some squatter’s place, someone trying to hide out or just live off the grid. The walls are made from pallets covered with cheap plywood, the roof is corrugated aluminum, and there are three rough cut windows without glass, and a door that’s just resting against the opening with no hinges. But hopefully there’s something useful inside.

Mac runs the fishing line across the trail leading away from the shack, then ties a handful of tent stakes to the end of it. They’ll jingle if anyone steps through the string. “At least we’ll have time to prepare if they’re coming.”

He moves the door, and Jack and Carsen follow while Denika watches the road for them. Mac starts searching the cabin for anything he can use to make an antenna. There’s not much here. A couple
shattered dishes and mugs, an old dishpan, and a metal-frame cot with a shredded mattress. A crate in the corner with an old plastic bottle and a mouse nest inside. None of this is going to help with the phone. And judging by the amount of dirt and rot, this place has been abandoned for so long that anything metal has rusted or corroded.

*This was a waste of time. We should leave.* And then he sees it, the looped snares hanging from a nail by the door. Thin wire, maybe just enough to make this work. “Jack! Phone!” he calls, and Jack tosses it to him, shaking his head. Mac starts prying off the back and fiddling with the electronics. He’s no Riley but he sure hopes this works.

And then he hears the jingle of metal. *Someone came down the trail.* Denika whispers through the door, “We need to go!”

And then a rattle of bullets smashes through the side of the cabin and Mac ducks, splinters raining down on him and the others. Denika dives through the doorway, gasping and grabbing her shoulder, but apparently not seriously injured.

Carsen laughs gloatingly, he’s managed to slip his gag in the chaos. “My friends are coming for me. And you’re all about to die.”

Mac glances at the man from where he’s huddled into a corner, trying to avoid the worst of the gunfire and finish rewiring the phone. “They’re not your friends now. You’re tainted. You’ve spent time in the Feds’s hands. Who knows what you might have told us?” Mac stares Carsen down. “In prison, we call people who cooperate with the authorities a snitch. And they usually wind up shanked in the yard.”

“I never talked. They know me better than that.” But there’s a genuine fear in his eyes.

“Is that why you’re trying to kill you?” Denika asks. “Because that isn’t a rescue operation. That’s a kill squad.” More bullets strafe the building, and Mac cringes. He thinks something grazed one arm. But the phone’s getting signal now. He types an SOS into the text conversation to Thornton, and hits send. There’s a small swirling circle next to the message. *Please go, please go.*

Jack and Denika are crouched near the busted-out windows, aiming and firing carefully. Mac hears shouts as at least two of the militia members are hit, how seriously he doesn’t know. But then Denika’s gun clicks uselessly and she throws it to the ground.

“We can’t hold them back much longer. They’ve taken cover, and they’re going to wait for us to run out of ammunition.” And then Mac sees movement out of the corner of one of the windows.

“They’re surrounding us.” There’s a low roar as at least two more ATVs arrive, probably drawn by the gunfire. The message still hasn’t sent. *Come on, please.*

“If you surrender now, I will ask my men not to kill you,” Carsen says, his bravado returning. Mac’s fumbling desperately with the wiring now. *We’re out of time. It’s no use anyway.* And there’s nothing in this cabin to barricade themselves with, or to fight back. Jack glances at his gun, then back at Carsen.

“Do it.”

Carsen yells out the window. “I’m here! Don’t shoot! They’re surrendering!”

“Throw your guns out the window!” a new voice shouts. Jack and Denika do so, carefully. “Step out slowly, hands in the air!” The four of them move toward the door, Carsen leading the way.
“Diego!” Carsen calls as soon as he’s outside. “Are you insane? You could have killed me!”

A tall, burly man that Jack can only guess is Diego steps forward. “That was the plan, Rufus.” Faster than thought, he raises his pistol and fires.

Carsen falls to the ground, stunned, the red mark on his forehead slowly blooming into a trail of blood. Mac shudders.

*I was right. They just handed themselves over to a madman.*

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Jack braces himself for the next kill shot. *At least it should be quick. Sorry Patty, they’ll probably never even find our bodies.*

But Diego is holstering his gun. “Somehow these agents knew how to find Rufus’s safe house. I want to know how. What happened to Francis and Davison?”

“Both dead. And Collins is injured.”

“Matthews, Grant, Ellison, you’ll be taking these three back to camp. There’s no point wasting the chance to pick the Feds’s brains.” Three men step up, and begin frisking Jack and the others for more weapons. Mac’s knife is pocketed by one of the men.

“Whoa, easy there, you’re gettin’ a little frisky for a first date,” Jack mutters at the none too gentle pat-down. All he gets is an icy glare.

He can see that Mac’s shaking, and probably not from the cold, even though his clothes are still damp and the wind’s picked up. *Stop touching him.* The man checking Mac over is the biggest of the three and he’s got massive bear paws for hands. Hands that are currently all but groping a kid who got raped a few weeks ago. He’s surprised Mac’s not going into a full-blown panic attack. He can hear Mac’s breathing quicken when the man reaches into his pocket for the knife, and the shuddering, desperate gasps as hands move down his legs.

He cringes, hoping they don’t spot Mac’s tether. For once it looks like they’re going to be lucky. The man’s hands pat down the ankles of the hiking boots that cover the small band. Good thing Riley created that new thinner version, or it might have felt like a knife.

The guy finally stops, grabs the kid and yanks him onto his ATV, pulling Mac’s hands in front of him and tying them tightly with coarse rope. Jack finds himself in much the same position a few minutes later.

“Hey, wanna take it easy there, Evil Knievel?” Jack mutters as his captor guns the engine and they get airtime bouncing over rocks and tree roots. He gets a helmeted headbutt and an elbow to the gut for his trouble, all without a single swerve or even slightly slowing down.

The group stops at the bottom of a low hill. There’s a camouflage-painted metal door set into it. *No wonder the FBI couldn’t find the compound location. An underground bunker would be invisible on sat views.*

The other two ATVs pull up beside the one Jack’s on. Mac and Denika look, if a bit scratched and disheveled, not seriously the worse for wear. “I think we found their compound,” Jack mutters. Denika gives him an unamused glare.

Their captors undo the ropes and pull the three down, shoving them harshly toward the door. There are faded stenciled letters on the metal. *O.P.I.* That’s not an acronym Jack knows. It’s not this group’s, not with the name Denika said, and he doesn’t recognize it as one of the Alphabet agencies.
He also doesn’t think a militia built this place. There are too many earmarks of a government facility. Maybe seventies era. Jack was at a CIA blacksite once that had code locks like this, a relic of the past that was still somehow in use.

They’re let in by more guards in fatigues and bandanas, and dragged down a long, dimly lit hallway. The lights flicker often, probably run off some kind of generator.

They’re shoved into a small, dark room. One of the other guards drags in three chairs and sets them inside. Their captors shove them down, cuffing them to the chairs with the cuffs looped around the middle rail in the back. *So we can’t do what Carsen did and get them in front of us.* Their backpacks are set on a small table to the side and then the door slams and they’re left in the pitch blackness.

Jack can hear Mac breathing raggedly. *Kid’s been through enough today already.* “Mac? You okay?” he whispers.

“Yeah.” The shakiness in his voice says otherwise, but Jack doesn’t have time to argue with him, because the door flies open, a naked bulb above them blinks to life, and Diego steps into the room.

He tosses Jack, Mac, and Denika’s IDs onto the table beside the backpacks. Jack and Mac were carrying civilian IDs, but Jack’s gun has likely given him away as a government agent. He lifts one of the backpacks and overturns it, then another, shrugging at the assortment of camping gear and Mac’s random acquisitions.

*We really were just on a camping trip. Not even a cover.*

Jack can only imagine the man’s confusion at trying to place whether Mac and Jack are random civilians or covert operatives. *My fighting style says agent. My backpack says dad on a camping trip.* “This is an unlikely group.” He looks from Denika in her tactical gear to Mac and Jack who are clearly anything but dressed for a fight. “Carsen told me he was meeting with a potential recruit today. But apparently it was all a front for you to arrest him.” Diego smiles toothily. “It looks like you’re the ones caught in our trap now.” He smiles. “I don’t know where you picked up those two, Miss FBI, but it really doesn’t matter. I’m going to find out soon enough.”

“You already know we’re not going to cooperate,” Jack snaps. “You shot your own boss in cold blood. You aren’t going to let us go if we talk.”

“Maybe not, but I can make your deaths as painless as possible if you do,” Diego smiles. “If not...well, I spent five years with a CIA intelligence extraction unit. I know plenty of ways to make you scream.”

Jack has to admit the first punch is unexpected. His cheek is hot and stinging before he realizes the hand was coming. Another hit knocks the air out of his stomach. A third probably cracks a rib. A fourth makes flickers of light dance through his vision.

Jack coughs out a mouthful of blood. “I can do this all day.”

“Maybe you can, soldier. But can they?” The grizzled man growls, nodding to Mac and Denika. Jack freezes. Diego smiles. “I know CIA training when I see it. You and I, we’re bred to take hits. To make sure we’re the ones who take the punishment. Antagonize the attacker, keep the focus on you, take the punishment. You’re the muscle here.” He smirks. “It’s not going to work on me.”

Jack’s pretty sure saying something smart is only going to get one of those kids hurt. So he keeps his mouth shut as the man walks over to Denika. It’s harder than he expected to bite back the smart remarks designed to insult and grab attention. *I guess that’s not just my training. It’s my natural instinct to protect my team.*
Diego smiles eerily. “Well, well. Such a pretty face. What a waste as a government drone.” He runs his hands down her cheeks, cupping her chin, and then his hands are around her throat and squeezing. She shoves her shoulders up, straining at the cuffs, trying to put pressure on his hands. Jack knows that trick. She’s tucking her head forward at the same time, hoping to detach his grip by forcing his wrists to an uncomfortable angle. Diego doesn’t seem affected, but after a minute he does let go. Denika gasps for air, but she spits back in the man’s face.

“You might as well kill me. I’ll die before I give you anything.”

Diego shrugs. “Oh don’t worry, you’re the most likely to live out of all three. But I think you’ll be more valuable to us mostly undamaged.” Jack cringes at the implication. Denika glares right back at him, gaze murderous. “If a few more rounds of this won’t make you open up, we’ll move on to the pretty boy.” He glances at Mac.

Denika freezes. Jack watches her face change from anger to fear to a calculated resignation, but it isn’t fast enough. Diego moves to stand next to Mac’s chair.

“He doesn’t have your training, I can already see it. He’s not preparing himself the way you both did. And he doesn’t carry a gun.” The man fists a hand in Mac’s hair and pulls his head back. “Would be a shame to damage this pretty face. Who knows, we might get as much from him as from the girl.” Mac shudders, Jack grinds his teeth, and Denika breathes in sharply.

“I think I have just the thing. I’ll admit, I was a little hasty with the girl, left some bruises. This time I’ll make sure that doesn’t happen.” He steps out into the hallway and returns with a pail and a stained rag. He drops the cloth in the water, picks it up, and walks over to Mac.

“No!” Jack can’t hold back his horrified yell as the man places the towel over Mac’s face. The kid thrashes and jerks his head, trying to shake it off, but the wet cloth sticks to his skin. And then Diego lifts the pail and starts pouring water slowly and steadily.

Jack’s in agony watching. He can feel the chill of water on his own face, the burn as lungs struggle for air that isn’t coming. He can feel the desperate tug of hands against cuffs, trying to reach for the towel, to pull it away.

And then it’s over. Diego removes the cloth, and Mac takes a shuddering breath, his whole body trembling. Mac is wide-eyed and gasping, and Jack’s not sure but there might be tears running down his face along with the water. *He’s reliving what happened in Mexico.* Jack knows nitrogen asphyxiation feels like drowning. He really, desperately hopes Mac doesn’t start to have a panic attack right now. Who knows what Diego would do about that?

“Still, you refuse to tell me what I want to know?” Diego chuckles. “I suppose I’ll need to improve my persuasion. When I come back, perhaps you’ll have decided to accept my offer. If not, I promise you, you’ll think what I just did was a mercy.” Then the light goes out and the door slams shut.

He’s been through so much these past few weeks and he just can’t catch a break. Jack wants nothing more that to hold the shivering kid close and protect him from everyone who could ever hurt him. But he can’t. *I wanted to do something to get his mind off the past, off the pain. And all I did was put him where he got dragged into another mess. I knew we should have just done a Die Hard and Star Wars marathon this weekend instead.*

“Mac?” He asks, a little louder than before. “Mac, it’s gonna be okay. I’m gonna get us outta this.” He doesn’t know how, but he’s going to. He might be able to do what Carsen did and break or dislocate his thumb, but these cuffs are so damn tight he’s already losing feeling in his hands…
“I’ve got this.” Mac’s voice is shaky, but surprisingly confident, for the tears Jack heard earlier. *But was that actually crying?* Maybe it’s just the kid trying to breathe around water in his throat and lungs. Maybe Mac’s a hell of a lot tougher than Jack’s willing to give him credit for. *Just because he’s been broken doesn’t mean he’s not strong.* Mac survived four years as a vigilante, and two years in a supermax. He didn’t do that by shattering and leaving the pieces on the floor. He picks himself up, puts himself back together, and keeps going. Except now he doesn’t have to do it alone.

“Can I borrow your glasses?” Mac asks. Denika agrees, but Jack cuts her off, grinning slightly.

“Trust me, if you want them back in one piece, do *not* let him have them.”

“At the moment I’d rather be the one in one piece.” Jack smirks, even though no one can see it.

Mac’s got a plan. Look out world.

**CARSEN’S MILITIA COMPOUND**

**A SHAME THAT NOW THAT THEY’VE FOUND IT THEY MIGHT DIE**

Denika scoots her chair closer to MacGyver’s. She’s not entirely sure what he plans on doing with her glasses, but she can tell Agent Dalton trusts him. She’s seen the older man watching the young agent with a quiet, proud respect.

She saw the same look in Agent Ross’s eyes when he thought she wasn’t watching. *Dalton took this boy under his wing. He cares about him, a lot.* When she was training, she was told that forming relationships with a team was a liability for a field agent. That it made it harder to do the job. And after leaning over Ross’s body, pounding his chest over and over as ribs cracked and her arms burned and her eyes flooded with tears, she thought she might actually believe it. *I cared, and I lost him, and I might get killed because I wanted revenge.* But everything she’s seen about “Mac” and “Jack” makes her believe that maybe everything she’s heard about not caring too much about your partner is wrong.

Those two act like they would go through hell and back for each other. They tease each other, jab and joke and snark, but at the end of the day they’re fully willing to die for each other. Even if they don’t know it themselves.

She doesn’t know if there’s a guard at the door, but just in case, she tries to move her chair as quietly as possible. It’s dark, but the door isn’t completely sealed, and her eyes are starting to adjust to the light a little. She can vaguely see MacGyver’s outline in the light. She has to get behind him and get her glasses into his hands.

The chair screeches on the concrete and she freezes, hoping no one heard. As much bravado as she has, she still doesn’t actually want to die. *I didn’t think my first case might be my last.* Ever since she joined the FBI she’s known, logically, that this is a possibility. That she picked a career path that might end in a pine box instead of a picket fence. And she was comfortable with that. But now that death is right here, outside that door, waiting for them, she feels oddly numb and terrified at the same time.

She’s not afraid of dying. She hasn’t been, for a long time. *It’s just going home.* To see Grams and Pappy again. And Uncle Brady. She’d like to have had more time. To have met someone. Maybe even married, maybe had a family. *But that’s a hard thing to do with this job.* And maybe that’s the real thing that’s shaken her now. The realization that she was so prepared to die that she didn’t think about what living with this job actually mean. What she was committing to.
If they get out of this alive, there’ll be time to reassess things. To think about what the future holds. Right now, the only future she can see is a very painful death or a degraded life; if Mac can’t get them out of this. She keeps moving, inching the chair across the floor, until she’s sitting right behind Mac, like they’re in her middle school history classroom where even her short legs always slammed into the chair in front of her.

“Mac. Right behind you.” She whispers. She hears a rattle as presumably he moves his hands.

“Okay, ready. See if you can get them to drop off.” She nods her head carefully. They have one chance to do this right. If the glasses fall on the floor, they’ll have to work even harder, make even more noise. She tips her head forward, feeling the glasses slide up from behind her ears. They tumble off her face, and she’s bracing for hearing the clatter of them hitting the concrete. But there’s only a soft thump. He actually caught them.

Mac’s fingers fumble with the glasses. She hears a faint snap, then he whispers to her. “Turn your chair around. It’ll be easier to pick your cuffs than mine.” She can hear the rough raspiness of his voice, and he coughs wetly when he’s done talking. He’s probably inhaled some of the water.

His hands when they touch hers are ice cold and shaking slightly. She wants to wrap her fingers around his, reassure him they’re going to be okay. But there’s no time. Instead, she focuses on the sound of scratching against metal. And then there’s an audible pop and one hand is free. She carefully pulls away from the chair, takes the piece of metal from MacGyver’s hand, and works it into his own cuffs. It takes a little longer, but they snap open as well.

Angus MacGyver is a puzzle. Clearly, he’s got field agent skills. But he doesn’t act like a trained operative at all. She can’t stop thinking about what he said to Carsen in that cabin. “In prison, we call that a snitch.” Not “they”. “We”. Clearly he’s spent some time on the wrong side of the law. Which might explain the lockpicking skills but the obvious lack of training on withstanding interrogation methods. I wonder what he did before this. His name sounds familiar, in a way, but she’s having trouble placing it.

She’s heard rumors about the agency he and Dalton claim to work for. The “Phoenix” has a reputation for unconventional methods and for getting results. There was a rumor floating around the LA field office last month, right after she and Agent Ross arrived, that Agent Robinson had called them in on the Ghost case. No one was supposed to know about it, and all she ever got was hearsay, but the fact remained that Robinson had definitely requested an outside partnership for that case. Seeing these two in action, she knows it’s the real deal. The Phoenix exists, and they’re just as good as rumor would have it.

The second Mac’s free he snatches back the piece of her glasses and rushes to Jack. Denika hears the older man’s cuffs click free, and then a soft rattle as he gets his arms out from behind the chair. In the dim light creeping through the door she can see a silhouette of Jack grabbing Mac and pulling him in close, rubbing a hand up and down the younger agent’s back. But then Mac pulls away, and she can hear him fumbling through the items that were dumped out of the backpacks on the table. She can feel a faint smile spreading across her face in the darkness. I think we just might make it.
make the battery overload.”

“Are you making a bomb?” Denika asks.

“Just a tiny one. We have to get this door open somehow.”

“That’s going to bring them all running.”

Jack just grins. He saw the way the kid was just looking at the chairs. “I think that’s what he’s counting on.”

Mac shoves the contraption against the door lock, lights the alcohol soaked cotton balls from the first aid kit that he packed in around the battery, and steps back, Jack and Denika joining him behind the table. There’s a loud bang and an acrid smell, and Jack rushes to the door, kicking it open. He can already hear the yelling in the hall. Behind him, Mac’s holding two chairs, and Denika has the third and their two sets of cuffs. Jack’s are still hanging off his wrist but he doesn’t have time to worry about that.

He sets the chairs just around the corner, so that the men coming on the run won’t see them until it’s too late. Sure enough, when four of the goons barrel around the corner, they trip over the metal furniture and go sprawling, piling up on each other like an old cartoon gag. Jack wades into the chaos, fists swinging, and out of the corner of his eye he sees Mac whack a guy with a set of the cuffs, and Denika land a knockout kick.

Jack grabs one of the men’s guns, taking a minute to admire the custom work on a typical stock semi auto. It’s lighter than its off-the-line counterpart, and the handgrip seems custom. Better yet, it has a full clip. He can hear more yelling coming from ahead of them.

Denika has a gun of her own now, and her glasses are back on, if slightly askew from the missing earpiece. “What’s the plan?” She asks, and her voice is just a little shaky.

“There has to be a back way out of here, right?” Mac asks. “Wouldn’t there be an escape tunnel or something, not just the front door?”

“Sure, but those things are usually really well hidden, kid. I might be able to guess the location in a CIA designed site, but I’m not familiar with this O.P.I.” Jack’s already thought of that, but they can’t search every janitor closest, storeroom, and bathroom with these guys hunting them.

He can see the wheels turning in the kid’s head, and then that little nod that means he’s got something. “They’re running this place off a generator,” Mac mutters. “And I didn’t see or hear one outside. But if it’s inside the exhaust has to go somewhere.”

“It’s worth a shot.” Most of these places had built-in backup generator rooms. And a generator big enough to power a whole black site would need a decent sized exhaust shaft. And then Jack hears more running and more yelling and the world narrows to the clatter of boots on the hallways, glancing backwards around every corner, and reading the signs on the doors they pass.

They hear it before they see it, the low hum of an engine. Then a gun pokes around the corner and shots pepper the concrete block wall. Jack curses. They had a guard on the door, and he definitely heard us coming. Jack fires, noticing dimly that Mac’s gabbing something out of his bag and tossing it. Then there’s a loud explosion and a muffled yell. Jack peeks around the corner to see the guard unconscious or dead, his face all bloodied, and the walls scorched.

“Where’d you find a grenade, kid?” At this point Jack wouldn’t be surprised if Mac had made one out of duct tape and dishsoap.
“One of the guys we took out with the chairs had it on his belt.” Mac shrugs, and then runs to the dented, half-off-its-hinges door whose scorched metal ID plate at one point read ‘Generators’.

The first thing Mac does is throw the switches, and the hum dies down, the room instantly going pitch black. Jack switches on the tactical light on his gun, pointing it toward the rear of the generator where Mac’s following what’s likely the exhaust piping up the wall to a spot near the ceiling. He climbs on top of the generator, detaches the exhaust pipe, and pulls it away from the gap. It looks narrow, but there’s a large suction fan lazily spinning to a stop and beyond that is daylight. Jack figures he can squeeze.

And then there’s a low roar of an explosion, and dust spatters down from the ceiling. “What the hell was that?” Jack instinctively glances at Mac, but the kid looks as confused as Jack is.

“Whatever it is, we need to go, now.” Mac pulls off the grating and kicks at the fan. There’s a clatter and then the kid’s halfway through the opening. “Guys, hurry!” Jack doesn’t have to be told twice. The lights going dead slowed pursuit down, but now he can hear the voices in the hall again, and they’re close.

He helps Denika climb the generator, cringing when another low rumble shakes the room, and she slides through the vent shaft and out to safety. Jack follows, tucking in his shoulders. Hey, that’s the part of me least likely to fit. Broad shoulders run in the Dalton family. So the kid better not give me grief about being too big to fit.

Fortunately, Jack doesn’t get stuck. He wriggles out onto the grass, glancing back to realize the place he just came out of is barely more than a head-high rise in the ground. Mac and Denika are already standing, and while in the sunlight they look plenty the worse for wear, they’re still in one piece. Jack readies his gun.

We’ve still got to get out of this forest with these guys looking for us. And then there’s the familiar thump of helicopter rotors, another earth-shattering thudding, and Jack looks up to see the black belly of a chopper with the Phoenix logo stenciled on the bottom roaring over them. What the hell?

FORMER OPI BLACK SITE

SOME PEOPLE STILL REMEMBER THAT’S THE DXS’S OLD ACRONYM

No one else in the Phoenix chopper would know Patricia Thornton is worried. She’s had years of experience hiding her emotions from anyone who doesn’t need to see them. Even Riley, sitting adjusting their coordinates on her rig as they approach the site, doesn’t need to know that Patty’s afraid.

Afraid that what they’ll find at the end of this is her worst fear brought to life. She’s seen a dozen scenarios in which Jack and his team have vanished like this. He’s survived every single one. But this wasn’t a sanctioned operation, they didn’t even know Mac and Jack were in trouble until they got the SOS. Or at least they didn’t have anything to act on. Patty’d been nervous since she started seeing the signal Mac’s tether was giving veer around on odd paths and then backtrack on itself. I knew he was in trouble. The SOS just gave her a valid reason to respond.

Riley tracked its signal to a small cabin on her satellite feed, and they could see ATV tracks nearby that disappeared in the trees. The second she saw the direction, she knew exactly where they were going. Mac’s tether signal is being blocked by something, and if she has her guess it’s probably the dirt and concrete of the O.P.I. bunker. At least that’s the only reason she’ll let herself assume. He’s going to be fine. So is Jack.
The trees blur below the chopper and then Riley sits up sharply. “We’re here.” Through gaps in the tree cover, Patty can see a line of ATVs parked, mostly camouflaged by tarps and brush. There’s a scurry of movement, and bullets ping off the chopper’s armored underbelly. Patty barely flinches. She’s been in this situation too many times already.

From the other helicopter, she hears a roar as a rocket grenade takes out half the line of ATVs. the helicopters circle, and another shot takes out a small machine-gun nest just above the door of the old bunker. These people are well-armed, but the tac team was expecting it.

*Trust Mac and Jack to get themselves mixed up with a grassroots militia while on a camping trip.* Patty can’t even say she’s honestly surprised. *Jack is the living embodiment of Murphy’s law.* She’s lost count of how many times he’s called her on vacations, long weekends, or even just his way home to tell her he may or may not have gotten into a situation. She’ll never forget the Christmas 2015 debacle. *He wouldn’t stop joking about Die Hard for a month. Although, to be fair, he did get involved in a hostage situation at a Christmas party, so...* She still doesn’t even know how that happened. Jack refuses to tell her the actual version of events. And since it wasn’t technically a Phoenix operation, she can’t legally require him to.

They’re rounding up the last of the militia members, who seem to have finally given in to the unexpected air assault, when she sees three figures on the top of the bunker. None of them are wearing the forest camo that the militia members are.

She recognizes Jack’s mohawk and one of Mac’s plaid shirts, but the third person isn’t familiar at all. *Looks like someone from the FBI task force made it out, ran into them, and they decided to help.* *How very them.* The second she’d seen that report come in, she’d known, coupled with Mac’s increasingly erratic movements, exactly what happened. And then when they got the SOS...

Jack’s pumping his fist in the air and grinning. “Yay Patty! She called in the cavalry!!” She allows herself a small smile, feeling the tension leaching away. If Jack’s in good enough condition to be that enthusiastic, it means Mac must be too.

Their pilot brings down the helicopter, and Riley and Patty step out. Riley runs straight to Jack and holds on for dear life. Patty envies her the luxury of showing her real emotions. *Sometimes that’s what I miss most about the field.*

Instead, she watches Jack and Mac with a quietly reserved happiness. Riley and Jack have dragged Mac into their now group hug, and the FBI agent is standing off to the side, watching, smiling.

“I guess you got my message,” Mac says shakily.

“If you mean the text from Jack’s phone which should never have gotten signal in the middle of nowhere, then yes, we did. We’d already been informed of the FBI’s missing task force situation, so I decided to operate on the assumption that you two had done what you do best and gotten yourselves mixed up right in the middle of it.” She doesn’t add that she was already thinking about mobilizing a tac team by the time they got the SOS. They don’t need to know how much of a literal helicopter parent she’s been today. “I wondered if they were holing up here.”

“What the hell is this place?” Jack asks. “How’d you know about it?”

Patty allows herself a small smirk. “The Phoenix has gone by a lot of names. When it was the Operations Protection Initiative, it operated a black site in the Los Padres. The site was decommissioned but not destroyed when the OPI became the DXS. A citizen militia whose whole compound seemed to be invisible to satellite searches...it seemed like the most likely place.”
“We had a black site and I didn’t know about this?” Jack looks genuinely insulted.

“Never when you were here. This was decommissioned over fifteen years ago.” Patty glances at it. “And when we’re done here we’re going to do what we should have done back then and bury it.”

Jack gives her a nod of agreement. He’s got the beginning of a black eye and it looks like a possible concussion as well. The FBI agent is sporting a pair of vivid hand prints on her throat. Mac is shivering, hair and shirt damp, and she’s pretty sure she can hear some water in his lungs every time he takes a breath. Patty sighs. I can’t leave you guys alone for two days.

“Alright, if everyone’s done with the kumbaya and hugging, let’s get the hell out of here.” It looks like no one is going to argue with her.

Mac spends the ride home bundled in two blankets, with a medic on one side of him, Jack on the other. Apparently he and Jack and Denika are suffering mild hypothermia, and Mac’s likely going to have at least a mild case of pneumonia from the water he breathed in when Diego was torturing them.

Now that the giddy relief of being alive, of surviving yet another near death experience, is fading, Mac just feels sick. He can’t stop feeling the hands all over his body, the choking desperation as water ran down his throat and into his lungs. I thought I was okay. I didn’t feel this bad in there. But then all he had to do was focus on surviving. Now he has the luxury of time to think. Which just feels like even more torture.

His stomach is churning with the memories. It wasn’t Diego slapping a cloth over his face, it was El Noche with that leering smile and the burn of nitrogen in his lungs. It wasn’t hands slapping him, checking for a gun, it was stolen touches in a crowd, slamming up against other bodies and not knowing who to run from, where to go.

“I will show you how long I can make a minute last.” “I thought that was you, pretty boy.” “Well, what do we have here?” “My men all wanted a chance at the pretty gringo.” The words are burned into his memory. They’re never going to be gone, not really. They’ll come back every time something like this happens. He can’t bury them. He’s never going to be free.

And then he does throw up, and the medic checking him over says it’s probably his body trying to get rid of the water in his lungs. He lets them have that explanation. It’s better than the truth. He can’t stop shaking, and his empty stomach is churning. Jack reaches for him, putting a hand on Mac’s knee.

“Mac, you okay, bud?” No, I’m not. I’m not. I’m scared. But he can’t even say a thing. How do I tell you I’m so broken? Do I have any right to want to come back as a field agent if I can’t even handle one round of torture? If I get squeamish just from being frisked for a weapon? He doesn’t know when Jack starts rubbing his shoulders. He just realizes after a while of chasing thoughts in his own head that he isn’t alone.

“Hey kid, I know the first time is rough.” Jack shakes his head. “You’re doin’ better than I expected, really. My first time getting waterboarded, they had to resuscitate me. I had cracked ribs, big ol’ bruises, full blown pneumonia for a month.” Mac can’t say a thing. “You didn’t even come close to cracking. And I know how scary that is. I’m proud of you, kid.” Jack keeps talking, and Mac can hear the worry in his voice. “I’m gonna have to teach you how to avoid breathing in when that happens. Guess we should have covered interrogation before wilderness survival, hey?”

Mac just nods. Jack’s trying to joke, trying to make him feel better, but it’s not just that he’s cold and
wet or that he still can’t breathe properly or that he still feels hands on him or that he can’t stop remembering the nitrogen and El Noche’s words. It’s all of that wrapped up together.

Jack’s voice lowers. “I’m so sorry kid. I’m so sorry all of this happened.” He puts his arm around Mac’s shoulders. “This was an absolutely shitty vacation and none of that shoulda happened to you. I’m so sorry, bud.” He rubs Mac’s arms gently, and Mac leans into the warmth and contact. *This is Jack. Jack is safe.* He thinks it’s a small victory that he at least knows who he can trust now. He can tell the difference between Jack’s hands and someone who wants to hurt him.

“Wasn’t your fault.”

“I know. But what they did to you…” Jack shivers, Mac can feel the movement through his arm. “If you get flashbacks it’s okay. All right?”

“No it’s not,” Mac whispers. “I can’t do my job if this happens.”

Someone else enters his field of vision, Denika. “Mac, what you did today was incredible,” Denika says. “I’m only alive because of you. You didn’t crack under pressure in there. You got the job done and you got us out. It’s okay to break down after it’s all over. No one is ever going to fault you for that.” Denika wraps her blanket around his shoulders; Mac dimly wonders how badly he’s shaking.

“Trust me,” Riley says. “If I ever get poisoned on a mission I have nightmares for a week. I can get the job done but once it’s over I fall apart. No one ever said that was going to take me out of field work. We all have our demons. It comes with the territory.”

“She’s right,” Jack says. “I’ve had professionally diagnosed PTSD from the time I was twenty-five. Hell, I don’t think any field agent doesn’t.” He glances at Denika, and she meets his gaze. *She’s probably going to have nightmares about the car crash, Ross’s death, being choked, for weeks.*

The next hand on his shoulder is unfamiliar. He doesn’t remember Thornton ever doing something this physically affectionate, this gentle. She doesn’t say anything, but he can see when he meets her eyes that of everyone in this chopper, she has the most demons of all. *And she’s the boss.* He knows what she’s telling him without needing to hear a word. *Trauma doesn’t have to mean we’re no good to anyone. It doesn’t have to be the end.*

None of them let go until they land at the Phoenix. Mac finally feels warm, surrounded by his family. *They have my back. No matter what.*

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**MORGAN’S CAFE**

**AS FULL OF MEMORIES AS MAPLE SYRUP STAINS**

Morgan looks up from the pancake griddle when the doorbell tinkles. “Mornin, Riley. Long time since I’ve seen you here.” She smiles. “Where’s that doting boyfriend of yours?” Riley never came back after Como. Too many bad memories. So Morgan wouldn’t know anything about the cover story that he’s dead.

“He’s supposed to be coming.” There must be something in the way she says it that catches the woman’s sympathy. Morgan walks over to the counter, leaning over, her wispy silver hair escaping the kitchen hairnet, brown eyes meeting Riley’s directly.

“You two having issues, darlin’?”

“He wasn’t the man I thought he was. But he said he could explain. Said he wanted to make things
Morgan makes a clucking sound with her tongue. “Love, don’t get me wrong, second chances are a
kind thing. But don’t let no man give you the run around. You too good for that, hun.” She gives
Riley a knowing look. “You deserve better than a lyin’, cheatin’ bastard who takes advantage of
your good heart. He better come crawlin’ back with a hundred apologies and a dozen roses,” she
says. “If you need, just give me a holler and I’ll come up and whack him upside the head with my
biggest fryin’ pan.”

“Thank you, I think I’ll be fine,” Riley says with a chuckle, imagining the slight woman cracking
Nick a good one with her skillet.

“Just remember, don’t give him nothin’ he doesn’t earn,” Morgan says sagely as she turns back to
her cooking. “Give a man like that an inch, he’ll take a mile. You stand your ground, little lady.”

“Oh believe me, I will.”

Riley smiles as she walks away. Morgan is muttering under her breath, “Never did like that boy too
much. Had some kinda look in his eyes. Oh, if I see him I’ll give him a piece of my mind.”

Why do I just attract protective parental figures? Do I give off some kind of vibe?

Riley slides into her usual seat, fingering the tear in the blue plastic booth cover. Every time Nick
arrived here before her, he’d leave her something there. He called it their personal dead drop.

There’s a small bulge in the plastic now. Riley fumbles with it, sliding out a single sheet of lined
notebook paper, folded into eighths. She glances at it, just like in Lisbon there’s no obvious sign of
danger. She carefully unfolds it.

**Dear Riley,**

**Sorry I’m not here to talk in person but it’s not safe.**

**Figured you’d tell Jack about this. I couldn’t risk being caught. I know you don’t trust me, Riley,
but I promise, I can explain everything. Just not right now.**

Someone’s coming, and she tucks the paper out of sight and glances up guiltily. It’s Kira, one of the
waitresses. “Good morning, Miss Davis. Do you want the usual?”

French toast with strawberries and whipped cream, and a mocha with dark chocolate. She
remembers Nick swiping his finger through the whipped cream and dabbing it on his nose, or hers,
or both.

“No, just a black coffee please.” Kira scribbles it down and walks away, darting Riley a concerned
look over her shoulder. She waits until Kira’s gone to keep reading.

*I know you must have a million questions and I promise there will be answers soon. Hang onto
that key. You’re going to need it when the time comes. I promise everything will make sense then.*

Kira comes back with the coffee, her shoes clicking on the linoleum floor. She pours the cup and
glances at the paper crumples in Riley’s hand, but when Riley doesn’t offer any explanations, she
walks away, dejected.

Riley takes a sip of her scalding coffee and continues.

*Riley, you have to believe me, this isn’t what it looks like. There’s more at stake here than you can*
imagine. Everything you think you know is a lie. You’re in a lot of danger, and I had to tell you. I’m risking everything to do this, but believe me, your safety means the world to me. I have to protect you.

Riley snorts, coffee going up her nostrils. Yeah right. You were perfectly willing to let Kendrick shoot me. You didn’t care if I lived or died.

Don’t trust anyone.

Does that mean you, too? She glances at where Jack is sitting across the street in a rental car. Nick was right about one thing. She couldn’t avoid telling Jack everything. Not after yesterday. I can’t go running headlong into danger and leave him to worry about me. It’s not fair to him.

She folds up the paper, shoves it back in her pocket, and watches Jack cross the street to join her when she holds up two fingers to the window. Safe sign. He sits down across from her in the booth, and she wordlessly hands him the paper.

Nick’s words are ringing in her ears. Don’t trust anyone. But if Riley can’t trust Jack, who can she ever trust? At some point, you have to have a little faith.
The football field has a massive hole in the fence right next to the bleachers. Angus knows about it because he’s heard high schoolers brag about being able to sneak in there on late nights and “get some action” with their girlfriends. Dad won’t tell him what that means when he asks. He doesn’t know Angus already knows; it’s just something you’re supposed to ask your parents anyway. He’s nine, almost ten, not stupid. Even if Dad thinks so.

And knowing about the hole in the fence works out perfectly for Angus’s plan. He needs a big enough space to test his science fair project, because if it’s good Mr. Ericson promises he’ll work on getting Mac an entry in the California Science and Engineering Fair. Angus has read about it, that’s for the best of the best.

If I make it into that, Dad might be really proud of me. He likes when Angus gets As in his classes, and when he does extra credit work and the teachers write nice letters or say good things at parent teacher conferences. Dad doesn’t like it when Angus doesn’t do so well in his classes, when he gets distracted or doesn’t pay attention well enough. He doesn’t like hearing about trouble, and he got really mad about the time Angus got the entire school evacuated when he mixed some of the chemicals from the maintenance closet.

I didn’t make anything really dangerous. But there was a test in English and Mrs. Raffton always made them hard and I hadn’t finished The Giver yet. He’d been working late on Mr. Ericson’s class’s robotics project, because if they could just get their robot’s arms to work properly they might stand a chance of winning the state division competition. He’d much rather spend his time working on physics or engineering or chemistry than English. Math and science make sense. If you do things right, you always get the same results. You can make something good every time.

English isn’t like that. Angus can’t figure out a formula for what makes a “good” story, a “classic” book. He can memorize the “elements of a story” that are written on a big poster on the wall behind Mike Leland’s desk, but they aren’t like the periodic table of the elements, where when you combine certain ones you always get the same result. One story that put “foreshadowing” and “irony” together was a good story and got an A. Another one that did the same thing was a C-. It doesn’t make sense. He doesn’t know why the five paragraph essay is supposed to work, or how to find a “theme”. Sometimes the books are interesting, but he doesn’t want to read them and then have to write papers about them and try to tear them all apart. Can’t stories just be to enjoy? Not dissect like the frogs in biology?

The other kids in class were all just as happy as Angus to not have to take the test. But none of the teachers were happy. They blamed Mr. Hobson, the nice maintenance man, for doing something wrong. And Angus couldn’t let them do that. He couldn’t let Mr. Hobson, who always talked to him in the hallways, and sang opera songs while he fixed the hall lights, and let Angus help use the electric stud finder, and congratulated him for fixing the drinking fountain with a gum wrapper and some rubber bands, get fired for something Angus did. Mr. Hobson was nice and funny and Angus didn’t want them to try and find someone new, because what if the new maintenance man wasn’t nice and didn’t like when Angus asked him questions about how things worked, and didn’t let him
come sit in the bus garage when he was running from Donnie Sandoz? Even Donnie is scared of Mr. Hobson. He’s not really scary, but he’s so big and tall. If he’s gone, who’s going to help me? So Angus told the truth, for once.

So he got in trouble again. Dad had to come, and they had to talk to the principal, and the whole way home Dad yelled at him for making a problem. Now he’s not really talking to Angus again, and Angus spends as much time as he can in Mr. Ericson’s lab. Which is when they started talking about the science fair. Mr. Ericson says he’s sure Angus can at least place, maybe even win his division. If I did, Dad would be happy. When he said that to Mr. Ericson, though, the man just sat him down in a chair and said, “If you spend your whole life trying to make that man happy, you’re going to waste the amazing talent you have. If you do this, do it because it makes you happy. Because you want to do it.”

But Mr. Ericson’s wrong about that. He’s a good teacher, and he’s nice, but he was wrong then. Angus isn’t supposed to do what makes him happy. That’s selfish and wrong. Dad says so. And he’s Dad, so he has to be right. Angus is supposed to do things that make other people’s lives better. “It doesn’t matter if you’re happy or not,” Dad always says. “It only matters if you did your job well. And eventually, knowing you did your job well will be enough to make you happy.”

Angus thinks he might be able to do both with this project. He’s been excited about trying this for weeks. The little device in his backpack is perfectly safe, Mr. Ericson helped him check it over. It’s just going to make a very small reaction, nothing dangerous. But Mr. Ericson said Angus should probably stay a good distance away just to be safe.

He runs out to the middle of the field and sets down the box, flicking the switch on the side. If everything goes right, it should produce enough energy to power the lightbulb on top. He crouches under the bleachers in amongst the discarded cigarette butts and squashed concession stand cups and spilled popcorn, watching.

There’s a whirring noise, and the box starts glowing. It’s not supposed to do that. And then there’s a massive bang, and Angus curls up, shaking, as dirt and debris spray onto the metal above him. There’s a rippling shockwave of energy, and then he smells smoke. He scrambles to his feet, dodging the bleachers’ supports, running for the fence. He makes it out of the hole in the fence, but there are already lights coming and he can hear sirens. So he runs, heading straight for the woods behind the school. It’s dark and scary in there, but he doesn’t want to get caught. He wonders what would happen if he was. Will the police arrest me? I wasn’t supposed to be there. And I probably ruined the whole field. He wonders vaguely if that makes him liable for arson, or destruction of public property. He heard what happened when they caught the kids who were setting barns on fire. He didn’t want to get locked up.

He doesn’t notice until it’s much too late that he forgot his backpack under the bleachers. And when the police show up at the house, the look on Dad’s face says everything Angus needs to hear. I tried to make things better, and I only messed everything up more. Maybe I should just stop trying.

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LOS ANGELES, PRESENT DAY

6 DAYS AND COUNTING SINCE THE LAST EXPLOSION MAC WAS DIRECTLY RESPONSIBLE FOR

Bozer shuffles out to the mailbox, tugging his hat on a little tighter. There’s actually a bite in the air today. It’s beginning to feel a lot like Christmas... And this year, for the first time in a long time, it really actually does.
When he got back from Deja’s, Mac was so much better than when he’d left (aside from a nasty cold that was borderline pneumonia, which Mac’s still trying to shake the last of). He knows Mac was staying with the lawyer, Mr. Preston (who for some reason insists on being called Jack) and it seems to have helped. Bozer wonders, a little selfishly, why Jack helped when he couldn’t. *I’ve been Mac’s best friend for years. What was I doing wrong?*

He can’t shake the little voice in his heart that says that what’s wrong was that Mac is trying to protect him. He knows that’s how it always was when Mac was still a vigilante. *He thinks I’m the one who’s still naive. That somehow not telling me anything, keeping his pain to himself, keeps me from being hurt.* He’s almost insulted that Mac even entertains the thought that Bozer doesn’t know what happened to him. Maybe he was more comfortable telling Jack because Jack is a stranger. Because Mac doesn’t feel any obligation to protect the man from the harsher side of life.

Mac, I’m not seventeen anymore. I know how the world works. I know what happens to people like you in places like that. Bozer just wants Mac to treat him like the man he is now. *I can handle whatever you throw at me.*

But he’s not going to push. Nothing will shut Mac down faster than trying to force him to open up. For now, he’s just glad to have Mac back in the house, to see the few half-smiles that are starting to break through, to know that his best friend isn’t locked up with monsters anymore. They have all the time in the world to work on everything else.

The mailbox is stuffed chock-full of catalogs, like it always is this time of year. Bozer flips through them lazily on his way to the house. Most of them are headed straight for the recycling bin, aside from one that has some science and mechanics related stuff Mac might like. It’s almost odd to be thinking of actually getting a gift for him this year. The first Christmas Mac was in CCI, Bozer went to visit him. He had gone a lot, the first few months, but after a while he noticed Mac didn’t seem to want to talk to him. He’d started acting frightened and evasive and he seemed happy when Boze finally ended their calls, or when the guards told them their time was up.

So it had been a while before Bozer went to see him at Christmas. And he’s never going to forget that visit. Mac had come in hunched over, limping, moving stiffly like the time he fell off his bike trying out some jump ramp he and Boze built in the backyard. His face was bruised, and there were fading reddish handprint shaped marks on his neck. Bozer had almost been sick at the sight.

At first he thought desperately that maybe it was just a fight. But he’d seen Mac come back beat to hell from fights before, and there was never that haunted look in his eyes. Boze had barely been able to whisper, “Hey Mac, I just wanted to come see you.” The words “Merry Christmas” wouldn’t come out of his mouth, because they would mean absolutely nothing. Mac was the furthest thing from happy that Bozer could imagine. He’d gotten up and left in a hurry, and he’s still ashamed to say that’s the last time he went. But it was clear Mac didn’t want to see him either. *He didn’t want me to know.*

He thought about visiting last year, but he wasn’t sure he’d want to see what Mac had ended up becoming. He wasn’t dead, at least, whether by his own hand or someone else’s, but that didn’t mean his life wasn’t an absolute hell. In the end, Boze finally got up the guts to at least call and ask if he could see Mac. He got the reply that Mac was in solitary and wasn’t going to be allowed visitors. *I’m still ashamed that that made me feel relieved.*

Every time Mac tries to ask what Bozer wants for Christmas, Boze brushes his roommate’s questions away with one answer. “You’re back safe, that’s all I could ever ask for.” He failed Mac once, let him slip away. Now that his best friend is back, he’s not going to let that happen again.

The magazines were all folded around a small stack of Christmas cards. Boze grins when he sees
Uncle Mick from Baton Rouge’s handwriting. Uncle Mick never fails to send the best punny cards. Boze rips this one open right there in the driveway; he can almost hear the massive guffaw Uncle Mick must have let loose when he picked up the card saying “I thought they said pick up a missile toad ... hope your Christmas is a blast,” accompanied by a picture of a toad strapped to a small rocket. There’s another one from Miss Owens, his third-grade teacher, and the one Deja sent him (that he literally watched her pick out from a box of the ones still left over from Mom’s stuff).

Boze knows already that there won’t be any for Mac. Mac doesn’t have any real family, and most everyone else he knew cut ties with him after he moved to LA, or after he got arrested. Boze figures most people probably don’t even know he’s back out.

Mac doesn’t really get ‘normal’ mail at all. So when Bozer sees the card with small, neat handwriting addressed to “Angus MacGyver” he nearly drops it. He quickly checks the postmark, it’s from Mission City. Mac’s old hometown. Boze is absolutely dying to know who this “Arthur Ericson” is. It sort of rings a bell, but Mac didn’t talk much about his past, not even when he first came to LA, and besides, those years are all a hazy blur in Bozer’s mind. He wishes Mac was home, not pulling yet another all nighter at the Phoenix. I’m glad he’s feeling better, but he doesn’t need to burn himself out. He probably feels guilty for taking so much time off and is trying to make up for it now. Boze can only shake his head at Mac’s sheer stubbornness.

When Mac gets home, Bozer sets the letter at his seat along with a plate of lasagna. “Mac, you got mail today.” Mac glances from Bozer to the name on the return label, and Boze is pretty certain his roommate might start crying.

“Mac? Who is that?”

Mac hasn’t thought about his sixth grade science teacher in years. The last time he remembers doing that was when he got arrested. I knew somehow the story was going to make it home to Mission City and he was going to be so disappointed in me. Mr. Ericson had always thought Mac had the potential to do amazing things. And all he ended up as a was a car mechanic by day and a vigilante by night. A far cry from the student Arthur Ericson had praised and insisted was going to be the next Henry Ford or Thomas Edison.

He almost doesn’t want to open the letter. No matter what, I don’t know if I can take what’s inside. He doesn’t know if he’d rather hear disappointment bleeding through the words, or see only that still-determined optimism. Maybe I did have potential. But I threw it away a long time ago. No matter what, I’m never going to get it back.

He pulls out his knife and shakily opens the letter.

Angus, I know it’s been a while and I haven’t written as often as I should have. I sort of lost track of you after your grandfather passed away. Hopefully this letter gets to you.

I don’t know if you even still remember a silly old man with the toupee that got caught in the bunsen burner (I’ve parted with that and my vanity since, oh, almost ten years ago now). But I thought I’d ask you if you wanted to come see me and the school one more time. I’m retiring, and there’s going to be a reunion of sorts for my old classes. I was hoping you’d come.

I understand if there are still too many hard memories in Mission City. But if the old place still means anything to you, I’d like to see you again. I want you to know, Angus, that no matter what, I will always consider you like a son to me. Nothing you have done and nothing anyone says about you will change that.
Mac can’t read any further. There are still two more paragraphs, but the words are blurring and his eyes are burning. He sets down the paper and wipes frantically at his eyes. Don’t cry. Don’t cry.

Apparently Mr. Ericson’s chosen to retire mid-year. Mac wonders if the man’s health is deteriorating. He’d already had heart issues when Mac was a student, as a matter of fact he’d take out the little bottle of nitroglycerin pills he carried around in his vest pocket and joke with the students that he was the most dangerous thing in the lab, and that he was an undercover spy and if he was caught he was going to have to take those pills so he didn’t talk. Half the class had thought he was actually telling the truth, and Mac remembers sneaking around Mr. Ericson’s house with a homemade microphone trying to catch secret conversations.

And now I’m an actual government agent. Mac could laugh at the irony, if he didn’t feel so much like crying.

He’s not sure he wants to go back, even if he could. He’s not allowed to leave LA city limits, so he’s not sure why he’s even considering the idea. But the truth is, after that letter, he really does want to see Mr. Ericson again. Except that everyone else in Mission City probably thinks I got what I deserved.

“Well? Are you going?” Bozer’s voice breaks into his thoughts.

“I-I can’t.” Mac gestures vaguely to his ankle. “I can’t leave town.” Technically I could, with Riley’s program, but he doesn’t know that.

“We could at least ask. I mean, they might encourage contact with an old mentor.” Bozer sounds the way he does whenever he overconfidently B.S.es himself through a situation. “That sounds logical, right?”

“No, I could still find out he’s the one who taught me how to make things that blow up.” It’s not strictly true, because Mac learned some of that from his dad long before he had Mr. Ericson’s classes, but that science project that blew up the football field was a direct result of Mr. Ericson’s plan to enter Mac for the science fair.

“It’s still worth a shot. Mac, you need a change of scenery. I can’t imagine sticking around in this city when some creep wanted you dead.” If only you knew I was with Jack in the Los Padres last week. “It still feels weird to be in this house.” The charred spots have been repaired, and the furniture has been replaced, but there are still some smoke stains on the ceiling and walls, and the fresh wood around the back window is very evident.

“All, we can ask.”

“Yeah, that’s the spirit! The worst your PO can say is no, right?” Mac smiles just a little at Boze’s enthusiasm. He’s never been one to be afraid of rejection. Guess that’s a good trait in the film business. No matter how many times one of his scripts is thrown out, Boze just bounces back as enthusiastic as ever.

So they get in the car and drive to Penny’s office. Mac wouldn’t have even entertained the idea if he still had to go to Hammond, but Penny is reasonable. She was always understanding when he had to adjust a meeting time, and she’s been nothing but sympathetic and kind since his last stint in prison. She doesn’t push, doesn’t make him feel uncomfortable. He likes her, as much as you can like someone who’s basically holding a sword over your head.

When they get to the office, the place is the usual chaos of enthusiasm Mac’s come to associate with Penny Parker. There’s tinsel and garlands hanging on every available ledge and cornice, massive
paper snowflakes on any windows, a jar of candy canes on the waiting room table, a radio playing a Christmas Classics station in the corner, and a scrappy looking real pine tree covered in cracked glass bulbs and glittery fake icicles. It might be a little tacky, but it looks happy. And it suits Penny’s way of seeing the world perfectly. Mac’s pretty sure she sees the potential in everything, whether it’s pitiful Charlie Brown trees or damaged ex-cons.

“See look, she’s even got a Christmas tree up. She’s probably in the giving spirit,” Boze says, grinning. They climb the stairs, ducking under some tinsel that’s slowly detaching from the wall, and knock on Penny’s door.

She answers, looking half-buried in a large chunky-knitted sweater with a bunch of penguins in Santa hats appliqued on the front. Mac would have expected nothing less, with Penny’s quirky fashion sense. I bet she loves being able to wear “ugly” sweaters. She probably wouldn’t call them ugly either.

“Well, to what do I owe the pleasure?” She clears a stack of papers off one chair, and a box of small ornaments off the other. “Cookie?” She holds out a tin of mangled gingerbread men who look like they ought to be victims at a crime scene. I’m not sure if that’s what she was going for… Mac waves off the offer.

“Actually,” Bozer cuts in, grabbing two cookies from the tin as it goes past him, “we have a question.”

“What about?”

“Special permission for an out-of-city trip,” Bozer mumbles around a mouthful of cookie. “And your gingerbread recipe.”

Penny laughs instead of frowning, Mac hopes that’s a good sign. “What kind of trip?” She’s digging through a file folder now, and then pulls out a large stack of paperwork.

“It’s for his old science teacher’s retirement,” Bozer says quickly, and Mac glances at him. “A bunch of nerds getting together and talking about weird sciencey things I don’t understand. The guy was his mentor, he meant a lot to Mac.”

“I’m technically allowed to make certain exceptions to your parole conditions, and in your case I’m perfectly willing to do it,” Penny says. “You’ll have to provide all relevant details for the event, where you’ll be going, how long you’ll be there, expected times of travel. Just to be sure you’re not wandering off.” Penny grins, sitting on the corner of her desk and biting the already half-severed head off a gingerbread man.

“How do you know one of these days someone isn’t going to take advantage of your kindness?” Mac asks. She hasn’t been beaten down by the world yet. She hasn’t been hurt, betrayed, screwed over by people she thought she could trust.

“I don’t. But I will say I don’t do this kind of thing for everyone. I’ve got a way of knowing who I can trust. And I trust you.” She smiles, and Mac’s a little bit shocked to see that kind of genuine faith in him from someone who isn’t Boze or Jack or Riley or Sam. People like her aren’t supposed to trust people like me. “Doesn’t mean you’re just free to go wandering off on your own, though,” Penny continues. “I’ll agree to an exception, if, and only if, you’re supervised for the entire duration of the trip.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll keep an eye on him the whole time,” Bozer says confidently.
“I’m afraid that’s not going to be good enough. It will need to be someone the court would approve, and I’m afraid your emotional attachment to Mr. MacGyver disqualifies you.” She shuffles some papers. “But one of your legal advisors would probably be permitted.”

*I don’t want to put Jack or Riley out, especially not this weekend. They’re probably getting ready for the holiday. But just as quickly, he realizes if he doesn’t call them, Bozer will. Better me asking than him.*

He’s still not sure he wants to do this. But he has the feeling Jack would want him to ask. *He said whatever I needed, I shouldn’t hesitate to call him.* So he does. “Jack? Are you free this weekend?”

He’s not sure how that conversation ends with Jack telling Riley to find him a rental car and somehow the plan including cramming Mac, Boze, Riley, Sam, and Jack into a minivan. But he’s not going to complain. *There’s no family I’d rather spend time with.*

Jack seriously regrets renting the minivan. It handles like an overfed steer that drank a bottle of moonshine. Riley won’t stop making dad jokes, either. The first thing she said when Jack pulled up to her apartment with the car was, “Who rents a lime green minivan? Jack, you’re such a dad.” He didn’t even argue with her, it’s actually true. He feels like a parent trying to keep their kids from making a mess, because there was an absolutely exorbitant damages deposit on this thing and he’d like to return it unscathed.

He’s already yelled at Riley for putting her feet up on the back of the passenger seat, Bozer for bringing in coffee in an unsealed mug, and Mac for trying to fix the cantankerous heating system. So far, Sam’s been the good child on this road trip, but he’s not sure how long that will last. She keeps looking at Bozer with a mischievous smile. Those two have some sort of long running feud over the right way to barbecue, and Jack does not want to be in the middle of it.

He’ll admit he’s having fun. Almost as much fun as the last road trip to see Metallica, although it’s just not *Texas* and this is a little awkward with Bozer along for the ride. They can’t talk shop and laugh about past missions with him in the car. But Jack’s got to admit he’s interested to see *Mac’s* old hometown.

Even if Mac seems like the least enthusiastic of all of them. He’s been staring out the window this whole trip, and Jack will admit the scenery up here in Northern Cali is pretty, but he’s worried about Mac. The kid was just starting to come out of his shell again after prison, and now he’s clamping up again. He’s the only one who didn’t protest when Jack immediately turned the radio from Christmas music to classic country, he didn’t have any input on where they should stop for lunch, and he hasn’t said anything about what memories he has of the town.

Admittedly, Mac did leave Mission City when he was only ten, so maybe he doesn’t remember much. Still, Jack has plenty of memories from before he was ten, ones he was more than willing to share while they rumbled along the dusty highway through Texas for the Metallica concert. He’d wanted to take them to see the old homestead in person, but then Patty called with another “fate of the world is on the line” mission, and they’d shipped out to Bosnia straight from the airport in Austin. Jack had told the story of how he rode the cattle dogs like a horse when he was barely old enough to walk, about Cousin Richie hiding him in the hayloft, about the time the cattle got out while Pops was on a supply run and Momma chased them out of the vegetable garden with a rake.

Jack’s inclined to think the real reason is that the kid doesn’t have very many *good* memories. But there have to be some, or he wouldn’t be going back at all.

“So your favorite teacher, huh?” Jack says, trying to start some sort of conversation.
“He let me stay after class and help him with fixing lab equipment or prepping experiments,” Mac whispers. Jack hears what isn’t said. **He let me get away from my dad.** Jack can’t imagine what Mac’s life must have been like.

*I always wanted to put school far behind me every day. But I had the ranch and my family and the animals. I couldn’t wait to get home and help Pops with the tractor or ride Duke and check fences.*

To Jack, having a family you would voluntarily spend *more* time in what, to Jack’s mind, basically amounted to a prison to avoid...well, the only thing he can think is that that’s absolutely screwed.

“Sounds like he knew you pretty well,” Jack continues. **If this were another time I’d have made a joke that the guy should have known better, with Mac’s record for ‘repurposing’ anything he gets his hands on.** But the kid looks so sad, Jack can’t bring himself to even jokingly criticize him.

“He said I had potential,” Mac mutters, pulling a paperclip out of his pocket and twisting it into the shape of a science beaker. **“He thought I was going to change the world.”**

Jack wants to say, **you are. Every day you go out there and you make the world a better place. Hell, you make the world a better place just by existing.** But he can’t say any of this in front of Bozer. Part of Jack wants to say screw the rules and just tell Bozer everything. He kept Mac’s secrets for years when he was a vigilante, Jack thinks he could be trusted to do it again now. But Patty’s staying firm on that front. Even after their run in with the assassin, “Murdoc” or whatever his name is, Patty still thinks Bozer’s safer not knowing the truth.

So Jack settles for just saying, **“He wasn’t wrong.”** Mac just shakes his head and goes back to staring out the window.

Jack groans internally when he sees Bozer lean across a now apparently sleeping Cage to talk to Riley. **He keeps trying to flirt with her. When is he gonna learn she isn’t interested?**

“What made you want to tag along on this? Parker said we only had to have one person to supervise.”

“You guys are basically family,” Riley says, shrugging.

“That’s what Sam said, when she came over to see me a while ago. Isn’t that, like, not supposed to be how lawyer-client stuff goes?”

“We do things a little differently.” Riley shrugs. **“Basically, you’re right. In our line of work, you’re not supposed to get attached. But our boss doesn’t really care.”**

“Is she the scary one? Ms. Baumann?” Bozer asks.

“You still think she’s scary?”

“You don’t?” Jack stifles a chuckle. **Even as her cover persona, Patty brings the Ice Queen vibes.**

“I guess I’ve worked with her long enough to know her.” Riley digs through her backpack and pulls out a box of candy. **“Raisinet?”**

“Oh man, I love these things!” Bozer takes a whole handful.

“Hey, don’t get chocolate on the leather!” Jack yells back.

“Leather-ette, Jack,” Boze says around a mouthful of chocolate and raisins. **“My aunt’s cat could do its business all over this seat and it would clean right up.”**

Mission City is one of those blink-and-you-miss-it towns. Jack drives straight through downtown without knowing it. It’s only when Mac tells him “You missed the gas station”, that Jack blinks and slows down.

“You only have *one* gas station?”

“There’s another one north of town but it’s out of our way.”

Jack sighs and pulls into a grocery store parking lot to make the turn. He pulls up to one of the pumps and hands Mac his credit card. “Here, fill her up. I’ve got to go hit the little cowboys’ room.” He frowns when that doesn’t get at least a wry grin out of Mac. He didn’t just give the kid his car because Mac was closest to him. *If he needs proof I trust him, he’s going to get it.*

When Jack comes back out, he wonders how everything went to hell in two minutes. Because now there’s a police car parked across from the minivan, and the officer seems to be arguing with Mac.

“You’ve got some nerve showing your face around here again, MacGyver.” The officer’s voice is a low growl. Mac’s backed up against the fuel pump, and he looks scared. Not just nervous, put off by the other man’s in your face attitude. He looks terrified. Riley and Bozer and Cage are getting out of the car now, and Riley looks ready to deck the guy with her laptop. *That's not gonna make this any better.* Jack hurries over before this gets more out of hand.

He can just read the officer’s nameplate. D. Sandoz. “Hey, officer, this is my car. Is there a problem?”

“Who the hell are you?” The cop asks.

“Roger Preston.”

Sandoz’s eyes narrow. “You’d better let me handle this. You’re lucky I showed up when I did; that kid’s been convicted of terrorism. Looks innocent, but he’s not. Did you pick him up hitchhiking?”

“I’m his lawyer.” Jack’s trying to move in between Mac and Sandoz as calmly as he can. “Since you obviously didn’t get the news, he’s been released.”

“Yeah, well, if you know what’s good for you Preston, you’ll dump this one. There’s no way he’s innocent.” Sandoz pushes past Jack to glare at Mac. “I knew you were trouble after the football field, ya little pyro.” Mac looks distinctly uncomfortable.

Football field? Oh yeah, the explosion. Jack remembers it now from Mac’s arrest report. “Everyone knew you were going to end up a criminal. You know, no one was surprised when they found out you went to prison for blowing something up and killing a guy.” Sandoz shrugs. “We all saw it coming.”

Jack glances at Mac. The kid’s imploding now, curling in on himself like he’s hiding from physical blows.

“What’d they even let you out for?” Sandoz asks.

“Not that it’s any of your business, but there’s new evidence to prove he is in fact not guilty,” Jack snaps. “So why don’t you leave him alone?”

Sandoz must see the building murderous rage, because he backs down and goes back to his own car. He looks back once over his shoulder. “You know, we all felt a lot better when we found out someone finally put you where you belonged. Shame they’re making the mistake of letting you go.”
“Wow, what a jerk,” Jack mutters. “Small town cops and their power trips.”

“He’s been like that since the fourth grade,” Mac mutters dully. “I was hoping I wouldn’t see him.”

Jack knows small towns. His own was always an absolute hotbed of gossip. The only time he was the center of it was when he made out with Minnie Jacobs in a car after prom and got caught by a cop for being illegally parked, but he remembers how it felt to walk into the diner or the hardware store and know the whispers behind his back were about him. When he went off to the Army and Minnie started dating Jesse Cooper, he remembers getting about a dozen letters to the effect that people were worried she was cheating on him behind his back. One kiss, one time, and small towns decide you’re gonna get married. They probably had our first three children’s names picked out too.

He’ll admit, that one was a little bit funny. But he’s seen small town rumor destroy people, like the new girl his sophomore year of high school who was quiet and a loner and a bit standoffish. And then someone, everyone knew it was Judith Howell but no one ever punished her, started the rumor that the new girl was a thief, that she was responsible for the things gone missing from lockers that year. She got suspended when teachers found some of the items in her locker. No one believed her when she said she hadn’t done it. The worst part is that that’s all Jack remembers about her. He can’t even recall her name.

“Well, let’s get outta here. Go see your old teacher and forget that box of stupid rocks,” Jack says, gunning the engine a little too hard. “Okay, Ri, which way to the school?”

No wonder Mac didn’t want to come back.

The car is silent aside from Riley giving directions. Mac looks like he’s either going to scream or cry if someone so much as glances in his general direction. Cage has her interrogation face on; Jack can’t tell what she’s thinking but he can bet it isn’t good. Bozer’s gritting his teeth and Jack’s pretty sure Riley wasn’t the only one ready to get physically violent. It’s a relief when they finally get to the school.

“Thought you were only ten when you moved to L.A.?” Jack says. “This building doesn’t have anything lower than sixth grade.”

“I skipped second,” Mac says sheepishly. “But it didn’t really matter because I had to repeat sixth anyway.” Jack’s having a hard time imagining a smart kid like Mac getting held back. But if that was the year he lost his dad and had to move, I guess I can see it. Mac doesn’t have the greatest reactions to trauma. Jack can’t imagine the kid version of him was any different. He probably didn’t want to ask for help from anyone. Thought every mistake, every failing grade was his own fault. He probably thought he deserved getting stuck back in the same classes. I wish I’d met him so much sooner. Jack wonders how much of the kid’s life would be different if someone, at some point, had told him all the shit that happened in his life wasn’t his fault.

MISSION CITY JUNIOR HIGH

MINUS ONE FOOTBALL FIELD

The retirement party, which they finally tracked to the school gym, gets awkward fast for Riley. She doesn’t know anyone and after Mac introduces them all to Mr. Ericson, she leaves Mac with him to start talking science. She grabs a handful of chips from a bowl on a table and leans against a back wall, under a faded banner reading “Mission City Miners”. It’s not too long before Bozer joins her. Sam is out there being her typical blend-into-any-social-context self; she’s probably just considering this practice for field work. But Riley has the feeling Sam’s doing a lot more than just polishing her
skill set. She’s probably trying to find out what people think of Mac.

Riley doesn’t think she’d want to do that. She’s heard just a few whispers already, and it breaks her heart. It sounds like everyone in town knows about what happened to Mac. And no one seems to care. Two people have asked if she’s his girlfriend, and in the same sentence if she knows anything about him, about his past. She’s heard even more start whispering as soon as they see him.

“That’s Angus MacGyver, isn’t it?” “I thought he was still in prison.” “He should be.” “I can’t believe they let him out.”

“Hey, Bozer, wanna get some air?” Riley doesn’t want to spend another minute in a room with these people. How can they all look at him and just dismiss him like that? How can anyone be that spiteful? Bozer nods, looking as desperate to escape as Riley feels, and they make their way out into the hall, leaning up against the lockers. Riley munches the last of her chips, feeling the salt stinging the cuts in her mouth from where she took a couple punches in Mexico.

They stand there in silence a long time, before Bozer starts to shuffle and sighs. Riley glances at him curiously. “What’s going on?”

Bozer looks from the locker to Riley. “I just can’t help thinking of what his life must have been like here.” He shrugs. “Listening to them...they’re probably the same kind of people they were in middle school. Or as parents.”

Riley nods. “I don’t understand why so many people hate Mac so much. It’s not fair.”

“The first time I met Mac he was getting his butt kicked and some kids from the football team were shoving him in a locker,” Boze mutters. “I bloodied two noses and may have dislocated a shoulder that day.”

“You beat up a bunch of football players?”

“I was going through a phase where I was obsessed with Bruce Lee movies. I guess I just decided if I could imagine myself doing it I could do it.” He shrugs. “I mean, after that they just ganged up on both of us, but at least Mac wasn’t alone.”

Riley shivers, thinking of the way Mac was yelled at and hit and brutalized in prison. He’s been bullied and treated like he’s worthless his whole life. No wonder Mac’s so messed up. He never really had enough people to support him. It’s not like Riley did either, but when she got out of high school she met Jack, and he was her rock for every part of her adult life. Mac watched his mentor die, and then got tossed in a supermax.

“I didn’t know it was that bad,” she says softly.

“With a name like Angus? Kid was running for his life most of high school,” Bozer mutters. “Being a total nerd didn’t really help either. And I can’t imagine things were much different from him here.”

“He’s lucky he had you,” Riley says quietly. He’s spent most of his life forced to protect himself, look after himself. No wonder he’s not that ready to let us help with that.

“No, he’s not.” Bozer suddenly crumbles, sliding down against the lockers. “Do you know how many kids those dumbass football players beat up?”

Riley shakes her head, this isn’t making sense.

“Pretty much everyone in science and chess club, any kids they so much as thought might be gay,
the kids they knew would give them anything they asked for to keep from being hit, almost anyone who had the backbone to stand up to them.” He slams a fist to the floor. “How many of them did I help? One. How many of them went to prison?” He doesn’t have to give her the answer.

“Boze, that wasn’t your fault.”

“If I hadn’t made friends with him, he wouldn’t have felt responsible for what happened to Jerry. He wouldn’t have become the Phoenix. He wouldn’t have gotten arrested.”

“Boze, how many bullied kids commit suicide?” Riley asks. She watches a broken look of a whole different kind slide across his face. “Mac could have been one of them, if it wasn’t for you. You made sure he knew someone cared. That someone was willing to stand up for him and defend him. You probably saved his life.” That’s something Riley hasn’t been able to shake the thought of. She’s seen only a tiny bit of what happened to Mac for two years, and she can’t imagine how he lived with that. He’s so strong. To be coping with any of it at all. And she’s got the distinct feeling that the reason Mac values his life even the sadly small amount that he does, is the person sitting there in the hall.

“He just...he deserved so much better,” Bozer says softly.

“We can’t give anyone what they deserve,” Riley says, sitting down beside him. “We can give them our best. And it has to be good enough.”

“But being my friend ruined his life,” Boze whispers.

“You have no way of knowing he wouldn’t have done the exact same thing anyway. And without a loyal best friend supporting him.” Riley says. We all could have done better by him. We all could have tried to help him more, protect him from some of the worst the world threw at him. But we can’t go back.

Jack immediately likes Arthur Ericson. The man is calm, kind, and genuine, greeting Mac with a massive smile and a firm handshake. “Glad you could make it, Angus,” he says cheerfully, and Jack watches the pain and shame from the encounter with Officer Sandoz slide off Mac’s face to be replaced with a real smile.

Jack hangs back once Mac and Arthur start talking geek stuff. He’s got one ear on the conversation about fluid dynamics, and the other on everything going on around him. After about five minutes he wants to punch three people in the face. Mac’s not some monster. Stop talking about him behind his back like he is. They paste on fake smiles if Mac looks their way, but there’s a poisonous suspicion running rampant in the room. I was hoping that cop would be the exception rather than the norm.

He’s pleasantly surprised when a young woman with curly red hair and a nametag that says Cathy K walks up, introduces herself to Mac, and then pulls an inhaler out of her purse and winks at him. Must be some inside joke. She leads Mac off to go get some food, and Jack’s watching them when he feels a hand on his arm.

“I want to thank you,” Arthur says when Jack turns and meets the man’s earnest eyes. “Angus told me what you’ve done for him.”

“You might want to hold that praise until we actually manage to get his conviction overturned,” Jack says, and he knows he sounds bitter but he can’t help it, not hearing all of these people talking. He wants to be able to shove Mac’s innocence in their smug faces. To grab the mic that’s currently being passed around for former students to share memories, and yell that Mac’s not the hardened criminal
these people treat him as, that he’s a good, kind, loving person the world doesn’t deserve to have in it.

“It’s not just that.” Arthur says. “I want to thank you for being the closest thing to a father that boy has now.” Jack feels a sudden tightening in his throat, and coughs as subtly as he can. “I watched that kid suffer for years, and I can’t tell you how happy I am to see him finally have someone he can depend on.” Ouch. If you knew what I let happen to him a month ago... “You’re the kind of man Angus deserved to have in his life.” And then something from the previous sentence hits. “I watched that kid suffer...”

Jack can’t help the barking anger in his voice. “Did his father hit him?” Jack’s wondered that often. Mac flinches from touch, but there’s no telling if that’s a reaction to childhood trauma or to what happened in prison. Jack just assumed it was the latter, especially after Bishop.

Arthur sighs. “I don’t know if that man ever hit him. If he did, he was careful not to do anything that would show. But James didn’t really strike me as the physical type. He was too smart for that. I think he did all the damage on the inside. ‘Cause if you saw the way that kid looked if he got one answer wrong in a whole sheet of questions, or if he couldn’t quite figure out what to say when I called on him...”

Jack’s not even surprised. Not after what Mac told him about camping trips with his father. James didn’t have to hit Mac. Every cruel word would have been like a slap in the face to someone that sensitive. No wonder Mac avoids making anyone upset at him. No wonder he flinches at reprimands. Somehow it’s almost sicker than what he knows Riley’s dad did to her.

Elwood always acted out of anger. Riley said he hit her when he was drunk, when things went wrong, when he was angry at Diane. According to her, it was almost like the man didn’t know what he was doing when he had one of those spells. Not that it was ever any excuse for cruelty, nothing was. But it was the actions of a man who wasn’t in control.

Jack’s never met James MacGyver. A very large part of him hopes he never will. But he has a cold fury in the pit of his stomach at someone who could sit and calmly shatter the confidence and joy and hope in a child’s eyes. Did that bastard even know what he was doing to Mac? Jack’s not sure which option is worse. Riley at least understands that her childhood wasn’t normal, that what Elwood did wasn’t something she deserved. But because James used twisted words instead of closed fists, Mac’s learned to believe his lies. To see himself the way James must have seen him; problematic, worthless, inferior.

Jack notices Arthur’s still talking. “I had a few kids who stayed late for tutoring. But they were the ones whose parents were drunk, who hit them just for existing. I got the feeling if Angus went home to his dad and told him he had to stay at school for tutoring, that was just going to make his life worse. James was always a perfectionist. I didn’t want him to have another reason to criticize his kid, especially if it wasn’t even true.” Arthur continues. “So I went to the house one day, told James his son was the best student I ever had, and asked if he’d be willing to let Angus help me prep for classes. It killed two birds with one stone, in a manner of speaking. Gave the kid a few more hours in a place where he didn’t have to worry about being perfect, and made James a little bit happier with him. I could tell the guy liked having his ego stroked.” Arthur frowns. “I’ll never know how a man like that ended up with a woman like Ellie. Or a kid like Angus.” He sighs. “I wanted to help him. I tried to get him an entry in the state science fair. Have you seen what he can do? He’s a genius.”

“Yeah, he’s showed me a few things.” Jack really wishes he wasn’t sworn to secrecy about the whole Phoenix thing. He’d love to tell Mr. Ericson about some of the crazy stuff Mac’s done.

“You know, in a way, I’ve always felt guilty for what happened to him,” Arthur says, looking
wistfully at Mac still talking to “Cathy”.

“We’re just talking.”

“The experiment I was helping him work on for that science fair entry accidentally burned down the high school’s football stadium. And I’ve wondered ever since if that wasn’t his breaking point. If he started seeing himself as a lost cause and a criminal way back then. If leaving him alone would have been better. Because things got a lot worse after that. Parents complained, some of them even tried to argue he should have been in legal trouble. I heard a few who said they were afraid their kids were going to school with a budding sociopath or something.” Jack growls, he thinks he might crumple the cup in his hand. “Everyone had something to say. That he was going to grow up to be nothing but trouble, that he was dangerous, that he ought to be someplace he couldn’t hurt anyone.”

Jack can’t imagine what that would have been like. He was nine years old, for heavens’ sake. To have to listen to people say he was going to end up a criminal or a killer, to be stared at any time he went to school or to the grocery store...

It’s already sickening that Mac has to deal with having a felony conviction on his record for the rest of his life. Jack can’t even fathom that the kid’s been walking around with people judging him since he was nine years old.

“I think he thought his dad left because of it all.” Arthur sighs. “He’s lived with the thought that he drove his own father away. Or the miserable excuse he had for one.” Mac’s starting back toward them now, and it looks like people are consciously avoiding him. He’s got his head down, looking at the floor. “I was one of the few people who actually cared that he got arrested, at least the few who were sorry for him.” And then Mac is there, and there’s no point in talking anymore. He looks sadder than before, if that’s possible.

This can’t be easy. He’s seeing former classmates who’ve been successful, whose lives look perfect. And he’s got to stand there knowing he spent the time they were in college as a vigilante and then in a supermax. And Jack thought going to his reunions with the cover of being a bathroom tile salesman felt shameful.

At least I have the satisfaction of knowing all the pitying looks are wrong, that everyone who thinks I threw my life away and I’m a failure is absolutely wrong. And these people are wrong about Mac, but half of it is the truth. He did get arrested. He did spend time in prison. Nothing is going to change that. No release, no overturned conviction. And this time Jack does crush the cup in his hand.

Mac’s deep in a conversation about one of the chemical engineering projects he’s working on at Phoenix in his downtime when Mr. Ericson’s phone buzzes. He pulls it out and glances at it, then up at Mac. “If you’ll excuse me for a minute, I’m going down to open the lab. One of my students is bringing a project in to do some extra work.”

Mac smiles. He remembers when that was him. “Who’s your prodigy this year?”

“Valerie Lawson.” Mr. Ericson smiles. “She’s the brightest in her class. Sucks up anything I throw at her. Physics, chemistry, electrical engineering…” He glances at Mac. “I remember a kid who was just like that.”

Mac sighs bitterly. “Yeah, a kid you thought had potential. Looks like you were the only one in town who was wrong about me.”

“No, I’m the only one who was right. Didn’t you hear yourself five minutes ago? You’re saving the world one new water filtration process at a time.” Mac hides a bigger grin at the irony of that statement. “No one else thinks like you do. You can figure out solutions no one even anticipated, because you’re not afraid to think outside the box. That desalination process will take a third of the
time it normally does, and that’s all your work.” Mr Ericson frowns, just barely, but Mac can see it.

“What’s wrong?”

“Valerie’s been...distant, lately. She’s stopped talking in classes. I’m worried about her.”

“Would it be okay if I came and met her?” Mac can’t help but feel a jolt of sympathy for anyone who’s probably in the same boat as he was. *This isn’t a great school to be a nerd in.* Most of the students here are the rough around the edges types who like making fun of the ones who might actually make something of their lives and leave this town someday. *They don’t know what to do with someone who isn’t like them.* Mac knows this is one of those towns people just don’t leave. They get hooked into alcohol or drugs or smoking before they even make it to high school sometimes, and often times they’re getting married and sometimes having kids before they graduate. Mac knows people think city public schools are a mess, and they are, but small town ones aren’t much better. *At least when I moved to LA, no one really cared who I was. No one knew.*

What he really wants is to get away from the voices muttering and mumbling behind his back. Cathy was nice enough, but even she seems to pity him rather than let go of the past. He doesn’t want to be here without Mr. Ericson, he’s the only one who’s making this bearable. *I’m glad I came to see him, but it still hurts a lot.*

“Sure thing. The lab’s changed a lot since you’ve been in there last, pretty sure you’ll appreciate the upgrades. We actually have a properly functioning centrifuge now.”

“Not that thing I made out of a cardboard box?” Mac grins. Their ancient centrifuge had broken down the year he started Mr. Ericson’s classes. Mac had rigged one up out of rubber bands and a cardboard box. It was the first time he’d made a really good impression on a teacher right away, and it had also inspired what Mr. Ericson used to say about him to anyone who would listen. “*This kid doesn’t just think outside the box. He uses the box in a whole new way.*”

Jack follows them. Mac knows it’s because he’s not supposed to be unsupervised on this trip, but he likes to think it’s also because Jack is at least a little bit interested in Mac’s life and his past.

When they get to the classroom door, there’s already someone there. A slender, almost frail-looking girl with pale blond hair and glasses is holding a cardboard box half as big as she is, with a robotic arm poking over the top.

“Hi Valerie,” Mr. Ericson says.

“Who are they?” She asks immediately, looking shyly at her shoes.

“This is one of my old students, the one I was telling you about. Angus MacGyver. And this is his friend Jack.” Mac’s immediately grateful they don’t get into the technicalities of Jack’s presence. *Although in this town, she probably grew up knowing what I did.* He’d bet the football stadium fire story makes the rounds every single year. Just like the fifteen-year-old story of Mark Brown who lost three fingers running a table saw in shop class that had still been circulated as a cautionary tale. *I used to have nightmares about that thing after those stories.*

Mr Ericson sits down at his desk and Jack takes a chair beside him. Mac follows Valerie to the table where she sets down her project. *The room feels a lot smaller than I remember.* Mac had always felt like the lab was huge, but now he realizes it’s barely bigger than the living room at home. *It’s an odd feeling coming back after all these years. I guess I thought it would be just the same, like stepping back into the past.* Instead there are new posters on the walls, new equipment scattered around, even different desks, because he can’t see the one Callum Fine was always carving more and more stupid
things into. Or the one that Mac burnt when he got slightly overenthusiastic about one of the experiments.

Valerie takes out her project, then dumps some tools and parts out next to it.

Mac studies the robot arm. “Where’d you get the servos from? A remote control car?”

“Old DVD players,” Valerie whispers. “I’m trying to increase the range.”

“Have you tried recalibrating?”

“It doesn’t make any difference.” She shrugs, and Mac recognizes that resigned air bleeding off her. *How does someone get that way at eleven years old?* Then he wonders if this is what *he* looked like then. *No wonder Mr. Ericson wanted to help me.* “There’s too much interference; the components aren’t sophisticated enough.”

“That doesn’t matter,” Mac mutters. “Not if we can figure out how to adjust them properly.” He picks up a screwdriver and a pair of pliers. “I built a…,” he trails off, not really sure how he’s going to explain having built a remotely detonated bomb out of the same kinds of components she’s using. *That’s not really something I want to encourage.* He doesn’t want to see another kid end up like him.

“How do you know how to do that?” Valerie asks. “Are you like me?”

“I guess so. Mr. Ericson says you’re his best student?”

“I’m good at learning it all. I’m not so good at making it.” She shrugs. “Sometimes things don’t work like they should.”

“That’s okay. Almost nothing I make works the way it’s supposed to.” Mac starts poking at the wires and joints.

“Mr. Ericson told me you built an in-line four cylinder engine when you were my age,” Valerie says, handing Mac the small wirecutters he’s reaching rather blindly for.

“Yeah, I wanted to make it a six cylinder but I couldn’t find enough matching parts at the junkyard.”

“I want to do that too, but it isn’t working. Did you have problems with cracking? Should I use a welding method or a cold technique like pinning?” *Wow, she is good.*

“Well, really, you’ve got to think about the microfractures, and with the temperature and pressure stresses, it’s better to use a hot welding method than a cold one like pinning. I worked with a mechanic in Los Angeles for a couple years and he prefers an inert gas weld on tungsten if it’s possible.” It wasn’t often that Mr. Weathers used that particular technique, because it was expensive; but if the car’s damage warranted it and the owners was willing to pay, he’d do that repair. Mac had done several; mostly high-performance engines for sports cars. They didn’t get a ton of work like that, but Weathers’s did have a reputation for restoring cars no one else would take on. Mac had seen the results of more than a few nasty accidents and bad driving habits.

“I’m just scared to do something wrong.” Valerie watches Mac move wires and remove part of the robotic arm assembly.

“Sometimes you have to do something wrong to learn how to do it right,” Mac says. *Mr. Ericson used to say that when our experiments didn’t turn out.*

“But sometimes you don’t get the chance to fix it afterward.” Valerie says quietly. “Is it true that
people who make mistakes go to prison?” Mac freezes. I am the town cautionary tale now. Am I the one parents tell their kids about to scare them into behaving? He’s about to ask her to elaborate on that when the door flies open.

Jack knows he’s got a goofy grin on his face watching Mac jabbering with his new mini-me about robotics and DVD players and engines. He’s so damn smart. Kid shoulda been so much more. Not that Jack isn’t eternally grateful to have a literal genius on his team, but he’d give that up in a heartbeat if it meant Mac was able to have a normal, safe life. Even if it meant I never got to meet him, I wish he’d gone to college, gotten the chance to use that big brain for more than just pulling us out of tight spots and making stuff that blows up. Sure they have the think tank work, but Mac’s barely ever got time for that. He deserves so much better than what Jack and the Phoenix can give him.

“He’s so smart. He could have done anything. He could have been a respected scientist, a college professor, whatever he wanted. And now he’s never going to be anything more than an ex-con to the people who don’t know him. Jack’s never been one to get bent out of shape at the unfairness of life when it happens to him. Not when we lost my dad, not when Uncle Bill sold half the ranch without telling us. Never. But God forbid life be cruel to the people he loves. Riley’s gonna have trust issues for the rest of her life, and I know why she doesn’t want to date anyone anymore. And Mac... He doesn’t even know where to start. He didn’t deserve to be stuck with a shitty parent, or to get caught up in the LA crime scene, or to go to prison.

“She seems to have taken to him,” Arthur says quietly. “That’s the most I’ve seen her talk in weeks.”

“Yeah, Mac has that effect on people.”

Arthur smiles. “Even back then, he was good at explaining things. I always thought he had the makings of a good teacher. He was smart, but more than that he was excited about things. I’ve always thought you shouldn’t teach unless you’re going to be able to get so excited about the subject that the kids can’t help but love it too.”

Jack wishes more of his own teachers would have followed that rule. Maybe if they had, I’d have been more interested. Maybe if I had someone like this teaching me, I might not be so confused every time Mac rattles off one of his science nerd rambles. Although come to think of it, Jack’s learned an awful lot in the few months they’ve had the kid around. Maybe he is a good teacher anyway; he’s teaching us.

And then Jack’s warm fuzzy mood is smashed by a door slamming open and the butt of a gun in the side of his head. He’s taken off guard by the shock of it, stumbling backward into the blackboard. Beside him, Mr. Ericson crumples, probably taken down the same way.

*I left my gun in the car. Didn’t think I should bring it into the school. Someone might have gotten pissed and I didn’t need that today.* Now Jack wishes he’d taken the risk. One guy keeps the gun trained on Jack while the other one heads for Valerie. Mac pushes the girl behind him and Jack sees him glance around the room, stopping when he sees a bottle of chemicals and the splash sink.

*Oh, this isn’t even a fair fight. There’s two of them and Mac’s in a science lab. Jack’s almost grinning. These guys are gonna get their asses whooped. And then Mac’s grabbing the chemicals and dumping them, and a billowing cloud of smoke fills the room. Jack takes advantage of the distraction to slam the arm of the guy holding him against the desk, the gun clatters to the floor and the guy leaps back, holding his arm.*

And then Jack hears a frightened scream. “No! Let me go!” There’s a third person in the room, Jack
doesn’t even know when they came in, and they’ve grabbed Valerie and are dragging her to the door. Jack’s about to tackle the guy when he hears Mac first shout, and then the sound taper down to a buzzing groan. *I’ve been in the business long enough to know what the reaction to electric shock is.* One of these guys has a taser or a stun gun or something.

The smoke’s clearing just enough that Jack can see the second goon jamming something against Mac’s neck.

Mac collapses, his head hitting the corner of a desk as he falls. Jack sees blood, and it’s all he can focus on. The world narrows to the red stains on the tile around Mac’s head. He doesn’t see the guy pull back and run for the door, he doesn’t see any of it.

“Mac! Mac!” The kid’s so damn still. Jack gently fingers the wound on his head, it doesn’t seem deep, just a heavily bleeding gash. Head wounds always look worse than they are.

Mac hisses and flinches away from Jack’s hand. “Ow.” Jack can’t bring himself to care too much; at least Mac’s alive and alert.

“Jack, go get Valerie,” Mac gasps out, still shaking.

“We’ll find her, kid.” Jack rocks back on his heels. “But I gotta make sure you’re okay.”

“Go check on Mr. Ericson. ‘M fine.” Mac pushes himself to his feet, using one of the desks for support. He stumbles and falls back into one of the too-small chairs.

“No you’re not.” Jack rubs a hand over Mac’s shoulders.

“I can’t go to the hospital,” Mac mumbles softly. “If my PO finds out I got in trouble up here I don’t know what’s gonna happen.”

“Mac, you didn’t do anything wrong. I’ll just call her and tell her what happened.” Jack’s pretty sure the woman will be understanding. “But I’m calling 911 first.” Mac grips Jack’s wrist as he pulls out his phone. “Mac we’re gonna have to report this to the police.” He doesn’t want to see the look in Mac’s eyes. “I have to call them.” He hopes to God it isn’t Sandoz that responds to the call.

By the time an ambulance and a police car arrive, Riley, Bozer, and Sam have joined them. While a paramedic patches up the cut on Mac’s head and another one checks over Mr. Ericson, who regained consciousness about five minutes after Mac and has been worrying himself into a frenzy over Valerie, Riley pulls Jack aside.

“I managed to sneak away from Bozer and got into the school’s main offices. I hacked their security cams and got this.” She pulls up a set of pictures on her phone. “I can only get a partial plate off one of them, but they’ve been heavily customized. If we can track down the person who did the work, we might be able to track down the cars.”

“It’s a small town, shouldn’t be too hard to find the custom body work place.” If there’s only one gas station there’s probably only one mechanic.

“Already did. There are at least four places in town that do custom work like that. Two more closed last year. One of the ones still open is Valerie Lawson’s father’s; at the very least he might know who did that work, if he didn’t do it himself.” *In a small town, everyone knows everything. I wonder if this was something personal?*

“What kind of town has one gas station and four auto shops?”
“Hick towns that are apparently semi-famous for dirt track rally races. There’s a big one up here every spring.” She shrugs. “Guess it’s legwork time.”

“Ri, I hate to say this, but I really think we need to let the police handle this one.” They can’t afford to get Mac mixed up in a mess up here. Jack wants to help, he does, but this is the kind of thing that could get them all disavowed if it goes wrong. There are so many reasons we’re not allowed to get involved in this.

“You and I both know the first things those guys are going to tell that girl’s parents is to keep the police out of it. We’re probably the best chance Valerie Lawson has of getting home alive.”

Jack sighs and rubs his forehead. “You’re right. But we’re all undercover right now. We can’t just go around saying we’re the people who solve problems like this. We’re supposed to be lawyers, not detectives. And we have Bozer.”

“Not doing anything doesn’t sit right with me, Jack.” Me either. And I know Mac’s gonna hate it. But we don’t have a choice.

“Promise me you’re not going to get in trouble.”

“Who, me?” Riley shakes her head. “I’ll be the picture of the perfect law-abiding citizen.” She walks over to Bozer just as a couple of police officers, thankfully none of them Sandoz, walk up to Mac and Mr. Ericson. Jack joins them, just in time to hear one of the officers say they’ll take Mr. Ericson’s statement there but Mac and Jack, since they’ve been medically cleared, will need to come down to the station.

Jack sits next to Mac while they’re waiting to make the report. The kid’s shaking like a leaf; even when he’s here to report a crime and not because he got in trouble, he’s scared to death.

“Hey, kid, you didn’t do anything wrong. It’s gonna be fine.” Jack rubs his thumb over the back of Mac’s hand. “Your PO legally allowed you to come up here, you weren’t responsible for anything that happened in there, and you tried to stop them. It’s gonna be okay.”

The cops split him and Mac up to take their stories, and Jack hates it. He knows it’s just procedure, to make sure they can’t corroborate each others stories if something is fishy, but Jack can’t imagine how terrified Mac must be. This whole town thinks he’s been on his way to crime since he was nine. They’re not gonna go easy on him. Jack wanted to protest, wanted to make them interrogate him and Mac together, but he also didn’t want to make this worse. Maybe if we don’t piss them off this will be over soon.

When he gets out, Mac isn’t done yet, and he has to wait fifteen minutes more for him. Sam’s still hanging around, but she says Riley took Bozer to go get some lunch, because he seemed like he was going to panic. “They’re not going to be able to do anything to either of you. School security feeds all confirm your story. They just wanted to make you two sweat a little.” Her words are bitten off, coldly angry. “I heard them talking. They liked getting a lawyer on the other side of the table for once. And they all wanted to watch Mac squirm.” Jack wants to punch someone.

When Mac comes out he’s scarily pale, and his hands are shaking. I’m just glad he’s not walking out in cuffs. Jack wouldn’t put it past some of these guys to hold Mac on some phony suspicion. He really doesn’t have any friends in this town.

“Are you ready to get outta here?” Jack asks. “We can go pick up Riley and Bozer and hit the road.” Mac looks like he’s going to say yes, but he shakes his head instead.
“I need to see her father.”

“Mac, we can’t do anything. The police are gonna handle this. We should probably be staying as far away from their investigation as we can.” Maybe if this was any other town. If Mac didn’t have a target painted on his back. I don’t like the thought of leaving that little girl with those guys. But our hands are tied.

“I want to apologize to him for letting them take her.”

“Mac, it wasn’t your fault.”

“I know. But I want to anyway.”

Sam texts Riley that they’re going to Lawson’s house and will be back to pick her up in about half an hour. Riley’s a better person than Sam will ever be, because instead of yelling at Bozer for pacing and constantly repeating himself with variations of “this is bad, they’re gonna lock him up again, this is bad”, Riley just took him by the arm and suggested going to find a place to get food.

Sometimes I forget he’s just a civilian. Sam’s spent her whole life working with people whose entire job description means looking like they have it together when the world is falling apart. I’m not used to people who just admit they’re scared without me practically having to drag it out of them. Even Mac is far more closed off than his roommate. Sure, he doesn’t have Riley and Jack’s training, he does wear his heart on his sleeve a lot more than they do, but he still tries to pretend he’s fine. Bozer doesn’t.

Riley texts her back Ok. He’s doing better. Told him Mac was out. Sam lets herself sigh softly; when did this turn into such a damn mess? They should be on their way home by now. And instead they’re driving to tell a man his daughter’s been kidnapped. Not that he doesn’t already know. Does trouble just follow us? She honestly can’t remember the last time she actually took a vacation. I guess in this life, you don’t get them. But still, Mac’s been catching hard breaks. The camping trip with Jack went so wrong, and now this. She sincerely hopes Christmas won’t bring another disaster.

The Lawson house is a modest, unassuming little suburban home. No one would know, just to look at it, how much tragedy there is inside right now. Isn’t that life for you? Sam’s not sure where the sudden attack of negativity is coming from.

She follows Mac and Jack out of the car to the door. Mac knocks, and his voice is a little shaky when he calls out, “Mr. Lawson?”

“What is it?” A strained voice calls back.

“Uh...It’s Angus MacGyver. I used to live around here? I’m here about your daughter Valerie.”

The door opens slowly, and a middle aged man, his face haggard and lines of worry creasing his cheeks, glances out. “You’re not with the police, are you? They already called me. And the people who have Valerie, they called too. They said no police.” He almost slams the door again.

Mac lowers his head, looking like a kicked puppy. “No, we’re not with the police. I... I was at the lab when Valerie was kidnapped. I just wanted to say I’m sorry.”

“I appreciate that.” Mr. Lawson pulls the door open. “Thank you, but I’m a little busy right now. I can’t leave. The kidnappers are going to call me back, and I don’t know when.” Sam can sense something hesitant in his voice. There’s something wrong about this whole thing.
She glances over the man’s shoulder into his living room; one whole wall is covered with car grilles and photographs and there’s a bookshelf of trophies for some kind of racing.

She needs to get a better look at what’s going on. She’s seen a lot of kidnapings and ransom demands. And this one isn’t matching the way things normally go. They’ve already made contact. But they haven’t made a demand yet, or at least that’s how it sounds. Kidnappers who act at random are amateurs. They make a demand on the first call because that’s how they think it goes in the movies. These guys are pros. They knew who they wanted; they didn’t just snatch a random kid from the schoolyard. Which begs the question, what do they want from a mechanic? She can’t stop thinking about what Riley said about all the mechanic shops. They’re probably struggling just to get by, with that much competition. If they know him, and the way this is working I think that’s the case, what do they want? “I can’t imagine it’s easy to be waiting alone. If you want us to stay, for a little…”

“Are you deaf, lady?” Lawson snaps. “I’m waiting for a ransom call. And you three are giving me nothing but problems.”

“We’re lawyers,” Cage says. “If they attempt a negotiation, we could help.” She knows Lawson can’t exactly turn them away without looking suspicious now. Make him think we’re necessary. And that we just might have some connections with the authorities.

“Maybe for a few minutes.” Lawson looks very uncomfortable. Sam, Mac, and Jack step into the living room.

“You were into rally car racing, huh?” Jack asks, apparently he noticed the trophies too.

Lawson glances at the wall behind him. “Yeah. I was working my way up through open wheel. Almost went bigtime. But I got out of it almost six years ago now. When Louise got worse.” She sighs. “I couldn’t stop thinkin’ of what might happen to Val if I got hurt. And now I’m all she has left.” He sighs and runs a hand through his greying hair. “And some father I am.”

“Do you know any reason someone would want to kidnap your daughter?” Jack asks.

“No. I don’t have enemies. It’s a small town, we all know each other.” He sighs. “I’m just afraid I’ll never see her again.” But it doesn’t sound like the tone of a worried father. It sounds like a man saying what you have to in a given situation. He knows exactly who has her.

“If they’ve called asking you for anything, that’s a good sign,” Sam says. “Before you give them anything, make sure you get proof of life. Make sure you get to talk to her.” Lawson nods. He’s not going to reveal anything with us here. And if they do make a call, and he’s worried about saying something in front of us, we might end up getting Valerie killed. Sam’s seen enough. She pulls her phone from her pocket and glances at it like she’s gotten a message. “It looks like Riley’s ready to hit the road.” She nods to Mac and Jack.

“I’m so sorry,” Mac says again as they leave. Lawson only nods and shuts the door behind them.

“He’s lying,” Sam whispers as soon as the door closes.

“No shit Sherlock,” Jack mutters. “He’s in on it.”

Sam suppresses a frustrated groan. “I don’t think he’s involved in kidnapping his own daughter. He was genuinely afraid. But he does know more than he’s telling.”

“Well, as much as I’d love to let you go Jedi Mind Tricks on the guy, we’re not officially allowed to be on this case, much less doing interrogations.”
“Jack, please.” Mac’s eyes are pleading. “We have to help Valerie. No matter what her father did, she doesn’t deserve to pay for his mistakes.” Jack nods. *He wants to take this on as much as any of us. He doesn’t want to leave a little kid to be hurt or killed. But he doesn’t want Mac in trouble either.*

Jack opens the door of the car and slides in. “What am I gonna tell your PO now?”

“They’re not tracking my tether. I’m technically out of range; it isn’t really common knowledge that it’s linked to a sat feed.” Mac shrugs. “She won’t know I didn’t spend the night in the hospital.”

“Which is really where you should be,” Jack mutters. “I think you really do need to get your head examined.”

“For trying to do the right thing?” Mac looks a little bitter. “That girl needs our help. I’m not leaving her hanging out to dry because I’m trying to protect my own back.”

Oh. And that’s what the real problem is. This isn’t about this town, or about his past. This is about Oversight and Bishop. This is about Mac being the one who paid for Oversight’s lapses of judgement when it came to handling situations. She wondered when that was going to surface. With everything that happened to Mac inside, it isn’t surprising it’s taken this long for his anger about being used as a pawn to finally be addressed. *He saw a lot of himself in Val. And he won’t let her end up like him, thrown under the bus to protect everyone else.*

“Mac,” Sam says gently, “Listen. I know you’re worried about her. And I’m not going to ask you to give up. I just want you to be careful.” He nods just a little.

“So what’s the plan, hoss?” Jack asks. “Cause I don’t know about you, but I haven’t exactly figured out how we’re gonna find Valerie if her own father doesn’t even want us to know.”

“Oh, that’s the easy part. He’s gonna tell us,” Mac says.

“What?” Sam’s heard plenty about Mac’s improvisation skills, but she has no idea what he’s about to do. Clearly he has a plan. She’s even more confused when he rips a solar light out of someone’s yard. *No wonder he got in trouble with the law.* She stifles a smile.

Mac clambers into the car and starts pulling out the dash radio. He does it scarily easily, and Sam wonders if that’s another thing he learned in his time as a vigilante. He probably saw a lot of kids rip radios out of cars on the street.

Jack slaps Mac’s wrists as he starts yanking the radio out. “Hey, hey, hey. I have to pay for damages!”

“What’s more important, your bank account or a little girl’s life?” Mac snaps back. *Jack was just kind of joking around. Mac’s so stressed he’s taking it seriously.* She sees Jack about to say something, and then he clearly notices what she has and thinks better of it. *He's more perceptive than people give him credit for.*

“What are you doing?” Jack asks.

“Well, properties of refracted light-”

Jack cuts him off. “Hey, you’re talking to your partner, not your little genius mini-me this time. Dial back the Einstein about ten notches, okay?”

“Okay, well, basically, sound makes vibrations in the air. And in solid things like glass. So I’m going to bounce the CD’s laser reader off the window, capture the light with the photocell from the solar
light, and convert it back into sound we can hear through the radio.”

“Couldn’t you have done that without ripping it out of the dash?”

“Not really,” Mac says. “You got any gum?”

Sam pulls out a stick of peppermint gum from her purse and hands it over. She started chewing it when she stopped smoking, and it’s her new nervous habit. She hasn’t been doing it so much lately. I haven’t had to buy a new pack of gum since October.

Mac folds up the wrapper and sticks it in his pocket before sticking the gum in his mouth. He’s pulling the radio apart, and Sam watches while he rips through the wires for the pieces he wants. He pulls out a small red piece, probably the laser reader, and then pulls the gum out of his mouth and uses it to stick the laser to the side mirror.

“Eww, gross,” Jack mutters. “Getting your germs all over my car.”

“It’s not your car Jack,” Sam mutters.

“Yeah, that makes it so much better.” Mac starts spinning the dial on the radio, searching for the right frequency. There’s a low buzzing, and then Cage hears Lawson’s voice. “No, thank you for calling, I appreciate your concern. But I have to keep this line open for when these psychos call about my daughter.” There’s a soft beep, and then a measured thudding, like pacing, and a low voice. Lawson’s talking to himself. “Come on, Karl, just tell me where she is. I’ve got the money. Just tell me what you want.”

“Damn, he does know them.” Jack mutters.

There’s no sound for a while. And then there’s a soft pinging noise, and some thudding. And something that sounds like a door slamming. What…

And then the car in the driveway roars to life and starts backing out. Jack, Mac, and Sam jump out of the minivan and start running, but it’s too late. The car peels out of the driveway in a cloud of exhaust and burnt rubber, and Mac pulls Sam back before the fender clips her.

“Wow.” Jack stares after the retreating vehicle. “That looks like a man who’s in way over his head.” Sam couldn’t agree more.

Mac doesn’t hesitate when Jack asks if he thinks they should go after Lawson. We’ve come this far. We have to. But they need to know where he’s going.

Mac studies the tire treads. “He’s got all terrain performance tires. And the way they gripped the road even after he fishtailed; that’s a modified suspension. The kind of stuff you’d see on a dirt track racer.” He saw a few cars come into the shop with those mods, they were usually beat to hell from the races.

“So he’s got a car made for rugged terrain racing. Sounds like half the guys in town have the same thing.”

“That’s not all.” Mac bends down, there are clods of dirt all over the driveway. “See this? It came off his tires and wheel wells.”

“Dirt?” Cage asks.
“Red clay. There are deposits all over SoCal, but there aren’t too many up here. In fact, there’s only one I can think of. Dad used to tell stories about bootleggers using the old logging roads north of town in the 20s. That’s the only place around here there’s red clay.”

“So a car tricked out for cross country, and clay that’s only found on old smuggling routes. Sounds like he’s running drugs or guns,” Cage says.

“Maybe he lost a shipment. And now his bosses are pissed.” Jack glances at Mac. “It’s like Han Solo in Star Wars, man!” Mac sighs and rolls his eyes at Jack’s movie reference, but he’ll admit it’s fairly accurate. Whatever this guy did, he must owe the people he works for money. And they took Valerie to make sure he’d come through on the deal.

“Do you wanna go after him?” Jack asks. “If he’s up there, chances are we might never find him.”

“I think we have to try.” Jack doesn’t say anything else as they drive away. I need to let Riley and Bozer know we aren’t coming back. Mac reaches for his phone when it begins to ring. But the caller ID isn’t Riley. It’s Thornton.

He’s about to pick it up when Jack mutters, “Don’t answer that.”

“Why?” If he doesn’t tell her something she’s going to be even more upset. She probably already knows about the incident at the school; Mac’s pretty sure as soon as his name came up in a police file she got hold of it. She’s going to wonder what we’re doing. Whether everything’s okay.

“You want to be the one to explain to Peppermint Patty that we’re doing an off-the-record favor for someone who didn’t even want us involved in the first place?” Jack raises an eyebrow. “Be my guest.”

Ok, well, when you put it that way… Mac lets the call ring through. Hopefully she’ll think we’re at the hospital and can’t answer. When it stops ringing he calls Riley.

She answers, sounding like she’s keeping her voice down. Mac can hear chatter and the tinkle of a bell hung over a door in the background. She and Bozer probably decided to eat at Marsha’s cafe. If it hasn’t changed since Mac was here, it’s the only one that has a bell with that distinctive tone.

“You guys on your way back?”

“Um, about that…” Mac’s suddenly struggling to figure out how to say this. “Uh, Lawson definitely knows the guys who took his daughter. I think he was smuggling for them using some old logging roads. And we’re kind of following him to see if we can find a way to get Valerie back safe.”

“Oh.” Riley sounds both unsurprised and a little concerned. “Patty’s been blowing up my phone. The last text she sent asked if Mac was okay. I think when the police report flagged she got worried.” Mac sighs. Maybe I should just call her. We’re already here, she can’t tell us not to go. But that makes him think of the other person who’s not exactly in the loop on this whole thing.

“How’s Bozer?”

“Fine. A little confused and a lot worried about you. What am I gonna tell him about all this?”

“Let me talk to him.” Mac hears a rustle and then Bozer’s voice comes through.

“Mac, what are you doing?” He’s so worried about me. First I get knocked out, then dragged down the police station, and now this. Mac can’t blame his best friend for being scared.
He can’t dodge the truth on this one. “We’re going to try and find Valerie.”

“Please be careful.” Bozer whispers. “Don’t do something stupid.”

“I won’t. I’ve got Jack with me, he’ll keep me out of trouble.”

“He’s okay with this?” Bozer asks. “I thought going vigilante again would get you locked up for sure.”

“I’m not going vigilante, Boze. I’m just trying to help someone.”

“While going outside of normal police procedures. Mac, that is the classic definition of vigilante.” It sounds like Bozer’s pacing, a sprung floorboard creaks in a rhythm as he walks.

“It’s gonna be okay. We’ll be fine.” Mac sighs. “I don’t know when we’ll be back. Just hang in there, okay?”

“Okay. I get it, I do. Just please don’t die.” And then Mac hears the phone be handed off.

“Don’t worry, I’ll make sure he’s okay.” Riley says. “We’re going over to the hospital to check on Mr. Ericson. We’ll just stay there until you get back.”

“It might be a while.” Mac doesn’t know how far they’ll have to go to find Lawson.

“It wouldn’t be my first time spending the night at a hospital.” It wouldn’t be Bozer’s either. Mac tries not to think about how many times he and Boze existed on crappy hospital vending machine snacks and even worse coffee as Bozer’s mother finally succumbed to her cirrhosis. Most people think I hate hospitals and medical because I don’t want to be the patient. I mean, not that that isn’t somewhat accurate, but the thing I hate most is the memories. I’ve never been to a hospital for anything that ended in a good one. He’s seen mothers come in and leave with new babies, parents reassured that a child’s surgery was a success, accident victims whose families were surrounding them when they woke up in the ICU. But Mac’s life never dealt him a good hand.

He hangs up and texts Patty quickly. Staying overnight in town. Be home tomorrow. Even if they find Lawson and Val soon, there’s no way they’re making it home tonight. He thinks they’ve crossed the state line by now. The dirt road isn’t as bad as he remembers from coming up here with Dad, so they’re making better time than he expected.

“Hey Mac, I got tire tracks.” Jack pulls the minivan into a small two-track. “Look pretty fresh.” He turns in, and the car pounds down the rutted, muddy trail with teeth-cracking jolts. Okay, that’s more like what I remember.

Suddenly there’s a blur of black through the trees. Mac doesn’t really have time to register what it is before there’s a car coming at them head on. “Jack!”

Jack tries to swerve, but there’s a massive tree on one side and a solid wall of rock on the other. And then the car in front of them swerves wildly, tires spinning in the slick mud, and fishtails, slamming sideways into a tree. Smoke starts to rise from the hood. Jack slams the minivan into park and Mac jumps out, running for the car door and yanking on it.

Lawson, inside, is half hidden by the airbag, head leaning on the window. Mac finally pulls the door open, slashes the man’s seatbelt with his knife, and drags him out, as Jack and Cage race up.

Lawson’s already regaining consciousness, and the second he does he’s scrambling to his feet, staggering toward the trunk of the car.
“Hey, what the hell! Get away from there, it might blow up!” Jack shouts, grabbing for the man’s arm.

“You don’t understand!” Lawson yells, voice slurring. “If I don’t get them their money they’re gonna kill Val.” He shoves Jack’s hand away and opens the trunk, frantically dragging out a pair of heavy duffel bags. Jack and Cage each grab one, and Jack unzips his.

“That’s a hell of a lot of money for a car repairman.”

“It’s…” Lawson sighs and staggers, leaning against a tree.

“You’re smuggling drug money, aren’t you?” Cage asks.

Lawson nods. “You gotta understand, man. We had so many medical bills. We didn’t have enough insurance for the treatments Lou needed. I ran up debt, a lot of it. Borrowed against the house, the shop, whatever I could. And then the bank started asking for it back. They were gonna foreclose on the house. The shop was going under. And Val, she just lost her mom. I couldn’t let us end up like that. So when some men came to the shop and asked if I could recommend a driver who was discreet and wouldn’t ask questions, I volunteered.”

“So why did they suddenly decide to threaten you?” Cage says.

“I told them I was done. It’s getting more dangerous. Roads are crawling with cops. Val’s already lost her mom. I couldn’t get arrested and leave her with no one.” He sighs. “And now they’re gonna kill her. I was supposed to make this run for them and they’d be at the end with Val. But now my car’s wrecked.”

“We can do it for you,” Mac says. Behind him, he hears Jack make a skeptical mumble. **We can’t let Valerie down.**

“With that car?” Lawson asks. “If we get made we’re never gonna outrun them.”

“Hopefully we won’t have to worry about that,” Mac says. He sees Jack and Cage grab the money and stow it in the hatchback.

There are some bags of groceries in the backseat of Lawson’s car, and Mac grabs them on impulse. **Never know when something random might turn out to be useful.** He jumps back as heat envelops the car, and as Jack pulls away the whole vehicle goes up in flames.

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**SOMEBODY IN THE NOR-CAL WILDERNESS**

**NOT A PLACE MINIVANS ARE NATURALLY FOUND**

Jack can understand that Lawson is worried about his daughter, but the man’s negativity is honestly getting a little draining, especially when Jack’s seat sore from bouncing around through the woods on back trails with a suspension clearly not made for off roading. “We have an hour to get to the meet location. We’re never gonna make it in a minivan. You don’t have any mods, any off-road enhancements. The first cop that catches onto us, and we’re done.”

“Listen, man, I’m a trained pursuit driver. I could make it to that meet on time in a shoebox,” Jack snaps, before he realizes he shouldn’t say that. “I was almost a cop before I was a lawyer, but I wrecked my shoulder in physical training and had to quit.” He can hear Cage facepalming in the backseat. **What? I needed to fix that mistake somehow.**
“You can’t outrun a cop in this thing! It’s absolutely impossible.” Keep telling me that, and I’m gonna come back there and knock you out for real, C-3PO.

“We’re not going to outrun them. We’re going to avoid them entirely.” Mac pulls out his phone and calls Riley. “Riley? Are you still at the hospital?”

“Put it on speaker,” Jack says.

“Yes. They took Mr. Ericson for a CAT scan. It’s just a precaution. He’s insisting he’s fine.” Jack shakes his head. Guess the kid came by that trait honestly.

“We’ve run into a little trouble up here, and we need a little backup from your end. Can you get hold of a paramedic’s radio?”

“You want me to resort to petty theft? Heck yeah.” Riley’s probably going stir crazy being stuck back in Mission City unable to help. He hears some rustling and then Bozer comes on the line.

“Why did you just ask her to steal something?”

“Because we might or might not be helping transport a shipment of laundered money across state lines and we have to keep the cops off our backs.”

“And your lawyer friends are cool with that?” Bozer sounds like he’s on the edge of hysteria. “Mac, what are you doing? You’re gonna get arrested. Again.”

“Not if Riley does her job.” And then there’s another scuffling and the phone’s apparently back with Riley.

“Okay, Mac, I got a radio. What now?”

“Tune frequencies until you find 161.505. That’s station dispatch. I need you to clear the roads for us. Whenever we take a turn, see if you can keep the cops moving opposite to us.”

“On it.” Mac can hear Riley opening her rig. “Got a map, got my radio, and I’m gonna go get myself a spot with free wifi and less prying eyes than a waiting room.”

“How do you know what the dispatch radio frequency is?” Jack asks.

“I had a lot of time on my hands and a homemade ham radio as a kid. I might have accidentally ended up on that frequency once and really confused a lot of cops.” Mac shrugs, cheeks turning slightly pink. “I was doing a really stupid impression of Bill Nye the Science Guy but with my own projects. Which might have been how the cops found out I was breaking into school after hours.”

From the back, Sam laughs, and Jack finds himself chuckling as well. Of course you did. Of course eight or nine year old Angus MacGyver built his own radio and accidentally snitched on his own slightly illegal shenanigans. Jack wishes someone would have helped him way back then, before everything went to hell and that innocence was lost for good. Before he had to turn himself in for something way worse than some B&E.


“Almost.” Jack hears her opening her rig. “Okay. I’ve got your location from Mac’s tether signal, and I’m ready to imitate dispatch. I’ve recorded all the transmissions in the last few minutes and I’ve got all the voice patterns I need scanned into my rig, so-”
“You can tell us all the fun stuff later. Just make sure we get back without getting arrested for now, okay?” Jack asks.

“Sure thing.” He can hear a vague mumbling in the background, probably Riley’s computer faking dispatch. “You guys should be in the clear from here on in. I’ve got all available units responding to multiple reported shots fired in an area north of you. By the time they figure out they’ve been had, you’ll be well past them.”

Jack can hear the sirens wailing faintly. And then more, coming up from in front of them. Slow down, don’t look suspicious. But it’s too late. He was pushing ninety-five as it was, and apparently he’s just become this cop’s prime suspect in Riley’s fake shooting.

The patrol car wheels around behind them, sirens screaming. We can’t stop. If they see the money we’re going down. And even if we could somehow come up with an explanation, we’re still going to run out of time to save Valerie.

Mac unbuckles his safety belt and scrambles over the console into the backseat. Jack’s not sure what he’s doing back there, but the kid comes back with a bunch of junk and starts twisting wires and smashing down a can. Jack’s been around him long enough to know that whatever this is is probably going to explode.

“Jack, pop the hood!” Mac shouts, and Jack has zero idea why, but he does it anyway. And immediately regrets it when the road disappears and all he sees is neon green. Musta busted the hood latch banging around through the woods. He thought bouncing over that rock sounded like it shook something loose.

“Hey kid, I kinda need to be able to see!”

“Shove this under the hood hinge!” Mac hands him one of two little crushed cans.

“Is that a bomb?”

“Yeah, just a little one.” Mac grins. Jack glances in the rearview mirror. Sam looks intrigued, Lawson looks terrified. This is gonna be fun. Neither of those two have seen Mac’s skills in action. Sam’s seen them from a distance, and Lawson’s probably heard the stories. But they haven’t had front row seats like Jack has. He finds himself grinning. Somewhere along the line Mac’s antics went from exasperating to entertaining. He’s proud of the kid, proud of the way Mac can salvage the unsalvageable, the way Mac always seems to make whatever he needs out of the junk he picks up along the way.

Jack watches Mac twist a few more wires together, and then there’s a bang and a puff of smoke from each side of the car. The hood flies over the top and smashes onto the windshield of the police car.

“That was awesome!” Jack can see the car screeching to a halt behind them. Then he realizes Mac’s opening the sunroof and pulling himself out of it.

“What are you doin’?”

“More oxygen, more speed,” Mac pants. “I got this, I’ll be fine.” Jack’s not so sure it’s the truth, as he watches the kid slither down the windshield and yank something out of the engine, flinging it into the road. He holds his breath until Mac scrambles back inside.

“Did you just throw out the air filter?”

“Yeah. We don’t have too much farther to go. And I’d like to be there early. I don’t trust these guys
Mac glances over the back of his seat. “Mr. Lawson, I don’t think those men have any intention of handing over your daughter. We’re going to do everything we can to get her back, but you’re going to have to trust us, okay?”

Mac really hopes this plan is going to work. Well, the half of a plan he has.

They’re not letting Lawson go to the meet. They dropped him off at a house they passed on the way, despite his insistence that he was going to be quiet and stay out of the way. There’s just no way to be sure he won’t forget anything about that promise the second he sees his daughter. He might decide that turning on them would help him get Valerie back, or he might just give in to whatever they demand.

“Okay, this is where you two get out,” Jack says, stopping just before the location Lawson gave them. “They’re expecting one driver, they’ll get one driver.”

“Jack…”

“Hey, I’ll be fine. And if I’m not, I’m counting on you two to save the day, okay?” Mac glances at Sam. She looks every bit as determined and calm as Jack. I don’t know much about her past, but she has to have seen some field action at some point. She’s not just a desk bound interrogation expert. Mac’s not sure why she’s no longer in the field, but he’d guess she has her own demons. I should know what that’s like.

Mac rummages around in the back and finds a can of spray paint amongst the random groceries. He pulls it out before climbing out of the car.

“What are you gonna do with that?” Jack asks.

“I don’t know yet,” Mac says, grinning, following Sam into the bushes. The two of them follow Jack until they catch sight of two parked cars. With a lot of guys with guns standing around. That’s too many to take on by ourselves. They must have been expecting trouble. He hopes Jack’s figured that out too.

Jack climbs out of the car and walks around it, showing his hands. “I know you guys must have a lot of questions, but really, the important thing is, I’ve got your money, right here, as requested.” He glances behind him at the beat-up, hoodless minivan. “For the record, this is not the car I requested.”

One of the men, Mac recognizes him from the school opens the back of a car and drags out Valerie. “I got a lotta questions. Where’s Lawson, who are you, and what the hell’s going on?”

“See now, those are exactly the kinda questions I said weren’t important.”

“Well, you can tell Lawson that since he’s gonna farm out his business to random people we don’t know if we can trust, the deal’s off. We’re keeping the girl. So if you don’t want her dead, you and Lawson both better keep your mouths shut. And keep bringing us our cash.” The man says, yanking Val back against him.

“So do you want this, or not?” Jack asks, patting the side of the van.

“What do you think?” The man snaps. “Bring it over. Carefully. Or the girl gets a bullet in that smart little brain of hers.” We need to hurry. Mac glances at the can in his hand, and fumbles through his jacket pockets for the matches he always keeps in them, just in case.

One thing I learned growing up was that aerosol cans should never be thrown in any trash that
might get burned. Granted, that didn’t stop me from seeing why that was a rule. And scaring the hell out of Mr. McGinty’s horses. Mac grabs a couple of the matches, pulls off the can’s spray nozzle, and shoves the wooden ends as far in as he can.

“When this goes off, get ready to move. I’ll grab Valerie, you help Jack.” Sam nods. Mac knows Jack will respond; he’s familiar enough with Mac’s crazy plans to react to them without needing an explanation.

Mac lights a third match and touches it to the top of the other two. He and Sam start to run, staying low behind the brush and scrubby trees, moving toward the back of the cars. Then there’s a massive bang, and Mac rushes out, heading straight for Valerie. He grabs her, pulling her away from the disoriented kidnapper, and starts running Val shrieks, but Mac doesn’t stop; they can’t afford to if he doesn’t want them both to get caught and used as leverage. I know where we are. And I know a spot we’ll be safe. He can hear yells and gunshots behind him, but he can’t look back. Jack and Cage are trained operatives. They’ll be okay.

“Mr. MacGyver?” Val gasps. “What are you doing here?”

“Helping your dad keep you safe. And you can call me Mac.” Mac pants, searching for the trail he knows must be here somewhere. Hopefully it hasn’t grown over so badly that I can’t find it. And then he sees a rusted piece of scrap metal nailed to the bark of a tree. The painted words are gone and the bark is growing around the edges of the sign, but he remembers when it read “Science Area. Keep Out.” in messy blue letters.

“Is my dad okay? Where is he? Why didn’t he come?”

“Something happened to his car.” Mac doesn’t think she needs all the details right now. “I promise, he’s okay. We’re gonna see him when this is all over.”

“Mac, I’m scared.” She’s shivering, despite the fact that they’re running as hard as they can, breath fogging in the chilly air. Probably in shock, from the trauma and fear. And it’s getting darker and colder by the minute.

Mac drapes his jacket over Valerie’s shoulders. “We’re gonna be okay. I know where we’re going. We’re gonna be safe. I’m not gonna let anything happen to you.”

“But what about my dad?” Val asks, pulling the much too big coat around her. “He got in trouble. Is he going to have to go to prison?” And that’s why she was asking earlier. It wasn’t about me. It was about knowing her father was breaking the law.

“It’s gonna be okay. I have friends who can help people who get in trouble.” Mac shivers and rubs his own arms. Why do I seem to keep ending up in the middle of nowhere in miserable weather? It’s not exactly raining, but it’s sure not dry. And it’s even colder here than it was in the Los Padres.

And then he sees it, the small shack up in the massive old oak tree that thankfully has stood a few more years. “What’s that?” Val asks, blinking up at where Mac’s shining his phone’s flashlight.

“My old lab.” Mac grins. “From when I was your age.”

He scrambles up the trunk of the tree, hands finding the old knots and branches he knows by muscle memory. He shoves up the trapdoor and scrambles through, almost knocking his head on the ceiling. Wow, everything really does feel so much smaller now.

He hasn’t been back here since...since the night he fell and broke his ankle. It had been raining, the bark was wet and slimy, and I slipped. I was hoping Dad would noticed I hadn’t come home yet and
come get me, but it got darker and darker and he never came. Mac had made a makeshift splint out of branches and his socks, and a crutch out of a big stick, and limped his way home. When I came in, Dad just seemed mad that I hurt myself. He didn’t seem relieved at all to see me back. It was like he never even noticed I was gone. And after that Dad had said Mac wasn’t allowed to go to the tree house again. So I never did. Not that I wanted to after that.

He opens the box in the corner and pulls out a rope. It’s a little frayed and starting to rot out, but it might be useful. Most of the chemicals have eaten through the bottles Mac stored them in, and anything metal is rusted. There’s a lot less in here than he remembers leaving. Probably someone else found it and took anything good with them. The place smells like smoke and there’s a lot of cigarette butts and empty beer cans lying around. Probably a bunch of local kids found it. Everything looks old, though. There’s a thick layer of dust and grime on the floor and it looks like mice have been the only occupants for a while now. He tucks some of the wires and nuts and bolts he found laying on the floor into his pockets. There’s not a lot here to work with. Less than I was hoping. He’s forgotten how long it’s actually been since he was here last.

“Valerie,” he calls down quietly. “I’m gonna have you come up here, okay? I’m gonna come down and help you.” He scrambles down carefully, his ankle twinging with the memory of the last time he was here in the dark, in the rain. He points out the handholds and she swings herself up into the trapdoor without too much trouble. Mac follows.

“Okay, let’s see here.” He picks up an old lantern and shakes it. There’s not much fuel left in it, but there’s enough to light it. The faint flickering glow illuminates the familiar milk-crate work desk and the math equations scribbled on the walls. Yeah, I was never gonna win any awards for interior design.

“Wow,” Valerie whispers. Clearly she’s impressed. “You came here when you were my age?”

“Yes I did.” Mac kneels down on the dusty floor so he can look at her eye to eye. “After I lost my mom, I felt like everything in my whole life fell apart. I needed someplace where I could put things back together.”

“I lost my mom too,” Valerie says quietly. “Were you scared?”

“Yes.” Mac swallows hard. The memories still hurt. “I was really scared. This was the only place I felt safe after she was gone.” He doesn’t elaborate on why. Those memories don’t need to come up right now. Her father cares enough about her to risk everything to get her back. He wouldn’t have yelled at her and ignored her.

Her father cares enough about her to risk everything to get her back. He wouldn’t have yelled at her and ignored her. For the first few years he hadn’t been able to escape that anger and grief. He’d been so glad when he found the old treehouse and was able to make it his. And I was lucky Mr. McGinty didn’t kick me out when he found me up here. “So I know you’re gonna be safe here too.” He glances around one more time. “Hey, my old telescope’s still here.” He pulls it out and shakes off a couple spiders. “It might still work. You can keep an eye out for anyone coming with it.” He hands it to Valerie. “Just brush off the cobwebs first.” He brushes some dirt and mouse nests off the three legged stool by the desk. He pulls out his phone. As much as I hate calling the cops, I’m going to have to. They need real law enforcement’s help for this one. But when he pulls out his phone, there’s no bars. Oh no. He tries holding it over his head, moving to the far corner of the treehouse, but nothing really helps. If he wants to make a cal he’s going to have to go find someplace with signal. “Okay, now stay up here until I come for you, or until morning, okay?”

Valerie nods, her face pale and stiff with fear. “Where are you going?”

“To try and get some cell signal and call someone to come help us.”

“Please don’t go, I’m scared.” She grabs his hand. “What if they find you?”
“I’m coming back.”

“Promise?” There’s so much blind faith in her eyes. And Mac wants to promise. He wants to say everything’s going to be okay. But he can’t do that. And he knows how much it hurts when someone you trust breaks a promise.

“I can’t do that. But I can promise you that I’m going to do everything in my power to stay safe, okay?” He smiles at her just a little. “I mean, I did just use a spray paint can to make a distraction and get you away from those men. Have a little faith, kid.” Damn, I sound like Jack.

He helps her up the tree. “Don’t come down unless it’s for me or my friend Jack or the police, okay?” She nods.

Mac plunges through the brush, continually checking his phone’s signal. He gets one bar for a moment, and a text buzzes through from Jack. On my way to you. Be careful. Some of those guys are still looking for you. Mac wondered if that was the case. He heard an engine that definitely wasn’t the minivan’s start while he and Val were running.

He’s getting close to the road. Signal’s stronger here, but if those smugglers are looking for him...

There’s a sputtering rumble and Mac cringes, ducking back into the bushes. Oh no. And then he sees the neon green that can only belong to one vehicle in Mission City. It’s Jack.

He steps out, just as Jack pulls the wheezing, squealing car to a halt. It sounds like the suspension is shot and the engine is a few minutes away from giving out. I knew taking out the air filter was gonna be hell on it. But they didn’t really have a choice.

“Jack!” He says, not bothering to hide the relief in his voice. “Wow. It looks like we broke it, we bought it.”

“Yeah, but that’s not the biggest problem we have,” Jack says. “Cage has a few of our friendly neighborhood goons back at the drop site. But one car pulled out right after you ran with Valerie. I couldn’t stop them.” Jack shakes his head. “They’re probably combing the roads for you right now.”

“We don’t need to use the roads. I know how to get back to town from here.” Mac leans on the car. “But that’s not the real problem.”

“Yeah. You and I both know those guys are never going to stop hunting the Lawsons. So either we change jobs to full time protection detail, or we find a way to stop them for good. I called in the cavalry as soon as Riley had a solid fix on your location from your tether,” Jack says. “But those guys might show up before then.”

“What do we have left?” Mac starts digging through the grocery bags again.

Chocolate chips. Sugar. Butter. Great if I wanted to make cookies. But I don’t think these guys are going to let bygones be bygones and be content with a plate of homemade dessert. I need something more...explosive.

Mac continues digging. Toothpaste, dish soap, hydrogen peroxide. Mac sets aside the soap, peroxide and sugar. All three of those have potential.

When he finds the package of baking yeast tucked in a bag with some potato chips and onions, Mac stops. Yeast, peroxide, dish soap...just like the experiment Mr. Ericson did on the first day of class.

“I’ve got an idea,” Mac says, turning to Jack, grinning at the half-amused, half concerned look on the
older man’s face. “We’re just going to give them what they want.”

“I don’t know if I like this plan,” Jack mutters. I know Mac likes to be cryptic about his plans, but what the hell does that even mean? “Give them what they want”? Not Valerie, he wouldn’t do that... And then Jack sees the kid start rummaging through the bags of money in the car. Ooohhh.

“Oh you’re gonna like it even less in a minute.” Mac’s fiddling with some stuff in one of the duffle bags. He’s got a bunch of random stuff from Lawson’s groceries and he’s muttering to himself.

“Why?” Jack has the sinking feeling he already knows.

“Because we need your phone for this to work.”

“Not again, man!”

“Hey! You get better signal than I do up here!” Mac argues. “I don’t know if a call will go through on mine.”

“Excuses. You just want to destroy my phone again.” But Jack hands it over with a grin. Let’s see what story I get to tell the guys at the genius bar this time.

Mac makes some final adjustments to whatever sciency thing he’s doing and shoves the phone in the bag. “If you have a waterproof cover on it it should be fine.” Jack grins. Don’t leave home without the fully ruggedized cases now. He thinks Otterbox should hire Mac to do testimonial ads for them. Like those old “takes a licking and keeps on ticking” Timex commercials. He’d like to see how many of Mac’s crazy plans those phone cases would survive. Probably not the ones where he blows them up. On purpose.

“Okay, we need to go.” Mac’s checking his phone as they head toward a spot where they have decent cover but can still see the minivan. “It looks like I can still get enough signal to call you.”

“This is more complicated than it needs to be. Just let me shoot out their tires!”

“And if you miss?”

“I’m not gonna miss!” I was the top sniper in my Delta unit. Keep insulting me and you’re gonna find out how good my aim is, with these pinecones.

“Okay, if this doesn’t work then you can shoot them, are you happy?” Mac snaps. Then there’s the rumble of an engine and they both stop talking. Jack may be perfectly willing to argue with his partner, but he knows when to shut up.

They watch the three men who show up grab the bags and shove them in their own car. Mac pulls out his phone. “Oh shit. It’s not sending.”

“What?” Jack snaps. “Seriously?”

“I’m gonna have to move.” Mac stands up, running toward the road.

“Wait, kid!” Jack dashes after him. He’s gonna run out there and get himself killed. Mac races into the middle of the road, holding up his phone. Jack’s right behind him, gun out, watching as the car wheels toward them.

“Got it! It’s going through!” Mac yells. Jack’s not in the mood to be cheerful just yet. “Did you have your ringer on?”
“You ask me that now?” There’s a brief moment where Jack realizes that these guys are really gonna be confused, because Mac’s ringer on his phone is AC/DC’s “TNT”, what, it fits with the amount of times he blows something up or sets it on fire, and then the car fills with some sort of foam, spins off the road, and smashes into a tree.

What the hell? Man that was cool. “Yeah! Geekachu does it again!”

“What?” Mac says, turning around with a comically confused frown.

“If you were a Pokemon, that’s what I’d call you. That or Nerdasaur.”

“Jaaacckkk.” The kid just shakes his head.

Jack runs toward the car, training his gun on the confused, foam-covered smugglers. “Don’t move!” He sees Mac race off into the woods, and he thinks about yelling after him, but the kid’s got to have a plan. And Jack’s proven right when Mac returns with Valerie in tow, just as sirens cut through the misty night air.

Jack sees Mac shudder at the sound. It’s not fair that this happens to him. It’s not fair that he has to be afraid of people who are trying to help. Although Jack’s not sure Mac’s wrong about being worried about these particular cops. They weren’t any too friendly with us the last time. They have it in for him. And they’re not too much happier about out of towners.

Jack steps back when the officers run up to where he’s holding the three men at gunpoint. He lowers his gun and raises his hands. “These are the men you want. They’re smugglers.”

“Then why are you the one pointing the gun at them?” Oh hell no. Jack’s only met him once but he’d never be able to forget Donnie Sandoz’s voice. Not when the last time he heard it, the man was insulting Mac.

“Because these are the criminals responsible for kidnapping Valerie Lawson.”

“It looks like you two are the ones who have her.” Val’s huddling by Mac, staring at the officers reaching for Mac’s arms and trying to cuff him. She won’t let them pull her away from him.

“They’re telling the truth! They helped me! Mac wouldn’t hurt me!”

“Yeah, right. Dollars to donuts this is all the little jailbird’s fault.” Donnie gets right in Mac’s face, just the way Jack imagines he used to in the halls. “What kinda trouble have you been causing, MacGyver? Seems like every time something bad’s happened the past couple days, you’ve been right in the thick of it. Makes me wonder why everything started going wrong when you came back to town.”

Mac cringes. “I swear, I just came to see Mr. Ericson. I didn’t mean for any of this to happen. I wasn’t involved.”

“Then what are you doing out here, with the kidnapped girl, a couple bags of drug money, and a gang of smugglers?”

“He was trying to do the right thing,” Jack snaps. “He felt so damn guilty about what happened to the Lawson girl he wanted to help get her back. Lawson was being blackmailed into transporting the money for these guys.” He skips over the part where it’s been going on for a while. “Come on, can’t you tell which side we’re on? Those smugglers are all trapped in a crashed car full of one o’ the kid’s crazy science experiments.”
“Yeah, well, the word of an out of towner means nothing to me.” Sandoz grabs Mac, spinning him around and shoving him up against the green minivan, reaching for his cuffs. Jack sees the second Mac’s eyes go wide with fear, the absolute terror of being pushed around by someone stronger and crueler. The kid’s panicking, breath coming short and gasping and broken, shaking uncontrollably.

That’s when Jack hauls off and punches Donnie Sandoz right in the nose.

MISSION CITY POLICE STATION

NOT EXACTLY THE BEST HOTEL IN TOWN

Mac really, really, wants to get out of here. Unfortunately, even though he’s being let off the hook (Lawson flagged down a cop as well, and told them the whole story), he’s terrified. Cage is sitting with him, and he’s grateful to not be alone, but everything about being inside a police station is unsettling.

But he’s not leaving without Jack. There wasn’t really anything to charge Mac with, Lawson claims he forced Jack and the others to drive him and the money back to town when they came across him. Mac wanted to protest, but Lanie Mills, the officer interviewing him, shut that down fast, and off the record. Mac remembers fixing her old Harley she didn’t want her dad to know about, when she was seventeen and he was eight. Now she’s a sergeant in the Mission City PD. And maybe the only friend in it that Mac has.

“Lawson’s probably going to get some leniency. Given that his daughter was under threat, his actions won’t be viewed as severely as they would be otherwise. He’s trying to help you, and you really should take it. You don’t need anything more on your record.” Mac’s well aware of that. Penny’s probably already going to veto any future trips when she gets the report that Mac’s been taken into the station not once but twice on this trip. Please don’t let her be really mad.

So Mac and Cage both walked out over an hour ago, charges cleared and nothing more than a slap on the wrist for being stupidly heroic and trying to do the cops’ job for them. Unfortunately, Jack’s situation isn’t so easy to explain away. Given the fact that he actually punched an officer, and there are a couple other cops who can back that charge up, Jack’s not getting off quite so easy. What are they going to do if they determine it’s serious enough to charge him with assault? He doesn’t want to see anything happen to Jack. No one else should be where I’ve been. Will they send him to prison? He doesn’t think it would be quite as bad for Jack as it was for him, but Jack’s more likely to say something stupid and piss off the wrong person and get killed. But that won’t happen, right? He knows they’re technically not legally allowed to operate on US soil, that’s what got the FBI upset at them after the mess with Pena and the bomb in LA. Would the Phoenix be able to help Jack if he got charged? Or would they have to leave him to his fate?

He’s too scared to ask anyone about it, even when Riley and Boze show up (with Thornton, who goes straight to the station office, a new rental car, and the news that Mr. Ericson’s being discharged in the morning, he has a concussion but nothing too serious). He doesn’t want to hear that Jack is going to pay for Mac’s decision. He tried to warn me not to go after Val. He was worried about me getting in trouble with the police over it. And now he’s the one who’s being interrogated. And all because Jack tried to protect him. If he hadn’t hit Donnie, he would have been let go with Sam and me.

Mac doesn’t want to think about what would have happened if Jack hadn’t stepped in, though. Donnie had been so distracted and angry he’d taken it out on Jack, manhandling him into the car and cuffing him harshly. But it meant he didn’t keep shoving Mac around, didn’t push him closer to the edge of a flashback. Donnie’s cruel, but he’d never do that to me. But his hands were just as harsh,
just as cruel. Mac hates that something as simple as that was enough to set him off. It’s getting better, a week ago I might have actually had a breakdown right there.

He’s about to have a panic attack right then and there, despite Cage’s attempts to calm him down, when Jack steps out into the lobby. He’s actually grinning, flexing his bruised fingers.

“Totally worth it.”

“Worth getting an arrest on your record?” Riley hisses, low enough that Bozer, who’s getting himself a third cup of coffee, can’t hear. “Jack, you’re here as Roger Preston. Anything you do goes on his record. What if word gets around that you got in legal trouble, that you got arrested? What if the court decides Mac needs a new lawyer? You don’t think.”

Jack grins. “Nothing’s going on my record, sweetheart. Patty’s taking care of that. And while she’s at it she’s getting Lawson some leniency too.” He shrugs. “And there’s lot of lawyers with much sleazier records than me who haven’t gotten disbarred yet.” Riley gives him an angry glare, but doesn’t continue the argument. “You know you woulda done it if you were there.”

A few minutes later, Thornton steps out of the office, her cold glare now directed at the team. But she doesn’t say anything until she gets into the new rental car, very pointedly ignoring Jack’s requests to be given the keys and drivers’ seat. The moment they pull out of the parking lot, Thornton snaps.

“I swear to God, Jack, if I have to bail you out of one more mess…”

“Yeah, but Dana, we saved a kidnapped girl.” Mac blinks, then remembers she has to be in character here. Bozer still doesn’t know what we really are. Or who we really are.

“And three of you got arrested. Do you have any idea how much paperwork I have to do every time you idiots do something like this? And by the way, I got an invoice from the rental company for a totaled minivan? The office isn’t paying for that.”

“Oh, come on.” Jack says. “It was damaged in the line of duty!”

Crammed in the back seat next to Mac, squashed in with Riley and Cage as well, Bozer mutters, “Your ice queen boss is kinda awesome. I can’t believe she got you all out of there.”

“It pays to have lawyer friends,” Mac says. Honestly if Thornton ever quit the spy world, she’d be an awesome attorney.

“I heard that,” Thornton calls back. “And if you think you can keep pulling stupid stunts and relying on me to get you out of them, you’re sadly mistaken.” But she’s smiling a little.

“I just need to make one stop first.” Mac smiles when Jack glares at him. I know, I keep asking him to go out of his way for me when he’s driving, and now I’m doing it to Thornton. But this is going to be worth it.

“Can we make one stop before we go home?” Mac asks. He hates to be that person, but he has one more thing he needs to do.

When he knocks on the door of Lawson’s house, Val answers. “Thank you for helping my dad.” Mr. Lawson is currently at the hospital, apparently he got a broken nose and a minor concussion from his accident. But Thornton assured Mac that he was going to get to go home as soon as he was discharged. He might end up with some probation time, but he won’t be getting a jail sentence.
“My friends are good at that. We like helping people.” Mac pulls a piece of paper out of his pocket. He scribbled down his phone number while he was sitting in the station waiting for Jack. “And we want to keep doing that. If you and your dad ever need anything, at all, call us, okay?” Valerie nods.

“And just for the record? That tree house is yours now; I called the people who own the property now and they said you could use it all you want,” Mac says, grinning. “It needs a little work, but it’s a great place to go and think. Because someday you’re gonna understand why you can do what you do. But trust me, you need a safe place to experiment, and you need people who believe in you. So don’t be afraid to ask Mr. Ericson for help, okay? Just because he’s retiring doesn’t mean he’s going to stop being your teacher.”

Valerie nods. “You really think I’m not just weird? That it’s not something wrong with me?”

“Really. Don’t let people make you hate what you can do, because it’s amazing. And Valerie? Make sure your dad knows how much you care about him, okay? He really really loves you. And he’s gonna be so proud of what you’re gonna do.”

“I know. He’s gonna want to help me fix the tree house up,” she says, eyes brightening. “He’s good at fixing stuff.”

Mac stands up quickly, before he starts to cry. “Yeah, he is. He’s gonna love it. Just don’t set something at school on fire, and you’ll be fine, okay?”

I was worried about her. There’s so much of myself there. So much potential, and so much to go wrong. But her dad cares about her. She’s gonna be okay. He fights down the bitterness as he turns back to the car and his new family.

Sometimes, all people like Val and I need is someone to love them.

PAROLE OFFICER’S OFFICE
THIS IS GOING TO BE AN AWKWARD EXPLANATION

Mac figures the least he owes Penny is an explanation of what happened. She was so nice to let me go up for the retirement party, and then I screwed everything up. He really hopes she isn’t mad. What if she decides trusting me was a mistake?

When he called to set up an appointment, she sounded a little cold when she heard who was on the line. But she did tell him he could come in on Monday to talk to her.

So now he and Bozer are back at the office. This time, Mac’s in no mood to enjoy the cheerful music and decor. If she was going to send me back she would have. Right? He doesn’t think this is bad enough to warrant sending him back to prison but he doesn’t know. I’m not sure if it’s bad enough that I just got hauled into the station on suspicion. Even though Patty got the charges dropped, she can’t make police records completely disappear. Not if it’s not an officially sanctioned mission. At least not fast enough to fix this.

Penny really liked Mac. She acted like he was someone she really respected and trusted. And now he ruined it. Is she going to start acting like Hammond now? Suspicious of everything I do? Watching my every move like a hawk? If he’s messed everything up for himself again, maybe he won’t be allowed on field missions anymore. I don’t want to work with R&D again. Jill was nice but I can’t deal with Dr. Barstow. I just want to stay with Jack and Riley.

By the time the appointment is set for, he thinks he might throw up. I’m probably never gonna want...
to smell cinnamon pinecones again.

When he walks into the office, Penny’s got yet another wildly colored sweater, and a small frown. Mac sits down, he doesn’t think he can trust his legs at this point.

“Ms. Parker, I’m really sorry for what happened this weekend. I know you thought you could trust me, and I’m sorry I let you down.” Mac thinks the worst part about this is knowing he’s disappointed her. *She said she wouldn’t do this for everyone. She thought I was different, that she could trust me. And then I went and made a giant mess of everything.*

“I don’t know what to think,” Penny says. “Your behavior is...well, quite frankly, I have no idea what happened this weekend. I’m not sure I want to.” She leans on her desk, sighing. “This isn’t even close to the first time I’ve okayed a parole exception only to get a police report two days later. But this one is a first.”

“How so?” Mac’s almost afraid to ask.

“This is the first time the report says my parolee was trying to stop a crime.” Penny looks up. “And then I get a *second* report that says you stopped a ring of drug smugglers and kidnappers with something from a sixth grade science experiment.” She shakes her head.

“I’m so sorry.” Mac whispers. *I made such a horrible mess of things. I should have listened to Jack.* He can’t say he does regret what they did, but this is bad. This is so bad.

“What are you sorry for? Doing the right thing? Saving a child?” Mac blinks. *Is she serious?* “Yes, you’re making me more work. But at the end of the day you made sure a little girl went home to her family.” Mac’s not sure he’s not dreaming.

“Why aren’t you upset?”

“Because of this.” Penny slides a paper across the table. It’s a file of newspaper clippings from the past few years. The front pages are splashed with the headlines Mac remembers showing Bozer when he got home from work, “Local Vigilante Prevents Officer Shooting”. “Phoenix Stops Merida Cartel Shipment”. “Cartel Crime Rates Fall as Phoenix’s Involvement Soars.” And then the one he wishes didn’t exist. “Vigilante Phoenix Implicated in Warehouse Bombing and Civilian Death”. There’s one more below it. “Phoenix Unmasked: Former Vigilante Angus MacGyver Charged with Terrorism and Murder”.

“I knew who you were the second you walked into my office. Everyone in LA knows,” Penny says. “I never believed what they said about you, afterward. I was almost burnt out of my Criminal Justice when you started. Everything I saw made me think I was never going to be able to do anything worthwhile. That I was wasting my time thinking I could change the world; that one person wasn’t going to have any impact. And then I started hearing about the Phoenix. And I realized that the only way I was going to be a useless cog was if I let myself. Because there were still people in the world who chose to be heroes, and I could be one of them.”

He doesn’t know what else to say to that. “And I don’t want to be the reason someone else doesn’t get to see someone they love come home.” She sets the paper carefully back in a drawer. “Don’t stop being a hero on my account.”
111-Scissors

MAC AND BOZER’S HOUSE

SUPPOSEDLY THE HOME OF THE WORLD FAMOUS BOZER FAMILY PASTRAMI

Riley’s not sure how she got roped into this. It’s the day before Christmas Eve, she’s finally enjoying some of her hard-earned vacation time, and she’s up at the crack of dawn because she for some reason agreed to Bozer’s invitation to come watch him make a Christmas pastrami. Sam, having had the good sense to turn him down cold, is still in bed. Riley tried to guilt her into coming, but there’s no out-psyching the mind reader.

Still, Riley’s in a good mood when she finally gets to the house. She stopped and got her caffeine fix at a Starbucks on the way, her radio is playing her personal favorite playlist of holiday music, and she’s more than ready to help get the house ready for the party, which Mac insisted on having it at his house because it was bigger than either Riley or Jack’s apartments, and Thornton refuses to give the location of her house to anyone.

But that good mood takes a hit as soon as Riley turns into the driveway. The last time she was at the house, after they all got back from Mr. Ericson’s retirement party, the house looked like a holiday movie threw up on it. There were lights everywhere, the second they got in the house Bozer started blasting Christmas radio on his phone, and there was a tree in the corner that was actually slowly spinning, probably courtesy of one of Mac’s moments of genius. Riley’s already been wondering if she’s going to get a headache from the combined smell of cinnamon, WD-40, and candles that seemed to permeate the house the second she walked in. Only Mac and Bozer’s house would smell like a car repair shop that doubles as a bakery.

Today, not only are the porch lights conspicuously not on, and the house dead quiet aside from an insistent beeping, Bozer’s car isn’t in the driveway. There’s probably nothing wrong. Maybe Mac’s sleeping in and Bozer went to get something he forgot for the pastrami. Sometimes Riley overreacts to normal life events. Not everything is an international emergency. She wonders if it’s possible to ever really leave this life behind once you’re in it. Jack once told her soldiers never really come home, not all of them, whether they lose a limb or not. She wonders if the same is true of spies.

*You’re jumping at shadows.* But she knows, knows, something is wrong. Bozer is nothing if not methodical. He wouldn’t have forgotten an ingredient for his pastrami. Riley knocks on the door. “Hey guys, it’s me. Riley.” She doesn’t want to sound worried, but something about this whole situation screams disaster.

The door’s locked.

She dials Mac’s phone, it rings through to voicemail. So does Bozer’s. She pulls up her location tracking program while she walks around to the back deck. *Mac’s tether says he’s at the house.* She doesn’t recall getting an alert that anything was wrong.

As soon as she steps around the side of the house, she notices the smoke, drifting lazily from the deck. *Why would you have a fire going now?*

There’s a burnt smell, charred meat, and Riley freezes. That never means anything good, *good God don’t let this be something horrible.* She’s seen too many bomb sites and body disposals to not feel
sickened by the smell.

She pulls her gun and tucks it against her leg. Thanks to Jack's training, she always carries her duty weapon around with her, at least in the car, even when making social calls. She peeks around the corner of the porch and breathes a small sigh of relief when she sees the source of the smoke, the grill. *Maybe Bozer decided to let Mac cook, and Mac ruined the pastrami. Maybe that's why he went to town.*

But it doesn’t explain why Mac isn’t answering the door. Riley steps up onto the deck. *Everything says he’s home. So what’s wrong?*

There’s a very, very blackened pastrami in the grill. And beside it is Mac’s smashed phone and his ankle tether. Riley feels her stomach drop out as she dials Jack. *What the hell happened here?*

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**DECEMBER 23**

**THE FIRST ONE JACK HAS SPENT AT HOME IN FOUR YEARS**

It’s not that Jack doesn’t love Christmas. He does. But he feels like a combination of Ebenezer Scrooge and the Grinch when his phone starts blaring Metallica at seven-thirty in the morning, the day before Christmas Eve. *I took a week of vacation. What the hell?*

It’s Riley, he notices sleepily when he rolls over. *That’s weird.* His mind takes a moment to process the fact that Riley Davis is less of a morning person than he is and her getting up before noon on a holiday is extremely out of character.

“Hey, Ri, what’s goin’ on?”

“Jack, Mac’s missing. So’s Bozer. I went to the house and they were gone.” Jack feels suddenly cold, empty, numb. *What the hell?*

“Gone? What do you mean, gone?!” He’s scrambling out of bed now, grabbing for the clothes flung haphazardly in the corner. They were supposed to be thrown in the washer, they’re sweaty and filthy from working on the GTO yesterday, but it’s faster than hunting through the drawers. He jams the phone between his ear and shoulder as he pulls on his jeans.

“Like something out of “Left Behind”!” Riley says, and Jack can hear the strained panic in her voice. “Their phones are dead, going to voicemail. They’re right here, smashed. And Mac took off his tether. It’s right here too.”

“I’m on my way. It’s gonna be okay, Ri.” *No, no, nothing is okay. Something awful happened.* Something that would make Mac risk removing his ankle monitor. *He’s scared to death of what happens if he breaks the rules with that thing. Something’s gone really, really wrong.*

His phone begins beeping. Someone else is calling him. He glances at the caller ID; it’s Patty. “Ri, Patty’s calling. I gotta take it.” He hears Riley’s sharp intake of breath.

*No matter what, this isn’t gonna be good.* Whether Patty’s calling with a mission or information on what happened to Mac, shit is about to hit the fan.

He hangs up on Riley and answers Patty on the last ring. “Hey Patty, what’s up?” The forced cheerfulness hurts. *But if she doesn’t know Mac is in trouble, we should hold off telling her until we get a chance to look into it.*
Patty’s voice is clipped and cold. “Dalton. We have a serious problem. You need to get to the War Room. Now. Tell Agent Davis as well.” If she’s resorting to last names it’s bad. And she didn’t mention Mac at all.

“What’s this about?”

“MacGyver.” And then Patty hangs up, and Jack stands there and watches the room tilt. This can’t be happening. I must be dreaming. I have to wake up. But he doesn’t.

When he walks into the War Room, Patty’s there, her usually neat clothes rumpled, her hair down and loose. “What happened to Mac?”

“It’s more a question of what he’s done,” Patty says, and there’s a cold edge in her voice. Jack’s about to ask for more information when Riley rushes in, rig already open, nearly tripping over the carpet and a chair.

Patty stiffens and her voice goes crisp, like this is any other official briefing, but Jack can see the pain behind the ice in her dark eyes. “At 07:48 this morning, Technical Consultant Angus MacGyver broke into the Phoenix labs, stole enough chemicals and components to build a powerful IED, and disappeared.”

Jack flinches like someone’s jabbed him with a cattle prod. “No. No way. Mac would never do something like that.”

“Well, according to security cameras he did,” Riley says. “He swiped into the lab with his access card, took enough supplies and components from the disarmed bomb locker to make a bomb that could take down a ten story building, and split. It wasn’t until a tech noticed he wasn’t at a workstation that security was alerted; there aren’t too many people here today, with the holiday.” Jack has a moment of concern that they have something down there they call the “disarmed bomb locker”. I know we bring the damn things home with us sometimes, hell, we just did this week after Shanghai. But I guess I didn’t expect that they just went in a locker down there with the nerds.

“This doesn’t add up,” Jack says, rubbing the bridge of his nose. A headache’s coming on full force. “Mac’s trademark was creating bombs outta whatever he found lyin’ around. Hell, he still does it. So why would he break into a place he knew was under surveillance, to get stuff he prob’ly coulda whipped up himself?”

“Because he wanted to get caught.” Riley’s frozen the video, and is focusing on Mac’s left hand. “He slipped something onto a desk when he walked past it.” Sure enough, Jack can see a small, folded scrap of paper in Mac’s hand, that then disappears into a cloud of sticky notes papering the surface of a lab technician’s desk.

“Whose desk is that?” Jack asks.

“Jill Morgan, one of our forensics techs.” Riley’s zoomed in on the desk’s nameplate. “She’s in today.”

“Jack, call her. Now. Have her check her desk and bring us whatever she finds,” Patty says. “I want to know what’s going on.” She turns to Riley. “Start searching every available security camera in the area. Find out where he went once he left the Phoenix.”

Jack dials Jill’s extension from the Phoenix directory. It’s not often he has to call the labs. Usually that’s Riley’s department.

He’s surprised Jill is still here. Does she not have family she goes home to? When she answers, it’s
clear she already knows why he’s calling. “Agent Dalton, I didn’t see anything. I’m so sorry. I got caught in traffic on my way to work, and I was late. He was gone before I got here.”

“Hey, hey, it’s okay. No need to panic.” Jack says it even though he feels like screaming. This isn’t Mac. Why would he do that? Unless it has something to do with the reason Bozer’s missing too. He has to be being blackmailed. It’s the only explanation that makes sense. “Listen, we think he left something on your desk. A note. Somewhere on the right side of it.”

“Okay, okay, okay.” He can tell Jill’s barely holding it together. There’s a thud as she sets down the phone, and then the frantic shuffling of moving paper. “I’ve got it!” She gasps.

“Okay, bring it up to the War Room,” Jack says, then hangs up. He paces anxiously until there’s a clatter of shoes and an out-of-breath Jill, her blond hair messy and flying, her glasses slipping down her nose, practically crashes through the door.

Jill hands him the note. It’s scribbled on the envelope of a Christmas card addressed to Wilt Bozer, the handwriting shaky, and smudged in a few places with marks Jack learned a long time ago, from letters from home that came to the Sandbox, are tear stains.

*Jack, Riley, Thornton, I’m sorry. But if I don’t do this Bozer’s going to die. They said if I told anyone they’d kill him. I couldn’t think of any other way to let you know and keep him safe. I’m sorry.*

Jack feels like crying himself. *Oh buddy. Oh Mac. I’m so sorry you thought you had to do this by yourself.* Jack knows Mac wanted to follow their instructions to the letter, but still, Jack and Riley are the people you call when people tell you not to call the cops.

“I got him leaving Phoenix,” Riley says suddenly. “Someone’s phone caught a picture of him two blocks down, getting into a vehicle with the duffle he put the bomb components in. It looks like he’s still got Bozer’s car. We can track it using security cameras,” Riley says.


“What’s going to happen to him?” Jill asks, and Jack knows exactly what the young woman is afraid of. Jill watched Mac get taken back to prison once already.

“We’re going to find him, and we’re going to fix this.” Jack sighs. “While we still can.” What happens if that bomb gets out of Mac’s hands, if someone uses it, doesn’t bear thinking about. *We’ll never see him again.* Jack doesn’t think even Patty will be able to save him then. *If another bomb he’s connected to kills someone, he’s never getting out.* But Jack already knows Mac has no intention of going back inside. *If we don’t stop this, he’s going to run. And he’s either going to spend the rest of his life hiding or get himself killed.*

**LOS ANGELES**

**THE TRAFFIC IS APPARENTLY EXEMPT FROM THE CHRISTMAS SPIRIT**

Mac hasn’t driven in two years. He’d be nervous and on edge anyway, but the bag beside him makes him feel like his heart’s going to beat right out of his chest. He’s terrified of getting pulled over by the cops who are frustrated about having to deal with increased holiday traffic and liable to attack the slightest infraction. *So much for good will and peace on earth.*

LA is a nightmare to drive in around the holidays, with people traveling to and from the airport, doing last minute shopping, or traveling to relatives’ houses. Everyone’s in a hurry.
Trying to actually obey the rules earns him the angry blast of a semi horn, three cab drivers yelling out their windows, and the middle finger from three middle-aged soccer moms, a guy in a suit, the driver of a plumbing van, and one Santa Claus in a black Chevy Cruze.

He doesn’t want to get run into either. Because that will mean he has to stop, because he can’t just leave the scene of the crash. And when cops show up, they’ll find the bag, they’ll know he doesn’t even have a license, and he’ll get locked up again.

The roads are a clogged mess and he’s afraid even if he’s careful and doesn’t get pulled over, or in an accident, he’ll be late. The dash clock is moving closer and closer to 9 am, and if he doesn’t make it to the rendezvous point by then, he’ll more than likely get there only to find Bozer’s body on the side of the road with a bullet in his head.

He doesn’t know how today went to hell so fast. One minute he was helping Bozer adjust the grill (Mac was working on tweaking it so it would cook the pastrami faster; they bought an extra chunk of meat to test it so they didn’t ruin the real one tomorrow for the party) and the next minute Bozer was being dragged backward with a gun to his head, and Mac couldn’t think of any way to get him free without getting him shot.

He can’t believe his job put Bozer in danger again. Except this time it wasn’t his work for the Phoenix that had armed goons showing up in his house. It was his past as the Phoenix. Gavin Richards had been one of the people whose plans Mac had thwarted a dozen times over, and apparently there was something about his expertise the man had come to appreciate. I wish bad guys would stop being impressed with me.

All of which is the reason he’s currently driving Bozer’s car through LA Christmas traffic with the makings of a bomb in the passenger seat. Richards wants to exchange the bomb for Bozer. 9 am, at the park where his old cartel, the Cinco, used to make their deals. Mac knows the place well. He’s the reason the Cinco stopped using that location for drops. Mostly because he’s the reason three of their top lieutenants got arrested, and flipped on the whole cartel. When Mac pulls up to the park with three minutes to spare, there’s a van parked half off the road, next to a few trees. Mac doesn’t see anyone else around. Not even a single homeless person, and the park is usually home to at least a few. Richards probably chased everyone away.

He grabs the duffle; it feels so much heavier than it should. I don’t want to give them this. But he doesn’t have a choice. Not if he wants Bozer to live. I can’t tell Deja her only living sibling is gone because of me. Especially not at Christmas. She’s lost too much already. Their dad, their little brother, their mom. I won’t let her lose Boze.

The van door slides open, and Richards steps out. “Hand it over, Angus.”

“Not until you hand over my friend.” Mac’s scared to death. But he’s at least got some control over his voice and the shaking his hands want to be doing right now. A few sessions of interrogation training with Cage are starting to pay off. He’s nowhere near the expert negotiator the Aussie agent is, but he’s getting the idea of sticking to a firm demand and forcing follow-through.

“You have something they want, or they wouldn’t come to you. Make sure you remember how valuable what you have is to them.”

“I could just shoot you and take that bag off your body. But I’m feeling the spirit of the season. Never let it be said Gavin Richards was a Scrooge. I’m in the giving mood today.” The man raises his hand, and two goons step to the door of the van with Bozer. He’s bound and gagged, but in one piece. For now.
“Hand it over, and we can all go on about our days.” Richards holds out his hand. Mac holds out the duffle, eyes on Bozer. Richards snatches the strap and jumps back up into the van. “Here’s your friend back, Angus, I’ve even gift wrapped him for you!” He says, as the tires spin, the two other men shove Bozer out the door, and the van disappears in a cloud of dirt and exhaust fumes.

Mac rushes to Bozer, who’s rolling across the asphalt, unable to stop himself with his hands and feet tied. Mac crashes to his knees beside him, barely feeling the roadside gravel tear through his jeans.

He tugs the gag off Boze’s mouth, but Boze doesn’t stop gasping and sputtering. Did he fall hard enough to crack a rib? Did he puncture a lung? And then Mac sees the cable around Bozer’s neck, cutting into the skin.

He rolls Boze over. There’s a little box at the back of his neck, with some kind of mechanism winding the cable in slowly. And to top it all off Mac can hear sirens in the distance. Richards wasn’t content with setting me up with the bomb. Now he’s going to get me accused of murdering my best friend.

He pries at the box with the flat of his knife blade, but whatever it’s made out of is too tough to break through. He’s going to choke to death in minutes if I don’t figure this out. Mac’s brain is going haywire, too much happening at once. The sirens are making it so hard to think. He drops his knife and tugs at the cable, like Bozer’s already doing. It doesn’t do any good.

Boze’s eyes are wide with panic, his lips turning purple. He’s staring at Mac in absolute terror, and maybe he can’t talk but his entire expression is begging for help.

What do I do? Mac wants to curl up in a ball and scream and cry, but he can’t. He has to fix this.

He looks down and sees his knife in the grass. Grandpa always said it had everything I ever needed to get out of any situation. He picks it up and quickly does a mental rundown of the tools it contains. Blade, can opener, corkscrew, saw, scissors... Scissors. He just needs enough leverage.

There’s a long, thin piece of metal lying by the side of the road, part of a sign that no one bothered to pick up. And he has some wire in his jacket pocket…

Mac’s fingers are flying now. He attaches the metal piece to the handle of the knife, braces the other side of the scissors against a rock, slips them under the cable, which is now leaving thin streaks of blood dripping down Bozer’s neck, and shoves down.

For a minute it doesn’t feel like it’s going to work. And then there’s a snap, Mac nearly falls from the suddenly released pressure on the metal bar, and Boze collapses forward, hands going to his neck, sucking in gasping, greedy breaths. Mac crumples beside him, lying on his back in the grass, shaking. And then the whine of the sirens gets louder.

“Boze, we have to go.” He slips his shoulder under Bozer’s arm and helps him to his feet, both of them staggering toward the vehicle. Mac shoves Boze into the backseat and then gets in, driving away in the opposite direction of the sirens.

I saved him. But I have nowhere left to go. He wants to cry or scream, because he did the right thing, the right thing, he saved Bozer’s life, but the Phoenix will never want him back.

I’ve messed up too many times already. He’s breathing too fast, he can feel the panic attack coming on. His hands and legs are shaking and he can’t stop thinking about it and he knows what will happen and he should have thought of this. I tried to do the right thing and I’m going to get punished for it. Just like always. I can’t catch a break. I never do. I wish I could go back in time. I wish I could
have been paying more attention so they didn’t take Bozer. I wish I would have told someone, let them help. I wish...I wish...I want to go back, I want to fix this, I can’t I can’t I can’t…

He’s so scared and there’s nothing he can do but run away. He wants to go home. He wants to go home and hide and never come out from under his bed again ever. He can’t do this. He’s been given second chance after second chance and he keeps blowing them. Eventually everyone’s going to get tired of dealing with him. They’re going to decide he’s too much work. That he makes too many messes, he breaks too many things, he’s just trouble.

He’s shaking and he wants to fix this but there’s nothing to fix. He can’t put this back together with duct tape and hope. This is really, really bad. This is like the time he smashed the side mirror on the Bozers’ car when Wilt let him drive home from school. He ran into the side of the garage door and the mirror broke so badly it was hanging off the car by the power cord, and there was a huge scrape on the whole passenger side.

He’d been scared to tell Mama Bozer. She cried or yelled about everything then, it was two months after they lost Jerry and she was drinking nonstop. He tried putting the mirror back together with duct tape but it wouldn’t bend out properly and it was an absolute wreck, and he knew she’d see and he didn’t want her to blame Boze or Deja. He’d had to tell her, and promised to pay for it himself.

He’d cried, Mama Bozer just sort of stared and then kept drinking, and then he took the car to Weathers’s because it was the only place he could think to go. He remembers standing there in the office and twisting the key lanyard in his hand, trying to explain the problem. He was trying not to cry but he knows he was, because everything was a mess after Jerry and Grandpa and Dad. And Dan Weathers just sat there in his beat up chair and then he shook Mac’s hand and said they had a man’s deal. And he showed Mac how to fix the car himself; the first one he learned, and then offered him a job on the spot because he said he wanted a kid that honest working for him.

He thought that was bad. This is worse.

He parks the car in a secluded spot near the park where he knows no cameras will catch it, hotwires a sedan in a nearby parking lot, and drives back. Bozer’s still dazed-looking and wobbly. Mac helps him into the new car and they drive off.

The Phoenix trained him to disappear. I hope they trained me well enough to run from them. Part of him desperately wanted Jack and Riley to figure this out. To realize something was wrong, to track him down somehow. He didn’t try all that hard to go unnoticed, and while part of that was his panicking rushing to finish the job, part of it was a vague, desperate hope that somehow Jack and Riley would put the pieces together and come save the day. I wasn’t sure if I wanted them to show up or not. He knows he was supposed to come alone, and maybe if they’d been here Richards would have just shot Boze, but maybe Jack and Riley could have helped. Maybe they would have been able to find a way to fix all this. But it's too late now.

“Mac?” Boze is sitting up in the back seat, staring at him, wide-eyed. His voice is broken, raspy from being choked.

“It’s okay. You’re safe.” Mac doesn’t know what else to say. What’s going to happen to Bozer? Is he going to get in trouble too? Mac doesn’t think they can accuse Boze of anything, but what if someone uses him to try to get to Mac? I don’t trust some of the agencies not to sink to that. Not when they think they’re hunting a cold-blooded terrorist. They might decide Bozer’s an accessory to it. But the longer Bozer’s with him, the worse this looks.

He pulls over on a deserted side street to get a better look at Boze’s injuries. The cuts on his neck, while they're bleeding pretty heavily, are superficial. His arms and legs are covered in cuts and
scrapes from rolling across the road. But the most concerning things are his left ankle and his very evident concussion. His ankle is swelling badly above his tennis shoe, and when Mac tries to feel it for breaks, Boze hisses and jerks away automatically.

“We’ll need to get that looked at.” Mac’s starting to shake again. “I’m going to drop you off at a hospital.” Hopefully they’ll leave him alone. He’s not safe with me. Maybe Thornton will find a way to protect him, if she doesn’t hate me for what I did. “As soon as you get a chance, you need to call this number. Tell them who you are and what happened, and they should help you.” He scribbles Thornton’s extension on Bozer’s arm with the pen he pulls out of the glove compartment.

“So you can run off and I never see you again?” Boze asks. “Hell no. Mac, I can’t lose you again. I’m not going anywhere. Unless you want to tie me up and throw me out of another moving vehicle today.”

Mac sighs. I don’t deserve him. I don’t deserve a friend like this. “Boze, you know we’re never going to be able to stop running, don’t you?”

Bozer nods. Mac can see fear and determination mixing on his face. “I’m ready for it. Knew reading all those dystopian adventure novels was gonna come in handy someday. Just thought it would be a movie, not my real life.” He leans back against the seat. “I trust you. Let’s go.”

Mac wants nothing more than to get out of town. But he’s more worried about Bozer’s injuries than he let on. His ankle shouldn’t be that swollen, and he can’t tell if Bozer’s disorientation and dizziness is just the concussion or a symptom of lack of oxygen. What if that cable damaged his throat, and it swells later, and he can’t breathe again? And they’re close to a place he knows can do a better job helping with that than he can. If we weren’t so close, I wouldn’t stop. But we need some help.

Riley feels absolutely numb. This can’t be happening. She directs Jack at every turn Mac’s taken, watching the trail of security and traffic cams on her rig. But she feels mechanical, like she’s just the voice of an onboard navigation system.

She doesn’t think this is ever going to change. Anytime something goes wrong, on a mission or in normal life, Riley gets this strange disconnect, like she’s watching someone else’s life play out in a movie, watching the plot twist that makes everything fall apart. It doesn’t feel real.

By the time they reach the place the car disappeared from cams, there are two police cars on scene. Jack hands Riley the ID from the car that says she’s an LAPD detective, Sarah Hayes. He grabs his own, and the badge that goes with it, both labeled for a Frank Austin.

The two of them walk up to the police cars. “What are we looking at?” Jack asks immediately. “My partner and I are here on a kidnapping case and we trailed our perps here.”

“We’ve found evidence that someone was dropped off here,” one of the officers says. “There’s some blood on the pavement, and we found these.” He holds up an evidence bag containing some sort of cable and box contraption, covered in blood, and another that holds some scraps of cloth that Riley thinks look an awful lot like parts of Bozer’s “Kiss the Cook” apron.

“Awesome. Tag ’em and bag ’em, Hayes.”

“I’m sorry, we can’t just hand this evidence over,” the officer says. “Orders come from HQ. We’re dealing with possible terrorism. Nothing goes anywhere until it’s logged for that case.” Riley feels the blood draining out of her face. Someone set Mac up really good. Probably made a call about seeing him here making the exchange.
“OK, I ain’t gonna squabble with HQ over that.” Jack probably doesn’t want to risk shattering their flimsy covers. If this guy decides we’re a problem, he’s going to start asking about us, and find out we aren’t who we say we are. “Can we at least look the scene over?”

“Sure. But if you find something, it’s ours first.” Jack nods.

Riley immediately starts walking back toward where tire tracks are clearly visible pulling off the shoulder, where the first few scuffs of drying blood are marking the pavement. And then she sees it, half buried in the gravel. She reaches down and a broken keychain charm is dangling from her fingers. A small black and white clapperboard, the kind used on film sets.

Riley recognizes the little clapper board keychain. This is Bozer’s. He was here. But we’re too late. She glances back at the officers. They’re still doing something down where they found that awful cable thing. She doesn’t think she wants to know what it was.

She slips the keychain into her pocket, then walks back to Jack. “Hey Austin, I think we’re better off heading back to the station and taking another look at our files on this one, at least till HQ hands over what they’ve got.”

Jack follows her back to the car. As soon as they’re inside, Riley pulls up her rig. “It looks like they’ve made the exchange. I found part of Bozer’s keychain; it looks like he’s the one who was tossed out of a vehicle back there.”

“And those cops found his car. Parked up the road a little way.”

“No wonder we lost it here.” Riley pulls up her rig. “They could be driving anything now.” She pulls Mac and Bozer’s pictures from the Phoenix databases and starts running them through her facial rec software. It’s a long shot, but it’s all they can do now.

This is falling apart. Now that bomb is somewhere out there, and if it’s used Mac’s going to be implicated. Riley’s running a background program looking for the other vehicle that was at the scene, syncing all that data to the War Room computers, but that’s not her focus right now. She just wants to find Mac. And then her computer pings.

“I’ve got them. They’re in a little Puerto Rican neighborhood; just went into a local clinic.” It’s not too far away. She can see that Bozer’s leaning heavily on Mac. At least they’re both still alive. She quickly searches for the clinic in the Phoenix database “It’s run by a former Army medic, Carlos Rivera, some nonprofit outfit.”

Jack guns the car, weaving in and out of traffic. Riley doesn’t even flinch. I hope we get there in time. Because she has the feeling that once Mac leaves that clinic, he’s going to vanish. We taught him the basics of how to deal with a field op gone wrong, what happens if we get disavowed. They taught him how to avoid being caught by authorities anywhere. And yes, we might know some things he might do, be able to predict some movements, but this isn’t like a normal agent disappearing. He doesn’t just know our tricks, he has his own. Mac was a vigilante in this city for almost four years. He knows every inch of it. He knows how to avoid camera, cops, everything.

If they lose Mac now they might never get him back. And Riley can’t imagine that future. It’s like the blankfaced Ghost of Christmas Yet To Come from A Christmas Carol, pointing at the gravestone that tells Scrooge he dies alone and unloved. She used to hide her head under a blanket at that part every time she and Mom watched The Muppet Christmas Carol. She just watched it with Sam two days ago, and it still gave her the creeps.

I want to wake up, like Scrooge, and be able to fix the future I’m seeing. But she already knows no
Christmas miracle is going to do that for her. *We don’t get a do-over of today.* But maybe they still have the chance to make this right. Maybe it’s not too late to give up praying for some kind of miracle.

Bozer’s not sure if it’s oxygen deprivation or if reality hasn’t set in yet. *We’re fugitives from the law. Shouldn’t that be scarier?* But at the moment he can only focus on the stabbing ache in his ankle and the burn of road rash on his arms and legs and shoulders. *Does this actually happen in real life? Are we actually going to be running from the police? From everyone?*

And then the door’s opening and Mac’s pulling him out. They hurry to the back of a small building with a mural of a psychedelically colored orchid on the side. Mac shoves open a window after prying the latch loose with his knife, and Boze can feel Mac shaking as he helps him slide through the opening.

They’re inside what looks like a doctor’s office exam room. Mac helps Bozer onto the paper-covered table and goes to the door. “Just stay here, okay?” *Where do you think I’m going on a busted ankle?*

Boze glances around the room. There’s an eye chart and a list of flu symptoms in Spanish, a couple photographs of somewhere with sandy beaches, the usual small sink and jars of cotton balls and tongue depressors. The light feels too bright, like it’s stabbing his eyes. He closes them and leans back on the table, wincing at the pressure on the bruises and scrapes on his back.

Then the door opens and he sits up fast. Too fast. His head spins, his stomach churns, and he covers his mouth with his hand. And then someone’s shoving a trash can under his chin, and he’s grateful for it. There wasn’t all that much in his stomach, but he can’t keep it down.

Finally, he stops retching, his head aching even worse, the taste in his mouth revolting, the pain in his throat a knife. He wipes his face on his sleeve and looks apologetically toward the person he almost barfed on. A pair of kindly brown eyes meet his. From behind the guy, Mac speaks up. His voice sounds like it’s coming through water.

“Boze, this is Carlos. We can trust him.”

The name sounds familiar. But Bozer’s too tired and achy and dizzy to process why.

“Wilt, I’m a good friend of Mac’s. I’m gonna take a look at you, okay? Make sure nothing’s really wrong.” Carlos’s voice is soothing, which is a relief. Bozer already feels a little calmer. “Mac said your ankle’s probably broken, and that you have a concussion. I’m going to agree on the concussion front. And you’ve got some nasty scrapes I’d like to disinfect while we’re at it.”

“I’m sorry about your trash can,” Bozer mutters, then stops, because talking *hurts.*

“Don’t worry about it. Earlier this morning a kid with the stomach flu ruined my shoes.” Carlos chuckles warmly. “You might want to lie back.” Bozer does.

Carlos shines a light into his eyes, and Boze thinks if there was anything left in his stomach it would be coming back now. He moves on to feel the damage to Bozer’s neck. “I’m not at all sure there isn’t trauma to the trachea that’s not visible.” His voice is gently concerned. “I’d feel much better if he were in a hospital where someone could be monitoring this more closely.”

“We can’t go to one.” Mac has his eyes down, kicking at the floor. “I’m in trouble again.”

“I figured as much, when you came asking for my help. I have to admit, I was hoping it was a social call to a friend for the holidays.” Carlos’s gentle manner is relaxing. Which is good because reality is
starting to kick in, and Bozer feels like he’s just downed three espresso shots. *Just like the night before our final film class projects were due.*

*We’re actually running. We’re hiding from the police, asking one of Mac’s friends from his vigilante days for help.* Bozer finally remembers where he knows Carlos’s name from. *How did Mac do this for years?* Bozer used to beg to go with Mac on his nightly adventures. *It sounded fun. But it was probably a lot more like this.*

Bozer doesn’t know how Mac did it. *He had to be in this much pain or more so often. And he hid it from almost everyone.* He remembers standing guard at the bathroom door while Mac washed out wounds, helping him wrap his right wrist when he sprained it badly, using up all the ‘Ivory 10’ shade of his stage makeup hiding the bruises on Mac’s face. *He was hurt more often than he wasn’t.* And somehow, through all of it, Mac kept going.

Bozer’s dragged back to the present by a sharp pain in his ankle. He barely bites down on a scream, biting his tongue instead, and tasting blood. Somehow that almost hurts worse than his ankle.

“It’s actually probably just a nasty sprain,” Carlos says. “It’s gonna hurt like hell and I’m going to have to wrap it, but I don’t think anything’s broken. And all that blood is just road rash.”

Mac sighs, and Bozer can almost read his expression. *He’s so rattled.* Mac is panicking, and Boze would guess it’s equal parts that Mac was worried about him, and that now Mac’s more than likely a wanted fugitive. Again.

“Thank you, Carlos.”

“Listen, Mac, I really don’t feel comfortable with this being a wrap and run. His neck’s got some pretty severe bruising. There could be a hematoma forming, and if it puts pressure on an already damaged trachea…”

“How long until we know for sure?”

“I’d like to watch him overnight if you can’t go to a hospital.”

Mac sighs shakily. “Okay. We’ll stay.”

As much as Bozer hates it, he knows he has to say something. *Mac can’t hang around town. He has to go now, while he might still have a head start on the cops. He doesn’t stand a chance of making it out when the streets are crawling with them.*

He forces his burning throat into action. “Mac, you have to go.” He sounds croaky and weak to his own ears.

“I’m not leaving you. I got you into this mess. I have to make sure you survive it.” Mac sits down on the end of the exam table as if he’s the one whose leg will give out under him.

“I’ll go get a brace for that ankle,” Carlos says, stepping out.

Bozer sits up a little, ignoring the returning dizziness and the way the room starts to spin. “Mac, you gotta stop doing stuff like this for me.”

“Boze, you’re my best friend. What else was I supposed to do, let you die?”

“What’s gonna happen to me if you go back to prison, Mac? You think that wouldn’t kill me?” Bozer reaches for his arm. “I don’t want to live in a world where my best friend is thrown into a hell
on earth because of what he tried to do for me.” To think of that being Mac’s fate for the rest of his life, and Bozer being the reason for it, is unbearable.

“And I couldn’t imagine a life worse than one where you died because of me.” Mac starts to shake like he’s cold. Bozer forces himself fully upright and wraps an arm around his friend’s shoulders. Mac’s breath hitches and he shudders, turning and leaning into Boze’s shoulder. Bozer pulls him close and lets him cry. *It isn’t fair. Mac deserves so much, and life keeps breaking him.*

Carlos is standing at the door when Bozer looks up. He’s not sure how long the man’s been there. Mac must feel the change in Boze’s posture, because he looks up as well and quickly sits up straight, brushing away his tears with the back of his hand.

Carlos carefully wraps Bozer’s ankle. Mac starts to get down from the table, but Carlos stops him with a firm hand on his shoulder.

“Oh no you don’t. Not until I get a look at those hands and knees.” Bozer realizes Mac’s hands are bloody, and it’s actually not Bozer’s blood. There are raw cuts where he must have been pulling on the cable around Boze’s neck. And his knees are skinned up the way they were when he got pushed around in middle school.

*Typical, he’s hurt but he’s trying to hide it, trying to deflect everyone’s worry onto someone else.* Actually, knowing Mac, he probably didn’t realize he was hurt. *He has such a ridiculously high pain tolerance.*

“I’m okay.” Mac tries to push away Carlos’s hands and hisses when it probably stings the cuts on his hands.

“If I had a dollar for every time you said that, I’d be able to buy a house in the Hills,” Carlos chuckles. “I know you too well to let you get away with that one. Now sit still.”

Despite the pain and worry, Bozer smiles, just a little. *At least someone knows how to handle Mac. At least someone is going to take care of him.* It’s not really just them against the world. And for some reason, having just one person who still wants to help them makes Bozer feel a whole lot less scared. *Maybe we will be okay after all.*

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**CARLOS RIVERA’S CLINIC**

**FREE TO THE PUBLIC...AND THE OCCASIONAL VIGILANTE**

Jack parks the GTO in the lot of the little clinic Riley tracked Mac and Bozer to. It’s in a shabby neighborhood, but a lot of the walls have murals painted on them and the clinic looks surprisingly new.

He opens the front door and a bell tinkles. There are a few people in the small waiting room, a couple with a baby, and a kid holding an icepack to his nose. Jack walks up to the desk secretary, a petite woman with the name Kamila embroidered on her scrubs.

“Good morning. I’m looking for a friend of mine, Angus MacGyver?”

“I’m sorry. No one by that name is here.” But there’s a nervous tremble in the woman’s voice.

“I promise, we don’t want to hurt him. We’re his friends.” And then the door to the back offices opens and a man in a white coat and blue scrubs enters the waiting room. *Must be Dr. Rivera.*
“Can I help you two?”

“Yes. We’re looking for two people. Angus MacGyver and Wilt Bozer.” Jack nods to Riley, and she pulls up the pictures on her tablet. “I promise, we’re not with the police. We’re his friends.”

“I haven’t seen them.” Carlos glances at the floor. *I don’t have to be Sam to know this guy’s lying.*

“Listen, we saw them going into your building on security cameras. I swear we’re here to help, but we can’t do that if you won’t tell us where they are!” Jack knows he’s getting too loud but he can’t help it. *Mac’s probably scared to death and beating himself up for this. The faster we get him back and let him know we aren’t mad, the better off he’s gonna be.* Jack’s seen the kid’s downward spirals. They aren’t good. Not at all.

And then there’s a muffled exclamation from somewhere in the back. “Jack?”

“Mac?”

Jack’s a little shocked when the kid walks out of the door. Mac looks defeated and exhausted. “Carlos, it’s okay, they are my friends.” Mac’s eyes are suspiciously red and his cheeks look damp. “Jack, Riley, what are you doing here?”

“Looking for you, genius,” Jack says gently. “We were worried.”

“You’re really not here to arrest me?” Mac whispers, and the disbelief in his eyes cuts Jack to the quick.

“No. We’re here to help you. Is Bozer okay?”

“Kind of. He almost died,” Mac whispers, and Jack can tell the kid’s about to break down. “He seems okay but Carlos didn’t want him to leave yet in case something gets bad.” Mac sniffs. “I couldn’t leave him. I couldn’t run away.”

“Hey, Dr. Rivera, is it okay if we go talk in the back?” The people in the waiting room are starting to stare. *We don’t need to draw more attention.*

“Of course.”

Mac pulls them down the hall to one of the exam rooms. He leans against the wall, shaking, and Jack aches to hold the kid tight but he’s not sure how bad a place Mac’s in right now and he doesn’t want to set him off. “I’m so sorry. I was just so scared. I didn’t know what to do. I didn’t want to hurt any of you. Thornton’s going to get rid of me, isn’t she?” *Oh kid. How many times do we have to explain that no matter what you do, you’re family and we all love you?*

“Hey, hey, it’s okay. We’re gonna fix this. We got your note. No one at the Phoenix is mad at you. We just wish you’d asked us for help before it got this bad.”

“They told me if I talked to anyone else they’d kill Boze.” Mac shivers. “They gave me two hours to get their components and hand them over. I did the only thing I could think of.” He takes a shaky breath. “I wanted you to know I wasn’t just turning on you.”

“I’m sorry we didn’t get your message soon enough. I’m sorry we didn’t come in time.” Jack can feel the guilt gnawing his stomach. *We didn’t figure it out in time. We failed him. Again.*

“But the police are still looking for me,” Mac whispers.
“Yeah, we know. But we didn’t call them. Patty’s keeping this in-house as long as she can.” Jack sighs. “But Mac, what the hell’s going on here? Who took Bozer?”

Mac sits down heavily on the exam table. “His name is Gavin Richards. He was a cartel hitman, until I took down the cartel he worked for. He went freelance and now he’s taking jobs for any cartel who will pay his asking price.” Mac sighs. “His specialty is getting other people to do his dirty work for him. Blackmail, threats, kidnapping, whatever it takes. He gets away clean and someone else takes the fall. It’s the only way he’s avoided arrest for so long.” Mac glances at Jack. “He especially likes to settle old scores that way. He sets up someone he has a grudge against to take the fall, and he gets paid for the job. Kills two birds with one stone.”

“No surprise that he didn’t like you.” Jack says.

“And now they have the bomb.” Riley says. “Mac, it’s okay. We’ll find them.”

“It won’t work.” Mac whispers. “I couldn’t give them a live bomb, so I rewired the detonator. They have a slightly dangerous paperweight.” He sighs. “But that won’t help me when the bomb squad finds it. My fingerprints are all over it from disarming it.”

“Then we just have to find it first.” Jack’s got something to do now. He likes that. We just have to find the bomb and find a way to implicate Richards.

Riley looks up from her rig. “Turns out all that time I spent hacking the multiple levels of the LAPD paid off. I found the case file that those officers at the drop scene were talking about. It looks like there was an anonymous tip called in about seeing someone matching Mac’s description handing over a bag of what looked like wires and blocks of something to a person in a white car.”

“That’s wrong,” Mac whispers. “Richards called that tip in. It was a blue van.”

Jack’s struggling to keep up with what’s happening now. We know Mac broke into the Phoenix labs. The cops know he handed over something suspicious to someone. And they’re probably gonna get Bozer’s DNA from the blood there was on-scene. He glances at Mac’s scraped knees and bandaged palms. Maybe Mac’s too. And his will definitely be on file. If they don’t get this fixed fast, Mac’s going to be right back where he was two years ago.

“Well, at least that gives me something to look for.” Riley pulls up her rig.

“He’s too smart to keep the van. He’ll have ditched it.” Mac mutters.

“Yes, but he drove to the meet in it. Maybe we won’t get to see where he’s going, but we might be able to find out where he’s been.”

Jack nods. “When you’ve got something, Ri, we’ll hit the road.” He pulls his gun and checks the clip. Full, and there’s two extras in the car. He knows he really shouldn’t want to just kill these guys, but he wants to for what they did to Mac. “Mac, is it safe for you to stay here?”

“Carlos won’t turn me in.” Right, isn’t that the guy he said used to help him when he was a vigilante? Jack thought that name was familiar.

“Then you and Boze stay put here until we come back for you, okay?” Jack doesn’t want to risk Mac getting caught before they have chance to get Richards into custody. If we have a big fish like him, hopefully Patty will be able to do something to help get Mac off the hook.

“What’s going on? Mac?” Jack jumps at the voice from behind him. Bozer’s leaning on the doorframe, a slightly loopy look on his face and one ankle in a boot brace. “How did they find us?”
Boze looks like he’s ready to fight Jack and Riley both.

“They’re gonna help. Or at least they’re gonna try,” Mac says quietly.

Bozer stares at Jack. “Who are you people? You’re not a defense lawyer.” Jack’s suddenly, painfully aware of the gun in his hand. Oh shit. They’ve done such a good job keeping the secret from Bozer, and now… “Mac?”

Mac slumps even further, curling into himself in shame and guilt. “Boze, please…”

“Mac, why does he have a gun? If they aren’t your lawyers, what were they doing coming to the house?” The guy’s none to steady on his feet as it is, and Jack thinks Boze just might pass out if he keeps working himself up like this.

Riley sets down her rig. “Bozer, I promise we’ll explain everything when we have the time. But right now we’re trying to help Mac.”

“You say that, but you’ve been lying to me this whole time! How can I trust you?” Bozer’s yelling now. “How do I know you’re not working with that psycho?”

“If we were, I’d have shot you by now!” Jack snaps back. Bozer stumbles back a little, eyes wide. Damn, that came out too harsh.

“I should have known something was wrong a long time ago!” Bozer yells. “I should have known when they didn’t stop coming after you got sent back to prison. And when they let you go after that girl in Mission City. Mac, what the hell are you mixed up in?”

“Bozer, I can’t tell you.” Mac looks like he’s about to cry. This day’s going from bad to worse for him. Mac’s been accused of terrorism (again), gotten blackmailed, is on the run from the cops, and now his oldest and best friend is angry with him for lying to him. What a giant fucking disaster.

Mac just wants to go to sleep for a hundred years and wake up and all of this to be over. He thought there was no possible way for today to get worse. And now Bozer’s angry and scared and Mac couldn’t even manage to keep his job a secret. If they didn’t want me gone already, they will now. I screwed up. I screwed up so badly.

“What the hell do you mean you can’t tell me?” Boze snaps, his half-wrecked voice echoing in the small room. “You’ve never kept secrets from me!”

“Mac didn’t tell you because he couldn’t.” Jack says. “He works for a covert government agency. The think tank is a cover.”

“And I’m Martian.” Bozer retorts.

“No. Really. Boze, I know it sounds crazy, but that’s the truth.” Mac figures there’s no point in lying anymore. What did Grandpa Harry always say when I lied to him? ‘Oh what a tangled web we weave, when first we practice to deceive.’ And now it’s all unraveling. Bozer pulled on the wrong thread. “That’s why I’m always gone.”

“That’s why you come home hurt!” Bozer yells. “And I was afraid you were trying to be a vigilante again! This is worse, Mac, this is worse!”

“Bozer, I wanted to tell you. But it’s technically illegal.”
“So was being a vigilante! You told me about that!”

“If I told you about this my boss could have had me sent back to prison!” Mac says. *This wasn’t just about being a do-gooder. This was about national security and laws that are a hundred pages long, and prisons they don’t tell you exist.*

“A lot of good that did, you got sent back anyway!”

“It wasn’t what it looked like…” Mac trails off, aware that now he’s the one pulling on that wrong thread. He stops and puts his head in his hands.

“You said it was a prank gone wrong! That someone at the think tank…” Now it’s Bozer’s turn to trail off. “Oh my God. No, please tell me that wasn’t-”

“I’ve got a hit,” Riley says suddenly. Mac almost forgot the team was in the room. *They must be so uncomfortable right now.* Riley’s probably trying to break the tension, keep this from exploding. Mac feels like he’s dead center of one of his own improvised bombs, one that’s seconds away from going up in smoke.

“Okay, let’s go.” Jack steps for the door, but Bozer blocks him, despite the fact that he’s swaying on his feet and looking considerably exhausted.

“Wait. Just answer me one thing, Jack, or whatever your name really is.”

“It’s Jack. Jack Dalton.”

“I don’t care!” Boze snaps. “What I want to know is, did you people send Mac back to prison on purpose?”

Jack looks like someone’s shot him. *And there it goes.* Mac can’t stop the sob that rips through him. His whole world is falling to ashes all around him. *I burned all my bridges with the Phoenix, I stole from them and now I gave away their secret. And now Bozer’s angry at my team, who aren’t even my team anymore.* He has no one and nothing left. *Maybe I should just turn myself in. There’s no point in running now.* He would have gone with Bozer, they could have made it together. But Mac doesn’t want to run alone. It’s not worth it. *I ruined everything.*

Riley whispers chokingly, “Bozer, we didn’t have a choice-”

“That’s bullshit!” Bozer’s actually screaming now. “We don’t want your help! You stay away from us!” Bozer’s probably somewhere between ready to hit someone and breaking down sobbing. “Do you know what you did to him? Don’t fucking touch him!”

“We never meant for him to get hurt-” Riley half-whispers. Mac can tell she’s on the verge of crying too.

“Of course not! Because you sit behind a desk and you don’t have to know what it’s like for people like us in the real world. You have your ivory towers and government paychecks and get out of jail free cards, and you don’t get it!” Bozer’s gasping for air now. “You get in trouble and you just call that scary boss of yours and she makes it go away for you! But you didn’t help Mac!”

“Boze, they’re telling the truth,” Mac chokes out. “Please, just listen to me-”

“No! Mac, tell me you don’t believe them. All they’ve done is hurt you!” Boze is crying, tears rolling down his bruised cheeks. “How can you still even look at them after what they did to you? I can’t believe I let these people into our house, I let them eat with us, I thought they were our friends. I
can’t believe this. I trusted them, I thought they were helping you!”

“They are.”

“No. No, Mac, they’re using you. I can’t watch this. I can’t. Please, Mac, don’t listen to them.”

“Bozer, you’re wrong.”

“Mac, can’t you see?” Bozer’s voice shudders to a halt. “They don’t fucking care. All they care about is catching their next bad guy. I care about you. Choose a side.” He turns and hobbles away.

Mac feels like someone ripped out every bone in his body. He sits on the exam table in shock. Riley’s stopped typing, Jack is gripping his gun with white knuckles. It’s suddenly horribly silent. And then Mac starts to sob. He can’t stop it now; this day has been absolutely wretched and he feels lower than dirt. I betrayed my team, I stole from my job, I helped a killer, and I lied to my friend. No one who tells Mac he’s a good person is right. He slides to the floor, pulling his knees to his chest, wrapping his arms around them, and rocking slowly back and forth. I ruined everything. I’m ruined. No one should care about me, I don’t deserve it.

He feels warmth surrounding him, and slowly realizes Jack and Riley are sitting beside him, each one with an arm around him.

“You should go get Richards,” Mac whispers.

“That can wait.” Jack says. He pulls Mac a little closer. “Oh kid, I’m so sorry. This is my fault.”

“No.” Mac hiccups. “It’s mine.”

“How? Because you took a job that would get you out of that hellhole you were in? Because international laws kept you from telling Bozer the truth? Because some nutjob with a grudge against you kidnapped your best friend? Because you did what you had to to save him?” Jack rubs his hand up and down Mac’s back, then starts running his fingers through Mac’s messy hair. “Kiddo, we put you between a rock and a hard place. That’s on us.”

Riley stands up and comes back with a cup of water from the water jug in the hall. She hands it to him and he takes a few shaky sips. “Mac, Bozer’s not mad at you. He’s mad at us. And he has every right to be. He’s right about one thing, we didn’t do enough to protect you.”

Mac shakes his head. “Wasn’t your fault.”

“And none of this was yours.” Jack says gently. “Go talk to your friend.”

“He doesn’t want to talk to me.”

“Yes, he does. He just might not know it,” Riley says. “Go. We’ll keep trying to find Richards.”

Mac stumbles to his feet. His eyes hurt and he feels lightheaded. But he makes it down the hall to the room Boze was originally in.

Wilt’s sitting on the floor, his back to the cupboards under the sink. His face is tearstained, and he’s got the jar of tongue depressors on the floor beside them. He’s slowly bending them until they snap. There’s quite a pile of pieces next to him already.

“Boze…” Mac sits down next to him, picking up one of the broken tongue depressors and flipping between his fingers. “Please, it’s not like you think.”
“It’s not like I think?” Boze chokes out. “Mac, what I think is that these people blackmailed you just like Richards did. That they took advantage of you needing a way out of prison. They could ask you for whatever they wanted and if you said no they’d just threaten to send you back.”

_I used to think so too. And then they proved that wasn’t it at all._ “It’s not like that, Bozer. They really are trying to get my conviction overturned. They have connections, people who can help prove I didn’t kill anyone with that bomb.”

“Then why haven’t they already done it?” Bozer asks. “Why are they waiting so long?”

“It’s hard to get the evidence they need…”

“Is that what they tell you?” Bozer asks. “Mac, they’re lying. They’re never gonna let you walk because if they do they know they can’t control you.” He’s full on crying again now. “Mac, this is exactly what I was afraid of.”

Mac can’t say he hasn’t had those same fears. _Jack and Riley would never do that to me. I don’t think Thornton would._ But they’re not the ones who control what the Phoenix does. The mysterious Oversight does. The same person who was adamant that they do whatever was necessary to appease the FBI. The same person who insisted on sending Mac undercover to Bishop. _What if Oversight is holding up the investigation? Whoever they are, they might be doing exactly what Bozer said._

“Mac.” Boze reaches for him, a hand resting warmly on his shoulder. “Mac, they’re no good for you. You’re killing yourself to do what they want, and they haven’t lifted a finger to help you in return.”

“That’s not true. They got me out of CCI—”

“Because they wanted your skills. Mac, all you are to them is another tool. You’re their Swiss Army knife. Handy to have around, can do anything they want, and can be replaced if they lose it or break it.” Bozer’s voice breaks. “Mac, you’re worth so much more than that.”

“That’s what they said too.” Mac wants Bozer to see Jack and Riley like he sees them. To understand that no matter what the agency does, Jack and Riley and Cage and even Thornton are family. “Boze, they really do care. Jack’s risked his life for me so many times. So has Riley. They’re not just government suits behind a desk. They put their lives on the line every day, just like I do. Boze, I have trust issues the size of Mt. Everest. Do you really think I’d keep working with people I didn’t absolutely depend on and trust with my life?”

“I think you’d do anything to protect the people you care about.” Boze says quietly. “Tell me the truth, Mac, did they use me against you?”

“Never.” Mac can at least honestly say that. “Boze, I swear, they’re good people.”

“I’m not sure how ready I am to believe that,” Bozer says. “I can’t get past that they put you in prison. Or that they made you lie to me.”

“I’m sorry I did. I was going to tell you. I was. But I was too scared to. And not because of them.”

Mac says hastily. “Because it really is a violation of the Espionage Act and the government could throw me in a hole somewhere and lose the key.”

“That’s exactly the kind of situation I don’t want you in,” Boze mutters. “Are you ever going to be able to get out?”

“I don’t know.” Mac figures honesty’s the best policy at this point. “Maybe if they get my conviction overturned. But even if I walk on the murder and terrorism, there’s still going to be some charges that
stand. I did actually break the law. And it’s hard for an ex-con to get a job.” I used to think about that a lot. What I’d do if and when I was a free man. But now it’s hard to imagine a life without the Phoenix. Without Jack and Riley and Sam and Patty.

“So you would voluntarily stay with a place that sends you off to get nearly killed on a semi-weekly basis?”

“You’re talking to an ex-vigilante who nearly got killed on a daily basis.” Mac’s attempt at humor falls flat.

“And do you know how much that scared me? Mac, I stayed up every single night you were gone. I laid there in bed and prayed I wasn’t going to lose another brother. I wanted you to quit, but I never would have asked you to.” Bozer twists his fingers into Mac’s. “I don’t want you to die. You shouldn’t have to pay for other people’s mistakes with your life.”

Mac sighs. So there’s the sticky point. “Boze, that’s what I do. That’s who I am, who I’ll always be. In any life. What do you think I’d be doing if I wasn’t here?”

“Doing something you wanted. You wouldn’t have been forced to either join a danger-courting secret spy ring or rot in prison. You didn’t have a choice.”

“Maybe not. But maybe that’s still where I would have ended up.” Mac runs a hand through his hair, trying to steady himself. “Boze, I’m not the kind of person who gets a nice ordinary life. People like me don’t get picket fences and suburban two-kid families and office jobs. We don’t even get lab spaces and Nobel prizes. I would have been a cop. Or a soldier. Or an agent, just like I am now.”

Bozer sighs, a shaky, tear-laden sound. He knows it’s the truth. Because he knows me. “I’m still pissed that you lied. And that they lied.”

“We really had to.”

“Maybe I’ll get it. Someday.” Bozer shrugs. “And don’t ask me to make nice and shake hands and forgive them for everything they made you do.” He looks up at Mac, and there’s a world of love and hurt in his eyes. “Mac, you know I love you. And I know you’re an adult, and you can make your own decisions about where to work and who to trust. But for one, I’m allowed to disagree with those choices, and tell you, because that’s what a good friend does. He doesn’t watch his buddy throw himself off a cliff.”

“I promise, I’m not doing that.” Well, not figuratively anyway. Literally...we won’t bring up Switzerland...

“And two, make sure it really is your decision. Not theirs, not some Big Brother mystery boss. Yours.”

CLINIC EXAM ROOM

THIS IS THE MOST STRESSED RILEY HAS EVER BEEN IN ONE...AND THAT’S SAYING SOMETHING

Riley really, really wants to go after Mac. But it’s clear Bozer hates her guts. Hates her and Jack and the entire Phoenix at this point.

“I just want to tell him what we found,” she sighs, leaning on the padded table. I think I need a padded room.
“And make him more upset? Just keep digging, Ri.”

I’ve got nothing. After Richards took Boze, he drove aimlessly around the city for an hour and a half and then went to the rendezvous point. And then just like Mac said, he ditched the van someplace we couldn’t see. He could be anywhere in the city now. She hasn’t been able to pull a clear image of the man off any of the cams, and his dossiers, where they even exist, have only vague physical descriptions attached.

She jumps when Mac walks through the door. He still looks like a kicked puppy, but less like a kicked, starving, whimpering puppy abandoned on the side of the road in the rain.

“I thought you were leaving?” He’s holding a cup of water. “I went to get Boze something to drink and heard you talking.”

“We hit a dead end. How’s Bozer holding up?” Jack asks.

“He’s still mad. But he understands a little better.”

“I didn’t expect one conversation to be a miracle cure,” Jack says. “I get it, man. I do. Lying to family, or to the people who become family, that’s a hell of a weight on your shoulders.”

“That’s not my only problem,” Mac says quietly. “If we don’t find Richards, Boze isn’t gonna have to worry about the Phoenix sending me off to get killed. Cause I’m going to go back to prison. Not that I won’t anyway because I let a civilian find out about the Phoenix.”

“It happens more often than you’d think,” Jack says. “My great-aunt found out. Because she’s freakin’ nosy…and because I might have accidentally gotten caught on camera at a failed assassination of a senator…” He grins. “She’s a nightly news junkie, she’s got eyes like a hawk, and she’s a tinfoil hat conspiracy theorist. So thank God no one believes her at family reunions.”

“But I’m not an agent like you. I’m on probation,” Mac says quietly.

“Doesn’t matter. Patty’ll straighten the whole mess out eventually. I promise, nothing’s gonna happen to you or Boze, okay?” Riley knows Jack can’t promise that. Mac or Bozer or both of them could be in real trouble. It’s not Mac’s fault that his secret got out but I doubt Oversight will see it that way. And there’s no way Bozer’s gonna be allowed to walk out without any problems, knowing what he does now.

She wonders how everything went so wrong so fast.

“So Richards’s van was a bust?” Mac asks.

“Yeah. He doesn’t show up on any cameras until he’s getting into it in an alley. And he drove around aimlessly after he took Boze, and then dumped the van somewhere we can’t see.” Riley sighs. “You said the bomb won’t go off, right?” That at least gives us more time.

“Not the way I put the detonator together. Of course, if he gets suspicious he might just use a different one.” Mac sighs. “And even if it doesn’t, Richards is a perfectionist. He doesn’t leave a job to chance. So he’s going to have his people ready to kill his target if the bomb doesn’t work.”

“So we have to figure out who he’s been hired to kill.” Riley shakes her head. “You said he usually works for cartels?”

“Anyone who will pay him.” Mac shrugs. “And he didn’t say anything that would help me figure out who he’s after.”
“Maybe not to you.” Jack says. “But you had someone on the inside.” Mac glances up. “Right now, the only person who can help us figure out what Richards’s plan is, is Bozer.”

When Bozer limps back into the room, Jack can feel the murderous glare aimed at him and Riley.

“I hope you both know I’m not doing this to help you. I’m doing this for Mac.”

“We know. And for what it’s worth, we’re sorry,” Riley says quietly. Jack thinks she’s taking this harder than normal. She and Bozer were friends. She liked having someone who wasn’t part of the agency to talk to.

“You ought to be. And you ought to be apologizing to Mac, too.” Bozer’s voice is hard. “All you did to me was lie. People have done that my whole life. But what you did to Mac…”

Jack can’t take this anymore. Riley blames herself enough for what happened in Bishop. She already thinks it was her fault. He doesn’t get to make this worse.

“Boze, please,” Mac says placatingly. “Don’t fight with them, not right now. We can’t afford to.”

Bozer looks like that’s going to send him into another tirade, but he cuts himself off.

“Boze, I’m so sorry to have to ask you for anything, and I know this is a lot to take in, but without your help a lot of people might die, and I’ll definitely get sent back to prison.” Mac takes Bozer by the shoulders, leaning down and looking him in the eye. “Do you remember anything? Overhearing anything that might help us? Something they said, something you saw?”

Bozer closes his eyes. “I need all of you to be quiet. And get me a chair. And Mac, please tie my hands and ankles.”

“What the hell is he doing?” Jack asks.

“It’s an acting exercise, Mac explains, rifling through a drawer for bandages. “A memory technique. Like studying in the same room for a test. Memory’s better if you’re in the same position or situation as when you first heard the information.” Bozer sits down, and Mac follows his directions as to where to tie his hands and ankles.

“And shut the lights off!” Boze hisses. “It was dark in there.”

Jack complies.

The only sounds in the room are the four of them breathing, the hum of the water pump somewhere, the muted chatter and a crying baby in the lobby, and some sort of soft latin music playing somewhere. And Mac’s breathing sounds so broken and wet and shaky.

And then Bozer speaks up. “It was dark, and they were talking really quietly. They didn’t say much, there was an argument about where to buy bagels. And someone wondered if Mac was actually going to come through with the deal.”
“But-” Jack starts.

“Shhh!” Boze hisses. “They didn’t say much after that. They got food, I could smell cheese bagels. I was hungry.” He takes another breath. “And then there were a lot of horns and someone was yelling and cursing out another driver, and we swerved, hard.” His voice goes up in tone, excited. “And a newspaper fell off a shelf inside. On the floor by my feet. I could see it from under the blindfold.” Jack wants to scream at the guy to tell them what was on it, but he knows that won’t do any good.

“One of the articles was written all over,” Bozer says. “It was about the only thing in there to look at. It was all in Spanish, and mine is so rusty it’s nonexistent, but it sounded like it was about someone named Estevez. It was hard to read much in the dark.”

Jack can already hear Riley typing, and she looks up with a small triumphant shake of her fist. “Javier Estevez. A Columbian diplomat,” Riley says. “He’s coming into town to make a speech about cooperation with the DEA in trying to track down shipments of drugs from his country into the U.S. Apparently LA’s been flooded the last few months by drugs laced with a toxic herbicide that was traced back to Columbian sources.”

“So he’s here trying to seal a deal cracking down on whoever’s distributing the drugs.” Jack’s not sure how far he trusts the man; it’s probably a political power play. Still, if it gets more drugs off the streets, Jack’s willing to overlook some ladder-climbing. And the guy definitely doesn’t deserve to die.

“Okay, now you can get me out of here.” Mac rushes over to untie Bozer, and Jack flicks the lights on so the kid doesn’t trip over something getting there. There’s a crash and a muffled “ow” as he turns around. Too late. Mac’s biting his lip, it looks like he smashed his foot into the rolling supply cart. Nice job, klutz.

“At least now we have his target.”

Riley’s typing even faster. “He’s going to be staying at a hotel in town. He’ll be making his speech at City Hall, but since the Ghost bomb LAPD’s tripled the kind of security they have at events like that. I don’t think Richards could sneak the bomb to the speech.”

“He can’t afford to have Esteves ever even meet with the LAPD in person. He has documents he’s refused to hand over any other way than to the commissioner himself, in person. He knows the cartels have officers in their pockets.”

“And where is he meeting the commissioner?”

“His hotel. The bomb is probably intended to take them both out together.”

“How is she doing that?” Bozer gasps. “Is that all in the newspapers? About the meeting?”

“No, I hacked the LAPD’s mainframe a few weeks ago, and I have access to all their information. Including the commissioner’s private files and email.”

“No way.” Bozer collapses back into the chair. “You people are freaking insane.”

“Okay, so we know it’s Mr. Esteves, at the hotel, with the bomb.” Jack cuts in. “So now what?”

“If we try to warn Estevez and get him to safety, they’ll make their move sooner,” Mac mutters. “They probably won’t let him out of their sight.”

“And how would we even warn him? ‘Sorry, one of our agents got blackmailed into making a bomb
to kill you, which actually won’t work, but there’s still a hitman coming after you’?” Jack shakes his head. “The only thing we’d accomplish would be getting ourselves under suspicion and incriminating you.”

“When does his flight land?” Mac asks, and Jack can hear that little I have a plan sound in his voice.

“In four hours.”

“Boze. How fast does that new polymer we worked on set?”

“Forty-five minutes, an hour to be safe.” Bozer looks shell-shocked. “Why?”

“That would be cutting it really close…” Mac sighs. “But it’s the only chance we have. Boze, we need a face. We need a fake Esteves.” Mac looks from the floor to Bozer, head hanging. “Please?”

“I think I can make it work.” Boze glances at all of them. “It won’t be my best work, but it might be enough to fool their killer.”

“What’s going on, kid?”

“One of the oldest tricks in the book. A bait and switch,” Mac says. “We’re going to pick up the real Esteves at the airport, then swap him out for someone in disguise. That way they don’t decide to change the plan, and we can find the bomb and draw out the shooter at the same time.”

“It’s not a bad idea,” Riley says. “It could work.” She glances at Mac. “The hotel has closed circuit security, I’ll have to be inside to get access to the cameras and see if we can find out where Richards’s people planted the bomb.”

“I’ll be tracking down the sniper,” Jack says.

“I’ll be posing as Esteves,” Mac finishes.

“No, you won’t be,” Bozer says. “Because I will.” Jack starts to argue, and so does Mac, but Bozer shuts them both down with a glare worthy of Patty. “You’ve risked Mac’s life I don’t know how many times in the last few months. I’m not scared to take his place for once.” Jack can see the faint trembling of fear, but there’s the same hard courage in Bozer’s eyes that Jack saw over and over in the Sandbox. Men willing to throw their lives on the line for the people they cared about. For the people they’d come to call brothers. “I have to do this.”

MAC AND BOZER’S HOUSE

MAKING MASKS IS LESS FUN THAN DECORATING COOKIES

This has got to be the strangest Christmas party Bozer’s ever had.

When they arrived at the house, it was surrounded by flashing red and blue lights, rather than the twinkling Christmas decor Bozer’s had hanging from the eaves for a month. Somehow a couple phone calls ended with the police quickly exiting the scene, apparently under the impression that some Homeland Security agents were taking over the case because of the terrorism suspicions. I think I would have left too. Bozer’s not sure exactly what Jack and Riley said when they went to go talk to the officers, but he’d guess it was something along the lines of threatening “leave or spend the rest of your life in a very small box”.

He’s currently mixing the slurry for molding a mask, Riley (apparently that’s still actually her name,
but it’s Riley Davis) is on the phone with her roommate, (Who’s still Sam, but her last name is
different too), who’s conning a rental company that caters to Hollywood bigwigs out of an official-
looking (and highly secure) black SUV. Apparently they have them at the Phoenix office, which is
actually the agency Mac’s working for, but because this isn’t something official they can’t use those
vehicles without getting someone in trouble.

“Esteves has a police escort,” Riley’s saying. “I’m going to try to stall them in traffic by hacking the
lights, but that’s not a guarantee they won’t be there.”

Mac’s in the living room, with Jack (who also is definitely not a lawyer, not even close) who’s
cleaning his gun. As much as Boze hates everything about this, he’s starting to think maybe Mac
could be a little bit right too. Because the way Mac is leaning into Jack, the way Jack sets aside his
disassembled gun to pull Mac into a reassuring hug, that’s the kind of trust Boze thought was
reserved for only himself now.

Mac wouldn’t act like that with people he was afraid of. With people who hurt him. Boze has known
him too long to think anything else. That’s not some kind of forced acceptance, it’s not Mac
pretending he’s okay. That’s the real deal.

Boze isn’t sure he’s over the shock yet. I knew something was wrong. I just didn’t want to believe it.
He’s not even sure how this works. Mac’s supposed to be going from home to work and back again.
How is he doing this? But then again, if their team has a hacker who can break the LAPD, he’s
pretty sure they can also fake the records Mac’s PO has been getting.

Riley hangs up and walks over to where Bozer’s pouring the mixture into a base mold. He doesn’t
have exact specifications, but he has several pictures of the Columbian diplomat and that’s good
enough. He’s always had a talent for being able to recreate what he sees.

“I didn’t realize making a mask was such a process.”

“It should actually be more,” Boze says. He can’t just not talk to her. It feels wrong. He and Riley
were friends. He wanted to be more, even if she was giving him the cold shoulder on that front. And
realizing it was all lies hurts. But at the same time, something hasn’t changed. Riley is still Riley.
She’s still the same person who fixed his CGI program and laughed at his jokes so hard she snorted
her beer up her nose. She couldn’t fake everything about who she is. “This is a quick and dirty
version. A really good prosthetic can take a week to create.”

“Wow. I’ve had to requisition them for ops before but I didn’t know what went on to get them to
me.” It’s weird to hear her say that. But all of a sudden so many more pieces are clicking into place.
Suddenly the way Jack reaches for his leg when startled is perfectly logical. The funny little twitch
Cage’s lips get when she knows Boze is exaggerating one of his stories. The way Riley didn’t bat an
eyelash at stealing a paramedic’s radio last week. They’re all agents. They’re actual freaking secret
agents.

“This mask only has to hold up for one use, so I can use a more rapid setting polymer. But the ones I
film with have to be reusable, so they get a heavier duty base. It takes longer to set. But the hardest
part is the painting. On a really detailed job I can spend eight hours getting shading and colors right.”

“That’s amazing.” Riley looks from the mold to Bozer, and he sees the pain and guilt on her face as
clearly as any stripes of paint on one of those masks. “If it means anything to you, I truly am sorry
we had to lie to you. So is Mac.” She swallows. “You can hate me and Jack and Sam and Patty if
you want. But please, please don’t let what we did rip you and Mac apart.”

“But you’re not going anywhere,” Bozer says, leaning on the counter and watching the minutes tick
by on the microwave clock. “It’s not like we can say it happened, it’s over, and we never have to deal with you again. Mac isn’t going to be able to quit what he does. If he’s even still going to have a job when this is over. And whether you all stop coming to the house or not, I’m never gonna stop thinking he’s there. With you.”

“I don’t expect you to forgive us. At least not right now,” Riley says. Damn right. There’s a hell of a lot of betrayal and pain here. It’s not going away any time soon. “Just don’t take it out on Mac. He didn’t have a choice.”

“I’ll try.” He doesn’t want to admit that there’s no good option here. Because he doesn’t want Mac to be wrong about these people. He can’t get hurt again by someone he trusts. He’ll shatter. But at the same time, watching Mac and Jack sitting on that couch, looking like they don’t need anyone else in the world but each other, it hurts.

_Does he trust them more than he trusts me now?_ Bozer always thought it was going to be him and Mac against the world. That was the way it had always been. When they first met, and Boze found himself becoming the target of the middle school’s worst. When it had been his fists and Mac’s crazy shoelace contraptions against Cal Forester and his cronies.

And then when Mac became a vigilante, Boze had felt like the loyal sidekick, helping Mac stay hidden, helping patch him up when he came home injured, keeping his secret. _I was the only one who knew who “The Phoenix” really was. And that made me feel more important and happy than I’d ever admit._ It was a storybook adventure. Until it all came crashing down.

Even then, Bozer had tried. Tried to make Mac understand that no prison sentence, no accusation, would tear them apart. Obviously Mac hadn’t felt the same way, and Bozer had been starting to accept that his friend was hurting so much he didn’t want anyone to know.

And then Mac came back, and it was supposed to go back to the way things were. Except it didn’t. Mac vanished at all hours, he was never home, he avoided Bozer’s questions, and he outright lied. Boze is never going to stop loving that kid because God knows he doesn’t need another person who gets fed up and gives up on him, but Bozer’s just been so worried and hurt.

_I wasn’t going to spend a whole week with Deja. I was going to come home as soon as the cops caught that psycho._ But when he called Mac to make sure he really was safe, Mac had seemed happy. Happier than Bozer had seen him since Bishop. _Was he really better off without me? _Because it seemed like one night spent with Jack had started to heal the broken fragments Bozer hadn’t even been able to get close enough to touch.

As much as he hates to admit it, Bozer felt jealous when he heard a tiny bit of Mac’s smile through the phone. When he heard the kid get excited, actually excited, about some camping trip Jack was going to take him on. _When I left him he could barely hold his head up. He was empty._ Just a shell. And somehow Jack had managed to change that.

_However I feel about whatever they’ve done to him, that fact still remains._ The more Boze thinks about it, the more he realizes he can’t deny that Mac needs these people. _There’s no way I can pretend I understand the kind of PTSD he lives with day in and day out._ Jack carries himself like every ex-military man Bozer’s ever seen. _I noticed when I first met him, but I figured he might have done ROTC, or a couple tours before getting out and getting his law degree paid for._ It hadn’t occurred to him that Jack might still be on the front lines of a war no one got to see. _Doing what he says he does, he’s got to have seen the kind of things that would keep a person up at night._

Boze learned a long time ago not to discount the effects of his own trauma, not to belittle the pain and the lingering ache of losing a sibling. But he also knows that now he and Mac have two very
different experiences of life. And I’m just not always equipped to be there for him. As much as Bozer wants to be everything Mac needs, the sad fact remains, that that just isn’t true.

That’s about the time he realizes Riley’s watching those two with the same kind of ache in her eyes.

“Riley? Is something wrong?”

“No.” She turns away quickly, glancing back at the mask. “How close is this to done?”

“Still got at least fifteen minutes.” Bozer looks back at the two on the couch. Something about that hurts her like it hurts me. Riley’s a trained spy. She’s not just going to blab to him what’s going on in her head. She won’t tell him what’s hurting her. But he can guess.

*The way they talk to each other, Jack’s her father figure. She probably had the same “you and me against the world” vibe going on. It was her and Jack out there being super spies, kicking ass and taking names. And lately it’s been clear that Jack’s started to focus a lot on Mac. And she won’t complain. Doesn’t think she has a right to. Probably tells herself that after everything Mac has been through, he needs Jack more than she does.*

“Still got at least fifteen minutes.” Bozer looks back at the two on the couch. Something about that hurts her like it hurts me. Riley’s a trained spy. She’s not just going to blab to him what’s going on in her head. She won’t tell him what’s hurting her. But he can guess.

“Elephants. Definitely.” Riley grins. “And I’m going to blame my love of bad puns solely on Jack.”

*It’s not okay. Nothing is okay right now. But somehow Bozer’s starting to think this might be salvageable. Mac always told me, there’s always a way to fix something if you look hard enough.*

Jack can’t honestly say he’s not worried about every single bit of this. He’s taken his gun apart, cleaned it, and put it back together twice already.

Mac’s curled up next to him on the couch like he wants to go to sleep but is way too keyed up to do it. Bozer and Riley joined them at one point, both of them with mugs of egg nog, and Bozer even offered Jack some. Aside from the slight concern that he was about to be poisoned in retribution, Jack doesn’t think he can stomach anything right now, so he turned the offer down.

Now Bozer’s at the dining room table putting the finishing touches on an absolutely startling copy of Estevez’s face, Jack just heard Sam pull the SUV into the driveway, and Mac is checking his knife with the same kind of obsessive attention Jack was using on his gun.

*If we screw this up, we all go down.* They can’t technically be doing something like this on domestic soil. And it’s not even an officially sanctioned op. If they get caught, Patty will have to disavow them. All of them will be implicated in the same terrorism charge that’s currently being pinned on Mac. *If any one of us screws this up, all of us go to prison.*

Boze finally leans back from the mask. “This should be good enough.” He lifts it to his face.”Do I look ready for my close-up?”

Jack sighs. “For the record, I don’t like this plan.”

“I’m the only one who’s the right height and not a woman.” Bozer says, but his hands and voice are
shaking. “And everyone else has something to do. Riley has to find the bomb, Mac might have to disarm it, Sam has to keep Estevez safe, and you have to find the guy who wants to kill me before he gets a chance to.”

“But we’re still sending out a civilian to get shot at.”

“It’s not like I haven’t had a target on my back before,” Bozer says, and Jack hears a kind of brokenness he’s already experienced too much of. “Besides, that’s what you’re already doing with Mac.”

“That’s different. Mac has training.”

“Did you train him to stop a bullet with his bare hands?”

Honestly it wouldn’t surprise Jack if the kid figured out a way to do just that. But the truth is, Bozer’s right. Mac is just a civilian. He didn’t sign on for this like the rest of us. And we throw him to the wolves anyway.

And that brings him to the thing Jack truly hates most about this plan. In order to find their sniper, he has to leave Mac. Riley will be in the hotel with him the whole time, but Jack just can’t shake the feeling that something bad can happen if he’s not right there. They’ll be shooting at Bozer, not Mac. He’s the one who’s going to look like their target.

The door opens and Sam steps in. “I hope you all appreciate this. Do you know how hard it is to find a rental vehicle in LA at Christmas time?”

“Car keys.” Cage tosses Jack the SUV’s key ring. “Don’t wreck it if you can help it. I convinced the guy we needed a low profile transport vehicle for Bruce Willis. And that I’m his PR agent.”

“Nice.” Jack grins. “But next time, you might want to avoid doing that at Christmas. I mean...let’s not tempt bad luck, shall we?”

“Okay, time to hit the road.” Riley’s packing up her rig. “Estevez’s plane is landing in thirty minutes. I’ve got eyes on the LAPD transport, and I’m going to start trying to slow them down soon, but we have to get past the same intersections before I can do that.”

“Here.” Jack hands Riley the GTO keys. “Try not to beat the old girl up, okay?” Riley nods, eyes wide. How else were you gonna get to the hotel?

“Okay.” Jack, Bozer, and Cage into the car, and Jack takes a moment to appreciate it. Man, I think we need to start getting all our rental vehicles from places like that. Not only is the car fully tricked out with bulletproof glass and metal sheeting, it’s got absolutely massive internal video screens, a stellar sound system, and even a minibar. It’s official, I need a cover ID that lets me pass myself off as a Hollywood celebrity.

But no one’s actually in the mood to enjoy the accommodations. Cage is checking over her weapon, and Bozer keeps pulling off the gloves he’s using to hide his hands and tugging at the stiff collar of his dress shirt, looking like he’s suffocating. Too much happened today. He can’t even start to process it.

They pull into the airport and Jack gets out, standing next to the car in the best imitation he can do of an undercover cop trying not to look suspicious. In a few minutes, three men in crisp suits step out. Two of them Jack instantly pegs as a security detail. The third he recognizes because Bozer’s wearing his face.
“Javier Estevez?” Jack asks.

“Are you the escort?”

“If you mean the driver the LAPD sent, yes. But if you mean anything else, sorry man, I’m not for sale.” Jack realizes the joke fell completely flat. “I’d feel safer if you were in the car.”

Estevez nods and Jack opens the car door. He can tell the second Estevez sees Bozer inside, because the man shrieks and starts to scramble backward.

Estevez’s security guards jump, training their weapons on Jack. “Hey, hold it, fellas, let me explain. Wait, there is no time, let me sum up.” What, I can’t help myself. He glances at Estevez. “We have reason to believe your life is in danger. This is just a precaution.” He flashes his fake LAPD ID. “My partners and I are going to make sure you make it to your hotel in one piece.”

“How do you know this?”

“Listen, it’s a long story, but I meant what I said about feeling safer with you in the car.” Jack says. He watches Estevez and his men climb into the car, then slams the door and gets in.

Okay. Time to see how good an actor Bozer really is.

Riding in the GTO with Riley is a totally different experience than riding in it with Jack. Mac doesn’t feel like he has to cling to the door handle every time they go around a curve, or like he’ll slam his head straight back through the headrest when they take off after stopping at a light.

He knows some of it is that Riley’s babying Jack’s prized car. Some of it is also trying to make sure they don’t catch any unwanted attention from cops. And a very very big part of it is the laptop propped on the console that Riley occasionally glances at, clicks something on, then hits the spacebar.

“Is it working?” Mac asks.

“Well, considering they kept taking alternate routes, it’s not working as well as I hoped. And I’m not willing to create a pileup to try and stop them for good. And now the traffic control system’s found my backdoor and locked me out, so no more red lights for me.” Riley shrugs. “But they’re going to be at least forty minutes late.”

“That should give Jack and Sam and Boze enough time.”

“I hope so.” Riley’s quiet the rest of the way to the hotel.

When they get out, Riley tells Mac to follow her lead. He carefully adjusts the glasses and hat Bozer gave him, they’ll cover his face enough that he shouldn’t be easily identifiable.

Riley asks for the hotel manager and introduces herself as a regional manager of the company that installed the security system. She hems and haws over why she’s there until she finally coughs up the “secret” that there’s a glitch in that particular make of camera, and that the company wants to handle it as discreetly as possible. “Just a small software update, and no one has to know anything. I’d appreciate it if you kept this quiet, we don’t need all our customers jumping ship,” she says in such a perfect fake conciliatory tone that Mac would almost have believed her himself.

Which gets them half an hour with the computers. More than enough time, at least Mac hopes so. The commissioner’s supposed to be meeting Estevez when he arrives. Riley did manage to jam the
police escort’s radio signals, so the LAPD won’t know their people didn’t pick up Estevez until it’s too late. We don’t know who on the force is compromised. If anyone finds out Estevez didn’t get picked up like he was supposed to, it could blow this whole thing. There are a lot more dirty cops on the force than anyone knows. He found that out the hard way. I thought the only people I was going to have to worry about would be the ones angry I took the law into my own hands. But they were nothing compared to the ones who wanted to make me pay for what I did. He was lucky he wasn’t killed then.

“I think I have something.” Riley pulls up a security feed from around ten a.m. Two men in workman’s coveralls are walking in with a handcart. It looks like they’re working on the elevator shaft, but then one of them moves to a pile of empty decorated gift boxes that are part of the hotel’s holiday decor, and carefully slides a duffle bag into one. Mac recognizes the bag.

“Yes, that’s them.” There’s enough explosives in that bag to collapse this building. As soon as the commissioner and Estevez arrive, it’s going to blow.

“I’m setting a jamming signal now. If it’s remotely triggered, this should stop them from being able to set it off.”

Riley closes her rig and follows Mac to the display of stacked boxes. “It looked like it was under a couple others…” She trails off as Mac begins pulling each one down, then tossing it aside if it’s too light. This isn’t the time to be subtle. The commissioner will probably show up soon.

And then he feels it, the box that’s definitely not empty. “Got it.” He sets it down carefully on the floor, then opens the lid. Inside is that very familiar duffle bag, still zipped shut. He carefully opens it, and that’s about the time the manager shows up, apparently confused as to why the security systems manager’s tech aide is wantonly destroying the holiday display.

“Is that a bomb?” The woman shrieks. Please don’t make any loud sudden noises right now. Mac’s under enough stress as it is.

“Listen to me, you need to evacuate this whole hotel, right now,” Riley says. “Don’t panic. Just calmly and orderly evacuation, okay?” We don’t have time to try and keep this under wraps anymore. When he opened the bag, Mac just triggered a countdown timer. And they have one more very big problem.

“That’s not my detonator,” Mac whispers. “It’s actually going to blow.”

“Can you disarm it?”

“I hope so.” Mac stares at the blinking lights. I have to be able to.

Jack already knows two things about the sniper he needs to find. One, they’re going to have to be close to the building, to react if things go wrong. Two, they won’t shoot until the bomb fails to go off. The bomb will destroy all the evidence Estevez has without risking it getting into police hands. A simple shooting won’t do that.

When they pull up outside the building, Jack leans toward Cage. “Keep an eye on that bodyguard. I’m not positive one of them isn’t our man.” She nods, and he sees her rest a hand on her gun in her lap.

He opens the door for Bozer, who steps out followed by one of the two bodyguards. Jack watches the man carefully, but he doesn’t see any sign of suspicious action.
Bozer must be scared out of his mind right now. But he’s holding it together as well as any trained field agent Jack has ever seen. He’s walking tall, the only sign he’s nervous the way he’s pulling on the fingers of his left glove.

Jack scans the passersby. *Unless this dude has a death wish he won’t be inside.* He hopes this plan works. *This is the only chance we’ve got.*

And then the doors slam open and a flood of people starts pouring out. *Someone already found the bomb.* Jack doesn’t have time to wonder if that someone is Mac and Riley, or some random cleaning lady.

*They just know their plan went to hell.* Jack glances around the crowd one more time, and then he sees it. Off to the side, barely reacting to the yelling, surging masses of people, a man shoves his phone in his pocket with a glare, reaches for his side, and pulls out a gun, leveling it at Boze’s head.

He never gets the chance to fire. Jack’s own gun is out, and the second he sees the glimmer of light on metal he fires. The would-be killer stumbles backward, blood streaming from his shoulder. Jack shoves his way through the now even more panicked crowd to reach him, kicking the gun away from his hand.

“Oh hell no, you don’t;” Jack snaps, then reaches into the man’s pocket for his phone. Bozer appears at his side, wearing his own face now, sweating and shaky, but apparently not about to have a nervous breakdown.

“That’s one of the men from the van.”

“Here, hang onto this,” Jack says. “Riley might be able to trace the signal back to Richards.” He quickly cuffs the man’s hands behind his back, ignoring the yell of pain when he pulls on the injured shoulder, then rushes toward the hotel. *This op isn’t over yet.*

“Hey kid, how’s it looking in there?” Mac would know Jack’s voice anywhere. But he can’t talk right now.

“We found the bomb but it’s going to go off in three minutes if Mac can’t disarm it!” Riley yells back. *Thanks. No pressure. No pressure at all.*

He’s vaguely aware of Jack and Bozer rushing up and skidding to a halt on the floor, but he can’t think about them. All he has time for now is the bomb.

Mac watches the blinking numbers as he carefully pries open the casing of the detonator. It’s a basic circuit-based system. Break the circuit of the wires running between the clock and the detonation switch, set off the bomb. Which is what’s going to happen anyway when those red numbers reach zero. He glances at the wall beside him and the string of colorful Christmas lights plugged in there, and suddenly he knows exactly what he’s going to do.

*Every string of Christmas lights has tiny little fuses in the plug. It’s a fire safety precaution, so if something shorts out the tree won’t catch on fire. But those same fuses just might be able to conduct the same current that’s going to set off this bomb and redirect it.*

He unplugs the string and pops open the plug base.

“What are you doing?” Riley asks.

“If we just cut the wires the secondary failsafe will kick in. But if I redirect the current…”
“The clock will still think it’s connected to the trigger.”

Mac carefully shaves away the coating on the wires, then wedges the fuse between them, completing the circuit early. Then he positions the scissors over the red wire.

“Well, what are you waiting for?” Jack asks.

“Well, there’s about a twenty percent chance that I did this wrong and the whole thing will blow up in our faces.”


“You all need to get out of here,” Mac whispers. “Please.”

“Oh hell no.” Bozer rests a hand gently on the arm that isn’t holding the scissors. “We’re not going anywhere.”

Mac sighs. And then closes the scissors.

There’s an audible click. He braces himself for fire and pain, but nothing happens.

When Mac opens his eyes, he’s staring at a snipped wire, a clock still ticking down, and his three friends whooping and hollering and high-fiving.

Jack grabs Mac’s shoulders and shakes him, a little roughly but it’s Jack so it doesn’t matter. “I can’t believe you disarmed a bomb with Christmas lights.”

“Well, I could have done it with paper clips or a gum wrapper, but…”

“Just let me enjoy it, Mac.”

________________________

DECEMBER 24

NOT A DAY YOU WANT TO SPEND IN THE POLICE STATION

Patricia Thornton is seriously considering early retirement. *I’m going to have an ulcer from the things these idiots keep doing.* Now she’s spending the wee hours of Christmas Eve explaining to a the police commissioner that her people are the only reason he’s still alive and has Estevez’s information.

The official story is that members of the LAPD, most notably a very mysteriously uncommunicative Detective Austin, stumbled upon the bombing plan while working a missing persons case. Wilt Bozer, the kidnapping victim, was able to provide valuable information that led to not only the prevention of a bombing attack, but also the arrest of one Gavin Richards, whose personal files indicated that he was responsible for no less than a hundred cartel hits over the past three years.

When Cage showed up at the Phoenix with Mac, Patty ordered them both in no uncertain terms to stay put until the investigation was over. His involvement is being kept strictly off the books. And since the phone number that was used to place the anonymous tip call that had implicated Mac in the first place belonged to one of Richards’s accomplices, that tip is being thrown out of evidence.

There’s still plenty of wrangling, plenty of cover stories, plenty of things to fix to make this go away. But as both Patty and Commissioner Wilson finish their fifth cups of coffee, she sees something resting on the corner of his desk. It’s immediately recognizable as one of Mac’s creations, a paperclip bent into the shape of a bird in flight.
She notices that he’s followed her gaze, and he picks up the wire sculpture almost reverently. “When I first took this job, I promised a hard crackdown on cartels. They didn’t take too kindly to that. There were three or four death threats in my mailbox every day.”

“You don’t get this far without making enemies. Especially if you take a hard stance for what you believe in.” Not everyone likes a person who does the right thing.

“One day I went out to my car, just like any other morning. And there, on the hood, was this.” He picks up the paperclip. “And right next to the car was a disarmed bomb. When the bomb squad arrived they said the explosives had been connected to my starter. If I had turned that car on, me, my house, and my wife and the two kids inside would be gone.” He looks straight at Patty. “You and I both know what happened out there today. But sometimes there’s no point in worrying about the technicalities when what happened saved a life.” He smiles. “I’m not one to look a gift horse too long in the mouth, Ms. Thornton.”

Patty collects her paperwork. “I assume that means the rest of my team is free to go?”

“Of course. Merry Christmas to you.”

“You too.” Patty lets the door swing shut behind her.

Jack, Riley, and Bozer are very quiet in the car on the way back to the Phoenix. They look like kids who’ve been caught breaking the rules. No one says a thing until they’re in the War Room, where Mac and Cage are waiting.

Patty’s the first to break the silence. “Well, I must say, this has been the most interesting Christmas Eve since 2004.”

“I’m sorry,” Mac whispers.

“There’s nothing to be sorry for, Agent MacGyver,” Patty says crisply. “This op was a success.” She can feel Jack and Riley’s eyes on her, the telegraphed confusion. “Thanks to your willingness to work a dangerous undercover operation, a man we can link to over a hundred murders and acts of terrorism is now in prison.”

“But this wasn’t-” She cuts Mac off.

“Of course, Operation Secret Santa had to remain off the books until it was complete. We couldn’t risk compromising it by letting anyone at the agency know it was a legitimate mission.” There’s going to be a hell of a lot of paperwork to cover all our asses on this one. But it’s worth it. It’s worth it to see the look in Mac’s eyes as he realizes she’s going to have his back. That she’s giving him the best gift she can, her trust.

“Unfortunately, it seems that a civilian was caught up in the operation, and became privy to information that is highly confidential.” She wants to see how Wilt reacts to this. What will he do if he thinks he’ll be punished for this.

“All due respect, Patty, it’s thanks to him that Estevez is still in one piece and not a million.” Jack’s speaking up now.

“I’m aware of that. However, giving him information on the Phoenix was a severe breach of the Espionage Act.” Patty pauses. “You realize that the consequences for you and Davis could be a court martial. And MacGyver and Bozer could face immediate imprisonment.”
“It wasn’t Mac’s fault. I kept pushing. I listened in.” Bozer steps forward. “What do I have to do to make them see it was only my fault?”

*He’s loyal. Brave. Self-sacrificing.*

“Nothing. Mr. Bozer, the only people currently aware that you now know about the Phoenix’s real operations are in this room. And that is the way it can stay. If you want.” She nods to him.

“I won’t tell anyone anything about this. And there’s no point in threatening me. I’ll do whatever I need to to make sure Mac stays safe. His secrets are always going to be safe with me.” Patty likes his spunk. She likes him.

“It’s been a long past two days,” Bozer says. “So if it’s all over but the shouting, if you don’t mind, I’d like to take my best friend home and get some sleep. Can I walk out that door or not?”

“You can; but your car’s still in police impound as evidence,” Patty says. “You’re welcome to stay here until you can get a ride.”

“I’m not staying in this building another minute.” Bozer starts for the door again.

“I’ll take you home,” Jack speaks up, and Patty can hear the heartbreak in his voice.

“We don’t want your help either.” Bozer says coldly.

“Boze. Please. Let him.” Mac’s voice is an exhausted echo of itself. And Patty watches Bozer melt, nodding his assent. *Mac is his whole world.* She wonders what it is about the kid that has that effect on people. *What I just did, I don’t know if I would do that for any other agent in this building. I don’t know if I would do it for my own flesh and blood.* She still doesn’t understand why she’s gone to the lengths she has to protect Angus MacGyver. Even if Oversight is going to give her hell again for this mess, she doesn’t regret it.

*Maybe it’s just knowing that the world’s been everything but fair to him. So we do all we can to make it right.*

Jack can’t bring himself to look in the rearview mirror at Mac and Bozer huddled up in the back seat. *This time yesterday morning the world was a lot simpler. For both of them.* He’s honestly not sure how they’re going to cope with all of this.

He doesn’t want to watch Mac have to choose between his job and his friend. Between Bozer and Jack, Riley, Cage, and Patty. And Jack will admit that is because some small selfish part of him says Mac will choose Bozer. He’ll choose the person he’s known most his life, the person who doesn’t ask him to lie and put his life on the line.

The worst part will be that Mac won’t just vanish. *He won’t be one of those people who break off a friendship and leave town.* Because he can’t. He needs the job at the Phoenix to stay out of prison, at least for now. *I don’t know if I could bear to come to work knowing he’s in the same building and he doesn’t want to talk to me.* Because Mac could easily ask to stop working field teams and go to R&D again.

*I don’t want to lose him.* The realization is one that Jack knows has been at the back of his mind for a long time. Since he followed the kid through the night to a Mexican compound. Since he watched Mac cut the wires on a bomb that could have blown Jack off the face of the earth. Hell, it’s been there since he watched the kid parachute out the back of a truck with half its canvas strapped to his shoulders and Jack’s little girl, the most precious thing in his whole world, held safely by his side.
Because Jack’s tiny little wolf pack has grown. Somehow, along the way, Mac worked his way into it. And Jack’s been taking it for granted. *I just never thought that he might have to make a choice about what he wants, like this.* Now that it’s staring Jack in the face, he doesn’t like it.

He pulls into Mac’s driveway on autopilot and parks. Bozer gets out and goes straight for the door, like being around Jack might be contaminating somehow. But Mac stays. He leans over the center console and taps Jack’s shoulder lightly.

“I’m sorry I made such a mess of things.” Mac’s eyes are glossy with tears, his lips trembling slightly. “I’m sorry it got you all in trouble.”

“Listen. Mac. No matter what, you can come to us. You don’t have to deal with your problems on your own anymore. That’s what you have family for.” Jack can’t help himself. *I just want him to know how I feel. To know that if he cuts and runs it’ll break my heart.*

Mac smiles. Jack hasn’t seen that since...he doesn’t actually think he’s ever seen the kid smile like this. That’s the look of someone who’s still not sure a good thing has actually happened to them, but is choosing to accept it anyway. “Thank you.”

“No problem. Merry Christmas, Carl’s Jr.”

“Merry Christmas, old man.”
SO this is another all original episode...it was intended to be a SHORT Christmas special and ended up being the length of a regular episode...so it's just gonna get added to the season on its own!

TW for brief mention of past suicide of a minor character.

111.5-Tweezers

LOS ANGELES

A LONG WAY FROM HOME

Christmas in the Dalton family has never once been held on Christmas in Jack’s living memory. The Dalton clan is flung over approximately six states, one U.S. territory, and for a while, (in Jack’s case) foreign countries. Everyone celebrates with their local family for Christmas, and then converges on the ranch two days before New Years’ Eve.

That’s the first thing that makes Dalton Family Christmas a little different from other people’s. The second is that in pretty much any family picture taken at one of these little shindigs, you can be sure you’ll look at it five years later and wonder who the heck that random person was in the back corner. Or sitting on the fireplace mantel. Or hugging Uncle Joey. Because the Dalton family has a habit of inviting anyone they’ve met over the course of the past few months who they know doesn’t have family to go home to for the holidays.

For five years now Riley’s been a fixture of those Christmas photos. And now Jack’s planning on adding a few more to the mix. Sam’s already said she’s game to come; she claims she’s got no family back in Australia to go see. Jack may not be a Jedi mind reader like her, but the look in her eyes says that’s a big fat pile of cow pies. But he’s not gonna ask. People in this profession keep their personal lives a secret for a reason.

Now he’s on his way to invite Mac and his roommate. After last week he’s more than a little worried about how that’s gonna go over. Mac hasn’t seemed like himself the past few days. Which is understandable, given that his best friend was kidnapped, Mac was blackmailed into breaking the law, and he was totally convinced he was going to be arrested and sent back to prison again. But Jack’s also got the feeling things with Bozer aren’t that great.

People don’t understand what it means that we lie to them. They look at it as a betrayal. But really, it’s to save them, to protect them. Jack comes from a military family, he knows they understands that. But Boze is a civilian. He doesn’t have anyone in his family who had a job they couldn’t share. And to make things even worse, the one person who did have a secret, Mac, let him in on it.

That has to sting. The only equivalent to that, that Jack can think of, would be if his old war buddy Steve suddenly revealed that there was a whole other side to his life that he hadn’t told Jack about for months. Steve’s always calls me when something changes in his life. Sure, he can’t always give details, but at least Jack knows when that idiot goes off and takes another hare-brained risk. Jack is
well aware that even though Steve has left the SEALs, he still has a job where he puts his life on the line every day. He knows that someday he could get a call from one of the Five-0 team telling him that the worst has happened. It would be devastating, but it wouldn’t be an absolute shock.

But if Jack had had to call Boze and tell him Mac was gone, that boy would have been absolutely stunned and confused. He thought Mac had a nice safe job at a think tank, and now he has to come to terms with the fact that the only way his best friend is staying out of prison is by risking his life all over the world.

He’s more nervous when he knocks on the door than when he picked up his high school prom date and when he walked into the recruiting center in town combined. Everything between the team and Bozer and Mac is hanging by threads that the wrong move could snap.

Mac answers, and when he sees who it is he seems shocked and a little taken aback. “Hi Jack.”

“Hi kid.”

“I had my phone on. Did Phoenix try to call? What’s going on?” The kid looks worried, probably afraid this is the straw that broke the camel’s back for Thornton. Even after we keep showing him we’re not gonna toss him away, he doesn’t believe it. Jack can’t really blame the kid though, not after the life he’s had.

“Nope, we got nothin’ for the next week and a half. Patty’s handin’ over all the stuff she’d give us to our backup team.” He grins. “Because I’ve got my vacation time and I intend to use it goin’ home to Texas, to my family.”

“That’s good.” Mac glances over his shoulder at the clock on the wall. “Bozer’s gonna be back from a film pitch soon.”

“I’ll be gone before he comes. He still pissed at us?”

“We don’t talk about it.” Mac sounds shaky. “Best if we forget it.”

Jack feels his heart sinking. “Yeah. Best for everyone.” He turns around and walks back to the car.

“What were you gonna say?” Mac asks. Jack stops short.

“Nothing.”

“No, it wasn’t.” Mac follows Jack, cringing when the driveway stones seem to cut into his bare feet. “Jack, please don’t be mad. It’s just hard. Bozer’s mad, and you’re mad, and I just want things to go back to normal,” he whispers.

“Yeah, me too kid.” Jack puts a hand on Mac’s shoulder. “But what I was gonna say doesn’t matter.”

“Yes it does.” Mac says quietly. “A week ago you would have told me.” His sad eyes are too hard to resist. He just wants something to not be different. He wants someone to still treat him like nothing changed. And he’s right, before this mess I would have told him without hesitation.

“I was going to ask if you wanted to come back to Texas for Christmas, with my family. Riley does every year. And Cage is coming.” He doesn’t want the kid to feel uncomfortable accepting. “But with things with Bozer the way they are…”

“I want to come,” Mac says suddenly. “I need to get outta this town for a while.”
“Just don’t make Bozer more upset with you, okay? Cause he’s your best friend; you two gotta work things out.” Jack doesn’t want to make this any worse. “Make sure he knows he’s more than welcome to come too. He’s as much family as you are.” Mac nods.

Jack turns back to the car. “I gotta get going and pack. If you decide to come, text me, okay?”

“Okay.” Jack watches the kid walk back to the house. It’s not fair how much life has screwed him over. And it hurts even more that I was a part of that, by mistake or not.

MAC AND BOZER’S HOUSE

MAC ISN’T SUPPOSED TO BRING WORK HOME WITH HIM

“No. Absolutely not.” Bozer flings the dishrag into the sink. “Mac, you’re an adult, you can go where you want and do what you want. But I’m not coming.”

“Boze, you have to start talking to them sometime.”

“No, I don’t. They’re your friends. They don’t have to be mine.” He can see the hurt on Mac’s face, but it’s nothing compared to the hurt those people have inflicted on him.

“I don’t want to go knowing you’re upset that I did.”

Bozer knows this is a cruel thing to say, but he can’t help himself. “Since when did you start caring about how I felt about anything? Since when have you put me before them?”

He regrets it instantly when he sees the tears that fill Mac’s eyes the second he hears Bozer’s vicious words. “B-boze, I…”

“I’m sorry, Mac. I didn’t mean that. I’m sorry.”

“It’s just so hard,” Mac whispers. “I couldn’t tell you, and I wanted to, but I didn’t want to put you in danger. If anyone found out you knew, they would have sent us both to prison. Forever.” His voice shakes, and Bozer suddenly feels even guiltier. Even if he did keep secrets to protect himself, and no other reason, he has more than a right to.

It’s by no means easy for Bozer to forget what prison means for someone like Mac, but at the same time, he wasn’t there. It doesn’t haunt his dreams and put a shadow on every waking moment. It doesn’t inform every single decision he makes. He can’t begin to imagine what it’s like to have to second-guess yourself each time you make a choice. To wonder what you’re going to do that just might be the wrong move.

“I get it, Mac. It just hurts.” He’s going to be honest, because hiding what he really feels is only going to make this situation worse. “I wish you believed you could trust me to keep a secret.”

“It’s hard to trust anyone anymore,” Mac says quietly.

“You seem to trust Jack and Riley. And everyone there.”

“Because I have to. Bozer, if things were different, if they were the ones who weren’t allowed to know what I do, I wouldn’t tell them. Believe me.”

He does. He’s known Mac for a long time, and he knows how hard he struggles to trust anyone, ever. He’ll admit he’s jealous of how fast the others won Mac’s trust, but then again, isn’t there something people say about intense situations making relationships happen faster? Then again, there’s also something about those relationships dying out fast, and Boze doesn’t want to see Mac
lose anyone else. He may not be too fond of the Phoenix crew himself right now, but Mac finally has a few more people he’s not afraid of, and who don’t treat him like a subspecies of human for being a former convict.

Boze doesn’t want to drive a wedge any further between Mac and those people. *I can’t make him choose between them and me. It’s not fair to him.* And while part of him is pretty sure he can make that clear just by not being actively snarky about the Phoenix team, he’s also aware that if Mac feels like Bozer hates his work friends, he’s going to feel pressured to choose anyway.

*I need to make an effort, to let him see that it’s okay to be friends with them.*

“Okay, I’ll come with you. But I’m bringing my camera gear, so if they piss me off I can go try and shoot a western short film.” He grins at Mac, and Mac smiles back, just a little. “I promise, I’ll be nice.”

When he leaves, Mac is already texting Jack. *I really hope no one screws this up. Bozer used to think the worst thing that could happen at a family Christmas was a political discussion. Now, he’s pretty sure the worst possibility is him accidentally starting a fight with Jack’s family or letting the truth slip and getting Mac fired from the Phoenix and sent back to prison. I really hope this goes well.*

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A FEW HUNDRED MILES EAST OF ABILENE, TEXAS

IT FEELS GOOD TO BE ON THE WAY HOME

Jack plans on taking the long way to the ranch. It adds forty minutes to the trip but they stay well away from the general vicinity of Bishop Correctional. Mac doesn’t need more bad memories.

He hopes this trip gives Mac a different impression of Texas than his last visit. Jack’s always associated the smell of dust and mesquite with safety and home. He’s afraid Mac associates it with fear and pain. Jack will admit to feeling a slight twinge in his own stomach when he sees the turnoff he took a couple months ago. *If I never see that place again it’ll be too soon.*

He tries to put everything about that miserable op out of his mind. This isn’t the time to be dwelling on what happened. Mac’s moving on, or at least seems to be. Jack can’t figure out why he can’t do the same. *The kid got the worst of it by far. So why is it me that still has nightmares?* Jack’s never had them this long since the Delta tours.

To get his mind off the thoughts, he focuses on the chatter in the back seat. Mac, Bozer, and Riley are sitting there; Cage is in the passenger seat because apparently she’s fighting a cold and trying to avoid contaminating the others. Jack hopes she doesn’t contaminate him.

“So is it like the ranches on old westerns?” Bozer’s asking. He’s been plying Riley with questions nonstop since they left, but even though they’ve all been about the ranch, and Jack is much more qualified to answer them, Bozer hasn’t talked to him at all. “Do they do cattle drives and stuff?”

“Not really. They have horses, and they raise cattle, but the furthest they go is the stock auctions in Abilene.” Riley grins. “It’s still cool though.” She’s come prepared, with the heavy denim jeans instead of her usual ripped skinny ones, and Jack can see the bandana peeking out of her shirt collar. *Riley likes to ride, but she always gets dust up her nose.*

“Is it a big ranch?” Mac asks. It’s one of the first times he’s spoken up all day. Granted, they’re all sleepy, because they left LA at five AM on the Phoenix jet, which got them into Dallas. Jack rented a car for the rest of the way. Mac, Riley, and Boze slept most of the flight, which meant they missed the amazing sunrise Jack was treated to from the pilot’s seat. Cage is as alert as Jack, which might
have something to do with the empty coffee thermos mug in the center console.

Jack doesn’t drink coffee anymore, it made sleeping harder and for a while after the Deltas he was lucky to get any sleep at all. Now that he’s broken the addiction he doesn’t really care for it that much. Plus, it makes road trips a little more complicated, with having to track down restrooms and all.

He figures on stopping at a diner outside Abilene, it’s a long time to wait for food, but worth it. This little place was his and Pops’s favorite place to go after bringing in the cattle. Speaking of...Mac did ask about the size of the operation

“We run about a hundred head of prime Angus cattle each year.” Jack grins at the look on Mac’s face. “I’m used to wranglin’ your stubborn kind, but you been worse than Ol’ Brutus and Buddy Lee combined.”

Mac glares at him and mutters something under his breath.

“Be thankful I nicknamed you after a burger joint and not one of our old bulls,” Jack chuckles. *Kid reminds me more of a head-shy colt than a big ol’ tank of a stock bull.*

Bozer actually chuckles a little. Jack blinks. *Okay, maybe the way to win him over is humor.*

“Don’t think I ever told you what Buddy Lee liked doin’ when I was a kid,” Jack says. Riley groans from the backseat, she’s heard this a dozen times. “So my mom had this shampoo that smelled like strawberries…”

By the time they reach the diner, not only have Jack’s passengers heard how he got an actual cowlick, but also how his attempt to impress his high school crush ended with him trapped on the roof of the neighbor’s barn by three dogs, how he and his sister stole watermelons from Mr. Jacobs’s patch every year and made him think he was haunted, and how he and his cousin Cody accidentally set Uncle Tony’s car on fire.

Bozer starts laughing so hard he almost hyperventilates by the second story, and Jack considers it a success when, by the time they’re done eating and walking back out to the car, Bozer is asking him questions about the ranch.

“Well, there won’t be as many people there right now; we’re in between the stock run and the calving, so most of the hands have a couple months off work. And the ranch is half the size it used to be. When we lost Pops, Uncle Bill didn’t want to try and run his half o’ the place anymore, and he sold out from under. They started developin’ it right away, but at least most of the folks movin’ in leave us alone.” *I’m not gonna let myself dwell on how the lights from those houses dim the stars, or how those idiots with their big trucks scare the cattle, or how a lot of ‘em seem to think they know what ranching’s supposed to be like because they saw it in the movies.* “The ranch hands who live close stick around, keep an eye on things, but there’s only three of them right now. Momma lives at home by herself, but she keeps the place up well. And Great-Uncle Joey, one of Dad’s brothers, and Auntie Dorthy, live just down the road. Some of the other uncles and cousins help out during the busy season; half the family still lives in town.” *If you can call it that. Auga Azul is barely a sneeze on a map.* He’s pretty sure anyone who got lost enough to drive through would think it’s a ghost town. But he wouldn’t have it any other way.

Jack’s been away long enough that city driving doesn’t give him the headaches it used to. But he’d much rather cruise by the light of the stars instead of brake lights and street lamps, and watch for antelope and armadillos instead of drunks running red lights. Even in broad daylight, it’s a whole different experience.
The hum of car tires on dusty asphalt is calming, Jack can feel all the stress of the past few months melting away. Como, Nick, the Ghost, Bishop, Murdoc...all of it fades into the rearview. For a little while, he gets to pretend his job doesn’t exist, that he’s just Jack Dalton, tile salesman, Cowboys fan, and family bird facts encyclopedia.

Sometimes he wishes he would have left the Army when his tour was over and come home, like Pops. Found someone, settled down, raised a family. But when he looks at the others in the car with him, he can’t help but think that he couldn’t have asked for a better family than he’s got.

Mac keeps dozing off. He wants to stay awake, wants to be as interested in every detail of Jack’s home country as Jack clearly is; Mac is starting to think every signpost, mailbox (and the missing ones too) and fence has a story behind it, but he just can’t keep his eyes open. The car is warm, he didn’t sleep well with being stressed about the trip and Bozer and everything that went along with that, and constant low hum of the tires keeps dragging him under.

He wouldn’t mind sleeping a little longer; he slept most of the flight but he’s exhausted anyway. And he knows Jack would only pretend to be offended that Mac didn’t hear his stories. The problem is that every time Mac falls asleep, he dreams of a different car, a different ride through the Texas back country.

Each time he drifts off, he jerks awake, hoping he hasn’t screamed or cried, because all he ever sees is the blackness inside the trunk of a car, the leering hungry eyes of the man who didn’t quite trust him, but wanted him anyway. I’m safe. Everyone in this car, now, would protect me with their lives. He hopes this gets better, that he can sleep here without dreaming of Bishop, or El Noche. It’s just because I’m in a car. The house won’t be anything like a supermax cell. He wants to be okay, because he wants Jack to enjoy coming home, not have to worry about him. Maybe I shouldn’t have agreed to come after all.

Then they turn down a small two-track rut of a road, and Jack’s enthusiasm suddenly spikes. He goes from occasional anecdote to a full on stream-of-consciousness narrative, and Mac swears his Texas accent just got ten times more noticeable. “Over there’s the spot that used to flood every spring and a calf always got stuck...that’s the creek my cousins and I used to fish in...oh man, they cut down the swing oak! Are you kidding me?” Mac grins. He can’t quite reconcile this nostalgic farm boy with the terrifying death machine he’s seen Jack become on missions. But somehow Jack manages to be both people at once. If I met him this way first, I wouldn’t have been so afraid of him. Mac’s still trying to wrap his head around how Jack can seem so threatening and yet be one of the kindest people Mac’s ever had in his life.

Jack swings them into a driveway that looks even more pathetic than the road itself. They rumble over some kind of gate that’s lying on its side in the middle of the road. There’s no actual gate here, but there’s barbed wire fence on both sides of the driveway, stretching as far as Mac can see in both directions. Should have been paying attention to when it started. How big is this place?

There’s a massive green and cream house at the top of a small hill. Mac can see already that the shutters are lopsided, the porch posts need paint, and the siding is cracked and buckled. But it looks cozy and homey, with a stained-glass window facing the road, a little attic space with a painted chicken on the gable, and a swing on the porch swaying back and forth in the breeze. It looks like a home. Like a place a family lives who care about each other more than keeping up appearances. Dad’s house always looked perfect. Mac wasn’t allowed to leave his inventions out in the yard, or leave the house messy before he left for school.

Here, there’s a rusty bike propped against a wall, and a sandbox with one side broken and a host of random cast-metal farm equipment strewn in and around it. There’s a tractor visible in the barn that
looks like someone started to take it apart and then left in a hurry. *I could fix that. Maybe if I stay busy I’ll be too tired to dream at all.*

The second the car stops it’s swarmed by dogs. Or at least it feels like a swarm. Mac thinks there might be only two, but the way they’re jumping and barking he can’t be quite sure.

“Mav! Slip! You get back here right now!!!” Someone shouts. “Jack’ll wrestle both o’ ya later.”

A short woman with her greying red hair in a thick braid steps out onto the porch, shrugging a brown coat with a sheepskin collar around her shoulders. “Jackie, you get your butt over here and give me a hug this minute, young man.”

“Good to see you too, Momma.” Jack wraps the woman in a crushing hug.

“*What* in the name of sanity have you done to your hair?” Mrs. Dalton asks.

“Figured I’d take it off myself ‘fore it left on me,” Jack says with a grin.

“I miss that ridiculous cowlick.” She smirks, and it looks so much like Jack that Mac actually flinches a little.

“Yeah, but I don’t miss you lickin’ your hand to flatten it out.”

Riley leans toward Mac and whispers, “He’s had that mohawk as long as I’ve known him but she says the same thing every year.” She winks. “One of these days I’m gonna cut mine and see how she reacts to that.”

She follows Jack onto the porch, and receives an equally enthusiastic hug from Jack’s mom. Mac wonders if Sam and Bozer feel as nervous as he does. *Probably not. Neither of them seem to have any aversion to physical contact.* Cage doesn’t strike him as the huggy type, but she also doesn’t cringe and flinch when people so much as brush against her. And Boze...well, Bozer’s always hung off of people like he’s a tree sloth.

Jack walks back to the car. “Come on, don’t be shy, she won’t bite,” he chuckles. “Momma, this is Sam, this is Bozer, and this is Mac.” Jack claps a hand on Mac’s shoulder. He tries not to move.

Sam walks up onto the porch, and now that he knows her Mac can see the little flick of her hand, pushing her hair behind her left ear, that means she’s getting into character in a cover. “I’m Riley’s roommate, I’m a psychologist.”

“Riley talked about you, when she called me a couple weeks ago.” Momma smiles broadly. “Said she has a live in counselor. Tell you what, when you figure out how to get her to admit she changed my phone’s autocorrect settings, tell me your tricks.”

“That was one time!” Riley protests, cheeks going slightly pink.

“Every time I texted someone to ask where they were, it inserted the entire chorus of some song I’d never even heard of.”

“Jack put me up to it!”

The playful, sting-less scoldings do enough to calm Mac’s out of control pulse that he feels slightly more comfortable joining the others on the porch, Bozer tagging along. “Hi, Mrs. Dalton.” Momma smiles; she doesn’t give him the enthusiastic hug she gave Jack or Riley, and he guesses she’s the perceptive kind of person who waits to see what the other person is comfortable with. *I like her*
already.

“I’m Mac’s roommate.” Boze goes for the exaggerated theatrical handshake. “Nice to meet you, ma’am.”

“Well, let me tell you boys right now, I am neither “Mrs. Dalton” nor “ma’am”. You can call me Meg if you must, but you’re all family if you’re Jack’s kids, so just call me Momma.” She pulls Jack toward the door, sighing when the dogs race in as well. “Now get in here, dinner’ll be gettin’ cold.”

DALTON FAMILY RANCH

IT FEELS MORE LIKE HOME THAN DAD’S HOUSE EVER DID

Mac’s a little surprised at how easily Jack’s mother accommodates to more people in her life. He’d expect someone who lives alone to be a little overwhelmed at suddenly having to cook for a small army.

But the table already has extra leaves in it, and there’s a massive pot of chili bubbling on the stove, and Meg Dalton looks like she’s having nothing but fun as she pulls a pan of cheese-covered biscuits out of the oven. Mac wonders if the entire Dalton clan has the same adoptive streak as the one member of it he knows. She probably just invites people over for dinner randomly. This house is probably full more than it’s empty. The woman doesn’t strike him as the sort to be content puttering around a massive empty house by herself.

The bowl the biscuits are in has a piece of masking tape on the bottom with M. Dalton scrawled on it in Sharpie. Jack notices Mac’s glance. “Momma always cooks about five dishes for church potlucks. But I swear everyone in town bought the exact same bowls from the town store when they were going outta business. We’ve lost at least four, three of which probably weren’t ours to begin with. So now everything’s got a name on it.”

Meg asks Jack to say grace over the food, and Mac doesn’t miss the way Jack spends a little extra time being thankful for family of all kinds. Or the tighter squeeze both Bozer and Riley give his hands at that part. He takes a deep breath so he doesn’t get any more emotional, and blames the sniffle and the few tears in his eyes on the first ill-advised mouthful of very hot chili.

HOME

SOMEHOW THIS PLACE FEELS LIKE IT NEVER REALLY CHANGES

When all six of them are so stuffed they can’t manage another bite of chili, biscuit, or Momma’s sweet potato pie (which Cage seems a little put off by, pushing most of it around on her plate with a fork, until Bozer takes it off her hands with a wink and a grin), Jack collapses into Dad’s La-Z-Boy in the living room. Momma’s already got the tree up, it’s a scraggly-looking little fake pine from the 1970s that has stiff, plasticky needles wound onto stiff wire branches with some weird mixture of yarn and paper-coated wires. More needles fall off it every year, Jack swears it’s as much of a pest as a real tree and that if they don’t get a new one soon all they’re going to have left will be a heap of bare wire branches.

Another family tradition is that Momma waits until Jack comes home to decorate the tree. The ornaments and lights are all still packed away in crumbly cardboard boxes shoved in the closet under the stairwell. Jack starts pulling them out until he finds the one that says “lights” in Pops’s handwriting.
Momma turns on the radio on the coffeetable and twists the dial until she finds a Christmas station. Jack didn’t tell the team that this is why he doesn’t like listening to Christmas music in the car. It’s not meant to be half-sung-along to while you’re also cursing at the car in front of you, and getting interrupted by angry drivers honking. It’s supposed to be listened to here at home, with family, laughing about Pops every time “Jingle Bell Rock” and “Rockin’ Around the Christmas Tree” play three times in an hour. *He couldn’t stand either one of them.*

The radio fritzes in a burst of static and Momma swings the antenna back and forth. “It gets worse every year. I swear Pops kept this thing running from sheer willpower.” Jack Sr. “Jay” Dalton had been the county ham radio enthusiast. Even had his own broadcast for a while. He built that radio out of scrap parts from the dump and the junkyard behind the body shop. Jack doesn’t have the faintest idea how to fix it.

Mac looks over from where he’s flopped onto a couch with Bozer. “Let me see.” He pulls out his knife, removes the back of the radio, and begins fiddling with the wires. A couple minutes later the static clears out with a soft hum, and predictably, they catch “Jingle Bell Rock” in the last minute of the song. Jack laughs.

Mac makes a few more adjustments and then puts the radio back together. “Should be okay till next year at least.”

“Thank you.” Momma pats Mac’s shoulder; Jack realizes too late that he should have warned her that Mac doesn’t react well to being touched. He’s suitably shocked when the kid seems to actually melt into her touch. “I haven’t seen anyone do that since we lost Jay.”

Mac smiles shyly at her. “It’s the one thing I’m good at.” Jack cringes at the pain hidden under those words. *He really does think he’s worthless if he doesn’t do something useful.* He wonders if the kid fixed the radio so he’d seem like he’s pulling his weight around the house. *Ouch.*

Jack pulls the lights out, and Momma untangles them, finding the plug and sticking it into the wall socket, shooing Maverick away from them. Jack shakes his head; the younger of the two Australian Blue Heelers is an idiot. He’s Jack’s favorite.

The string remains depressingly dark. “Shoot,” Momma mutters. “I guess I never got around to fixin’ them last year.”

“May I?” Mac takes the non-functional light string from Momma’s hands. He quickly studies them. “How long have you had these?”

Momma’s cheeks go slightly pink. “Oh, it’s been since before Pops died. I haven’t had the heart to replace them. He always liked that set.”

“Because they’re so old, the lights are in a series circuit instead of parallel. You have one burnt out bulb and it’s shorting out the whole string.”

“Oh, I know that, honey.” Momma grins. “I just ran clean outta replacements, that’s all.”

“I might be able to whip up something temporarily.” Mac runs out to the kitchen and starts pulling open drawers. “Where’s your tinfoil?”

“Tinfoil?” Momma asks.

Jack only grins. “Oh, my man never jokes about tinfoil.”

Mac returns with a tiny twist of tinfoil and a grin. “All we have to do is…” He pops the broken bulb
out with his knife, then jams the little shred of foil in its place, “bridge the connection and…” he plugs in the whole string, and the lights flicker on, “we have lights!”

“Is that safe?” Momma asks, hesitantly.

“Yes,” Mac replies confidently. “I used to do this all the time to the lights Bozer’s sister Deja had hanging in her room. Nothing burnt down.”

“After watching you fix that radio, I’ll take my chances with your tinfoil lights.” Momma starts winding them around the branches. “Jack, can you get them up there are the top? We have to get one high enough to get it in the angel’s hand.”

Jack leans against the tree, praying he doesn’t fall into it and make a fool of himself in front of the whole team. Good thing we didn’t let Mac try and do this. With the kid’s luck, he’d have ended up hopelessly tangled in the string of lights, and make the tree fall over on top of him. “Got it!”

There’s a brief moment of triumph, with the newly gleaming string of lights almost matching the bright sparkle in Mac’s eyes. And then there’s a little too much light…

Jack’s already running for the fire extinguisher in the stairwell. “Nice job, genius, you just set the tree on fire!”

Mac’s just staring at the conflagration, as Jack douses the three smoking branches with white foam and Meg pulls the plug out of the wall. “That shouldn’t have happened, I’ve fixed lights like that a dozen times...I’m so sorry.”

“Nothing to be sorry for,” Meg says with a smile, dropping the plug to wrap an arm around Mac’s shoulders. “Because if half of what my son says about you is true, small fires are just part of the required process of being introduced to Angus MacGyver.”

JACK’S HOUSE

THANKFULLY IT’S STILL STANDING AFTER INCIDENT FLAMING TREE

Riley wants to spontaneously combust herself from a combination of both the strangeness of seeing the tree on fire, and the look on Mac’s face when it happens. She’s seen that look a few times in the field before, when one of his tricks goes horribly wrong, but this is the first time Mac failing to do something right doesn’t mean possible imminent death.

But she also doesn’t want to embarrass him in front of someone he barely knows, and who he’s probably desperate to gain the approval of. She remembers being worried about whether Jack’s family would accept her the first time she came. It was arguably more nerve-wracking than meeting a boyfriend’s family.

Momma must see how upset Mac is too. “It’s okay, honey. You know, I should have tossed both the tree and the lights a long time ago.” She smiles. “Now I have an excuse to get new stuff.”

“Well, there’s another string of lights, the ones for the mantel,” Jack says, holding up a colorful riot of them. “We could put those on the tree and just not do the mantel this year.” He glances at the scorched branches. “And we can turn this part to the back. Like in that little Christmas special with the ninja elves.” Riley will never be over the fact that Jack unironically watches Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer, Frosty the Snowman, the Charlie Brown Christmas special, and Prep and Landing (although he won’t shut up about wanting them to get Christmas themed gear during the whole thing) every year. Usually with her. I’ll never forget the time we got called up for an op on
Christmas Eve and he requested that our call signs be “Little Drummer Boy” and “Tree Skirt”.

“Sounds good to me.” Riley starts getting the ornament boxes while Jack and Momma put up the new lights.

She turns around with one of the boxes and nearly rams into Bozer.

“Here, let me help you with that.” Riley rolls her eyes.

“Boze, I’m a grown woman, I think I can manage to carry one small box of ornaments.” She shoves it at him anyway. “But if you’re so determined to get in my way you might as well do something useful.”

She hands another box (making sure it’s the ones labeled ‘unbreakable’) to Mac, and a third to Sam. She pulls out the old milk can, and then sits down on the couch (after shooing Maverick off it) next to Cage.

She pulls the lid off the can and takes out a small knitted mitten. All the cloth ornaments have to be kept in the tin, so the mice don’t get into them. No matter how large the barn cat population gets, somehow there are always mouse nests in the ornament boxes, under the sink, and in unused shoes in the closet.

Sam rummages through her box and pulls out a tiny typewriter. “This is cute.”

“That one’s actually one of mine,” Riley says. “Grammaw couldn’t see the difference between this and a computer one, so she bought it for me, and she was so excited when I opened it at the party that year.” She has to admit she can totally see how the mistake happened, the keyboard was made very flat, and the paper flicked up in the back covered with words does look a lot like a computer screen. *It’s the last time I saw her before...* It was harder to lose Grammaw Dalton than it was to watch her own father walk out on them. *Because I knew she actually cared.*

“That’s precious.” Riley takes the ornament and walks over to hang it on the tree, next to Jack, who’s putting up the one with the Delta insignia painted on it that one of his nephews made for him.

She spins around, startled, when there’s a panicked yell from the other couch. Bozer, apparently under the impression he was holding an ornament, just pulled out a very live and startled mouse. Bozer shrieks and tosses it onto the floor, the small brown furball bolts under the couch, and the dogs both go nuts in the same second, parking and pawing under the furniture.

Boze hands his box to Mac and stands up, wiping his hands on his shirt and shuddering. Riley pushes the milk can his direction. “Here. This one’s guaranteed mouse-free.”

He whispers to her while Momma’ back is turned, she’s putting up a set of blown-glass ornaments Riley knows Jack brought home from an op in Venice for her and Pops’s thirty-fifth anniversary. “So how long have you been, you know…” He mimes typing on a computer, then holding a gun like a James Bond film star.

“Wow.” Riley shakes her head. “Your subtlety could use work.”

“I’m an actor. Subtlety is not my strong suit. Charades on the other hand…”

“Please quit while you’re ahead.” Riley shoves a handful of glittery icicle ornaments into his hands and pushes him toward the tree. “Stop failing at flirting, you’re only embarrassing yourself.”

“I’ll remember that when it’s New Year’s Eve and you want someone to kiss when the ball drops.”
“I’d rather kiss a Wookie,” Riley deadpans, and turns around just slowly enough to see the shock on his face. *Now that was a good old fashioned Jack burn.*

The rest of tree decorating continues to consist of discovering mouse nests, Mac making new ornament hangers out of paperclips when they run out of real ones, Bozer not knowing when his attempts at romance have been shot down, and Momma and Jack sharing the stories behind some of the ornaments.

Finally, they all collectively step back, looking up and down the whole tree. Riley likes the eclectic hodgepodge of wedding and anniversary ornaments, stuff the Dalton kids made over the years, and random additions that came with new members of the family, inside jokes, or just plain “well, that’s cute, let’s get that one”. There are an inordinate amount of ones from foreign countries, she can see the one she bought for Momma in Hungary, the little carved wooden deer.

“Hey, where’s the snowman?” Jack asks, glaring accusingly from the tree to Riley. “Did you hide him again?”

“Yes, because he’s a demented monstrosity and someday one of the kids is gonna be mentally scarred for life.”

“He was my kindergarten Christmas project!”

“Exactly.” Jack turns to Bozer. “Hey, go through that milk can again and see if there’s a felt snowman, about so big.” He holds up his hand.

“Yikes.” Bozer picks up the felt figure. “Why does he have a warped traffic cone on his head?”

“That’s a cowboy hat, dude.” Jack says.

“It doesn’t look like one.”

The grimy, stained felt ornament has only one eye, a nose that stopped being a fake carrot and became an oversize blob of hot glue sometime in the distant past, the ‘traffic cone’ cowboy hat, a lariat that appears to be strangling its user, and horrifically mismatched and not-at-all-in-a-straight-line buttons. And to top it all off, a demented Joker smile. Apparently the ink pen Jack was using bled into the felt a little much.

Riley tosses the malformed snowman at Jack. “You like him so much, you find a place to hang him up. Above the eye level of six years old and under.”

Jack does so, giving the monstrosity a place of honor near the top. Then he pulls something out of his pocket. “Hey kid, c’mere, I missed one.” Mac looks confused, but steps up. His eyes go wide when he sees what Jack has pulled out of his pocket; it’s one of Mac’s paperclips. The one he made into the shape of a Phoenix. “Took a liking to this one, I think it should have a spot up here on the tree too.”

Mac stands carefully on tiptoe to hang the ornament from the branch Jack points out, a very visible one near the top. Riley smiles.

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**JACK’S ROOM**

*YES, THERE ARE STILL METALLICA, AC/DC AND ROLLING STONES POSTERS. DON’T JUDGE.*
When he was fourteen, Jack broke his first bronc. Duke, the old bay, came from the slaughter pens, a wild-eyed critter with a mean kick. Jack got thrown more times than he cares to remember, and some days he wonders if that’s the reason his left shoulder gets dislocated so often. But he never gave up.

Getting past Mac’s defenses is the same way. Jack gets pushed out and snapped at, given the cold shoulder, when he’s too curious. But the kid’s warming up to him. Someday they’ll be the best partnership Jack could ask for. Just like him and Duke.

Jack’s dreams of the old horse are interrupted by a soft sound coming from the room across the hall. He sits up quickly, pushing the blankets aside, feeling the bite of the chilly desert night air.

Jack feels like a new parent who’s conditioned to wake up at the slightest noise their child makes. He’s been attuned to his partner ever since he first got Riley paired up with him, and realized she sometimes had nightmares about her abusive father.

Now Riley’s nightmares are pretty much a thing of the past, but he’s got a new kid to worry about. And from the sound of it, and the fact that it’s the guest bedroom and not his sister’s old one; the one Riley and Cage have now, that the sound is coming from...That has to be Mac.

Jack rushes across the hall, knocking on the door in case the kid locked it; he has a tendency to do that and Jack can’t blame him.

Bozer pulls the door open, eyes wide. “Jack?”

There’s another choking cry. Mac is panting for breath, hands scrabbling wildly at the blankets around him. Bozer looks at Jack. “He won’t wake up.”

“Don’t touch him.” Jack has the feeling Boze already knows that’s gonna be a bad idea, but he figures he’ll tell him anyway, just to be sure.

Jack kneels beside the bed, trying to ignore the sudden resurgence of the memory of Mac on another bed, in another house, the kid wrapped up in a different patchwork quilt.

“Mac, wake up, it’s okay. You’re safe.” He doesn’t expect it to be easy to snap the kid out of the nightmare, and it’s not. It takes at least five more minutes of coaxing, and by the end Jack can see Riley, Sam, and Momma milling in the hallway, looking concerned. They haven’t been front and center for the worst of Mac’s nightmares like Jack and Bozer.

Finally Mac blinks awake, eyes unfocused and confused, but when his hand touches Jack’s and wraps around his fingers he calms down. “Sorry. I’m okay. Just couldn’t get out.” He shivers and turns away to stare at the wall.

“It’s okay kid, you’re safe. No one’s gonna hurt you here.” Jack can see Mac fumbling ineffectively with his hands at the blankets he’s more or less kicked off himself. Jack pulls the sheet and quilt up around the kid’s shoulders and tucks him in like he’s eight years old.

He deserved to be treated kindly as a kid and all he ever got was hurt.

Mac burrows into the blankets and slowly his breathing evens out.

Jack walks out into the hall where the others are waiting. “He’s okay. He just has real bad nightmares,” he adds for Momma’s benefit. Riley and Cage move off, and Bozer steps back into the room, leaving Jack with Momma.

Momma looks at him with sad eyes. “Jackie, I know I got no call to be askin’ about that boy’s life. An’ it ain’t fair to him to be askin’ behind his back anyhow. But anyone with two eyes can see he’s hurtin’.”
Jack hasn’t told the family much about Mac. Just that he’s a contractor for the tile company Jack supposedly owns. Just like they think Riley’s his social media coordinator and computer expert. But there’s got to be some explanation for why Mac screams in the night that Jack’s family can accept.

“Kid drew the short straw in the parents department,” Jack says. “Mom died, and if I had my guess his dad was a mean son of a bitch.”

“Where’d you get that mouth, Jackie?” Momma scolds quietly. “But if you’re saying it I guess the man prob’ly deserves it.” She sighs. “It ain’t right to see kids walking around with that kinda pain in ‘em.”

Jack can agree with that. “I’m tryin’ to help him, but it’s hard when he won’t talk.”

“Don’t push him.” Momma rests a hand on Jack’s arm. “He’ll let you in when he’s good and ready.” She shuffles off back down the hall, Pops’s too large slippers slapping on the wood floor. Jack grabs the quilt and pillow off his bed and walks back to the still-open door of Mac and Bozer’s room.

“I’ll stay here in case it happens again. Boze, you’re welcome to my room if you want.”

“I’m staying with him.” Bozer says. He hasn’t gotten back in bed, he’s sitting in the chair in the corner, watching Mac like if he takes his eyes off him the kid will disappear.

“Jack,” Bozer says quietly. “I need you to tell me what happened to him.” Bozer’s normally warm brown eyes are swirling with pain and confusion. “I know the bits and pieces, but Mac couldn’t ever tell me everything. I think the least I deserve, after all the lies, is some truth.”

Jack can’t deny that.

“You have every right to blame us, all of us, for what happened to him in there.”

“I have been. But the thing is, if it was your fault, Mac wouldn’t trust you anymore. And he does. And I want to know why.”

Jack sighs. He does deserve the truth about it. “We got on the bad side of the FBI for a while; the Phoenix isn’t technically supposed to work on US soil.” That was the wrong thing to say; Bozer’s eyes go even wider. He just realized we’ve been dragging Mac not just across the city or state but around the world. All the time. “Our boss, not Thornton, but the real boss, decided the best way to get us out of trouble was to work a joint operation to take out a cartel head called El Noche.”

“From the Meridas?” Bozer asks. Right, he would probably have known from Mac’s vigilante work. “That’s one of the cartels…” He trails off and his hand strays to a guitar pick hanging from a worn string around his neck. Oh shit. Jack hadn’t looked over the records from Jerry Bozer’s shooting. Now he recalls that one of the cartels in the shootout was suspected to be the Meridas.

“Yeah. And El Noche was in prison here in Texas, in Bishop Correctional. So our boss, Oversight, decided to send Mac there undercover to break El Noche out, track him to his compound in Mexico, and rip the whole operation out by the roots.” Bozer’s hand is clenched around the arm of the chair. “I was supposed to be watching his back in there. And I made a mistake, and he paid for it.” Jack takes a deep breath. “There’s not a day goes by that I don’t look at that kid and know that what happened to him in there was on me.”

“What were you going to do about it?” Bozer asks suddenly. “Were you his cellmate? Were you with him every second of the day?” Jack shakes his head. “Then as much as I want to blame you, I can’t. Because you have no idea how many times I wondered if I could have done that. Turned myself in with him. Gone inside with him. Protected him. But I learned that no one has any control in
a place like that except the people who are willing to do unspeakable things to get it.”

Jack sighs. “But it wasn’t your job to protect him. It is mine.”

“And I still wish you had been. I’m still more than a little pissed. But you were almost as trapped as he was.” Bozer sighs. “That’s why I turned the job offer down. I can’t come to work for a place that might ask me to let my best friend get hurt and do nothing. Or worse, ask me to be the one who hurts him.” Bozer glances at the huddled, quietly breathing form under the blankets.

“I get that.” Jack hates everything about that op. Oversight was out of line; and Jack’s questioned decisions before but this took it to a whole new level. If it so much as looked like it might happen again, he’d walk out of there with Mac and take their chances.

“For what it’s worth, I don’t hate you,” Bozer says quietly. “I’m glad you’re there to protect him. That at least he has someone watching his back. I wanted to, when he was the Phoenix, and I couldn’t. And if I have to know he’s going and risking getting killed, I’m glad to know you’re trying to keep him safe.”

“What’s with the sudden change of heart?” Jack asks.

Bozer looks down at his hands. “I never saw you talk him down from a nightmare before. You couldn’t ever hurt him. Not when seeing him in pain hurt you as much as it hurt him.”

Mac’s gotten used to waking up in unfamiliar places. At least this is a good one, and he remembers how he got here. That’s not always the case. He blinks awake to the low clanging of a bell.

His nose is cold; it’s chillier in Texas than he expected it to be. Bozer seems as distressed by that fact as Mac is, rubbing his arms and carefully keeping his feet on the braided rag rugs like a game of hopscotch. Mac puts on a sweatshirt and his tennis shoes before going downstairs.

Mrs. Dalton is in the kitchen, whipping pancake batter in a scratched yellow and white bowl. Sam is cracking eggs into a glass and then sliding them into a pan. And Riley’s just stepping up onto the porch with an old coffee can in her hand and three cats trailing her.

“Don’t look at me like that, it’s not my fault it still smells like bacon even after you’ve licked out every particle of grease.” She slams the door behind her, sets the coffee can in a corner, and then looks at Mac and Bozer. “Come on, you don’t want to miss the sunrise.”

Mac has to admit standing in the chilly morning air is worth it. The sky is covered in streaks of lavendar and peach, with the sun spreading more and more white rays across the whole thing. But the more he stares, the more he notices there’s something odd about the lower edge of the horizon, something moving...the shapes finally solidify into four men on horseback. They’re coming at an easy pace, steadily growing larger against the sky. Then one of the horses seems to crouch and leap into a run, getting closer much, much faster. There’s a familiar voice whooping and hollering, as the rider leans over the horse’s neck.

“Is that….” Mac trails off, watching the chestnut horse racing full tilt for the house.

“Yes, that’s Jack.” Riley’s leaning on the porch post with a very amused grin.

“He’s not gonna be able to—” And then Jack’s horse practically sits down, skidding up to the porch in a cloud of reddish dust that flies into Mac’s eyes and makes him choke and start coughing. Bozer yelps.
Jack’s laughing as he slides off. “Scare ya, kids?”

“Jack, you know you scare everyone with that trick the first time.” Riley smacks his shoulder.

“I was afraid ol’ Winnie forgot how to do that,” Jack says, slapping some dust off his sleeves. He turns back and pats his horse affectionately on the nose. “Think he likes it as much as me.”

“You’re both show-offs,” Riley chuckles warmly. “Your mom’s got breakfast waiting.” Jack nods and walks inside, Bozer following him, probably eager to be doing something that gets him in front of the warm stove.

Mac wonders, for a moment, what the clicking sound is. Then he sees the spurs on Jack’s boots. This feels like he’s woken up in the wrong era. Like somehow someone turned back time and he’s living in one of the old westerns Grandpa used to watch.

Jack flings his hat onto the hat rack in the hall with a frighteningly accurate precision. Mac stares after him, too much in shock to be able to say anything as coherent as “Good morning.” Jack, who is notorious for not getting out of bed until the last possible moment, has apparently been up for hours. And it’s barely pushing sunrise.

Riley can only shake her head at Jack’s insanity. One of these days that’s not gonna work and he and his horse are going to end up inside the house.

Three more riders amble up to the house much more calmly than Jack. “Eric, Mason, Juli, this is Mac.” She grins.

“Jack adopt another one?” Eric asks.

“Three, actually.” Riley can’t help grinning at the look on his face. “Don’t worry, they won’t eat you out of house and home. One of them’s a really good cook.” There’s a muffled curse from the kitchen that sounds an awful lot like Bozer just discovered the stove burner that shocks everyone on contact and doesn’t actually heat up.

Julio, who at some point everyone ended up calling “Juli” and at least three of Jack’s younger nieces and nephews have called “Hula-hoop”, chuckles. “He’d be hard pressed to beat Meg’s cookin’, but I’m willin’ to give him a chance. How are you, rizado?” He’s always called her “curly” because of her wild hair, which she never tries to tame when she comes home to the ranch.

“Just fine, Juli.”

“Heard you were in a car accident few months ago.” That’s the official story for what happened at Como. When Riley woke up in the hospital, Jack was sitting right next to her, and the first thing he told her was that Momma and the entire congregation of Butte Baptist Church had been texting him hourly asking for updates. Riley’s been a Dalton to the whole town since she first became Jack’s partner.

The family has a tendency to pick up new members whenever they can. Eric and his wife and their new baby Cash, whom Riley’s only seen in pictures because last year he had an ear infection over Christmas, live down the street in the house that used to be Grammaw and Grandpappy’s. Riley knows for a fact they eat at Momma’s more often than they do their own house.

While they sit around the table demolishing the stacks of pancakes, bacon, and eggs, and Bozer nurses his slightly scorched fingers, Momma asks what the plans for the day are. Her own, apparently, are to get started on the cooking for the party. The Dalton clan, thanks to the adoptive
tendencies, is ever-growing. They’ll need plenty of food.

Bozer, despite his mishap with the stove, immediately offers to help. “I make Christmas dinner every year. The Bozer Family Pastrami is a tradition now.”

“Oh honey, you ain’t seen nothin’ till you’ve seen a spread for a Texas Christmas,” Momma says, grinning.

“Sounds good to me,” Bozer smiles.

“You’ll have to share space with Auntie Dot,” Jack says, grinning. “She always comes to pitch in.” Riley smiles at the thought of the little old woman with her arms that barely bend anymore, and her back permanently stooped with arthritis, who still putters around the kitchen with a smile and a spatula, ready to lend her eighty-six years of cooking wisdom to the world.

“Cattle seem pretty content,” Eric says. “There’s some fencing starting to sag, so we’ll probably ride and check it today. Don’t want the girls gettin’ frisky when we have a lot of people here.”

“I’ll check a section with Mac,” Jack says.

“Thought you hated ridin’ fence,” Juli mumbles around a mouthful of bacon.

“Can’t take the kid here out around the cattle. He’d prob’ly fall off his horse and start a stampede,” Jack chuckles, and Mac goes red in the face and takes such a large swallow of milk he chokes. Which only seems to cement Jack’s opinion. Better get used to it. Jack becomes the world’s biggest tease out here.

THE BARN

MAC’S PREVIOUS EXPERIENCE WITH HORSES HAS BEEN LESS THAN AWESOME

Mac purposefully takes his time eating his breakfast after Jack basically volunteers him into helping check the fencelines. Not that he wouldn’t gladly help fix anything around here, but he’d rather ride across the place in the old pickup parked beside the house, not on a horse.

He doesn’t want to admit that he’s scared in front of the three other cowhands, but once they’re all back outside and the other riders have headed off with chain binders and wirecutters strapped to their saddles, Mac tries to tell Jack that he’s not going to be able to do this.

“Not dressed like that, of course you’re not,” Jack chuckles. “Go grab a pair of spare boots from the closet, and there’s leather gloves in the breadbox by the door. You can’t ride in those shoes, and you sure as hell can’t handle barb wire fence barehanded.” He shoves Mac’s shoulder gently. “I’ll get the horses ready, you can come meet me at the barn.”

Mac does manage to explain the problem to Riley, while he’s searching for a pair of boots that will fit him and not slip through stirrups. “I can’t ride.”

Riley chuckles. “I never rode till I came out here with Jack the first time. Trust me, he’ll teach you right. You’ll be running all over the place in no time.”

“It’s not just that I don’t know how.” Mac shudders. “I’m scared to.”

Riley stops him, turns him so he has to look her in the eyes. “Jack won’t make you do anything you’re not comfortable with. Just tell him, and he’ll take it easy on you.” She smiles. “And you’ll
enjoy it, eventually. I’m gonna go riding with Sam this morning, show her around.” Mac nods and
swallows, but even Riley doesn’t really get it. He hopes Jack, who obviously can make a horse do
anything he wants it to, will understand, but he doesn’t hold out much hope.

When he gets to the barn, Jack’s leading out the chestnut he was riding earlier, and a grey horse, both
saddled.

Mac decides it’s best to just choke out what he has to say right now. “Um...I’m not the biggest fan of
horses,” He whispers.

“Why?” Jack asks, slapping the grey horse’s hindquarters. The big mare moves out of the way with a
huff.

“I rode one once.” Jack glances at the kid, clearly surprised.

“Really?”

“It was a neighbor’s horse. Old Man McGinty got her in a swap. She was real pretty, golden
palomino. And I made up my mind I was gonna ride her.” Mac shrugs. “Snuck over to his place one
night. Had to distract his dog Hector with the last of the ham from the fridge, but I got over the fence.
And then the horse started looking bigger up close. I couldn’t figure how to get on, so I just climbed
the fence and when she came past, I jumped.”

“Well, that was your mistake right there, cowboy,” Jack chuckles. “You jump on a horse like that,
she’s gonna think you’re a cougar fixin’ to eat ‘er. Today, you’re gonna learn how to do it right.”

Jack can’t stop grinning at the thought of a young Mac running out hell-bent on riding some
neighbor’s half wild horse. For a smart kid, he sure does beat all sometimes. Obviously no one
bothered to teach him basic common sense around horses.

“Silver here’s a smart girl, but some o’ these fools ‘ll blow their bellies out when ya saddle ‘em.”
Jack gently knees the mare in the belly. “If ya don’t make ‘em blow out, you go to get in the saddle
and it’ll slide right around with ya.” That was one of Duke’s favorite tricks. Jack doesn’t know how
many times being in a hurry and trusting the fool horse landed him in the dirt. Or mud. Or Duke’s
apparent favorite, a nice fresh heap of manure. “See, it’s all tight now.” He leads the mare into the
round pen. “She can’t get up to much in here.” Duke could, I can still see the different colored
boards where he smashed right into the side of it and knocked part of it clean over.

The kid’s shaking. “Jack, I don’t know if I can do this.”

“Trust me. Silver ain’t gonna hurt ya.” Jack would honestly be more afraid of a car crash than of
Silver doing any damage to anyone. The car crash is about a hundred times more likely. “Just gimme
yer foot.”

Mac rests his right boot in Jack’s hands. “Other leg, genius,” Jack says, and Mac quickly corrects the
movement. “Now swing the right one up and over.” He resists the urge to toss Mac completely over
the horse’s back. He did it to Riley, her first time. But he’s seen what happens when Mac ends up on
the ground. So he gives just enough of a boost for Mac to get in the saddle.

“Now squeeze her with your knees. Gentle like, or she’ll take off on ya.” Silver moves into an easy
walk. Mac’s pulling back on the reins so hard he’s leaning in the saddle, and Jack shakes his head.

“You don’t have to hold her back. Horses ain’t like cars. They wanna live as much as you do.” Jack
shrugs. “Most o’ the time, anyway.” Mac relaxes his grip on the reins and the mare extends her neck
with a grateful shake of her head. *Sorry ol’ girl. But I know you’re good with the newbies.*

He lets the kid make a few more circuits, at a walk, a jogging lope that Silver can do that’s much less jarring than a full-on trot, and a gentle canter. Mac’s loosening up a little, his shoulders more relaxed, posture better, not looking so terrified of falling at any second.

Jack opens the gate. “Okay, bring her out here. Now you don’t pull the bit to turn her, you just lay the reins on her neck and she’ll move away from them, okay?” The kid’s still holding one side of the rope reins in each hand, fingers tense. *Neck reining usually means you can use just one hand, frees the other one up for roping, or whatever.* But that’ll come in time. For now, the kid’s on a horse, and that’s what matters.

Jack swings up onto Winchester’s back, patting the gelding’s neck. “Wanna take a quick loop around the place?”

“The Um…” Mac glances longingly at the safe confines of the round pen. “Okay.”

Riley saddles Miss Kitty, the red roan mare who seemed to take a liking to her when she first came. Cage chooses a black gelding from the pasture, and she saddles up with the ease of someone who’s been riding since they were old enough to walk. The way Jack does it.

Riley’s still a little skittish around horses, after all, she’s a city girl and she’s not always sure she trusts something that big that has a mind of its own. It doesn’t help that when Jack gets drunk he tells her about all the mishaps he and the other ranch hands have had.

Sam seems to be as good with horses as humans. When the gelding shies slightly at a barn cat running through, Sam stops cinching the saddle and goes around to the horse’s nose, whispering something that is either too quiet for Riley to understand or is a foreign language she isn’t familiar with.

They both ride off, in the opposite direction from Mac and Jack. Riley doesn’t want Mac to feel like he’s being hovered over, and she also doesn’t want to risk spooking his horse or making him more nervous than he clearly already is.

There’s still a chill in the air from the night before, and Riley lets the sleeves of her coat slide down over her hands on the reins. Cage is doing the same with the overly large sweater she’s wearing; Riley’s pretty sure Momma Meg must have loaned it to her, because it doesn’t really seem like Sam’s usual.

“At least it’s not snowing,” Riley says, kicking Miss Kitty to a more rapid pace, since she can feel the mare tugging on the reins, eager to let off some steam. “Two years ago, we got half an inch and everyone freaked out. Including me.”

Cage grins. “The first time I saw snow was with my family when we went on a trip for Christmas. My dad took us all to New South Wales, to the mountains, when I was ten. I thought it was magic.” She glances down at the ground. “I’d only ever seen it on TV; I thought it was like superheroes or something. Something people made up.” She smiles. “I thought my dad was some kind of magician, that he made it happen just for us.” A sad grimace slips across her face for a moment; and Riley wonders if it’s something about her father that she looks back on that hurts. *I’m starting to pick up on a few of her tricks, living with her.*

“My dad wasn’t really one to add something to the family scrapbook. We were lucky if Christmas meant he went out to drink with his buddies rather than doing it at home,” Riley says quietly. *Cage*
gets people to talk about themselves by revealing little things from her own life. Let's see if it works both ways.

“I know what you’re doing,” Sam mutters. Nope, okay, it doesn’t. “You could have just asked me outright if there was something about my dad that hurt.” But she’s smiling a little. “He wasn’t a bad man. He was just a big dreamer. And he was gone before he got the chance to make his dreams pay off.” She shrugs. “We didn’t know how bad it was until he died. I guess I come by the secret-keeping as honestly as it’s possible to.” Riley can guess at the rest. A desperate family, Sam, or whatever her name was then, looking for some way to pull them out. Taking a risk, taking a job she didn’t quite understand the implications of. And only finding out too late that there was no going back.

Riley’s spent too many boring stakeouts wondering if her own life could have ended up like that. What if the CIA hadn’t given me a chance? What if someone else found me first? She knows that her eighteen-year-old self could easily have been recruited by some rogue hacking organization, spurred on by her rebellious idealism. I could have gotten in a lot too deep to get out. Or she could have ended up in prison, like Mac did.

They come up to the river, and Riley slides off, dropping the reins and letting Miss Kitty start browsing the low grass.

Sam kicks a boot through the dust. “Feels a lot like home,” she says quietly.

Riley says nothing. Sam’s been quiet since they came. The two of them scuff down the bank to the river, and Riley tosses a couple stones in just to hear the splash, then dips a hand in the cold, clear water and runs it over her cheeks to brush off the ever-present layer of dust and grit.

Sam sits down cross-legged, picking up a small stick and beginning to snap it into smaller lengths, tossing each piece into the water and watching it float away.

“You know, I lied to Jack about not having family to go home to.” Sam tugs at a thread unraveling from her sweater, snapping it off and tying it into a small bow around a rock, before undoing it and throwing the rock into the stream. “I have a sister. I haven’t seen her in sixteen years.”

Riley nods.

“My sister’s safer the further I am from her.” Cage slowly rolls a stone between her fingers. “I never wanted her to get dragged into everything. I wanted to protect her. The same way you want to protect Mac.” She sighs. “Linsey’s the same as him. She’s got too good a heart, wants to save the world. She would have wanted to save me. And I couldn’t let her get involved.”

“Family and this job don’t mix well.” Riley thinks of her own mother. Diane almost got killed because of the things Riley’s done. And just like Sam, it wasn’t the legal things. It wasn’t her work with the CIA that put Diane Davis in the line of fire. It was the illegal hacking she did as a high schooler. “I know what it’s like to make mistakes and see your family suffer for it.”

Cage nods. “I just wanted to protect her. From what I did. What I became.” She sighs. “What I’ve done...the girl who was her sister is long dead.”

Riley sits down beside her. “None of us are who we used to be.” She’ll never forget the first time she killed a man. The nightmares that woke her screaming, the thought that she was capable of something so violent, so brutal. Diane will never know that her precious little daughter, the girl she still worries will cut her fingers slicing vegetables in the kitchen, has stabbed people with knives not much different. That the child whose eyes she covered when the TV reruns got too violent, carries a
gun almost every day, and has killed with it.

*This job drives a wedge between us and our families. But it gives us new family too.* She thinks of Jack and Sam and Mac and even Patty.

Cage rests a palm against the sand, then picks it up and lets it run through her fingers. “I guess this is the closest I’m ever going to get to having a family again.” She looks up at Riley. “And that’s okay.”

“Best way to see Texas is from the back of a horse,” Jack says.

Mac’s not sure he’s seeing much. He’s keeping his eyes straight ahead between Silver’s ears, afraid if he turns his head he might fall off.

He doesn’t know how far they’ve gone, and he’s only heard about half of what Jack is telling him, because all his focus is on not getting tossed off this thousand-pound-possible-deathtrap. And then Jack’s horse squeals, shies, and leaps sideways. Mac can’t even see what spooked it, and for a second he’s afraid Silver will start doing the same thing. But she just stops, swishes her tail, and watches the other horse like she’s vaguely put out by the antics.

“Jack!” Mac yells. Jack’s horse is kicking, jumping back and forth like a wild mustang in a rodeo. Jack’s leaning backward and forward in time with the horse, and as Mac watches his hat flies back to slap against his back from the strings. Mac doesn’t know what to do. His own horse isn’t freaking out yet, but Mac’s not sure he can get off. And even if he could he can’t stop a thousand pounds of spooked horse; he’ll only get trampled.

And then Winchester stops bucking. Mac breathes a shaky sigh of relief...and then the horse rears back on its heels, front feet pawing the sky. Jack’s leaning on the horse’s arched neck, and he actually *lets go* of the reins with one hand, grabs his hat, and starts waving it.

“Yeeeee hoooo!” He yells, and then the horse crashes back to the ground in a cloud of dust, gallops a circle around Mac and his own mount, and skids to a stop.

“So, whadda ya think? Should I quit the Phoenix and go find a sideshow job, kid?”

Mac takes another shaky breath. “You did that on purpose?”

“You think that would happen by accident?” Jack says. “You don’t get a horse to rear like that less’n ya teach em.” He’s shaking his head.

Mac’s heart rate finally descends to a near-normal as they continue, Jack getting off his horse ever once in a while to check a sagging spot in the fence. He wraps wire around the staples to make it snug, or sometimes cuts it and reattaches it if there’s enough sway.

About mid-morning, though, Jack starts to veer away from the fence, heading up toward a small hill, topped by a single tough-looking twisted oak. When they come up to the top of the ridge, Mac sees a small wooden fence and what look suspiciously like grave markers.

“Family burial site?” He asks, trying not to let it get to him. *Jack’s just messing with you. First the wild horse tricks, now the slightly weird graveyard.*

“Yep. Figured if you’re gonna meet my family, you might as well meet all of ‘em.” Jack swings off his horse and helps Mac down as well, and they wander between the rough lopsided boards, Jack telling stories of outlaws and Texas Rangers and everything in between that Mac suspects are likely either exaggerated or wholly made up. But he can tell Jack’s having the time of his life.
“You really love this place, don’t you?” Mac says. *I wish I could say that about the place I come from.*

“Hell yeah. Texas runs in the Dalton blood. We’re as much a part of the land as it is of us.” Jack rubs at the faint indentations in the bark. “Six generations were buried up here, ‘fore it kinda got illegal.” He grins.

Mac glances at the vast sweep of hillside. Something’s tugging at his thoughts, something out of place. Then it hits. *Jack’s dad isn’t buried here. He isn’t even buried in Texas.* His grave is in L.A. Mac and Riley went and saw him there. *If Texas is in their blood, why is his dad in California?* It doesn’t make sense that it’s for military reasons, there must be military cemeteries in Texas.”

Jack fingers a medal hanging from the tree. “Even though they won’t let us put anyone’s bodies in the ground anymore, we still leave somethin’ of ‘em up here.” Mac sees the light catch on a Purple Heart. “Pops always liked to come up here and be alone, when he was havin’ bad days. Now he’s at peace.”

Mac swallows. He feels stupid asking such personal questions. What if Jack gets upset? What if this is off limits? “Why…” He croaks out, but he doesn’t get any further than that. *Don’t ask him that. That’s insensitive. You always hurt other people’s feelings when you let your mouth run away with you.*

“I guess you’re fixin to ask why Pops isn’t buried in his home state,” Jack says. “Most people wonder that when they learn how much Texas means to the Daltons. But there’s one thing that means even more, and that’s a Dalton’s promise.” He sighs, staring off across the rolling land.

“When Pops was in ‘Nam, he had a flight buddy. Kid who was barely old enough to go to college. Got drafted, only son in his family. Pops looked out for him like that was his own kid.” Jack smiles softly. “Ty Emerson. He made it through the war in one piece; when they came stateside Pops never lost touch with him. Sent him a letter every month, asked about his family, his job. He came and visited, too, a couple times, I was just old enough to remember him and Pops sittin’ on the porch with beers and Pops’s guitar.” He smiles sadly. “But it wasn’t enough. The kid had it rough, rougher than Pops. He saw too much too young. Never really could get his head back outta that jungle. One day Pops got the call that he committed suicide in his apartment.” Jack clears his throat. “He had no family, really, his parents were both gone by then, he never married. He was all alone. Died with no one who seemed to care. Pops was the person he listed as his emergency contact.” Jack sighs. “It ripped a big chunk outta Pops’s heart. He thought if he woulda done more, been a better friend, stayed closer, Ty mighta got his life turned around. So he swore on the kid’s grave that he wasn’t gonna be alone there. He made Momma promise that when he died, they’d bury him next to Ty.” Jack turns back, and there are tears shining in his eyes. “He didn’t want that kid to be alone. No matter what.”

Mac doesn’t realize he’s crying too until a single hot tear slides over his wind-chilled cheek.

“Daltons protect the people they care about. No matter where they have to go, what they have to do.” Jack says. He walks up and slowly puts an arm around Mac’s shoulders. “We know better than to let the people who need us slip away.”

*That’s why he keeps trying to help me.* Mac cringes at the thought that Jack’s probably feared getting that exact same call. Especially after Bishop. *I was a mess. He probably thought I might be desperate enough to do just that.* Jack’s dad lost a good friend, because he wasn’t there. Jack isn’t going to let the same thing happen to him.
The kid’s quiet on the ride back. Granted, he was quiet on the ride out, but that seemed to have more
to do with the fact that he thought the horses had it in for him. *Might have been a little bit my fault,
but hey, I couldn’t resist.*

He can tell the story about Pops went to the kid’s heart. Jack never forgot hearing about that, many
years after it happened and only a few before the man passed. He wants to give the kid a little time to
process, so he doesn’t say anything until they get back to the barn.

Mac’s the first one to start the conversation. “Jack, are you worried about me? You don’t have to be,
I’m okay.”

*Yeah, so okay you had a nightmare you couldn’t escape and second-guess yourself every time
you’re around any human being. Some of that’s from prison, some of it’s from his dad. Jack hates
that any of it exists. “I know. But I want you to understand why I think of you as family. Why caring
about people’s so important to us.”* Mac nods, and Jack tosses him a rag and a currycomb. “Gotta get
the sweat off the horses before we turn ‘em out.”

“Thank you.” Mac’s voice is quiet. “For letting me come here with you.”

“Peaceful, isn’t it?” Jack rubs his horse’s sweat-damp coat. “Came back here the first time I was on
leave. Spent the entire week out on the pastures. Camped out there every night. Couldn’t stand the
feeling of a real bed. And I didn’t want to be around any of my family.”

“Because they asked about the war too much?” Mac asks, hesitantly running the currycomb over the
roan horse’s neck.

“That too, but mostly it was knowin’ they were seein’ a hero when all I saw in the mirror was a
killer.” Jack sighs. “Only thing I shot before the war was varmints. But when I came home, I’d killed
men.” He watches Mac freeze up, hands going still on Pepper’s neck. “Not an easy thing to live
with. Even harder when you got people you don’t want to let down.”

Mac only nods.

“I didn’t want to worry Momma and Pops, his health was startin’ to go an’ I knew he’d fret and
make himself sicker. And Grandpappy had fought in Korea. Didn’t need him thinkin’ back on the
past. I knew what PTSD was, after watchin’ it happen to Grandpappy and Pops. The way they acted
on the fourth o’ July, the way Pops looked when he took out the varmint gun.” Jack swallows hard.
“I knew what happened to me.”

He knows the kid’s probably a little confused and a lot uncomfortable. Jack’s not one to show
emotion to anyone, especially not as much as he has today. But Mac needs to know he’s not the only
one with ghosts in the past. With the thought of blood on his hands. And this is the only place Jack
feels like he can talk about it. The only place he really feels safe.

“Did it help?” Mac asks quietly.

“I’m not sure anything does.” Jack figures he might as well be brutally honest. “This isn’t the kind of
life that you ever really leave behind. No matter where you are.” He sighs. “Then I took a bullet on
the next tour and it made things different. It felt a little more fair, in a way. Like I wasn’t shootin’
someone who couldn’t fight back.” He’s not sure if that’s messed up logic or not, but it’s how he
sleeps at night.

He and Mac are just turning the horses to pasture when Riley sticks her head out the front door. “If
you want to get in on the cookie baking, you two better get in here right now!”
Jack grins at Mac, the heavy somberness that took over starting to fade away. He shoos the dogs away from door. “G’won, Momma doesn’t want you idiots underfoot and tryin’ to eat everything.”

He’s not in the kitchen two minutes before the inevitable ensues. “Get your grubby hands out of my cookie dough, young man,” Momma snaps, swatting Jack’s hands with the spoon. “This is why I make my cookies before the young’uns start showin’ up.”

“I washed my hands after ridin’!” Jack protests.

Riley picks up a piece of dough, looks directly at Jack, and pops it into her mouth. “At least scold her too!” Jack grumbles.

“Grandchildren are allowed to get away with things like that, you know it. This is just payback for all the times you came home from Grammaw’s with saltwater taffy crammed in your pockets to sneak past me.”

Jack hears Bozer stifle a laugh.

Riley dips a hand in the cookie-cutter flour and then swings around, leaving a massive print right on the front of Jack’s t-shirt. Which happens to be black. “Hey!” He picks up a small handful and tosses it at her.

“Guys! Be careful,” Mac intervenes, a small smirk on his face. “You know flour dust in the air can explode in contact with open flames, right?”

“Then I guess we won’t light candles for a while.” Jack shakes his head at the kid’s random esoteric knowledge. Although Jack was aware of that one, he used that in Moscow. When we were on our way to disarm that warhead and needed the little computer doohickey. It’s times like this he wishes he was allowed to tell his family about some of the crazy stuff. He’d like to be able to brag up Mac and Riley to his mom even more than he already does. But then again, to Mom, helping her set up her new laptop, and repairing the radio, already makes those two her heroes.

Cage is predictably smart, it looks like she’s offered to start making the frosting, at the opposite counter. Jack sees her slip a finger along the side of the dish and lick it when Momma turns back to the rolling pin and the dough on the counter. Apparently even she isn’t immune to the requirements of cookie making. Jack’s noticed the closed-off agent starting to open up to them a little. There are still a lot of secrets in her past, but I think we really can trust her.

Mac and Bozer seem to have been chosen as the cookie-cutting experts, and Jack will admit it was a good idea. Not only are they new, and less inclined to eat quite as much of the profits, Bozer is a genius in the kitchen and Mac is...well, a genius. Which means between the two of them they end up managing to get almost half again as many cookies from one piece of dough as Jack remembers it making, and there are also significantly fewer leftover scraps.

Once the first batch is in the oven, and Momma’s starting on the second one, Cage brings over the frosting and starts separating it into bowls, handing one to each of them, a small tube of food coloring, and a spoon.

They found out the hard way that Riley’s severely allergic to a type of green dye, so these food colorings are all made from natural sources, Momma picked them up from Miss Lucille. Jack always thought the old woman was stuck in her sixties hippie phase, but he won’t complain if it gives them something Riley can eat and enjoy.

Jack’s always been of the persuasion that the more frosting he can fit on a cookie, the better. When
the first batch is finished, he doesn’t actually wait long enough for them to cool before going to town with the green from his bowl. Pretty soon there’s melted frosting on the counter, the floor, and his hands.

“You did that on purpose,” Riley says, watching Jack lick the sticky goo off his fingers.

“I can neither confirm nor deny.” He winks at her.

“I’ll get a dishrag,” Mac says, hurrying to the sink and rushing back with the wet cloth in one hand. Jack doesn’t really have time to warn him to be careful on the hardwood. They just refinished the floor last summer and it’s still not worn out of the smoothness. Mac’s foot slides on the floury floor and true to form, he flails wildly before crashing to the floor. Unfortunately, also as usual, there’s something in the way of his attempts to grab for support.

This time it isn’t one of his half finished inventions, a cup of coffee, Riley’s rig, or Jack’s arm. It’s the glass bowl on the counter holding the cookie sprinkles. That bowl’s one Jack’s seen Momma pull out every year; he thinks it was her mother’s.

The bowl skitters to the edge of the counter, spins on the edge, and then smashes to the floor in a spatter of glass shards and colorful sprinkles. Riley yelps and jumps back, Bozer drops his frosting knife, Cage winces, and Jack heads automatically for the broom behind the door. He broke his own fair share of dishes in his day; he figures he’s got the art of cleanup down to a science by now.

Mac starts to roll over, and Jack, out of the corner of his eye, sees Momma hurry toward him. There’s glass all around him, if he moves he’s going to get it embedded in his hands or legs. Jack’s done some damage to himself that way, he thinks there might still be some little white scars on his foot from when he didn’t listen to Momma telling him to stay still after he smashed out a lightbulb with a little rubber ball.

Mac stops trying to roll over. Instead, he scoots himself up against the side of the counter, holding his hands in front of him to protect himself. His eyes are wide with the same fear Jack saw on that mission in Bosnia. The kid’s so scared of being defenseless, and he absolutely hates falling and being on the ground, although Momma won’t know about that. She’s going to think he’s afraid to be hit by a parent or something. Still, Jack’s not all that certain Momma’s going to be wrong about what caused this reaction. Mac very well might assume he’s going to be punished for breaking that bowl. Who knows what his dad did to him? Ericson said he didn’t think James was physically violent, but the man didn’t live with Mac and James. He couldn’t see what happened behind closed doors. And knowing a little bit about the perfectionism James expected from his son, Jack can imagine causing a problem was severely punished.

Momma wasn’t a school nurse for nothing. The second she sees Mac beginning to cringe, she stops moving toward him. Instead, she bends down so she’s eye level with Mac, hands in view but not moving. He doesn’t let down his own defenses, but he does stop forcing himself to try and disappear into the cabinets.

Momma keeps her voice low and soft. “It’s okay, Mac. You’re not the first of my grandkids to break something in this house, and you won’t be the last.” He nods, and uncurls a little. “Now don’t you move just yet, I’m gonna sweep up this glass so you don’t get cut. It’s okay.”

“I’m sorry I broke it.”

“Honey, if there’s one thing I’ve learned, since bein’ a mom, it’s that anything you break can be replaced. But a person can’t. There’s no call for you to think that anything in here is more important to me than you are. If you do, then someone made a mistake somewhere.”
They finish the cleanup, and the baking, in a more subdued silence. Jack doesn’t even bother to wipe out the empty frosting bowls with a finger, and neither does Riley.

Bozer watches the door slam behind Mac as he walks out to the barn and the dismantled tractor. He knows his best friend is going to work himself to exhaustion out there. Things were going pretty well. And then he had to have another panic attack. The nightmares...they’re awful but they’re different. Almost everyone has them. Bozer did, for years, after Jerry. It’s so much more horrible when they happen in broad daylight.

He finishes washing dishes from the cookie baking and wanders out on the porch, sitting down in the creaky swing. Mac’s tinkering, Boze can hear the clatter of metal and Mac mumbling to himself. Jack’s out in the round pen beside the barn, supposedly working with one of the horses that’s still being trained, but it looks like he’s paying a lot closer attention to the skittish kid inside the barn than the skittish horse in the pen.

Bozer jumps when Riley sits down next to him. “You okay?” She asks quietly.

“I’m not the one who just had a total meltdown because I fell and broke something.” He knows it sounds harsh. But he’s hurting. He’s not really angry anymore, not at Jack, or Riley, or Cage, or anyone here. But his heart aches for the way he can tell Mac struggles to get through every single day in a way that sort of approaches normal.

“I know how much it hurts to watch someone you love in that much pain.” Riley says quietly. Bozer glances at her, her eyes are wide and a little too shiny. “My dad hit my mom way more often than he hit me. I knew other things were happening too, that it was worse than just the bruises I saw. Sometimes when he was gone, I heard her crying in her sleep and I’d crawl into bed with her and try to make it better. Try to make it okay. Because she was my mom, she wasn’t supposed to be hurt. She wasn’t supposed to cry. She was supposed to be okay, because moms were like superheroes.”

“After we lost my brother, My mom started drinking, really bad. She always had but it got worse. After just a year she developed cirrhosis. I watched her literally killing herself, and I wanted her to stop, but nothing I could say would change her mind. I always felt like she was selfish, like the only child she cared about anymore was Jerry, when me and my sister and Mac were all right there.” He sighs. “I guess all three of us had pretty shitty childhoods, huh?”

“Sometimes I think that’s why I keep doing what I do. What makes the risks worth it.” She glances at him. “I just want to make the world a better, safer place for other people. So they don’t go through the same pain I did.”

“Yeah.” Bozer nods. “That’s what Mac says. What he always said about being a vigilante. He didn’t care if he got hurt, as long as he saved someone else.”

“And you’re the same.”

“No. I’m not. I’m not hero material. Not like Mac. Not like you.” He looks at Mac and he sees someone who is almost unbelievably good and kind. He looks at Riley and he sees someone confident and dedicated. He looks in the mirror and sees a quitter, someone who failed.

“What you did, to save Esteves, that was heroic.” Riley glances at him. “Something I learned really fast, as soon as I got into this business, is that the real heroes aren’t the people who make headlines for saving the world. They’re the ones who keep doing their job, day in, day out, whether they see results or not. Because they believe in what they do.”
Bozer only nods. He can’t help but look at Riley and Jack and Cage, and even Mac now, and feel like he doesn’t belong anymore. It was different when they were lawyers and IT workers and his best friend. Now they’re super-secret agents who save the world on a weekly basis. And he’s still just plain Bozer. Burger flipper and failing short film maker.

*Everyone else is really a hero. I’m just the civilian.* He should be grateful he’s not risking his neck on a daily basis, that aside from being the occasional target of someone’s revenge his life is marginally safe, and he has a whole team of agents watching out for him. But he just feels like a failure. *Everyone else is doing something with their lives. I’m just sort of existing. Just getting through one day at a time. Making things no one else wants and working a dead-end minimum wage job.* He just feels...ordinary.

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**THE KITCHEN, 1:30 A.M.**

**MEG HAS SPENT TOO MANY NIGHTS TO COUNT SITTING HERE AT THE TABLE**

Meg knows Mac will be down at some point tonight. The ghosts that seem determined to nip his heels like stubborn cattle dogs have to be coming out in full force after what she saw today. So the soft creaks and thumps from upstairs don’t startle her in the least.

She watches him come down the stairs, stumbling over the loose step they’ve been meaning to fix, but forget about because it’s habit for everyone in the family to avoid it.

He is very surprised to see her. So surprised, in fact, that he almost crash lands for the second time that day...well, it’s technically past midnight now, so second time in past twenty-four hours.

“I knew you wouldn’t want a scene in the kitchen, not with everyone around. But I figured you’d be down tonight.”

“You waited for me?” He glances at the knitting in her hands. “You didn’t need to, I’m okay.” He says it automatically. He’s so beaten down he just has a rote reply for anyone who seems like they care. *He tries to make himself believe it.*

“Well, not just for you. If it makes you feel any better, it’s also because I have to get Matt’s sweater done before the cousins come over tomorrow. I shoulda done it a while ago but my arthritis acted up again.” She sets down the needles. “Want something to drink?”

“Just water.” He rubs his arms, starting to shiver. He’s only wearing a t-shirt and thin sweatpants, and he’s barefoot on the cold wooden floor. *Cali kid who wasn’t really prepared for how cold Texas can get in winter.* Riley used to be the same way. Now she sleeps in a hoodie, with the pair of socks Meg knitted her for Christmas four years ago.

“How ‘bout hot chocolate instead?” He nods and sits down at the table, crossing his arms. Meg puts a saucepan of milk on, goes to the hall closet, and pulls out one of Jay’s old sweaters, the brown one that she knit him years ago, when he first got back from ‘Nam. It’s worn soft with age, and the sleeves are raveled from him picking at it when he got stressed. He always wore it on his bad days, said it reminded him he was home. She hopes the comfort and love woven into the yarn might find their way to this broken young man as well.

Mac pulls on the sweater and curls into the warmth, pulling his knees up and tugging the oversized clothing over them, a small huddle of quiet pain. Meg has seen her fair share of abused children, and she’s certain this boy’s father is every brutal thing Jack claimed. The way he cringes and cowers and avoids people says far more than any explanation Jack could give her.
While she’s making the cocoa, she says nothing, just listens. Mac’s breaths are shaky, the kind of sound a person makes before they cry. She guesses he probably hasn’t slept well, if at all. When she glances at him, he’s rested his head on his knees and is still shivering, although whether it’s cold or emotion, she can’t tell. The dogs stir from where they’re curled in the corner at the heater vents, and Slippy comes up to nuzzle Mac’s arm, while Maverick tries to get his paws into the boy’s lap and put his head on Mac’s shoulder. He uncurls enough to start rubbing the dogs’ heads.

She hands him a mug of cocoa and he accepts it gratefully, sleeve-encased hands wrapping around the warmth and clutching it close to his chest. There’s a look of innocent wide-eyed surprise at the kind gesture that goes straight to Meg’s soul. *Oh honey, who made you think you didn’t deserve to be loved?*

“You know this isn’t the first time I’ve seen someone hurtin’ like you are.”

He just nods. “I worked in the schools for thirty-five years. I saw kids come through with more shit than any adult should ever have to try and cope with. And I’ve seen three of the people closest to me fight their own demons.” She sighs. “Everyone’s got their battles, they’re just all different.”

“But everyone else seems okay.” Mac’s voice is bitter. “I know other people have lives as hard or harder than mine. But it doesn’t seem like they have as much trouble coping with it. I just want to know what’s wrong with me and fix it.”

Meg’s heart twists. She’s heard too many kids say that. “I watched my Jay come back from Vietnam a different man. A man with more scars in his head than on his body. I used to lay awake next to him, scared to touch him, because I didn’t know if he’d wake up, or attack me. And then I had to watch my baby boy go off to the same thing.” She takes a deep breath and wraps her fingers even tighter around the mug. “He came home once, couldn’t tell me what happened, but he was shattered. Jack wouldn’t even sleep in his own room. He slept on the floor, in the living room. And the very first night, he was screaming, wouldn’t wake up no matter how hard I shouted, no matter how much I tried to shake him. I was terrified. And then he finally stopped screaming, and he started sobbing. He didn’t stop crying for an hour. And all I could do was hold him and pray.” She glances out the kitchen door, still seeing the ghosts of herself and Jack in there so many years ago.

“There’s no shame in having a lot of hurt inside you. I see how much you look up to Jack. And maybe he’ll be mad I told you this, but I think you need to know that strong people aren’t strong because they never let anything hurt them. They’re strong because they learn to heal.” She doesn’t expect him to start talking, to spill his life’s story to her, a total stranger. It’s clear he has trust issues. But maybe, knowing Jack carries around some demons too, he’ll be more willing to open up to him. *That kid couldn’t have anyone better to look out for him.*

Mac takes another swallow of his hot chocolate, and when Maverick whines and shoves his head under the kid’s arm, he puts his free arm around the dog and holds on tight.

“I don’t know exactly what the people you had for a family did to you, but I want you to know you can call me a parent anytime. Whatever you need, whenever you need me.” Meg puts her hand on his shoulder gently. “You’re as much family as any one of my kids.”

Mac nods, then he sniffs. Meg pulls him into a gentle hug, letting him rest his head on her shoulder, and feels him melt into the kindly touch. *You poor sweet broken boy. I’m so glad Jack found you.* They stay there a long time, until the cocoa goes cold, and Mac has nearly drifted back to sleep. When she starts to let go, Mac wraps his own arms around her and holds on. She ignores her stiff, sore back, and hugs him even tighter.
IT’S BECOMING MORE OF A PARTY VENUE

Mac’s having a hard time keeping track of the people who are starting to arrive. He can tell who Uncle Joey and Auntie Dot are, Joey because he looks like a much older version of Jack, and Dot because she goes straight to Bozer with a handful of carefully cursive-written recipe cards. He knows she was over cooking with the family yesterday until her arthritis got the best of her. Bozer insisted he was going to get her recipes for at least a dozen different things.

Those two are the first to arrive; they’re in the kitchen already by the time Mac comes downstairs, although he’s admittedly not much of an early riser this morning. He doesn’t even know when it was he actually went to bed. But it doesn’t really matter.

Joey helps Dot up from the table and to the kitchen counter, where she can use the flat surface to support her as she hobbles around; then goes outside and starts messing with the water pump. Mac decides that’s something he can help with; the cooking is beginning in earnest again and no one wants him within fifty feet of something that could give someone food poisoning, or actual poisoning, if it gets messed up.

Joey proves to be quite friendly, and also very good at making something that by rights should have ground to a halt years ago continue to run. Mac wonders if that same stubbornness is what’s keeping the eighty-nine year old man running around the place like he’s Jack’s age. *I hope if I make it to that age, that’s gonna be me.* He doubts he’ll live that long with his job, but he can hope.

It’s when aunts, uncles, and cousins start pouring in, cars parking up and down the driveway and mothers balancing plates and children, dads lugging extra chairs and the occasional massive slow cooker indoors, that he starts losing track. He can tell the old woman who arrived in a nursing service’s van is the infamous Great Aunt Christina, who knows about Jack being a spy but also has wild claims about everything from the water system to the moon landing, and that Cody is the man about Jack’s age with two full tattoo sleeves, and also apparently the second body thief from Jack’s story. Beyond that he’s starting to get muddled.

There’s Luella, Jack’s uncle Tony’s wife. Tony died over twenty years ago but she’s still totally included in everything. She’s got two kids, and the second she shows up everyone asks where her son Josh is. Apparently he’s in the Air Force and is on deployment. But she’s making up for it by the fact that her daughter Kelly, who apparently just got her nursing degree, has her fiancé in tow.

Uncle Bill Dalton, one of Jack’s dad’s brothers, and his wife Mary live in Denver now, but two of their three children live in town, and Jack says the third will be driving down from Detroit as the family’s annual road trip vacation; last they heard Julia, Tony, and the kids, Ella and Reagan, were held up with snow in Kansas.

Mac thinks the two families who are here now are more than enough. There’s Kevin and Kate, and their fourteen year old twins Matt and Amy (apparently the Matt who now is out a Christmas sweater thanks to Mac’s inability to sleep). Amy heads straight for Riley, and proceeds to show her the new computer she got for her birthday, and the new self-defense moves she’s been practicing since Jack taught them to her last year. Mac can’t help but grin at the way Riley absolutely melts around this kid who clearly idolizes her. *Probably wants to be her when she grows up.*

When the other brother Mike, his wife Carrie, and their three kids show up is when the house becomes a real madhouse. Jessie, the oldest girl, heads straight for the barn and the horses, but Matt enlists the younger boys, Colton and Evan, into a rubber band gun battalion with the express purpose of beating Jack this year. Mac has no idea where any of them are until one or all of them charge
screaming through the crowded living room, looking for Jack, who is, according to them, on the run. Mac’s not so sure, he saw Jack hide behind a couch with a fully loaded rubber band gun a few minutes ago and he thinks there’s an ambush in progress.

Unfortunately that ambush plan comes to a sudden halt when Jack’s phone rings. He pops out from behind the couch, answering it already.

“Oh man. Guess there were some spots we missed. I’ll be out.”

He turns to Mac. “The bull we just picked up at auction is a sneaky little bastard. Got out of his fence somehow and we’re gonna have to run him down.” He taps Kevin on the shoulder. “Eric just called, the bull’s loose.”

“They always pick the worst days,” Kevin mutters, but he’s already heading for the front hall and his boots. “I’ll see you at the barn. Find me Echo outta the pasture, will you?”

Jack turns to Mac. “Hey kid, wanna go track down one of your own kind? Maybe it takes an Angus to catch one.”

Jack can tell Mac’s not too sure about this plan. But he can also tell the kid’s getting in over his head with all the chaos in the house.

“Come on, kid, if you’re gonna come to Texas with me you gotta see my mad roping skills.”

Mac finally nods and follows him to the barn. Jack finds Silver, Winchester, and Kevin’s gelding Echo, and starts tacking up his and Mac’s horses. He shows the kid how to adjust the bridle and make sure the saddle is cinched correctly. This time Mac figures out how to mount off a rail of the fence, and Jack gives him an approving nod as he swings on his own horse and grabs his rope off the fencepost where he hung it, securing it to the saddle.

Kev’s already riding toward the stock pen where they’ve been keeping the new bull. They’d finally had to part with Toby after breeding season this year, and this is the new, younger, and apparently more problematic replacement. They don’t like to put new bulls with the older ones right away, because there’s always nasty fighting about who’s in charge.

Jack figures the bull will head straight for the herd, who, last anyone knew, was up at the north end of the ranch. There are tracks for a little while, but then they’re lost in the shifting dust and rough grasses. There’s no way of knowing, the further in they go, if the broken stems are the result of an antelope, a coyote, the three other ranch hands and their horses, or their bull. The ground’s too dry to take a print.

Jack veers off, on a hunch, following a track that heads toward the river. Kevin keeps going, preparing to make a wide loop and swing back, coming in down the river. Jack doubts an animal unfamiliar with the terrain would cross here, the water is pretty deep, even in the drought. And on the opposite side from Kev is the fence. They’ve got the fool critter pinned.

Mac looks nervous. “Why did you bring me along? I don’t even know what I’m doing.”

“I could tell you were gettin’ a little overwhelmed in there.”

Mac nods. “Yeah. It’s just a lot of people. But it’s great,” he says hastily, as if Jack will be offended that he isn’t one-hundred percent okay with everything here.

“I know the Dalton Clan is a little much. Riley had a hard time with it too, at first.”
And then Jack cuts off, because he can hear yelling.

Down the ridge, close to the water, he can see a black shape running. Behind it are two horses, closing in. Then he notices two more coming in from the other side. They’ve got him. All Mac and I gotta do is sit and watch. He’ll admit he’s slightly disappointed, he really was hoping to show off his roping. But at least the kid won’t be able to laugh at me if I screw up.

And then he sees the subtle shift. That fool critter’s gonna cross the river right there. Jack pushes his horse into a gallop down the hill. He sees the others start to pull up as the bull’s headlong rush changes trajectory, and Jack’s own horse dashes between them and into the water without hesitation.

The water’s slowing the bull down, and Jack’s horse’s height is working for them. He gets up decently alongside the animal, lariat swinging, and then drops a perfect loop over the bull’s head, rope settling around its neck. He starts pulling back, and the bull is forced to follow, both of them moving downstream slightly until Jack gets his horse back up the bank. Out of the water, the bull starts fighting back immediately.

Jack snubs off the rope to a thick tree branch. “Ok ya stubborn rascal.” He winks at Mac. “Think I’m gonna call this new boy Mac.”

“Very funny.” The kid rolls his eyes. “But that was cool.”

Jack’s got to take a second before he realizes the kid just complimented him. “What?”

“I didn’t think you could actually do that.”

“Oh trust me, I don’t brag unless I can make good on it.” Jack grins. “And I’ll tell you now, it’s harder than it looks.”

“I feel like you’re trying to goad me into asking you to show me.” Mac grins. “It worked.”

Jack’s seen the kid throw rope loops before for some of his random inventions. But it lacks the grace or the accuracy of Jack’s work.

“Hey Kev, can I borrow your rope?” Kevin tosses it to him with a grin.

“C’mere.” Jack pulls the kid out of the line of sight of the other three riders. “Don’t need them givin’ you grief.” He doesn’t know that they would, but sometimes they like messing with new people. Especially people who don’t share their skill set.

He hands the kid the rope and watches, hiding his smile at how awkwardly Mac tries to swing the loop.

“You gotta keep the rope open. An’ don’t do it over your head, that’s askin’ fer trouble. Off to the side. Spin it in a big circle so it doesn’t close up on ya.” Jack takes Mac’s wrist and adjusts his grip.

“Okay, now see if you can get it around that rock.” Mac tries, but he’s not spinning the rope fast enough, and it gets all wobbly and misses by a mile. “Try again.”

Mac does, over and over. He looks like he’s ready to give up, when finally the loop settles perfectly around the stone.

The grin on the kid’s face is as massive as Jack thinks his own was when he heeled his first goat. “I did it!” He sounds like any other ranch kid.
“Yeah you did. Now do it a hundred more times and you’ll get the hang of it.” He grins at the way the kid rolls his eyes but immediately starts spinning the rope again. Jack leans back, puts his hands behind his head, and smiles. He knocks his hat over his eyes and sighs. “We’ll let the ol’ boy tire himself out and then head on back.”

THE DALTON HOUSE

MAC HASN’T SEEN THIS MANY PEOPLE IN THE SAME ROOM WITHOUT A FIGHT STARTING IN A LONG TIME.

The second they get back from wrangling the stubborn bull, who is also officially Mac’s new namesake, into his corral, Jack looks from Mac to a battered Land Rover that’s parked near the porch, one door still open, and chuckles. He ducks behind it, and when a tall woman with slightly greying black hair and a toddler wobbling after her rushes back out to slam the door shut, Jack jumps up and rushes around the vehicle to give her a hug.

“Laura!”

“Well, here comes trouble. I was hoping they kicked you out this year.” Mac guesses this is Jack’s sister, judging by the resemblance and the good-natured ribbing.

“And this is Rosa?” Jack leans down and hefts the little girl into his arms, where she studies him carefully with huge brown eyes before hitting him in the face with the raggedy giraffe she’s carrying around.

“She’s got you pegged,” Mac says without thinking.

“Hey Laura, this is Mac, the new kid. Mac, this is my sister Laura and her youngest.” He smiles. “Both of us seem to have inherited a knack for adopting any kids we come across. Laura’s got two adoptees and she’s fostering Rosa. How are Luke and Diego?”

“Well, Luke is inside with Auntie Dot; he’s claimed ownership of doing the turkey carving this year. I just hope he doesn’t cut a finger off. And Diego went to the barn to see the horses.”

“He just missed getting to ride out on a real roundup. The new bull got loose. How long are you staying for?”

“Couple of days, probably, Tyler doesn’t have to be back to work until the 5th.”

“Maybe Diego’ll get to ride out and do a stock check. I saw he won his roping division this year.”

“He’s so proud. It’s all he wants to talk about. Which is why I sent him to the barn; he was telling the same story over and over.”

“I think that’s a Dalton family trait,” Mac interjects. He likes Jack’s sister; she’s pretty much a copy of him, except less sarcastic and less scary. He wonders if that’s different if you’re one of the kids in the family.

“I hear Jack more or less adopted you,” Laura says. “And two more as well, if they’re not someone’s boyfriend and girlfriend. I can never tell who’s a relative in this family.”

“Sam, the Australian, is Riley’s roommate, and Bozer, the one who’s probably bossing everyone around in the kitchen, is Mac’s.”
“You mean the one who got swatted with a spatula by Auntie Dot for putting nutmeg in the stuffing.”

“Yep, that’s Bozer.” Mac shakes his head. Bozer family food traditions are weird.

Mac finds a semi-quiet corner once they’re inside, and actually ends up in a conversation with Laura’s husband, who’s a chemical engineer for an oil company in Houston. It’s nice to talk science with someone; it helps him focus a little with all the chaos around them. He does start to worry a little when Ty starts to question how someone as smart as Mac clearly is ended up a tile installation contractor, but when Mac tells him he didn’t have the money for college and didn’t want the debt from student loans, the man takes it at face value.

The door slams open, startling Mac out of his science daze.

“Hey!” Jack is immediately bowled over by two small girls, one with a purple dress, the other holding what looks like a miniature version of Thor’s hammer. “Hey, calm down, I’ve got two arms!” The parents, behind them, are laughing. Mac wonders if they’re the ones who were on the road coming down.

“Yay! You brought the cranberry kind!” Riley grabs a case of ginger ale from the woman. “This is the one time a year I can find this stuff.”

“She’s the only one who actually drinks it, besides them,” Tyler mutters. “We used to joke it was the only way to tell she wasn’t actually a blood relative. Jules and Tony don’t count; they live in Michigan so they’re already certifiably crazy. I couldn’t take all that snow.”

“It beats the hurricanes!” Julie yells.

“Food’s hot!” Three people, one of them Bozer, yell from the kitchen. That sets off a mass stampede that Mac thinks might be nearly as dangerous as one in the actual cattle pastures. He doesn’t really remember getting a plate, or how half the food on it got there. He thinks someone else might have put it on while he was standing next to them, and it’s confirmed when Meg slaps a massive slab of ham on, and mutters, “Jack hasn’t been doing such a great job of making sure to get some meat on your bones. I’m gonna take a wooden spoon to that boy.” The house is a crowded chaos of people dragging chairs around, carrying plates of food, and talking while eating. He’s spinning in a circle looking for a spot to sit down when Jack grabs his arm and drags him to a table.

Mac’s struggling to keep up with conversation. There’s someone ranting about a broken phone line that was repeatedly calling 911 of its own volition, the girl who came with her fiance, and Mac’s already forgotten both their names, is telling a story about how her boyfriend grabbed the first hat off the stack when he went to help her dad do chores at their farm, and it was her rehearsal veil, and Laura is talking over one of her kid’s heads to Jules, although the only things Mac can make out are “delivery man” “bomb” (which does make him panic a little) and “dryer motor”. He finally manages to piece together that the woman’s neighbor sent the motor out for repair and when his wife opened the package thought it was a bomb, panicked, and called the cops. When the bomb squad did show up, it turned out to be the repaired motor her husband ordered. He wonders if Pena ever responded to a call like that, and the thought is bittersweet. He should go see Annabelle when they get home, he decides.

He hears at least three conversations about people’s kids in college, who’s going where, studying what, and what grades they’re getting. There’s one person talking about a niece’s baby, another whose sister-in-law just got diagnosed with a lung tumor, and Jack is talking animatedly about one of Mac’s inventions that wasn’t for a mission. He talks about me like a lot of these people talk about their kids.
“Uncle Paul’s on the phone!” Meg yells from the kitchen, momentarily breaking the chaos. Almost immediately she starts yelling, “Cash? Hi Cash, put down the phone please.”

“Eric?” Jack yells. “Your kid’s playing with the office extension again.”

Eric’s been pinned in by the table, so one of the aunts is conscripted to go find the boy and tote him back to the dining room. People mill in and out, taking their turns on the phone with the great-uncle in Alabama.

Jack glances at Mac. “You doing okay?”

“Yeah, actually.” It’s chaos, Mac can’t figure out what’s happening at all. But no one has singled him out. No one is gossiping about where he came from, who he is, what he’s done. He’s been accepted, dragged right into the family circle. Everyone’s telling their stories, no one seems afraid of him. Three of the kids are already following him around, when they found him playing with more paperclips. He’s not sure which ones they are, but he likes them. No one here pulls their children away from me. It doesn’t happen often, but sometimes people do notice the ankle tether. He feels sick every time a mom in the grocery store yanks a child away and starts talking in a low voice. He always goes numb and cold and empty, and once it was so bad he dropped the gallon of milk he was getting and made a mess and made everything worse.

There are kids yelling, the dogs are running around, everything is wild and like some over-the-top Christmas comedy, but it’s good. Eventually Bozer, a plate loaded with what looks like literally everything from the table, elbows his way into a seat beside Mac. “This is freaking awesome,” he mumbles around a mouthful of glazed ham. “I need to find out who made what so I can get recipes.”

“If you cook like this when we get home I’m gonna gain twenty pounds,” Mac mutters.

“You could stand to,” Jack says. “I, on the other hand…”

“Who said you were invited?” Bozer asks, and Mac cringes. I thought we were making progress. I thought he was more okay with Jack and Riley and the Phoenix thing. And then Mac realizes there’s that funny little quirk in his voice that means he’s joking. “Just kidding, Jack, I need you to tell me the secret to the bourbon pecan pie because I followed the recipe in the cookbook but everyone says it’s not the same as your grandma’s.”

“That’s because Grammaw didn’t make it like the recipe.” Jack laughs, winking at Bozer.

Gradually the tables clear out. Riley stops fork-fighting with Jack long enough to help fix a phone that someone’s kid dropped into the dogs’ water bowl, and there’s a mass migration to the living room, where presents have somehow mysteriously appeared under the tree.

Jack pulls out a guitar from behind the La-Z-Boy. “Who’s ready for some Christmas tunes?”

Riley cringes and covers her ears. So do about half the other members of the family. Anyone who’s over twelve, really. But all the younger kids are cheering.

“He does this every year. You’d think it would improve with time, but no, every year it sounds exactly as horrible as it did before.” She grimaces. “How this is the same man whose father used to sing in the church choir and do solos on Christmas and Easter and was in every musical when he was in school?”

“Apparently it skipped a generation,” Bozer says.

“If that was some weird attempt at flattery…” Riley trails off as the guitar twangs and Jack’s voice is
at least half a note out of tune with it. “Oh, this is worse than when I got captured in Rio.”

Almost thirty minutes, twelve songs, and three urges to throw one of the chairs at Jack’s head later, it’s mercifully over.

“Jack?” Riley says once it’s safe to assume everyone can probably hear again. “The only song you should ever play is ‘Silent Night’. Silently. So no one can hear it.”

“You just don’t appreciate good country talent.”

“Yes I do, you’ve forced me to listen to Willie Nelson and George Jones for the past five years.” Riley glances at the others. “They’ll all tell you the same thing. Your musical skills suck.”

“No, they don’t. Right kids?” Jack asks.

“You’re right, Jack. Your musical skills don’t suck,” Bozer says, and Mac glances at him, wide eyed. Boze was cringing more than almost any of them during the whole thing. Is he just trying to play nice? “Because you don’t even have any!”

There’s a moment of silence, then the whole room erupts in roaring laughter. Meg is bent over wiping tears out of her eyes; the twin cousins are slapping each other’s backs, and even Great-Aunt Christina is chuckling.

Then the presents come out. Mac honestly wasn’t expecting anything, but apparently Riley, Jack, and Sam hid theirs well. He opens Sam’s first, and is honestly a little surprised to find a small notebook and a pen.

“Sometimes the best thing you can do when things are hard is to write down all the darkness in your head and then get rid of it,” Sam says quietly, so no one else overhears. “Scribble down whatever hurts, whatever scares you, and then rip it out and throw it away. Or burn it. Anything to make it disappear.” He gets the feeling this one comes from personal experience. “And then when you don’t need it for that anymore, write down the good things. Keep something close so you can look into it and remember how much you’re loved, how important you are to the people around you.” He notices that she pats the back pocket of her jeans almost unconsciously, although it’s Sam so she probably meant to draw his attention. *She keeps hers close.*

Riley’s present is a roll of duct tape...and the old phone she just replaced. “This is as much for Jack as it is for you,” she chuckles. “Keep this in that knapsack of yours and next time you need parts, cannibalize that instead of Jack’s.” Jack makes a theatrical bow to her, then starts laughing when she hands him his present, a new and supposedly almost indestructible phone case.

Mac is pretty sure Jack’s present will either be something absolutely ridiculous or extremely heartwarming. As it turns out, it’s both. It’s a kids’ Erector set. And there’s a note taped onto it.

Mac opens it and finds he has to blink and swallow a few times. *I know you had a kind of crappy childhood, and I talked to Ericson a while back (don’t get mad, he gave me his number cause he knew I was looking out for you) and he said you always used to worry in class abotu doing everything exactly right. I took the instructions outta the box on purpose. Mess around, make some mistakes, have some fun. I just want you to understand that mistakes happen, and they’re not the end of the world (well, unless we get another mission where the fate of the world is in our hands, but you get the idea).*

“Please tell me that thing doesn’t possibly make a trebuchet?” Bozer asks. “He busted the living room window with the one he made for a high school physics class.”
“Because you bumped into it and messed up the trajectory!” Mac chuckles.

“You had it pointed at the neighbor’s windows!”

For a little while, he can forget that back home, things are a mess. He can forget that Bozer’s stressing about him again, that if Oversight finds out Bozer knows the truth, he and his best friend might go to jail. He can forget that tomorrow could be the last day he wakes up, that the next mission could be their last.

“Alright, guys, let’s get coats!” Someone yells. “We have to be home before it gets too dark.”

“Not until we get a picture!” Momma says. “Okay, Jules, Ty, see if you can get the kids wrangled. Tallest in the back, shortest in the front, okay, get up on the mantel, that gives us more space.” She’s running around like one of the cattle dogs, herding everyone into place.

“Okay, come on,” Jack says.

“No, no, it’s your family picture, I couldn’t,” Mac protests.

“Mac, if you’re in this house, you’re family. Now get on in here or do I have to rope you in like that stubborn bull?” Jack tugs him into the middle of the group. “Momma’s not lettin’ you outta this, and neither am I.”

Mac feels Bozer and Jack’s arms around him, Riley’s elbow from where she’s standing on a chair, leaning on Jack’s head, Cage’s shoulder where she’s peeking between him and Jack, and Meg’s hand gently twisting into his. This is good. This is family.
Screwdriver

112-Screwdriver

ONE OF THE MOST DANGEROUS PLACES IN THE WORLD
AKA JUST ANOTHER DAY AT THE OFFICE

Mac crouches in the dark hallway of the military compound Jack’s been captured inside for over six hours. He’ll be okay. He has to be. Riley’s on her way to the center of the compound, to get the intel they came here for, and Mac’s job is to get Jack out.

It was supposed to be break into the cell, snatch Jack and run. But by the time Mac got here, he could hear another voice inside the cell. This isn’t going to be as easy as he was hoping. He has a plan but it’s pretty flimsy and relies on something from the grocery store, and the random stuff he got his hands on in the tiny office area he snuck into...

He’s afraid of messing up. This is his first time back in the field for real since Bishop, and Riley leaving him alone to do this is tying his stomach in knots. What if I screw up and get Jack killed?

He’s not even a real agent, he’s just a technical consultant. Thornton changed his status to make her cover-up for what he did to save Bozer believable, but really nothing’s different. He doesn’t have Jack or even Riley’s level of training and skill. He’s just a kid running around playing with matches. He’s going to get someone killed.

“So tell me, Agent Dalton, what did you come here for?”

“You.” Jack’s words are slurred, he’s either concussed or drugged, possibly both. And he’s in there with the boss. Mac takes a deep breath, tries to settle his racing heartbeat. You can do this. Jack is counting on you.

“Well, it looks like all you’ve managed to do is let me catch you. There’s a creak, like a chair shifting. “Who do you work for?”

“The Phoenix Foundation. Little covert operation, under the cover of a think tank, right in Los Angeles in the great US of A.” Jack suddenly begins humming and then launches into a horrible rendition of “We’re an American Band”.

There’s a sharp smack. “Focus. Tell me who you work with.”

“I gotta great team. They’re family.” Jack slurs. “There’s my partner Riley, an’ she’s smart an’ badass. She’s a real firecracker. Wipe your existence off the face of the earth in three keystrokes. An’ I’d die for her, man. She’s my daughter. Like not real daughter, but closest I’m prolly gonna ever get.” He chuckles. “An’ my boss, Patricia, but I call her Patty an’ she says she hates it but I think she’s gettin’ used to it. She’s got no chill, though, man, seriously. She didn’t laugh when I called her Peppermint Patty. You oughta be sorry what you did pissed her off. And there’s the goofy hamburger kid too.” Even drugged out of his mind he jokes about my name. Wonderful. “He’s fun. Likes thing that go “K-bshhh”,” and Mac can only visualize Jack with a frown and pursed lips and hands wiggling to mime an explosion. “But man, I love the little guy. He’s my kid too.” Mac tries to ignore the sudden warmth in his chest and focus on the mission.

He hears a punch thrown. “Stop rambling, tell me where they are!”
Jack’s probably actually going to. So he has to get this plan moving.

“Somewhere in here, man...” He needs to move fast, get this guy before he raises an alarm and sends anyone searching for Riley. Mac steps up beside the door and jiggles the handle, then jumps out of the way as three bullets tear through the wood. He makes a fake gasp of pain and then dumps the canister of liquid from his backpack onto the ground, letting the mixture of red pen ink and chocolate syrup that he and Bozer used to use for fake blood in his movies run under the door.

The door opens, and almost before he sees who’s in it Mac’s swinging a punch. The guy goes down, and Mac quickly grabs him and ties his hands behind his back with zipties. He has to admit these things are effective, he’s totally adding them to the list of things he consistently keeps in his pockets.

Mac shakes the stinging pain out of his hand. No matter how many times he does this, it never hurts less. Jack assures him he’s doing it right, but he’s not so sure. Jack doesn’t even seem to feel it when he hits someone.

“You’re alive!” Jack says, and there’s more relief in his voice than Mac was expecting. He’s so out of it he probably totally believed I got shot. “Man, Patty’s gonna be pissed I told him about the Phoenix. And that I said she was too uptight.”

“Yeah, but he’s going to jail.” Mac starts removing the IV drip from Jack’s hand.

“Thought you were dead, buddy.” Jack reaches out the hand Mac just freed, and slaps it uncoordinatedly on his arm.

“It was just chocolate sauce. And the cheap kind too, with the high fructose corn syrup. I’d probably have been in more danger eating it than I was outside that door.” He doesn’t tell Jack that he was scared, that he hoped the guy shot straight through the door and not to the side of it.

“I love you man.” Jack, free of the restraints, lurches to his feet and stumbles against Mac. Mac catches him, and Jack holds him tight, tangling his fingers in Mac’s hair.

“I love you too, big guy.” And then the door flies open again, Riley rushes in, swings one of Jack’s arms over her shoulder, and Mac takes the other. And they run.

Jack continues to mumble incoherently, occasionally interspersed with bad renditions of random Whitesnake songs, the whole way through the halls to where the tac team is waiting to back them up. For having spent half a day in that place, he’s in decent condition. There are plenty of bruises, and some cuts, but it looks like the majority of the interrogation was handled just the way Mac saw; with the drugs and the slowly increasing questions.

It isn’t until they’re in the plane, on the way home, with Riley patching up Jack’s cuts and scrapes, and Jack himself sprawled out half asleep on the jet’s couch, that Mac lets the stress catch up to him. He collapses into a chair across from Jack, unable to look away, afraid if he does Jack won’t be there anymore. That Mac will find out he made a mistake and Jack is lying dead in that sandy little room.

“Hey, what’s with the creepy stare, man?” Jack asks. “If they gave me something that’s slowly turning me into the Hulk, just tell it to me straight. Are my eyes turning green?”

“Shut up,” Riley says, and smacks one of the bruises on his arm. He flinches and turns an accusing gaze on her for a second.

“Sorry.” Mac glances down at his hands.

“You worried about something?”
“Not anymore.”

“Anymore? What’d you worry about before?”

Mac feels like he’s the one who just got dosed with truth serum. “I was scared I was going to mess up. That you were going to get killed because of me.”

“But I didn’t. You did good, man. You’ve got everything it takes to be a real field agent.”

Mac glances at the floor and kicks his shoe into the carpet. “Thornton just said I was so they could clear me for stealing the bomb components.”

“She wouldn’t have done that if she didn’t think you earned it,” Riley says, looking up from where she’s bandaging Jack’s arm. “Believe me, she didn’t have to change your status to sell her story. She did it because you’ve proved you have every qualification for a full field operative.”

Mac reaches into his bag for the Phoenix ID, this one shiny and new; he hasn’t needed to use it to jimmy open a door lock yet. Level 1 Junior Agent: Angus MacGyver.

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JACK’S APARTMENT

CURRENTLY LOOKS MORE LIKE A CONSTRUCTION ZONE

“How old do you think I am?” Jack asks.

“Huh?” Mac’s clearly not really listening, he’s rooting around inside a toolbag, muttering about wrenches. “Come on. I put you right back where you were, you’re supposed to be there!”

“Well, according to your Phoenix dossier…” Riley’s already pulling it up on her rig. She was surprised to find Mac here when she showed up for her and Jack’s weekly “father-daughter” time, which was supposed to involve, this week, her picking up donuts and Jack renting them a movie. She held up her end of the bargain, but it’s much more entertaining to watch Mac crawling around working on Jack’s garbage disposal than whatever the action flick of the week is.

Mac gets funny when he’s fixing stuff and whatever he’s doing doesn’t involve the fate of the world as they know it. He talks to himself, and to whatever he’s working on, and rambles about math formulas and engineering principles, all while tearing apart a piece of machinery with a flashlight between his teeth.

*We probably could go over there and help him. But he seems like he’s having fun.* And Riley’s not too keen on having her fingers anywhere near something that once mangled a spoon (the damaged piece of silverware is still displayed on Jack’s wall above the sink, as a reminder to check for any before starting the disposal). *My hands are my tools, doing what I do.* Not that Mac’s aren’t, but he does seem to know what he’s doing.

“I don’t want to know what my dossier says, I want to know how old I can get away with.” Jack chuckles.

“Don’t lie on a dating profile. Not a good idea,” Riley says. *If he does I’ll just hack him and make it honest, but still.*

“What do you think? Thirty-five?” Riley shakes her head, and Mac laughs around the flashlight in his mouth. “And a half?”
“Just be honest,” Mac mumbles, muffled by the cupboard he’s crawled back under.

“Okay fine. What am I looking for in a partner…” Jack mumbles.

“Someone who likes bad karaoke.” Riley deadpans.

“And getting shot at,” Mac yells from under the counter.

“I got you for that, kiddos.” Jack chuckles. “Aw hell, guess I’ll go with southern accents and into martial arts. And a decent knowledge of classic rock.”

“That sounds more doable.” Riley grins; she fully intends to check out Jack’s profile as soon as it posts and edit it if necessary. *Spare some unsuspecting woman the horror.* Jack’s a great guy, but he’s…well…not for everyone.

There’s a rattling knock on the apartment door. Mac looks up from where he’s crammed in under Jack’s countertop, only his legs visible. “You should probably answer that.”

“You think they responded to my dating profile that fast?”

“If they did, they’re a stalker,” Riley says, not bothering to set down her beer.

“Ha.” Jack stands up. “You all think you’re so funny.”

Riley immediately sets to work hunting Jack’s dating profile. It’s only when she realizes he isn’t talking that she starts to worry. *Who knows who could have come to the door?* She turns around and looks over the back of the couch, fully prepared to reach for the gun Jack keeps on the side table.

“Sarah?”

Sarah Adler glances past a shell-shocked Jack, to Riley. “Nicholas Carpenter was a member of your ops team, correct?” Riley nods. “And before he stole a WMD, attempted to release it, and escaped federal custody, he was also your boyfriend?”

Riley swallows. “Yes.”

“Why is this important?” Jack mutters.

“We’ve found him.”

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**THE PHOENIX FOUNDATION**

**SOMETHING IN LOS ANGELES**

It feels strange to see Sarah up front doing the briefing. Jack hasn’t run a full mission with her in over five years now. *Caracas doesn’t count.* This is the way it used to be, back when she was his partner. Before she literally threw herself in the line of fire for him. Before they assigned him a new partner, a sassy, troublesome hacker. *Riley.* And now five years later, here they are, like nothing ever changed. Except that everything has.

“Thirty-eight hours ago, one of our intel teams intercepted a communication to set up a dead drop, with an alias we traced back to your former agent, Nick Carpenter. When I found out, I took the op myself, and then tracked Jack down.”

“We appreciate you coming to us with this,” Patty says, giving Sarah a nod. “Our agents have been
looking for Carpenter for quite some time, but he’s always evaded us.”

“We’ll handle it from here,” Jack says. “Our agent, our op.” He knows it’s not going to go over well, and Patty probably won’t back him up, but he has his reasons.

“This is my op. And seeing as you know the suspect, I’m offering you a chance to assist me.” Sarah folds her arms, looking a little pissed.

“Well, since you’re getting married this weekend it hardly seems like the ideal time for a field operation…”

“Oh, so you did get my invitation. I thought you lost it.”

“I just...I didn’t know how to respond, okay?” Jack honestly didn’t think Sarah would invite him to her wedding. And when she did, he didn’t know if he wanted to go or not. He’s not sure he can watch her walk down the aisle to someone else.

“It was an RSVP, yes or no, Jack. That simple. Like those “be my girlfriend” cards kids hand someone in elementary school.”

“Now you’re dating yourself,” Riley whispers under her breath, although Jack can hear it. *Yeah, you probably left them a message in some sort of programming code, and if they could figure it out they were worth your time.*

“You need to work things out,” Patty snaps. “Or I’m pulling our team off the op.”

Jack steps out into the hallway. *I can’t do this. I can’t.* Then he hears the footsteps behind him.

“I’m coming, Jack.”

“I…” Jack rubs a hand over his face. “Running an op. Together. Days before your wedding. Is that the smart thing to do? You know what can happen on a mission adrenaline high.”

“I was hoping you’d be mature enough to keep it in your pants. Because the only reason this wedding’s going to get called off is if I’ve done something we both regret, you’re sterile, and I’m in jail.” Jack raises an eyebrow.

“I just meant, it doesn’t look good. People will talk.” Sarah knows him better than to think he’s going to pressure her into doing something stupid. *Right? She knows I wouldn’t. It’s just that these darn intelligence agencies like to try and make theories about more than the people we hunt.* Jack knows inter-agency gossip is nasty. Sarah could be in for some harsh words at the CIA once this is all over.

“You and I both know that what people say doesn’t matter. They don’t know what the truth is. Have we ever let that bother us?” Sarah meets his eyes firmly, her jaw set defiantly.

“Does your fiance know?”

“That I’m on a case? Yes. That I’m with you? No.” She shrugs. “It was on a need to know basis. And he didn’t.” Jack sighs. *That’s no way to be starting married life. Lying to your partner, in any line of work, is a major problem. Lying to the person you’re planning to spend the rest of your life with… This is why he’s never gotten serious about a relationship. Because some lies are always necessary, in this line of business, and eventually it gets too hard to sort out the lies and the truths. Were you really on a business trip this weekend? Was it a mission or a one-night stand? Was it both? Did you really get that bruise from falling down some stairs? Do you really love me?*
“Okay. We can run the op together.”

DEAD DROP

HOPEFULLY EVERYONE LEAVES THIS PLACE ALIVE

Jack wonders if it’s chance that Nick chose an abandoned church for the drop site. *One of the old ones where there’s still a cemetery right out back. Convenient.* There’s something off about this. Nick has been dark for months. Ever since Lisbon it’s like he fell off the face of the earth.

*Why is he showing up now?* Nick is a trained operative. He wouldn’t make a rookie mistake like the unsecured message the CIA picked up. *This is some kind of trap.*

He carefully checks the entire building, sweeping the basement, the bell tower, the closets, the choir room, with Sarah. It’s almost effortless how they slip back into their routine. Sarah takes left, Jack takes right. She goes low, he goes high.

The place is empty. Jack checks his watch. Less than an hour until the meet time. He’s tense and stressed, and he feels a little jittery. He checks his gun, pulls it apart, and puts it back together. Mac and Riley are standing near the front of the church, and Jack sends up a quick and silent prayer for protection for both of them. Nick almost killed his baby girl once. He has no doubt that that traitor will try again, given the opportunity. He knows Riley wanted to be on this op, that just like Sarah she would have thrown a fit at being left behind. But oh God, he’d feel so much better if she was safe in the Phoenix. If it was just him and Sarah.

As hard as that would be on a personal level, he’d much rather deal with his failed relationship than the risk of losing one of those kids. Because Mac shouldn’t have gotten dragged into this either. This isn’t his problem. Not his fight. Yes, he’s here because of Nick, and what Nick did, but that doesn’t mean he should be risking his life to bring their problem in. But he tagged along like a loyal dog, and Jack doesn’t have the heart to kick him out of the case. *He’ll take it as rejection. As a sign he isn’t actually as ready for the field as we’ve told him. I have to be careful.*

He stands up and goes to check on Sarah. She’s pacing the back of the church, glancing at the woodcuts on the walls. When she sees Jack, she meets him, and both of them start toward Mac and Riley.

“You, me, walking down an aisle...don’t you think maybe this is a sign?” Jack asks, giving her his characteristic half-smirk.

“No. Give up already, Jack.” She punches his arm lightly. “My bad for thinking we could still be friends.”

“It was worth a shot.” He shrugs. “You sure you’re not gonna reconsider?”

“No. I’m not.” She stops, leaning on the end of a pew. “Jack, I’m happy. I would hope you could accept that and move on. I want you to be happy too. But you and I were never going to work. We’re too similar.” He doesn’t want to accept it, but it is the truth. Two strong, determined, hard-headed individuals. It made them a great field team. Driven, intense, willing to question each other’s decisions for the good of the mission. But somewhere deep down, Jack knows that without the pressures of the field, without the ability to pour frustration into a mission, they would have gone down in flames.

“So what’s the dress like?” He asks, trying to change the mood.
“Traditional.”

“White?”

Sarah rolls her eyes, and her voice drips sarcasm. “No, black kevlar with a comm set and tactical holsters, Jack.”

“I mean, you could probably be a trend-setter. You always did look good in black.” He swallows back the urge to say anything more. She’s happy. She said it herself. She has everything she wants, and that everything doesn’t include you.

“Come to the wedding, and you’ll get to see it.”

“Is Jim okay with you...you know, inviting your much cooler ex to the wedding?” Jack leans on a pew, shoving his hands in his pockets.

“It’s Jeff, and yes, he is, because he’s not insecure.” She smirks. “He’s an officer in the Portland PD’s hostage negotiation department. We met when a case I was working overlapped with his. So he’s pretty cool.”

Jack shrugs, a bit of a smile slipping onto his own face. “So, did he propose over a radio call?”

“No, but I did give him my plans for the wedding as a list of ransom demands.” She turns to glance at the door, then back at Jack. “Newspaper letter cutouts and everything.”

“Let me guess, he countered with an offer to help you fly out of the country. For the honeymoon.”

“Something like that.”

“You two are so sweet I’m gonna get diabetes.” Jack has to admit he really is happy for her. It sounds like she has a guy who can make her laugh. And who she can joke with. Someone she’s comfortable with. Someone willing to commit.

“Guys, we need to get in positions,” Riley says. She and Sarah crouch behind the last row of pews, weapons ready. Jack pulls Mac over to the confessional booth. He can still keep an eye on the door, but it’s far enough away that the kid should be decently safe. Both of them duck inside, and Jack pulls his door shut, breathing in the faint smell of incense in his booth. He’s in the priest’s side.

Mac, in the other half, sounds restless, and his breathing is quick. Jack guesses being trapped in small enclosed spaces isn’t his favorite thing.

“Is everything alright...my son?” Jack asks, deepening his voice. He doesn’t want the kid to realize this is about a lot more than lightening a tense mood, that Jack is so desperate to say this to Mac that he’ll take any opportunity. That he really wants to be able to call Mac his son, and mean it. No drugs, no jokes, really and truly be the dad Mac deserves. But he can’t tell the kid that now. So he settles for dealing with the slightly less deep wound in his personal life.

“I think so. Are you?”

Jack sighs. “I just don’t know how much longer I can keep pretending to be okay with this whole wedding thing.” If I talk about Sarah, I don’t have to talk about Mac. Honestly he’s more okay with that than he acts, he just has to give her grief. The real problem is Mac.

Jack won’t admit to anyone that the thing he is most shocked he gave up under the influence of that truth serum isn’t the Phoenix. It’s that he said he thinks of Mac as his child. I can’t tell him that. I
can’t.

He wants to be there for Mac, to be the parental figure the kid missed out on. The statistics for people accused of crimes show that overwhelmingly they come from fatherless homes. He wonders what would have happened if he’d met Mac sooner. Been able to redirect the kid’s talent for disaster. Could he have been able to escape that hell?

“This is you pretending to be okay with it?” Mac’s voice has a weak chuckle, and it breaks Jack’s rambling thoughts.

No it’s not. I’m not okay with what your dad did to you. But I also know you’ve probably got a thing about father figures. Mac’s real dad left, Pena turned out to be a murderous bomb maker. Jack doesn’t want the kid worried that Jack will betray him too. Better to just be friends. Brothers, even. I don’t want him to be afraid something will happen to me.

“Yeah. It’s just hard, you know? What might have been?” If I’d gotten to you sooner, kid. If when I left the Army I stayed out. If somehow I was here when you needed me.

“You know, there’s a reason they say speak now, or forever hold your peace.”

“Already did. She’s happy.” Jack sighs. “She’s got exactly what she wants in life, and she’s gonna hang onto it.” I’m trying, so hard, but I don’t know if you want it as much as I do.

“Guys,” Riley whispers over comms. “We have incoming.”

Jack hears a car roll in, then a door slam. Footsteps rattle up the steps, the door opens, and Nick Carpenter, his formerly blonde hair dyed reddish-brown, his steps light and nervous, walks inside. He glances around the room, and then Jack sees him tense. Oh shit. The footprints. In the dust.

They’ve been made.

Mac hears Jack’s breathing quicken. He’s only seen Nick once before, when the guy was pointing a gun at him, Jack and Riley. The red-haired guy in the middle of the room is only vaguely recognizable.

The man glances around, then down, and then freezes. Mac sees him tense to run. He knows we’re here. Riley and Sarah stand up, guns drawn. “Nick! Stop!” He bolts. Mac flings himself out of the small booth just as Jack does, vaulting over one of the pews to get a head start.

Nick can’t get past Riley and Sarah to the door, so he runs the opposite way, heading for the stairwell that leads to the basement level. Mac, Jack, Riley, and Sarah all converge on it seconds after Nick disappears.

“I’ll check this route,” Sarah says, motioning to a door marked Exit. Jack seamlessly moves in to cover her. Mac and Riley head the opposite way, toward the kitchen, a large open common room, and a second set of exit doors. Riley gets in front, covering their path, checking around the corners of cement block walls. She gets to the door and shakes her head. It’s alarmed, and the alarm hasn’t been disabled. He didn’t go that way. She turns back toward where Jack and Sarah disappeared.

Mac makes a detour through the kitchen. If Nick bolts, and they need to chase him down, he’d like to pick up some supplies.

There’s a faint scuff from behind him as he stuffs some saltshakers into his bag. Mac stands up and glances at where the pantry door is swinging open on its hinges. Nick is standing there. Mac’s hand
moves blindly toward the countertop, searching for a knife he knows he saw there, something, anything to defend himself, although if Nick has a gun...

“My replacement. Angus MacGyver, accused domestic terrorist and murderer.” Nick’s lip quirks. “And here I thought the reason the agency didn’t like me was because they’re calling me a terrorist.”

“I didn’t do it,” Mac says defensively. “You were going to set off a bomb and kill thousands if not millions with that virus.” *This shouldn’t be able to hurt me. He’s a monster. His words mean nothing.* But the truth is they do sting. *What makes us so different? They don’t know for sure that I’m not just like him. What if they decide I’m not useful anymore...*

And then that whole horrible mess with Bozer and the bomb comes back. And Jack and Riley coming to find him, to make sure he didn’t just disappear, to help him clear his name. Thornton covering for him. *They won’t throw me away. They won’t.*

“You know, someone with your skills...we could use a man like you.” Nick says. “I’m glad I caught you alone, Angus. I’d rather recruit you than kill you. I promise, the people I work for think of your past as an asset rather than a liability.”

“Then you’re going to have to kill me.” Mac straightens, he has a hand on the knife handle now, he might get a decent throw in. Even if Nick shoots him, maybe he’ll be able to wound the guy enough for the others to catch him. Or maybe he’ll even take Nick down with him. *I can do this.*

“Nick Carpenter! Put your hands up!” Riley’s voice is a vicious snarl. She sounds like Jack when he’s angry. Mac glances over, she has her gun trained on Nick’s head. And her finger isn’t on the trigger guard, it’s over the trigger. If she shoots, it will be instant and she won’t miss.

“Altiara Pedimus, Bravo Seven!” Nick shouts, just as Jack and Sarah burst in, weapons raised.

Sarah makes an audible gasp. “That’s an agency code.” She gives Jack and Riley the signal to stand down. “It means Nick’s not a terrorist. He’s a deep cover agent for the CIA.”

Riley’s still wrapping her head around this. *Nick was a CIA plant this whole time? He was working a long cover?*

Nick seems remarkably calm for someone who was moments away from having his head blown off. He glances at Mac, who’s still got a death grip on a butcher knife. “Sorry about the scare, Angus. I had to be sure we could trust you.”

“His name’s Mac,” Riley snaps. “And the hell do you think you can get away with that? It’s you we should know better than to trust.”

“I just gave you my identification. You were CIA, you know the drill,” Nick says.

“So you’re telling me the whole Como op was some kind of crazy buy-in?” Riley wants to say that in itself proves Nick’s lying, but she knows the Agency will approve some very dangerous things in the name of doing the job. Stealing and possibly setting off a weapon of mass destruction isn’t off the table of things she’s heard of happening. *If they thought it would guarantee success, they’d approve it.* That’s one of the reasons she’s glad to be at Phoenix. They don’t cross the line...or at least they didn’t. After Bishop, she’s not so sure she isn’t working for a person who might allow something awful to happen in the name of the mission. *Would Oversight ask us to take a risk like that?* With Mac, it was one life, and as awful as that is, she knows someone like Oversight considered that a small sacrifice in the big picture. *But what if it was millions?*
“I assured them you and Jack would never let the virus be released. I knew I was leaving it in capable hands.”

“Am I supposed to feel flattered?” Riley shakes her head. He’s cold. How did I ever think he and I were compatible? She doesn’t recognize the Nick she knew. But I didn’t know him. He was the best deep cover agent I’ve ever seen. And he fooled us all.

“Then things started getting messier. I found out an assassin had been hired to take you all out. It had gone too far.” Nick shrugs. “I called my CIA handler and asked to be pulled out. And then two days later he died in a car crash.” Nick glances at Sarah and Jack. “After that I went dark.”

“No one else knew you were undercover.” Sarah says, sharply.

“No. I thought I’d stay in, get enough intel to take Omnus...that’s what they call themselves...down once and for all. I thought if I had that it would be a hell of a bargaining chip and maybe I could come in from the cold. But then they moved up their timetable. They have someone on the inside of Phoenix. Someone I know only as the code name “Chrysalis”. And I got word a couple days ago that they were starting to mobilize something called “Artemis”. I knew I had to get word to you.”

“The dead drop was a fake. You wanted to get caught,” Riley says.

“I had to get word to you, and since I can’t trust any Phoenix communication, I had to try to get picked up by the CIA. I hoped they’d involve you.”

“You expect us to just swallow the hook?” Jack asks. “Why should we believe you? You could have gotten that code phrase out of a real CIA plant in the Organization.”

“Check it with the logs. It’s my ID, three years old.” He tosses Riley his phone. “I have access codes. In my messages.” She unlocks the phone, it’s the same password he used when they were dating. He’s right. There’s a string of texts with the kind of codes used to log into the CIA mainframe. The ones that change every half hour.

“Three years?” Riley thought this was about Como. That Nick was approached days or weeks before that one job. He’s been a plant the whole time?

“The CIA approached me right after the Phoenix did. They knew that intel was going missing; they’d traced the leak back to Phoenix. They told me to accept the offer, to gather intel, and to stand by to be activated.”

“You were a sleeper agent. For the CIA.” Riley feels the world rock under her feet. They don’t trust anyone in our agency. She or Jack would have been the logical choice for this kind of op, they are former CIA trained. But apparently, to the Agency, everyone in Phoenix is potentially tainted. They had to have someone new.

Riley taps a few keys, and the comms fill with static and then go dead. Jack glances at her, but she shakes her head subtly. Don’t let him know anything changed.

“Do you still have that key I gave you?” Nick asks. Riley nods. “It opens a strongbox in a safe house about two hours from here. Everything I have on Chrysalis is in that box. It’s the proof I’m telling the truth.”

Riley glances at Jack. “I need to talk to you.” She nods to Sarah. “Do you have this under control?”

“You know it.” Sarah nods.
“If he moves, shoot him,” Jack says.

Mac seems unsure about who he’s supposed to go with, standing between the two groups and leaning back and forth like a kid at a party who isn’t sure whether to get on the dance floor, until Riley motions him over.

“Why’d you cut comms?” Jack asks.

“You know what happens if we let Patty make the executive decision on this. She’s gonna say he’s playing mind games and to bring him in right now. And if Chrysalis is real…”

Mac finishes for her. “They could be inside the Phoenix right now. Ready to take Nick out the second we arrive.” Riley nods.

“And, I hate to say this, but it could…” She looks at Jack. “It could be Patty.”

“No way. She would never.” Jack shakes his head. “You know her too well to think that, Ri.”

“We have to assume everything we know is a lie.” Riley’s still reeling from Nick’s revelations. He was never what we assumed. How can we trust anyone?

“Ri. I get that this hurt. That what he did is an absolute shock. But that doesn’t mean everyone is Nick. You trust me, right?” She nods. “So trust Patty. You know you can. You’re just in shock. You’re letting your emotions run this op, not your head.”

She nods slowly. He’s right. I felt betrayed and now I’m reeling, just trying to cover my ass and protect myself from any more hurt.

“But we still can’t bring him in. Who knows how many agents Chrysalis has compromised? The whole tac team they would send could be turned.” She shudders. Chrysalis must be a high-level employee; they could be in charge of the tac teams, of the tech division…they might already know they’ve been exposed.

“We have to get out of here. If Chrysalis overhead that conversation, there could be someone on the way to eliminate us all now.” She glances back at Nick and Sarah. “We can’t go back to the Phoenix. I think we need to find that safe house.”

LOS ANGELES

APPARENTLY IT’S HOME TO A TOP SECRET AGENCY NOW

Bozer jumps when the phone rings. When he sees that the caller ID is displaying “Phoenix Foundation” his heart drops into his shoes. Mac is out on a mission. What if they’re calling to tell me he’s hurt? Bozer won’t let his thoughts wander darker than that. Mac can’t be dead. He can’t be.

Bozer stares at the phone, wondering if he should pick up or not. Mac had some story about a scientist named Schrodinger and a cat in a radioactive box. Once the box was open, you’d know for sure if the cat was dead or alive. But as long as the box was closed the cat was in a state of limbo, neither one nor the other, because no one could see what it was. Picking up that phone is like opening Schrodinger’s box. If he picks up, he’ll know for sure if Mac is alive or dead. If he doesn’t, then Mac’s somewhere in between.

On the last ring, he picks up.
“Wilt Bozer speaking, can I help you?”

It’s Thornton. “Mr. Bozer, there have been a few...complications regarding your involvement in Operation Secret Santa. I’m going to need you to come into the agency for a full interview.” That sounds ominous. Probably ‘interrogation’ not ‘interview’.

He doesn’t really blame Jack, or Riley, or Sam for Mac getting sent back to prison. He’s not sure if he blames Thornton or not. Jack claims the woman’s hands were as tied as her team, thanks to their mysterious “Oversight” boss. That doesn’t mean Boze wants to go see her. He wonders if somehow, something slipped, and Oversight knows he knows the truth.

“I’ll be there as soon as I can.”

The whole drive over, his mind reels with possibilities. He left a note for Mac just in case he never comes home from this. In case they throw him in a hole somewhere. But if they do, won’t they do that to Mac too? At least Bozer can hope that if they’re going to go to prison for selling state secrets, they’ll be put in solitary confinement. *If they send Mac to any place like where he was...* And as much as Boze hates to admit it, he’s afraid for himself too. *I don’t have any right to be. Not after what Mac went through.* But he still doesn’t want that to happen to him.

When he gets to the Phoenix, the building feels even more imposing than when he was here with Mac. Maybe because he’s alone. He’d feel better if any of Mac’s team was here. He’d prefer his best friend, but Jack, Sam, or Riley would stick up for him, he knows they would. Now, he’s all alone.

When he tells the front desk that he got a call from Director Thornton, he’s directed to sit down in one of two chairs against the wall while the secretary calls someone. A few minutes later, and man and a woman in stiff grey suits come up and walk him deep into the heart of the building. They take an elevator down one floor, march him down a hall, and then open the door of a room at the end. Inside, Patricia Thornton is waiting.

The room is cold, grey, sterile; furnished only with a table and two chairs. Thornton pulls out the one across the table from the door and motions for him to sit. He does. The woman’s icy gaze is frightening; she reminds him of a vampire, with her red lipstick, black dress, and demanding glare. *She could stare me into doing whatever she wanted.* No wonder she’s the boss.

This is the “secret agent” vibe Jack and Riley and Sam never seemed to have. Sam, sure, she was a little strange, but she was Australian so it didn’t really count. Those people are crazy to live someplace that can kill you five ways in the first minute after you wake up. Thornton is the kind of badass scary that Boze thinks people should be afraid of.

“What exactly am I here for, Director Thornton?” Bozer’s seen these movies. A lot. And the guys like him, the ones on the other side of tables, only make it out alive if they’re spunky and tough and a little brash. He wonders if it works the same in real life as on TV. *If she says, “I ask the questions here” I’m doomed.*

“This doesn’t leave this room.” Thornton leans over the table, but her menacing gaze is muted slightly by the worry in her eyes and the slight tremble of her lips. “I need your help.”

He stares, wide-eyed. *The scary head of a top secret agency needs my help?*

“I need someone I can trust. Someone who has no affiliation with the Phoenix.” Bozer nods, mouth dry. “We have a mole, and you’re the only person in this building I trust to help me find them.”

Bozer just swallows.
“I’ve suspected there was something wrong for a while now. Something about a past op never sat right with me. That’s why I hired your friend MacGyver. Someone who I knew had no prior connections to any government agency, someone willing to break the rules to do the right thing. He was just the kind of person we needed to smoke out this mole.”

Boze nods again. Mac was a vigilante, used to operating on his own, disregarding rules and protocols. He knows what he’s doing. Boze is a failing filmmaker who works in a restaurant.

“But MacGyver’s in the field, unable to communicate with us. And according to his last communication, the mole, Chrysalis is about to mobilize their plan. So effective immediately, you, Wilt Bozer, are being granted Beta level clearance.”

Bozer can’t feel his hands. Or his feet. This is happening. Oh my God this is happening. This only happens in movies. There’s no way he, Wilton Frederick Bozer, just got recruited by a top secret agency to stop a mole.

“I was highly impressed with your actions in our last encounter. And your skill at making disguises. Our own team would be hard pressed to replicate that work. If this goes well, and there’s still an agency left standing at the end of the day, I hope you’ll consider this a job interview.”

“All due respect, Director Thornton, your agency put my best friend in prison. It almost killed him. So I’ll help you save his life, but then I’m done. You can put me in some secret prison and throw away the key, if you want, but I’m not going to be part of a place that would risk Mac’s life so carelessly.”

She nods. “I can respect that. Are you with me for today?”

*If the Phoenix goes under, especially if it’s for something like this, Mac is gonna go back to prison. For sure. I have to do this. To save him, I have to save the Phoenix. “Yes. I’m with you.”*

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**SAFE HOUSE**

**SUPPOSEDLY THE KEY TO PROVING NICK’S INNOCENCE. PUN INTENDED.**

The safe house is nice. A cabin in the Sierra Nevadas, out of the way, quiet and rugged in a comfortable way. The kind of place where city people would go to feel like they’re roughing it.

Riley wonders if this is the place Nick said he’d take her after Como. If this is one of his real safehouses, not just the one the Organization set up. It would make sense, since he wouldn’t want to store evidence against them in one of their own houses.

Jack and Sarah clear the house, including the attic and the basement. Riley glances at Nick. “Okay, where’s the box?”

Nick gestures with his cuffed hands; Jack and Sarah insisted on him being restrained. Riley’s pretty sure, based on the evidence, that he’s telling the truth, but still…

Riley opens the cabinet and pulls out a lockbox, an older-looking thing that she figures wouldn’t draw attention to itself. It doesn’t look official or even all that secure.

Riley pulls the key from her necklace and slides it into the lock. The box opens with a soft click. It’s empty, the surprisingly modern-looking inside a black hole of nothingness. “Nick?”

Nick’s face shows genuine surprise. “It was all there, I swear. Chrysalis must have gotten here ahead
of us and destroyed it.”

“Or you were leading us on a wild goose chase the whole time,” Jack snarls.

“How would Chrysalis possibly have gotten here before us?” Mac asks.

“Agents are required to register their personal safehouses with the agency,” Riley says. Her own, in Portland, is. “It’s a way to help us find an agent who may have been badly injured and gone to ground, if we can’t track them any other way and they’re not responding.” She shrugs. “If Chrysalis is as high up in the Phoenix ranks as Nick claims, they could get their hands on the registry list and find Nick’s.”

“Which means that whether or not Nick set us up, we just walked into a trap.” And then there’s a rattle of gunfire and they all dive behind chairs, couches, and walls as bullets tear into the wall. Riley hears Jack shout, and she risks a glance from behind her chair to see that there’s red running down his arm. It can’t be too bad, though, he’s still holding his gun.

Jack flings open the door and shoots a couple rounds, glancing out and then ducking back in. “Looks like Belarus out there, Sarah.”

“That bad, huh?”

“I’m counting two three-man teams. And they’re surrounding the place.” Jack glances at Nick. “One way or another, you led them right to us.”

“They’re trying to kill all of us,” Nick snaps. “Do you think I would set up a trap that got me killed?”

“He’s right, that’s a kill squad out there,” Sarah says, then ducks as a window shatters and rains down glass over her head and shoulders.

“It’s not going to matter when we’re all full of lead,” Riley snaps. “Is there a back way out of here?” Nick’s smart enough to have had one.

“Through the basement, but it comes out right in the woods. Where they are.” Nick looks up from where he’s crouched behind a chair.

“I think I can get us out of here,” Mac says. He’s looking at the old woodstove with that funny little gleam in his eye that says he’s got an idea. And then he’s off and running, and Riley cringes as he tries to stay low, avoiding the bullets still tearing through the room. He stumbles once and she can’t tell if it’s clumsiness or if he’s actually hurt.

He rummages through cabinets in the kitchen, grabbing a bunch of random stuff that she can’t really see from her hiding spot, and then rushes back, unhooking the stove from the chimney, stuffing a couple cans of things inside, and pouring the contents of other ones in as well. He opens a box of spaghetti, pulls some out, and lights the ends on fire before shoving that in as well.

“Spaghetti?” Jack asks. “Are you gonna distract them with a potluck dinner?”

“No,” Mac says, sounding equal parts amused and aggravated. “I’m going to roll this out the door, and the explosion should knock them back. And then we run for the car.”

“Got it. That thing blows up, we run. Classic MacGyver plan,” Jack chuckles. “I love it.”

“Yeah, there’s just one problem. I need someone to shoot directly through the stove’s grate to make it explode.”
“Well, then I got your back kid.” Jack readies his gun.

“No, no, I’ll do it.” Sarah moves forward. “We want it to actually work, don’t we?”

“You wound me!” Jack exclaims dramatically. “Okay, we’ll both shoot and between us we gotta hit it, right?”

Jack pulls the door open and Mac rolls out the stove. It lurches down the stairs, Jack and Sarah both firing at it. And then there’s a blast that makes Riley’s ears ring, but she’s already on her feet and shoving Nick toward the car.

“Good shot!” Jack yells.

“Thanks, Jack, that was big of you to admit!” Sarah calls back, and Riley grins. Those two really did work well together. She wonders what would have happened if Belarus had been different, if Jack hadn’t gotten reassigned. If he’d never met Riley, and he and Sarah kept working as a team. Would he be the one walking down the aisle with her?

She only realizes that she forgot the cardinal rule of being a spy, don’t let your personal life get tangled up in the mission, when she feels a bullet rip through her side, and stumbles. Nick lurches in front of her, she can’t tell if he’s been hit too or if he’s far enough to the side that the bullet missed him. She can feel herself going down, losing her footing on the loose leaves that are now slick with blood.

There’s a burning ache in her stomach and a thousand pound weight seems to have settled there. Riley vaguely feels Jack dragging her, hears him yelling at Sarah to drive, feels herself laid down in the back seat of a car.

She knows what getting shot feels like, all too well. There’s the pain, but more than anything just a vague numbness. She sits in the back of the car, between Mac and Jack, the shock setting in whether she wants it to or not. She risks a glance at the wound, at the blood welling over her olive t-shirt. I’ve had worse, it’s not so bad... Is it evening, or does it just feel like everything’s getting darker?

“Ri. Stay awake for me. Stay with me. Hey, baby girl, you keep those eyes open!” She can hear the tears and panic in Jack’s voice. She wants to keep her eyes open, but she’s so tired...

THE WAR ROOM

NOT SOMEPLACE FOR CIVILIANS

Sam has been worried since Riley stopped texting her. They had Nick in hand. They should have been coming back. Apparently Nick was CIA, so she doesn’t think he had Organization backup waiting in an ambush. But maybe they knew he was a traitor...

When she gets the message to come to the War Room, she has to push down a faint spear of worry in her chest. Patty would tell me outright if one of them was dead.

When she opens the door, both Wilt Bozer and Patty are inside. She blinks slightly; while it’s one thing to have broken the rules and allowed him to know about the Phoenix, it’s another thing entirely to let him roam the agency willy-nilly. She knows she’s exaggerating, but still, he shouldn’t be here. At best he should be in one of the secure interview rooms. She should be vetting him.

“Director?”
“Agent Cage, Mr. Bozer has just been granted Beta level clearance as an asset. But I would prefer that that knowledge did not leave this room.” Patty’s voice is strained. “I wanted to wait to bring you in until I talked with Agent Jarvis in Sydney.” She smiles. “He confirmed that you had no communication with the DXS in any way until you were hired. Now there are two people in this building that I trust.”

“What is this about?” Sam has the feeling she already knows. Riley mentioned something about a mole before she shut down her phone. But saying anything about that might make Thornton question the decision to trust her.

“An agent highly placed in the Phoenix is a mole for the Organization. They’re funneling classified intel, and Nick Carpenter was a CIA plant tasked with infiltrating the Organization and learning the true identity of this “Chrysalis”.” Patty sighs. “Given your record, I needed confirmation that you weren’t connected.”

“I understand.” Sam knows that it’s not that Patty doesn’t trust her. But for someone to have hidden this long...Nick was hired two years ago, and he was a plant the whole time. The CIA has known about Chrysalis for a long time. At least that explains the state of his apartment. She knew something about him was wrong. Patty can’t take chances on trusting an outsider with Sam’s history right now. She has to suspect everyone.

“We might have a chance of getting some information from someone who might have crossed paths with the Organization.” Patty says. “And so far, the only person we might be able to tie to them, is Murdoc.”

Sam nods. Murdoc had taken contracts on Patty, Riley, and Jack, contracts that very well could have been set up by the Organization. Even if that’s not the case, in his line of work it’s very possible he crossed paths with them at some point.

“We need someone who’s capable of matching him at his own mind game.” Sam nods. She doesn’t like the idea. Murdoc knows too much about her. About her past. But right now, she’s not the important thing here. The important thing is getting what they need. And if she plays her cards right, no one will ever find out what Murdoc knows.

THE BACKSEAT OF THE CAR

THIS IS DEFINITELY NOT THE BEST TIME RILEY’S HAD IN ONE

When she comes to, the first thing Riley sees is Jack’s concerned brown eyes hovering over her. “How long was I out?” she mumbles.

“Like a minute or so,” Mac says. “Probably just shock.” She’s dimly aware she’s now got Jack’s coat spread over her legs, and Mac’s jacket around her shoulders. Is he hurt? She saw him stumble, and she knows Jack got shot...

Riley presses a hand to the blood. “It’s a through-and-through. I’ll live.” The wound is bleeding enough that it’s cleaning itself out, for now. It’ll be good enough until they get somewhere they can do a more substantial job. The road is too rough here to do more than keep on some pressure.

“I need the first aid kit. From the glove box,” Jack shouts. Nick, in the passenger seat, complies, opening the glove box clumsily with his still-cuffed hands. There’s blood on them but Riley can’t tell if it’s his or hers.

“We didn’t bring a large kit,” Sarah says. “This was supposed to be a simple asset interception.”
Which means they don’t have the pressure bandages and the bullet kit.

“We could use a shirt,” Jack suggests, starting to pull his off.

“Or these.” Riley pulls a handful of sanitary pads out of her computer bag. “Should do the trick.”

She sees Mac’s smile. *His knack for repurposing things is really rubbing off.* “They’re made to absorb blood, so they oughta do until we get something more...professional.” She tosses one at Jack, and he opens it and presses it against his shoulder wound, holding it in place while Mac secures it with a couple bland-aids.

“As soon as I get signal we’re calling Patty,” Jack says. “We’ve got a badly injured agent and a giant mess on our hands. There’s no way she’d turn on us, she’ll help us lay low and stay safe.”

“You can’t make contact. They’re going to be breaching the Phoenix through *Riley’s* login,” Nick mutters. “You’re all going to be under suspicion.”

“What?” Jack turns on the man, and Riley’s afraid he’ll go full wookie and rip Nick’s arms right off.

“How did they...Did you...?” Riley can barely form coherent words, and it isn’t because of blood loss.

“I tried to slow them down. But they had a complete clone of your rig. The woman who gave it to me said she got it off you in Germany. Something about a train?” Nick shrugs. “After a while it was pretty clear that the ultimatum was going to be ‘hack it or die’.”

“So you chose to compromise me and my entire career?” Riley is beyond furious. *If we don’t figure this out, I’m facing a life on the run or life in prison.* Neither option is appealing. But there’s something even worse about this whole scenario, something that will hurt more people than just her.

“Guess Wagner wasn’t just a civilian after all.” Jack’s fingers tighten on the pads held over Riley’s stomach, and she hisses. She bites off the pained yelp to tell Jack what she needs to, even though it only makes everything worse.

“I have admin access,” she says quietly. “That’s why they needed my passwords and my login codes. When I reset the system and updated our security after the DXS went under, I got full access to the mainframe. To all the security codes for the building, to all the firewalled files. Only Patty and Oversight have the same privileges. If the Organization gets inside, they can wreak havoc on the entire Phoenix network.”

“We have to go to ground.” Jack says. “Figure out our next move. And you need better medical treatment.”

“I’ll be fine,” Riley growls out. “You ran around for almost two days with a bullet in your gut in Myanmar.”

“Yeah, well, I’ve got a little more padding there than you do, kiddo.” Jack chuckles wryly. “And in case you forgot, that darn thing got infected and I was in the hospital for two weeks.”

“There’s a hotel up ahead,” Sarah says. “I can still use my Agency issued ID and cards. I’m the only one here not possibly under suspicion of being a traitor.”

“It won’t last long,” Jack says. “You’re right, we should stop while we still can. Before they have our faces on screens all over the state.”

When Sarah finds a parking space at the hotel, Jack carefully rearranges Riley’s leather jacket so it
hides the blood, then puts on his own coat to cover the wound and makeshift bandage on his arm. Mac steps out, and there’s blood on his hands and arms from helping Riley, but nowhere else. She’s glad he wasn’t actually wounded in all the shooting, it’s surprising given that he was the one moving around so much to make the stove bomb. *For once, luck was on his side.*

Jack goes with Sarah to the front desk. Mac holds Riley, and she lets her head lean against his shoulder. She can vaguely hear Jack at the desk, saying they need the honeymoon suite. *Big, high up, with limited access and good vantage points. And no one makes too much fuss about odd sounds, especially when you have to treat a wound. Or interrogate someone. A little blood doesn’t immediately raise red flags.* She used to be fake married to Nick a lot to get those rooms. She wonders if Jack and Sarah are doing the same.

Jack returns with the keys and a triumphant grin. “Got it.” They take the elevator up, there’s no way Riley can manage the stairs. It’s a relief to be in the room, where she can lie down on the bed, which Mac tells Jack to cover with towels from the bathroom before he sets Riley down. There’s going to be a decent amount of bleeding from patching up this wound.

“What’s our next move?” Sarah asks. “If we can’t contact the Phoenix, I’m sure I won’t be able to reach out to the CIA to have us brought in. Especially if this plan is already in motion. Riley and anyone connected to her will be under suspicion.”

Jack glances at Nick, still cuffed and standing near the door. “You need to contact Chrysalis. Set up a meeting.”

“But he destroyed everything I had on him.” Nick’s confusion is clearly evident.

“He doesn’t know that,” Mac says. Riley gives him an approving nod, he’s got the idea. “You can claim whatever was in the lockbox was a copy.”

Jack continues. “With your handler gone, you can’t come back to the Agency. Chrysalis knows you’ll have to run. And they’ll know you’re desperate. If you demand a face to face meeting, maybe he’ll show up to get rid of you once and for all.”

“Great. I’m the bait,” Nick mutters.

Mac glances from Nick to Jack. “We don’t have a computer. And we can’t turn on our phones. How is he going to contact Chrysalis?”

Nick raises his cuffed hands, wiggling his fingers. “Just need the TV.” He shrugs. “You want me to contact him, take these off, will you?”

“Don’t think I won’t keep an eye on you the whole time,” Jack mutters, unlocking the cuffs. “If you so much as make one suspicious keystroke, say goodbye to a kneecap.” Riley smirks. Jack’s not kidding. Nick may not believe it, but Jack has watched Riley work long enough that he does know what Nick should and shouldn’t need to do to get that message out. She lays back, wincing as Mac starts to remove the bandages on her stomach. *This is gonna suck.*

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SECURE GOVERNMENT FACILITY

**THIS IS THE FIRST TIME SAM’S BEEN ON THE OTHER SIDE OF THE DOORS IN ONE**

Sam glances through the small window into the interrogation room. Murdoc is inside, his red jumpsuit giving him the aura of a cartoon devil. *He’s as dangerous as one.* She takes a last deep breath. She has to play her cards just right. But even a psychotic killer like Murdoc is still human.
And she knows how to play people.

“Well, well, if it isn’t the Phoenix’s little mind reader.” Murdoc laughs. “I’m guessing this isn’t a social call to relieve my boredom in solitary.”

“I wouldn’t have come at all. But we need you.” He’s proud. Use it. “Several of our agents are missing. And we need what you know to bring them home.”

“Why should I care about the agency that put me inside? They can all rot in the ground for all I care. Or did you forget that I was going to kill some of them? That’s why I’m here, you know.”

“You didn’t want to kill MacGyver.”

Murdock leans back, folding his hands and smiling. “Oho. So there’s the rub. Precious little Angus is one of the agents you so incompetently misplaced. You know, you should have let me have him, I would have done a much better job of protecting him.”

Cage leans across the table. “You’re going to have to step it up if you want to play your mind games with me, Murdoc.”

He smiles. “Oh Deborah. Or should I call you Debbie? Do you like that better? Or Deb?”

“Actually, I prefer Samantha Cage, now.” She smirks slightly. “You should know all about that, Dennis.” I never met him. But I did cross paths with the man who trained him. Who thought he and I would be the perfect pair. She’s glad she got out before then. Alone, either she or Murdoc is deadly. Together...

He chuckles. “On no. You and I are very different. You’re trying to hide the monster inside. I just chose a name that suited it better.” He raises an eyebrow. “I’m sure you haven’t told your precious little team your dark secrets. Shall I?”

She stares right back. “Go ahead.”

“Oh, it’s too sweet, you actually trust them?” he laughs. “You’ve gone soft, Debbie. But what do you think is going to happen when I spill all your dirty little secrets? When they see the blood on your hands?”

Cage lets her composure break a little.

“What do you want?”

“For precious little Angus to come home unscathed.” Murdoc smiles eerily. “I want him alive as much as you do. But...for different reasons, I’m afraid.” He cocks his head. “Or is there enough left of the scorpion you were to want to hear him scream, to feel his blood on your skin, to want to watch that delicious fear in his beautiful eyes?”

“You couldn’t begin to understand what he is to us.” She lets a bit of all the anger boiling under the surface show through her calm facade.

“I’ve always heard it’s possible for people like us to change. But I’ve never really believed it.” He shrugs. “Tell me, wouldn’t it be so easy for you? To kill any of them? To kill all of them? Don’t tell me you haven’t dreamed of it. Those nights when the darkness comes back to play. Don’t tell me you haven’t thought of how easy it would be to snap your little roommate’s neck while she slept, to turn that brute Dalton’s own gun against him, to watch the light fade out of precious little Angus’s eyes...If he isn’t already so broken that you might be doing him a favor.”
“It’s none of your concern what I dream about.”

“Oh, so you do dream of blood.” He smiles.

“It will be your blood, if you don’t give me what I want.” She leans in, lets her smile grow a little colder.

“Oh, no need to get so vicious, little scorpion. I’ll give you exactly what you came for. But you have to give me something too, you’ve been in this game long enough to know how it works. No one in our line of work does anything for free. Out of the goodness of our hearts.” He whispers.

“Well, then, what is you want?” She raises an eyebrow. There are plenty of things he could ask for. She has no real authority to promise him anything, but he doesn’t know that...

“Oh, you already know what I want. Little Angus. I want a visit with him. Alone, no guards, just the two of us.” He seems to relish her slight movement of shock. “What did you think I was going to ask for, a book?”

“You know quite well that you’re not allowed visits from anyone but agency employees on official business.”

“Well, isn’t he one of your agents? Isn’t it official business, getting information that can save your team?”

Sam has to admit his game is confusing her. “You realize I can’t guarantee that you’d be able to see him, even if I promised it. Why this request? Why not something easier to get, something you can have in hand before you tell me what you know?” He has to know that the second he gave us what we wanted, we would back out of our end of the bargain.

“There’s nothing else I want,” he purrs. “And besides, what I have to tell you will make no difference. The pieces are in motion, the game is checkmated already.” She takes a mental note. It sounds as if he’s involved with Chrysalis. “Whether you want him in my hands or not, you will have no choice when this is over.”

She should keep her focus on whatever game Murdoc is a part of. But his obsession with Mac is so unusual. For someone like him, fixating on anything this much is a risk. “What is it about him? You’ve killed hundreds; why was he any different?”

“What is it about him that makes you care so much? The fate of your entire agency, your own safety, is hanging on my information, and you still want to bargain to protect one criminal.” He leans back, a hungry gleam in his eyes. “That precious, innocent boy. So ready to believe the words even of someone like me. He doesn’t even know why he was really supposed to die.” Murdoc laughs chillingly. “He thinks it was all about that prison, and that brute El Noche. I didn’t even know there was a bounty on his head until I killed the mediocre amatuer trying to collect on it and took his phone.” He shrugs. “It was a good excuse.”

Sam doesn’t have to pretend surprise. I know Murdoc didn’t just come for Mac. He came for Jack and Riley and Patty as well. But we all thought he was collecting on El Noche’s bounty. “Are you going to tell that to him? In person?”

Murdoc’s smile spreads, he thinks she just agreed to give in to his demand for a visit with Mac. “Oh yes. I’ll make sure he knows just how much he has to pay for the sins of his father.” She forces herself not to cringe at the gleam in the man’s eyes. This is new. She’s intrigued, but unless Mac’s father is somehow Chrysalis, and from the sound of it that’s not the case, this information won’t help
them, so she simply tucks it away to be revisited another time. She’s got to try another method.

“Oh, I don’t think you will,” she says sharply. “We are never letting you anywhere near Mac. Not in a hundred years. You’re going to rot in here for the rest of your life, and he’s going to forget that you ever existed.”

“I won’t be here forever.” He smiles eerily. “This is the long game, Deborah. I’m playing with the big dogs now. And in the end, you’re going to learn just how misplaced your loyalties are.” He leans closer. “You ought to join me now, while you still can. So that when the Phoenix burns, you can join me as we rebuild it from the ashes. The way it ought to be, unfettered by the foolish regulations and rules that tie it down. I was only the beginning.”

Got it. He’s been skating around the admission all this time. But now she knows for sure. He’s working for Chrysalis. *Burning the Phoenix to the ground and rebuilding it...that’s the plan of someone on the inside.* Creating a shadow agency that isn’t afraid to employ assassins like Murdoc and negotiators like what she used to be. Someone inside Phoenix is tired of following the rules. *That’s why Patty and Jack and Riley were supposed to die. Because they would fight back against someone making those kind of changes.* She finally lets the satisfied smile slip across her face.

“Thank you, Murdoc. Your cooperation has been invaluable.”

He knows he’s been had. There’s the faintest look of both shock and respect on his face.

“I like you, Debbie. You know, it’s not often you meet a legend in person and they actually live up to everything you’ve been told.”

She lets the door slam behind her without looking back. Yes, she got what she wanted. But he played her too. This was a battle she barely won. Next time, she might not be so lucky. She waits until she’s in her car to call Patty.

“Murdoc told me everything I need to know. Chrysalis was behind your contracts, and Mac’s.” She sighs. “You still have everything Riley got from that phone he dropped, right?” *They can trace the way Chrysalis communicated with him, to set up the hits.* When Patty confirms that they do, she adds one last piece of information. “Murdoc said when he was hired to kill Mac, it wasn’t about El Noche’s bounty. It was about Mac’s father.” The other end of the line is only silence.

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THE HONEYMOON SUITE

SOME PART OF JACK STILL WISHES THIS WAS REAL

Sarah’s standing on the balcony, watching the water below them. Jack joins her, leaning against one of the posts. He pulls out his gun, checks it, and slips it back into his belt. “Between us, we’ve got three and a half mags.”

“We’re a little low.”

“Not Naples low, but low.” Jack smiles. “You remember Naples?”

“Where you bet me you’d save my life more times than I saved yours?” Sarah laughs and leans back on the railing.

“As I recall I won that bet.” Jack smirks.

“No, we were tied. And then I pulled your ass out of that Jeep before the mini-gun shredded it.”
“Oh. Right. Guess I still owe you dinner then.” Jack pulls a handful of candy and chip packs out from behind his back. “Will you accept vending machine snacks as a substitute?”

“Yes.” She laughs and snatches three of the packages from Jack, sliding down the railings to sit on the balcony floor. Jack joins her. There’s no activity down below, and they have a clear view of the door.

“This reminds me of the stakeouts we used to do.” Sarah opens a bag of Ranch Doritos, and pops two in her mouth.

“Remember the one where we found out you had a nut allergy because I got all those Almond Joys?”

Sarah laughs. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen anyone madder than Matty Webber when she had to call in a special medevac for me.” She shook her head. “She wanted to put me with a new partner way back then. I guess she was probably satisfied after Belarus.”

“Belarus.” Jack sighs. “What do you think woulda happened if we hadn’t taken that op?” He opens a package of M&Ms and dumps half of them in his mouth at once. He gets why Riley carries snacks in her bag at all times, a sugar low is a real bitch on a mission.

“I don’t know.” Sarah sets down her food. “Like I said, I don’t think we could have lasted.”

Jack nods. He didn’t really expect her to have changed her mind. He knows her too well. He’s well aware that she wouldn’t let one day, one mission, make her change something she’s committed to. But he just wants to feel some closure. And then he realizes he has, all along. Because today hasn’t been about him worried about a relationship with Sarah. It’s been him worried about his kids.

“You know, I think we both got what we wanted.” Jack glances at her. “Remember, back in Moscow? You said we shouldn’t get together because I wanted kids, and you weren’t ready for it. You get your family, and I got my kids.”

She nods, slowly. “We weren’t meant to be. But them, they were.”

“And if I’d had you, I would have missed out on them.” She puts a hand on his. “I’m always gonna wonder what would have happened if things had been different. But…”

“Maybe it’s just what was always going to be.” Sarah glances inside, at Mac helping patch up Riley’s injury. “You raised a couple of good kids there.”

“Thank you.” Riley inspects Mac’s work as he cleans and wraps her wound. “This is as good as anything I’d get from a field medic team.”

“Carlos taught me a lot about taking care of wounds with limited supplies,” Mac says, finishing the last wrap of a bandage.

“Well, I’m grateful to him. Remind me to stop at the clinic when we get back and thank him in person.” She leans back on the bed, putting one hand reassuringly over his. “I think I’m gonna try to get some sleep. Let me know if anything happens, okay?” He nods. “You did well out there today,” she whispers as she yawns, shifting slightly and then wincing when the movement pulls her injury. Slowly, her breaths even out and she relaxes. Mac stands up, heading for the bathroom to wash his hands and the towels and stuff he used while patching Riley up. He at least managed to keep the worst of the blood off the bed.
He stops when someone steps into his path. Nick.

Nick glances from Riley to Mac, then grabs Mac’s shoulder and practically drags him into the corner. His eyes are cold, his words a low, angry hiss. “So what’s with you and her? Did she decide to move on?” Mac feels a nervous tremor go through him. “She’s got a thing for blue-eyed blonds, I guess.”

“She and I...we’re not…” Mac doesn’t even want to think about it. Riley’s like a sister. He would never...

“Why else are they keeping you?” Nick asks. “You don’t have any real training, you’re not an agent like them and you’re never going to be. You’re just an ex-con who happened to be useful. You’re just a stop-gap. For the agency, and for Riley.”

Mac shudders. Now that Nick is coming back, would they really replace me? Because Nick is right, Mac doesn’t have the real qualifications for this job. Patty upped his status to cover the mess he made. Maybe she’ll decide that she’d rather have a qualified asset back than some charity case convict. There are footsteps behind him, and Mac flinches and spins around to see Jack standing there. How much did he hear? Does he believe Nick’s logic too? Jack has known Nick a lot longer than he’s known Mac.

And then he hears the safety click on Jack’s gun. “Keep talking, Carpenter, and I’ll put one in your skull. Everyone in here will cover for me. Say you tried to run.”

Nick lets go of Mac’s shirt, raising his hands slowly, but the arrogance doesn’t leave his voice. “I know you’re pissed about Como, Jack, but I did what I had to do. Riley wasn’t supposed to get hurt.”

“And today? That wasn’t supposed to happen either, right? And I guess what you just said to Mac, that was an ‘accident’ too?” Jack says, anger burning through his tone. “You come near one of my kids again, and you’re gonna be a memory.” Mac’s been trying to subtly wedge his way out of this mess, but he stops dead at Jack’s words. Kids. Plural.

Nick’s voice is placating. “I’m trying to protect Riley just as much as you are, Jack. She doesn’t need a risk like that in her life. You can’t trust a criminal like that not to hurt her. You don’t know what he’s capable of. None of you are willing to see that he’s dangerous.”

“I’d rather have him watching my back than you.” Riley’s sitting up slowly, a hand on her side but her expression hard and determined. “The only person I can’t trust in this room is you, Nick. We finish this mission, and then you walk away. Forever.”

“You’d chose this ex-con over me?” Nick looks a bit shaken now. “What about him is so special?”

“Nothing you’d be able to understand,” Jack snaps. “Mac knows a hell of a lot more about loyalty and courage and sacrifice than you ever will.” Mac feels like he’s the one who’s injured, because he has to be delirious. There’s no way this is happening. No way he’s being chosen over a qualified field agent.

“He’s just going to bail on you. When things get bad, he’ll turn. Or run. People like that don’t change. They get hurt, they learn to hurt back. To protect themselves.” Nick glares at Mac.

“This kid spent his whole life protecting everyone but himself,” Jack says, and Mac looks up to see Jack glancing at him, the warmth and defensive love in his expression a little staggering. “I don’t think that’s going to change any time soon.”

“You’re the one who puts everyone else at risk to cover your own ass,” Riley says. “You don’t care
about your team, you don’t even care about the mission as much as you claim to. You just want to
keep yourself safe. You contacted us because you wanted to come back to the agency, not because
you wanted to warn us. You took needless risks because you wanted to stay on everyone’s good
side. And you somehow think you’re important enough that when you come back we’re just going
to accept you, no questions asked, like nothing ever went wrong. Like nothing changed.” She shakes
her head. “Because I guess for you, nothing did. You were never really part of the team. Never really
family. You were playing us all the whole time. And I’m not giving you the chance to try and do it
again.”

Jack grabs Nick by the shoulder and pushes him to the couch. “You stay right there, and I swear to
God if you move, or if you open your mouth again, it’s the last thing you’re gonna do.” Nick sits
down slowly. Sarah’s come in off the balcony, and Mac cringes, avoiding her eyes.

How much of

Even though Jack and Riley defended him, he still feels small and humiliated.

Sarah, here, you watch him. If I do, I’m liable to shoot him,” Jack says, handing over his gun.

“Come here.” Riley says gently, patting the bed beside her like she’s calling a puppy. Mac sits down
slowly, and when he does, Riley puts one arm slowly around his shoulders, letting him lean against
her good side. “That idiot didn’t know a damn thing about you. He just wanted to hurt you. I’m so
sorry.”

It wasn’t your fault,” Mac says, leaning over, fingers twitching restlessly without his normal
paperclip.

Jack sits down on the other side of him, and he turns one of Mac’s tightly clenched fists over, gently
opening the fingers to hand him a small cluster of paperclips. Mac looks up in surprise.

“Taken to keepin’ some in my Tac gear,” Jack says with a small smile. “Seein’ as you don’t carry a
gun, so I’m not storin’ any extra clips of that sort for ya.”

It gets a weak chuckle. Jack’s jokes are so awful. But they’re almost over the line into so bad they’re
good. Mac begins twisting the metal, working out the bends in the paperclips.

“I’m sorry we left you with him,” Jack says gently. “I’m sorry you ever had to cross paths with that
miserable excuse for an agent.”

“You’re ten times the agent he could ever be,” Riley says. “You have a good heart, and you care.”

“We’re not supposed to, though.” Mac can hear Thornton’s voice in his head. Getting attached, in
this business, is a liability.

Mac feels Jack’s hand slide over his again. “They told me that, when I showed up with Ri. Took one
mission for them to see I’d do anything to protect her, against all odds, no matter the risk. I got
hauled into debrief and told that getting emotionally involved was the biggest mistake I could make.”
Jack shakes his head. “I told them if they wanted to hire soulless robots, they ought to get busy
inventing them. Because until then, they were stuck with real human people, whose empathy is their
greatest strength.” Mac gets the feeling this is something Jack tells himself often. “People who don’t
care about anyone, they end up like Murdoc. Cold and dangerous.” Mac shivers in spite of himself.
That man was a creature from his worst nightmares. “The moment you stop caring about people, the
moment losing anyone in the field stops bothering you, it’s time to get the hell outta Dodge.”

Mac sets the chain of three paperclip hearts on the small nightstand. Maybe I do belong after all.

THE PHOENIX
POSSIBLY THE LAST DAY OF ITS EXISTENCE

Bozer jumps when Patty enters the room with him. He must have been so focused he didn’t hear her open the door. “Any progress?” They’ve been here all night, analyzing the damaged intel retrieved from Murdoc’s phone. She has her suspicions, but that’s all they are. She needs proof, proof that hopefully Murdoc’s mistake will give them.

He swipes a hand over his eyes. “I don’t know what half of this even means.”

She hates to push him, but he needs to know he’s on the clock. “Our firewalls have been breached by someone using Riley Davis’s logins. She has admin access, since she set up our entire network, and right now the only thing standing between whoever has her codes and our mainframe, is a firewall with a rotating password, that she didn’t have the most recent copy of. But it’s only a matter of time.” And once the breach happens, Patty will have to report it, sealing Riley and the rest of the field team’s fate. *If they don’t have evidence to clear their names, they’ll be going to prison for life.*

“I’m trying. I’m not a tech analyst, I’m just a filmmaker and a burger flipper.” Bozer looks exhausted, frightened, and confused.

“I know. But sometimes, it takes fresh eyes to see the puzzle pieces. The people who’ve done this a long time tend to overlook things.” Bozer looks back when a light begins to flash on his computer.

“I ran the data through the program Riley had to break encryption. It just opened up a whole subfolder of emails.” Bozer clicks on one, and his forehead furrows. He types in a few more commands. “Pay dirt!”

“What is it?”

“Whoever contacted Murdoc was using a VPN. And not one of your sanctioned ones.” Patty knows the Phoenix has four, they’re used for all communications external to the agency itself, rendering emails untraceable. The networks are set up to appear to be in various remote, uninhabited locations around the world. “This might not be the right time to admit that I illegally watched BBC Sherlock by setting one up.”

In spite of herself, Patty chuckles slightly. *This isn’t the right time to worry about being chastised for small infractions.*

She glances at the network he’s uncovered. It is a VPN, operating on Phoenix servers but not connected to the main systems. *How could that even be set up? There are only a handful of people with the admin access to make a hidden VPN within the system.* Whoever set Riley up has done a fantastic job; with her skills and past she’d be all too easy to paint as the villain here. “It has to be hidden well, to miss the scan reports.”

“Who do those scan reports go to?” Bozer asks.

“Directly to Oversight. Every week he’s given a breakdown of all activity on all of our servers, both secured and unsecured.”

“Then he has to have information that would help us track the VPN user.” *He’s right. Maybe there’s a pattern, maybe something we can track.* Patty is about to call him when something pings on Bozer’s computer.

“I just intercepted something.” Bozer glances at her. “There was a new message sent on the network.”
The lockbox was a copy. If you want the originals, meet me in person here tomorrow at 10 am. Come alone. Bring two million. Cash.

There’s an address below it, and a name. Nick Carpenter.

Something’s gone sideways. Either Nick got away from the team, or this is some kind of sting. She’s inclined to assume the latter. Jack once did this in Bolivia, when she was still part of his field team. Our safe house was torched, with the evidence inside it. Jack bluffed his way into getting us a meet with the head of a cartel. And we took them all down. This is a very Jack move. Holding a poor hand and making a big, risky bluff. He always did play a wild game of Texas Hold’Em. She spent enough hours on slow stakeouts with him, and played enough poker, to know his moves.

Her own phone pings, a text message, and the tone is the one reserved for one person only.

“Oversight just asked me to mobilize his hand-picked tac team, and to hit...Nick’s location.” She didn’t want to believe it, but this is only the confirmation of what she’s known, in her gut, since Cage brought up Mac’s father. We just intercepted that message. We would be the ones who should have sent it up the line to Oversight. No one else in the building even knows about this VPN.

“That message was just sent…” Boze looks up at Patty just as she looks down at him. She knows, he knows, and she knows he knows. Oversight...is Chrysalis.

Jack doesn’t take his eyes off Nick the entire elevator ride to the lobby, or when Nick sits down at a table to wait for this mysterious Chrysalis to show up.

He left Mac with Riley, up in the room. If this goes well, they’ll have Chrysalis in hand and a hell of a good bargaining chip to get everyone off their backs. And they’ll be able to get Riley the medical attention she needs. The kid did a good temporary patch job, but the wound’s starting to look a little sketchy. Jack knows Riley needs a hospital sooner rather than later.

He also can’t get Nick out of their hair fast enough. After what that bastard said to Mac last night, when he thought no one was going to intervene...Jack was ready to put a bullet in him then and there. He thinks it’s admirable restraint that he’s managed to avoid doing it yet.

“No sign of anything suspicious,” Sarah says from her post near the door. “And it’s five minutes to meet time.”

“Maybe whoever this Chrysalis is likes to be fashionably late,” Jack mutters. “Nick, see anything?”


And then the door flies open and half a dozen men in black tac gear rush in, guns raised. People start screaming and running, and Jack tunes them out and focuses on the team’s pattern. Two clearing high, two clearing low, two on sweep... That’s a classic Phoenix assault pattern. He should know, he trained enough new agents in it.

“Here we go again,” Sarah mutters, and he hears her click off her safety.

“I thought you told them to come alone,” Jack mutters.

Nick looks as startled as any of them. “I did, I swear!” Jack wasn’t all that sure Chrysalis would hold up that end of the bargain, but maybe they’re high enough of a clearance level in Phoenix to have known that Nick had a field team with him, and came prepared.
And then Patty sweeps into the room, her coat flapping, her eyes cold. “Dalton, Adler, Davis, lay down your weapons.” No, no, please don’t let it be her. He would have trusted Patty with his life. She can’t be the mole. She can’t be.

“Riley’s not here!” Jack calls, moving out from behind the pillar he was using as cover. “She took a bullet and she needs a medevac.” No matter what, he has to make sure she stays alive.

“We’ll make sure she’s alive to stand trial for treason.” Patty snatches Jack’s gun away and shoves him up against the wall.

“Patty,” Jack says. “You have to believe us; Nick was telling the truth. There is a mole.”

She moves closer, leaning against his neck. “I know about Chrysalis. And I know who he is. But you have to trust me.” He does. She slips his gun into his hand. “Keep it hidden. On my signal, take the team down, fast. They’re all loyal to Chrysalis.”

Patty makes a show of securing his hands and starts shoving him forward. Then she pulls her own gun, releases Jack’s wrists, and takes the first two team members down before Jack even has a chance to fire.

Patty, Jack and Sarah are a deadly force. The corrupt Tac team don’t stand a chance. It’s seconds before they’re all on the ground.

“Riley’s injured?” Patty turns to Jack. “Where is she?”

“Upstairs, with Mac. Honeymoon suite,” Jack says. “Took a through and through to the side in an ambush.” He doesn’t mention his own grazed shoulder. He patched it up last night, it’s barely a scratch. Riley’s the important one.

“We still have tactical transport. You get the chopper fired up, I’ll retrieve the rest of the team.” Jack nods. He’s the only one here with actual flight training.

It’s not ten minutes before he has them in the air. Mac, Riley, Sarah, and Nick are in the back, and Patty is up front with Jack. Once they’re above the treeline and on a pretty straight course for the nearest medical facility, Jack switches on the headset comms.

“What’s going on?”

“Oversight is Chrysalis,” Patty calls back. “He sent that tac team right after we intercepted the message from Nick. There was no way he should have known about it so quickly. Unless it was sent directly to him.”

“I called Wilt Bozer in. He was the only one I could trust.” Patty shrugs. Jack can only imagine the amount of stress she’s been under. It’s a wonder she doesn’t have a few dozen grey hairs sprouted overnight. “Cage wrung enough information from Murdoc that we found a tie to Chrysalis in his phone. Bozer discovered a VPN that was sending out the encrypted messages, hosted on a Phoenix server. Only a handful of people could create that. And when I got the message to mobilize the tac team, I knew exactly who was receiving those messages.” She shrugs. "My guess was, they were going to get all of us in that chopper, and then kill us together, and claim it was because we tried to fight back, because if he let even one person live they might be able to prove he was lying. I'm fairly sure that's why he sent me to personally supervise bringing you in." She takes imminent death better than anyone I've ever known.
“So what do we do? Who can we trust now?” Jack asks.

“I sent a message on the same VPN as soon as the tac team was down, saying the mission had been completed as planned. And then contacted the CIA. They’ll take things from here.” Patty sighs. “We just need to sit tight.”

“What about Bozer?”

“I sent him home. With Cage as protection, just in case.” Jack nods. He wonders what will be left standing of the Phoenix once this is over. How many people did Oversight corrupt?

HOSPITAL ROOM

NOT REALLY THE PLACE FOR A SECURE CONVERSATION, BUT THEY’RE OUT AN OFFICE BUILDING

Riley’s itching to get out of this bed. Rather literally; her wounds are healing, but it’s a slow and annoying process.

She’s also a little overwhelmed. It seems her hospital room has become the War Room for now, while the CIA clears up the mess over Chrysalis. She’s been drifting in and out a lot, but from what she can understand, the investigation has concluded that the only people directly connected to Chrysalis were Oversight’s personal tac ops team (Two of whom are dead, four in serious medical condition here at the same hospital she’s in, and the other six in custody), the heads of all five departments and their immediate staff, and a few people in tech and security. The VPN was traced only to the phones of the thirty-four agents who are now in federal custody. Apparently Oversight was a fan of the top-down corruption method, hoping everyone would follow the department heads’ lead when things started changing.

There will still be days and weeks of mandatory debriefs of everyone from Phoenix, including Riley once she’s feeling up to it. She’s afraid of this turning into some massive disaster, with suspicion placed on everyone in the agency. What if they go after Mac? She’s not worried about herself, although maybe she should be. But Mac, with his record...he helped bring Chrysalis down, but will anyone see that?

She’s also learned Oversight’s name, for the first time since coming to work for the agency. Jonah Walsh. An unassuming name for a dangerous, devious man.

“CIA’s been unable to track Walsh down. He’s flown out of the country under one of his aliases.” Patty sighs. “He’s gone underground. Probably prepared to run the moment he heard we were planning to bring Nick in. He was trying to salvage the situation, but he knew his cover could be blown.”

Oversight. Jonah Walsh. A traitor. Riley’s still reeling with the thought that all this time, their agency has been run by a monster.

“I don’t get it. Why all the cloak and dagger?” Bozer asks; he was part of this, so he’s allowed to be here. Plus, he keeps bringing Riley flowers, as if she’s somehow going to suddenly decide to date him. Maybe he’s under the delusion that near-death experiences always make single people rethink their life decisions and decide to find romance. He’s seen too many Hallmark movies. “He could have just handed everything in Phoenix over to the Organization in one blow.”

“Walsh has always been a master diplomat,” Patty says quietly. “He knew certain information leaks would lead right back to him, because there are codes and files that only Oversight has access to. If
any of them had turned up in the Organization’s hands, his game would have been over.”

“So instead he gave them the tools to dig things out for themselves.” Riley speaks up. This, she knows. “They had backdoor access through my profile, thanks to our German friend, whoever she really was. Walsh was going to set me up to take the fall.” And Nick would have inadvertently helped him. She can’t believe he agreed to hack her logins, knowing she had admin access. But then again, he would have released that virus...

He actually had the nerve to come to her room, bring flowers, and try to apologize. She told him in no uncertain terms (and some of Jack’s more colorful language) that he was no longer welcome in her life and if she saw him again she would be more than willing to shoot off part of his anatomy he’d rather keep. As soon as he left she threw the flowers in the trash.

“He would have claimed you were working with Nick the whole time,” Patty replies. “We found a file on his desktop, under a code name of ‘Artemis 37’. He was digging into your past, compiling a case against you for whenever the leak was discovered. He planned to exploit your early illegal hacks and claim you were a member of the Organization all along. The information breach would have dissolved the Phoenix. And Walsh was planning to make himself the hero for revealing it. He would have pushed his agenda for an agency that could operate more rapidly, more violently, and more stringently under his own control. The kind of operation Cage said Murdoc suggested he was poised to become a part of.”

Jack clenches a fist and Riley hears him mutter a strained curse under his breath. If he had his way he’d track Walsh down himself for this.

“So the guy who sent Mac to prison was a double agent the whole time.” Bozer glances at the others. “That doesn’t mean I’m over what happened, or that there isn’t still going to need to be a lot of work for all of you before I trust you again. But I’d rather be here where I can keep an eye on my best friend and just maybe keep him from getting himself killed.”

“I take it that’s a formal acceptance of my employment offer?” Patty’s smiling. “I can promise you, without Walsh as Oversight, this place is going to be run very differently. And since I’ve just promoted Jill Morgan to head of R&D, there’s some empty desk space waiting for you.”

He shakes her hand firmly, and Riley smiles. Now he finally gets the chance to prove he’s worth so much more than he thinks he is. Wilt Bozer has surprised her, over and over, with his courage, his devotion, and his skills. It will be good to have him on the team.

“I will be handing over temporary administration of the Phoenix until I bring in Walsh. I’ve been cleared of suspicion and given permission to track him personally.” Patty looks hard and determined, her black tac gear a stunning contrast to her usual crisp suits and dresses. She looks dangerous, and if Riley weren’t so furious with the man who betrayed them, betrayed the Phoenix, betrayed everything they stand for, she might pity him a little. The woman coming after him is something like a vengeful goddess.

“I’ll still have plenty of input on who the CIA chooses for an interim director.” Patty smiles. “You’ll be in good hands.”

“We’ll keep the ship afloat until you get back.” Jack says, smiling. “When you get him, break his nose for me, will ya?”

“On the record, that is a violation of agency policy,” Patty smirks. “But off the record, he’ll probably try to resist being brought in, and a broken nose might be a necessary condition of capture.”
Jack watches as Sarah walks down the aisle, gorgeous in her white, flowing dress, makeup covering the bruises on her arms and cheek from their last op. He wasn’t going to come, but Riley practically shoved him out of her hospital room and insisted. She claimed she needed sleep, which is a lie because she’s slept on and off for the past three days, but he’ll humor her, she’s injured.

And he really does want to see Sarah get married. It’s just the last brick in the wall to remind him that that part of his life is over and he has something new ahead.

Mac’s sitting beside him; the kid’s all dressed up, one of Jack’s old suits from a time when he was a lot slimmer and a lot less fond of black. He doesn’t know what possessed him to buy a blue suit for his high school prom, but he did, and for some reason he kept it all these years, folded up in a tac boot box with his high school yearbook and some random other memorabilia. Momma shoved it in his car when he left after Christmas, insisting he needed to start cleaning his random crap out of the house so she didn’t have to bang into it every time she got her sewing machine out of his closet.

So when Sarah asked Mac if he’d like to come to the wedding in Riley’s place, and he answered her, very shyly, that he didn’t really have any way of dressing for the occasion, Jack dug out the old suit. It fit decently well, and after Bozer worked his magic, it now looks like it was made for the kid. *Okay, I do know why I bought a blue suit. Cause that’s his color. Jack’s dad passed down his own dress suit to Jack, although he had outgrown it by junior year, turning out to be a good four inches taller than Pops ever was. He feels like he’s just continuing the tradition.*

The wedding is nice. Jack doesn’t remember all of it. He also insists he isn’t crying the first few times Mac offers him a Kleenex, but he finally gives in and just accepts it. *Geeze, if I can’t handle this, what am I gonna do if it’s ever Riley or Mac up there?*

Once it’s over, and they’re heading toward the car (Jack decided not to stay for the reception, he doesn’t remember many of the people here, he’s not sure he can avoid more crying, and besides, he’s pretty sure he saw Matty Webber in here and he does not want to cross paths with her after the CIA just had to clean up the Chrysalis disaster), Mac speaks up.

“This week has kinda sucked.”

“Yeah, it has.” Jack puts an arm around the kid’s shoulders, Mac’s slowly getting more okay with human contact, and at the same time, Jack’s noticed that the kid’s actively seeking it out. *It’s gotta be hard for him to do two years in a place where the only people who touched him wanted to hurt him, and then suddenly be surrounded by people who care about him.* Mac always makes a point to sit as close to Jack or Riley as he can in the War Room, on the Phoenix jet, or really anywhere they are. He was moving closer and closer to Jack the whole time the wedding was going on. *After this hell of a week, he just wants some reassurance.* “Hey you think Riley’d be happy if we smuggled her in some pizza and her rig? I know she has access to my online videos, we could all hang out and watch Die Hard.”

“I’ve never seen that,” Mac says.

Jack gasps in mock horror. “You’ve never seen Die Hard?”

“Nope.” Mac shrugs. “When you go out and fight cartel members on the streets every night, you’re not really in the mood for action movies that make it look easy.”
“Make it look easy?” Jack claps a hand to his heart. “Allow me to change your mind, young padawan. I criticize a lot of action movies, but Die Hard is sacred.” Mac grins. “So what, may I ask, did you watch? The Disney channel? Hannah Montana and all that kid stuff?”

“National Geographic specials, mostly.”

“I shoulda known.” Jack shakes his head. “I don’t know how you made it this long with me without watching Die Hard.” He shakes Mac’s shoulder playfully. “Just for that, you’re buying the pizza tonight.”

Mac groans, but he doesn’t argue. He gets in the GTO and Jack guns the engine. *Yeah, things are kind of a mess right now. But we all have each other, and that’s all that matters.*
Jack moves his casted arm carefully, trying not to aggravate the annoying itch that could pop up any second. He’s stiff from falling asleep in the cheap plastic hospital chair, and his wrist aches, but he can’t leave the bed where his partner is lying, too pale, too still, too quiet. Sarah’s never been quiet in her life. She’s almost gotten them busted during stakeouts way too many times. He won’t complain about the amount of times she’s pretended they’re a couple making out in the car to give them a cover story, though.

He’s spent too much time in hospitals lately. He was here for a day, then in Dallas for three, before Pops’s old ticker finally gave out. Sarah hasn’t even woken up so he can thank her for getting him there to see his old man before it was too late.

It shoulda been me who took fire. Who broke cover first. But Sarah was never one to be any too careful with her own safety.

He just got in from Texas yesterday; the funeral was at the ranch, up on the Graveyard Knoll. Everyone picked up a handful of dirt to place in the coffin when the preacher finished his sermon; Pops is going to be buried in a military cemetery in Cali, beside his Vietnam buddy, Ty. But he wanted to be buried in good old Texas soil anyway. There’s still a smudge of reddish dust on his cast from where he unthinkingly tried to wipe his hands together to brush off the dirt.

Jack leans over, brushing back a strand of Sarah’s dark hair. The left side of her scalp is bald, shaved off so the bullet wound creasing her skull, the one that sent her into this coma, could be treated. He took a picture, because when she wakes up he’s gonna tell her she looks like an emo teen.

The door opens, but all he sees is the top of a head of dark hair, over the edge of the bed. Matilda Webber, his and Sarah’s handler.

Matty walks softly around to Jack’s side of the bed, and puts a hand on his knee. Her face is creased with sadness. “I’m sorry about your father, Jack. And about Sarah.”

“How you.” He doesn’t really know how to reply to that. He’s never been good with sympathy. When you come from farm country stock, you know life is hard and unfair and uncontrollable. Death is like a drought or a rainstorm during hay season or a tornado ripping across the plains. No one can predict it or stop it. It happens, and you pick up the pieces of what’s left and keep going. Because you can’t afford to wallow in grief. Life is too short for that.

He’s already made some stupid dead dad jokes in the airport, because Pops would have wanted it that way. He doesn’t dare make one with Matty, but if Sarah was awake... Pops was always saying weird stuff like that. He even wanted his tombstone to say, ‘He was a pretty good dancer.’ Momma had laughed her head off when he said that at the kitchen table, and insisted hers was going to say ‘He said he was a pretty good dancer’.

Matty glances from him to the quiet figure in the bed. “Jack, I realize you’re on personal and
medical leave…”

“...I’m not leaving until she wakes up.”

“And I respect that. But Jack, I wanted you to know now, you’re being reassigned once you return from leave.”

“They can’t do that to me!” Jack momentarily lets go of Sarah’s hand and stands halfway out of the chair.

“Agent Adler will be in PT for months. Jack, your fracture will heal long before Adler is field ready.”

“All due respect, Matty, you can’t split us up.” He’s been working with Sarah two years now, since he got out of the Army and out of the Sandbox.

“I’m sorry Jack, but we can’t afford to have a good agent like you out of rotation that long, if you don’t have a medical reason to be. I’m assigning you one of our newest and brightest. Riley Davis.” Matty hands him a file, and Jack glances at the young woman on the picture clipped to the front. She’s probably in her late teens, early twenties, with a wild crop of messy curls, a surly expression, and defiant brown eyes.

“Matty, I’m not a babysitter.” He’s been Delta Force, EOD overwatch, CIA field agent. He’s not here to train a newbie. This will land his ass in Langley for the better part of a year. He purposefully didn’t take the training officer job he was offered last year. Jack’s a field operative, not a teacher.

“You’re not babysitting her. Davis is a fully trained operative, she’s simply out a partner. Her last two have requested reassignments.” That sounds even more ominous than being a babysitter. How hard is she to work with?

“She just needs a firm hand. Someone who will stand up to her a little. An experienced agent who won’t let her get away with insubordination.”

Jack sighs. This kid is young enough to be his daughter. What is Webber thinking? He looks down and sees the woman looking back up at him with something unreadable in her eyes. She’s not doing this to be cruel. I think she thinks I’m this girl’s last chance.

ASTANA CITY, KAZAKHSTAN

NOT MOST PEOPLE’S BUCKET LIST TRAVEL DESTINATION

Jack scrambles onto the roof of the building that’s been chosen as their exfil site. His head hurts, the glaring sunlight is distinctly not helping, and the world looks a little blurry. He glances back at Mac, who’s bringing up the rear, behind their asset.

The Kazakh journalist they’re extracting has a head almost as hard as Jack’s. He thinks the guy might have actually given him a concussion.

Erzhan is a guerilla journalist whose latest project is threatening to expose a massive ring of traffickers preying off war refugees. However, said traffickers have friends in high places, and the reporter has been targeted twice in the past week, with a car bomb that went off prematurely, and an attempted stabbing. His work was leading him up the ranks of the Kazakhstan government, about to prove that a high-level official, identity as yet unknown, is not only being financially supported by the traffickers, but actually funneling the victims to them by controlling the border crossing points.
It’s small wonder the reporter is finding himself a target.

That’s why Mac and Jack are here to pull him out; his intel might yield a name if they can run it past some eyes in the Alphabet agencies. Jack wishes Riley were here; she ought to be but she’s still in PT for her bullet wound and she has two more meetings with the CIA investigators. He and Mac finished most of their mandatory debriefs before Riley was discharged from the hospital.

Mac was scared to death the whole time. He tried to hide it, but Jack could tell the kid was a panicky wreck. He stayed at Jack’s apartment the whole time, because the nightmares about prison had come back full swing. Being in an interrogation room has never meant anything good for Mac.

Jack’s been through more than one of these messes, so he tried to give the kid as much advice as he could about how to handle the interviews, how to avoid making the investigators suspicious for no reason, and how to deal with some of the specific questions they’d likely ask. He probably technically wasn’t allowed to do that, but he couldn’t risk seeing the kid mess up, get blamed, and go back inside.

He’s actually glad for this op, despite the fact that he’s definitely got a concussion and probably a nice black eye as well. He needed to get out of LA after everything. And a nice simple asset extraction in Kazakhstan sounded like a vacation after weeks of interviews.

Unfortunately, the man they’re here to retrieve speaks very little English. So when Jack tried to identify himself as an American agent, Erzhan thought he was being kidnapped. He headbutted Jack, and despite the pain, Jack has a grudging respect for anyone who can use his own trick against him.

Unfortunately they’re currently being chased by three guys who also want Erzhan. And Jack has the feeling they’re not going to be as nice. He really hopes Cynthia Rawlins is ready with the chopper for exfil. He’s worked with her before, she’s an ex-Air Force pilot who joined the DXS around the time he and Riley did.

Sure enough, the chopper is just setting down, whipping the layer of dust that seems to have settled on everything in the city into a frenzy that stings his eyes.

“There’s our ride!” He pulls Erzhan forward. “We’re leaving. For America. Safety.” He hopes the guy understands, they don’t have time for it to come to blows again.

Mac’s behind them, doing something with his belt to the roof door to stop the guys with guns who are chasing them. “Hey kid, you wanna hurry up? Things are about to go from bad to worse real quick.” Jack can hear the kid muttering to himself.

“What?”

“Second law of thermodynamics. Entropy of a closed system always increases,” Mac says. “Means you shouldn’t be surprised when missions suddenly get a lot worse because that’s how everything goes, it gets messier and messier.”

“See now, I thought that was Murphy’s law,” Jack shouts back.

“That’s not a scientific law!” Mac sounds highly insulted as he finishes tying off his belt and runs toward them.

“Hey now, see, I’ve proved it right on enough missions that there should be enough evidence to be accepted by science!” Jack pulls Erzhan into the chopper and puts him in the middle seat, and Mac rushes around and jumps in the other side. They lift off of the building just as the door flies open and a spray of bullets rattles after them. Jack winces, he doesn’t particularly want to get shot again. It
does not get easier with practice.

Fortunately, Cynthia’s a good pilot and maneuvers them well out of range as fast as she can. “Looks like we’re in the clear, boys,” she calls back over comms. They’re outside the city now, flying under the radar close to slowly rising mountains ahead.

Jack snaps a quick selfie with Erzhan, who looks puzzled and a bit disturbed, and sends it to Riley. “We have confirmation on acquiring the package.”

Riley’s voice comes back, tinny through the comms. “Good work. We’ll see you back at Phoenix.” Her voice suddenly changes. “The sooner the better. These CIA liaisons are driving me crazy, and I’ve heard a lot of chatter about a new director, but nothing solid.”

Jack sighs. “Maybe it’s a good thing they sent me halfway around the world. If these guys are managing to piss you off, I feel like someone woulda got a taste of my left hook by now.”

Riley chuckles. “Just get back here so I have someone who will spar with me instead of remind me I should be taking it easy while I’m still in PT.” Jack rolls his eyes. I used to give her hell about working out while she was injured. And then she caught me going a few rounds with a punching bag three days after getting a knife jammed into my arm. He hasn’t been able to argue with her since.

There’s a sudden beeping sound that cuts into Jack’s aching skull painfully. “Is that what I think it is?”

“Depends on if you think it’s a surface to air missile!” Cynthia shouts. Sure enough, Jack can see the trail of a missile streaking upward into the sky after them. These guys have some serious artillery. When the kill squad lost Erzhan on the roof, they probably called the government-armed traffickers roaming this area.

Cynthia sends the chopper into a sharp descent, and Jack feels his body react to it without his thought, bracing and leaning to account for the changing momentum. He’s been on all too many ops where evasive flying was a necessity, and while he’s usually the one at the controls, he still retains all the muscle memory of how to be one of the passengers.

Cynthia pulls up sharply, and Jack mentally critiques her technique. I woulda dropped a little longer, let that missile pick up a little more speed and get a little closer to the ground. This baby could handle it. There’s a time delay between the missile sensing its target change course, and it actually responding, and Jack’s taken advantage of that several times on ops, pulling up the chopper just in time to avoid them crashing, but not giving the targeting missile that same chance.

Cynthia’s trick works, despite the fact that she isn’t quite as gutsy a flier as Jack. The missile explodes against the ground. “Nice work!” Jack shouts, but then there’s that beeping again. “Damn it, another one?” He turns to Mac. “Is this your second law of thermodynamics at work?” The kid just nods.

They’re approaching heavy treeline, and this isn’t going to go great. Diving now risks ripping the chopper apart trying to fool the missile. “I don’t think I’m gonna be able to trick this one!” Cynthia shouts. “It’s locked in on us too tight! And it’s gaining!”

Mac reaches into the first aid kit, pulls out the foil survival blanket and starts shredding it with his knife.

“What are you doin’, kid?” Jack asks. “Cause you know I’ve seen you do some crazy stuff, but I don’t think that’s gonna make a real good parachute.”
“I’m making something else for it to track!” Mac flings the lapful of shredded foil out the door of the chopper. “Change course! Now!”

“Nice! Chaff to confuse the sensors!” Jack watches as the missile runs into the swirling foil shreds and explodes.

The blast doesn’t incinerate them. Unfortunately, it does send the helicopter into a spiral, and Jack’s pretty sure some of the explosion’s debris took out the tail rotor. He’s heard that kind of metallic screaming before, when that happened on a Delta op.

“We’re caught in the blowback! We’re going down hard!” Cynthia yells.

Jack has enough time to yell at the kid to make sure he’s buckled up, and then he reaches across Erzhan to grab Mac’s hand in his as they plummet toward the ground. Mac’s so damn scared of heights, and Jack can feel him shaking, because this is why he’s scared and it’s a very good reason.

Jack can protect his team from a lot of things. But he can’t make a shredded helicopter rotor repair itself. He can’t make them magically stop falling out of the sky. All he can do is hold on and pray.

And then the world goes black.

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THE WAR ROOM

THERE ARE FEWER EXPLOSIONS HERE, BUT IT ISN’T ANY LESS STRESSFUL

Riley can only watch in horror as the helicopter’s signal blinks out, seconds after she hears the broken chatter on the pilot’s radio saying they’re going down. She starts scanning the treeline immediately, recalibrating the sat feed to search for wreckage, but the forest is so dense...

“Agent Rawlins? Jack? Mac?” The chopper’s radio comms are totally down, and Mac and Jack’s comm feeds as well, since they were being routed through the chopper’s signal.

Maybe she can get the sat phone. She dials the number listed in the dossier with shaky fingers. There’s only an error signal. Something is wrong. The phone’s been damaged...she won’t let herself wonder why.

Suddenly, there’s a faint ping, one comm feed coming online momentarily. All she hears is some scratchy noises, the creaking of twisted metal, and harsh, broken breaths. “Jack? Mac? Cynthia?” And then the few sounds cut out altogether in a burst of static. She scrambles desperately to get signal again, but nothing will connect. No, no, no. She refuses to lose them.

She follows up on the last location the signal trace registered in, retasking a geoscanning satellite and searching for anything that looks different since its scheduled pass three hours ago. It takes agonizingly long for the satellite to slip back into position, valuable time that the team doesn’t have to waste. She’s on edge, even biting her nails, a nervous habit she thought she kicked when she was fifteen.

Finally, the scans begin to pop up on her computer, and she quickly punches in the algorithm she designed that basically acts as a “spot the difference” scanning system. She actually developed it in high school to beat those insanely difficult puzzle books, then perfected it to use to find dead drop markers and other things a lot more important than a shirt that is black in one picture and white in the other. When she gets a hit, she zooms in fast.
There’s some scattered debris from the missile in the general area, but the crash site itself is too overhung with trees to see anything clearly; she can only guess at the likeliest spots. She can’t tell if anyone is inside or outside, or whether there’s any movement. She switches to thermal, hoping to at least pick up body heat.

And then the feed fails altogether as a cloud slides between the satellite and the ground. And not just a faint one, this one is a charged electrical storm. The dense cover is scattering heat signals and also causing a lot of interference. Even if she could get the comms back online there’s no guarantee she’d hear a thing other than static.

This is why Riley, despite Jack’s continued insistence that the wilderness is the best place to be trapped, with the most resources and fewest people, will never ever feel as safe on ops that land them in the middle of nowhere. Jack may be a country boy and a survivalist, but Riley is a city girl and a hacker. In a city, even if she lost all other communication and tracking methods, she could start hacking security cameras, people’s phones, anything with a video feed, to get eyes on her team again. She can’t hack trees and birds and clouds.

*Come on, clear out.* She hates being separated from her team. There have been too many missions where she and Jack got split up for one reason or another. She’ll never forget Venice, she thought Jack would bleed out on her before they got the medevac. Or Budapest, where they both almost died a dozen times over before they accidentally ran into each other in a subway station. *Jack never misses the opportunity to joke that that means he and I ‘remember Budapest very differently’.* He’s not wrong, he spent most of his time on the Buda side of the Danube, and she somehow ended up across the river in Pest after being grabbed and tossed in a car. *That city is confusing.*

But even then, she was only ever a few miles at most from Jack. Not stuck on the other side of the world watching from her computers. *Before, they would have benched Jack when they injury benched me.* But the CIA is insisting that the Phoenix continue operations as normal, and they also don’t want to lose a whole good team because one member is out. Now that they have Mac working with them, apparently the powers that be have decided that a level one junior agent is ready to work with only one other supervising operative. Riley can’t deny that Mac and Jack do work well together. And under ordinary circumstances they’d be fine. But this is anything but ordinary.

Her sat feed suddenly beeps, registering a massive heat plume somewhere below the treeline. *No, no, no.* The chopper must have exploded.

“Jill?” Her voice is shaky. “Please send up Agent Bozer.”

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**SOMEWHERE IN THE KAZAKH WILDERNESS**

When Jack wakes up, his head aches twice as much as it did before. And he smells smoke.

He can’t quite remember what happened...there’s something about a reporter, and a helicopter...wait, is that the plot of a movie? Did he fall asleep in the theater? But why does he smell smoke…

Then the world jolts into awareness. Half of it is a blurry red, and it takes a few blinks and some uncoordinated swipes of his hand across his face before he realizes it’s because blood dripped into his eye. He glances around the helicopter. Erzhan is still next to him, and the man is groaning softly, one arm clearly broken. Jack’s own left hand doesn’t feel so great. He can’t tell if it’s a break or a sprain.

*Mac. Where’s Mac?* Jack can’t see the kid. *He was wearing a belt, I made sure of it. He can’t have*
gotten thrown out. He can’t. Jack undoes his own belt and Erzhan’s, pushing the journalist past him out into safety. They still have to protect the asset.

Now he can see Mac. The kid’s got a nasty gash on one cheek and his head is lolling limply, but he seems to be at least in one piece. Jack scrambles around to where he can get a grip on him, and ignores the burning ache in his left hand as he undoes the belt and drags the kid a safe distance from the smoldering wreck.

The pain in his hand becomes almost unbearable, and the smell of burnt metal and foam turns his stomach. With his already pounding headache, it’s too much, and he turns away to be sick onto the ground. He doesn’t feel any better when it’s over. His head still pounds, his arm is on fire, and the world is vaguely spinning.

He glances around, trying to take stock of the situation around the ache in his skull. Mac’s unconscious but safe, Erzhan is walking around aimlessly, holding his arm, and their pilot...Cynthia’s waking up, but as soon as she tries to move, Jack hears her bite down on a scream. It looks like her leg is pinned under part of the front panel. Probably broken, damn it. She’s groaning, tugging at her leg.

“Just a sec, I’m gonna get you outta here.” Jack starts scanning the ground. There’s a blurry look to everything, his head is absolutely killing him, and when he reaches for a piece of one of the blades to help pry the metal off Cynthia’s leg he misses by a mile.

He hears someone else moan softly, and he glances back just in time to see Mac roll over and gasp out a soft cry of pain. Jack rushes over to him. “Mac?”

“J-jack?” He whispers, struggling to sit up.

“Hey, calm down, we sorta crashed but we’re okay.” He brushes the kid’s hair out of his eyes. “Is everyone out?”

“I’m gettin’ Cynthia now. Erzhan’s okay.”

“I’ll help.” Mac starts to roll over and then grits his teeth, making soft, muffled sounds of pain. “G-get Cynthia, I’m okay.”

“I will, okay?” Jack gets up slowly. “Her leg’s stuck, but I’m gonna get her out.”

“You need a lever.” Mac says, and then he pushes himself to his hands and knees, panting. “I can help.”

“No, no, you’re not gonna do that.” He pushes Mac gently back to the ground. “You’re gonna stay right here.” He picks up the piece of rotor again and jams it in between the twisted metal and Cynthia’s leg. “Hey, I’m sorry, but when I get this open you’re gonna have to pull your leg out.” She nods, gritting her teeth and groaning. Jack puts more pressure on the metal, and there’s a screeching groan. Cynthia makes a muffled scream, but she manages to lift her leg free. Jack lets go of the metal and pulls her out, dragging her well away from the chopper and motioning to Erzhan to get away as well. He can smell smoke and fuel, that’s not a good combination.

There’s a massive bang, and Jack looks back to see the helicopter on fire. Well, if they didn’t already know where we went down, that just gave them a pretty good idea where to find us. He starts scraping some dirt over the worst of the flames, but it’s probably too late.

Mac is finally standing, leaning against a tree. His face is all cut up from the shrapnel, one long gash along his cheek bleeding slightly. His side of the chopper took the worst of the hit. But he’s on his
“Well, our transponder was in there,” Cynthia says, pointing to the smoldering hunk of tail lying on the leaves, “and that blast just fried the internal comm unit for good.”

“And our cell phones ain’t gonna get a single bar of signal out here. On the upside, though, no roaming charges,” Jack says.

“Wait, I had a sat phone. In a red backpack,” Cynthia says. “It was...in the helicopter.”

Jack glances at the wreck, then notices the kid’s looking toward a small stream. “That backpack?” Mac asks, pointing at something red in the water.

Jack fishes the backpack out of the water with his good hand. “Dang. Looks like the sat phone bought it.” He pulls out the waterlogged device. *Man, another phone we’ve destroyed. This time it wasn’t technically Mac’s fault...*

Mac digs around in the backpack and pulls out a water bottle, then walks around to where some scorched small trees are lying, burnt by the licking flames from the helicopter’s engine.

“You know how if you drop your phone in water, you’re supposed to put it in a bag of rice? I can’t find us that out here but some charred wood and a water bottle should be a decent substitute.”

Jack takes the water bottle from the kid, it’s still half full. “Everyone drink up, can’t let this go to waste.” He hands the bottle around, and by the time it gets to Erzhan the man seems to understand what’s going on and drinks his share of the water. Jack hands the kid the empty bottle, which he wipes out as dry as he can with the edge of his shirt.

Mac pulls the phone out of the backpack and drops it in the bottle with some hunks of wood, shaking it slightly. Jack attaches it to his belt.

“Whoever shot us down is going to make sure they finished the job. Unfortunately, we can’t stay with the chopper and wait for rescue.” Jack glances at the others.

“We’re about ten miles north of the Kazakh border. If we keep going south, it’s our best shot at civilization,” the pilot says. Cynthia is biting her lip, trying to put on a brave face, but Jack knows the thought of moving on that broken leg is unpleasant to say the least. But it’s way better than waiting around to be picked up by men who sell human beings on the black market.

Jack doesn’t want to see any of them end up in that situation. But if he’s being totally honest with himself the one he wants to protect most is Mac. Not that he wouldn’t do anything in his power to keep Cynthia out of that too, but if it came down to a choice between her or Mac, Jack would choose Mac. Even if the kid would be angry with him for it. *Better an angry Mac than a Mac in the hands of people like that.* Jack can’t bear the thought of Mac being sold off to the highest bidder, treated like property and abused by someone cruel and heartless. Or by more than one. Jack has seen more than enough of that in the kid’s life.

He shudders. He’s not going to let those people get hold of Mac, no matter what.

The kid’s leaning against a tree again, his face unnervingly pale, but when Jack asks if he’s feeling up to traveling he nods. Erzhan’s apparently trying to piece together what’s going on, but Jack has the feeling he’s missing most of it. He attempts a rudimentary sign language explanation of why they have to leave the crash site, and while it doesn’t seem to go much better, Erzhan does finally nod and make a motion with his hands like walking feet. “Go away from fire,” he says, and nods. Jack takes that as a good sign.
“She’s gonna need a crutch.” Jack nods to Cynthia. Under other circumstances he’d just have her lean on his shoulder the whole time, but with this concussion he’s liable to lose his balance and fall, and that could injure her worse.

Mac pushes himself off the tree and half walks, half limps over to the remains of the helicopter. Jack frowns. “You okay?”

“Just sore.” The kid bends over gingerly, pulling out his knife and sawing at one of the metal skids. He cuts some seatbelts out of the helicopter, and some fabric off one of the seats. “Jack, you might want to splint our reporter friend’s arm.”

“Oh yeah, let me try and help the guy who barely speaks English and already head-butted me. What could go wrong?” Jack finds a stick from the ground, and takes a couple of the strips of fabric, watching as Mac leans down next to Cynthia.

“It looks like your tibia’s fractured. I have to stabilize it so it doesn’t cut an artery.” He wraps the cloth, then the belts, around her leg, tightening them expertly. Jack cuts off the train of thought that asks how the kid instinctively seems to know how to do this. Please tell me this isn’t something he’s done to himself in some alleyway.

He distracts himself by trying to mime to Erzhan that he’s going to fix his arm. The man nods and holds it out, and Jack carefully wraps a splint as best he can. He’s no medic, but he’s done his share of field medicine too. Not quite the same as the kid, though. Usually I knew help was on the way. Except for that time in Iran...

Jack picks up the crutch Mac’s made out of the helicopter skid, to hand it to Cynthia who’s now pulling herself to her feet. “Dang, kid, think you coulda made her a heavier one?”

“If you want it to break, I could use a stick.” Mac rips some of the padding out of one of the seats in the helicopter and ties it around the end of the strut with the L-shape. Cynthia puts it under her arm to test it.

“I think I’ll be able to manage.” She takes a hopping step. And they walk away from the smoldering ruin of the helicopter together.

Mac shivers. It’s chilly out here, it’s started to drizzle, and he doesn’t even have his jacket. He wraps his arms around himself, half to try and control the shivering, and half to try to ease some of the pain. He’s more terrified than he’ll admit to Jack or Cynthia. They have enough problems. They don’t need to worry about what happens if the traffickers find them, or the way his stomach hurts and feels swollen. Internal bleeding, more than likely, or at least swelling. It hurts to walk, but they can’t stay put. Jack is right, the downed chopper will attract the people combing these hills for refugee camps. He forces himself to stop thinking about what might happen. They’re not going to find us. Jack is going to get us out of here. We’ll be okay. The traffickers aren’t going to take us. Jack promised not to let anything like that happen to him. Jack can’t protect him if his own body decides to turn against him, but he will do everything in his power to keep Mac out of the hands of those monsters. He won’t let them hurt me. Mac knows that’s a flimsy hope, because there are a lot of them and one Jack, and what if Jack is more hurt than he’ll admit too? But it’s the only thing keeping Mac from having a panic attack right now, so he just keeps repeating it, in his head, over and over.

He thinks his entire life might be permanently on the cusp of a panic attack. Any misstep could cost him everything. He’s had to reschedule two parole meetings already because of the CIA interviews.
He’s never been more grateful that Jack and Riley found him a new PO because Hammond would have sent him right back to CCI after the first time he asked to change the time. Penny just finds him a new slot and makes it work. Once, when they had a court date coming up, she fudged the whole thing entirely and had him come to her apartment late in the evening, made them both hot chocolate, and had the meeting there so she’d still have a transcript to take to court in the morning. She’s unconventional, but he likes it.

Another shiver rips through him, doubling the agony in his stomach and back. He gasps and staggers slightly.

“You okay, kid?” Jack asks.

“Fine. Just tripped.” Mac can’t tell them the truth. He knows Jack would abandon the mission to protect him at all costs. And the mission is to get Erzhan and now Cynthia too to safety. Mac doesn’t know which would be worse. Knowing Jack left the reporter and pilot unprotected to stay with him, or watching Jack actually listen to him and walk away, leaving him to die here in the forest, or be found by the traffickers.

He feels numb and distanced from the real world. Voices are blurry, everything shifts and sways around him. He blinks and forces himself to focus; he shouldn’t be moving around like this, it’s making everything worse. But there’s nothing Mac can do about potential internal bleeding. Not out here. He has to get them home, and he can’t do that resting. Nine times out of ten, the best option isn’t to aggravate the injury. But if we don’t have a way to call for help, sitting around’s just going to mean I die more slowly.

Jack’s stopping near a tree. He takes the water bottle off his belt and glances at the wood. “Hey kid, remember what I told you about how to get safe drinking water if you can’t purify it?”

Mac racks his jumbled brain for what Jack told him on that camping trip. It feels like forever ago. “Tree roots filter the water for you, and you can drink the sap?”

“Good memory.” Jack starts cutting a slit in the bark, then pulls the phone out of the bottle and hands it to Mac; they’ll put it back in after this if it needs to be dried longer. Mac checks it, it seems dry but they can’t risk shorting it out and losing their only shot at getting help. He’d rather keep it with the dessicant a while longer. Jack’s still talking, he notices vaguely. “Plus, it’s usually got some good nutrients as well. Maple trees are the best.” He winks at Mac. “This won’t be as good, but it should keep us on our feet.”

“Do we have time to wait for that?” Cynthia asks, watching the slow drip of liquid into the bottle.

“If you don’t want to get dehydrated.” The rain is still only falling in a slight mist, enough to dampen clothes and chill skin, but not to capture and collect. They sit down in a tight huddle, keeping Cynthia in the middle to give her the most warmth.

Mac dimly notices that he and Cynthia have both stopped shivering. That’s not good. His survival refresher course with Jack reminded him that that’s a bad sign when it comes to hypothermia. He knows neither of them have been moving fast enough to get rewarmed, so this means they’re either getting weaker or colder. Neither one is good.

Mac has started shivering again by the time Jack decides they’ve collected enough water and gets up. He can’t bring himself to drink even a few drops when Jack hands around the water bottle. He thinks he’ll throw up if he does, and that sounds incredibly unappealing. His stomach hurts enough already.

“It’s not gonna hurt ya, kid,” Jack says. “It’s just good clean stump water. Tastes a hell of a lot better
than that coffee you’re always drinking.”

“That’s a matter of opinion,” Cynthia mutters, making a face and wiping her mouth on her sleeve. Mac fakes drinking his share, swallowing just enough to feel the coolness in his throat. It’s not horrible, but it’s not great either. He’s getting a headache, and he can’t tell if it’s from an injury from the crash, or from dehydration. But at this point, he prefers a mild headache to any increase in the pain in his stomach.

There’s a low rumble overhead, and a slight increase in the falling rain. Jack sighs and helps Cynthia to her feet, Mac shoves the wood and the phone back in the water bottle, and they set out again, as much downhill as possible. Mac bites his lip and keeps putting one foot in front of the other. We can’t stop. There’s no other option.

Jack’s trying to keep his eyes on the ground and keep from jarring Cynthia’s leg any more than he has to when he hears it. She’s having more and more trouble navigating the terrain, and Jack’s giving her as much support as he can while still hopefully not being more of a problem than a solution. He’s still a little wobbly from the concussions.

There’s a sound almost like a crow, but just different enough that it catches Jack’s attention. He glances up in time to see a large brown bird swooping out of the grey sky.

“That’s a Steppe Eagle!” Jack whispers, scanning the treeline where it just disappeared. Then he sees the second tawny shape perched on a limb. It’s a little smaller and darker than the other. “Holy crap, two of them! They must have a nest around here.” I hope they’re gonna be raising a nestful of fledglings.

“So?” Cynthia asks. “Is that going to help us find a way out of this mess?”

“Those are endangered; they can get kidney failure from a common veterinary drug that gets in their bodies from things they eat. It’s awesome to see a mating pair out here in the wild.”

“We are literally in the middle of nowhere. I don’t think there’s any civilization around here, let alone a veterinarian.”

Jack grins. A veterinary office would be a nice find right about now, he could use some supplies to patch up his ragtag team. He and Riley have done their share of clinic raids; vets usually aren’t as secure as human clinics.

Mac comes up beside them, followed by Erzhan. It looks like Mac’s been retying the man’s makeshift splint. Way to belittle my medical skills, kid.

Jack can’t resist the chance to one-up his genius partner. “Hey man, I just saw two Steppe Eagles. Did you know…”

“It’s featured on the Kazakhstan flag?” Oh, you insufferable know-it-all. For once, can’t you let me be the smart one? Birds are the one thing Jack was supposed to have a corner on knowing about. He’s been obsessed with them since he was a kid, and his parents had half-expected him to go into a career in wildlife biology, instead of the military. But really, I wasn’t cut out for school.

“Yeah, and it’s also the national bird of Egypt, and it’s on their flag as well.” The kid turns and looks at him.

“Really?”
“Yeah really. Don’t tell me you didn’t know that, it’s too late to save my pride anyway.”

“I really didn’t!” Mac shakes his head. “I just knew about the Kazakhstan flag because it was on the briefing dossier and I was bored on the flight, so I looked up everything on it.”

“All this tells me is that you learn completely random and useless information for fun when you get bored. What else utterly unhelpful to 99.99 percent of humanity do you know?”

The kid answers him absolutely deadpan. “More people are killed by falling icicles every year than by sharks.”

He half-expects Mac to continue talking about random facts, and is surprised when he doesn’t. Mac is quieter than Jack’s heard him since they went camping. What’s wrong? Jack wonders if it’s residual fear from the multiple interviews (well, really, they’ve been interrogations) the kid’s been put through in the past couple weeks. He decides that’s it when the kid finally speaks up again, given his choice of topic.

“So who do you think they’ll put in charge of the Phoenix?” Mac asks, and Jack can hear the tension and fear in his voice.

“Probably some office-bound suit who’ll give us grief for not going by the book,” Jack grumbles. He knows Patty was trying to put in some influence, but she really doesn’t have much sway, not when her whole agency was just outed as being run by a mole. They won’t listen too much to what she has to say about who should be running the operation. “It’s gonna be okay, kid, the CIA already cleared you. They’re not gonna keep needling you.” He has no idea if that’s true or not but if it isn’t someone is going to have a concussion, and it won’t be Jack.

“Just…” Mac sighs heavily. “What if they decide they don’t want me anymore?”

Somehow he still thinks he’ll be seen as replaceable. Jack’s heart shatters a little more for the broken boy. “That’s not gonna happen, okay?” He lets go of Cynthia’s arm to put a hand on the kid’s back, give him some reassurance. “No one who ever met you could think you were useless.” He hates that that’s what he has to tell this kid to make him think things are going to be okay.

Jack would never tell Mac, but he’s been doing some digging on the kid’s scumbag dad, since Christmas. Mac was so happy at being basically adopted into Jack’s family, and despite the fact that Jack just can’t bring himself to tell the kid how much he wants to be the father Mac deserves, he knows the kid feels loved now. And I’m not gonna have some jerk come back into his life and screw with that.

Jack spent the times Mac was in interrogations without him poking around some of the databases. He would rather have had Riley’s help, but she was in the hospital, and also he feels a little stalkery, hunting up Mac’s missing dad like this. Riley would probably tell him that Mac’s parent is his business, not Jack’s. That’s what she told him when he threatened to punch Elwood in the face if he came around Riley’s asking for money again. She wanted to handle him her own way. And I could respect that, she’s a grown woman and more than capable of taking care of herself.

But Mac and Riley are different people. Riley knows her father was a shitty excuse for a parent. She is more than willing to call him out on being a monster. But Mac seems to think that what his dad did was excusable, maybe even on a spectrum of normal. He might think he’s obligated to let his dad walk all over him again.

But there’s something off about what he’s been seeing about James MacGyver. The man doesn’t exist after he walked out of Mac’s life in 2003. There’s barely a paper trail before that. Jack may not
be an intel expert like Riley, but he knows something sketchy when he sees it, and James MacGyver’s footprint has all the earmarks of a black ops agent. The total disappearance, the lack of much information even prior to that...And some of the things Mac has let drop, about a cabin in the wilderness that they only went to at night, about some of his dad’s “friends”...Jack’s mind is painting two different but equally ugly pictures. *Either James is a government operative, and he decided to bail on his kid to go deep cover, or he’s a black operative for a shadow organization. And not the good kind.*

He’ll keep his worries to himself, for now. If Patty were still around, he’d take this to her. She would be discreet, and she would look into it. Maybe when this Walsh thing is wrapped up, he’ll ask. Because some small petty part of him wants James MacGyver to be a criminal. *If he’s gone, out of Mac’s life for good, and Mac isn’t wondering if or when he might come back around, maybe I could tell him that I hope he can think of me as a father. And maybe if James is revealed as a monster in one way, Mac can accept that he was a monster as a parent too.*

He notices that the kid’s shaking, arms wrapped around himself. He knows, from their little camping trip, that Mac hates being cold. He can’t be having a great time right now; not that any of them are, but this probably reminds him of Carsen and the militia compound and the waterboarding.

Jack pulls off his own jacket. That leaves him just his thin t-shirt, but he’s hanging onto Cynthia so he’s got her warmth as well.

“I can’t take your shirt,” Mac insists when Jack shoves it at him with his free hand. “I’ll be fine.”

“You’re shakin’ like a leaf, you’re not fine. Take it.” Jack pushes the shirt at the kid’s stomach, and Mac leaps back like he doesn’t want to be touched. He takes the shirt and gingerly pulls it on, threading his arms through the sleeves fast before tucking them back around himself, rubbing at his arms and biting his lip. Jack hates seeing the kid look so miserable.

And then Jack’s ears catch something that’s a lot more concerning than the cry of a Steppe eagle. It’s the rumble of heavy trucks. They all duck behind a stand of trees and watch as a small ATV, the kind Jack knows can fire those surface to air missiles that took them down, and a couple heavy canvas back trucks, drive past on what it would be generous to call a road. If they needed more proof that the traffickers have government support, this is it. Those are official Kazakh military trucks. And the men inside definitely aren’t soldiers.

Erzhan shakes Jack’s sleeve. “Them. The men I write about.” His voice is heavily accented and broken, but Jack can at least make out what he means. Those are definitely the traffickers. Erzhan begins to mutter in his own language. Jack wonders if they’re curses. He could use another language to get angry in. *If we get outta here alive I’m gonna ask him for his favorites.*

Jack checks his gun and his ammo reserve, and glances back at the retreating vehicles. He has a clip and a half left, and these guys have an army. If they get spotted, he’s just going to try and hold them back as long as he can. *They’re not getting Mac unless it’s over my dead body.*

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**THE WAR ROOM**

**THOUSANDS OF MILES AWAY FROM WHERE RILEY SHOULD BE NOW**

Riley feels helpless. *If I hadn’t been an idiot and gotten shot, I could be out there with them. I could be helping. And instead I’m stuck here in the War Room, watching everything fall apart.* She’s skipping out on her mandatory PT to run this op. Until they get the interim director Patty promised, she and Jack are the ranking agents here at the Phoenix. The other top agents were members of...
Chrysalis’s inner circle.

She can’t help but remember what Patty said to her on the Bishop op. That she had the talent to be the one behind the desk. But she also can’t help but remember what happened on that op. We almost lost Mac. She refuses to let that happen again.

In all reality, Mac could be lying out there dead. That crash was an awful one. She can’t pick up signal on their cell phones or the sat, and the satellite image she’s getting in between massive clusters of clouds is showing a disturbingly large debris field around the scorched and smoldering remains of the chopper.

At one point there were small figures poking around the remains, and a couple trucks parked off to the side, that she picked up in between swirls of cloud. She guesses it’s the people who wanted Erzhan dead, so probably the traffickers. I really hope Mac and Jack and the others were in decent enough shape to get away before those guys showed up.

She’s not sure if it’s worse to imagine the team dead or captured. Because if they’re in the hands of those traffickers, they’re going to wish they were dead. She swallows the horrible sick feeling in her throat. If that happens to Mac, again, while I’m the one running the op...

She knows this isn’t her fault, but she feels cursed. The what-ifs swirl around her mind, paralyzingly loud. What if they don’t all make it back? What if the pilot dies, or our asset? Mac would blame himself even if there was no logical reason. Jack might too. What if Jack never makes it home? Her heart rebels at even the thought of losing the closest thing she has to a father. Jack is going to be fine. He’s survived worse. He’s coming home. But it’s only replaced by an equally awful thought. What if Mac doesn’t make it? Jack will be devastated. Lately, Riley’s noticed she and Mac are starting to occupy equal footing in Jack’s heart. It stung a little at first, but now she’s glad. It’s like having a little brother. Who loves physics and chemistry…and occasionally gets in trouble for playing with fire.

If he doesn’t make it, Jack and I will never be the same.

But if Jack comes back to tell her Mac is in the hands of those monsters...that will be just as hard to bear. Riley would never give up trying to find him. She’d scan the darknet, burn her bridges with every one of her confidential informants if she had to, pose as a buyer if necessary, and bring Mac home.

She shivers at the thought of seeing him in one of her regular scans of black market trafficking operations. She keeps an eye on that part of the shady side of the internet, and the pictures of people she doesn’t know, and never will, shatters her heart. She doesn’t want to see Mac being advertised there, listed by his height, weight, coloring and age. She hates that she knows the fact that it wouldn’t be his first time will attract a more callous, violent clientele. People who think experience equates to willingness, or at least some level of familiarity. She feels sick at the pictures forcing themselves into her brain, a macabre mixture of imagination and the evidence photos from El Noche’s compound. The rope knotted around Mac’s wrists, the frightened eyes she’s seen all too many times...

“Riley?” Bozer asks shakily, as the sat feed once again swirls over with clouds, these ones an ominous shade of orange on the radar. The storm is getting stronger. She shakes herself out of the waking nightmare and turns to him, hoping her thoughts aren’t showing on her face. I’m never going to be as good at hiding emotion as Sam or Patty.

She thinks Bozer has a right to be here. As long as he’s an agent now, he should know how much danger his best friend is in. He’s technically still in probationary training, he was supposed to have a session this afternoon, but she couldn’t stand the thought of letting him think Mac was okay when the reality is that everything’s gone wrong. We lied to him enough already.
The door opens, and Riley jumps. A man and a woman she vaguely recognizes from some of the interviews walk in, looking stiff and overly professional. She hopes they’re not here to introduce the new director. She feels seriously underdressed in her leather jacket and jeans.

“I hope you’ve acted on my intel and scrambled the closest Army base’s Blackhawks,” Riley says. She relayed the crash site data as soon as she could. “There’s a major storm heading in and if we don’t get our guys back soon we’re gonna lose our window.”

Jeffers and Ramirez are their two full time CIA liaisons, but they don’t seem to have any respect for the fact that Riley was once with the Agency. They look at her like she’s a petulant child. “We’re sending out an air rescue team now, but I’ll be honest, Agent Davis, that’s going to be like looking for a needle in a haystack,” Ramirez says.

“Well, I’m not giving up.” Riley crosses her arms. “As long as that needle is still out there, we do whatever it takes to bring them home.”

The two nod and move out, clearly aware that Riley’s just going to give them the death glare until they do. Once they’re gone, she turns to Bozer.

“What did you want to say?”

“Isn’t there anything else we can do?”

“No.” Riley sighs. “That’s the hardest part of being out of the field.”

“You know, I thought it would be scarier to be out there, on the front lines, getting shot at.” Bozer shakes his head. “But I’ve been shot at, and it wasn’t as awful as sitting here watching ‘Google Earth’ is.” He shivers. “Mac is stuck out there and he might be dead or dying. And I can’t help him.”

Riley stands up slowly. Her stomach aches, and she can feel her movement pulling the still healing wound, but she reaches over and wraps her arms around Boze’s shoulders. “I know.” She can feel him shuddering, trying to hold back tears.

“He’s gonna be okay.” Bozer says quietly. “He has to be.”

“He’s got Jack looking out for him. He’ll be okay.” Riley’s trying to reassure herself as much as Bozer.

Bozer nods. “Mac doesn’t like being out in the woods. We went on a school field trip once, and he got lost cause he stayed behind too long looking at something, and when the teacher found him he was just sitting against a tree. I thought he was gonna cry.” He glances at the floor. “He was twelve years old.” He shakes his head. “And all he said, over and over, was why did we come back if he wasn’t smart enough to keep up.”

Riley’s heart clenches. I hate knowing that people I care about had the same kind of shitty childhood I did. She’s moved on, let the pain make her stronger. But she wouldn’t wish that nightmare on anyone, especially not Mac. He’s not the same kind of personality as me. Riley developed a harshness, sharp edges to drive away anyone who might be able to hurt her. Mac seems like he just implodes. He tries to disappear.

“I have training to get to,” Bozer whispers.

“You don’t have to. You can stay.”

“I can’t. I need something to get my mind off this.” Riley watches him walk away, shoulders slumped. I don’t know if it’s better or worse that he knows now what Mac does for a living.
ABOUT TWO MILES AND A HUNDRED FEET LOWER IN ELEVATION THAN THEY WERE

IT DOESN’T FEEL ANY BETTER

Mac huddles into himself, taking advantage of the slight decrease in the rain. There’s a few tears in the soft grey overhead, and a little weak sunlight shining through. It won’t last though. The clouds are swirling, darker than before off to the west.

If it rains, I’m never going to make it out of this. He hopes there are search parties out looking for them, the chopper might have been able to send out a distress signal before the transponder got fried. But in the storms, they might fly right over the team and not see them, if the weather is safe to fly at all. And if we don’t get help in the next couple hours… He knows he’s taken a turn for the worse, ever since they stopped for Jack to get the water. The pain in his stomach has turned into a dragging weight, and he figures that means there’s even more internal bleeding, or at the very least swelling. He can’t walk properly, every step is agony.

I should tell Jack. I should. Mac is putting them all at risk by letting them think he’s okay. Just because his injury isn’t as visible or immediately concerning as Cynthia or Erzhan’s doesn’t mean it’s not going to affect their progress. He’s slowing them down, and as the combination of internal injury, hypothermia, and his increasing fever get worse, he’s going to become a liability. Jack needs to know. Just so he can make decisions based on that.

But some part of him stubbornly insists that telling the truth isn’t safe. Mac has spent most of his life hiding various pieces of himself from various people. From something as simple as not telling Dad he got beaten up on the playground again for his name, to sneaking out of the Bozers’ house early in the mornings so he could go to class without anyone asking about the bruises. And now he’s required to lie to people, on the regular, for this job.

He knows some people have a hard time with that. Jill Morgan from the lab eats lunch with him sometimes, and she says the toughest thing is when she goes to visit her grandpa in the nursing home, to sneaking out of the Bozers’ house early in the mornings so he could go to class without anyone asking about the bruises. And now he’s required to lie to people, on the regular, for this job.

He knows some people have a hard time with that. Jill Morgan from the lab eats lunch with him sometimes, and she says the toughest thing is when she goes to visit her grandpa in the nursing home and he asks her, every time because he has late stage dementia, what she’s doing. She’s a forensic tech, so she doesn’t even have the luxury of a cover that admits she’s a scientist for a think tank, like some of the other R&D members. She’s supposed to be a circulation desk clerk in a library here in LA.

“I just want to tell him once. He’ll forget about it by the next day, and he’d never tell anyone. I just want to see him be so proud of me. To know I’m doing more than just shuffling paperwork and stamping book covers.” But she can’t.

Mac doesn’t really have anyone to tell, besides Bozer. And he feels a little guilty that he of all people gets to have his friend in on the secret. Even in the agency now. But even when that wasn’t the case, the lies came hardly easily. As much as he hated lying to his best friend, it just rolled off his tongue. Like it was normal. Because it is normal.

Lying is safe, it’s the only way to make sure you don’t get hurt. If he learned one thing from his dad, that was it. Granted, if he got caught the lies made the punishment that much worse, but he got away with it more times than he got caught. He’s not great at fooling Bozer, because Boze taught him most of that, from his acting lessons, but some of it was learned long before he moved to LA.

As long as you don’t get caught, lying makes people like you. You can be whatever they need you to be. Whatever they want. And it’s worth it. Or he thought it was. But it hasn’t turned out great in the end, now that he thinks about it. He couldn’t fool James forever, and he thought that was because he
was just a bad liar. He was ten, and he didn’t really know enough to make what he said convincing. But it seems like every time he lies to someone, eventually everything comes to light. Like with Bozer.

He wants to be what everyone wants, so they don’t decide they don’t want him around anymore. He’s played so many parts for so many people he doesn’t even really know who the real Angus MacGyver is anymore. He doesn’t know if the boy who slaved away at homework for hours to get all As was really him, or if it was the him that Dad wanted. He doesn’t know if the Phoenix, the nighttime vigilante, was him, or if it was just an extension of the justice Mama Bozer asked for and was denied. He knows the tough front he tried to have in prison wasn’t him, because it shattered in days. Maybe the real him was the ruined, terrified, pathetic boy curled up sobbing into a bunk because someone decided he was pretty. Because the real him sure as hell isn’t the Level 1 Phoenix agent who’s currently slogging ankle deep through mud, trying to pretend nothing is wrong because he still can’t accept that someone somewhere might like him enough not to abandon him at the first sign of trouble. That’s just the person Jack Dalton and Cynthia and Erzhan and everyone at the Phoenix and the CIA want to see. Agents just suck it up and keep going. So I have to keep pretending because they want an agent. They don’t want a scared, hurt kid who drags the whole op down.

Cynthia stumbles, gasping, and her bad leg slides on the muddy ground. She goes down hard with a soft cry.

“Cynthia!” Jack shouts.

“I’m alright.” She’s shaking, her voice quavering, but she’s already trying to get back on her feet.

“No, you’re not.” Jack gently eases her down against a nearby tree. “You’re running a fever. I was afraid of that, with a break like this.” Mac steps back a little farther. I have a fever too. What if he notices that? What if he realizes how bad this is? He knows, logically, that Jack would never leave him behind. Jack won’t leave any of his team behind. But it might come down to the grim reality of everyone dying if the people who can still get out safely don’t leave the ones who are too badly injured. I don’t want him to leave me. But I don’t want him to die because of me either.

He knows that if he lets anyone take care of him he’s going to collapse. That his body will just give out. He can’t afford that.

His own steps are unsure, and he’s trying to avoid the slickest muddy spots or he’s going to be in the same situation as Cynthia. If they have to leave us I’ll try to protect her but I’m not going to be much help. He figures he has another hour or so left in him before he’s too far gone.

He feels absolutely awful. His stomach is churning but he doesn’t want to throw up, his head aches, and he feels stiff and both overheated and chilled at the same time. It’s miserable. He wants to tell Jack, he wants someone to take care of this, and he knows Jack would try. Jack would at least hold him, he wouldn’t feel so cold and alone. But they don’t have time, and it isn’t safe to not be okay right now.

He knows how to do this. How to hide that anything is wrong. He thought maybe he wouldn’t have to do that anymore with Jack, but maybe it’s always going to be this way. It’s just who I am. I have to be okay, because I have to make sure everyone else is okay. It doesn’t matter what happens to me. He can lie. So he does.

There’s a low thump of helicopter rotors. Mac glances up at the grey sky, scanning for the incoming aircraft. It might be friendly, or it might be another one of the traffickers’ military vehicles. He doesn’t have it in him to run if they’re spotted.
“That’s a Blackhawk!” Cynthia shouts. “They must be out looking for us! If they clear this sector they won’t be coming back. We have to get their attention.”

There’s a clearing up ahead, and the sun is just slightly coming out from behind the clouds. Mac pulls out his knife and glances at it. It might work. He stumbles out into the clearing, opening every tool on the knife and holding it up. Please work. Please.

Mac raises the knife and angles it to catch the few rays of sunlight. He hopes the helicopter will turn, just a little. They’re looking for anything, right? Anything out of place? Like a flashing light?

The chopper starts to angle back, and Mac feels like sobbing with relief. It’s going to see them. They’re going to get to go home. And then someone yanks him down, his whole body flares with unbearable pain, and he thinks he’s going to be sick. He rolls over to see Jack’s bloodied face next to him.

And then he looks up. The Blackhawk is disappearing into the returning rainstorm. They didn’t see enough to convince them to stay, and they think the team isn’t in this part of their grid search. They’re not coming back. He wants to cry again, but this time because everything is wrong.

“Jack!” That was their one chance at getting out of here, and now it’s gone.

Jack puts a hand over Mac’s mouth and points to the left. There’s a truck rumbling slowly by. Mac can see the canvas back flapping, and through it he notices the huddled shapes of men, women and children, guarded by men with guns.

The traffickers are right there. Mac begins to shake, and not from the cold dampness of his wet clothes clinging to him. If Jack hadn’t followed me, if he hadn’t seen them, I would have led them right to me. He should have noticed, but he’s in so much pain and he’s struggling just to think straight.

“I’m sorry.”

“You didn’t know,” Jack says, and Mac can see the deep-seated worry in his eyes. He won’t leave me behind. He won’t ever abandon me. Jack doesn’t want to see a tough agent who pushes on through whatever happens, he doesn’t care what’s wrong. He just wants to see Mac. Whoever the real version of him is. I just wish I knew which one of me that was. Maybe the real Mac is the cold, frightened, hurting Phoenix agent huddled up here in the mud and rain, facing a slow, agonizing death stranded out here. Maybe he’s all the things he pretends to be, and the things he tries to hide and ignore, all rolled up into one.

“J-jack?” He’s going to tell him. Jack deserves to know that Mac is hurting, that he’s sick and won’t make it out of here if they don’t get help fast. That that Blackhawk was probably his one chance at surviving this mess, and that that’s why he took that stupid risk and almost got caught.

And then he glances past Jack and sees Erzhan waving frantically. Something’s wrong with Cynthia. He bites back a groan and pushes himself to his feet. He doesn’t have time to not be okay. They have enough problems.

Jack can’t help but notice the kid’s shaking. He’s soaked to the bone from the rain, and that could be all it is, because Jack’s clothes are damp and he’s starting to feel the wind as well, but he can’t miss how Mac’s holding himself. How he’s curled protectively over his stomach, how he doesn’t straighten to his full height. He stumbles heavily over the uneven ground, limping his way back to where Erzhan and Cynthia are. Erzhan looks worried, his face creased with wrinkles, and Cynthia is
shaking, eyes closed, face pale.

Mac presses a hand to Cynthia’s forehead. “Her fever’s getting worse. And this weather isn’t helping; the colder it gets the harder her body’s going to work to keep her warm, and the worse she’s going to get. We need a fire.” The kid’s right, Cynthia’s body’s going to burn through her energy reserves trying to keep the fever going. Jack was weak as a kitten after he got sick on that surveillance op in Norway and spent two days alone in a freezing cabin with a 103 fever. He hadn’t even been able to get up to refill the fireplace and once that went out it was hellishly cold.

Mac starts disassembling the sat phone. “I’m gonna use the battery to light this, because everything’s so damp I don’t know that we can get it started if I don’t.” He holds out a hand to Jack. “I need one of your bullets.” Jack knows the kid’s going to use the gunpowder to make sure this fire starts on the first go in the dampness, but he still doesn’t want to get rid of one bullet, not when they still have those traffickers roaming the hills. He reluctantly removes one bullet and hands it to the kid. At least he didn’t ask to take my gun apart and use the firing mechanism. Jack would have put his foot down at that, he needs his gun in one piece if he wants to protect them.

Mac pulls out the battery and his knife. He opens the bullet, pours the gunpowder onto the pile of sticks and leaves and grass he’s making, and shoves the tweezers from the knife into the battery. When he holds the battery to the powder, there’s a snapping sound, and then a burst of white flame, that slowly evens into a yellow and orange glow. Jack’s glad it actually took, sometimes starting fires fast doesn’t work all that well. But he’s glad the kid seems at least aware and alert enough to be trying to do things.

There’s a much brighter flash in the sky in front of them. That storm is still hanging on. Jack doesn’t like the thought of spending the night in the woods out here in a downpour and electrical storm. It’s bad enough that the weather would probably give them all hypothermia, but Cynthia and Erzhan are seriously injured, and Mac might be as well, although he’s being stubborn about it. They might not survive the night.

Jack counts the seconds between the lightning and the thunder. “Ten, eleven…” There’s a rumbling crash. “It’s about two miles away. Getting closer.” He sighs. “Of course we’d get slammed with a doozy of a storm on top of everything else.”

The rain’s already starting to come down harder again. He was hoping that the weather would hold. But it’s too much to ask.

Mac stumbles up to him, and the kid looks awful. His face has gone past white into ashen, he’s shuddering, and his breathing is raspy. “The ph-phone’s dry, but I-I shorted out the battery st-starting the fire.”

“Can you use one of the cell phone ones?”

“N-not unless y-you can find s-some wire thin enough to go into the terminals.”

“Why didn’t you start a fire with one of them?”

“N-not the r-right kind. They’re made t-to avoid sh-shorting out.” Of course. The sat phone has a regular C type, like the kind Jack always has to put in his smoke detector. Mac probably needed to be able to use the terminals. Another vicious shiver rips through the kid’s body, and he bends over even further.

“You need to sit down by that fire for a while. Take your own advice.” The kid shakes his head.
“I c-can’t. Th-there isn’t time. The storm is c-coming and if we don’t f-find a way to signal our l-location, we’ll be trapped h-here. And we’ll be f-found.” Mac’s teeth are chattering, his whole body uncontrollably shivering. And there’s a panicked fear in his eyes. And then a flash of lightning cuts across the sky and that fear turns into a spark of possibility.

Mac feels more like himself the second he realizes there’s a way to fix this. He grabs the water bottle they’ve been using to dry out the phone, rushes to the closest little stream, and begins filling it.

If he talks he’ll keep his mind off how sick he feels and how much every single movement hurts. “In 1752 Benjamin Franklin reportedly flew a silk kite into a lightning storm and discovered that lightning was actually electricity.” He picks up the jar and starts digging along the ground. Jack said tree roots store electrolytes in them, which is good to know if you’re trying to survive in the woods. But I think he assumed I’d need to know that for eating them, not for making my own battery. He grabs a handful of small roots and a couple rocks and begins crushing them. “But there’s two things most people don’t know. One is that the string wasn’t attached to a key. It was attached to something called a leyden jar. An insulating material filled with salt water.” He dumps in the roots, screws the jar closed, and shakes it. “It had metal wrapped around the outside... Jack, can I have your cuffs?” Jack hands them over and Mac starts arranging them the best he can. “And a spike of metal through the center.” He glances at the skid that Cynthia’s crutch is made from. “I guess I could cut one from that.”

“Would a tac knife do?” Jack pulls a small canvas pouch out of a back pocket, unrolls it, and hands Mac a knife that’s all metal, without any added grip. “What? You carry paperclips, I carry these.”

“Just stab it right through the center of the lid,” Mac says, and Jack does.

Mac picks up the jar and examines it. “The spike collects ambient electricity and the liquid inside stores it. Like a battery.”

“Ambient electricity...like in the air...like from this storm?” Jack asks. “We’re makin’ a lighting rod?”

“Well, not exactly...okay yeah, kinda.” Mac rubs the bridge of his nose, and Jack can’t tell if it’s worry or pain. “I gotta set it in that clearing up ahead where it’s got a chance of picking up some good charge.”

“What’s the second thing most people don’t know?” Cynthia asks. I was hoping everyone would forget about that little slip of the tongue.

Mac hesitates. “Uh...the experiment is a myth. If it went down the way Priestly said it did, Franklin would have been killed instantly.”

“So you’re gonna go out there and get yourself killed trying to save our lives?” Jack asks.

Mac just shrugs. I’m dying anyway. Unless we get this figured out soon I’m not going to make it. So it might as well be me.

“No, no, hey, you’re not going anywhere alone with those creeps roaming around out there.” Jack shrugs. “Besides, how could I pass up the chance to have a tombstone that says, ‘Here lies Jack Dalton, he rode the lightning’?”

Mac shakes his head. “No, Jack, you gotta stay and protect them.”

“I gotta protect you.” Jack hands Cynthia his gun; she looks like she’s feeling better now that she’s warmer from the fire. She’s stopped shivering and her face doesn’t look so pale. “If those guys come
for you and Erzhan, give ‘em hell.” She nods, her face stiffly determined. “Kid, I may be a lotta things, but I ain’t afraid of dyin’ in the line of duty. And protecting you is just that.”

Mac shivers. The rain isn’t doing his shock and fever any good. He’s kept deflecting Jack’s concern to Cynthia, but he knows Jack’s not falling for it. He should leave me to do this. He might make it through all this. Right now, I'm expendable.

“Let’s go find a place to catch some lightning.”

Riley sets down her rig and rubs her strained, aching eyes. She knows, logically, that staring will not make the storm disappear or Mac and Jack and the others magically appear. But somehow she can’t stop herself. I hate not being in the field. I don’t ever want to get promoted to a desk job unless they pull my whole team at the same time. For a while she’d entertained the vague idea that after what Patty said when she was running the Bishop op, that Riley herself might get the interim director position.

I have to admit, I did daydream about it a little. I imagined what it would be like to be respected like that. To be in charge. But as flattering as a promotion like that would be, she wouldn’t want it. I can’t be behind a desk while my team is out there. I can’t do this. She knows she already knew that, but this is just a bitter reminder.

She also thought the honor might go to Jack. For all that he and Patty bicker, she knows he’s a good agent, and he has years more experience than Riley. He’d be a shoo-in, if he didn’t hate paperwork so damn much. Jack has complained about it a little too often. Patty would worry he’d let things go to ruin around here in her absence.

Bozer knocks on the door, holding two paper cups of coffee. “Can I come in?”

“Sure.” Riley leans back and Bozer hands her one of the coffee cups. She takes a sip, it’s blacker than she usually takes it but she doesn’t care, as long as it keeps her awake. The day vanished outside the windows at some point she doesn’t recall seeing.

Patty always says the darker the sky, the blacker you make your coffee. Jack doesn’t drink coffee, but Patty lives on the stuff, and she and Riley sometimes ran into each other making their cups in the break room. Every year the whole agency does secret Santa, and the year Riley ended up with Patty’s name, everyone pitied her. She just bought the woman a coffee mug with “Boss, because ‘Badass’ isn’t an official job title” on it. Patty actually laughed when she opened it, and Riley counts that a win.

She misses Patty already, and it’s barely been two weeks. But the Phoenix doesn’t feel the same without her. Whoever they get to replace her, it just won’t be right.

“Has anything changed?” Bozer asks, wandering over to glance at her rig.

“Clouds have cleared over the crash site. But all we have is bad news.” Riley points out the small blips, and the movement that from this distance looks like ants crawling over the ground. There’s still one truck at the crash site, but it looks like the other one has moved out. They’re probably tracking the team through the forest, following the trail from the crash site. “I think the people who were after our package are tracking the team now. And if anyone’s injured they’re going to catch up. Jack wouldn’t leave someone behind unless they were dead and he was sure of it.” He has a horror story from one of his early Delta ops, about a guy they thought was dead who turned up six months later in a hostage video, alive but tortured almost beyond recognition. Jack won’t leave anyone on an op, ever.
“I just wish there was more we could do.”

“This is great.” Riley holds up her cup. “Because when Mac figures out some crazy way of sending us an SOS, he’s gonna need me right here watching.” She takes another drink and flings the sat view onto the main screen so she can still keep an eye on it.

“Riley?” Bozer’s rolling his cup of coffee back and forth in his hands. “What’s going to happen when we get a new director?”

“Same thing we’ve always done.” Riley herself isn’t too sure how this is going to go. She and Jack should be fine, they have good records and some CIA past to help sweeten the deal. But she has spent some sleepless nights worried about the repercussions for Bozer, Mac, and even Sam. All three of them were unconventional hires. Sam has a seriously checkered past, Mac’s name still hasn’t been cleared, and Bozer is anything but a trained operative. What if they force us to let them go?

She can’t decide if the CIA will respect Patty enough to remain only limitedly involved, or if they’ll throw in someone heavy-handed and try to totally absorb the Phoenix. She’s inclined to think the latter. “I wouldn’t start clearing out your new desk just yet, okay?”

“It...it’s not me I’m worried about,” Bozer says. Riley’s heart drops. “What if they kick Mac out? What if they send him back to prison?”

“I’m not going to let that happen.” Riley knows Jack is with her on that. He and Sam and I could break Mac out of anywhere. And then we’d take Boze with us and disappear. She knows they could. But she hopes it won’t come to that.

“Great. All we’re missing is a clock tower and a Delorean.” Jack stares out at the open meadow, overgrown with weeds. “There isn’t a less, well, deadly way to do this? Do we really need 1.21 jigawatts to power a sat phone?” He smirks, going into his best Christopher Lloyd impression. “1.21 jigawatts, what was I thinking? The only thing that can generate that much electricity is a bolt of lightning, and you never know when or where one is gonna strike!”

“Very funny,” Mac mutters. He’s doing the hunched over thing again, and Jack tells himself the second they get this thing figured out he’s gonna force the kid to sit down and do a full-body check on him. He didn’t even correct me on the science of jigawatts, or time travel. Now I know something’s not right. Shoulda checked on him earlier but he woulda argued and we didn’t have time for a fight. Now he’s seriously concerned because the kid looks like death warmed over. There’s gotta be something wrong. Like, really wrong. It looks like he’s in constant pain. Jack wouldn’t be surprised if he has a cracked or broken bone in his leg he’s trying to walk on, or maybe some busted ribs.

“You know, this is all stuff they told me not to do as a kid.” Jack grins. “I never was much good at following the rules. He plunges through the weeds beside Mac. “Kept grabbing the electric fence cause I wanted to see the horses. Never did learn even though Momma said I screamed like a stuck hog every time it shocked me.”

“Well, the good news is, if this doesn’t work, you won’t embarrass yourself by screaming. You’ll be dead.” How reassuring.

Jack starts to notice a strange buzzing in his ears, and it feels like his hair is literally standing on end. “What the hell?”

“That’s the corona effect! Water in the air gets ionized.” Mac’s yelling to be heard over the wind and
“Awesome. Let’s drop it and run, okay?”

“And the last words?” Mac asks. Jack’s brain suddenly throws out every cheesy one-liner or Die Hard quote he’s always said he was going to go out with.

“I think of you as a son. I’m sorry I’ve messed up and let so much happen to you. I’m sorry I didn’t do my job better. I…”

And then it’s too late, because Mac is flinging the bottle down and shoving them both into a stumbling run. Jack hears a sizzling sound and then the world goes white and he’s flying.

They hit hard. Jack’s ears are ringing and he’s spitting out dirt and grass.

“Nice work, Doc Brown! You did it!” Jack shouts. And then the kid doesn’t get up and every bit of thrill bleeds out of Jack’s body, replaced by cold fear.

He leans down, feeling for a pulse. It’s there, but weak and thready. Mac’s skin is ice cold, and he’s shivering faintly, but Jack can tell there’s a feverish heat burning below the damp chill. He brushes filthy hair away from Mac’s equally dirty face. The kid’s struggling to breathe, every inhale is a shuddering gasp.

Mac whimpers softly and Jack feels like sobbing. Oh kid, oh kid. He’s known something was wrong since that chopper fell out of the sky. Mac’s been acting stranger and stranger since then, shaky on his feet, sweating in spite of the cold, clearly in pain and having trouble walking. Jack blames his own concussions for why he didn’t make a bigger fuss about what was obviously a problem.

Jack remembers their last game of truth or dare. He told Riley if he could have any superpower in the world, he’d want to be able to fly. I take that back. He wants to be able to take away other people’s pain. Even if it means he has to feel it all; he wouldn’t care. He’d rather be in agony than watch Mac suffer. He thought the same when he watched Riley bleeding in the back seat of that car. He would endure anything if it meant sparing these kids. They don’t deserve this.

Mac groans and curls up, trying to find some measure of relief from the pain, but it seems all that does is spark fresh agony. Tears spill down his cheeks, and his already harsh breaths become strangled half-sobs. Oh Mac. He lifts him as gently as he can, making sure to grab their little battery jar as well. Mac would never forgive me if I didn’t finish the job because I was worried about him. Besides, they need that phone so they can get help.

Cynthia gasps when Jack returns, carrying Mac’s limp, shaking body. “What happened?”

“And idiot was hurt worse than he let on. Probably got busted ribs and one of ‘em went into a lung when we went down,” Jack mutters. He lays Mac down gently and picks up the sat phone. Okay, kid, you had a plan for how you were gonna hook this to the jar. What was it? Mac had said something about wires earlier. They don’t have wires, but they do have... Jack glances at the zipper on the leg of Cynthia’s flight suit.

“Can I borrow your pantleg? Well, the zipper?” Jack cuts it free, opens it up, and wraps it onto the jar. He’s jump-started a lot of cars in his day, and he hopes it’s on the same general concept.

This better work, kid.

Jack touches the wires to the terminals of the sat phone and carefully presses the on button. He tries to shut out the harsh, agonized breaths of the kid on the ground; the faster he gets this done, the faster
Mac gets the medevac he needs.

Jack punches in a quick text; he doesn’t have their exact coordinates, but Riley will be able to track
the signal. **Send medevac**. He’s about to say more when the phone screen flickers and dies. It either
got overcharged or the little battery jar ran out. It doesn’t matter.

He hopes Riley’s getting their signal, because Mac needs that medevac, fast. The kid’s scarily pale,
and his lips are bluish. Jack can’t tell if it’s from cold or lack of oxygen, but neither one is good.

He pulls Mac against him, wrapping his arms around the shivering kid, ignoring the ache in his arm
and wrist. “Hey, hey, Mac, it’s gonna be okay. We’re gonna get you outta here. We’re gonna get
you home.”

Mac’s gasping for breath, blood trickling over his lips. He’s panting heavily, and the soft whines that
keep slipping past make Jack wonders if the kid’s actually trying to scream, but can’t because of his
ribs and lungs. He’s not actually conscious, but Jack can see his fingers fluttering like he’s trying to
do something with them.

Jack doesn’t bother to hide the tears welling up in his eyes. He doesn’t care what Erzhan or Cynthia
think. All he cares about is that his kid is dying in his arms and there’s nothing he can do. He rests a
hand gently on Mac’s forehead, wishing it was possible for him to absorb all the pain. Wishing he
could do anything other than watch.

When he started out as an agent, Jack was told over and over that his empathy and his soft heart
would be a liability. That he cared too much about his teammates, about the people he tried to help.
He still doesn’t think that’s strictly true. But it does mean everything hurts more.

Jack knows it’s not the first thing people expect from a guy who looks like a club bouncer and packs
three handguns for practically every mission. They don’t expect him to be the one with tears in his
eyes at the end of a bad mission. They don’t expect him to be the one to break every protocol to save
the people he cares about. They don’t see someone with a fragile heart.

He can hear the rotors of the incoming chopper, and he’s already calculating their arrival speed based
on the increasing loudness, and trying to decide if they’ll get here before Mac’s increasingly shallow
breaths fade to nothingness.

“What, kid, stay with me.” He knows some of the drops falling on the boy’s face aren’t the rain,
they’re the tears he can feel running down his face. “Stay with me, Mac.”

Everything hurts so much. Mac wants to scream but every breath is just bubbling in his lungs, he
feels like he’s drowning. **Please, please, please make it stop.** He doesn’t think he’s ever felt so
horrible in his whole life. It feels like he’s sick and hurt and too cold and too hot all at the same time
and it’s unbearable.

There are hands all over him, too, now. Tugging and pulling and making him move even though it
hurts so much. He doesn’t want to move, he wants to stay curled up here until he dies because it
would hurt less.

They pick him up and set him on something, and then he feels something cold against his stomach. It
makes him shiver even harder, and he can feel tears streaming down his face because just shivering
hurts so badly. Then the coldness goes away and there are warm hands on his skin, pulling off his
wet clothes. He shivers when chilly air brushes across his exposed skin. And then the coldness is at
his legs too, and the hands pulling the last of his clothes away, and he’s shaking harder, this time
from fear and not just because he’s so cold. There are hands all over him, poking and prodding, and he wants to roll away from them but he doesn’t even have the strength to lift a hand to push them away.

_The traffickers took me._ He doesn’t know if Jack is dead or if Jack finally realized he needed to leave Mac if he wanted to live. It doesn’t matter either way. The only consolation Mac has is that he’ll probably die before these people get to do anything worse to him. But what if they try anyway? He doesn’t want to die like this. _I had nightmares about it in prison._ He wonders if they’ll just throw him away into the woods when they’re done, like a dying animal. _Will anyone ever even know what happened to me? Will Jack think it’s his fault?_

He shudders and tries again to pull away from the hands. “No, no,” he tries to mumble, but all that he hears is a faint bubbling sound, and he tastes blood in his mouth. Something is laid over him, and it feels warm, but that just scares him more. _No, they’re only trying to take care of me because they want me healthy enough to sell._ He has a brief moment of bitter satisfaction that they won’t get what they want; they won’t be able to treat his internal injuries in time. He’s going to die, not recover.

“Hey, kid, it’s okay. They’re just trying to help.” That’s Jack. Jack wouldn’t let the traffickers take him, he wouldn’t let them hurt him. _It’s okay, because Jack says it’s okay._ Mac lets the warm darkness pull him under.

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Riley’s sitting in her chair, fighting a caffeine headache and the urge to curl up in a ball and sob, when it happens.

Her computer pings and then a red dot begins blinking. _That’s the sat phone!_ Riley quickly marks the position, and she’s glad she does, because a few seconds later the signal disappears again. Her phone buzzes, and she picks it up. It’s the sat phone’s number, and the message is short. Send medevac.

Bozer jumps out of his chair; he refused to go home until they heard something, and despite his coffee, he crashed about an hour ago. “Is that them?”

Riley only nods. She doesn’t have time to tell him anything else. She immediately calls Ramirez. “I have a location! Get those Blackhawks on site now!”

Ramirez’s voice is cool and clipped. “They’re already heading back to base, Agent Davis. We made an executive decision to call off the search. The weather’s settling in, it’s getting too dangerous to fly.”

“Turn them around,” Riley snaps.

“Do I need to remind you, Agent Davis, that you are the employee of an agency that is under investigation for treason, that you hold no direct authority, and that those pilots are not your agents?”

Riley’s done. “You listen to me. If you abandon that team out there, you won’t have to suspect me of treason, because damn it, I’ll do whatever I have to to bring them home myself even if it involves hijacking the nearest jet.” She slams down the radio and turns to her rig.

Bozer’s staring. “They’re not going to go get them?” He looks somewhere between his earlier adrenaline fueled rush and now a heavy crash of disappointment. Riley can’t bear the kicked puppy look on his face, it’s too much like Mac’s own. _I won’t accept that. I won’t. Those are our agents, this is our op, and they ARE coming home. Now._ Even if she has to circumvent the CIA to make it work.
Those pilots are on a comm frequency. Maybe I can get in. She starts scanning for transmissions outgoing from the phoenix, hoping to find the one Ramirez and Jeffers are using, and finally picks up one going to the right area. It’s a matter of minutes for her to get in, she used to hack police scanner frequencies for kicks and there’s very little difference.

“Bozer, get me that headset from the desk.” He does, and she adjusts it on, plugging it into her computer.

She has all the callsigns for the choppers, the lead is Foxtrot Alpha Victor 23. If she can get them convinced she has the authority to ask for a reroute, they’ll go get the team.

“Foxtrot Alpha Victor 23, this is Phoenix command. We have confirmation of life from our team on the ground and a request for medevac. Coordinates incoming.” She hopes they won’t bother to confirm with the CIA liasons that this is legitimate. She’s going to be in hot water later anyway, but she’d rather be there with Mac and Jack en route stateside than having an argument now and having the liasons pull rank on her and send the choppers back to base. She thinks she made sure they won’t hear the radio chatter, but it’s too late to second guess herself.

“Roger that, Phoenix command. We’ve received your data and are en route.”

A few seconds later there’s more buzzing static and a voice, calling all of the choppers in flight.

“Just got orders from the top. Turn these birds around, we have proof of life and we’re going in to bring that team home.”

Riley pulls Bozer into a hug, and he returns it with crushing force. Mac is coming home, Jack is coming home, it’s going to be okay. Or at least as okay as possible.

She stays in the frequency, monitoring the comm transmissions. “We have a visual. Male, grey shirt, appears to be Dalton. He’s waving us in.” “We have eyes on the asset, Agent Rawlins, and Agent MacGyver.” The next thing she hears stops her heart. “Agent MacGyver is in critical condition. I’m having trouble finding a pulse.” There’s a fainter, broken up mumble of “Dalton, you’ll have to step back, let us take it from here.” Riley hears muttering. “We’ve got a severe pneumothorax.” She steps back and sits down hard, a hand over her mouth, listening to the drone of medical jargon in the background and listening to her heartbeat in her ears.

“Riley?” Bozer is kneeling beside the chair, and she realizes just how scared he must be. I have to be strong for him. If I panic, he’ll panic even more.

“They’re in good hands.” She’s had the same thing before, most notably after Bangladesh, when she was that opium runner’s human punching bag. Having a needle jammed in your chest is no walk in the park, but Mac is strong and young, he’ll probably be okay. But if they’d been any later...she doesn’t want to think about the consequences.

She doesn’t care if the CIA liasons do hate her. She’s brought her team home. I think Patty would be proud.

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PHOENIX MEDICAL

THERE ARE EXACTLY 17.5 CEILING TILES PER ROOM

When Mac blinks awake, there’s a face hovering over him. “Hey Marty McFly, welcome back to the present.”
Mac groans and regrets the sound instantly, his chest hurts like hell. And his mouth is dry, with an awful taste in it. He lifts one hand and fumbles for the glass of water on the bedside table.

“Sorry, kid, you’re not allowed to drink anything just yet, don’t want to put too much stress on your bad lung. You can have a piece of ice though.” Mac just nods. He can see the IV running into his arm, but even though he knows he’s hydrated enough, his mouth just feels so parched.

The ice is cool and soothing, but it’s gone too soon and Jack won’t let him have any more yet. He leans back against the pillow. “Wh’h’ppn?” he asks, as quietly as he can, because just breathing hurts, and speaking is torture.

“Well, you’re the most excitement medical’s had in weeks. Bruised spleen and kidney, internal bleeding, two broken ribs, a punctured lung, hypothermia and a fever, which just confuses the hell out of me, a minor stress fracture in your right foot, and one heck of a concussion.” Jack sighs. He has a wrist brace on his left hand, and a couple bandages on his head.

“Ow.” Mac feels as heavy as a bag of rocks. His whole body aches, and his head feels fuzzy and too large. He still feels vaguely feverish and absolutely miserable, but it’s better than it was the last time he was awake. He doesn’t feel like he’s actively dying. Now it’s just that he regrets living through this because recovery is going to be a pain.

“We did get Erzhan back. And Cynthia said to give you her thanks when you woke up. Her husband came and picked her up yesterday. You were out cold for three days, man. We were all worried.” Jack sighs. “Bozer was practically camped out in here, and Riley and Sam came in every day.” He pulls out his phone. “Patty even called in, left you a video message. Probably she’s gonna scold you and then get a little mushy and try to hide it.”

He must notice Mac glancing around the room. Where is everyone? “They all had to go up to the War Room to greet the new director.” Mac flinches in spite of himself. They picked someone. Who is it going to be?

“Well, it could be worse,” Jack mutters. “Only reason I’m not up there now myself is I know she can’t hate me more than she already does. I’d rather be here with you.” That doesn’t sound good.

The door is shoved open, but Mac can’t see who’s done it. “They told me I could find you two here. And Dalton, if you’re going to talk about me behind my back, you should at least be sure of where I am before you do it. Have you really forgotten Panama?”

Jack sighs. “Meet the new boss.”

“Hi Blondie.” A short woman, so short she barely stands at the height of the hospital bed, is glaring at him. “They told me you’re accident-prone.” Mac glares at Jack, who holds up his hands in mock surrender.

“Mac, this is Matty Webber. My former handler for the CIA.” Despite the fact that Mac’s high as a kite on painkillers, he remembers everything Jack and Riley ever said about “Matty the Hun”. Which isn’t much. Normally Jack only talked about her when he’d had half a beer too many, and Riley would mutter random things when a mission went sideways.

The only things he knows for sure is that the woman is a reputable, brilliant agent...and the reason Jack and Riley are no longer with the CIA. Jack insists he wasn’t fired, and Riley actually backs him up, so Mac believes him. He’s pretty sure Riley would rub something like that in Jack’s face for eternity. But Webber is the reason both of them took the transfers to Phoenix the minute the opportunity presented itself.
“Angus MacGyver.” Director Webber says stiffly. “I hope you know that the minute you’re discharged, you and I are going to have a very long conversation.” There’s something cold in her voice, something that reminds Mac of the way Thornton talked to him at first. *It’s going to be okay. She just saw my rap sheet, she’s concerned with good reason. I’ll be able to explain and it will be okay. Like it was last time. But there’s something about her that’s different from Thornton. Something hot and angry beneath the cool calm she’s projecting. She actively hates me and I don’t even know why.* Mac shudders, wincing at the pain that causes. *What did I do?*
114-Fish Scaler

WAR ROOM

JACK CAN’T SAY HE’S MISSED THE STARING CONTESTS

Jack’s legs are aching from the crouch he’s been holding. *It’s been too long since I’ve looked Matty Webber eye to eye.* His eyes are getting dry, but he’s not about to blink first.

This isn’t about him. He already knows she’s still holding a grudge from Panama. And Nepal. And Shanghai. She’s made that abundantly clear already. His evaluation was a persistent onslaught of questions about his recent missions, whether he’s been filing the proper reports in each case, whether he’s waiting on clearance from command before making decisions. He knows it’s all for show. Matty won’t fire him, she knows he’s a competent agent and that his penchant for going off-script in the field has saved a lot of lives. She just likes giving him hell for it. And she wants to remind him who’s boss.

No, what’s stressing Jack out isn’t Matty’s opinion of him. It’s her opinion of Mac. When she shifted from asking about Jack’s performance to asking about Mac’s, he could tell her tone was different. This wasn’t her slightly annoyed but mostly jerking-the-leash tone. It was a bitter, cold, angry one.

And the questions she asks have been worrying. A lot about Mac’s field performance, specifically when he decides to break the rules or disobey direct orders. The questions are clearly phrased with an end goal in mind; to make Mac appear disobedient, reckless, and dangerous.

Jack lost his barely retained composure after just four questions. “Why don’t you ask him to his face, Matty? He has an eval with you too, you know.” Jack knows he’s not the right person to explain Mac. He doesn’t understand the kid’s crazy side himself. But he does know Matty’s wrong about him.

That’s what brought on the current state of affairs. With both of them refusing to give an inch. And then Jack’s left thigh cramps painfully, he gasps, and blinks. Matty smiles. “Looks like I win, Dalton. Again.”

“Matty,” Jack says quietly, “I know you and I have had our issues…”

“Issues, Jack?” The sarcastic tone cuts. “If you’d call the Chernobyl meltdown an ‘issue’ then yes, we have issues.”

“I get that. We have a lot to work through. But please don’t take it out on my team.”

“If they can’t take the way the real espionage world works, then they shouldn’t be a part of it,” Matty says sharply. “Thornton ran a loose ship. For all her stiffness and coldness, the ‘Ice Queen’ had too big a heart. Taking in strays and lost causes and trusting them so completely.” It’s typical Matty Webber, business before heart, seeing the big picture. It makes her a hell of a covert ops director. But it also makes it hard to get her to trust.

Jack knows Riley can take the heat. Jack was still partly under Matty’s leadership when he was
assigned to work with Riley, so both of them have had their share of brutal debriefs, before Matty got promoted and they got Carstairs as handler. He’s not too worried about Cage, and Bozer...well, Bozer could probably charm anyone into liking him; if he really wants to. But Mac...the kid’s traumatized and not technically a trained operative. He reacts to harsh criticism by believing it fully, because all he sees in himself is a failure and a disaster.

“Just...please don’t let what you think of me influence what you think of Mac.” He gives her the best pleading eyes he can muster. “Why are you doing this to him? He’s already been cleared by a full CIA investigative team.”

“I have my reasons for my actions regarding Angus MacGyver,” Matty says coldly. “They have nothing to do with my assessment of you.”

Jack sighs. It’s all he’s going to get from her. “Are we done here?”

“Yes.” Jack goes to the door; he can see the others watching him from around a corner. He has to smile. Riley, Cage, Mac and Bozer look like the cover of a mystery novel, heads poked around the corner at all heights. The second Jack steps out they disappear.

“So?” Riley asks.

“Well, the good news is she’s not gonna fire me. The bad news is, I have to work with her.” Jack cracks a stiff grin, but he knows it isn’t reaching his eyes. Because Riley and Cage and even Bozer are laughing, but Mac is just staring at the woman in the War Room.

Mac’s supposedly made a full recovery from his injuries from Kazakhstan, but Jack doesn’t like the way the kid looks. There are shadows under his eyes and he’s gotten skinny again. Not as bad as it was after Bishop, but if he keeps this up he will be.

“She hates me,” Mac whispers. “Jack, I can’t avoid that interview anymore, or she’ll fire me for that, but I’m so scared that when I walk in there she’ll tell me I have to go.”

“Trust me, Mac, if she wanted to fire you she would have already done it. The interviews are just a formality. I mean, she hates my guts and mine was just a recap of what I do for the agency and my skill set. And she asked about my team, and I gave her a glowing report on you.” Jack doesn’t want to scare Mac any more than he already is. If he walks in there shaking and cringing, she’s going to think he’s got something to hide.

Jack pulls Mac away from the others; this isn’t something they need to hear.

“Ok, I’ll be honest, kid, something is wrong. I know she sort of hates me, and I know what that looks like. And she doesn’t hate you.” Jack sighs and rubs a hand over his mohawk. “She despises you. Like you did something to personally wound her. I’ve only ever seen her react that way to one other person.”

“What did she do to them?” Mac asks, starting to shiver.

“Got them demoted and assigned to a long term op in Finland.” Jack shakes his head.

“What do you think she’ll do to me?”

“I don’t know, kid. I don’t know.”

Mac cringes when his phone pings. It’s Director Webber. Get your ( )( ) in here. Now. He cringes,
this is not good. Not good at all.

And then he realizes other people’s phones are beeping or buzzing too. He’s able to sneak a glance at Riley’s phone, it’s got the same message. Group text. He dimly realizes it’s only gone to him, Jack, and Riley. Sam and Bozer’s phones are silent, and after a second, both of them slip away.

“We’ve got an op,” Jack mutters.

_for someone who struck me as so professional, that’s a really strange and very not protocol way to announce a meeting for a mission._ Webber struck Mac as someone who likes going by the book. A text that looks more like a preteen with a sort of dirty sense of humor sent it doesn’t seem like her style. But then again, he doesn’t really know her.

He still tires pretty easily, so the minute they get in the War Room, he claims his favorite chair, sitting down, grabbing a paperclip out of the bowl on the table, and putting up his feet. _I may have a clear medical form, but weeks of recovery took a lot out of me._ His right foot still aches if he’s on it for too long, even though he’s been assured the fracture has healed.

“Get your feet off the table, Blondie.” Mac complies, wishing he had the guts to tell her he doesn’t like that nickname. _Too many guys inside called me that._ He pushes down the involuntary shudder the thought brings up. _I can’t let her see how damaged and fragile I am._ Apparently he’s just a magnet for awful nicknames. _I’d almost rather she called me Carl’s Jr._ At least that one only brings up memories of Jack.

“Put that paperclip down!” The sharpness in her tone startles Mac so much he drops the thin wire, which bounces away under the table. Without something to fidget with, his hands shake even more, and he resorts to twisting the hem of his shirt into tight points.

“Eyes up!” Webber snaps, and Mac jumps, nearly falling out of his chair and glancing straight up at the screen. _What on earth did I do?_

He wants to know what’s wrong, so he knows how to fix it. She hates him and he doesn’t even know why. _I don’t have any history with her, not like Jack. Is it because I have a record? _ The thought scares him, because there’s nothing he can do to change or smooth over the fact that he’s technically still under charges of terrorism and murder. Charlie, Jack’s friend, had promised to work on proving Mac’s innocence, but Charlie’s been busy with some serious bombing cases in San Diego and the last time he called Jack he’d said the LAPD were still giving him the run-around. Apparently the commissioner has an old grievance with the FBI and isn’t in the mood to cooperate.

Mac wonders if Webber’s just the next in a long line of people who’s only going to see him as a rap sheet. He’s never going to get out from under the shadow of that conviction. As soon as those cops snapped cuffs on him, Mac’s chance at a normal life was gone. And now, maybe even his chance at a not-so-normal one is ruined too.

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**THE WAR ROOM**

**THE LAST PLACE RILEY EXPECTED TO SEE MATTY WEBBER**

Matty pulls up the schematics for a very familiar program on the War Room screen. “I’m glad to see that FR1507 made it past the suits and the red tape.”

“It’s still in beta testing,” Riley says. “We’re running it on random background faces in YouTube videos and cross-referencing with the FBI’s most wanted list, testing for false positives.” The advanced facial recognition program is Riley’s baby. She’s been working on it since she was first
recruited to the CIA, when she realized that the current programs were either giving too many false results or not able to scan anything but a full-front facial capture. FR1507 is predictive, using a 28 point algorithm to build a full facial scan from even a partial profile by extrapolation, and then scan for comparative facial structure in database photos. It’s taken over six years to complete, but Riley’s insanely proud of it.

“Well, you’re looking for false positives, but I think Friar just made its first official case.” Riley grins at the nickname. She used to just call it FR, but then Jack mangled it and called the program Friar Tuck, and apparently that was much catchier. It’s gotten shortened back to “Friar” again, but Riley has to admit it always makes her smile. *Jack says it’s his contribution and he wants royalties when I sell the darn thing.* Not that she’s allowed to make a profit off it, she’s a government employee building software for government use. It’s more or less just another part of her job. Even if she has spent a lot of her spare time on it.

“Oh, I’ve seen this video,” Riley says as Matty pulls up a YouTube clip onscreen, of a guy shoplifting in an Atlanta convenience store. “It went viral two days ago.” Jack and Riley are both struggling not to laugh by the time the store owner, a rather intimidating redhaired woman, smashes a liquor bottle over the thief’s hoodie-obscured head.

“Wait, the ding-dong stealing Ding-Dongs is on the FBI most wanted list?” Jack asks.

“No, but this man is.” Matty zooms in on the upper left corner of the video, where a man two aisles over is glancing at the commotion. “Friar gave us a seventeen-point match to this man. Douglas Bishop.” Matty flicks to the next screen. “Bishop was about to be taken down in a sting two years ago. Agent Eva Santos was his contact, she was going to be making the final meet and securing the conviction. But somehow the arresting team blew their cover and Bishop realized he’d been had. He gunned down Agent Santos in the street and ran.”

“Okay, so why aren’t we just handing this over to the FBI so they can go get their guy?”

“We would. If we could trust them.” Matty glances at the team. “There have been at least five attempts to arrest Bishop, after he shot Santos. But all of them have been unsuccessful. He’s slipped through their fingers each time.”

“You think he has someone inside the agency,” Riley says.

“And until we find out who, I’m not giving him the chance to know he’s been made. MacGyver, Dalton, you’re on the next flight to Atlanta.” She glances at Mac. “And the minute you’re back in LA, you and I are having that interview. I don’t care if the building is on fire.” Mac bites his lip. He’s managed to hold off the interview a little by being in PT after the helicopter crash, and once more after that because he had a meeting with his parole officer that he was able to claim he couldn’t reschedule. And Riley may or may not have helped him out by jamming a gum wrapper in a security door and following his (supposedly hypothetical) directions to make the coffeemaker catch on fire. Technically he can’t be blamed for either incident...But she has the feeling Matty knows about it already.

“Riley, you’re going to be running tech from this end.”

“I’ve got a clean bill of health from PT.” Riley’s in better field shape than Mac, she’s been cleared for longer. She should be going.

“I want to do your evaluation. Don’t think you can skate because I’ve already worked with you. If Dalton didn’t, you don’t either.” Riley sees Matty glance at Mac as she says it, and Mac’s face goes three shades paler. *What is your problem with him?* Maybe she can find out. She settles into her chair.
Mac sleeps restlessly the whole flight to Atlanta. When Jack asks if he wants to play a couple games of poker, or even just crazy eights or war, the kid shakes his head. Mac keeps reaching for his pocket and then stopping himself; Matty’s words about not playing with paperclips must have cut deep. *She doesn’t realize he has to do that, it’s his way of relieving stress a little.*

When they land and pick up the rental car, the kid’s practically vibrating with tension. This is his first field op under Matty, and he’s probably terrified of screwing up. *No matter how many times we reassure him we’re not gonna let him go back to prison, he doesn’t believe us.* And whose fault is that? Jack envies Patty the opportunity to chase Walsh down. *That monster sent Mac back to prison for his own ends. And my kid paid the price for that traitor’s actions.* He’s not sure Mac is ever going to trust them completely, after that.

*I want him to feel safe with us.* And he thinks Mac really was starting to. They got him out of the mess with the stolen bomb, and Jack could tell he was impressed that they defended him in front of Nick. But now…

Jack shakes his head when he sees Mac dig a granola bar out of his satchel. “No, kid, that’s not a decent lunch. Especially not around here. You’re not eatin’ that block o’ sawdust when there are at least three good southern home cookin’ diners in a block radius.” He’s gonna make sure the kid eats a proper meal if he has to wrestle him into the nearest mom and pop place and tie him down at the table. He hates seeing Mac’s face reverting back to the sharp angles it had when they first met him, and there are no words for how much it hurts to see that the kid’s shirt is starting to look as loose on him as one of Jack’s.

*It’s absolutely unfair that every time things start to turn around a little for him, something else in his life falls apart.* They’d just gotten things fixed with his PO, and Jack had just been starting to feel like Mac was a part of the team, when Bishop happened. And then Mac was starting to heal from that and he got blackmailed into breaking the law. And now, he knows the team isn’t going to give up on him, but Matty’s a wildcard that just got thrown in. Mac doesn’t know where he stands with her. And quite frankly, Jack doesn’t know either.

*There’s something she’s not telling me.* Jack knows Matilda Webber well. And this is *not* her way of punishing Jack for their bad history. She’s too direct to get at him through someone else, and too fair to punish Mac for someone else’s faults. *Something about him sets her on edge. And not just that he’s a criminal.* Matty always had a soft spot for Riley, despite her own record of incredibly illegal stunts.

He can’t worry about that right now though. What he can worry about is the kid in the car with him. It scares him that Mac just...shuts down when he’s scared. He starts retreating into himself, getting quieter and quieter. Jack’s more used to people who take out their stress in action. Except for a few truly crushing incidents, Jack’s dealt with his nightmares by fighting them, and more than one punching bag has been destroyed in the line of duty.

Riley and Patty were the same way. Riley prefers to run, but Patty spent a lot of time in the gym with Jack, especially when she first got promoted to Director. Any time they lost someone on a mission, she took out her anger with her fists and her feet. *She could keep a calm face in the War Room, but she’d push herself to exhaustion in the gym.* He knew it was the only way she was going to be able to sleep at night after those missions.

It’s not like he *hasn’t* seen guys that shut down like this. A few of the other Deltas, some of the people in the Sandbox. But the scary thing to Jack is that those were the guys you were most likely
to find with a bullet in their skull or a rope around their neck. They bury the pain, try to put on a face
that says they’re coping, and then it all gets to be too much.

“Hey, that place looks good.” Jack pulls into a parking space in front of a diner with charming
gingham curtains and barn-wood window frames. White letters painted on the front window
announce “CINDY’S: Country-style Cooking in the Heart of Atlanta.”

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CINDY’S

YET TO BE DETERMINED IF THE BUTTERMILK FRIED CHICKEN REALLY IS BEST IN
TOWN

Jack has a plate of fried chicken, sweet potatoes, and corn, with a dish of peach cobbler beside it. He
insisted on ordering the same for Mac, even though pancakes are the only thing on the menu Mac
thinks he could stomach right now. “You can have those back home,” Jack insisted, taking the menu
away from him when Mac tried to protest. “You ain’t gonna get southern home-fried chicken in
LA.”

Mac pokes at his food with a fork. His stomach has been in knots since Webber insisted on them
having their meeting as soon as he gets back from Atlanta. Jack sounds worried. Mac knows not
much fazes Jack. But he’s really genuinely worried about what Matty is going to do. And that’s
absolutely terrifying.

“Hey kid, what’s the matter?” Jack asks. “You allergic to chicken?”

Mac just shakes his head, too wound up to even laugh at Jack’s dumb joke.

“You should eat. These fugitive retrieval ops tend to get a little hairy. Who knows when we’ll have
time to sit down for food again?”

Mac picks off a small bit of the chicken. “Okay, I’m eating. Happy?” He shoves the small forklful of
meat and crisp skin into his mouth, and then stops. It tastes better than anything he’s eaten for a
while. Granted that’s because he was just discharged from medical two weeks ago and was supposed
to be eating bland food to let his body readjust slowly after his internal injuries healed, but still...this
is one of the best things he’s ever eaten. Okay, Jack wins this time. He was totally right. Mac didn’t
realize how hungry he actually is.

Jack’s grinning at him. “Not bad, right kid?” Mac just nods, his mouth is too full to say anything.

The only sounds for a while are the clinking silverware. If it could just be like this... Mac remembers
Grandpa Harry taking him out for breakfast sometimes on Saturdays, to the little coney place he liked
that was down on the corner. This feels like that. He likes being here with Jack, and he’s savoring
what might be the last time. Because once this op is over, he’s headed to the chopping block, and he
has the feeling he’s not going to come back, if Webber has anything to say about it. But he’s trying
to forget about that and just enjoy these few peaceful minutes with Jack.

“Here.” Jack pushes the rest of his dessert and the unfinished chicken leg in Mac’s direction. “My
eyes were bigger than my stomach.” Mac knows for a fact Jack’s lying, there’s that tiny, almost
insignificant twitch at the corner of his left eye that Mac has learned is his tell.

He doesn’t know that Mac knows that particular one, and Mac plans on keeping it that way. Besides,
he’s not about to turn down more warm peach cobbler.

Once he’s done, he pushes his plate aside. He’s full, almost uncomfortably so, but not quite.
leans back on the booth and sighs. “Okay, kid, now that you’ve eaten, tell me what’s eatin’ you.”

Mac shifts, pulling a paperclip out of his pocket. It’s safe to do that here. No one will be watching. He isn’t sure about the jet. “If Webber says I have to go, I’m going to go back to prison.” His work release is only valid if he’s employed by Phoenix, and Webber doesn’t want him to stay there.

He’s known this since he saw the woman walk into his hospital room. She has it in for him. He’s seen too many people with that look in their eyes when it comes to him. Prison guards, fellow inmates...the people who either wanted him dead or worse. People who didn’t see a person. Just a criminal. Just someone to be used and thrown away. Or to be hated.

*If she sends me back I’m going to die.* After what happened with El Noche, he’s a marked man twice over. Anyone who’s transferred from Bishop would know that he was responsible for El Noche’s recapture and the downfall of the Merida cartel.

*They’d make my life a living hell before they killed me.* He’s seen it happen before, to people the prison top dogs believed were informants. Those screams will haunt his nightmares until he dies.

And even if by some miracle no one at CCI has heard what happened at Bishop, he’s still going to suffer. Nothing will ever change the fact that he’s the pretty one in a cage full of monsters. *How much more of that can I take? Can I spend the rest of my life in solitary?*

“Mac, listen to me. I’m not gonna let you go back there.” Jack reaches across the table and takes Mac’s hands. He pulls the twisted little wire handcuffs out of Mac’s hands and sets them aside. “Kid, it will be over my dead body that you go back to prison, you hear me? I will do whatever it takes to make sure that you are never behind bars again.” He feels Jack let go of his hands, and for a moment he thinks he’s been too clingy, too needy. But Jack is just sliding into the booth next to him.

Jack slings an arm around Mac’s shoulder. “It can be you and me and our little family, taking on the world together.”

ILEEN’S STOP AND SHOP

**NOT REALLY THE FIRST PLACE YOU’D EXPECT TO FIND A FUGITIVE**

The tiny convenience store from the video has a slightly sad air about it. The front sign is dingy, the doorbell’s chime is muffled and dull, and half the fluorescent lights in the place are dim or completely dead.

Jack glances around before he catches sight of red curls and hands rapidly shuffling soda bottles on a shelf. That’s got to be the woman from the video. He hopes she doesn’t react to everyone in her store the way she did to that shoplifter. *As long as I don’t pocket anything, I should be fine.*

“Ilene? Ilene Preskin?” Jack asks. The woman turns around from her spot on a rickety stepladder, curls flying.

“I already told the last set of y’all Hollywood types, I ain’t interested in doin’ any appearances. No testimonials, no talk shows, and I’m not sellin’ my life rights.” The woman continues stocking off-brand cola bottles on the shelf. “You guys been crawlin’ all over the place since my nephew posted that damn video.”

“We look like Hollywood types?” Jack takes a second to push down his amusement at the sideways compliment. “Well, ma’am, I must say you have good eyes. That’s us, from the good ol’ L.A.”
“Don’t think you can turn on that fake southern drawl and get an in with me, honey,” the woman snaps, climbing down from the ladder to shake a finger in Jack’s face. “You actor types muddle around this city enough, now that they got all them studios poppin’ up ‘round here. I know your kind when I see ‘em.” Jack tries to keep a straight face. 

“I’m not slipping into that dumb fake Yosemite Sam thing Mac does, right?”

Jack holds up his phone with the photo of Douglas Bishop. “Actually we’re looking for this guy. He’s got just the kind of ‘everyman’ vibe we’re looking for in our next project.”

“What’s the movie?” Ilene asks. Jack takes a second to think, this was not part of the plan or the cover.

“Space Whales,” Mac pipes up. “A high schooler finds a stranded alien creature and has to hide it from the government when they want to take it to experiment on it. We’re still looking for a convincing actor for one of the parents, and we think this is our guy.” Jack has a moment of sheer confusion before he realizes this sounds like the plot of one of Bozer’s truly terrible sci-fi scripts. 

“Mac’s probably just quoting a pitch Boze practiced on him.”

The woman raises an eyebrow, but shrugs. “That’s Charlie. He comes in here every day, and he’s always chattin’ me up.”

“Does Charlie have a last name? Stage name or somethin?”

“Dunno. Don’t really need an ID to buy gooey pies,” Ilene mutters. She gestures vaguely to the end of an aisle covered in blue boxes. “Although I think maybe I should start askin’ for one cause I got no earthly idea what he’s doin’ with ‘em all. They don’t make drugs with that stuff, do they?”

Jack shakes his head. “Not that I know of. Only thing he’s getting high on from those is sugar.” He’s going to try asking again while the woman’s in a somewhat chatty mood. “Do you know where ‘Charlie’ lives?”

“Nah, but I oughta, with how much he talks. And he’s always bringin’ me little sketches. Like if that don’t say love, what does?” She gestures vaguely to the cashier’s window and Jack notices a group of pencil pictures tacked up on it. Mac wanders over to investigate.

“So you really don’t know anything about him?” Jack continues. She seems sincere. But she could be covering for him.

“I think we have everything we need,” Mac says suddenly. Jack turns around to see him pulling one of the travel maps of Atlanta out of a display near the checkout window, and pulling out his wallet. 

Jack really, really, wants to ask what Mac means by that. But he knows that’s probably not a great idea. They don’t need Ilene figuring out that they’re not Hollywood talent scouts. Because he’s pretty sure whatever idea Mac cooked up to find Bishop is possibly slightly illegal. And probably very sciency.

“She didn’t give us an address, kid,” Jack says when they get to the car. “Or have you suddenly developed mind-reading powers?”

“I don’t need them,” Mac says. “She told us how to find them. With those drawings.” He holds up his phone with a picture on it.

“So you’re gonna turn a sketch of a bird into GPS coordinates?”

“No.” Mac grins. “I’m gonna turn a sketch of a skyline into GPS coordinates.” Mac spreads out the
map he bought on the car hood. “I’m guessing that’s the view from Bishop’s apartment. Now there are two large and very identifiable buildings visible. With a little trigonometry, I can find the location of the window. Which should give us Bishop’s place.”

Jack grins, watching his whiz kid with a pencil in his mouth, doing weird math stuff and smiling a little. *No one is taking this kid out of this team. We need him, and he needs us.* Jack can’t bear the thought of this smart kid, who’s just starting to come out of his shell and feel human again, going back to the place that shattered him.

Matty turns away from the screen. “They’ve landed in Atlanta, once they know more they’ll be in touch.”

Riley closes her rig with a little more force than is probably strictly necessary. *Yes, I’m acting like a bratty kid who didn’t get to go on the trip all her friends did. But really, something about this is weird. Matty split Jack and me up for a reason.* Matty knows the two of them together are an unstoppable united front. She’s chipping at that for some reason, creating a gap. *But to what end? She certainly doesn’t want to drive a wedge in her best field team...* She looks up to see Matty giving her the judgemental look an exasperated mom would give said bratty kid.

“I know you’re disappointed you’re not on the ground with them.”

“You’re the boss,” Riley says, but she lets the hint of frustration stay in her voice.

“I didn’t ask you to stay because I’m punishing you. I kept you here because I wanted to talk to you about MacGyver. Alone.” *So she is splitting Jack and me up for leverage.*

Riley glances at Matty. “I…”

“If you say anything even close to what Dalton has already tried to argue, I’ll put you both on suspension. My investigation of Mr. MacGyver is for very good reason. And that’s all you need to know.”

Riley hasn’t seen Matty this keyed up since Kuwait, when their CI turned out to be a double agent and Jack and Riley walked into an ambush. Jack ended up in PT for two months, Riley had her second worst round of nightmares, and that CI ended up in some black site. The ferocity Matty went after that man with is the only thing Riley can compare this to. *It’s like Mac hurt us in some way. But he didn’t. He never did.* Riley’s most recent injury is Nick’s fault, and Mac is the one who came home clinging to life a few weeks ago.

“What did you want to ask me about him?”

“It’s come to my attention that the only reason Angus MacGyver has the title of Level 1 agent is that my predecessor was covering for his theft of bomb components.” Matty stares at Riley. “Am I wrong?”

“No, but…”

“I’ve already read the reports. And seen that MacGyver was being blackmailed, because his roommate Wilt Bozer was kidnapped. A roommate, who, I might add, was illegally informed of the existence of Phoenix’s covert operations. And who was brought into the agency without the proper vetting, in a last ditch attempt to smoke out the mole Chrysalis.” Matty catches Riley’s gaze. “Tell me, Riley, if you didn’t know either MacGyver or Bozer, what would you do?”

“See if they were worth the trust Thornton obviously placed in them.” Riley sets down her tablet. “I
would approach their interviews looking to see what they bring to the Phoenix. To see if they were valuable additions to the agency. Unconventional hires can be the most valuable.” She hopes Matty will remember how Riley herself was hired. *Just because I didn’t actually go to prison for what I did, doesn’t mean I’m not as much of a criminal as Mac.*

“Riley, I know what you’re trying to do. I taught you all those tricks, you know.” Matty sighs. “I promise you, I will approach this with as open a mind as I can.” She glances to the door. “Which leads me to your roommate. Since apparently she was responsible for assessing Mr. MacGyver’s competency as an agent...after only three months of being a member of the Phoenix Foundation.”

“Cage has worked with the FBI and CIA before permanently transferring from Sydney. She’s been cleared by both Australian and American intelligence agencies.” Riley knew Matty would come down hard on Sam, but she also knows Sam can take it. Putting her and Matty in a closed room should be fun. *I want to be a fly on the wall for that conversation. Matty taught Riley half of what she knows about psychological interrogation. Cage taught her the rest.*

“I’m well aware that Miss Cage was cleared by the CIA. I cleared her myself.” Riley hides a shocked inhale. *She didn’t say anything. Never. Even when I talked about Matty. Even when she showed up here.* “Wipe that stare off your face, Davis, it was a confidential meeting. She was never allowed to reveal the details to anyone. Not even who she met with.”

“Then why do you have concerns that she cleared Mac?”

“Because when I interviewed Agent Cage, she appeared to me in every way to be someone who assessed risk and reward and acted accordingly. I want to know why she took a chance on someone like MacGyver.” *If anyone can explain Mac’s situation, it’s Sam.* Riley feels just a tiny bit better. *Sam can make Matty see how important it is, for Mac and for us, that he stays.*

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**BISHOP’S APARTMENT**

**THE GOOEY PIES KIND OF GAVE IT AWAY**

Jack glances out the window. “Nice job, kid.” That skyline view is a perfect replica of the sketch in Ilene’s shop. Mac smiles a little.

Mac glances around the room, shutting the door behind them. He doesn’t want nosy neighbors getting suspicious.

Jack glares at him. “You could at least let me clear the place and make sure the guy who likes killin’ federal agents isn’t home before you close our only exit.”

“I’m just glad we broke into the right apartment. My trig’s a little rusty.” There wasn’t much call for math skills in CCI. Except the pretty depressing *1 Mac + 5 gang members = 1 week in the infirmary*.

Mac glances around the room. “Hey, this coffeepot’s still warm.” He taps his hand to it, it’s almost scorching. “He was here not that long ago.”

“Musta had his go bag behind this picture in the bedroom,” Jack says. “It’s pulled off the wall and just laying on the floor, with a big ol’ hole behind it.”

“He left in a hurry. Left his hiding space open and a coffeepot on.” There are two possibilities. One, that coffeepot is designed as a slow-burn fuse, that’s eventually going to catch fire and burn the place down, hiding all the evidence in what looks like an accidental fire, or Bishop was just in too big a
hurry to remember to clean the place up. Either way, it probably means he left at least some evidence that might help them track him.

Mac glances at a newspaper that’s propped suspiciously close to the coffeepot. *Yep. This is definitely set up to make the place burn down.* The corner closest to the heating plate has some numbers scribbled on them in blue pen. Mac rips it off and jams it in his pocket, committing the numbers to memory just in case. 23-5.

And then the door handle begins to rattle. Mac freezes, hands still on the torn paper.

“Maybe he forgot somethin’?” Jack whispers, raising his gun. And then there’s a bang, the door flies open, and four men in dark suits, guns raised, rush in. “FBI! FBI! Lay down your weapons and put your hands in the air!” Mac instantly raises his hands, an icy chill sliding down his spine.

The agents force him and Jack to their knees on the ground, wrenching their arms behind them. Mac cringes. The click of cuffs has a terrifying finality about it. Mac can’t help the full-body shiver as the agents lead him out the door, followed by Jack. That sound never, ever means anything good is going to happen.

Mac is shaking uncontrollably as the feds begin patting him and Jack down for weapons. Jack wants to punch the agent checking Mac in the face for how rough he’s being. *Yeah, he doesn’t know what the kid’s been through, but he’s coming pretty darn close to an accusation of sexual harassment anyway.* When the man reaches into Mac’s pocket for his knife, Jack can see a shimmer of tears in the kid’s eyes. He hopes they don’t notice the tether. If they do, it’s over for Mac. The agent’s hands are going lower and lower on Mac’s legs…

Jack suddenly thrashes against his own guy’s hold, and almost succeeds in breaking free. The agent frisking Mac stops and comes to help his partner restrain Jack, who’s spitting every curse he knows. If he can keep their attention on him, they won’t have time to worry about Mac, who isn’t even attempting to move.

Jack stops fighting when he gets a gun waved in his face. “Get up against the hood.” Jack complies. Mac’s being shoved against the car as well, and Jack can see the raw fear in the kid’s face as he’s practically body-slammed against the side of it by the agent behind him. *Stop scaring him, you bastards!*

“That one had a gun. And this one has a Swiss Army Knife.” The agent who was checking Mac says, slipping Mac’s little red knife into an evidence bag. Mac flinches when the man slams the door after tossing the evidence bags on the front seat.

*He’s scared to death of what happens now.* Not only does Mac have a serious criminal record, he’s thousands of miles outside his set parole limits. This is why Jack hates in-country ops. If this makes it into the official records, it’ll get back to Mac’s PO and God only knows what that could unleash.

Neither Mac nor Jack have their real IDs on them, and Jack’s pretty sure Georgia FBI won’t recognize an LA criminal on sight, but the minute they run Mac’s prints it’s over. But Jack’s starting to wonder if they’re ever intended to be booked. *There’s something off about this whole situation.*

“What are we being charged with?” Jack asks. The man gives him a glare. “Hey, if we’re being arrested we have the right to know what we’re being charged with.”

“We found you two inside the apartment of one of the FBI’s most wanted,” the agent who was checking Jack over snaps.
“Yeah, but what are you actually charging us with?” Jack asks. And then he’s being shoved into the back of the car, next to Mac. He can feel the kid practically vibrating next to him as the doors slam and the agents walk back into the apartment.

“Mac, Mac, it’s okay.” The kid’s been holding it together, but he suddenly turns and buries his face in Jack’s shoulder.

“It’s not okay. They’re gonna take me in and they’re gonna find out who I am and…” he chokes. “Matty Webber won’t bother to get me out if I’m this much trouble.” Oh kid. I know, this is an awful way to start out with a new boss, especially one who has it in for you.

“Listen, kid, I think there’s a way outta this where Matty doesn’t have to find out. And where you don’t have to get locked up.” Mac glances up at him, and there are tears glittering in his eyes. He’s so close to just totally breaking down, and Jack can’t blame him. You’ve been through more in the past few months than anyone should have to endure their whole lives.

“Mac, think about it. I know that brain of yours is a little scrambled right now, but just listen to me for a second. I don’t think those guys are who they claim to be.”

“They had badges…” Mac’s voice is an unsteady whisper.

“I know, but listen, Mac. There should be no way they got here so fast. They were minutes behind us and I know we weren’t being followed. And did you hear their accents? Those weren’t locals. Those are guys from Philly.” Jack’s finally put his finger on precisely what’s been bothering him about those agents.

“Where the mob Bishop was part of is.” Mac’s starting to uncurl a little, and there’s a bit less of a quaver in his voice. “You think they’re his inside men?”

“Yeah. And the good news is I don’t think they plan on taking us anywhere near a jail. The bad news is, I think they plan on taking us out to some secluded spot and popping us off execution style.” Jack shrugs. “So I’d kinda appreciate you turning on that brain of yours and getting us outta this one.”

Mac glances around the car, some of his curious enthusiasm returning. How messed up is his life when the threat of potential death is less paralyzing than the thought of going to jail?

“I think I’ve got something. But I don’t think you’re gonna like it,” Mac says, glancing at Jack.

“You know what I don’t like? Getting dragged out to the middle of nowhere and dumped in a shallow grave. I don’t want my body to be found by some random hikers who only notice cause the coyotes dug me up and started gnawing on me.” Jack may have seen a few too many crime procedurals…

“Okay, well you just lost the right to complain about what comes next.” Mac starts to scramble around in the seat, and Jack flinches when one shoe nearly clocks him in the face.

“Hey, watch it with those giraffe legs, Mac! I don’t need a concussion. Unless that’s part of the plan.”

“No, but this is.” Mac stretches his leg between the seats and kicks at the shift lever. Good thing government issued cars tend to be the cheap models. This one’s still got the steering column shift. The car clicks into neutral and begins to roll backward, down the hill they’re parked on.

Mac struggles to work his cuffed hands around his feet. “Not gonna pick the lock with a paperclip?”
Jack asks; he’s seen Mac do that scarily often.

“I left my last one at that diner! Figured if I didn’t have any on me Webber couldn’t scold me for playing with them.” Nice job, Matty. If this plan kills us I hope someone tells you it’s your fault for taking away Mac’s tools. Asking the kid to give up his paperclips is like asking Jack to give up his sidearm.

Mac finally gets his hands in front of him and scrambles into the driver’s seat. They’re picking up some speed, but Jack can see the feds rushing back out of the apartment. They’re running after the car now, even though that’s becoming a losing battle. One of them slams a hand on the hood and Mac flinches, but the car picks up some more momentum and starts pulling away again. Jack sees one of the men raise a gun.

“Hey kid, it would be nice to get this thing started about now!”

“I’m trying!” Mac yells back. “Federal vehicles have some built in anti-theft failsafes I have to bypass!”

Jack isn’t even going to ask how the kid knows that. Sometimes he scares me. Like, I get that he was a vigilante, but when does that entail extensive knowledge of B&E procedures and theft of government property? There’s a horn honking, and Jack glances backward to see a car coming up the street, clearly annoyed at these people going the wrong way...in more ways than one.

Mac spins the wheel and the car sways wildly, but they do miss the oncoming annoyed driver. Hopefully they think it’s some joyriding kids. The feds have lowered their guns, probably because of the potential witness, but now the runaway car is headed straight for a busy intersection.

“You know this plan is only a success if we survive, right?”

“They were gonna kill us anyway!” Mac yells back. “I don’t see that we’ve made the situation any worse!” He’s pulling things out from under the dashboard, but he grabs the wheel again as the car flies through the intersection, narrowly missing colliding with one minivan, two compact cars, and a retirement home bus.

There’s another intersection coming up, and this one’s even busier. “Uh Mac, not to rush ya, but…”

Mac doesn’t answer. There’s a sparking crackle, and then Jack hears the starter turn over and the engine growl to life. But there’s no time to celebrate, they’re in the middle of the road with a semi bearing down on them.

Mac spins the wheel hard over, turning them so fast that Jack slams up against the glass. He can see the truck heading for them in perfect detail. If they hit us, one or both of us is gonna die. And then the car slides into a gap in the next lane, narrowly avoiding going right over the curb, fishtails madly, and then straightens out.

Mac is gasping, and when he turns around to see if Jack is okay, Jack has to stifle a laugh at how wildly the kid’s messy hair is falling into his face. “Nice job, kid.” Apparently the few pursuit driving lessons Jack’s managed to squeeze in have paid off. Why am I surprised? He’s good at literally anything anyone teaches him.

Mac just laughs, a breathy, relieved sound, and Jack sinks down against the back seat. Made it out of another jam. Now they just have to avoid getting arrested again, find Bishop, and get him into custody without his inside buddies pulling strings. Yeah, sounds easy enough.
PHOENIX BASEMENT

THIS ROOM DOESN’T EXIST ON THE OFFICIAL RECORDS

“I see you’re early, Miss Cage,” Matty Webber says when Sam knocks on the door.

“You’re earlier.” Sam replies. The game has already begun, actually, it started the moment she pulled her car into the parking lot and made her way onto Phoenix security cameras.

Sam sits down across the table from the small but intimidating woman. One of the few people I ever met who could go head to head with me and make me wonder if I’d come out the winner.

“I don’t think there’s any point in rehashing an evaluation that was done less than a year ago,” Matty says. “Unless of course circumstances have changed?” Cage doesn’t have to guess what she’s referring to. No, I haven’t been able to track down Tennant. Scorpion still wants me dead. I still can’t show my face in the field.

“Then why am I here?” She has the feeling she already knows, but there’s no sense in giving everything away right now. She knows I’m good, I have nothing to prove. Putting the ball in her court makes it more likely that she slips up and tells me more than I already know.

“I’m here to talk to you about a decision you made four months ago. You approved the hire of a technical consultant, one Angus MacGyver, am I correct?” Sam nods. “You completed a full evaluation and stated that the request for a work release should be approved.”

“Agent MacGyver has been an invaluable asset on several operations since then. I don’t see a reason to question my choice,” Sam says cooly.

“Despite the fact that he was facing a life sentence for domestic terrorism and murder, and that he had spent more than half of his two years in solitary confinement?” Matty taps a finger on the dossier in front of her.

“You approved me for a consultant with the CIA. With a very similar record, in case you’ve forgotten.” Sam says coolly.

“So you decided to pay it forward?” Matty replies. “That’s exactly why I don’t trust your judgement in this case. You’re too emotionally invested. This is personal for you. You look at Angus MacGyver and you see yourself.”

“Then what did you see when you looked at me?” Sam asks. “Don’t tell me it wasn’t a little bit of you too. We share the same skill set, after all.”

“I saw a valuable asset who could share intel on an organization we have been hunting for years without success.”

“And I saw someone with a very specific and very unique skill set. Which has been extremely valuable since his hire.” Sam replies.

“I also take into account actions following said hiring. Your record is nearly spotless, aside from a few counts of insubordination that I find to be rather inflated by those reporting them. On the other hand, Agent MacGyver has spent more time on medical leave in four months than most agents spend in a year, and he has also jeopardized the secrecy of Phoenix operations, revealed the agency to a civilian, and committed more than one felony, one of which was the theft of bomb components from the Phoenix laboratories.”
“Under duress.”

“The fact remains that all I can see here is a supposedly reformed criminal who’s continuing to do the exact same things that got him arrested. And I’m afraid that if the pattern continues, someone is going to die.”

“You’ve read his file, haven’t you?” Sam doesn’t drop her gaze.

“You know that I have.”

“Then you ought to believe me when I say that’s not the kind of person who would hurt someone.” She thinks back to that conversation with Murdoc. “I’ll show him just how much he has to pay for the sins of his father.” She wonders if something about that secretive past is what’s making Matty worry. I know a lot of things. And a lot of people. But I’ve never heard of his father. That’s either a good thing, or a very bad thing.

“Not willingly, maybe. But MacGyver is reckless, insubordinate, and takes far too many unnecessary risks.” Matty frowns. “This agency has already made several very dangerous mistakes when it comes to who to trust. I’d rather be safe than sorry.” Matty slides a paper across the table to Cage. It’s a signed revocation of Mac’s work release. She just has to file it, and someone’s going to come haul Mac away, right back to CCI.

“If you send him back, you’ll kill him. You didn’t see what I’ve seen.” Cage’s thoughts flicker back to what happened after Bishop. Mac calling her in the middle of the night, sitting on his porch, crying uncontrollably. After just a week inside, one assault, and one close call. She knows it’s dangerous to let so much emotion slide into her work. That she’s tipped her hand, shown that Matty is right. I am emotionally invested.

“I have your assessment of Mr. MacGyver’s case. I’m well aware of what’s been done to him.” It might be Sam’s imagination, but the woman’s eyes are a bit mistier, there’s more of a tremor in her voice. “Believe me, this is not a decision I’m taking lightly. But there are forces at play even you are unaware of.” Cage raises an eyebrow. Normally she’s too good to let anything slip. But this time she’s emotionally invested too. She feels just a little guilty about trying to manipulate the new boss, but Matty is the one holding Mac’s very life in her hands, it wouldn’t hurt to have cards of her own to play. She wants to make that the reason I’m not trustworthy. I can make it the reason she shouldn’t be allowed to make this decision. If hiring him shouldn’t have been an emotional call, firing him shouldn’t be either.

“Like his father?” She can tell she’s hit a wound, and a deep one. Matty’s face goes stiff, cold.

“What do you know about him?”

“Only that he’s the reason Jonah Walsh hired a hitman to kill Mac.” She shrugs.

“This wasn’t made part of any report on the incident,” Matty replies cooly, leaning forward. “Keeping a few bargaining chips close to the vest? I knew you were a good player. And I know what you’re doing now. Forcing my hand.”

“Well, since the last boss we had hated Mac, and turned out to be a traitor, I’m just covering my bases.” Cage leans back, smirking slightly in contentment at that burn. Sometimes I surprise even myself.

She can tell she’s gaining ground, Matty looks a bit shaken. To her credit she recovers quickly. “I assure you, I’m not another Walsh.”
“You’re still hiding things.”

“As are you.” Matty folds her hands on the table. “Why?”

“It’s not important. And it could put them at risk.” Sam realizes she’s the one who’s been played. Damn, she’s good. “I think I know what you’re saying.”

“What I am doing is to protect this team. Always.” Matty stands up. “Whatever decision I make, it will be one that holds that in mind.” Cage nods. She’s not going to get any further with this. But somehow she doesn’t think she’ll need to. Sam’s never been one to discount gut feelings, and she has the feeling that somewhere in this conversation, Matty told her everything she needed to, and that Mac isn’t as close to the razor’s edge as everyone thinks. Now all she can do is hope her intuition is right.

Riley sees Cage walk past the War Room. She doesn’t look too rattled, and Riley can’t tell if that’s because things went well, or because Cage is so freakishly good at hiding all human emotion.

When Matty walks in, her face is equally as unreadable. Riley hopes she has a roommate when she goes home tonight. If this case lets her leave the agency that long. Matty barely gets into the room before there’s a ping that announces Riley’s tracking of all FBI activity in Atlanta just got a hit. She throws the action report that just came in onto the main screen, then cringes. Oh man, are they in for it!

Matty’s dialing Jack’s number before she even gets to the end of the report. He answers on the third ring.

“He-ey Matty, how’s it going?”


“Well, we found Bishop’s apartment, and he’s planning on skipping town.” Jack says. “Haven’t got him yet, but we’re close. We’ll let you know when we have him.”

“Don’t hang up on me yet, Dalton.” Riley hears a faint groan; Jack should know better than to try that trick, Matty knows him too well. “So you thought you just wouldn’t tell me about stealing a car from two FBI agents?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about, Matty!” Jack’s voice is way too cheerful. Riley knows from personal experience that that means nothing good.

“I’m monitoring FBI activity in regards to Bishop. I’m looking at a report that just came in from Atlanta. Agents Brooks and Cho just reported their car stolen by two male suspects they found at Bishop’s apartment.”

“Yeah, but Matty, we’re pretty sure they’re dirty. So it doesn’t count.”

“Two wrongs don’t make a right, Jack.” Riley hides a smirk. How many times has she told him that? “Just because they’re criminals doesn’t mean stealing from them is okay.

“Guys, I just got something. A car registered to one of Bishop’s aliases, a Charlie Cole, is parked at the Atlanta train station. And he bought a ticket for Austin, Texas online this morning.”

Mac speaks up. “Well, we know he’s not on a train then. He’s been on the run too long to make a rookie mistake like that.”
“Great, Baby Einstein, we know where he’s not.” Matty’s voice is cutting. “Can you enlighten me as to where he is?”

Mac’s voice changes, there’s a little bit of hopeful excitement. “I think I might know how to find him.” There’s a faint rustle of paper. “Riley, is there an Atlanta bus 23? That leaves at 5 p.m.?”

Riley looks up the Atlanta bus timetables. “There’s a Bus 23 leaving the Forsyth St. station at 5.”

“That’s where he is.”

“How did you know that?” Riley asks.

“He told us,” Mac mutters, and then Jack must take the phone back because there’s a soft rustling and then Riley hears his voice.

“Well, as fun as this little heart to heart has been, we’ve got a bus to catch.” This time, Jack does hang up.

Matty sighs. “He’s insufferable.” She glances at Riley. “He’d better not make me regret taking this job.” Riley suppresses another giggle. Matty’s been saying stuff like that about Jack for years.

Andie, their new secretarial assistant, steps in, holding a tablet. “Martin Dryer is calling.”

“Should that name mean something to me?” Matty asks coolly.

“Regional director of the FBI.”

“I’ll take it in here. Thank you.” Matty flicks the call from the tablet to the screen. “That will be all, Andie, thank you.” The woman nods and walks out.

A slightly gruff voice fills the War Room as Matty mutes the windows.

“Director Webber, did your agents steal a car in Atlanta?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” Matty says, her voice that careful, calculated one Riley remembers well. “I don’t know where you think I work, Mr. Dryer.”

“All I know is, you left a highly respected position with the CIA to head up a ‘think tank’. And I know eggheads aren’t your style.”

“I don’t know what you mean by that, Mr. Dryer.”

Dryer’s voice is gaining a hint of exasperation. “I suppose you wouldn’t know anything about an interdepartmental notice that one of our most wanted showed up on a YouTube video? In Atlanta? Caught by a program one of your former agents developed?”

“This is the first I’ve heard. Well, congratulations on catching your man, Mr. Dryer.”

“Actually, I haven’t caught my man. Thanks to agents that the CIA, NSA, and DEA refuse to claim.”

“Don’t make me do the ‘confirm or deny’ twice in one phone call, Mr. Dryer.” Matty paces around the table, tapping gently on its surface. This feels so familiar. Riley remembers far too many calls like this, and most of them ended with Matty eventually getting what she wanted. Riley’s always liked watching Matty at work. She and Patty were two very different leaders, but both of them are strong. The kind of person I want to be someday.
“Two agents from our Philly branch are in Atlanta, without authorization or approval. I don’t know who I can trust, but I do know your reputation.”

“I appreciate that, but you understand that I am not in a position to help you with this situation. If and when that occasion does arise, I promise, you will be the first to know.” Matty hangs up.

ATLANTA BUS STATION

HOPEFULLY MAC WAS RIGHT ABOUT THIS

The bus station is crowded. Jack stares over heads, searching for someone out of place. This guy planned on burning down the place. He’s running. He’s gonna be nervous, jumpy.

So is the kid next to him. Mac hasn’t stopped faintly trembling since they parked the stolen car and Jack found some tools to pick the cuff locks. Jack probably should have kept a set of the cuffs for when they do track Bishop down, but the kid looked so distressed at the sight of them, that he threw them in the nearest trash can.

“You okay?” He asks. Mac doesn’t really meet his eyes.

“Yeah. Fine. Let’s just get this guy so we can go...home…” his voice trails off, and Jack may not be a mind reader like Matty or Cage but he doesn’t have to be to know that Mac just remembered he has his interview with Matty when they get back to L.A. He wants to get out of here because of those feds, but going home is just as scary.

“Listen, kid–” and then Jack breaks it off. There’s a guy near the end of the station, with a green ball cap pulled low over his head and a backpack on his shoulders. He’s looking at the ground, not looking at anyone.

“That’s him,” Jack whispers. He starts moving slowly through the crowd. This guy’s going to be easy to spook. Jack doesn’t want to do that until he has a good chance of catching him. And then a woman snaps at him for colliding with her, Bishop looks up, and begins to run.

“Hey, stop! Bishop, we got you man! There’s no place to run!”

Jack breaks into a run. He’s not letting this guy get away from them again. It’s his fault, however indirectly, that we got arrested. That those guys scared Mac. He’s dimly aware that Mac is grabbing some random things off a cleaning cart, but he doesn’t stop to wonder what he’s doing. At this point the kid could snatch a nuclear warhead and I wouldn’t really worry too much. He’s got some kinda plan.

Jack chases Bishop out of the station and across the parking lot, jumping over a small fence and hoping the guy doesn’t get so desperate he runs right into traffic.

And then he sees Mac running toward them both, with that odd loping stride Jack really hopes doesn’t send him tripping over his own feet and sprawling nose first on the pavement. He’s spinning a couple bottles of cleaner attached to some rope, and Jack barely has time to wonder what the plan is...and if that’s going to explode...before Mac flings the bottles at Bishop’s legs. He’s got good aim, and Jack takes a minute to wonder if he’s responsible for that, after teaching the kid how to rope on the ranch. And then Bishop goes down like a heeled calf and Jack grabs him, using the rope to hogtie the guy’s hands. This feels like team-roping goats in kiddie rodeo with Jimmy Malone. Jack barely resists the urge to call time and throw one hand in the air.

“Hey Bishop, you shoulda done this the easy way. It’s over. And this time your friends in the FBI
aren’t gonna be able to help you.”

Bishop squirms against the dead leaves covering the ground. “You can’t hand me over to the FBI.”

“Yeah, you can cut the act. We know you have a fed in your pocket.” Jack shakes his head. “Hey Mac, wanna get the car?”

“No! I don’t have anyone in my pocket! If anything it’s the other way around. Three years ago, some Fed payed me to do his dirty work. And now he wants to kill me.” Jack freezes. He’s heard a lot of liars in his career, and this guy does not sound like one. He sounds genuinely freaked out. But the fact remains that he’s wanted for killing an agent.

“Dirty work? Like shooting an FBI agent?” Jack asks.

“I never shot her! I was trying to turn myself in to her. She had a spotless record and I knew she couldn’t have been the man on the phone.” Bishop swallows, and it looks like there’s genuine grief in his eyes. “She was gonna bring me in that night, I was gonna turn myself in and testify. And then they shot her.” His eyes are wide. “I think they were trying to kill me, but she stepped in front of me at the last second and they shot her instead. I was too scared to stay and try and help her. I knew they’d just shoot me too. So I ran. And I’ve never regretted anything more. She might have lived if I hadn’t been such a coward.”

“You got any proof that’s the truth?”

“No...but I’d know the person who called me if I ever heard them again. I could ID him. That’s why he wants me dead. He was someone high up in the Philly offices; I just need a chance to give someone an ID.”

“Yeah, this sounds fishy.” Jack grabs the man’s arm. “You just want the chance to get to talk to your FBI buddies who can get you off the hook.”

“Jack, I don’t think he’s lying,” Mac whispers. “He’s really worried.”

Jack can see the hurt in the kid’s eyes. He doesn’t want someone else to go through what he did. If this man really isn’t guilty, and we send him to prison, Mac’s going to carry that guilt around with him. He’ll feel personally responsible for putting someone else through a hell he understands all too well.

And then Jack’s phone rings.

“Please tell me you have Bishop in custody,” Matty says.

“Uh, yeah, Matty, about that…”

“If you don’t have him I’m going to fly to Atlanta myself.”

“We’ve got him, Matty, but he claims he’s innocent. That he was being blackmailed by a dirty agent instead of having one in his pocket.”

“We’ll sort this out later,” Matty says. “Just get him somewhere you can lay low and I’ll send people to pick him up.”

Riley’s voice cuts in. “Guys, you have company. I may have illegally tracked Brooks and Cho’s phones after they popped up in Atlanta. They’re pulling up to the bus station now.” Jack pushes Bishop toward the car.
“Okay, we’ll sort this all out on the road. Let’s go.” Jack pulls Bishop into their rental car and drives away.

PHOENIX LABS

THIS IS AS COOL AS ANY SCI FI MOVIE SET

Bozer’s enjoying his favorite upbeat Spotify playlist and putting the finishing touches on a mask for Agent Connor’s upcoming undercover sting. Technically the mask doesn’t need to be made until tomorrow, but he’s too stressed to be doing anything but working.

Molding latex and layering paint takes Bozer’s mind off all the problems in his real life for a few hours.

He’s happily engrossed in his work until he feels someone tap on his arm. Probably Jill with some project that takes priority over my mask work. He spins his chair around with a flourish, hoping it makes his lab coat billow impressively. I feel like a mad scientist now that they let me run around in these things.

“Director Webber!” He drops the paintbrush and a very unprofessional splatter of Blush 40 sprays itself across his lab coat, his hands, and the worktable. “How long were you standing there?” Did she hear me totally butchering half these songs out loud?

“Twelve and a half minutes.” She glances at him. “Do you need to change your underwear?”

“Uh, no, ma’am.”

“Matty, please.” She grabs a stool from an empty desk and comes to sit next to him. “Don’t forget, your evaluation is tomorrow.” She glances at the half-finished mask. “So this is what you do all day?”

“Yeah. Glamorous life of the super-spy, right?” Bozer chuckles, then cringes. “Uh, I mean, it’s great, I’m totally cool with working in the lab. Right here. Away from all the crazy stuff.”

“There’s no need to backpedal with me, Mr. Bozer.” She smiles slightly, and he’s not sure what to think. She seems to hate Mac. Why would she trust me? I hope you’ll always feel you can be honest with me.”

“I really do love it here, though.” Boze is pretty sure he has the dream job. He’s doing what he loves, for a super secret spy agency. I could never be a real field agent, but I can do what I do best.

“This is quite impressive. For a civilian hire, you’re performing above expectation.”

“You didn’t think I was going to be any good. That Thornton hired me out of pity, or to protect me. Well, she didn’t. She wouldn’t have taken me on if she didn’t trust me. And she wouldn’t have hired Mac if she didn’t trust him.” Bozer knows both of them are probably on the chopping block. So he’s going to say his piece while he can.

“You’re very defensive of your friend. I never asked about him. What made you feel the need to defend him to me?”

“Uh…” Bozer forgot how scary this woman is. She’s like a freaking mind reader. And I’m no good at this spy game.
“When did you first meet Angus?”

“He prefers to go by Mac,” Bozer answers automatically. It’s just a natural reaction at this point.

“When did you meet Mac, then?”

“He was ten. Had just moved to LA after his deadbeat dad split. He was living with his grandpa and started going to my school.” Boze has no idea why they put a kid with a Hollywood Hills address into his school, but he’s not complaining. “I found some of the football players beating the snot out of him behind the lockers one day.” He shrugs. “I wasn’t gonna let that slide.”

“What do you know about an incident in his hometown shortly before he moved, one involving a sealed charge of arson on his minor’s record?” No one was supposed to know about that. It was supposed to be cleared up...but I guess top secret agencies can get any information they want.

“He didn’t really talk much about it. Science experiment gone wrong.” Boze shrugs. Mac always steered the conversation away from that. But from the sound of things, he kind of thought it had something to do with why his dad left.

“And what about when he moved to Los Angeles? Any more incidents?” This feels like an interrogation. Right now.

“I thought my interview was tomorrow.”

“It is.” Matty gives him a level stare. “I’m just making small talk.”

Right. And I’m making a Rembrandt.

“And then, after your brother was shot,” Boze flinches but says nothing, even he knows he has to avoid showing weakness, “LA gained a vigilante. Someone called the Phoenix. Who was eventually exposed as none other than Angus MacGyver.” Matty pulls a newspaper clipping from her pocket. “After an explosion he caused killed an innocent civilian.”

Boze clenches a fist. No one gets to talk about Mac that way. No one gets to blame him for something that wasn’t even his fault. Too many people have already done that.

“Yes, Mac was a vigilante. But he didn’t want to kill anyone. If that Ramsay guy died in the warehouse, it was a mistake. And Jack and Riley told me there was some proof he might not even have killed anyone with that explosion, mistake or not.” Bozer doesn’t care if standing up for Mac gets him fired. He doesn’t care if it means he gets sent to some black hole...well, he does care about that, a little, now that he thinks about it, but still. “Mac did what he did because he wanted to protect people. To save lives. And he must have saved dozens. If not hundreds.” Bozer meets Matty’s eyes unflinchingly.

“How much did he talk about his father?” Matty asks. That’s a massive u-turn. Bozer blinks.

“That miserable excuse for a parent? He used to talk about him a lot, say he was gonna do something important and then his dad would want him around again. I wanted to whale on that guy more than even the football players. Because all those guys did was give Mac a few bruises. His dad crushed his soul. I never saw anyone more afraid of making a mistake, more afraid to admit he was human. Do you know he tried to hide a broken arm from all of us because he thought he was going to be a problem?”

“How does he feel about his father now?”

“I don’t really know. He wrote him a letter a while ago, but I think it was more that he felt like he should, than anything. That guy messed him up, but Mac doesn’t really want to accept it. He thinks
James was trying to be a good parent. Thinks somehow his shitty childhood was okay.” No matter how many times Bozer’s tried to tell Mac that no, he’s been the victim of an abusive, controlling parent, Mac makes excuses for the man. Mom had died, he was grieving. He had a lot of work to worry about. I kept messing up. I made him mad. That kid blames himself for his dad abandoning him, and Boze hates it.

Matty’s face is unreadable. “Did he say anything about what his father did?”

“Just that he was a genius. Invented a lot of things, and I guess he sold them out of his own house.” Boze doesn’t care to know anything more about that man. He isn’t even really comfortable with Mac trying to reconnect with his dad. The guy ran out on him. Doesn’t want anything to do with him. He’s toxic.

“Okay.” Matty’s face is almost stiff. “When was the last time he saw him?”


Matty nods. “I believe you.” What wasn’t to believe? What’s up with her interest in Mac’s dad? Like I get that lacking a father figure makes kids more volatile, but this seems excessive. There’s something going on here. And Boze doesn’t need to be a spy to figure that out.

PEACH GROVE MOTEL

HOW THIS PLACE HAS MORE THAN ONE YELP STAR IS A MYSTERY

Mac pulls out a length of fishing line and connects it to one of the wires on the tiny fan that was sitting in the corner of the room. He wonders if the place will charge damages. Hopefully I’ll be able to put it back to normal tomorrow morning and no one will be the wiser. Everything in here is in various states of disrepair already. He’s a little afraid that there’s a nest of mice in the bed mattress.

He unspools part of the roll of fishing line that’s part of the supplies Jack grabbed out of the back of someone’s pickup truck. Mac felt kind of bad about it but they have no way of knowing if they made it onto the FBI’s wanted list as well. Pictures of them might already be circulating.

He hopes the dirty feds won’t want to draw too much attention to themselves. I don’t need anyone even remotely suspecting I’ve been in Atlanta. Even Penny won’t be able to charm him out of a mess like that. He thinks he should probably, when this is all over, take her out to dinner at the nicest place he can find. Doing anything to thank her right now will look suspicious, but once his parole gets straightened out, if it ever does, he’s going to make sure she knows how much he appreciates everything she’s done to protect him.

Mac’s gotten about as far as he can with this project without leaving the room, and he’s not about to do that until Jack gets back. Mac really does believe Bishop is telling the truth, but he’s not about to give this guy the chance to bolt. If I lost him, Matty would toss me out of the Phoenix so fast I wouldn’t know what happened. He’s not going to take that risk.

When Jack knocks on the door with the little tapping pattern that means it’s safe, Mac lets him in. “Will you watch him? I gotta go set up our doorbell.” Jack looks a little confused, but nods. Mac grabs a couple bulldog clips and the rest of the fishing line, then strings it across the stairs to make a nearly invisible tripwire. If anyone runs into it, it’ll start the fan and they’ll know someone’s on the way.

When he comes back, he copies Jack’s knock and Jack pulls the door open. “Nice contraption, Mac.”
“Hopefully we don’t need it.”

Jack nods. “I parked the rental car four blocks away, and I checked to make sure no one was following me. Unfortunately, the diner across the street is closed, so dinner’s coming out of the vending machines.” Jack drops a handful of chip bags, candy packages, and pop bottles onto the rickety little table. “Here Bishop, have a gooey pie.”

“I hate those things.” Bishop drops the package Jack just tossed at him.

“Then why’d you buy them every day?” Jack asks.

“Well, that’s a bit of a long story.”

“We got all night. And the TV in here’s broke.” Jack grins. “Go ahead.”

“I’d been on the run for three months. I stopped at that convenience store and there she was.” He holds up a pencil sketch he made on the pad of paper by the phone. “Ilene.” He sighs. “She asked me how I was, and I swear I couldn’t even think. I didn’t know what to do. So I just reached for the closest thing, set it on the counter, paid, and ran. And I only realized when I got to the car that it was a box of gooey pies.”

“And then you kept going back.”

“And every time she looked at me, I just got so nervous. And I just grabbed another box of them. And I couldn’t really explain, after a while, you know? I was afraid if I told her I didn’t like gooey pies, I’d end up spilling my whole life story.” Mac knows how that goes. “She was just...she was the first person in a long time to treat me with kindness, you know?” He shrugs. “People like me are the ones people are scared of. But she wasn’t scared. And I couldn’t lose the one decent thing left in my life.”

“Being on the run isn’t easy,” Mac mutters. He’s thought about it often enough that he knows what it would entail. “But if you’re telling the truth, our boss will probably be able to help you get some leniency. If you can help us find whoever was threatening you.”

“You mean I might actually get to testify and go to prison?”

“You want to go to prison?” Mac asks. He feels stiff and cold at just the thought.

“Yeah, I know it’s not easy inside but what I’ve been doing the last three years, that’s not a life. No one you can trust, never being able to tell people the truth...”

“You can’t trust people in prison either.” Mac mutters. “At least out here you were alone.” He shivers, despite the fact that the room is stifling and the little air conditioning unit is just softly wheezing. I could probably fix that... But his hands are shaking so much he’s not sure he could fix anything.

“Don’t you get it? That’s what’s killing me. I met the love of my life two years ago and I can’t even risk asking her out to dinner.” You can’t do that behind bars either. This guy might not have it quite as bad as Mac did, but he’s small and nervous and clearly not that hard to coerce and threaten into falling into line. I’m not sure if it’s worse to be alone or surrounded by monsters. But I think I’d rather be alone.

“It’s just...it’s worse than you think,” Mac says. Wonderful. You’re doing great. You’re trying to convince the guy you caught not to testify. That being on the run is better. You’re doing a fantastic job, MacGyver.
Bishop glances at him. “You’ve done time?” Mac just swallows and nods. “You really aren’t feds, are you?”

“Nope.” Jack sits down on the bed. “Did we look like it?” He opens a bottle of flat coke and takes a long drink. He sighs, then frowns. “Hey Mac, do you think that squeaking is just rusty bedsprings?”

Mac is saved from answering by Jack’s phone ringing. He answers and moves to the corner of the room where he can still keep an eye on the door. “Hey Ri.” Mac walks over to stand close enough that he can hear.

“I’ve got something interesting for you guys,” Riley says.

Jack lowers his voice. “Interesting as in this weirdo’s telling the truth, or interesting as in we just agreed to spend the night in the same room as a guy who likes shooting federal agents?”

“The FBI’s case hinges on one video.” There’s some clicking. “I’m sending it to you now.”

A file pops up on Jack’s phone, and he hits play. There’s a staticy recording, but it’s clearly Bishop and someone who, from the back, appears to be Agent Santos. And then there’s more static, and Santos falls to the ground. And Bishop runs.

“Yeah, Ri, that doesn’t look good for Bishop,” Jack says. “But there’s all that static, right at the crucial moment.” He frowns. “That’s a hell of a coincidence.”

“That’s the thing. That video was recorded on a fourteen year old CCTV system. One that still used magnetic tape.”

“Thus all the static,” Jack says.

“Almost all of it.” Riley’s voice becomes more enthusiastic. “You’ve got good instincts. The static that appears when Santos is shot has an underlying repeating pattern.”

“So the tape was tampered with?”

“Yes, it was edited after the fact.”

“Can you de-edit it?” Jack asks.

“Based on the repeating patterns in the fake static, I can probably reverse engineer an algorithm…” Riley trails off. “I can see the glazed eyes from here. Short answer, yes.” Jack hears some keys clicking.

“Uh, how long is this gonna take? Cause I still need to have some minutes at the end of the month, ya know,” Jack mutters.

“Jack, you have an unlimited plan.”

“It was a joke, kiddo.” Riley groans.

“They get worse every year.” There’s another long, blank pause, and then Riley speaks up. “Bingo.” A new video pops up on the phone. This time, the scene of the shooting is clear. And in the split second that was missing, Santos turns and glances up in the general direction of the camera, her body almost hiding Bishop’s, concern on her face. And then a bullet catches her shoulder, spinning her around and dropping her to the floor. Bishop stares for a fraction of a second, then bolts, and Mac recognizes what was visible on the other tape. *She heard something. She knew something was*
wrong, and she paid the price for having good instincts. She was looking for the killer.

“I had some reservations about his story, based on the fact that the official report said Santos was shot from the front. But now it makes sense.” Riley shakes her head. “Whoever this was had to have a hell of a lot of pull in the Philly branch, because an ME would have been able to tell the shot was long-distance and not point blank like it should have been if Bishop did it. Someone went to a lot of trouble to cover this up.”

“Yeah.” Mac mutters. “So should we…” he trails off. There are sirens in the background now. And sure, it’s the city, there’s always some of that, but these are close. And getting closer. I really hate that I know that so well. It’s pretty much instinct at this point to be mentally calculating Doppler effect and figuring out how long he has before the cops show up. “Riley? Can you tell me if there’s a reason there are police coming?”

Riley’s typing, and then there’s a sudden dramatic stop. “A bulletin was sent to Atlanta PD 15 min ago with your exact location. And it warns that all three of you are armed and dangerous.”

“Well, that explains why a SWAT team just showed up loaded for bear,” Jack mutters, pushing aside the curtains briefly. “Ri, we gotta go. We’ll call you back.”

“How did they know where we are?” Bishop asks.

“That facial rec software doesn’t just work on YouTube,” Mac says. “They’ve probably been running it on traffic cams and security feeds since they got the first hit that you were in Atlanta. They were bound to get lucky sometime.” That’s probably how they found the apartment, too. But that doesn’t really matter now. What matters is getting out of this one.

“Smart. Got the local PD to do their job for them,” Jack says. “Not like we can just shoot the boys in blue here. They’re not the bad guys any more than we are.”

“Jack, room key?” Mac asks. He’s got an idea. Not a great one, but it might work. He opens the file on his knife as Jack hands it over.

“Well, we’re not gonna be sticking around long enough to get charged for damages anyway,” Jack mutters.

“If I can file it down enough I can make a bump key,” Mac mutters. “Get us into the adjoining rooms.”

“Were you in prison for breaking and entering?” Bishop asks.

Mac just shakes his head, he doesn’t have time to answer that. “Jack, is there a Gideon Bible in that dresser?”

Jack pulls one out. “Kid, while I do think now is a very appropriate time to send up a little shout to the Big Guy, what’s the plan?”

“Need something hard and flat to hit the key with,” Mac says. “And yeah, pray it works.” He shoves the key in the passthrough door and taps it. The lock clicks open softly.

They slip through just as the pounding on the stairs intensifies and the fan starts buzzing. The SWAT team left the first floor, they’re on their way up. The first room is empty, and Mac sticks his key into the next one, tapping it again.

The door creaks open, and Mac stops short at the sight of a young girl sitting wide awake on the end of a bed. He puts a finger to his mouth and nods. She does the same, giving him a wide grin. She
probably thinks it’s a fun game. The three of them tiptoe through the room and on into the next one, and only when they’ve made it into the hall and down the stairwell undetected does Mac finally release the breath he’s been holding.

“Who are you people?” Bishop asks.

“The good guys,” Jack replies simply, and Mac grins. *Yeah, we are.*

Riley’s been waiting impatiently since Jack hung up. She’s kept an ear on the police scanners, and the SWAT team apparently left the motel without finding Mac, Jack, or Bishop. She feels a little better, but not much. She’ll relax when she hears their voices.

The phone rings and when Matty answers, Riley sees some of the tension slide out of the woman’s shoulders. “Where are you now?”

“75 heading north.” Jack pauses a little too long. “We weren’t able to get back to the rental car so we...sort of stole another one.”

“You stole another car?” Matty asks, and the cutting tone in her voice makes Riley cringe.

“Well, on the bright side, this one doesn’t belong to federal agents. And when they get it back they’re gonna be happy cause Mac here fixed the windshield wipers and the radio.”

“That’s beside the point, Dalton.”

“At least this time we told you?”

“Yes, you’re telling me. What do you want, a cookie?” Riley stifles a laugh.

Jack goes right along with the old lines. “I love cookies.”

“Not the way I’m going to be giving them to you.” The familiarity of the old banter makes Riley feel like she’s back as a junior agent, running her first ops. *Matty was the first person to realize I could do more than sit at a desk all day.* She personally trained Riley for the field, seeing potential where other people didn’t. *She knew I wanted to be more than just a hacker.* And Riley hopes she’s made the woman proud.

“While you were racking up felonies, we’ve been trying to find the dirty cop.” Matty turns to Riley. “You want to take it from here?”

“Whoever sent the bulletin tried to anonymize themselves. But I was able to trace the sender and traced it to a phone we were already tracking.” Riley grins. “It’s Brooks. He’s already been taken into custody and we’re looking into whether his partner Cho was involved.”

“So it’s safe to bring Bishop in, then?” Mac asks.

“Yes. I’m setting up a handoff with an FBI agent I trust. I’ll contact you with the details as soon as we have them.” Matty hangs up.

“Go get some rest, Riley. You’ve earned it.” Riley nods. She doesn’t go further than the couch in the corner, but she does lay down. And she pretends she’s already asleep when she feels Matty walk up beside her, take off her suit jacket, and spread it over Riley’s shoulders.
Bozer adjusts his tie nervously. *I already torpedoed my job yesterday with how mad I got about how she was treating Mac. Might as well go out with a bang.* Riley called him this morning to tell him how things went, and something was bothering him the whole drive in. And he just figured out what it is.

*I could be wrong. But if I’m right, Mac and Jack are walking into a trap. And I’m not going to let something bad happen because I’m scared of pissing Matty off.*

He knocks on the door. “Come in,” Matty says. He almost loses his nerve right there, but he pushes the door open anyway.

Matty glances at him. “You do realize your interview isn’t until this afternoon, don’t you?”

“Yes. But there’s something I have to tell you.” She glares at him, but he ignores it and steamrolls ahead. “At my last job an assistant manager was forging timecards. They never caught him though because…”

“How is this relevant?”

“Um, I’m getting there?” *I hate that I start to ramble when I’m nervous.* He’s always getting told his scripts are too meandering, that he gets too lost in explanation. It happens in real life too.

“I would like this with a hundred percent less burger references and some sort of reason?”

“Ok. It’s about Brooks. He’s 40, been 20 years with FBI, right? But he’s still on the street. Don’t you think if he had someone doing his dirty work, he’d be profiting off it? Getting promotions?” Out of the corner of his eye he glances at Riley. *Sorry I’m spilling that you shared the case with me. But this is for a good reason.*

Matty looks interested. “Go on.”

“I may not know the spy game, but I know bosses, I’ve had my share. And Brooks is not a boss.”

Bozer sighs. *This came out all wrong. It was supposed to sound like the dramatic reveal at the climax of a spy film. And it just sounds like me rambling about my past jobs.*

“He might be right,” Riley speaks up. “I’ve been looking into Brooks’s records. At the time of the shooting, he was flying to Oregon because his sister was having her first baby. He couldn’t have been the shooter. And he doesn’t have the salary or the pull to get a case of that magnitude covered up. I don’t think he’s the mastermind. Maybe a pawn, but definitely not the person who managed to manipulate the entire Santos case.”

Matty appears to suddenly slam into emergency mode. “Andie!” she yells, and the woman appears shockingly fast. “Get me the director of the FBI.” She marches into the hall, yelling orders at anyone standing around. “Get me Nashville PD, have them send backup to that meet! Riley, get Jack, or Mac, or whoever will answer their phones.” Bozer just stands there in the center of the hurricane, wondering how in the world he became responsible for this chaos.

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**PARKING GARAGE: NASHVILLE, TENNESSEE**

**JACK HASN’T STOPPED SINGING COUNTRY SONGS SINCE THEY HIT CITY LIMITS**

Mac seriously regrets ever fixing this car’s radio. Because the second they found out the location for
the drop is Nashville, Jack found a country station and has been blasting it. The only time the car has been quiet has been when they pulled off the road to a rest stop to get a few hours’ sleep because they’re all exhausted.

Mac realized too late that he should have been content with the radio blaring. Because the first time they saw a directional sign for Nashville, Jack started singing along with the voices on the radio. And it’s not a pretty thing to witness. *Maybe we should record this as a new interrogation tactic.* Mac’s pretty sure being inside an enclosed space with a radio and an enthusiastic Jack would make most people start talking fast.

“You know we’re not here to appreciate the music scene, right?” Mac asks.

“Come on, man, it’s culture!” Jack says, thankfully cutting himself off in the middle of a truly awful off-key chorus of a song Mac’s never even heard of. “Glen Campbell *made* the Nashville sound.”

They park, and Mac can see the car up ahead of them, right where Matty said it would be. A man with silvery hair and a stiff looking face is leaning on it.

They all slide out of the car, and just at that second Mac feels his phone buzzing. It’s Matty. He has a sudden flare of panic. *I have to answer this, or she’ll be mad.*

Jack’s phone died on the road this morning, and they couldn’t find a car charger for anything but an android in the console. *If I’d had some more stuff to work with...* But Mac pulled everything he could possibly fidget with out of his pockets, and the car is almost immaculately clean. *Not even a stray gum wrapper to be had.*

**Is your agent a 6 ft 1 black guy?**

Mac quickly types back. *No.*

**Then that’s not the agent I sent. That’s the dirty Fed.**

Mac looks up. Jack has outpaced him and he’s just about to hand off Bishop.

“Thank you. I’ll take it from here.” Bishop looks up and the shock in his posture is evident from where Mac is standing.

“You…” And then the man’s pulling a gun, jamming it against Bishop’s head.

“So you’re the one who was pulling the strings,” Jack mutters.

“I didn’t want to do this, but you leave me no choice,” the man mutters. “Unlike last time, I’ve accounted for the security cameras here. Your deaths will be nothing more than a cold case.” Jack reaches for his own gun, and then there’s a ear-splitting crack. Mac feels like all the blood’s drained out of *his* body as Jack falls backward, blood streaming from his chest and covering the concrete.

*No, no, no, no! Get up, please, please get up...* This isn’t supposed to happen. Jack’s supposed to be fine. He’s always supposed to be fine. He’s Jack. He’s not supposed to just get shot in the chest in a parking garage. *He’s not moving. He can’t be dead, Jack can’t be gone...* And then Mac realizes the gun’s being turned on him. And a little voice in his head that sounds a lot like Jack yells for him to take cover. He dives behind a parked car, just as a bullet pings off of it. *Jack...* He can’t think about that right now or he’s going to shut down. This isn’t supposed to happen, he just wants to wake up and find out this was a nightmare, he’d even let Jack sing along to the radio all the way back to LA and he wouldn’t complain, if he’d just yelled when he first got the text from Matty maybe Jack would have had some warning and been able to hide... *Jack would want me to make sure he didn’t die for nothing, I have to finish the op. I just bought myself a little time,*
but he’s gonna shoot Bishop... There’s a sudden scuffling noise, a curse, and another gunshot. Mac risks a glance over the hood to see that the man is no longer holding Bishop. He must have taken advantage of not having the gun on him to bolt. And then Mac sees the man crouched behind another car, shaking.

The FBI agent is slowly coming their way. He’s going to get to Bishop first. Unless...

This is the parking level for electric cars, complete with charging stations. Mac glances from the charging port to the electrical box nearby. The FBI agent is almost directly under a set of lights that that box leads to. Maybe...

Mac jams the power cable into the electric box, and the lights flicker and send a shower of sparks downward, spattering over the agent’s head and shoulders. He flinches, and it’s the distraction Mac needs. He vaults over the hood of the car and starts running, anger and adrenaline carrying him faster than he thought he could go. He’s not getting away with this. Not after what he did to Jack.

But it’s not quite fast enough. He pulls up short when he finds himself facing the barrel of a gun. I’m sorry Jack. But maybe he’s bought Bishop enough time to get away. And if Jack’s dead...Mac can’t quite bring himself to care that he’s going to be dead too. I didn’t warn him, so I guess I deserve it.

And then the agent is knocked sideways, and Mac stares in shock as Jack flattens the guy, wrenching his arms behind his back. The FBI agent shouts in pain, and Jack just snarls, “That’s for my shoulder, asshole.” He presses a knee into the man’s back, fumbles the guy’s cuffs off his belt with one hand, and snaps them on. Then he glances up. “Mac? You okay kid?”

“J-jack?” Mac fumbles over the words. He was bleeding out. He dimly realizes Jack is bleeding, the whole left shoulder of his shirt is saturated in dark red. “B-but he shot you...”

“Just a flesh wound, kid. These corner office pencil pushers can’t hit the broad side of a barn.” Still, Jack grimaces as he hauls the man to his feet, rooting through the guy’s pockets for an ID. “Well, Regional Director Dryer, let’s see you explain your way out of this one.”

Mac stumbles to lean against one of the cars, legs suddenly too weak to hold him up. Jack’s alive. Jack’s okay. The world blurs, police sirens and flashing lights and shouts all mixing together, and Mac isn’t really aware of what’s happening. And then he sees Jack, shoving the FBI agent into the hands of the cops and starting toward him, concern written all over his face, pushing away a chittering, worried paramedic.

“Mac?” Mac takes one stumbling step and then starts to fall. This whole day has just been too much. Jack was dead, but he’s not dead, he’s okay, but he’s hurt...

And then he’s leaning against something warm and solid, and Jack’s easing him to the ground, arms around him. Mac leans against his shoulder, not caring that he’s getting blood all over his cheek and shirt. “I thought you were dead. I thought you were dead,” he mumbles, and he knows he’s repeating himself but he doesn’t care.

“No way. Just biding my time till I could get the jump on him. Nice work with the lights, by the way.” Jack runs his fingers through Mac’s hair, and Mac can’t bring himself to care that it looks like he’s a five-year-old scared of the dark, he just wants Jack to hold on and never let go again. Please don’t leave me. Please. He’s lost too many people already. He can’t lose Jack.

“Sir, I’m sorry, but we’re going to have to treat your wound,” someone says, and Mac glances up at two very concerned paramedics. “Are both of you injured?”
“N-no, I’m okay.” Mac stumbles to his feet, feeling suddenly ashamed of how he’s reacted to the whole thing. He should have been able to tell Jack wasn’t shot fatally. He feels like an idiot for overreacting so much. I’ve probably embarrassed him in front of all these people, acting like a scared child.

“You better check him over for shock,” Jack says, and when Mac just shakes his head, Jack sighs. “I don’t need you passing out in my arms again, kid. My shoulder can’t take it.” Mac feels a hysterical laugh about to break out of him.

Finally the paramedics succeed in getting Jack into the back of an ambulance and Mac, realizing that he’s doing more harm than good by being in the way, wanders over to where Bishop is sitting in the back of a patrol car. He doesn’t want to see the blood, or the wound, or any of it, he feels sick enough thinking of what he did see. Jack isn’t supposed to get hurt. Bishop’s just hanging up the phone when Mac walks up, and his small smile shifts to a frown of concern.

“Thank you for saving my life. And please tell Jack too. I’m sorry for what happened.”

“He’s gonna be okay.” Mac glances at the phone. “Who’d you call?” He doesn’t want to talk about Jack anymore because if he does he’s just going to see him bleeding out on the concrete again. I’m going to have even more nightmares.

“I called the convenience store. I told Ilene everything. We have a date on Tuesday.”

“You do realize you’re going to prison, right?” Bishop will get a reduced sentence for testifying, but the fact is that he was involved in mob activity. He’s still going to get several years.

“I know. She’s going to come visit me in lockup. And bring cookies.”

Mac doesn’t say Ilene probably won’t be able to get the food past the guards. He just nods. There are so many things he wants to tell this guy, because maybe if he can spare someone else the horror he lived through, it won’t have been for nothing.

“You know, I get that my view is gonna include bars for a while, but for the first time I really feel...free.” Bishop glances at Mac. “And that’s thanks to you, MacGyver.”

And Mac can’t help it anymore. This guy is thanking him for helping send him to a place that’s Mac’s worst nightmare. “There’s a few things you need to know, before they take you away…” He doesn’t want to talk about any of it. It’s painful, and humiliating, and he wants to forget. Especially because now that the op’s over, he’s facing the possibility of being back behind bars himself. But he owes it to Bishop to make sure the man knows the truth. It’s my fault, in however tangential a way, that he’s actually going to end up behind bars. I helped track him down. It’s my responsibility to at least try to help him now. And nothing, nothing is as bad as thinking about losing Jack. I couldn’t keep him from getting shot, but maybe I can help Bishop stay safe.

THE PHOENIX JET

THIS IS THE FIRST TIME JACK WISHES IT WAS SLOWER

Mac is silent the whole flight home. Jack doesn’t ask him why.

Mac seems like he’s torn between wanting to be as close to Jack as possible, and also wanting to avoid him. He’s upset at how vulnerable he was. Jack would have been willing to hold the kid all day, but the second the paramedics cut in, and Jack curses their existence for it, Mac jumped back like Jack was a cobra about to strike. He’s okay when it’s just me, but he doesn’t want other people
to see it. And from the way he’s acting now, he probably thinks he was ruining Jack’s tough guy image as well. *Kid, you can do that any day.*

He guesses that now that the adrenaline and shock has worn off, Mac feels more than a little embarrassed about the display of emotion. *He should know by now I’m not gonna judge him for it.* And honestly, Jack thinks with a tiny smirk, this is payback for the kid scaring him back there in the Kazakhstan forest. *But heaven knows I’m not gonna hold that over him. He’s already got enough trauma for one day. He doesn’t need to know how much he scared me.* Jack sighs. *I guess I hate being emotionally vulnerable almost as much as he does.*

And the kid’s shown that vulnerability in more than one way today. Jack overheard enough of the conversation Mac was having with Bishop to know that the kid wasn’t glossing over the realities. Jack has no idea how much that had to hurt to relive. The only thing he’s got to compare it to was speaking at a veteran’s seminar on PTSD. And he’d had nightmares the next three nights.

He wants to give the kid some space, because Mac’s been more vulnerable than usual today and Jack figures he’s feeling kind of shy about it. Mac isn’t going to want to ‘talk about it’, he already just did and Jack can tell that was a massive sacrifice on his part. And he’s definitely not going to want to rehash what happened to Jack.

*I’m so damn proud of him.* Jack’s seen a lot of guys who’ve gone through hell and back and survived it, but it’s the rare few who are brave enough to revisit that place to help someone they barely even know. *That kid never even begins to think what’s easiest for him. He’s always trying to see what he can do to help other people first.* Even when he thought he didn’t have any backup he was fully prepared to face down Dryer, with a loaded gun pointed at him, to save a man he barely knew. And while Jack does sometimes wish Mac would slow down, take some time, make sure he is okay before he goes rushing off again to try and help, he can’t help but admire that. *His father may have been an absolute monster, but Mac turned out okay in spite of it.*

Somehow that kid took all the hurt and pain and neglect and managed to become someone who’s kind and generous and would never in a million years do what his dad did. *But the fact that he’s living with the pain from his past doesn’t mean he doesn’t still need someone to fill that gap.* Because Jack knows from personal experience that not having a father in your life, even if you’re already an adult and the man was the best parent you could ask for, hurts. Mac’s gone his whole life deprived of that kind of affection, guidance, and support.

*And then he thought it was gonna happen again.* Jack has no illusions about how absolutely traumatized the kid was the second that gun went off. *He almost passed out right there.* And he figures that’s the real reason Mac is avoiding him. *He just realized how big a part of his life I am. And for him, that’s terrifying. Because he lost two father figures already and he’s probably trying to decide, right here and now, if it’s worth letting himself be so attached to me.* No wonder Mac seems so torn. *He wants me to care, he wants someone who does, but he’s scared to death of letting me in and losing me.* There’s no good answer to this.

Jack gives up telling himself he’s going to let Mac sit there in peace, and stands up and joins him. Mac glances up, he’s folding and unfolding the tools on his knife, and Jack figures the kid misses his paperclips.

“Hey, you keep doin’ that, you’re gonna break it.” Mac doesn’t even look up. “Listen, I’m gonna be fine. It’s okay. I’ve had worse.”

Mac swallows. “It’s my fault you got hurt.”

“How you figure that? You didn’t pull the trigger, you hate even touching a gun.”
Mac shivers, and Jack sees two tears slide down his cheeks. *He didn’t cry back there in the garage. He was too stunned. Now it’s all hitting harder emotionally.* “I knew. Matty told me Dryer was dirty when we were about to make the drop. I should have warned you sooner.”

“When your phone was going nuts and you were texting like every other millennial? I figure we both found out about the same time, right?” Jack says. He leans back, wincing as it pulls the gash along his ribs. *Another inch and it would have gone through a lung.*

“Maybe Webber’s right. Maybe I shouldn’t be in the field.”

“Listen, kid, it’s no one’s fault but that scumbag that this happened. Ops go sideways. It wasn’t on you to be watching my back, I’m the senior agent and I should have been more observant.” He sighs, and then reaches out to brush a strand of still bloodstained hair off Mac’s forehead. “You did real good out there today, Mac. Even when you thought I wasn’t gonna be there to back you up, you went ahead and finished the job.”

“He almost killed me too.” Mac whispers. “I can’t do this job without you, Jack.” He sighs. “What kind of an agent am I?”

“A good one. One who knows the value of having a team.”

“What if Director Webber doesn’t see it that way?”

Jack sighs. “You’re going to have to convince her yourself, to really make an impression on her. It can’t just be all of us standing up for you. Matty likes people with backbone. People who can go toe to toe with her. You have to tell her exactly why she should want to keep you.” Jack puts his good arm around Mac’s shoulder. “I’m sorry I scared you, kid. I want to promise it won’t happen again. But you know as well as I do that I can’t do that.” Mac has to know what he’s letting himself in for, letting himself care. *Being an agent is knowing it’s probably a one-way ticket.* “I want to tell you that’s never gonna happen again. But I can’t. And I know how much that’s gotta scare you. I know people have abandoned you way too much. And I don’t want to do that. So if you wanna keep your distance, I get it. It’s dangerous to get attached in this business.”

“I know,” Mac whispers. “I’m scared, Jack. I don’t want to lose you.” He rests his head on Jack’s shoulder. “But I’m more scared of being alone.” A few more tears slide down his cheeks.

“Aw kid.” Jack holds him close. *I want to promise him the world. And I can’t even promise I’ll be here tomorrow.* But that’s life. And for now, he can be here. Mac is falling asleep against him, and Jack sighs. *Why is life so hard?* He wants to give Mac the family he deserves, but that risks shattering his heart all over again.

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**WAR ROOM**

2:30 PM

Boze hopes this won’t have been the biggest mistake of his life. *I’ve been questioning her, arguing with her, pushing back on her decisions for this entire week.*

His interview’s been pushed back slightly because of the disaster of a handoff in Nashville. Matty was waiting to confirm that her agents were indeed alive and mostly intact before doing anything else. Bozer saw Riley pacing in the hallway, when she heard that Jack had been hurt she looked like she was the one who took a bullet.

In the few weeks he’s been here, Bozer’s seen literally every member of Mac’s field team injured.
I’m scared to death for them. And I don’t know if I’d rather stay working here, and know when things go wrong, or be blissfully ignorant.

“You can sit down, Mr. Bozer,” Matty says. He does.

“I understand that today has been a bit traumatic,” she says. “So we’ll forgo some of the normal procedures. I’d rather you be comfortable talking to me. Although it seems you already are.” Bozer flinches. This is it. The axe is about to fall.

Matty’s actually smiling. “You know, you may not have a knowledge of covert ops, but that I can teach. What I can’t teach is good instincts, and a willingness to be honest and challenge authority. Not many people would have the guts to do what you’ve done the past few days. I expected Davis and Dalton to push back on my resistance to hiring MacGyver, but a recently hired civilian with everything to lose...Your loyalty said as much about your friend as about your own character.” She taps the file on the table. “And then this morning, you gave me a valuable piece of information that saved the life of an important asset. Some people in the espionage world go their whole lives without making that much of an impact. You should be proud of yourself.”

“Jack still got hurt, I don’t see how I helped the situation.” He didn’t warn them in time to prevent a near catastrophe.

“MacGyver says the only reason he wasn’t right next to Jack was because he stopped to answer my texts. He would have been shot just like Jack, possibly fatally. What you did bought him time to react, to get to safety, probably saved his life.”

Bozer feels cold and like his head isn’t even attached to his body anymore. Everyone’s lives rest on a hair trigger around here. Mac was seconds away from being killed.

“Now, Mr. Bozer, I believe you have a mask that won’t paint itself.”

Mac nearly ran into Bozer on his way to have his meeting in the War Room. Boze said his evaluation went better than he’d expected. “She’s going to let me stay, and I think she wants you to, too.”

Mac wants to believe him but Boze has a habit of seeing the best in any situation. After I almost got Jack killed, how could she possibly want me?

Jack wished him luck before he got bodily dragged off to medical by a distraught Riley. Mac wishes Jack could have been here with him. But he said I have to do this on my own. Prove to her I can be trusted.

He thinks he might throw up when he finally knocks on the door. “Come in,” Webber says, and he opens the door with shaking hands. “I understand that this mission was traumatic, but I didn’t want to delay your evaluation any longer. In fact, I’d like to discuss what happened today.”

Mac smooths out the wrinkles in his shirt; his hands are visibly shaking. She’s going to know I’m not capable of handling the pressure.

“Director Webber, I...”

“Matty. Please. This whole “interim director” business is starting to wear a little thin. According to Dalton’s field report, you salvaged the situation at the drop. By shorting out the lights to create a distraction.” Webber says. “Unorthodox, but I must admit, effective.”
“I failed to warn him in time to keep him from being shot, though.” Mac looks down.

“That is as much my fault as anyone’s. I failed to take into account that Brooks wasn’t high enough in the Bureau to have orchestrated the cover-up.” Webber says, and he hears genuine remorse in her tone. “This operation was a mess to begin with. You, Dalton, Davis and I all played a part in what happened today. But none of you is soley responsible.” Mac sighs, a bit of relief slipping in, but she’s not done. “That said, I do have my concerns about you.” Webber frowns. “It’s my job to clean up the mess Thornton left me with. And to decide whether hiring a convicted felon with a rap sheet that includes murder and terrorism was a wise move.”

Mac can’t think. He feels cold and sick and terrified.

“I’ve already talked to Dalton, Davis, Bozer, and Cage.” Mac swallows. “All of them have told me you’re worthy of my trust.”

“Because I am.” Mac knows he has to say it now before he loses his nerve. “I’m aware that my methods are...unconventional. But they work. You can see the proof for yourself, you can see how many ops I’ve worked since coming here. And that my skill set is a valuable part of my team.” He feels so wrong saying anything like this about himself. He was always taught that you’re not supposed to promote yourself, you have to let other people do that or you just look bad. But Jack is proud of him, so maybe he should be proud of himself? Maybe this is something worth being proud of? “What I do saves lives. And taking me out of the field puts the people I’m trying to help at a greater risk. It puts my team at risk.”

“That’s a nice speech,” Webber says. “And I believe it’s sincere. But I still want to know what made anyone think hiring someone with your record was safe.” She flips some papers in the file. “I want to know why I should believe you’re not just telling me what I want to hear so that I don’t send you back to a place you obviously are afraid of returning to.”

She lays three sheets of paper on the table. The first is Cage’s psychological evaluation, with one question crossed off, but then scribbled below in handwriting that’s visibly shakier than her normal script. Mac doesn’t have to look to know that it’s the mandatory question about sexual assault. The second paper is actually a stapled set, the Phoenix medical records dated for early November. He doesn’t need to see them to know which mission they’re for. And the last is Jack’s report of the Bishop op. Mac looks away from all of them, to the floor. The paperclip he was twisting into a question mark before they headed out to Atlanta is still laying under the table.

Mac can’t meet Director Webber’s eyes. She knows what happened to me. He can feel a hot flush of shame running over his face. I guess she had to know. But still…

It’s bad enough that she’s always going to see him as a convict. Now she’s going to see him as a victim too. If Jack knew she used this against me, he’d be furious. He’d say... And then Mac knows exactly what he has to do. Webber might not like Jack, but she respects him. Because he stands up to her.

“And what, exactly, does that have to do with the validity of hiring me?” Mac straightens, forcing himself to meet those unflinching eyes. “Every field agent has trauma. It’s unavoidable. You don’t automatically pull them from the field for that. If you think that something that happened in my past defines everything about me then you’d better pull every one of our field operatives now.” The shocker is that as he says it, he realizes he might actually believe it. I did think I was never going to be free of what happened. And I won’t be, what happened at the apartment with the dirty agents proved it. But I still did my job in spite of that. He was able to talk to Bishop about it. I’m starting to heal. And it’s this team who’s helping me. She can’t take that away from me.

Webber picks up the papers and slides them back into the file. “I’ve heard everything I need to.” Mac
cringes. Was I too blunt? Too aggressive? That’s Jack’s style, maybe it doesn’t work for him. “I’ll re-approve your release on a provisional basis. I will continue to monitor your field work, and if I see reason to change my mind, I will. But as of now, Agent MacGyver, you will remain part of this team. But if you mess up, the first time this improvising fails, you and I will have a problem.” He shivers. “Unless you have something more to say, this interview is over.”

Matty Webber watches the MacGyver boy walk away. There’s a hell of a lot of damage there. A lot of ragged edges, shattered fragments. Dangerous pieces. But he’s amazingly resilient.

He risked his own life to save our asset. That says a lot about his character. As does the trust everyone on this team seems to place in him. Even Jack, and Jack doesn’t trust a lot of people. He sees something in this boy. And so help her, she’s beginning to see it too.

She turns back to her desk, thoughtfully fingerling the twisted paper clip as she picks it up off the floor and sets it on the table. I’ve seen these before, every time we raided a place sometimes only seconds too late. It was a calling card, a taunt. Only time will tell if he’ll take the same road. She stacks Angus’s dossier on top of one fifteen years old, the CIA seal on the front faded, the cover creased, stained, and a corner torn away.

She traces the red stamp that still partially covers the name printed on the front. Priority Target. The black stencil letters beneath it spell an all too familiar name. James MacGyver.

Chapter End Notes

I swear I wrote this before I saw Mac+Fallout+Jack...So when I saw that plot twist, I almost screamed...because I was planning on posting this the next week. So I'm sorry for emotionally traumatizing all of you AGAIN...
Jack can’t help but feel a little unnerved at the sight of a metal skeleton with wires and hydraulics sprawling all over in a macabre imitation of muscles and nerves. “I thought you were building an AI. Not a freakin’ terminator in our basement!”

“It’s a think tank. Every once in a while we have to do something smart,” Mac says, but Jack’s not really satisfied because the kid’s bent over in the guts of that thing tightening screws. One wrong move and that faceless monstrosity could snap his neck…

“Come on, man, why can’t you do something like, you know, end world hunger? Or save the bees? Not start the end of the world?” Not that he really believes some of the more wacked out theories about the rise of the machines, but some of the stuff Riley’s told him about computer capabilities is a little terrifying.

But he’ll admit, it’s not so much the rise of the sentient robots that scares him, it’s who’s in charge of these projects. *We were working for a despicable monster for years. God only knows what he used the things the Phoenix invented to do.* And now that the CIA’s in charge of them, he’s still not altogether comfortable. *They’ve done some messed up things in the past.*

“How come Riley’s not part of this project?” Jack asks.

“Oh, she is. She’s coding the AI. We’re building the body,” Bozer says. “She just got tired of hanging out listening to Mac rattle off engineering principles and mechanical jargon.”

“More like she’s smart enough to get the hell outta Dodge before this thing goes haywire.” Jack risks another glance at the freaky creation. “What’s even the point of making this thing, besides being able to say you did it?”

Mac’s voice is a little softer, a little less gleeful. “It’s going to be a super-intelligent bomb disposal unit.” *Oh man.* This was probably Mac’s idea, he went to see Annabelle and her mom last weekend. *He probably thinks if something like this had been around a few years ago, Pena not have been blown up that night.*

“Don’t they have those already?” Jack saw Charlie operate a couple different models in the sandbox. They’re clunky, but effective.

“Yes, but this model mimics human movements. Making it controllable by specialized gloves to train it on models. It will be able to mimic the kind of precision of actual hands, rather than working with a more rudimentary build.”

Jack glares at the tangles of metal on the table. “All great. But that doesn’t explain why it needs its own brain. Why not just have an EOD tech controlling it long-distance with the training glovey things?”
Mac looks up from his work. “Because in bomb disposal, split seconds count. Signals traveling at different paces, speed of light, speed of the transmissions controlling the robot...everything has to happen right on location or the risk is exponentially increased,” Mac says with confidence, and Jack blinks, because it sounds so like when Charlie tried to explain all that stuff. *He’s so damn smart.*

Bozer speaks up. “It also learns and adapts in field. Even if it’s blown up, its processor core is shielded to survive, retain data, and learn from the experience.”

“What kills you makes you stronger, huh?”

“Yes.”

“But what if it learns that we keep sending it to get blown to bits, and it decides it doesn’t really like that anymore?”

“Jack, you’ve heard of Isaac Asimov’s three laws of robotics, right?” Bozer asks.

“Dude, that is *not* reassuring. Haven’t you ever seen *I, Robot*?” Jack asks. “When it comes to robots, the only person I trust is my man Schwarzenegger. Ol’ Arnie showed us the future, and believe me, it ain’t pretty.”

Bozer picks up a tablet and walks back to one of the other worktables. And then the robot snaps upright, and Jack reacts on instinct, punching the freaky thing right in its not-face. The robot falls back onto the table.

“Man, the look on your face…” Bozer is laughing. Mac looks somewhere between amused and concerned for his friend’s life, with good reason.

Jack shakes out his hand. “The next one’s gonna be your face.”

“Boze…” Mac’s voice is scolding. Bozer just shrugs.

*Oh it’s on, man.* Jack has every intention of getting Bozer back for this one. *Maybe I’ll ask Riley to code some random stuff into this thing, so it steals his keys. Or his phone. Or just follows him around all creepily.*

Mac’s phone jingles, and pulls it out of his pocket. His face goes at least two shades paler.

“Guys, Webber’s asking for us.”

“You gotta start calling her Matty, man, she doesn’t like anything else,” Jack mutters. *He’s only going to make things so much worse between them if he doesn’t just listen to her.* Granted, Matty’s been slightly less frosty since the interview, but Mac’s still scared of her.

When Matty meets them at the door of the War Room, her face has a strange expression. Mac almost thinks it looks like grief. She looks more vulnerable than he expected her to be capable of.

“Come in, please. All of you.” Mac closes the door behind him. Something is very wrong.

Matty steps up the screen as if it’s any other mission briefing. “Last night, there was a shooting in a San Francisco park. The victims were Vanessa Frank and Daniel Lee.” Matty’s voice is strained. “It was reported to police by a driver who happened to be passing the scene, and saw a man with a dark hood walking away with a gun in his hand and getting into a car. It was too dark for him to see anything about the car itself. Lee was shot once in the head, Frank four times in the back.”
“This sounds like a regular murder case, why exactly is the Phoenix involved?” Bozer asks.

Jack turns to him. “Because Vanessa Frank is Matty’s god-daughter.” He sighs. “Her father was CIA, one of Matty’s early partners. He asked her to stand up for Vanessa when she was born, and Matty’s been looking after the family since Bill was killed on an op eight years ago.”

Mac glances at Matty. Her eyes are glittery with tears, and it looks like if she tries to talk right now she’ll cry. Riley steps up and takes the tablet from her, and the woman nods gratefully.

"Young couple in a park and a black hooded shooter?" Boze asks. “Uh, the details...just sound...familiar.”

“That’s because they’re identical,” Riley says, glancing at the tablet.

“To what?” Mac asks.

“To the Zodiac killer,” Matty replies quietly.

“The police report doesn’t mention that,” Riley says. “Probably trying to keep it out of the papers, avoid instigating a panic until they know more. But there is a video from the initial investigation that they’re not making public.” Her fingers skim the keyboard. “But now we have it.”

Matty mutes the windows, and Mac watches the white film spread around the room. It never ceases to impress him, the kind of technology this place has access to. And the fact that he gets to be part of it. I’m lucky to be here. And lucky that Matty’s willing to take a chance on me.

The officer’s voice is shaky. “I’m first on the scene of a double homicide. First victim male, Asian, shot once in the head. Second victim female, African American, shot...four times. In the back. It looks like she was trying to escape...no…” The camera pans up, accompanied by shaking breaths, to show Vanessa Frank’s hand outstretched, fingers covered in blood, and above her on the side of a car, the distinctive shape of the Zodiac killer’s notorious signature.

Mac sees Matty’s lip quiver, but the woman swallows the emotion a moment later. “She’s her father’s daughter,” Matty whispers. “Always leaving a message.” Mac wonders exactly what happened to Bill Frank on his last field op.

Matty turns to the team. “I’m flying to San Francisco today. This isn’t an officially sanctioned Phoenix operation, so I can’t force any of you to come. But I am asking for your help.”

“You know I’m coming,” Jack says.

“What he said.” Riley’s already stowing her laptop in her backpack.

“I’m coming too,” Mac says, and Matty glances at him with a mixture of surprise and respect. She probably thought I’d take any opportunity to have her further away from me. She didn’t expect me to volunteer for her personal mission.

“I’m coming too,” Bozer says. When they all collectively stare at him, he shrugs. “Guys, I’ve seen every serial killer movie and documentary ever made. I know everything there is to know about what makes guys like that tick.”

Matty shrugs. “Okay, you come too.”

As soon as they step out of the doors, Mac pulls Bozer aside. “You had nightmares for weeks after you watched half those movies, and now you want to go track down one of those creeps in real
life?’

“That family deserves some closure,” Bozer says simply. “And if I can help give it to them, I’ve got no right to hide away in my lab to try and protect myself.” He gently moves Mac’s hand off his shoulder. “You don’t have to protect me anymore, Mac. This time, I’m coming with you. Let me help.” Mac sighs, knowing he won’t win this argument. Maybe he could when they were still kids, when he was just a vigilante and Boze was just a film student and third shift diner employee. But they’re not those people anymore. Maybe he’s more like me than I thought.

PRESIDIO HEIGHTS

NO, THIS ISN’T CREEPY AT ALL

Riley spins slowly in the swivel chair at her desk in the hotel room they’ve rented for the weekend. This place definitely isn’t five star accommodations, but Riley’s seen much worse. So far, nothing has topped Singapore and the snake in the bed. And she’s pretty sure that’s also the place there were baby frogs swimming in the toilet tank.

“His first victims were Betty Lou Jensen and David Arthur Faraday, on December 20, 1968. David was the first boy her parents let take her out.” Riley’s half-listening to Bozer’s spiel on the Zodiac killer while she sorts evidence on her computer. “David was shot once in the head, Betty got five bullets to the back. Both died instantly.”

“Sounds like he had something against women,” Riley says. “He shot the men once, but the women he likes to shoot in the back, multiple times. I wonder if he was betrayed by a wife, girlfriend?”

“It’s possible,” Bozer says, but his voice lacks enthusiasm for her theory. “But that sounds a little more like an overdone movie plot. Personally I think he just got pleasure from killing, because of what his letters said, and during some of his other kills the men were shot or stabbed more than once. He probably just quickly took out people who he might have seen as possible threats, maybe ones he expected to fight back.”

Riley nods. Maybe I watch too many convoluted crime shows.

“Police only proved 5 murders were actually the Zodiac. But letters he sent to the San Francisco Chronicle claimed he killed 37.” Bozer glances at the images flicking across Riley’s screen; she’s scanning through the old case files. They were digitized a while ago when the case was reopened by the SFPD in 2007. “There were a few more cases that could have been connected, but nothing has actually been proven.”

“Well, he sure knew how to dress the part.” Riley glances at the sketch one of the surviving victims provided of the hooded man. It’s eerie.

“The lead detective believed he was inspired by movies. One of his first letters quoted The Most Dangerous Game, a 1932 movie about hunting people.” Riley cringes. Mac said when Murdoc was after him in that junkyard, Murdoc was talking about the story that movie is based on. Said it was sort of his “awakening”. She’s never reading that or watching the movie. Nope.

She stops scrolling on her computer. “But that’s why this has to be a copycat. No creepy handwritten letters with the weird cipher at the bottom this time. That was his signature.”

"But in ‘68, letters didn’t show up till months after first killing.” Riley doesn’t admit how unsettled this makes her feel. What if this is a copycat who’s going to mimic the murders exactly? What happened to Daniel and Vanessa is almost point for point the same as the Zodiac’s first kill. Could
“If I’d gotten away with murder for almost fifty years, I don’t think I’d risk starting again.”

Bozer shrugs. “You would if it was your nature. A life change could suppress the urge to kill for a while. Both the BTK and the grim sleeper stopped killing for a while. But then the monster inside woke up again.” He shakes his head. “There’s something in these people, some kind of compulsion. Like I have to write movie scripts. Or you have to be working on a computer. Or Mac has to be building things. Except that they’re driven to kill.”

“I think you know wa-ay too much about serial killers. That’s a little creepy, Bozer.” Riley raises her eyebrows and turns back to her computer.

"I call it being prepared. If you ever come face to face with one, your survival hinges on being able to get inside their head. Figure out what they want. Otherwise you just end up another one of their statistics."

“Or you end up one.”

"Trust me, if this was a serial killer flick, I’m not the psycho. I’m the loyal friend who dies first.” Boze’s face falls. “Oh no. I’m the one who dies first.” Something changes in his face and he sits down on the end of the bed.

“Boze.” Riley gets up and puts a hand on his shoulder. He’s rambling a mile a minute so he doesn’t have to remember that this case hits home. She’s been in the business long enough to know an act when she sees one. Serial killer nerd is a pretty convincing one. And yeah, he does know his stuff. But he’s not just throwing all this out to impress me, or to show that he’s worth having on the case. He’s doing whatever he can to think about anything other than the fact that those kids and his little brother shared the same fate. “You know you don’t have to pretend you’re okay if this case bothers you.”

“I wanna catch him.” Bozer’s voice is suddenly choked. “I wanna watch when they snap on the cuffs.”

“Well, then, we’re gonna make that happen.” Riley smiles softly. “With as much as you already know about him, we’ve got a good start.”

Riley’s phone buzzes, a text from Sam. Sure you don’t want my help for this one?

No. We’ve got it covered. Thanks though. Any luck?

Not yet. Paying an old friend a visit today.

Cage has been back in Australia the past three days, under orders from Matty. It’s all very hush-hush, but Riley knows enough to piece together that Matty thinks some of Cage’s old sources might help find Jonah Walsh. Matty knows more about Sam’s mysterious past than Riley does, so she must think there’s a connection somewhere. Maybe the CIA investigation turned up a lead.

The phone lights up once again. If you need a long-distance psych profile, you know who to call.

Riley grins. Sam, you’re the best.
Mac’s never been the sort of person who knows what to say at these places. When Mom died he was too young to remember anything but Dad constantly telling him not to wipe his nose with his hands because people were going to want to shake them and he shouldn’t have them all snotty.

At Grandpa’s funeral he just thanked people for their concern. So many people said they were sorry for his loss, and he couldn’t really understand why, because it wasn’t their fault Grandpa had lung cancer, it wasn’t their fault he was dead. So what were they apologizing for? It wasn’t logical to say you were sorry unless it was your fault.

When they lost Jerry, he didn’t say anything at all. He just stood at the gravesite holding Mama Bozer’s hand, and he made a silent promise to get justice for the boy in the coffin. He never told anyone but Wilt.

He and Jack follow Matty through the house. The scent of flowers is overpowering; Mac hates the smell of lilies now. He’s seen too many of them already. This family already lost a father. Now a daughter. Except that unlike the Bozers, the only one left now is the mother.

Matty pushes open the door to a smaller room with a long table, the kind made for large family meals. But now there’s only one person inside, a bent, bowed figure, pressing a tissue against her eyes and nose. There’s a single photograph on the table, surrounded not by lilies but by a tangle of common daisies. The girl in the picture is smiling, arms around the neck of a tall man with a wide smile. The woman laughing beside them bears little resemblance to the one weeping at the table. Mac’s eyes are drawn to the flute in the girl’s hand and the ribbon around her neck, denoting that she’d won second place in a music competition.

A young, talented person with their whole life ahead of them, killed because they happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. Mac’s seen this room before. He’s seen the same distraught, grieving mother.

Mac aches to comfort her. But what can I say? For all the death I’ve seen, I don’t understand it. I don’t know what to say to make it better. Because nothing made it better for me.

Matty doesn’t say anything as she walks over to stand beside the woman. Mrs. Frank turns and pulls Matty into a tight embrace, and Mac’s a bit surprised to see the woman relax into it. It looks like they’re trying to hold each other together. He can tell Matty is murmuring something, but it’s too quiet to hear and he doesn’t want to go closer, it feels like prying into a moment best left undisturbed.

Finally, the two let go and Mrs. Frank turns to look up at Mac and Jack. Matty follows her gaze. “Sarah, these are some of my co-workers. Jack Dalton and Angus MacGyver.” Matty says. “They’re here to help investigate.”

Jack kneels down, his eyes damp with emotion. “There’s no good way to ask the questions that we have to.”

“I-I know. But I want to catch the monster who did this. So ask whatever you need to.” The woman crumples the tissue in her hand. There’s a fire below the pain in her eyes that Mac also recognizes all too well. He saw it in the mirror for four years. She wants to make someone pay for this.

“Can you think of any reason someone might want to hurt your daughter?” Jack asks.

“N-no. Sh-she had so many friends. Everyone...everyone loved her. She was a good student; she...she’d just gotten a scholarship for band. To Stanford.” The woman looks up again, eyes
brimming with tears. “Everyone who knew her loved her.”

“No problems with her boyfriend?”

“Does anyone have problems in the first few months?” Sarah Frank asks, her eyes shimmering. “Dan was a wonderful boy. I was so happy that she was happy. After we lost Will, I worried about her. She’s so sensitive…she was…” her voice trails off in a hiccuping sob.

Mac wraps his arms around himself, there’s a deep pain inside him that’s almost worse than the internal injuries from Kazakhstan. History is repeating itself, in some way, and he’s powerless to stop it. Just like he couldn’t stop what happened to Jerry.

Matty puts a hand on Mrs. Frank’s knee. “We’re going to catch him, I swear to you.”

“What if this was about Bill?” Sarah asks quietly. “What if someone from his past has come back?” She glances at the picture on the table. “He used to tell me he was afraid of someone coming after us. Said he made enemies.” Her voice breaks.

“We don’t believe that’s the case. We believe this is something else entirely,” Matty says quietly. “We’re not at liberty to disclose that information now.”

Sarah cuts her off, voice rising “That’s what Bill always said! When something was wrong! He never let me in, he never let me try to understand. Please, Matty, don’t say that to me now.”

“We’re not going to stop until we find whoever did this,” Mac says, and out of the corner of his eye he sees Matty turn to look at him with a mixture of respect and surprise. *She didn’t expect me to be so invested in something that was personal for her.* Mac may not be too fond of the woman, but she is human. And right now, she’s more human than he’s ever seen her.

*I know what this kind of loss does to a person. How much it hollows you out.* Jerry’s death still hurts, years later. He wouldn’t wish that kind of pain on anyone. “Can we see her room?” he asks, and the woman nods.

Vanessa’s room is an eclectic mixture of decor that reminds Mac a little of what Deja’s used to be like, before she developed her obsession with all things medical. Before she replaced her posters of popular R&B artists and boy bands with anatomy diagrams and the art models on her desk with miniature papier-mâché models of hearts and lungs and brains that Bozer made her. Before the shelves of mystery novels and reimagined fairytales got boxed up to make room for textbooks on first aid and hospital care.

The room looks happy, with its yellow painted walls, a shelf covered in art supplies and potted plants, a little row of painted clay “Little Mermaid” characters on the edge of the dresser in front of the mirror. The lobster looks the most well-loved, his paint is chipping and one claw has been broken off and glued back on. Mac turns away with a sudden catch in his throat. *It was different when she was pictures on a table and papers in a police file. Now she feels so real. So alive. She was a person with a whole real day-to-day routine, with things that made her happy, with things she loved.*

Mac tries not to look at the flute case and music stand in the corner too long. *Mama Bozer refused to let us get rid of any of Jerry’s things. She would go in his room and dust and act like he was going to come back. At least for a while.* He doesn’t think about what happened when she stopped doing that.

He wanders past the bed to the window, glancing out. There’s a massive tree in the backyard, and Mac can see some faint scuffs on the windowsill. *So she did have a pretty adventurous side.* He recognizes the marks someone makes climbing in and out of a window. He made enough of them on
his and Bozer’s room during his days...well, nights...as the Phoenix.

But he always used a combination of a tree limb and a homemade rope ladder to reach Boze’s second floor room. He can’t see any evidence of a rope, and there’s no limb reaching toward the window unless this girl’s a champion jumper.

*But there was.* There’s a stub of a thick branch, fairly recently removed. It’s partially splintered, and at a random glance looks like it was snapped off in a storm. But there are some flat parts around the edges that say differently.

“What do you see, kid?” Jack must have noticed how hard he’s staring.

“It’s what I don’t see.” Mac nods to the window, and Jack comes over to look. Mac points wordlessly to the damaged tree.

“Someone cut that branch so they could get a clear view into Vanessa’s room.” Jack glances past the shorn-off limb to the ramshackle building on the other side of the street, and Mac stares at the graffitied, abandoned building with concern. *That’s odd. That kind of run-down place so close to a nice residential neighborhood?* Something about it is setting Mac on edge. It’s out of place. And in his experience, that always means something. Usually not something good.

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**ABANDONED APARTMENT BUILDING**

**BECAUSE ISN’T THAT WHAT EVERY SERIAL KILLER’S DREAM HIDEOUT IS?**

Jack hopes no one saw him kick in the door of the old apartment building. He doesn’t really want to get arrested in San Francisco for breaking and entering. Mac would have picked the lock, but Jack beat him to the door kick.

Jack isn’t showing it as much as Matty, but this case has hurt him too. He’s keyed up, clearing hallways like they’re in an active war zone, continuously motioning to Mac to stay behind him. He’s not gonna let the kid walk into an ambush.

The hallways smell sickeningly like garbage, sweat, and animals. Jack tries not to sneeze as they climb up to the level where the room that faced Vanessa’s house is located.

This time Jack allows Mac to pick the lock, and he quietly clears the whole room before he motions to Mac that it’s safe to come in.

Jack thought the hall smelled terrible, but the permeating odor of stale cigarette smoke in this room is even worse. The worst of the smell is coming from a red Solo cup on the windowsill. Jack glances inside, it’s two thirds full of cigarette butts.

“He took his time.” Mac nods at the cup, stepping a little closer to examine it.

“Don’t touch it, kid. Cops might be able to get fingerprints or DNA off that stuff,” Jack says. Mac halfway glares at him.

“I wasn’t gonna.”

“Just didn’t want you to get yours all over. With your luck, they’d blame you for this whole thing.” Mac bites his lip and nods. *Dang, I meant it more as a joke, I gotta be more careful.* He’s said that to Riley on ops at least a dozen times; it’s almost force of habit. *The fact of the matter is, Mac would really be in serious trouble if that happened.*
He’s about to start looking for anything else specific when he hears a sound of creaking metal, footsteps on stairs, it sounds like, and the creak of a door opening on the other side of the suite-style apartment.

“Get behind me, kid,” Jack whispers, lifting his gun and moving toward the small passthrough hallway. The door opens from the other side, and a man stares at Jack in shock, then turns and runs back to the window, jumping out onto a fire escape. Jack curses and runs after him.

He wastes a few seconds getting out the window, because it’s on the small side, and Jack’s legs don’t really bend the way they used to. He more falls than steps onto the small landing, and then begins to rush down, gun trained on the fleeing man. There’s too much metal in the way right now to take a shot, he risks a ricochet. *As soon as he’s off this thing I’m gonna get him.*

And then there’s a crash from somewhere above and to the side, and he looks up just in time to duck when glass shards scatter down onto the fire escape. He doesn’t quite realize what the blue and brown shape falling is until it’s already below him.

Jack freezes. Mac just jumped out a freaking window. It looks like the kid’s rappelling down some kind of cable...and then the length runs out. There’s a strangled yelp from the kid as he free-falls the last six or seven feet and crashes into the fleeing man.

Jack rushes down the last of the steps and reaches for Mac. “Kid, you okay?” Mac nods, and then Jack pulls the man to his feet and shoves him against the wall, arm on his throat. “Hey, creep, what were you doing in that building? Why are you still stalking that family? You got what you wanted, you killed the girl!”

“Wh-what the hell?” The guy sounds genuinely stunned. “It was my first time in that unit! I was staying in the stairwell but the guy who was there left. Listen, man, I know it’s trespassing, but it’s warmer in there...”

“What guy?” Jack asks.

“The guy who was in there before.”

“What did he look like?” Jack snaps.

The man begins to stammer and shake. “Normal! Like, normal normal. Not homeless. He was old, but scary old. Like Clint Eastwood, you know? Like he’s old but he’ll kick your ass. We called him the smoking man. He always wore these weird mirrored sunglasses. And he had this real weird walk, not quite a limp, more like heavy. Like lumbering.” The man coughs against Jack’s arm. “We could always hear him coming up the stairs.”

“Who’s this ‘we’?” Jack asks.

“I’m not the only guy who lives here, man. Other people got the same idea. We ain’t hurtin’ no one. The place is empty, no one’s livin’ there. We’re just tryin’ to survive.”

“Well, don’t go anywhere. The cops are on their way and they’re gonna want to talk to you.” Jack glares at the man, who just nods and sits down against the base of the wall. He’ll keep an eye on the guy, but he has to check on Mac too. Because the kid took a very nasty fall. And now he’s leaning on the fire escape, clearly in pain, also clearly trying to hide it.

“Mac? You doin’ okay?”

Mac pushes himself off the fire escape quickly, but stumbles, clutching one wrist and favoring an
ankle as he limps over to Jack. Jack pulls the kid’s hand away from his wrist, ignoring Mac’s hiss of pain, praying he won’t find a shattered bone in the fragile limb the kid’s cradling against his chest. He breathes out a small sigh of relief when it appears there’s nothing more serious than a painful sprain, to either the wrist or the ankle.

*He’s more invested in this than he’ll admit to any of us.* A kid who’s deathly scared of falling just threw himself out a window to stop a guy who might have been the killer.

Jack’s known exactly what this case is bringing back for Mac since he saw that music stand in the room and heard Vanessa had gotten a full ride scholarship for music. *This is Jeremiah Bozer all over again.*

“Yeah, I’m fine. I’ve done stuff like that before. As the Phoenix.” Jack cringes at the thought of Mac without backup, flinging himself out of windows and over edges trying to bring down the bad guy of the week. *Oh kid, you’re lucky you didn’t wind up dead.* He’s honestly shocked that Mac made it almost four years as a vigilante. *Granted, he had Pena around for a while. But still.* Not that the kid doesn’t have fairly impressive skills, but he’s also got absolutely no sense of self-preservation. *Or did that come after prison? When anything is better than messing up and going back inside?*

“Mac, I know this is important to you. But please, kid, don’t kill yourself. It’s not gonna bring those kids back, and it sure as hell isn’t gonna bring Jerry Bozer back.” He forces Mac to sit, rubbing the kid’s shoulders in a combination of forcing him to stay down, and trying to provide some small comfort.

“I know, Jack.” But Mac’s eyes are glassy with tears.

Mac’s glad the pain in his ankle and wrist have dissipated a little by the time Matty shows up with some police officers in tow. He doesn’t think anything’s broken, he’s already told Jack that at least a dozen times. He doesn’t want Matty to have to call anyone to deal with him. *She doesn’t need to know how dangerous some of my improvising is. Or at least doesn’t have to see it firsthand.*

The officers take the homeless guy, who says his name is Randy Dean, to another room to ask him some questions, leaving Mac, Matty, and Jack in the room that faces the Franks’s house. The smell of smoke is making Mac sick. But the cup of cigarette butts has given him an idea.

*I hope we didn’t already accidentally step on any of the evidence.* But Jack had warned him not to touch the cup, so he hadn’t gone any closer. Mac bends down and begins to examine the floor, holding his breath so he doesn’t accidentally blow away any evidence.

“What’s Encyclopedia Brown doing?” Matty mutters. Mac doesn’t like the biting sarcasm in her voice. When Jack teases him, he knows the man doesn’t mean it. Not now. Not even when he still jokingly calls him Carl’s Jr. from time to time. But this hurts. The way it did with Jack at first. *It took so long to get him to trust me. And it took some awful things happening. What is it going to take for Matty to trust?*

“I don’t know, part of his charm I guess.” Jack’s trying to sound casual, but his tone is defensive. Mac shouldn’t be surprised, at this point, when Jack stands up for him, but every time it startles him a little. That someone else would risk making someone mad at *them* to try to protect Mac.

And then he sees it, the slight discolorations on the floor near the window. “Is SFPD’s forensics team here?”

Matty shakes her head. “No, they’re on their way. You’ll have to wait another half hour to play with
Mac glances into the hallway, at the scattering of trash along the walls. There’s an old purple balloon there, almost totally deflated. *I wonder if some of the people who’ve been living in this place are homeless families? If a little kid brought that in with them?* “Or I could just make my own electrostatic dust print lifter…” He grabs the balloon, a soda can, and a few other odds and ends and gets to work.

He can *feel* the judgmental gaze burning into the back of his neck. He’s not going to be able to work knowing he’s being watched so closely. But asking Matty to leave him alone is out of the question.

*Maybe it’ll be okay. If everyone’s quiet, maybe I can ignore…* “Since it looks like you’re just playing with the trash, mind explaining what you’re doing?” He cringes. Talking is the last thing he needs to be doing right now. He’s worried enough he’s going to mess this up.

“Yeah, just a minute…” Mac has to concentrate. He can explain when it’s done.

“That doesn’t work for me. You already know how I feel about your improvising, and all I see is you possibly destroying evidence.” Mac looks up to see Matty’s judgmental frown and Jack’s sad but helpless stare. *He can’t help me. Arguing with her will only make this so much worse.*

Mac isn’t going to be allowed to work in peace until he explains himself. “Every step leaves a little dust from all the places we’ve been. Hard to see on a dirty floor, but with a little mylar and a static charge…” He begins rubbing a sheet of newspaper over the deflated balloon on the floor, “We get a footprint.” He holds up the balloon and Jack takes a picture on his phone. The print is a little smudgy, and a few others are partially superimposed on it, but it’s decent. Enough, he hopes, to ID the owner.

Matty glances from the balloon to the photo. “Okay, send that to Riley. Have her analyze it.”

“Already on it.”

Mac rocks back on his feet and then regrets it as his ankle twinges sharply. He can’t help the soft hiss, and he cringes when Matty turns to glare at him. He’s saved an explanation when Jack finally gets hold of Riley on the phone.

“Hey Riles, we managed to lift a boot print that we think is probably our guy,” Jack says, but Mac doesn’t miss the concerned glance the man shoots his way. *Great, he’s going to scold me for saying I was fine. But I am, it just aches a little. Nothing is broken, there’s no reason to get upset.*

“Good, because I’ve got nothing but dead ends.” Riley’s voice is heavy with disappointment. “I’ve been monitoring cameras around the park, trying to see if one of them caught our shooter, but this guy is good. He knows how to cover his tracks, probably scoped out the place long term. All I’m seeing is a lot of homeless people.” There are a few more clicks. “Okay, I can tell you it’s a size ten and a half, but it’s going to take some time to run the tread through the databases. At least a few hours unless we’re insanely lucky.”

“I might be able to better that time,” Bozer says. Mac hears paper rustle. “That boot is a match to the ones used by the original Zodiac. Size ten and a half Wing Walkers. They’re an type of military boot.” Mac tries to ignore the chill that slips down his spine. *What are the chances that a copycat would have exactly the same shoe size? Unless he’s forcing them to fit…*

“So? Someone could get that from a military surplus store,” Matty says.

“Uh, not anymore.” Riley’s typing rapidly. “They were discontinued in the seventies. They’re an
“Now antique now, you can only find them on a few online sites, like Ebay.”

“Can you-”

“Search them, find out what purchases were made in the last year and trace them?” There’s a smile in Riley’s voice. “I was on that before I even started the sentence.”

Mac subtly readjusts his position as he waits, taking pressure off his ankle. *It’ll be fine in a couple hours.* The problem is, he’s miscalculated how close he was to the wall, and when he attempts to lean on it to relieve the stress on his leg, he simply topples sideways, crashing into a three legged chair that’s been abandoned in the corner of the room and knocking it down with him. The chair breaks into several pieces with a truly spectacular crash, worthy of one of Bozer’s movies. *I can’t even fall quietly.* Matty shoots him a glare that Mac thinks might be perfectly capable of setting the broken pieces of wood around him on fire.

Once again, Mac is saved from immediate consequences by Riley’s voice. “In the past year, eleven pairs were bought in US. But only one was shipped to San Francisco. Russ Collins. And I have an address.” Jack hands the phone to Matty and walks over to where Mac is still trying to remove himself from the remains of the chair.

Jack reaches down to help Mac to his feet, and when he leans in, he whispers, “It’s okay, bud, I’ll try and keep you away from her for a while.” Mac just shudders. *I keep messing up. I look like a stupid, clumsy idiot.* Matty’s going to want him gone.

“Okay, we have an address, people. Let’s move.” Matty hangs up and turns to glare at Mac and Jack, and Mac glances at the dirty floor. *I know I messed up. I’m sorry.*

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**RUSS COLLINS’S RESIDENCE**

**THIS GUY MIGHT BE A REALLY OLD SERIAL KILLER**

Jack slams a hand on the steering wheel. “Man, I can’t believe we might actually be able to catch the real Zodiac killer.”

“Do you really think he’d order a pair of boots that anyone could trace?” Riley asks.

“Maybe he doesn’t expect anyone to have the resources to do that. Not everyone has a Riley,” Jack says, and he smiles when she grins. *Always remember, baby girl, you’re so special.* Jack thinks he might have been one of the first adults who didn’t treat her like her talents either made her a criminal or a freak. *If she told people she was a hacker, they were afraid of her. If she told them she liked writing her own computer code, they called her a nerd and told her to get a life.*

“He was born in 1949. Which means he would have been 20 when the murders started.” Mac’s reading the guy’s dossier. He and Riley and Bozer are crammed in the back seat, with Matty riding shotgun with Jack. Really, that’s more agents than they need here, but this guy might be the actual Zodiac so in Jack’s opinion you can never have too much backup, even though they do have a van full of SFPD SWAT right behind them. And Bozer insisted on coming along, he didn’t want to be left in the hotel room by himself. Jack doesn’t blame him, although he heard a steely thread of determination in Bozer’s voice that makes him think Boze isn’t as scared to be left alone as he says. *He wants to be there when we bring this guy down. Just like Mac, this case is hitting awfully close to home for him.*

Jack parks on the street. The house is in a quiet residential neighborhood. It doesn’t give off the creepy vibes Jack would have expected, but then again, this guy’s avoided being caught for years.
They all pile out of the car, Jack, Riley, and Matty leading the way in tac vests, guns drawn. Jack knocks sharply on the door. “Russ Collins? SFPD wants to talk to you!” There’s no sound from inside.

“Collins?” Jack shouts again, and then there’s a bloodcurdling yell from the upstairs that sends a chill down Jack’s spine. Really? It’s a bit cliche, but terrifying nonetheless. And probable cause.

Jack kicks in the door, raising his gun. Riley and Matty are flanking him, Riley on his right, Matty on the left. This feels just like old times. He points right, and he and Matty and Riley step into what looks like a living room, while the SWAT team starts clearing the left side of the house, a kitchen and a small laundry room, and a garage.

The house is dark, the only light the

Riley leaps back. “There’s a head over there!” She points a shaky finger into the corner of the room, and Jack’s blood pressure skyrockets when he sees that there is indeed a head sitting on a small table. Along with half an arm.

Bozer’s staring, shaking, but suddenly he starts to laugh half-hysterically. Jack and Riley both turn at once to glare at him. “They’re latex props!” He manages to choke out. “I can tell by the way the light reflects.”

“Who is this guy?” Jack asks.

“According to his dossier, a theater manager. Which explains the props,” Mac says, but his eyes look a little too wide. He was scared too.

There’s a sudden clumping on the stairs, and Jack swings his gun upward. The second an elderly man rounds the corner of the landing and sees him, the man startles, dropping a sheaf of pages in his hands. Papers scatter everywhere as the old man reaches for his robe pocket.

“Hands where I can see them!” Jack shouts. He’s not taking chances. The old fellow with his glasses doesn’t seem like the killer type. But then again, he’s an actor, he can seem like anything he wants.

“I’m just getting my hearing aids!” The man shouts, loudly enough that Jack cringes. Jack keeps the gun on him as the man pulls out a set of hearing aids and puts them on.

“Russ Collins?” Jack asks.

“That’s me. Sorry, officers, I took my hearing aids out to work on my script and I didn’t hear you knocking. Deaf as a stone without ‘em, and I was lost in my own head to boot.” The man says. “Can I put my hands down now?” Jack glances to Matty for confirmation. She nods. “I could feel something shaking. Did you people kick in my door?” The man asks, glancing past them at the entryway. Jack feels a slight guilty flush spread across his face.

“We’d like to have a few words with you. About some shoes.” Jack hears Matty say.

“These ones.” Riley must have been rummaging in the hall closet, because she steps up beside Jack with a pair of black Wing Walkers. “You ordered a pair two months ago.”

Collins cocks his head like a confused dog, staring at the boots in Riley’s hand. “Yes. I bought a pair of those. One of my actors showed up to a rehearsal with a pair, and it reminded me I’d had them when I was in the reserves. Best pair of shoes I’d ever had, and it’s hard to find good ones anymore. So I had my daughter track some down on the internet and bought myself a pair.”
“I assume your daughter can confirm that story?” Jack says. “Can she also confirm where you were last Friday night?”

“No, but about thirty other people can. We were rehearsing Guys and Dolls that night. I was at the theater from five until two in the morning,” Jack sighs and puts his gun away. *He’s a dead end. Not our man. Not unless he’s a convincing enough actor to be in two places at the same time.*

“You said one of your actors was wearing those same shoes?” Mac asks. “Can you give us a name?”

“Wyatt Orwell.”

“What can you tell us about him?” Matty asks.

“He’s been with my theater since high school. Had a real knack for just sinking right into the characters. I could tell he liked spending a lot of time there, so I always let him stay late. Didn’t like to pry, but I don’t think the home situation was that great.” Collins shrugs. “I let him help make costumes and build sets as long as he wanted to.”

“Where can we find him?” Matty says.

“He still lives with his dad. Well, he did, up until his old man had a stroke two months ago. He’s missed most of his rehearsals ever since. Spends all his time at the convalescent home; which I got to admit is a bit of a shock since he and the old man never got along before. But I guess everyone’s different, maybe they’re patching things up while they still have time. I don’t want to fire the guy, not when the theater’s the only home he really had, but he’s not gonna be ready for any of the shows.”

Russ scribbles an address on a pad of paper next to the old landline telephone. “This is his house.”

“Oh, officers, what’s this all about? Is Wyatt in some kind of trouble?” Collins asks.

“We don’t know.” Matty replies, then turns to Jack. “Let’s go.”

Jack apologizes on the way out for destroying the door, but the old man looks rather delighted by it all. “I didn’t know they actually did that in real life!” he says, sounding rather thrilled. “Now I can throw this in those critics’ faces when they say my plays aren’t realistic! How many authors can say they’ve actually had a police raid on their home?” He’s already scribbling in a little notebook that he pulled out of the pocket of his robe. Jack grins. *Creative types are always eager to turn everything into a story.* He wonders for a moment if this scene really does make it into a script, who’s going to get cast to play his part. *They’d better find themselves a handsome Texan, if they’re really going for realism here.*

Jack and Mac are the only ones in the car when he sits down in the driver’s seat. Matty’s talking to the SWAT team, probably establishing a plan for hitting Orwell’s house, Riley’s on her computer, and Bozer’s shadowing her as usual. He’s got it bad. But she’s not having it.

Jack leans back in the seat and sighs. He really hopes this is the lead they’ve been waiting for. Matty’s at a whole new level of stressed out, it hasn’t been this bad since Chechnya. *Actually this might be worse.* So far Jack’s managed to avoid leaving her and Mac alone, and he’s hoping the chair incident might just fade from her memory entirely if they stay out of trouble long enough, especially if they catch this guy.

Mac clearly isn’t of the same opinion. He’s nervously twisting a paperclip in the back seat, glancing out the window every few seconds to make sure Matty isn’t coming. *He’s nervous, and that’s how he calms himself down, but he’s scared to death Matty’s gonna see it and scold him.* The kid can’t
Someone taps on the window and Mac jumps, tossing the paperclip into the air. Jack pulls his gun immediately, pointing it at the man who seems to have materialized outside the window, holding a letter.

“Don’t shoot! I was supposed to deliver this to you!” The man holds his hands in the air, waving the letter back and forth.

Jack pushes his door open. “You looking to get killed? Hey? Get around the front of the car. Put your hands on the hood. Now!” He can tell they’ve attracted the attention of the others, Matty and two of the SWAT guys are rushing over, and Riley’s closed her laptop.

Jack gingerly takes the envelope from the man’s outstretched hand and gives it to Mac, pulling out his cuffs and twisting the messenger’s hands behind his back. “Where’d you get that letter? Huh?”

“What did this guy look like?”

“I don’t know! He had a hoodie and sunglasses!”

“Sunglasses at night? You didn’t think that was suspicious?” The man just shrugs, clearly terrified that everything’s going so poorly for him.

“Everything about that envelope is evidence, down to the glue sealing it shut,” Matty says as Mac turns it over and glances at it.

“I’ll be careful with it.” Mac runs to the trunk of the car and rummages in what Jack assumes are the go bags, because he comes back with a bottle of water. “Jack, can you get him off of the hood and pop the release?” Jack shakes his head, but he follows Mac’s instructions.

Mac dumps the water onto the idling engine, then holds the letter into the steam. Eventually the flap falls open, and Mac pulls out the tweezers on his knife to remove the letter and hold it up. The letter is handwritten, ink on paper that looks fairly old, and slightly yellowed.

_This is the Zodiac speaking to the detectives in the parked sedan. You may be watching me but just no that I am watching you. Me 39 You 0._

“Oh man. I’m getting a bad feeling about this.” Jack glances from the letter to the wide-eyed man who delivered it. _He knows we’re onto him. And the hunters just became the hunted._

“Mr. Ronald Winter. I need you to listen to me very carefully.” Matty paces back and forth in front of where the man is cuffed in the back of the SWAT van. “Ordinarily, I’m supposed to reveal as little as possible about who I am or my involvement in any case. But I want you to understand something.” She leans in, and the man pulls back. “Vanessa Frank wasn’t just another victim of a random shooting. She was like a daughter to me. So now you know that if you lie to me, or try to be evasive, I will take it very personally.”

He swallows. “I swear, I told you everything I know already. He was a white guy, I could tell from the arm. He was wearing gloves, but it’s cold out tonight, it didn’t seem suspicious.”

“And the sunglasses?”
“I don’t know!” Winter is starting to shake, a nervous tremor running down his right leg. “I swear, I didn’t think it was anything wrong!”

“Someone asked you to deliver a letter to a car parked in front of a SWAT van and you didn’t think that was a little odd?”

“Listen, I just wanted the money!” The man gasps. “It was a quick hundred, and I could really use that! It seemed like a harmless prank!” Matty sighs. She’ll leave him for the police to deal with.

She climbs back out and walks to where her team is clustered around the car. As much as she wants to keep them all together, especially after this latest scare, the truth is it will be inefficient. If this guy is Orwell, he knows he’s being hunted, and he probably won’t be at the house. They need to start working on other ways of tracking him, and it’s better not to be doing that from a moving car.

“Riley, go back to the hotel, look through the evidence we have already, and start running everything you can on this Wyatt Orwell guy. Records, credit cards, emails, if the man sneezes I want to know about it. Bozer, take that letter to the SFPD crime lab, have them analyze it. Mac, Jack and I are going to that house.”

Bozer climbs into one of the patrol cars that’s arrived on scene, and Riley gets into another. Matty watches them leave, and then nods to Jack and climbs into their own rental. Time to go make their second raid of the night.

WYATT ORWELL’S HOUSE

NOT WHAT ANYONE WAS EXPECTING

Jack’s slightly disappointed when one of the SWAT members kicks in the door this time. I guess they were getting jealous the out-of-towners were having all the fun. This house is significantly less cluttered than the old theater manager’s. There are no latex props on the tables, no script books scattered haphazardly on counters, no costumes hanging up in the laundry room. The house is pristine, like a page out of a home design magazine. I had to subscribe to two because of my tile sales cover. And they were actually kind of interesting. Not Guns and Ammo interesting, but still.

Jack hopes if he dies and someone cleans his apartment out they don’t laugh at the dog-eared stack of them on his dining room table hidden under the ones about tactical weapons. Riley already knows he likes to flip through them on nights when he can’t sleep; she’s joined him for several of those late-night perusals and they’ve gotten into heated arguments about complementary color schemes and when minimalism is too much.

Everything is pristine. Clothes folded neatly in drawers, plates stacked in order in the cupboards. The place is giving Jack the heebie-jeebies, maybe more so than if it looked like the medieval dungeon he was imagining. There is not a speck of human personality here. Not so much as a scrapbook. At least a dungeon says something about its owner. This house doesn’t.

“It’s clear,” Jack finally reports back to Matty. There’s nothing here to help them trace this guy down, even if he is in fact their killer.

“We were expecting Seven and we got Leave it to Beaver.” Mac shrugs.

“I can’t go back to Sarah and tell her we have nothing.” Matty’s voice is the razor edge between anger and grief. “There must be something here.”

Jack doesn’t answer, but the SWAT leader does for him. “I’m sorry, Director Webber, there’s nothing here.”
Matty’s face collapses. Jack hurts for her, because to show this much emotion in front of complete strangers, she’s shattering on the inside. “Then we’ll go back to the hotel, regroup with Riley, and figure out our next move.” She moves slowly to the door, head bowed, all energy gone.

*This is unacceptable.* Jack may have his issues with Matty, especially when it comes to Mac, but the woman just lost someone she considered a child. *If someone killed Riley...or Mac, I would demand answers and I wouldn’t stop until I found them and squeezed every drop of blood from their body. And I’d steamroll anyone who got in my way.* Actually, he thinks Matty’s showing remarkable restraint. *If I was in her position someone would have been shot already. Probably non-fatally, but still.*

He takes one last look around, unwilling to leave just yet. *She’s hurting.* Jack has felt a small semblance of that grief, every time he’s come close to losing Riley and now Mac on ops. *I’m always willing to burn the world to get them back.* He would have turned this perfect house inside out… and then it hits.

Mac and Matty are still in the door, staring back at him, and Jack wonders if he’s making an odd face. “Know how you get that faraway look when wheels start turning in your head?” Jack asks, glancing at Mac.

“No, not really.”

“Well, you do, and I’m starting to get it too.”

“You think you’re thinking, Dalton?” Matty asks, and below the familiar sting is a deep current of hope. *She doesn’t want to let herself believe I might have found something, but she can’t help hoping.*

“Okay, bear with me a minute. What is it about a serial killer that makes them so hard to find?”

Matty snaps. “Is this a trick question? Do you want us all to sing the *Jeopardy* theme music and write down our answers? Because if you don’t have anything better than more questions, you are wasting our time and we need to go.”

But it seems like Mac’s caught on. “They look like normal people. Because they’re trying to hide the monster on the inside.” *He’s probably heard that from his serial killer nerd roommate a dozen times.* It even sounds like something Bozer would say. *We might just have figured it out. But the problem is, I don’t know what we just figured out.*

Matty is two seconds away from kneecapping someone with her sidearm. They’ve had an exhausting day, every lead is a dead end, and now Jack is spouting random nonsense and staring dramatically into the middle distance.

“Think about it. Man, this guy’s an actor. Don’t you think he should have pictures from his shows? Shouldn’t there be family pictures at least, if it’s his dad’s house?”

“My house didn’t have family pictures,” Mac says. Matty flinches. *Yes, because your father was a sociopath...* And then it hits her that Jack is exactly right. Because that’s the exact profile of the kind of killer they’re looking for. *Someone with absolutely no regard for human connection. No empathy, no emotion, no affection. Someone driven to do one thing. To kill.*

“You think there’s something hidden in this house.”

Jack nods. “It’s too perfect. Too staged. He’s trying too hard.” *But where do we even begin to look?*
And then out of the corner of her eye, Matty sees Mac moving. Mac is grabbing a handful of random things from the living room and kitchen. The wi-fi signal box, aluminum foil, and a radio from one of the SWAT guys, who tries to protest until Jack glares at him. Mac starts disassembling all of it on the kitchen table, and Matty has the deja vu feeling of when she used to raid a place too late, and see the remains of one of these projects. *It’s odd to see one in progress. We only ever encountered the end results.* She quickly shuts down that train of thought, before it leads her to places and people better left in the past.

“Okay, genius, what are you doing?” He finishes tweaking some foil.

“Wi-fi signals are just radio waves. And the cool thing about radio waves is that they can travel through walls.” He starts walking through the house, the wi-fi box wired to the radio battery to make it portable, the little speaker on top emitting a faint whine. “So with a dish to focus the waves and a speaker to pick them up…”

“You can see through walls!” Jack says excitedly.

“Well, hear through them, actually. To be able to see through them, I’d need a monitor screen and…” Mac continues walking, then stops at the back of the living room, near a wall of bookshelves. The speaker begins making a louder, more insistent drone. “There’s a gap in the wall here. Right behind that shelf.”

Mac sets down his wi-fi router and all three of them begin tugging at the edge of the cabinet. And then Matty’s fingers find a small clasp embedded in the wood, behind the edge of a thick volume of Shakespeare. “There’s latches!” Mac finds another above it, and then the door swings open.

Behind it is a small gap between the wall and the exterior of the house, and stairs leading downward. They end in a small area that appears to be a basement, but is apparently not directly under the house. Matty can see a wall that is probably the edge of the basement the SWAT team cleared. *Jack was right, there’s more to this house than there appeared to me.* She swings a flashlight up, and takes an involuntary step back at the sight of the papers, photos, and drawings that cover the walls.

She steps up to get a closer look at the yellowed, crinkled newsprint. “1969, 1970...Those are the original San Francisco Chronicle articles.” Jack and Mac look equally stunned and concerned by the sight.

“So either this is some kind of creepy shrine to the Zodiac killer…”

“Or this is where he’s been living the whole time.”

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SFPD CRIME LAB

Bozer jumps a mile when his phone rings, almost upsetting a box of papers and earning him an annoyed glare from the officer standing behind him.

The caller ID says it’s Jack. Bozer’s gonna punch the guy for giving him a heart attack. Well, he would if he didn’t think Jack might punch him back, and a lot harder. He answers, stepping off into a corner to take the call.

“Hey Boze, how’s it going?” Jack’s voice sounds a little stressed.

“I took the letter down to the SFPD’s crime lab like you asked.”
“And what have you got?”

“Well, they’re not completely done, but they’ve got a handwriting expert here and he took one look at it and said it’s a perfect match to the original Zodiac. Right down to the badly misspelled words.”

“So he thinks it’s the real guy?”

“Well, actually, it’s a little too perfect. Handwriting changes with age, so theoretically this guy’s should be a little different. This is almost identical. As if he’s the same age as he was when the killings first started.”

“So this is a copycat?” Jack asks. “Because we just found a creepy hidden basement lair in Wyatt Orwell’s house, and there’s a ton of original newspaper clippings from the Zodiac case.”

“Well, they think he can’t be the original. Maybe he just got his hands on a lot of the old stuff.”

Bozer can’t hide the interest, though. “And didn’t Collins say that Orwell was young, like thirties?”

“Yeah…” Jack seems to be thinking. “Hey Mac? Boze says they think the handwriting’s a copy.”

“What if Orwell’s dad had those papers?” Mac’s voice comes through a little tinny. “Maybe he kept them from when the Zodiac was starting out.”

“Ok, well, they’re done here, so I have to go.” Boze picks up the letter and walks out of the police station. It’s starting to rain, and he has to shake off a serious case of the jitters.

“I’m outside a freaking police station. Nothing is going to happen. But with the rain and the streetlights, it looks like every scene in a horror movie right before the damsel in distress gets kidnapped by the creep.

There’s a cab near the stairs, and Bozer flags it down.

“Cabbie?” Bozer opens the door. “Presidio Heights. Corner of Washington and Cherry.” The cab driver tosses a cigarette out the door.

“No problem.”

Jack can feel a full-body shiver coming on, and it’s not because of how damp the air is down here. This basement is seriously creepy. The walls aren’t just covered with newspaper clippings. There are photos too. And a disturbing amount of them are of Vanessa and her boyfriend.

Matty stares at the pictures with tear-filled eyes. She traces the outline of the girl with her fingers. “That monster watched her for weeks and she didn’t even know.”

“Matty, it you’re not okay, you can leave.”

“No. I have to be here. We have to find him.”

Jack pulls a box out from under the table and drops it there. “What’s this?” He starts pulling out some papers, a bunch of musty things with the pages crumbling and sections clipped out. “This looks like the original papers that those articles came from.”

Mac takes a few more, shuffling through them. “The dates are right for it.” He glances from the papers to the wall. “Most of those pictures are old, except the ones of Vanessa, but there’s also this blond girl. If he’s keeping to the original pattern, he won’t kill for another few months. But it looks like he’s already picked another victim.”

“Maybe he’s escalating the timetable? He did drop off the first of the letters already.” Jack reaches
down past the newspapers, there’s something heavier and more substantial underneath. That box weighed more than it should have if all it was stuffed with was those old papers.

There are four leather-bound journals under the papers. Jack opens the one with a “1” labeled on the spine in black ink. He leafs through the pages, and cringes. The handwriting is identical to the writing on the letter they were given. But what’s worse is what it says. In between the misspelled words, Jack can see that this is a record of the Zodiac’s techniques.

*How the hell did this guy get hold of these?* The newspapers are one thing, everyone would have had them. But these journals... *did he run across them at an auction or a roadside sale, like Aunt Chrissy got those letters from Sam Houston in that old steamer trunk she bought?*

There’s a more disconcerting possibility. *Maybe the old man who had a stroke was the original.* Maybe Wyatt Orwell inherited more than a house. Maybe he inherited the same psychopathic tendencies.

Mac reaches into a box and pulls out another one of the books. “These are…”

“Journals. In the same handwriting that the Zodiac’s original letters were written in.”

Matty takes the journal from Jack. “He was creating a manual for serial killers.” She flips through the pages. “In between these psychotic rants about the afterlife and police states and other crazy talk, he’s giving exact explanations of how he killed. His methods, how he avoided being caught, how he stalked his victims.

Jack thumbs through the other two books. The one labeled “4” is empty, and “3” is only half-full. The last entry is dated 1971.

“It’s incomplete. Why would he stop?”

“Same reason he stopped killing?” Mac rifles through the journal again and something loose falls out, fluttering to the floor. A photograph.

“No,” Matty whispers as the paper settles to the floor, the image of a man shockingly like the one in the police sketches, with a child in his arms.

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**MOTEL ROOM**

**YES, NOTHING BAD EVER HAPPENS TO THE GIRL ALONE IN ONE**

Riley’s lost track of time. Since she got back to the room, she’s been searching for anything about Wyatt Orwell. Apparently he was a problem student in school, likely undiagnosed dyslexic. *That would explain the poor spelling.* But there are also some reports that sound an awful lot like antisocial personality disorder. Fights with other students, cruelty to small animals, an apparent lack of social skills or empathy.

*The makings of a killer.* Riley’s pretty sure this is their guy. After school he has a pretty clean record for a while. Worked in Collins’s theater and at a local drugstore. Collins was right, he did live with his father. There are a couple filed complaints and one restraining order from a woman who claimed he was stalking her, all within the past few years.

When she gets the call from Jack, she’s less surprised than it sounds like he expects her to be. “We think Wyatt Orwell might be the son of the original Zodiac.”
“It would make sense.” The dyslexia could be hereditary. As could the clearly disturbed mental state.

“Well, that’s an underwhelming response.”

“Everything points to it.” Riley taps away. “He was born in 1971, right after the Zodiac stopped most of his communication. His mother died in the birth, and he was totally raised by his father, Keith. According to his teachers, he was a problem child. Looks like Antisocial Personality Disorder, before people were diagnosing it.”

“Any leads on where he might have gone? He’s not at his house. And he probably knows we had to have found it after talking to Collins.”

“His father owned some properties, I can check into that.”

“Why don’t you ask the resident nerd of all things Zodiac?” Jack asks, and that’s when it hits. Riley drops the phone to the desk, feeling herself go cold and stiff as if she’s the corpse.

“Ri? Something wrong?” Jack asks. “Ri! Are you okay?”

She finally forces the words out of her throat. “Bozer never came back to the room.”

“He said he was done at the crime lab almost an hour ago.” Jack’s voice has a dangerous edge. “He should be back there.”

“Maybe he just got caught in traffic. I’ll call him.” Riley hangs up and calls Bozer’s phone. It rings through to voicemail.

“You’ve reached the one and only Wilton F. Bozer. Let me know what’s up and I’ll get back to you as soon as I can.”

Riley hopes her voice isn’t shaking too badly. “Hey Boze, it’s me. Riley. Call me back when you get this, okay? I know I’m just being kinda paranoid but I’m worried. Bye.” She hangs up, then sets down the phone and leans her head in her hands.

I’m not helpless. I can check security cameras outside the station. See what happened to him. She quickly pulls up the San Francisco PD’s security system as well as the traffic grids. Hacking in is a matter of a few minutes, and she sees Bozer leave the crime lab, walk outside, and hail a taxi. Riley writes down the cab’s number and follows it through the city via traffic cam feeds.

It was on its way to the hotel over forty-five minutes ago. Something’s wrong. She continues to watch. The cab parks across the street from the hotel, near a shadowy spot that leaves the camera blind...and doesn’t move.

Riley speeds up the recording. The driver and passenger doors open briefly, then slam again. But Bozer never walks around the cab. Instead, he seems to have disappeared into that shadowy space beside the cab.

Riley rushes downstairs and out to where the cab is still parked on the street. It’s raining again, a soft mist that sticks to her skin, hisses on the street and the metal of the car, and makes her shudder. This is wrong. This is too much like a movie. She pulls open the rear door of the cab, one hand on her gun, afraid of what she’ll find inside. Would he have shot Boze right here in the cab? It doesn’t fit the Zodiac’s work but maybe he knows he’s being hunted and got desperate. Maybe he wanted to send a message...

The rear seat of the cab is empty. So is the front. But there’s a letter in a white envelope on the
driver’s seat. Addressed, in dark, messy handwriting Riley knows too well, To thoze who seek me.

SOMEWHERE ON A STAGE

BUT THE DEATH IS DEFINITELY GOING TO BE REAL

Bozer knows stage lights when he sees them. Even if it’s while coming out of a drug induced stupor while wearing some kind of cloth bag over his head. He shudders at the feeling of rope holding his hands together behind his back, of the loose material over his face. I wish I could say it’s the first time. But after Richards kidnapped me...

He tries not to think about that. He doesn’t need to panic. What did you just tell Riley? The key to surviving coming face to face with a serial killer is to get inside their heads.

He can hear someone pacing in front of him. Someone with heavy boots. And a bit of a limp, if he’s any judge of steps. I’ve heard Mac try to hide one often enough, I know what it sounds like.

Then the bag is ripped off, and he’s face to face with the hood, sunglasses, and badge of the Zodiac killer. He can’t quite hold back a surprised gasp when the man waves a gun in his face. “Well, well. So you thought you could find me. You thought you were all so smart.”

Bozer shrugs. “Clearly not as smart as you.”

“Flattery won’t get you anywhere!” The man shouts. “You will die. You must die.” He raises the gun, aiming it directly at Bozer’s head. “That’s the way it has to be.”

Boze swallows thickly. Why go through all the theatrics? This isn’t something the Zodiac did. Shooting me in the cab would have been more his pattern, he killed a cabbie right at that intersection.

“You’re not going to shoot me. Not yet. It doesn’t follow your pattern.”

“You know nothing about me.” The man snarls. “You’re not even a real cop. You don’t have a badge.”

“I may not be a cop, but I know everything there is to know about the Zodiac. And you’re not him. This isn’t right. The guy? In the movie theater? This never happened. Shoot me, and you’re not even a good imitation.” He knows it’s risky, he might just piss the guy off, make him shoot sooner. But he needs to stall for time. Mac will find me. He always gets me out of trouble. He’s coming, I just have to give him time.

“You’re a smart one. I need your little girlfriend too. And then the scene will be perfect.”

“Oh, she’s not...we’re not...Wait, does it look like Riley’s my girlfriend?” Bozer almost laughs. She’s so far from being even close...right? He wishes, but that’s all it is.

“When they come to rescue you, I will kill both of you together. Poetic, isn’t it? Together in life, together in death.” Bozer really could laugh at the irony. I guess I’m just fated to have to die to be with the girl I’m in love with. If he somehow survives this, it would make an amazing movie script.

“You say you know everything about the Zodiac?” The man continues, pacing. “Tell me, did you know he had a child?” Boze shakes his head. It does make sense, though. The major life change that would have halted the kills. “Oh. Then let me tell you a story.” The man crouches and whips off his mask, revealing shaggy brown hair and wild eyes. “Let me tell you my story.” And Bozer shudders
head to foot as all the pieces fall together.

When Jack parks the car, Riley meets him, her face a mix of fear and horror. Behind her, he can see the trunk of the cab open. Inside, barely visible, is a hand. A hand Jack is both afraid is attached to a body, and relieved, in a twisted way, to notice belongs to someone very pale-skinned. It's not Bozer.

“This cab picked Bozer up from the SFPD and drove him here. Whoever was driving must have taken him out into that shadowy area over there.” Riley gestures vaguely. “I found footprints with the same ten and a half Wing Walkers and some drag marks like he was moving a...a body. They stopped at the road over on the other side. He might have hijacked a car or hotwired one to make a getaway. I can’t get a good camera angle to see.” She sighs. “He killed the real cabbie and left his body right here. Corner of Washington and Cherry. Just where the Zodiac killed a cab driver years ago.” Riley shivers. “Up till now, he’s followed the pattern. Even to that detail. But kidnapping one man? That doesn’t fit. He liked to kill couples.”

“He’s probably getting nervous.” Jack glances at the letter Riley’s holding. “Damn, another one?”

“Let’s go deal with this in the room. I’d prefer not to be discussing it on the street,” Matty says. They leave the SFPD unit that followed them over to deal with the cabbie’s body. Jack hears them say it was a single shot to the head. Right down to the last detail. So why kidnap Bozer?

He hopes the letter provides them some clues. Mac steams it open in the bathroom sink, and when he pulls it out, the whole team clusters around to take a look.

You were warned to stop following me. This is what happens when you ignore me. Now you have four hours to find him. Me 40? You 0

“Man, you know he’s got to be lying. There’s no way he’s gonna let Bozer walk away, no matter what,” Jack mutters, standing up and beginning to pace. “It doesn’t make sense. None of this makes sense.”

“We’ve been pushing him hard. We forced him to up his timetable,” Matty says. “He knows we found his hiding place, he’ll know we’ll be looking for the second girl in the photos, putting her and anyone close to her under protection. So he went after another victim.”

“Yes, but why Bozer? The Zodiac usually killed couples,” Mac says.

Riley turns to them, and there’s a dawning horror on her face. “Oh God. What if he saw Bozer and me by the car? On the computer? He was standing so close, we were talking, what if he thought…”

“You two were a couple,” Jack finishes for her. That has to be it. He’s expecting Riley to show up to save Bozer. It’s why he left the letter for her to find. He was hoping she would open it and go directly after them. The guy probably didn’t want to risk trying to kidnap Riley from the hotel, but he probably hoped she’d abandon all caution and go after her ‘boyfriend’.

“This is insane. This is over the top,” Matty mutters.

“It’s theatrical,” Mac says suddenly. “Bozer said the original Zodiac was inspired by movies. And Wyatt Orwell worked at a theater. This is exactly the kind of convoluted plot someone mentally imbalanced might concoct, especially someone surrounded by complicated stories like that.” He pauses. “And I think I know where he’s keeping Bozer.”

THE SEAVIEW THEATER
Riley can’t stop thinking about all the ways this could go wrong. *If he dies it’s my fault.* She’s the one who convinced Matty to let him come along because she knew how much this case meant to him. It’s thanks to her that this creep thought Bozer was a fitting target.

When they step into the lobby, she can hear someone talking. It sounds like the villain monologue from a play, but she’s fairly certain this is a nightmare playing out in real life.

“I wish I’d never been born. He didn’t really want me. He wanted a puppet. He wanted to make me into the perfect person he saw in his twisted little world. Nothing I did was good enough for him. He was never satisfied.”

Riley follows Jack down the hallway into the auditorium. She can see a vague shadow of someone onstage in a chair, and another figure crouching in front of them, both faded out by the footlights.

Jack glances up front. “There’s no cover between us and them. I could bust a move but he’d see me coming a mile away.”

“Not if he’s looking the other direction.” Mac’s fumbling through a janitorial closet, pulling out some chemicals. He glances at them, pours a couple into the same bottle, and then lights the end of a cloth before jamming it in as well. “Get ready. When this happens, it’s going to happen fast.” He holds onto the bottle for a scarily long time, then as the cloth burns down flings it toward the side of the room. It hits the wall and explodes in a burst of flame, sending a cloud of roiling smoke through the room. Jack, Riley and Matty break cover and begin to run toward the stage.

By the time they get there, only Bozer is still there. He’s panting, choking on the smoke, but he seems intact. “Which way did that Phony-ac go?” Jack asks, and Bozer nods his head toward the right. Jack, Mac and Matty run off, but Riley stays with Bozer, starting to cut the ties on his wrists. *In case he doubles back, I don’t want to leave Bozer unprotected.*

“You know, he thought you were my girlfriend?” Bozer asks, as the smoke begins to clear and he stops coughing up a lung.

“Yeah, sorry about that,” Riley mutters.

“Don’t be.” Bozer pulls her into a clumsy hug as he stands up, and she can’t tell whether he was falling because of lack of circulation in his feet, or if he really is being clingy and affectionate. “We’re okay. We’re okay.”

The basement of the theater is a tangled maze of hallways, dressing rooms, and prop storage. Jack nearly blows the head off a mannequin before he realizes the bald thing staring at him can’t hurt him.

*Dang. Why does this guy have to have a thing for creepy underground places?* It just feels too much like the part of the horror movie where someone expendable gets killed. Jack’s not sure he wants to find out if he’s that guy or not.

Somehow, they managed to get split up. *That’s the cardinal no-no of horror movies. Never split up to search a place. Ever. We should have clarified that before we came down here.* He has no idea where Matty or Mac are.

*If something happens to the kid I’ll tear this guy apart limb from limb.* Jack hopes Mac had sense enough to realize they’re dealing with a guy with a gun, and his SAK isn’t going to be much use against that. He hopes the kid went back up with Riley and Bozer. He’d be safe up there, or at least...
safer. They’d be able to see the threat coming. Here, there are too many corners, too many blind spots.

Something rustles beside him and he jumps, but it’s just Matty coming out of a side hallway. “Dalton, it’s just me. Don’t shoot,” She hisses. *Not like I’d have hit you anyway. I’m aiming at his height, not yours.* That’s always been one of Matty’s particular advantages in a firefight. She can almost always find cover, and it’s rare she’s ever hit. *People used to say she couldn’t be a field operative. She proved them wrong a hundred times over.*

She falls into step with Jack, both of them clearing hallways. Jack’s doubly alert; his nerves are frayed looking for this guy, and if Mac comes out of nowhere like Matty did, Jack doesn’t want to shoot him.

And then there’s a crunch up ahead and Jack sees the barrel of a gun pointed directly at them, showing from behind a mannequin. “Shoot me, I shoot you.” Jack recognizes that voice, it’s the homeless guy from the stalker apartment. *I thought we handed him over to the SFPD. Guess they let him go.* He can’t believe they literally had this guy in their hands.

But it looks like the gun is focused only on Jack. *Matty’s almost hidden behind that stack of suitcases. He probably can’t see her. Perfect opportunity.* Jack knows Matty’s got this. He begins to raise his hands, letting his gun slide down his finger. And then there’s a crash and a blurry blue and tan shape crashes into their suspect for the second time in twenty-four hours. *Kid, you gotta stop throwing yourself into these things.* Jack hears the gun skitter across the floor, and sees it slide under a costume rack. *Okay, now get out of the way and we’ll handle this.*

And then Mac’s being dragged to his feet, and Jack sees the dim lights catch on the glint of a blade at his throat. *Damn it!* The killer pulls Mac in front of him, using the kid as a human shield. *We can’t get to him without going through Mac.* “If you want him alive, drop your guns.”


“You won’t shoot. You’re not like me.” The man’s laugh is mocking. “But I will slit his throat and let him die in a pool of his own blood, while you watch helplessly, if you don’t walk away now and let me leave.”

“You don’t want to kill him, not really. You just wanted to prove to your dad that you were good enough. To be just like him.” Jack’s got to keep him talking. Maybe it will let Mac get an edge, find a way to break this guy’s grip. “But this isn’t the way.”

“It’s the only way he understands!” Orwell shouts, and Jack sees the knife dig deeper. A thin trickle of blood begins to run down Mac’s neck, and the kid cringes, eyes widening in pain and fear. “I will kill him!”

And then there’s a deafening gunshot, echoing in the concrete hallway. The man screams and drops the knife, clutching at a sudden gush of blood from his wounded bicep, and Jack hears the metal clang off the ground. Mac stumbles forward, but then turns and catches the guy straight across the face with an elbow. The man goes down, and doesn’t move again. Mac looks at Jack and gives him a slight nod.

Jack shakes his head. *I didn’t shoot.* Then he sees Matty beside him, her gun smoking slightly. He looks down at her, and the look she gives him tells him everything he needs to know. And then Mac begins to shudder, the fear and trauma and adrenaline crash catching up to him, and Jack runs toward him.
Mac’s shaking violently by the time Jack reaches him, cringing away from touching any part of the body on the ground. “Hey, kid, I got you. I got you.” Mac stumbles and goes down hard, clutching at his ankle. *Probably re-injured it and made it even worse.* “Mac, you’re safe now. It’s gonna be okay.”

Matty hangs up the phone and turns to face her team. “I want to thank all of you. Because it’s thanks to your work that I just told Sarah her daughter’s killer will face justice.”

“And we caught the original Zodiac too,” Jack says with a grin. “I mean, he’s in a nursing home hooked to an oxygen tank and he can’t really move his right side, but still. We finally got him.”

“You do realize you can’t tell anyone, Dalton,” Matty says sharply, and he gives her a wounded look. She lets her smile soften. “But you’ll go to bed at night knowing the world is a safer place thanks to what you did.”

Bozer shakes his head. “I wish we’d gotten to him sooner. Maybe we could have saved his son before it was too late for him.” He shakes his head. “Like, I get that he kidnapped me, but his life was screwed up, man.”

“What did he tell you?” Matty asks. She’s pretty sure Bozer doesn’t really have Stockholm Syndrome, but she’s rather impressed with the level of empathy he’s displaying. *He’d made more than just a good lab assistant. He would make a fantastic intelligence gathering operative. Or a good infiltrator. He could convince people to spill their life story to him.*

“Apparently he’d spent his entire life trying to impress a sociopath,” Bozer says. “It was never enough. That man was incapable of love, and then his son paid the price. He got so desperate to finally find a way to make that man respect him, that he decided to become him.” He glances at Jack. “He said he was cleaning out the house after his father was taken to the nursing home. He found a box crammed away in a corner of the basement with the hood and the pin, and the journals hidden underneath.”

“Did he know?” Mac asks. “Before that?”

“That his father was the Zodiac? I don’t think he did. He thought the man was just a strict, slightly unusual parent. At first he wanted to live up to the man’s expectations, but after failing and being punished over and over he got frustrated. But he never really lost the desire to be the son his father wanted.” Bozer shivers. “That is one messed up childhood.”

Riley emerges from a prop room holding a backpack that looks vaguely familiar, Orwell was carrying it when he was pretending to be homeless. “This was his disguise. The one he used while staying in the apartment building and staking out Vanessa’s house. So he wasn’t lying when he said the people there would say the person in that place was an old man.” Inside the bag is a grey wig, some stage makeup, and some large sunglasses. “And all he had to do was take off the wig and paint, and he blended right in with the other residents. I think that’s how he evaded the park cameras as well. I saw a ton of homeless people, it was nothing suspicious. He just took off the mask and he walked away without a trace. I probably saw him on those cameras.” Her voice shakes with disappointment. “I could have caught him then.”

“We literally had our hands on him at that apartment building,” Jack says, wrapping one arm around Riley’s shoulders and pulling her close. “He had us all fooled real good.”

Riley sighs. “When I was looking into him, I found out that building belonged to his father. That’s why he chose it, purely out of convenience.”
“So the shooting was simply a matter of who lived in the house across the street,” Mac whispers quietly. He glances at Matty, and she can see the grief and sympathy in his eyes.

I’m not sure whether it’s worse to know a death was premeditated, or to know that the person was the victim of chance. To know that if just one variable had been different, it would have been someone else in their place. And she and Sarah are only just beginning to cope with that kind of grief. Mac and Bozer have been living with that pain for years.

And both of them came the closest to being yet another victim. She pulls the two of them aside slightly. Bozer looks confused, Mac looks like a puppy who’s been found with a chewed-up shoe. He probably thinks I’m still going to scold him about falling in that apartment. Ever since then he’s been on edge, tried to avoid being alone with her at all costs, probably hoping she’d forget.

I’ll admit, what happened made me angry. But it was more because I was frustrated and grieving than anything else. He didn’t damage the investigation, he just made a small, clumsy mistake that didn’t hurt anyone. And in the end, he saved Bozer, and probably a lot of other people too. Mac is...unconventional, to put it mildly. But he’s capable of things Matty never thought she’d see used to help them rather than fight against them.

“Thank you both,” she says quietly. “I know this was a difficult case for you.” Bozer only nods. He’s coping with the trauma well, both of them are actually. But she expected that from MacGyver. He was trying to get out of bed less than a week after the Kazakhstan incident, insisting he was fine, even though he was clearly in pain. And she’s seen his complete dossier, she’s impressed someone with his past is even still a functional human being, much less constantly putting himself at risk for missions on a regular basis.

Some monsters’ sons become monsters themselves. But sometimes they rise above it. Matty’s seen everything she feared today. But she was looking at the wrong man.

Whether Mac knows it or not, James leaving probably saved him. Matty has no illusions about what Mac is capable of. What she saw these past few days is nothing short of impressive. In the wrong hands, he could have become just like James. He has the potential. But he had the right people in his life, people who, however inadvertently, turned him in the right direction. Even after what happened to his best friend's brother, Mac tried to do the right thing. Just in his own unique way.

Mac glances at her nervously, and she can’t tear her eyes away from the white bandage around his neck. Glancing down is no better, there’s the compression wrap on his ankle for the sprain.

“Mac, I still have some concerns about your improvisation. But what you pulled off here today was nothing short of a miracle.” She meets his eyes and holds his gaze. “I’ll be the first to admit I don’t like relying on miracles. But they certainly have their place.” Mac looks like she just hit him over the head with a crowbar. He thinks I hate him. And maybe, to begin with, I did. But the sins of his father aren’t his to bear. He’s not like Wyatt Orwell. He’s not going to become his father, unless we force him to. Matty can make sure she keeps Mac’s skills and talents pointed in the right direction.

“Thank you,” he says quietly, and if she needed any more proof there’s a good, kind man standing in front of her, it’s in those words. He’s a good person and he’s more than willing to use his impressive skill set to help the Phoenix and its agents. He might be just the person we need to finally bring down James MacGyver. Now all Matty has to do is make sure he can be persuaded to go up against his own father. This should be interesting…

SOMEWHERE IN AUSTRALIA
WHERE THE WILDLIFE...AND THE TWO GOVERNMENT AGENTS...CAN KILL YOU IN TWO SECONDS

Sam parks her Land Rover and steps out, a hot, dusty wind whipping her hair across her face. She wipes it away and walks toward the second parked vehicle, an equally dusty Land Rover sporting a truly disturbing amount of bullet holes.

“Good to see you again, Patty,” She says, leaning back on the hood next to the other woman.

“Thought it would be worth the meeting when I heard you were in town.” Patty says, adjusting her sunglasses. “Still looking for Tennant and Scorpion?”

“I’ve never stopped. But Webber wants results.” Sam shrugs. “As soon as he knew I survived, he dropped off the map. There’s no trace of him or Scorpion left on the continent. All their old drops and safehouses are gone, there are no more agents or contact points. I can’t even track down any of our sleepers. And I’ve known that for two years.”

“Why didn’t you just tell Webber that? Why come back again?” Sam knows Patty’s already aware of all this. It was part of the full disclosure at time of hire. Sam has other contacts here, from before she signed on with Scorpion, but the CIA’s hope that she could help track the black agency never panned out. Which is probably why they were more than happy to hand her off to the DXS on a whim. It’s for the best, really. I prefer working at the Phoenix to being in the employ of those government drongos.

But now that the CIA is taking control of the Phoenix, they seem to be revitalizing the search for Scorpion. And despite Sam’s insistence she can’t be any more help, she’s come here again. Matty Webber already knows all my contacts here are burned. She had another reason for sending me.

“One of my old informants got wind that Tennant was coming back to Australia. That he was coming out of hiding to take a big contract.”

A slow smile spreads across Patty’s face. “Are you giving me three guesses? Because I think I can get it in one.”

Sam feels a matching smile on her sunburnt, dust-chapped lips. “Jonah Walsh.”
116-Hook

URUGUAY

TWO MILES FROM EXFIL

Mac’s not really sure how he got into this mess. Well, really he understands the logistics of it, both the mission they’re completing and the particular circumstances of how exactly he and Jack got into this particular sticky situation. It’s just not something he thought was actually going to happen to him in real life.

And to top the whole thing off, Jack won’t stop talking. “Drowning in quicksand... this ain't gonna be fun, bro. This has gotta be, like, one of the worst ways to die. And I’ve got a list. This is right below having all my blood sucked out by vampires, which is right under having my brains feasted on by radioactive zombies. Or becoming a zombie. That counts, right? Cause you have to die to be undead?”

Mac sighs. Only Jack would turn a situation like this into a chance to discuss his fascination with the undead. Only Jack would turn a situation like this into a chance to discuss his fascination with the undead. “First of all, vampires and zombies aren’t real. They’re not going to kill you, so you should just take those off the list right now. And really, most people don't even die from drowning in quicksand. It's a colloid hydro-gel; sand, clay, and water.” That was one of Mr. Ericson’s favorite subjects. Probably because another one was debunking scientifically inaccurate movies. Mac’s never told Bozer he wasn’t the first one to ruin movies for him.

Jack laughs. “Oh, I was wrong. Drowning in quicksand while getting a science lecture, that’s the worst way to die.”

“Jack, I just said most people don't die from drowning. They die of, like, sun exposure, dehydration, or uh, you know, starvation. Or if, if we're really unlucky…”

“Okay, all right, that's enough. No. Stop. That's enough. I get it, I get it. Just…” Jack pauses. “I had a dream about this once.”

“How’d it end?” Mac asks.

“I died.” Jack glances at Mac. “Can’t you just use that big, stupid head of yours to make, like, a grappling hook out of a helicopter or something?”

“I could. If we had any of that stuff,” Mac mutters.

“What about a vine? Like in The Princess Bride? You know, when Westley dives in after Princess Buttercup?” Jack shrugs, well, as much as he can when he’s buried from the shoulders down.
“None of them are close enough to reach. In case you forgot, I already tried that.”

“Well, I haven’t seen any flame spurts, but we have managed to discover the lightning sand. And I really hope there aren’t any Rodents Of Unusual Size waiting around to snack on us.”

“Well, actually the capybara, the largest living rodent, is native to these parts.” Mac can’t resist needling Jack. After all, this whole thing is kind of Jack’s fault. I should be the mature one and start thinking of a way out, but I can’t resist. “They can grow to up to a hundred and fifty pounds.”

“Oh man.” Jack glances around like he expects a monstrous rat to burst out of the foliage. “I don’t want to drown in quicksand and get my head chewed off by an ROUS.”

“Relax, they’re herbivores,” Mac chuckles slightly in spite of himself. “Now stop worrying and let me think!”

Ten minutes later, Jack is still asking if they’re any closer to getting out. And Mac still has no plan.

“This is your fault, you know,” Mac hisses. He thinks he has a right to be a little angry. He’s getting sunburned, but everything from his waist down is frigidly cold. And there’s mud in places mud has no right to be. It’s a truly disgusting feeling and he just wants to get out of here and take a shower. Unfortunately, getting out is kind of the current problem. “If you hadn’t gotten scared of that harmless water snake and yanked us both into this pit, we wouldn’t be here.”

“Man, how was I supposed to know that thing was harmless? For all I knew, one of us was about to get bitten by some super-scary poisonous anaconda or something.”

“Okay, there are so many thing wrong with that sentence I don’t even know where to start.” Anacondas are constrictors, they kill prey by squeezing it. And snakes aren’t ‘poisonous’, they’re ‘venomous’.

“Hey, man, I wasn’t gonna take chances!” Jack says, shaking his head.

“Admit it, you were scared of it.”

“A fear of snakes is a very logical fear. Even Indiana Jones is afraid of snakes. And he’s like, the coolest guy ever. After Bruce Willis.”

“He’s a fictional character, Jack.” Mac shakes his head. Grandpa loved those movies, I grew up watching them. Used to wear Dad’s jacket and Grandpa’s old fedora and run around the yard with Bozer pretending we were adventuring archeologists.

“Doesn’t make him not cool. Those whip tricks, man, those were awesome. I used to be able to do some of them.” Jack smirks. “I was county whip cracking champion three years running.”

“You know, I still want to see those tricks.” Riley steps out of the foliage, machete in one hand, a phone in the other. “When you didn’t show up to exfil after we got separated, I decided to come looking for you. You two picked the thickest stretch of jungle to get lost in, I hope you’re proud of yourselves.”

“We took out comms and ditched phones, how’d you…” Jack trails off and glances at Mac. “Hey kid, I think you managed to get us outta here after all. She tracked your tether.”

Mac rolls his eyes. “Great, I’ll gloat about it later,” he mutters. “Can you get us out of here?”

Riley pulls a rope out of her backpack. “Sure can.” She drops it to her feet, and then holds up her
phone. “But first, I need a picture, or Matty’s never gonna believe ‘my partners got stuck in quicksand and I had to ditch exfil to come get them’ is a real excuse.”

Mac groans. And then yelps when he feels Jack’s very muddy hand smear across his face. “Hey, what was that for?” He immediately regrets talking, now there’s mud in his mouth and it tastes disgusting.

“Smile!” Riley’s grin is way too big. I’m gonna kill them both for this one.

THE PHOENIX FOUNDATION
BACK ON SOLID GROUND

“Feel good to get that slime off,” Jack sighs, relaxing and tipping his head back under the warm water.

“Yeah. Haven’t been this dirty since I was a kid back in Mission City,” Mac mutters. “The time I tried to ride Old Man McGinty’s horse and she tossed me in the cattle yard.”

“That sounds fun,” Jack mutters. Mac had talked about his ill-fated past experience with horses when Jack took him out to ride on the ranch, but he hadn’t heard how it ended. Mostly because that was about the time Mac discovered the Dalton family’s horses were nowhere near the scatterbrained bronco he’d apparently tried to ride. Jack’s had more than his share of being dumped rudely off a mount, once Duke tossed him in a snowdrift and went back to the barn, and the multiple times the mischievous gelding knocked him into the manure pile. That’s not counting how many times the fool animal walked straight into the stock pond to get Jack off his back. But damn did I love that horse.

He’s trying to make normal conversation, because for the first time since middle school gym he’s feeling awkward about being in the locker room with someone else. Except that he feels awkward for the person with him instead of about himself. The kid normally doesn’t use the locker rooms, but there was no way anyone was taking him home with how dirty he was. Jack doesn’t want that filth getting within ten feet of the GTO’s interior, and Bozer took one look at the mess and shook his head. Which meant getting cleaned up before going home was just going to have to be the way it went.

Mac started shivering uncontrollably the second they walked into the locker room. Jack had offered to leave if the kid was more comfortable being alone. After what happened at Bishop, I don’t want to remind him of it ever again.

“No, you don’t have to go.” Mac had tried to sound flippant, like he didn’t care, but Jack had heard the fear and pleading edging his voice. He wants me with him because he knows I would protect him. There’s no one else in here; but if someone did come in, especially someone Mac didn’t know...he has no doubt the kid would have a panic attack right then and there.

I don’t think he’s been in here since the incident. Their past few missions haven’t really required them to clean up when they got back, and after the whole helicopter and unplanned hike disaster Mac arrived at the Phoenix in a medical coma.

So now Jack’s doing his best to act like nothing’s wrong. Mac hasn’t stopped shivering, but he’s not crying or curling up in a ball so Jack doesn’t want to make anything any worse. He’s giving the kid as much space as he can and avoiding ever really looking at him.

Jack drops the razor he’s using to get the three-day-old stubble off his cheeks, and curses when it skitters under the partition into the shower stall Mac’s using.
“Hey kid, can you hand that back?” Jack reaches over the low partition to take the razor back. Mac hands it over, but when Jack takes a grip on the handle the kid doesn’t let go. Jack glances at Mac’s face and sees that his eyes are practically glued to the massive, twisted brown line that seems like it cuts Jack’s chest in half.

Right. He’s never been in the locker room with me before. Ever. And Jack hasn’t yet had to have Riley check his ribs or use his shirt for a bandage. Even on their camping trip they let each other have the tent to change clothes; Jack didn’t want to do anything to remind Mac of being in prison.

“I know, you wanna ask what happened.”

Mac turns away, cheeks crimson. “I wasn’t…”

“Yeah, you were staring. Don’t feel bad, everyone does.” Jack sighs. “It was a machete. In Rio, in 2012. Guy was goin’ after Ri, and I got in between. Fifty-three stitches and three months of PT later, I got to hang onto this beauty of a souvenir.”

He reaches over his shoulder and pats a brown burn on his back. “This one I got with Charlie, in the Sandbox. Roadside IED flipped our humvee.” He grins. “Unfortunately, I wasn’t cool enough to get shrapnel in my chest and an arc reactor to go with it. Just a lot of cuts and bruises and some burns to seal the deal.” Mac gives him a weak chuckle.

“This here’s from the Delta days,” Jack runs a hand over the spattering of small white spots along his side and stomach. “Now that, I did take shrapnel on. Still no cool gadgets. Just a lot of people poking and prodding me.” He grins. “The one on the right shoulder’s from a tour in Myanmar, where I took a sniper shot. That’s why I have the tattoo on the left, Cody said the ink probably wouldn’t take as well over all that scar tissue.” He smiles and taps the triangle, lightning bolt, and sword Delta Force insignia inked on his upper arm.

He has to admit there’s a slight ulterior motive to the way he’s displaying the damage for Mac. He wants to know if the kid will respond in kind. Because even though Jack’s keeping his eyes on the kid’s face, he can still see the patchwork of brown and white and pink scattered across Mac’s shoulders and chest. The kid’s body is covered in scars; he has more than Jack, and that’s saying something.

Riley said she’d seen scars, a lot of them, when she checked Mac’s ribs for damage after Malaysia. And Jack noticed them, briefly, when he found the kid at El Noche’s, and when they were getting airlifted from Kazakhstan. But he never wanted to pry. It woulda felt wrong to be starin’ at the kid’s body without his permission. He’s been violated enough. But Jack’s seen enough to make him wonder.

For a minute, it doesn’t look like Mac is going to say a thing. He hands the razor back to Jack and ducks back under the water, scrubbing at his hair. But then his hand strays to his own right shoulder, where there’s a deep scar below his collarbone and another across the top of his arm.

“I’ve got my own war wounds,” he says quietly, so much so that Jack doesn’t know if that was intended for him to hear. But then Mac looks up at him. “At least you get to be proud of your scars. You got them honestly.”

Ouch. It hurts more than a bullet to the gut (and Jack can say that because he’s had two, and he has those scars to prove it) to hear the kid say that.

“Not all of them, Mac,” Jack says. “Bein’ a secret agent’s not so different from bein’ a vigilante. No one can ever know what really happened to you. My own mother’s never seen the machete scar. She
“I think I wear a shirt to swim ‘cause I’m gettin’ flabby in my old age.”

Mac chuckles weakly. His hand doesn’t leave the brown diamond-shaped mark on his shoulder.

“Turned out taking on eight cartel goons at once was a bad move.” Mac shrugs. “First time I had visit Carlos. I thought I was fine sewing everything up on my own but then three days later I had a fever and there was pus and I got freaked out. But I couldn’t exactly go to an urgent care and tell them I got in a fight with a bunch of the Los Diablos. So I asked around a little and one of the guys at Weathers’s used to live in Carlos’s neighborhood. Said he was worth checking into.” He rubs at something on his leg Jack can’t see and doesn’t plan on looking for, but judging from the way Mac’s face twists the memory is a very painful one. “Didn’t really learn my lesson though.”

Mac rubs more caked mud off his arms, displaying several pink-white lines across the backs of them. Someone else might have thought those were self-inflicted. But Jack can tell, just at a glance, that they’re defensive wounds. They’re faint, old and faded. Probably from when he was starting out. But there are others crossing them that are newer.

“Got in a knife fight in CCI the third day I was in. Los Diablos guys tracked me down once they found out the “Phoenix” was in prison with them.” Jack cringes at the thought of Mac all alone and utterly unprepared for what was waiting for him behind those bars and walls and barbed wire. Bishop was him knowing what he was walking into. Prepared to defend himself, prepared to need to fight back. He shakes his head slightly. Letting himself think about a younger, frightened, innocent Mac forced to fight for his life in a place where there was no running away from the people who wanted to kill him won’t help anyone.

“I learned how to avoid getting hurt as a vigilante. Hand to hand was never my thing, so I started making gadgets and homemade tear gas and other things so I didn’t have to get physical.” Mac says. But there wasn’t a choice in prison. There was a riot, my first few months there. I didn’t mean to get caught up in it, but some guy with a shiv and a grudge against the world didn’t care.” Mac’s fingers trace a puckered line on his stomach.

And that’s when Jack sees the white lines. Too straight to be even a knife wound, perfectly parallel. Stretching along Mac’s ribs down his right side. Oh kid. Jack’s wondered if Mac did anything like that. He knows Riley used to, before she joined the CIA and got her life on a track that didn’t involve a shitty parent who acted like pain was the only way someone could learn anything. And Mac sounded like he’d had much the same experience.

“Jack…” Mac’s voice is pleading, and Jack realizes he’s the one staring now. “I told you my scars aren’t something to be proud of.” Mac turns away from him, shivering again. “I’m not brave like you. My scars don’t mean I saved people. They just mean I failed. Because I wasn’t good enough. Because I was scared.”

“Mac, listen to me. That’s not true. You are not weak. That’s not what those scars say at all.” Jack aches to hug the kid but that’s the worst idea ever right now. He shouldn’t even touch him, not in here. So he settles for letting the kid know how much he’s valued with his words. “Mac, you made it out of that place. You survived. That’s all those scars, any of them, say.”

“You don’t get it!” Mac snaps suddenly. “I didn’t do that because I was depressed! I’m not the little sad kid in the corner who just wanted the pain and loneliness to go away! I didn’t want to kill myself, I didn’t do it because I wanted attention, or because I wanted to die. I did it because I had to remind myself that failing has a price!”
“What do you mean?” Jack asks, but he has the sinking feeling he already knows. Because Riley said almost the same thing when Jack saw the marks on her legs the first time he patched up a stab wound in her thigh. “Elwood always said he hit me so I’d learn not to do the same thing again. After a while I thought if I punished myself first, he wouldn’t have to, and then he’d like me again.”

“There are nineteen. For every person I didn’t save. It wasn’t fair that they suffered and I walked away unhurt.” Jack wonders if one of those little white lines is for Alfred Pena. If one is for Jerry Bozer. Oh kid. He can’t bear the thought of Mac coming home after a failure, locking himself in the Bozers’ bathroom, crying and blaming himself while there’s a razor blade in his fingers and blood running down his side.

“Mac, listen to me.” Jack waits as patiently as he can until Mac actually looks him in the eye, and the pain and shame in the kid’s eyes is unbearable. “I don’t care who told you what, in the past. But take it from someone who’s watched good men, good friends, die in the field and asked himself why he couldn’t do more to save them. It is not your fault.” Mac nods, ever so slowly, tears mixing with the water still dripping down his face from his messy bangs. “Now if it’s someone you want to remember, there’s a better way o’ doin’ that.” Jack runs his fingers over the three black letters below the Delta tattoo. The guys who didn’t come home. Might as well be visible that I still carry ‘em around with me. “Cause I know a guy.”

Mac smiles weakly. And then the showerheads sputter in unison, the water turns ice cold, and both of them gasp and rush to shut it off, teeth chattering, starting to laugh as they grab towels and dry off, the scars feeling like they’re fading into the past just a little more.

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MAC AND BOZER’S HOUSE

APPARENTLY TONIGHT IT’S ALSO A JUNGLE GYM

Riley dangles from her arms on a pipe Mac’s hastily rigged into a sort of gymnastics bar. Bozer’s keeping time and he’s shaking his head. I’d have fallen off of there two minutes ago. But then again, she’s a highly trained agent. She’s probably hung off the edges of buildings or off helicopter skids for longer than that. He can picture her as the star of an action movie. She could probably give Tom Cruise a run for his money. Bozer wonders if she’d agree to be the lead if he wrote an action script. She’d probably tell me that’s some sort of breach of protocol.

Jack picks up a rubber duck and flings it at Riley. It hits her squarely in the stomach, and she hisses out a soft “oof,” then yells at Jack. “Hey! No fair!” Riley glances at Cage, who’s watching the whole thing with an amused smile. “Hey, give me a little help here, roomie!”

“The dare was to hang for five minutes. No one said anything about assault with waterfowl.” Jack tosses another one. “Look at it this way, you’re starting this year’s mandatory interrogation resistance training early.” We have that? Bozer wonders if it’s mandatory for lab techs too. And then his phone buzzes.

“Riley! You’re done!” Bozer shuts off his phone as Riley hops down, shaking out her hands.

“That was boring. I could have done that in my sleep. You dared Mac to make fireworks out of kitchen supplies,” she mutters to Bozer as she sits down. “You could at least have asked me to hack the CIA or something.”

“I think Mac could make something that explodes in his sleep too. Which is a little scary, given that he’s been known to sleepwalk.”
“Not since I was fifteen!” Mac flings another one of the rubber ducks at Bozer.

“Yeah, but Mama found you in the garage taking apart the lawnmower. It’s a wonder you didn’t set the house on fire or cut your hand off with the blade.” Bozer still doesn’t understand how that happened. *Mac is just weird. But it makes him...him.*

“Okay, Ri, your turn. Who’s the lucky victim?” Jack asks. She glances around the circle, but Bozer thinks it’s all for show, because from the look in her eyes she has a target already chosen.

“Mac. Truth or Dare?”

“Truth,” Mac says. His shirt has scorch marks from the impromptu fireworks, and Bozer thinks they’re lucky the neighbors haven’t called the cops.

“How do you get those paperclips to bend?” Riley asks. Bozer grins. Everyone asks Mac that.

“I’ve been doing it since I was a kid; Dad showed me,” Mac says. “Trick is to make sure they’re the thinner wire kind, and hold them in your hand a little while to warm them. And for a while I used to use the pliers on my knife, but Dad said that was cheating.” He glances at her. “But Matty said not to do it anymore, so I guess I’m not gonna.”

“I was thinking about starting it myself. Little form of protest,” Riley grins. “Okay, your turn.”

“Jack?” Mac asks. “Truth or Dare?”

“Dare.”

Jack, Riley and even Cage have been taking all dares every time it’s Bozer or Mac’s turn to ask them something. Jack and Riley stubbornly refuse to talk about the mission that made both of them quit the CIA. The only thing Bozer has learned from either of them all night is the one time Riley chose truth, in the first round when Mac was asking her, and he found out she has two small tattoos, a sunflower on the back of her neck (which Bozer's already seen when she has her hair up) and a wolf’s head on her ankle (which looks a lot like Jack's ring).

Jack keeps insisting they left the CIA voluntarily, that the Phoenix, then called DXS apparently, came to them with an offer and they accepted. But still, something happened that made them want to get as far away from Matty Webber as possible.

Bozer’s sure Sam knows all the juicy details, she’s probably managed to worm them out of Riley with her mind-meld powers weeks ago, but she’s just as secretive as the others. He was hoping she’d be willing to spill, but honestly he thinks she might be harder to crack than Jack and Riley combined. She seems to be enjoying watching Mac and Bozer try to trick her into letting something slip. *It’s not fair that she’s so good at playing mind games!*

When Jack gets done roping a bottle ten times from where he was riding the porch railing like a horse, Boze asks him outright.

“You know, you can tell me what happened with you and Matty.” Bozer shrugs. “I’m an agent now too, so I can hear all of y’all’s crazy stories. Why does she hate you so much?”

Jack sighs. “Now Bozer, you don’t wanna go opening that can of worms.”

“Come on, you’ve gotta tell us sometime. If you don’t, maybe Matty will.”

Jack’s eyes go wide and he holds up his hands in mock surrender. “Okay, no need to go askin’
Matty the Hun, cause she’s just gonna twist that story and make it look like everything was my fault!” He sits down and rests his hands on his knees, leaning in with a conspiratorial wink. “Well, see, it was Christmas. And the op was almost over, but I’d met this girl. And she invited me to a Christmas party at the office building where she worked. I knew Matty wasn’t gonna say yes, so I went dark and ditched exfil, cause she was worth it, man. Prettiest eyes I ever saw.” Jack grins. “Well, I got there, and we were havin’ a good time, and then bam, the building’s being overrun by terrorists, and I…”

“Wait, stop.” Bozer’s been engrossed in the story, because to be honest it sounds like something Jack would definitely do, but he’s not a movie buff for nothing. “You’re just reworking the plot of Die Hard.”

Riley’s barely holding back a chuckle. “No, he’s not actually lying. But that happened with Patty, not Matty.”

“What?” Bozer blinks. “Jack messing with me I get, pulling my leg is just a giant joke to him. But not you too.”

“Nope, honest truth. Cross my heart and hope to die,” Riley says, dramatically swiping her hand across her chest. “He was in a hostage situation, at Christmas, in a skyscraper, but that was after we transferred to Phoenix. Although I think Patty rivaled Matty for pissed that time.”

Bozer takes a minute to process that Jack has apparently literally re-enacted Die Hard at some point, but he still wants an answer to his original question. “Then what happened?”

Riley glances at Jack. “Do you want me to tell him?”

“Go ahead, it was only the worst moment in my entire career.” Jack takes another drink from the bottle beside him.

“Really, this is still supposed to be top secret classified,” Riley hedges. “I could lose my job just for telling you. And you could lose it for listening to me.”

“I laugh in the face of danger,” Bozer chuckles. “Come on, spill.”

Riley lowers her voice. “It was Nigeria. 2013. Our last op for the CIA. And it’s where I got this scar.” She pulls up the edge of her tank top to reveal a dark brown spot, about the size of a quarter, on her left side, looking dangerously close to a lung. “Jack and I were leading a special ops team into the jungle, to pull out a volunteer doctor who’d been taken hostage by a guerilla rebel force when the government started to collapse. But when we got there, she insisted that we had to help her rescue seventy refugees, or she wouldn’t leave.”

“Hey!” Bozer smacks Riley’s arm. “That’s Tears of the Sun!” He can’t believe he’s been taken for a ride twice in one night. And that the one he really did think was a joke turned out to be real. “I swear, if you guys try to con me with another Bruce Willis movie reference, I’m gonna beat you over the head with…’” He fumbles for a decent weapon but all his hand closes on is something yellow and squishy… “this rubber duck.”

“Yeah. Real scary, Boze,” Riley mumbles.

“You know they’re never gonna tell it to us straight,” Mac says. “We’ve got to trick them into it.”

It takes a few more rounds (and Riley finally getting asked, by Cage, to hack the neighbor's TV and make it play the Jaws theme song on repeat) for Bozer to get another turn.
He’s still getting the blood back to his body after a three-minute headstand, but he knows exactly who he’s going to ask. “Jack, truth or dare?”

“Well.” Jack says, absolutely straight-faced.

“Drink the entire bottle of hot sauce in the fridge. Straight.” Jack fixes Bozer with a dangerously confident stare as he pulls out the bottle, opens the lid, and starts chugging it. Oh this is gonna be fun. Bozer’s uncle’s Ghost Pepper marinade sauce is widely known for being making the best...and spiciest...ribs in Louisiana, or so he claims. Bozer only used it once, and he and Mac weren’t even able to finish the first of the chicken wings Boze made with it. They had to throw the whole batch in the trash.

This is just payback for Jack gluing everything on his desk down, apparently in retribution for the scare Boze gave him with Sparky in the lab. Okay, so I did start the prank war. But Jack doesn’t know that in high school, everyone knew to fear Wilt Bozer’s prank game.

He’ll admit, this was a little more juvenile than most of his carefully laid plots. But there’s something simple and satisfying in the way Jack’s eyes bug out and the look on his face as he runs for the kitchen sink, then for the bathroom. Revenge is sweet. Or in this case, spicy.

Jack is still chugging milk when they get the text from Matty that they’re needed at the office. Mac nudges Bozer as they walk out to the car. “You’re buying us more milk. It’s your fault Jack’s drinking it all.”

“Totally worth it,” Bozer replies, grinning. Mac just shakes his head. Both of them are escalating this. He just hopes it doesn’t become something that gets them on Matty’s bad side.

When they walk into the War Room, Jack is just draining the last of the entire milk carton. Mac glances at him. He’s probably going to regret that almost as much as the hot sauce.

Matty takes one look at Jack’s still-watering eyes and red face, and her forehead crinkles. “Dalton, what’s wrong with you?”

“Nothing,” Jack croaks out, setting down the milk carton. “Nothing’ as in Mogadishu ‘nothing’ or Sao Paulo ‘nothing’?” Jack just shakes his head. “Well, I’m sure whatever it was you brought it on yourself. Because from the looks of it, you decided you were operating under your sadly misguided assumption that being Texan makes you immune to the effects of any and all spicy foods. So I’m guessing it’s a repeat of Sao Paulo. What was that you bought from that street vendor, anyhow?”

Jack just shrugs again and gulps the last of the milk. Riley chuckles. “I remember that one.”

“Well, enough reminiscing. We have a current problem that’s demanding our attention.” Matty seems to flip a switch, dropping her joking, slightly needling tone for a professional demeanor and a practical coolness.

“This is Aaron Deckard. He works for Armin Morsofian, a major player in the Armenian crime syndicate.” Matty pulls up two photographs on the screen. “Deckard is a fixer.”

“Morsofian drops a body, Deckard makes it disappear,” Sam says, probably in response to the slightly confused looks on Mac and Bozer’s faces. I still don’t understand all the terminology. From the sound of it, Sam’s either worked with a guy like this, or she’s been someone’s fixer. Mac always finds it oddly reassuring that clearly Matty is okay working with someone with a past as dangerous
as Cage’s must have been. *If she’s willing to accept Cage, I should be safe too.* And after San Francisco, Matty’s seemed to be easing off on the pressure.

“So where do we come in?” Jack croaks out, glaring at the empty milk bottle like it’s personally offended him by not refilling itself.

“Deckard was pulled over last night in Missouri for a burnt-out taillight. When police searched his car, they found 3 body bags, a shovel, and a whole lot of bleach.”

“To be fair though, there’s like twelve different things he could have been doing with that.” Mac can feel Matty’s stare boring into him. *Okay, I shouldn’t have interrupted.* “Yeah. He’s probably just burying bodies.”

“The only thing the police could hold him on was an unregistered firearm. When he made bail, he made himself disappear.”

“And we’re supposed to find him?” Jack asks. “I’ve run down my share of fixers, this ain’t gonna be fun. The guy could be anywhere by now.”

Matty glances at him. “Actually, we think we know exactly where he is. We’re following a string of stolen cars. Starting in St. Louis and heading south.”

“So our guy’s Grand Theft Auto-ing his way to Mexico?” Jack says. “Seems a little obvious for someone so good at hiding.”

“He’s running for his life,” Cage replies. “Deckard would know enough about Morsofian’s operations to put him away permanently. And now that he’s been in police custody, he’s tainted. Morsofian has to assume that Deckard could have talked. He’s running from the cops and the mob at this point, and his life depends on doing that as fast as he can.”

“And because he does have this information, we need to get to him first,” Matty says. “The Armenian mob has officers on their payroll; if Deckard’s taken into custody he’s in danger. And it goes without saying that if the Armenians find him first, his body will never be found.”

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**LOUISIANA**

**30 MILES NORTH OF BATON ROUGE**

“Riley, how we lookin?” Jack asks.

“Deckard’s most recently stolen car is right in front of you. You should catch up with him in ten minutes at your current speed.” It’s a little concerning hearing her over comms, she’s stayed behind at Phoenix to monitor their situation remotely. Jack’s noticed that Matty’s been splitting him and Riley up more often, and while he’s well aware that Riley’s now a full-fledged agent with years of experience, that doesn’t mean he has to like it. I know most training partnerships dissolve after two or three years, with the trainee getting their own team and the handler getting a new partner, but this is different. Riley’s like a daughter to me. It’s my job to keep her safe. The upside is that apparently Matty’s decided Jack’s new responsibility is to train Mac. As long as this arrangement doesn’t put Riley in danger, Jack’s more than happy to do for Mac what he did for her six years ago. *I’m more than happy to train him. And hopefully, to be a father figure too.* Working one on one with Mac might give him the opportunity to really connect with the kid, and maybe Mac will get more comfortable seeing Jack in that role. *A guy can hope.*

But that vague discomfort with being separated from Riley isn’t what’s really bothering him about
Matty’s choices on this op. Sending him and Mac after another fugitive, when the last time ended with Jack shot and Mac traumatized, doesn’t sit right. This is too similar a situation for Jack’s liking. *I mean, it’s not like I’m gonna run around with a target on my back, but still.* They’re looking for a guy who’s caught in the crossfire of potentially dirty cops and the Armenian mob.

He can tell Mac’s feeling the same way, the kid’s been restless and jittery since they got on the jet. When they got in the rental car, Jack pulled a handful of paper clips out of his pocket and handed them to Mac. The kid tried to refuse, but Jack had shut that down. “Matty never said I couldn’t carry paperclips around. And what she doesn’t know about what happens in the field won’t kill her.” He knows Mac’s worried about pissing the woman off, but Mac also has a hell of a lot of anxiety issues and messing with those paperclips is a coping mechanism. One Jack doesn’t want to take away.

“Ok. We’ll get this guy, wrangle him in the trunk, and then hightail it outta here.” Jack switches comms off again. He wants to talk to Mac without Matty overhearing, and he knows Riley will be confident he’s fine.

“Hey kid, you doin’ okay?”

“Why wouldn’t I be?” Mac adds an alligator tooth to the collection of paperclip sculptures he’s been creating. Jack definitely plans on grabbing all of them out of the center console and putting them in his pocket before they leave the car. He’s getting quite a collection of them at his apartment, he leaves them on the coffee table, on the counters, he’s even started tucking them in the edges of picture frames. *I guess it’s like a parent sticking their kids’ fingerpainting art on the fridge.* He tries not to think too long about the fact that Mac probably wasn’t lucky enough to have his dad ever care enough to do that. *The way it sounds, Mac probably didn’t even get his report card on the fridge unless it was all straight As.* He has no doubt James MacGyver would have discouraged anything as frivolous as art projects. *Really, Mac’s hobbies are all practical, aside from those paperclips.* That stings. And Jack hopes he can think of some way to start fixing that. *Letting him have his paperclips is the first step.*

“I don’t know. Because we’re chasing another guy who’s probably being hunted by some very dangerous people, and that puts us right in the middle of the same danger?”

“But Riley says there aren’t any cops in the area, bought off or otherwise, and as far as we know the Armenians haven’t found Deckard yet.” Jack can tell the kid’s trying to reassure himself. “We’re gonna grab him and go home, just like you said.”

“Don’t say that, you’re gonna jinx us.”

“You said it first!” The insulted look on Mac’s face, and the clear exasperation, makes Jack grin. He’s getting major flashbacks to early missions with Riley, developing their long-standing inside jokes and giving each other grief.

“Jack!” Mac shouts suddenly, and Jack’s first reaction is to assume an alligator crawled onto the road. He glances around at the road, and then sees where the kid is pointing. There’s a blue SUV in a ditch, matching the description of the car Deckard was supposed to have. Jack switches comms live again as he starts to pull over.

“Guys, you’re right on top of him!” Riley says. “I’ve been trying to tell you he stopped!”

“Sorry Ri.” Jack pulls all the way over. The vehicle is spun out, clearly forced off the road. There’s two sets of tire tracks skidding to the point where the car went over the side.

Jack jumps down into the ditch and walks over to the car. There’s a smashed out window on the
driver’s side, but it doesn’t look like anyone’s in the car. He walks around to take a closer look and
chokes on the fumes coming from the broken window.

“Military grade pepper spray. Reminds me of that hot sauce only in my eyes!” Jack stumbles against
the car, swiping at his face. “Mac, stay back.”

“Was it cops? Or do you think it was the Armenians?” Mac asks.

“If it was the Armenians this car would be full o’ lead, not pepper spray.” Jack mutters, still coughing
and wiping his watering eyes and runny nose. “There’s a dent back here on the left quarter-panel.
Right where a cop would hit him to execute a PIT maneuver.” He runs his fingers over the metal. *I
taught Riley how to do that. Should probably show Mac too, the last time he was driving a car he
almost killed us both.* He really does need to squeeze in a few more driving lessons with the kid. He
taught him the basics of a controlled skid and some sliding turns, which probably saved them both in
Atlanta, but there’s only so much you can do in the Phoenix parking lot.

“That’s cherry red. Not really a standard color for a police cruiser,” Mac mutters. “And it’s too high
to come from a car or even an SUV. I think we’re looking for a pickup truck with a lift kit.” *Who
woulda thought a past that included working at a car repair shop would come in handy in the field?
Jack’s never seen anyone who’s faster at assessing vehicle damage, the probable cause of it, and
makes and models.*

“Definitely not cops. I think we’re looking at a bounty hunter.” Jack sighs and leans on the ruined
SUV. He’s dealt with his share of these guys in his day. Some are reasonable, if you pay them the
bounty they were going to get anyway, they’ll hand over their man (or woman) no problem. Others
have some kinda honor code and like to flaunt it. *Guess we’ll see what kind of man this guy is.*

SOUTHERN COMFORT BAR

IT DOESN’T LOOK VERY COMFORTABLE

Mac sees the red truck in the bar’s parking lot when Jack first turns the corner. He points it out and
they pull in next to it.

“Get a picture of the license plate and send it to Ri. Have her see who we’re dealing with,” Jack
says. Mac snaps a photo of the plate and hits send, then follows Jack into the dim, smoky bar.

He’s instantly on edge. The darkness is unnerving, and the place smells like beer and old sweat and
gasoline, and the guys clustered around the bar and the pool table don’t look any too friendly. He
knows he shouldn’t be making up his mind about them all so fast, he hates when people do that to
him. But guys bigger than him, in large groups, just scare him.

_I don’t want to be here. But I have to stay with Jack._

Jack sits down at the bar. “Hey, what’s good around here?” He grins. “Got anything local?” When
the man slides a couple of glasses, that smell so strong Mac’s eyes water, across the bar, Jack picks
his up but doesn’t drink it. “Just in case you gotta set the place on fire again,” he whispers with a
wink.

Mac stares across the room. There’s a tall man at the pool table, grinning and talking to a couple of
the other men inside. “It was pretty easy, really. Little pepper spray, little nudge with the truck, and
he’s all mine.”

“Something’s up,” Jack whispers. “Most bounty hunters go straight to the nearest police station to get
their money. Why would he stop at the local watering hole?"

“Because he likes to brag?” Mac asks.

“Well, his bragging just got him in over his head. Maybe next time he’ll decide being smart’s better than being the local hero.” Jack stands up. “Let’s go see if he’ll make a deal.”

Jack swaggers across the room to the pool table. “Hey, couldn’t help but overhear you’ve had a good day.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about, Texas,” the man says, and there’s a dangerous, almost wolfish grin on his face.

“We’re in the same line of work,” Jack says.

“Oh really?” The man turns back to his game. “Well, I guess your loss, this time. You oughta start looking for work in a new neighborhood, cowboy.” He expertly sinks a ball into a corner pocket, but his next shot misses. He’s ignoring them.

There’s something about this that’s setting Mac on edge, but as he looks at the table, he can see the path the next ball needs to take. And maybe if he can buy them a little time Jack can get the information he needs out of this guy. “Hey, may I?” He asks the man standing across the table, who looks both incredibly frustrated and more than a little drunk. Most of the solid colored balls are still on the table; their bounty hunter is playing stripes.

Mac angles the cue and carefully curves the ball so that his first hit goes perfectly where he wants it. It’s all math. Geometry and physics. He lines up for his next shot.

“Thought I told you two to get lost,” the bounty hunter mutters.

“It’s just a friendly game. And then I promise we’ll be out of your hair,” Jack says. “But we might as well chat while you’re playing, hey? We’ve got plenty in common.”

“Yeah, aside from me catching my skip and you coming in empty-handed.”

“Got him tied up in the back of your truck or something? Cause I know it’s bad business to let the guy get away once you got ‘em.”

“Oh, when I get them, they don’t get away.” He grins. “And if you’re thinkin’ about stealing him off me, you’d be making a big mistake, boys.”

“What makes you think we’re gonna do that?” Jack asks.

“You know, I had you two pegged ten miles back. New car, strangers on a road that’s mostly only locals...you two forced me to up my timetable. Dent my truck.” He shrugs. “That’s my skip, and I plan on collecting. So I take this one kinda personal.”

“You know, I was prepared to offer you a pretty fair cut of the bounty on your man. But with that attitude, I think I’m gonna take that back.” Jack leans back on the table, and to all appearances it’s relaxed, but Mac can tell that he’s winding up for a solid hit. He’s leaning there so he can pick up one of the balls without anyone seeing. Mac sees Jack’s hand wrap around the ‘10’ ball, carefully concealing it in his palm. If he hits the guy with that, our bounty hunter’s gonna be out cold. Mac knows plenty about using the extra weight of something in the hand as a force multiplier. He’s been on the dealing and receiving end of more than a few hits like that.
The other man shrugs and casually spins his pool cue. “Fine by me. Cause you ain’t gettin’ him.”

“Hey man, we can do this the easy way or the hard way. And the hard way isn’t really fair, cause it’s gonna be two on one.” Jack’s grip on the ball tightens almost imperceptibly, and Mac takes a slow step back. *This is gonna be messy.*

“Actually two on...all of them.” The guy waves his hand and three big burly redneck types stand up from the bar and walk over, scowling. Two more stand up from a corner booth, and Mac instinctively cringes. This feels like a prison hit. *This isn’t gonna go well. Not at all.*

“Oh, I see how this is gonna go,” Jack mutters. “Friends of yours?”

The bounty hunter leans back with another massive grin. “Amazing how many friends a round of drinks will buy you.”


The man tosses a couple of zipties on the pool table. “When you’re done with ‘em, boys, make sure they won’t go anywhere.” He turns for the door.

Which is when Jack makes his move. One of the big, muscle-bound guys is coming straight for him, and Jack takes a swing with the hand holding the pool ball. Mac hears a crack and he’s pretty sure this guy’s gonna need to see a dentist after that hit. The man stumbles back, clutching his jaw and spitting blood and something that clatters onto the dirty floor.

Mac doesn’t really have time to be impressed by Jack’s work, because two of the other guys are coming for him and he’s not close enough to the table to grab a ball like Jack did. But there is a pool cue leaning nearby. He snatches it up and cracks it across the wrist of one of the guys reaching for him. The man howls in pain and jumps back, but the second guy gets a grip on the cue, wrenches it out of Mac’s hands, and snaps it across his knee like it’s a twig. There’s a vicious glee in his eyes when he turns to Mac. He swings, and Mac ducks, putting his head down and diving for the man’s stomach. He succeeds in knocking the wind out of the man and getting past him, but then there’s a sharp yank on his arm that stops him short. The guy doesn’t go down easy, and from the looks of this he’s going to snap Mac’s arm like he did that pool cue.

And then there’s an almost primal roar and Mac feels the man’s grip dislodge...and his shoulder dislocate as the guy’s pulled away from him. He barely bites back a scream. He turns to see Jack rolling the guy over on the floor, then landing a hard punch and jumping back to his feet.

“I got this! Get that bounty hunter and Deckard!” Jack shouts, before he smashes a pool cue over one of the guys’ heads and then swings another of the balls, wrapped in someone’s handkerchief, at the guy coming up behind him. *I think he’s having too much fun.* Jack’s been tense since Matty showed up, and he’s probably enjoying the chance to let out his frustrations on more than a gym punching dummy.

Mac rushes out just in time to see the bounty hunter dragging Deckard from where he was stowed in the luggage compartment of a broken-down bus into the cab of his truck. He glances around frantically for something to disable the truck, something to shove in a wheel, to blow out a tire…

There’s plenty of random junk around here, but with his right arm out of commission Mac doesn’t know if he’s going to be able to accurately throw anything. And what will he do if he does kill the truck? What if this guy just gets out, decks him, and drags his man off on foot? Jack’s not here yet and Mac’s in no condition to fight.
The truck’s started now, turning and coming straight for him, for the driveway. Mac can’t stop him with one useless arm. But he doesn’t have to get Deckard now. He just has to make sure they can find him.

He pulls his phone out of his pocket, and the squashed roll of duct tape he always carries. He rips off a chunk, folds it, and smashes it against the back of the phone. As the truck roars toward him, he drops, ignoring the screaming pain in his shoulder, rolls between the tires, and presses the phone to the undercarriage, with just enough time to make sure it’s wedged somewhere it hopefully won’t fall off.

Jack rushes out the door just as the truck pulls away. “Whoa, what a...Mac!” His voice is nearly a scream. “Come on kid, get up!”

Mac wants to. He wants to tell Jack he’s okay, the truck didn’t hit him. He wants to stand up. But all he can feel is the overwhelming pain radiating from his shoulder down his back and up his neck. He can’t even open his mouth because if he unclenches his teeth he’s going to scream.

Jack bends over him, and Mac’s dimly aware there’s a trickle of blood running down from the corner of Jack’s mouth and that he has a very impressive bruise on his cheekbone. But everything’s starting to turn into a white blur of pain. Rolling on a dislocated shoulder, in hindsight, was a really bad idea.

“Mac!” Jack rolls him slightly to get a better look at what he clearly assumes are hit-and-run injuries, and Mac can’t stop the pained sob. “Sh-shoulder,” he manages to gasp. “Dislocated. Before. Car didn’t…”

“Oh man, kid.” Jack gently brushes some hair off Mac’s forehead. “You sure that truck didn’t hit you?”

Mac just nods, feeling tears cutting through the dust on his face. “S-sorry I didn’t s-stop him.”

“Nothin’ to be sorry for, you got a pretty messed up shoulder.” Jack takes a look, and his face twists in sympathy. “Aw kid.” He meets Mac’s eyes sadly. “I’m not gonna lie, this is gonna hurt like hell to fix. I’ve dislocated my own shoulder way too many times, so I can do this, but I also know it’s not gonna be fun.”

“Just do it,” Mac grinds out between clenched teeth. And then Jack does, and Mac’s world narrows to a single point of pain. He reaches out blindly with his good hand, finds Jack’s leg, and grips tightly, anchoring himself to what feels like the only solid thing left in the world, until the pain begins to fade.

Seeing the kid laying there in the dirt, not moving, almost gave Jack a heart attack. He’d been coming down off an adrenaline high from that fight, and really, it still wasn’t fair, it was just four on one and none of them had any kind of military training, and then all the fight and energy went out of him in a rush when he saw that red truck squealing away and Mac lying in the settling dust behind its tires.

The kid tries to reassure him he’s okay, but clearly Mac’s in a world of pain. It sounds like his shoulder got dislocated in the bar fight. And from the panting breaths and gasps of agony every time Mac tries to move, it’s a nasty one.

Jack carefully pulls him to a sitting position and repeats the move Sarah, Matty, Patty and Riley all seem to know by heart now. Technically it’s risky to do something like this in field, but at this point I think I’ve had almost had much experience as a medical professional at this kind of thing.
Relocating joints is something Jack was specifically trained in during Phoenix’s yearly medical course. It sends a painful shock through Jack’s own bad shoulder, and the rest of his body, when the kid gasps and screams as the joint pops back into place. *It feels like someone just did that to me.*

He feels the kid’s good hand fumble across the dirt and up his leg before gripping tightly. Mac’s fingers dig deep into Jack’s thigh, and he grits his teeth at the pain. But if it helped Mac focus and ride this out, Jack would let the kid break his femur. *Been there, done that. But I don’t know if it hurt more than my heart does every time I have to see Mac in pain.*

Mac begins to shudder, the pain catching up and overwhelming him, and Jack pulls the kid into a tight hug, helping him gently to his feet and to the car.

“What were you thinking?” Jack finally mutters once he’s inside and Mac is positioned in a way that puts the least pressure on his bad arm. He wants to yell, but he knows that’s not gonna go over well with Mac, so he settles for the kind of gentle scolding tone he’s familiar with from his own parents’ conversations about some of his more dangerous stunts. “If you hadn’t been directly between the tires…”

“That model pickup has five feet between the tires and it had a lift kit. It wasn’t anywhere close to hitting me.” The casual way the kid says that makes Jack cringe.

“So you just decided to roll underneath a moving car for the fun of it?” Mac must have been up to something, but Jack doesn’t expect him to remember right away. As much pain as he was in, that’s all his mind would be able to focus on.

“N-no.” Mac’s eyes suddenly light up. “Jack! Give me your phone!”

Jack loves the kid, he really does, but this is crossing the line. *Yeah, I did just tell myself I’d let him break my leg if he had to. But this is a different matter entirely. Bones heal. Phones don’t. “No way man! Every time I give you my phone I end up at the genius bar explaining why its glued to a football or wired to a vacuum cleaner or something. Use yours!”*

“Mine is stuck under that truck. I just need to call Riley and have her trace it.” Mac holds out his hand, eyes pleading, and Jack gives in. “Fine, if that’s all you’re gonna use it for.”

He puts the car in drive and they start pulling out of the parking lot. He doesn’t think the guys inside will be getting up anytime soon, but no sense in taking chances.

When Riley picks up, she sounds slightly frustrated. “Your plate’s a dead end, guys, stop hounding me. It’s registered to someone who died two years ago in New Orleans.”

“Oh Riley, are you still tracking my phone?” Mac asks hesitantly.

“I can. I was kind of putting more faith in the thing actually physically attached to your body.” Mac glances at his ankle. *It's easy for me to forget he’s even got that tether on. Jack’s sure it’s not so easy for Mac. He called Charlie a little over a week ago, and as far as Charlie’s concerned, the investigation of what really happened to George Ramsay is still stalled. LAPD is stonewalling every request for information, sending Charlie around in red-tape circles. *That arrest was the Board of Commissioners’ keystone. They’ve gotten a lot of their ideas through because they keep waving the flag of being the administration who locked up a dangerous terrorist. If Charlie proves Mac wasn’t the killer, the commissioners’ whole platform gets a whole lot shakier. Instead of local heroes, they get outed for what they are, more concerned with image than justice.*

“And I see your phone is no longer with you. What did you do?” Riley asks.
“Kind of made a quick and dirty tracker. So we can find our bounty hunter and Deckard.”

“Um guys…” Riley’s voice cuts out and is replaced by Matty’s.

“You’re telling me you don’t have him yet? What are you two dawdling around for?”

Jack shakes his head. Trust Matty to be listening in when everything goes sideways. “We ran into a little trouble. But we’re gonna track him down. Don’t worry, we’ve got this,” he says, then runs his hand across his neck to tell Mac to hang up. The kid does, and leans back, then gasps, eyes going wide with pain.

He knows from experience how awful a dislocation feels. His own shoulder goes out on him at least twice a year; he’s had problems ever since Duke threw him once while he was breaking that fool horse in. Mac’s got to be in a world of hurt.

But true to form, the kid refuses to give up. Jack offers to get him out of here and have Matty call in a second team, or at least take him to a clinic, but Mac refuses stubbornly as they continue to follow Riley’s directions. “I’ll be fine, it’s not so bad now.” The ease with which the kid rigged up a sling on himself from his coat and some of the stuff he had in his knapsack actually scares Jack. I wonder how many times he did this as a vigilante?

The thought of the kid suffering alone, with no one to help him unless he got himself to someplace safe, tears at Jack’s heart.

“Guys, the phone just stopped moving. Sending you final coordinates now,” Riley says. Mac glances at them, then hangs up.

“So help me, if he’s at another bar, I’m buying everyone two rounds,” Jack mutters.

It’s not a bar. It’s a slightly dilapidated diner with a sign reading “Momma’s” out front. And there’s the pickup parked in the lot. “Man, am I getting deja vu,” Jack grumbles as he parks, directly behind the pickup. He’s learned his lesson. This guy’s not going anywhere this time.

But why the hell does he keep stopping at random places?

“I’ve seen this before. Kid, stay in the car.”

“No way.” Mac fumbles his seatbelt off with his good hand. “I’m okay. I’m coming with you.”

“You know, I’d threaten to hogtie you and shove you in the trunk, but I think that might actually do more damage. Fine. But if someone messes up your arm again, don’t blame me.” Jack chambers a bullet in his gun and slips it in the back of his jeans. I’m not gonna be relying on pool cues in here.

He takes the time to dive under the truck and retrieve Mac’s phone, and yes, there’s room down there, but he can’t imagine being under it when it’s moving and could swerve at any moment. He snaps a photo of the VIN number from the dash on his way into the diner. At least if we get ambushed again maybe we’ll know who we’re dealing with.

But when he opens the door and a bell jingles, he doesn’t see any sign of the bounty hunter in question. The place is half-full, not a stunning amount of business for a Saturday morning, but they are in the middle of nowhere.

A woman who manages to look both stressed and cheerful steps out from behind the counter, grabbing a couple menus and handing them to Mac and Jack.

“Welcome to Momma’s, take a seat anywhere you like, be with you in a minute.” Jack’s forcefully reminded of Maggie, who used to run a diner back home.

“Actually, we’re looking for a man,” Jack says, playing up his Texas accent just a little more.

“Well, so am I, sugar, so you’re gonna have to be a little more specific.” Jack feels a grin spreading
across his face. *If you keep flirting, though, Matty's gonna have your head.* And Mac looks more unsteady on his feet by the second.

“We’re looking for someone who was driving that red pickup. Tall, dark skin, wearing a hat? He might have been with this guy,” Jack says, holding up a picture of Deckard on his phone.

The woman narrows her eyes, studying the photo. “The man who was driving that truck, he was sitting in that booth. Got up and went into the bathroom over there. I ain’t laid eyes on that friend of his though.”

Jack looks around the room at the families and others sitting at the tables. *This isn’t the place to get rough, not like that bar.* “Better start clearing this place out.”

The woman raises an eyebrow and glares at Jack. “Why? There gonna be any trouble? Momma don’t want no trouble in her place.”

Jack raises his hands placatingly. “Trust me, we’re no fans of diner trouble. Just wanna have a little friendly chat.”

They’re on their way down a little hallway when Jack’s phone rings. It’s Riley.

“Guys, are you inside that place already?”

“Yeah, and this isn’t a great time, Riles, we’re just about to get our guy.” Jack’s trying to keep his voice down.

“I ran the VIN. The truck’s registered to a Billy Colton.”

A door at the end of the hall bangs open, and Jack sees the bounty hunter from before, and a girl who looks like she might be his sister, training guns on him. “Let me guess. The home address is right where we’re standing.”

He hears the telltale click of a shotgun, and turns to see Momma behind him. “Welcome to the Colton Family Bail Bonds.”

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**THE WAR ROOM**

**NOT A GOOD PLACE TO BE WHEN MATTY’S UPSET**

“That sounds...not great,” Riley says when the phone call cuts off.

Matty just glares at her. “I knew Dalton was going to find some way to screw this up. It was a simple pick-up job. I’ve worked with that man for years, and I still don’t understand how he gets himself into these messes.” Matty sighs and walks out into the hall, slamming the door behind her. Riley glances back at her computer and groans. *And today just keeps getting better and better.*

When the door opens, Riley doesn’t even look up. “Um, Matty, we got more bad news. I’ve been running a search in the background on the dark web for anything about the Armenians and Deckard, and I got a hit. The Armenians have a reward out for him. To the tune of two million.”

“Wow.” That is *not* Matty’s voice. Riley looks up to see Bozer almost directly in her face. She almost hits him before she gets a grip and remembers where she is and what’s going on. *He’s lucky I’m not fresh off a field op. He could have been on the ground in a headlock by now.*

“Bozer? Could you dial back the creepy? By about ten notches?”
He leans back slightly, and now that she’s not so startled she can see confusion and concern in his face. “I saw something this morning.”


“No!” Bozer sounds rather irritated. “A file. On Matty’s desk. She swept it off real quick when I came in to ask if she’d rather have me working on the prosthetics for Anderson’s team or if I had time to tweak my modeling polymer. I’m still trying to find something that’s both waterproof and paintable.”

“Bozer!” Riley cuts him off before he goes into listing chemical combinations. *Honestly he’s as bad as Mac sometimes.* She can see how they’re roommates. “Is this what I need to know? That I shouldn’t wear any of your masks in the rain?”

“No. Matty was looking at that file I said I saw. She closed it, but before she could shove it under any papers, I saw the cover. It said “James MacGyver”.

“That’s Mac’s dad.”

“Yeah, and he disappeared without a trace fifteen years ago. Do you think Matty’s looking for him or something?”

“Maybe.” Riley shrugs noncommittally.

“She was asking me a ton of questions about him before my assessment a while ago. She seemed really interested in him. And not in a good way.”

“Wait, Boze, what did that file look like?”

“Old. Like crinkly paper, been in the filing box for a few tax seasons old. The corners were all creased and the name was kind of blurry. It had something red over it. I was reading upside down so I couldn’t really tell what that said ‘cause it was super faded.”

Riley sets down her laptop, feeling suddenly lightheaded. *That has all the earmarks of a CIA priority target file. And a long-term one too.*

“Where did you say this file was?”

“On her desk.” Bozer glances at her. “But she knows I saw it, she probably moved it already.”

Riley sneaks a glance out the door. Matty’s coming back, and she’s a woman on a mission. *Yes, I shouldn’t even be thinking about it. But for some reason, Matty’s got something against Mac. And maybe that file on his father is the clue.*

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**MOMMA’S FAMILY COOKING**

**AKA COLTON FAMILY BAIL BONDS**

When Billy and the girl, who Mac thinks is Jessie, given the conversation taking place behind his back, push him and Jack out into the diner, there’s no one else there. Apparently Momma took Jack’s advice and cleared the place out. There’s a third sibling now, and Mac can’t figure out his name, but he looks just as dangerous as the others. Of course, it might be the thigh-holstered Glock that gives him that aura...

Mac cringes when Billy slams his hands on his shoulders to force Mac to sit down. His dislocated
arm throbs in protest at the rough handling, and also it’s just scary to have people pushing him around.

“Rules are simple. I don’t like no lying in my diner. So you boys are gonna tell me the truth, and nothing else. That clear?”

“Yes ma’am,” Jack says. Mac can only nod.

And then the woman turns around and slides a pie dish across the counter. “My buttermilk pie. I’ve been tweaking the recipe, thinking about adding it to the menu.” She cuts a slice and slides it over. “So tell me what you think. You two want any o’ my homemade moonshine to chase that down?” She gestures to a well-supplied shelf to her left. Mac and Jack both shake their heads.

Mac picks up a fork awkwardly with his left hand. The right hurts too much to use. Jack picks up the whole slice of pie off the plate and bites off a huge chunk of the end. Mac vaguely remembers that’s how he was eating the pies at the Christmas party at his house.

Jack’s eyes go wide and for a moment Mac has the eerie feeling that this is like some freaky movie plot where they’re going to be poisoned by the food. And then Jack grins, big and goofy. “This is fantastic!” He takes another bite. “This might be the best thing that’s happened to my mouth since Grandma’s bourbon pecan pie.”

“That so?” Momma Colton’s lips twitch with the faintest hint of a smile.

“You didn’t need to threaten me to be honest about that!” Jack’s grinning, talking with his mouth full. Mac takes a small forkful, still irrationally concerned that it’s going to poison him. He watches Momma serve Jessie and the other brother, who she calls Frank, their own slices, and he relaxes when they both take large bites as well. Billy stands off to the side, arms folded.

“I’m glad you feel like you can be honest about my pie. Now how about what you were doing in my diner?” Mac chokes on the pie. **Maybe it’s not poisoned, but it might kill me anyway.**

Thankfully, Jack speaks up. “I'm Jack, this is Mac, we're bail bondsmen too. Saw the bounty on Deckard and figured we'd collect.” Mac watches the nervous twitch in Jack’s left eye appear. Please don’t let her realize that’s a tell.

And then the woman slams the knife down on the counter, and Mac and Jack both flinch.

“Now didn’t I just tell you not to lie to me, sugar? I know bounty hunters and y'all ain't bounty hunters.” She leans over the counter, staring into Jack’s eyes. “Ex military, if I had my guess I'd say Delta.”

“I don’t know what you’re…”

“Callus on your gun hand, way Deltas were trained.” She smacks his hand with the dishtowel draped across her shoulder. “And everything about the way you walk into a room screams CIA training.”

“How do you know I’m not just a former military, former CIA operator who got tired of lousy hours and getting chased around and decided to do the chasing myself?” Jack leans back with a confident smile.

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Mac swallows hard, the buttermilk pie feeling like a stone in his throat.

“Now let's try this again.” Momma Colton leans back, crossing her arms but never letting go of the knife.

Jack sighs. “We work for the government.”

“What agency? You still with the CIA? Clearly it’s someone comfortable with taking on ex-cons.”

Jack glares at her. She’s brought up my past twice, he’s got to be fuming. Mac is both amused and more than a little grateful for how protective Jack is of him. I wouldn’t stick up for myself the way he sticks up for me. “Ma’am, I can’t tell you that. But I can tell you were here for Deckard, so whatever the bounty is we’ll double it.”

“Do I look like I can be bought?” The woman straightens up even further. “We Coltons have a code. When we take a contract, we finish it. When we say we’re going to hand over a skip, we deliver. We may not have much, but we have our word. And what good would it be if we didn’t have that, now?”

“Listen. I respect that, but I promise, we’re going to hand this man in to the people who need to get their hands on him.”

Momma Colton isn’t going to be budged. “Somebody who is not on the up and up with me from the get go is somebody I just can’t trust.”

“Well, then I guess we’ll just be on the way.”

Momma Colton leans in and points her knife directly at Jack’s throat. “Not so fast, boys. Now y'all come in here trying to start a ruckus with my boy Billy, trying to mess up our contract. And we just can’t let that stand.” With every word she leans closer to Jack, and Mac can see the man tense up. He might still be able to get out of this, but it would be close…

And then the woman leans back and begins to laugh. Jack laughs too, first nervously, then genuinely.

“You shoulda seen your faces. Like you thought we were gonna kill you or something!!” Mac can tell Jack’s more than a little impressed. He likes her. Because he would have done the same thing.

Mac can’t bring himself to join in the humor. He’s still too stressed. They’re no closer to a solution to their problems. Momma Colton said nothing was going to convince her to give up Deckard.

“Well, thanks for the pie. We’ll be hittin’ the road.”

Momma Colton laughs again, but this one isn’t cheerful. It’s cunning. “I may be sweet but I ain’t stupid. Jessie and Billy are gonna give you a little ride so far outta town y'all can’t make no more trouble round here.” Mac cringes. That sounds very, very bad.

Jack’s pretty sure they’re not being marched off to their imminent doom. But it’s still a little unnerving. Being taken for a ride doesn’t usually go well in this business. Except for that pretty little master thief in Venice...yeah, she wanted to kill him, but it might have been worth it.

He sees Frank jump down out of an empty horse trailer in the back of the diner. He’s holding a plate with what looks like the crust of the same pie they were eating earlier. Jack’s mouth water slightly. Damn, that was good pie.
“Hey man, I don’t know about where you come from, but in Texas, horses don’t eat buttermilk pie.”
Mac nods. “I think that’s where they’re keeping Deckard. It still doesn’t add up. Why haven’t they
taken him to the closest police station?”

“Hey, quit talkin’.” Billy shoves Mac’s shoulder, and the kid flinches. Jack takes a deep breath.

“I gotta plan,” Mac whispers the second Billy looks the other way. “Think you can piss him off?”
Mac asks. Jack just grins. _He’s been rough on my kid twice, and it’s his fault, if indirectly, that Mac’s
got a dislocated shoulder to begin with._

“Hey Boba Fett, why didn’t you get any pie? Momma mad at you for dentin that truck?”

Billy’s smile turns into a snarl. “Just keep walking, Tex.” He shoves Jack this time.

“Billy, you know what Momma said.” Jessie pulls Billy’s hands off Jack.

“Yeah, I know what she said.” Billy’s voice is tense and sharp.

Jack decides the faster he escalates this, the faster these guys are a memory. “That’s your sister! No
way to be talking to her. Probably that attitude that got you in trouble in the first place.”

Jessie folds her arms and smirks. _Clear sibling rivalry_. Jack knows a thing or two about that. He and
Laura used to do things like this constantly, try to one-up each other in front of strangers. “Nah. He
messed up a job last month. Lost the skip on a million dollar bond.”

Billy’s voice is an angry hiss. “Why do you think I took this one? Deckard pays two million.”

_That wasn’t what we were told. Police are only offering fifty thousand. Who are they handing him off
to?_

“Yeah, and now Momma’s pissed that you took the job without telling her.” Out of the corner of his
eye, Jack sees Mac doing something with his knife. And then the kid’s moving, fast, and the air is
full of burning spray. It looks like Mac just stabbed these guys’ cans of pepper spray. _Damn._ It was a
plan, he’ll give the kid that, but this is military grade stuff and it’s _everywhere_. It isn’t just the Coltons
who are being affected.

Jack stumbles toward the pickup hitched to the horse trailer as Jessie and Billy stumble, trying to get
the pepper spray canisters off their legs. He jumps in, and drops the front visor. The keys fall out and
he grins, then coughs, rubbing at his eyes. Mac jumps in the other side, and Jack guns the truck.

Mac is coughing and there are tears running down his face. Jack can’t tell if it’s from the pepper
spray or the way every cough jars his injured shoulder. Jack wants to try and get him to calm down
and breathe, before Mac starts hyperventilating or something, but they have to get out of here.

Once he can talk without coughing, he calls Matty and sets up exfil coordinates. All they have to do
is keep going north on this road, and in half an hour this will all be over.

Mac’s finally stopped coughing and shaking, but his eyes are still watery. Jack leans over and puts
his hand on Mac’s good shoulder. “Hey kid, we’re goin’ home soon. You okay?”


Jack chuckles. “Maybe next time gimme some warning before you mace everyone? That was almost
as bad as Bozer’s hot sauce.”
“Almost?”

“This I’m only gonna feel once. The hot sauce...I felt a couple times.” Mac looks at him with a slightly disgusted frown. “Your arm okay?”

“It’s fine.” Which is Mac-speak for it hurts like hell and I’m barely holding it together, but I’m not going to show you pain.

“Listen. Mac. This is at least the tenth time you’ve told me that, and every time it’s been a big fat lie.” Jack glances at him. “Kid, I know you’ve had to pretend everything’s okay for your entire life. But that’s not the way it works here. I get that I’m the worst person in the world to give advice on actually being honest about when you’re hurt, but…”

“I know.” Mac’s small voice sounds like a scolded kid. “I know I should. But…”

“It’s hard to unlearn something like that. It’s the only way you knew how to protect yourself,” Jack says. “I’m not mad. I know why you do it. But I just want you to know you don’t have to.”

And then there’s a loud bang. Jack feels the truck careen sideways, and Mac gasps when his bad shoulder slams against the window. Jack can see two vehicles ahead of them, and Jessie Colton lowering a sniper rifle. *Just shot out a tire*. They’re losing control, the trailer is jackknifing. “Mac, hang on!” Jack feels them sliding off the road, tires squealing.

They slam into a tree, in the ditch, and Mac gasps when the seatbelt slams him back. He’s got to be in absolute agony. Jack reaches for him, but the the truck doors are being yanked open and rough hands are pulling him away from the kid. He sees Frank Colton drag Mac out the other side, and then the kid collapses, like his legs have gone out from under him. That’s when Jack loses it and starts swearing a blue streak. And that’s also when someone clobbers him over the head with the butt of a gun.

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**THE WAR ROOM**

**NOT THE PLACE TO BE DOING A SCAVENGER HUNT**

Bozer feels really, really wrong about this. And sick to his stomach. If Matty finds him and Riley digging through her desk and her papers...he’ll never see the light of day again. “Are you sure she’s gonna be gone for a while?”

Riley answers without looking up from the file drawer she’s rifling through. “Yes. Cage asked her to help with an interrogation of a guy we picked up in Iran last month. He’s been a tough one to crack, ex-military with his own little guerilla terrorist force. She wasn’t slated to start working him for another week, but she told Matty she wanted a head start. And someone to play good cop, bad cop with.”

Bozer slams a drawer shut. “It’s not here. I told you, she probably moved it.”

“She wouldn’t leave a CIA file in Phoenix storage. This is the most secure place for her to keep it. I just happen to have an extra key to the desk that I never gave back.” Bozer desperately wants to ask how Riley got the key to the Phoenix desk, but something in her voice tells him not to. There’s some sort of bad memory there. She closes the file drawer, then blinks. “This isn’t as deep as the desk. Bozer, help me pull it out.”

The drawer slides easily out of the track, as if it’s been moved a lot lately. And behind it is a false panel that falls freely to the bottom of the desk when Riley taps it.
Inside is a single manila folder. The one Bozer saw this morning. It’s held shut with a red string, and the front is clearly labeled **James MacGyver: Priority Target.**

_This is wrong on so many levels._ Boze can’t believe they just did this. But he also can’t believe Mac’s father somehow made it to the level of investigation that’s reserved for international terrorists and assassins and the like. _He was an electrical engineer from a tiny NorCal town. What is he doing as a CIA dossier?_ The sudden churning in Bozer’s stomach has nothing to do with the ever-present fear that Matty will walk through that door any second. _Mac hid that he was a Phoenix agent from me, and he did it well. What if his father could do the same thing?_ Boze doesn’t know much about the man, Mac didn’t like to talk about him, but the little he did get was that the guy was cold, aloof, and distant.

Bozer fingers the file. The manila folder is stained and creased, it’s actually kind of disgusting, not at all cool like it looks in the movies. He wonders how many germs are on it, how many hands have touched it.

“It’s now or never. Cage can’t stall her forever,” Riley says.

Bozer reaches for the corner. And stops, fingers gripping the dog-eared edge. “I can’t do it.”

“We’ve just spent an hour searching this office, and we’re risking our jobs and possibly jail time to get it, and now you can’t open it?” But Riley isn’t touching the file either.

“I-” Bozer stumbles over his words, they all come out in a rush. “If Matty’s keeping this a secret there must be a reason. And we shouldn’t be the first ones to know it. This is Mac’s life. He should be the one who decides if we find out about his past or not.” He sets the file down, deliberately moving his hands away. “Put it back. It’s not for us.”

He hears a slow clapping and stumbles back, tripping over a stack of files and scattering them everywhere. Matty is standing in the doorway. “Well said, Mr. Bozer. I see you two have been busy.” Matty frowns. “I wondered why Cage was trying so hard to convince me to stay and assist with an interrogation.”

_We’re dead._ Bozer glances at Riley, she looks as utterly shocked and terrified as he feels. _We are in so much trouble right now._ “We just wanted to know why you seem to hate Mac so much.” Bozer doesn’t look away. He won’t. _Mac deserves better than to be judged by his past. Especially a past that wasn’t even his fault._

Matty closes the door and shrugs. She seems oddly calm about all of this. “I don’t hate him. MacGyver is proving to be a valuable asset.”

“Then what are you doing with a file on his father? One that is clearly a CIA priority case?” Riley asks. “And why would you encourage us to find it?”

“What?” Bozer asks.

“I wondered when you were going to realize the truth,” Matty’s lips are quirked in a half smile. “Bozer, did you really think you could fluster me enough to make me expose a state secret like that? Or that I would leave the War Room during the middle of a serious operation? If you had chosen to open that file, all you would have found would have been blank sheets of paper.”

He glances at his shoes, suddenly ashamed. _I thought I was a super-spy. I thought I beat Matty the Hun at her own game. And it turns out I’ve just been played like a fiddle._

“I had to know if you really wanted the answers. And as it turns out, you don’t. Which is for the
best.” Matty sighs. “I hope that someday this will all become clear. That everything will fall into place. But for the moment, all I have is questions. Questions I would rather not burden the rest of you with. Because if you know, then it will be up to you to decide whether to tell Mac or not. And believe me when I say that is a hard decision to make.”

“You can’t tell us anything?” Bozer asks.

“The only thing I will tell you is that I believe it was fortunate for all concerned that James MacGyver went dark when he did.”

And then the phone rings, an unknown number. Matty picks it up, stepping gingerly around the mess of files Bozer and Riley have left everywhere. “Hello...Jack?”

INSIDE A TRAILER

NOT WHERE JACK WANTED TO WAKE UP

Jack blinks out of unconsciousness to a truly blinding headache and a rather disgusting smell. He tries to sit up, only to feel someone rolling him over on his chest, and pulling his hands behind him to tie them with a ziptie.

“Billy, what cologne is that? Is that that toilet spray?”

“Shut up, Tex.” Billy smacks the back of Jack’s already sore head. *Today just keeps gettin’ better and better.*

“Cause I’m just sayin’, it’s a little strong.”

“Oh, I think it’s you, actually,” Mac mutters. “They were keeping horses in here for a while. And I think when they dragged you in-”

“Okay, I get the picture.” This wouldn’t be the first time Jack’s smelted like this. *One o’ Duke’s favorite tricks was to find the freshest pile in the pasture and roll. Sometimes with me on him.* He doesn’t normally mind the smell, it’s just that mixed with this headache it’s making him think he might be sick. And he doesn’t want to add that to the mix.

He feels someone pull Billy away. “I’ll take Yosemite Sam. You make sure the boy scout can’t get loose.” That’s Jessie. *I’d rather he rough me up than the kid.* Mac’s in a lot of pain, and twisting his arm behind his back is not going to help.

Jessie makes quick work of securing his arms and legs; she’s talking but Jack’s not really listening, he’s too fixated on the soft pained grunts and gasps from Mac’s side of the trailer. *He’s gotta be freaked out of his mind right now.* Not only is he hurt, but he’s got some guy holding him down and tying him up. *Kid’s gonna have a panic attack.* He only hears the end of Jessie’s mutterings. “Don’t you be thinkin’ you’re gonna get outta this and follow us. Cause if Momma ever sees you again you’re gonna get a whole lot more than a slice o’ pie.” Jack swallows.

The Coltons jump out of the trailer and leave. Jack hears the engines roar as they pull away. He’s already inching himself across the smelly straw, ignoring the way the overly tightened ties bite his wrists. He can hear Mac sniffling and gasping for breath.

“Hey Mac, Mac, it’s okay. They’re gone.” Mac keeps breathing raggedly and doesn’t answer. “Mac, they’re not gonna hurt you.” Jack rolls so he’s facing the kid. Mac’s eyes are swimming with tears, and he’s shaking uncontrollably. “It’s okay, kid. It’s okay if you’re scared. It’s okay if it hurts.” He
wants nothing more than to wrap Mac in his arms and hold him close, but these damn zipties…

Mac takes a few more deep, shuddering breaths, then whispers, “Pocket, Jack.”

“What?”

“My pocket. Jacket one.” Mac shifts a little. Jack reaches in, careful not to touch Mac himself. There’s a phone inside, not Mac’s or Jack’s.

“Where’d you get that?”

“Swiped it off Billy right before he tied me up.” Jack is momentarily just impressed that the kid was still able to think when he was being pushed to the ground by that guy. *Mac’s gonna make one heck of a field agent.* The kid’s been through enough to shatter any normal person, and he’s not only still functioning, he’s doing above and beyond what Jack would expect.

“You hold it, I’ll dial.” Jack types in Matty’s number. “Man, we really did it this time. Hopefully she’s not too mad.”

“Mad about what, Dalton?” Jack flinches when Matty’s voice comes through. “What did you do this time? And where’s Deckard? Exfil says you never showed up.”

“Uh, we’re a little tied up right now.”

“Why do I get the feeling you’re not speaking figuratively.” Matty sounds very, very frustrated.

“Right now I’m a little busy sending in Riley, Bozer, and a team of Phoenix agents. Because this is a lot worse than we thought.” And then there’s an odd buzzing sound, and the call cuts off. *Damn it.*

Jack sighs. “We’re in the middle of nowhere. Of course the phone would quit. This is how every horror movie starts, man.”

Mac chuckles. “I think it’s the electrical storm.” Sure enough, now that Jack listens he can hear a low rumble of thunder.

“You know, I was really hoping we could call for some help to get us out of here.”

“We could just use the phone itself. Jack, you have to break it.” Jack grins.

“Of course we do, cause when does one of your crazy plans not involve destroying a phone beyond repair?” At least this time it’s not Jack’s. He doesn’t mind if he smashes up Billy Colton’s. He’s not too fond of the guy anyway.

He drops the phone on the trailer floor and moves so he can pound it with his boot. When it smashes, Mac starts talking again. “Now pull out the circuit board.” Jack fumbles around, trying to avoid broken glass. He thinks he might have found what he’s looking for, it feels like a card with lots of wires embedded in it. “Circuit boards are just copper wire welded onto a non-conductive substrate, like fiberglass. Which means it can be sanded down into a blade.” Jack nods, then shifts so he can get his hands against the wall, rubbing the flat board against the trailer wall. It feels like it takes forever, but when he experimentally runs his finger over the edge to test it, it *hurts.*

“You didn’t tell me this plan of yours involved possible maiming. I’d like to keep all the blood *inside* my body.”

Mac sighs. “I said it was going to be sharp!”
“I guess it’s good to go then…” Jack tries to be as careful as possible cutting the kid free. When the tie holding his arms snaps, Mac gives an audible sigh of relief. He cuts Jack free, and the two of them scramble out of the trailer, heading back the way they came. *I know, Jessie said if Momma ever saw us again we’d have hell to pay, but the way Matty was sounding, something wasn’t right...*

Mac is pretty sure they passed a gas station a little more than a mile back down the road. But the pace they’re trying to maintain is jarring his shoulder. Jack can hear the kid hissing and gasping, trying to fight through the pain. He stops, and Mac slows to a halt, holding his injured arm tight to his chest. “Mac, I’m sorry, kid.”

“I’m gonna be okay,” Jack just shakes his head. “Kid, what did I *just* say about saying you’re fine?”

“I can’t afford not to be.” And then Mac glances up. “Hey, there’s the gas station.” Jack rolls his eyes, but Mac’s right. Jack can just see the sign through the trees. And there’s a car parked there. *Nice.*

Mac’s never going to be able to run quick enough that they won’t be noticed and stopped. “Listen, I’m gonna go steal us that car. You just wait right here okay?” Mac nods, and Jack settles him as comfortably as he can. He doesn’t like the faint shivers wracking the kid’s body, or the chilly mist that’s starting to fall. *Get that car. And get it fast.*

**MOMMA’S DINER**

**PROBABLY NOT THE GLAMOROUS LOCATION BOZER WAS EXPECTING FOR HIS FIRST SPY MISSION**

Riley vividly remembers her first field op. She was expecting something out of a James Bond movie, complete with the flashy cars, cool gadgets, and high-speed pursuits. It turned out to be a two day stakeout in a sleazy motel that had bedbugs. And they never did end up getting eyes on their target.

So she can understand the slight dejection she saw in Bozer’s shoulders when they pulled up outside the diner. *He was thinking the way I did.* But he shook off the disappointment pretty quickly, and now he’s into this undercover thing. Maybe a little too into it.

Bozer leans across the table, holding out a picture to Momma Colton. If Riley didn’t know that it was actually one of Bozer’s photos of a new test mask on one of their agents, she’d swear it was actually someone’s face. He does good work.

“He said he was an investment advisor. Didn’t know he was a con man. Ran off with everything I saved for our honeymoon.”

*Next time I’m going to tell him not to change cover stories on the fly.*

“Newlyweds?” Momma asks, clearly skeptical. *I would be too. We’re sitting too far away from each other, posture’s too stiff, we don’t look like we’re close.* She leans in and wraps one arm around Bozer’s.

“I feel like the luckiest girl in the world.” Riley chuckles forcefully.

“I assume you two have gone to the police?”

“And the FBI. Said there’s nothing they can do.” Riley shrugs, well, as much as she can when Bozer’s got her arm in a disturbingly tight grip.
“Well, then you come to the right place. So tell me all you know about this lyin’ sack o’ taters.”

Riley’s phone buzzes in her lap. It’s Matty, updating her on the status of the tac team pulling Deckard out.

**Keep her talking.**

Riley glances at Bozer, who’s begun a long-winded account of how he and Riley supposedly met, involving her apparently playing hard to get and giving him one digit of her phone number at a time. *I don’t think keeping her busy is going to be a problem.*

Unfortunately, it seems like Bozer’s elaborate storytelling is beginning to grate on Momma Colton’s nerves. After a three-minute description of the text conversation that supposedly led to their first official date, the woman rather abruptly snatches the picture of the alleged con man from Bozer.

“Well, Mr. and Mrs. Wilson, I think we have everything we need.” Riley’s about to hop in and keep stalling, as much as she hates to aggravate the woman more, when her phone buzzes.

**Package secure. Head to exfil.**

Riley’s never been more grateful to hear that. Well, except for maybe that time in Kiev.

She gives Bozer a subtle nod and he thankfully takes the hint. “Well, I guess that’s that, Snookie.” Riley shakes her head. “Muffin?” Bozer chuckles weakly. “Newlyweds, you know? Still working on the pet names.”

“Yes we are, Honey Badger,” Riley responds with a death glare.

“After you, pookie-wookie.” Bozer stands up, attempts to pull out Riley’s chair for her, and nearly pulls it out from under her.

*Well, they’re not going to buy that cover for long, but we don’t have to stay here long.* She traced the last location of the phone Mac and Jack used to call in, and an exfil team is on their way there. Once they pick up Mac and Jack, they’ll come back here and set up to hopefully snag the Armenians when they come to pick up Deckard.

“I want a divorce,” Riley grumbles as the door slams behind them.

She gets to the car before she turns on Bozer. “What happened to our original cover story? About being siblings whose mom got conned out of her life savings?”

“I called an audible. Newlyweds felt right, you know?” Riley just shakes her head. *Bozer, you gotta stop being less obvious about wishing we were a couple.* And then there’s a soft shuffle and she spins around just in time to see Jack standing behind a beat-up pickup in the parking lot, a finger to his lips.

“Jack?” Riley hisses. “What are you doing here? I told you to stay put and wait for exfil.”

“Didn’t hear that. Your call got cut off.”

“You know that’s the oldest and lamest excuse in the book, right?”

“I’m not lying! We really did lose signal!” Jack says, and Riley has to admit he doesn’t look like he’s joking. “We knew something was fishy about this deal, so we decided to come back and make sure things were on the up-and-up.”
“We? Where’s Mac?”

“In the car,” Jack says, and his voice goes from joking to concerned. Riley rushes over and glances in the passenger window.

Mac looks awful. His face is white, his arm’s in some kind of makeshift sling, and he looks like he might pass out any second. And if she’s any judge, Jack has a mild concussion. And both of them smell like the ranch barn. “What did you two do?”

“Got into a bar fight, a car accident, and got hogtied in a horse trailer.” Jack glances at her. “What were you and Bozer doing here? He’s not a field agent.”

“Undercover, stalling for time while a tac team retrieved Deckard. And Jack, you’ve officially been beaten at the sucky nicknames game.” Bozer gives her a kicked puppy look and Riley glares him down.

She’s about to explain everything, and suggest they get Mac to the closest medical facility, when there’s a roar of tires and engines and two massive black new-model SUVs slide to a stop in the Coltons’ parking lot. Oh no. The Armenians were closer to the area than Phoenix had predicted. They’re here early. We’re not in position.

“Who’s in the bulletproof SUVs?”

“That’s the Armenians.” Riley sighs. “They’re here early. Our team isn’t back from running Deckard out yet.”

“What?”

“The bounty the Coltons were collecting on wasn’t the one posted by the government. It was the one the Armenians set up.” Riley explains as quickly as she can. “We were supposed to get Deckard and Morsofian’s men. But it looks like Morsofian decided to up the timetable.”

Bozer stares at the guys carrying automatics who are piling out of the vehicles. “We just saved Deckard’s life. But we may have gotten the Coltons killed.”

Mac opens the car door and stumbles out. “Hey, hey no, you’re not gonna keep anyone safe when you look like death warmed over yourself,” Jack says.

“I gotta plan. Well, more like half of one…”

Mac will admit, this isn’t his best plan. But right now, he’s in a lot of pain, mildly concussed, and exhausted. He thinks he deserves a little slack.

“I don’t like this, kid.” It’s at least the tenth time Jack’s said that.

“I’m sorry I’m sending you to get shot at, possibly. If I thought there was another way…”

“No, no, no. I’m cool with getting shot at. It came on the job description, literally. What I’m not cool with is you walking into a roomful of guys with semiautos for your one-armed-bandit routine or whatever it is you’re gonna do.”

“I’ll be fine.” At least he thinks he will be. The plan depends on how well-stocked Momma’s kitchen...and liquor shelf...are.

He turns to Riley and Bozer. “You guys know what to do, right?”
“Yeah, I’m ready.” Riley’s already got her computer and the little satellite dish thing Mac rigged up out of parts of the car and Riley’s phone. *Yeah, I owe her a new one.*

“Ready for what?” Bozer asks, and Riley shushes him.

Mac takes a few deep breaths, then walks away from the others, up to the door of the diner, and pushes it open. The bell tinkles...and multiple guns click as they’re raised toward him. He slowly puts both hands in the air, well, as much as he can with his bad arm. “Hi. What’s going on here?”

“What are you doing here?” Momma’s voice is an angry hiss. She looks at him and there’s pure murder in her eyes.

“Who are you?” Morsofian asks at the same time.

“I’m Mac. I work for Momma. Sorry Momma, things didn’t really go as planned with my skip.” He raises his right hand a little higher and winces. Momma’s face crinkles with what looks like pretty genuine sympathy.

“He’s doing another job for me. Looks like he ran into some trouble. Let me take care of him, okay?” She pulls Mac aside toward the kitchen. “Just what do you think you’re trying to pull here? You are messing up my contract. Didn’t I tell you to keep your nose outta here?”

Mac tries to keep his voice as quiet as possible. “I wasn’t lying when I said we worked for the government. My people have Deckard.”

“Well, my client expects to see him here.”

“I know. And when he finds out you don’t have Deckard, he’s going to be very upset. I just want to help.”

“Why don’t I just tell them you took him?”

“Do you really think a man with that much armed backup cares whose fault it is?” Mac sees the woman’s bluster fade. *She’s afraid. She’s been scared since all those armed men barged into her diner. Because this wasn’t the plan.*

“And unless they forgot that two million in the car, I don’t think they were ever planning on paying you.”

Momma’s voice is suspiciously shaky. “Well, failure to render payment breaks their contract. Does your previous offer stand?”

Mac doesn’t actually know. But they have to do something. *Matty won’t be happy about me promising something like this. But better her upset than the Coltons dead. “Yes it does.”*

“Now you said you had a plan?”

“I do. Ask Jessie to go get Deckard.”

Riley watches as the Colton girl walks out the back of the diner to the little white shed. She glances at the door lock and frowns deeply, there’s no disguising the padlock the tac team sheared off with bolt cutters is missing. The girl shakes her head, probably preparing to ream her brother out for not properly locking the door, and then opens it.

Jack barrels out of that little shed like an elephant. He knocks Jessie back and starts running like
crazy, zig-zagging. Riley really hopes he can actually see through that hood thing they put over his
head, because he narrowly misses slamming into a car and a porch post.

There’s yelling from inside the diner, and then a spray of bullets spatters the ground near Jack. A
couple guys rush out onto the porch and keep shooting. Riley sees Jack stumble, but it looks like a
small clip across his shoulder. Jack dodges behind a car, ducking. Riley’s shaking with fear, and all
she wants to do is grab her sidearm and take those guys down fast. But if she does, then the
Armenians realize the Coltons have backup, and they might turn on everyone in that diner, including
Mac.

Several of the men scramble into one of the SUVs, and Riley pulls out her computer, fingers still
itching for her gun. Jack is panting, crouching behind the car, getting ready to run again. *Mac needs
enough of a distraction long enough to do his thing.* And seeing as nothing is on fire or exploding
yet, Riley doesn’t think that’s happened.

Jack takes off again, heading for the woods, and the Armenians floor the SUV. The two on the
porch are still shooting as well, and despite the fact that Jack’s using every evasion tactic in the
books, under that kind of fire he’s bound to get hit eventually. But it’s still a shock when it happens.

Jack stumbles, and then goes down. There’s a smear of red running down his jeans, and spreading
across the ground. And the car is bearing down on him fast. “Bozer! Hold that dish steady!” Bozer is
shaking, but he keeps his arm out, aiming at the SUV. Riley types as fast as she can, and then
breathes a sigh of relief when the engine cuts out. “Windows up, doors locked.” She drops her laptop
now pulls her sidearm, stepping around the van to crouch with the disabled car for protection and
train her gun on the two men still on the porch. “Don’t even think about it.”

The men in the car are yelling at her, pounding on the glass. Riley blows them an exaggerated kiss.
*It’s such a Jack move and I don’t care.* She grins as they continue to struggle uselessly while the
men on the porch lay down their guns. *Bulletproof glass works both ways. We can’t shoot them, but
they can’t shoot us either.*

“You hacked the cars!” Jack yells from the ground. “Nice job!”

“You okay?” Riley can’t move away from where she’s holding the men at gunpoint, but she does
spare a glance to see that Bozer’s rushed over and is trying to help.

“This is the second time in a month, man!” Jack groans, reaching down to gingerly wrap his hands
around his leg as Bozer folds up pieces of his overshirt to apply pressure. “Ahhh son of a bitch, that
hurts.” *Bozer’s shockingly good at this.* Riley expected a lab tech to be the sort who cringes at the
sight of blood. But now that the shooting’s over, Bozer is calm and capable.

*I wonder how many times he helped Mac patch himself up.* Riley feels slightly stupid for not
realizing that at first. *He lived with a vigilante, of course he’s not too squeamish around wounds
anymore.* She glances back at the diner, her thoughts drawn back to Mac, hoping he won’t be in
need of the same medical attention now... *If he did stupid things like that while injured as a vigilante,
it’s a wonder he’s not dead.*

And then Riley hears a shout from inside the diner, and sees Mac step to the window and give them
a thumbs-up. She relaxes slightly, and at the same time, she hears the Phoenix tac teams vehicles
pulling in. *Better late than never.*

Mac shakes his head, coughing almost as much as everyone else in the suddenly foggy room. The
alcohol vapor is burning his eyes; *okay, maybe putting it in a sprayer and gassing the place wasn’t*
Mac doesn’t have time to recover before a still-coughing Morsofian aims his gun at him. “Looks like you just made the decision of whether or not to kill you so much easier.”

Mac forces a weak grin. “I would think twice before I pull that trigger. Momma’s moonshine is what, a hundred and fifty proof?”

“A hundred ‘n fifty-five,” Momma says proudly.

“A spark from your gun, or any of the others, and that ethanol vapor you’re choking on is gonna turn Momma’s diner into Momma’s barbecue joint.”

Mac watches the men glance around at the foggy vapor, then the guns.

“Or I can save you the decision.” Momma’s holding a lighter. “Maybe I’ll just light you up myself.” Slowly, the men begin laying down weapons, and Momma, Billy, Jessie and Frank pick them up.

Mac sags against the counter, then turns enough that he can see out the window. Riley’s crouching behind a car that’s rocking slightly as the angry men inside attempt to escape. He gives her a thumbs-up and she returns a small nod. And then his legs give out and he sinks to the floor.

When Jack tries to get out of the back of the ambulance, Riley shoves him back inside with both hands. “Mac is fine. He didn’t even really pass out.” She knows Jack’s worried sick about Mac, but he needs to get himself taken care of too.

“It’s good, Ri. Just clipped me.”

“It may be a through-and-through, but that doesn’t mean you don’t need to get it patched up,” Riley grumbles. “Only you could get shot in the butt.”

“It’s my thigh, thank you very much, Riley.” Jack groans. “Matty’s already gonna give me grief forever.”

“Look at it this way, you’ll have a scar to match the one from Lagos.” Jack groans louder.

Mac walks over, looking substantially less pale, with his arm in a real sling. Riley’s had to deal with both of them since the standoff ended; Mac had gotten back on his feet and tried to come out and see Jack, and then panicked when the paramedics tried to hold him back. Riley’s been running back and forth relaying messages between the two ever since.

Mac reaches for Jack, who pulls him into an awkward hug, trying not to touch his bad shoulder. Mac stumbles again, and bumps against Jack’s bad leg. Jack hisses but bites the sound off abruptly.

“I’m sorry,” Mac whispers, pulling back. “I didn’t mean to hurt you.”

“Ah, I’m tougher ‘n old boot leather. That’s just a scratch.” Jack grins a little goofily, apparently the painkillers are starting to kick in.

“What’d you just tell me about not pretending you’re fine?” Mac says, raising his eyebrows, and Riley laughs.

She turns around when she feels someone’s presence behind her. It’s Momma Colton and a very nervous-looking Bozer.
“Y’all broke my no-lyin’ rule six ways from Sunday, now didn’t you.”

“It was for a good cause,” Jack says wheedlingly.

“Well, I don’t rightly care about the cause. I care about gettin’ paid. Will that be cash or credit?”

“Well, we’re gonna have to talk to our boss before you get paid.” Riley doesn’t envy Mac and Jack that conversation.

Momma colton seems to think that over, then nods and folds her arms. The rest of her family comes up behind her. Billy catches Riley’s eye and winks. Momma shakes her head. “All things considered, wasn’t too bad working with y’all. But I’ll tell you one thing. If you ever steal my mark again, there will be hell to pay.”

“Oh I promise, that’s not gonna happen,” Jack says. The Coltons start to move off, but Billy lingers, shifting and shuffling a little, like he’s nervous or something.

“So if you’re not really married to him...you on the market?” Billy asks with a tip of his hat. Riley just smirks. He is kinda cute. But a little immature for me. After all, this whole thing is apparently his fault...but she’s not going to totally throw out the possibility. After all, he already knows what I really do for a living...

“What you guys did today, that was incredible,” Billy says, turning to Mac. “Never seen nobody turn a diner into a weapon before.”

“You should see what he can do with shoestrings and bubble gum,” Bozer chuckles. Billy walks off to follow the others, and Jack grabs his crutches. He’s stubbornly refusing to go back to the jet by ambulance. And admittedly, Riley’s seen him walk to exfil on worse, so she’s not going to give him too much grief.

Bozer gives the diner a last longing look. “It really is a nice place. Kinda makes me want to stay with the Coltons for a while.”

“I think Jack wants to be a Colton.” Apparently Bozer’s also noticed that Jack’s needling with Momma Colton feels more like a game than anything.

Riley chuckles. “Jack, you’re not cool enough to be a Colton.”

“And you are?” Jack smirks. “Come on, don’t tell me you weren’t givin’ Billy the eyes. I know that look. And he was sure as heck returning the favor.”

Riley punches his arm. “Jack, my love life is not, and has never been, your business. I don’t take advice from someone who let the love of their life walk away with another man.”

“Oh, that is below the belt, kiddo!” Jack grabs her and tousles her hair, and Riley yelps. The Coltons may be a crazy little family, but so is mine.

THE PHOENIX FOUNDATION

THE CAFETERIA FOOD MAY BE ON THE CHEAPER SIDE FOR A WHILE

“So, aside from a few hiccups, I’d say that mission was a success.” Jack leans back in his chair, stretching slightly, trying not to jostle his injured leg. It’s a through and through, technically almost just a graze and not nearly as bad as the one from Lagos, but it does ache like hell.
“That’s because you don’t have to explain to the CIA how this agency, which need I remind you is currently provisionally operating, put them on the hook for a four million dollar bounty?”

“When we offered to double it, I swear we thought it was the fifty thousand one.”

“This is coming out of your paycheck Dalton. For the next fifty years.”

A quick retort of ‘Who says I’m gonna be here that long’ is on the tip of Jack’s tongue before he glances at Mac, who’s sitting carefully, his arm in a sling resting across his chest. *I’m not gonna joke about leaving. Not when the kid’s just starting to accept that I might be something stable in his life.* And really, that’s what went well on this mission. He and Mac got to talk, and work together, and prove they trust each other. *Granted, I wish we could have done all that without major personal injury, but that’s the life.*

“Okay, all of you, out. I have to shut the lights down in here early if we don’t want to get our electric cut off.” Matty’s joking, but she is shooing them all out the door. Jack pauses in the middle of the room as the others hurry out.

“Hey Matty, I’m sorry. What happened out there today...it was my fault, not the kid’s.” He doesn’t want her to take this out on Mac in some way. Which is why he kept the attention on himself in the debrief, with all the joking around.

“I know.” She smiles at him, and he feels something dissolve in his chest. Something dark and heavy and worried. “And believe me, you had best be prepared to be the butt of every joke around here for a long time.” Jack sighs.

“Wouldn’t be the first time,” he chuckles. Matty just shakes her head.

MAC AND BOZER’S HOUSE

IT’S EXACTLY THE WAY MATTY IMAGINED IT

She doesn’t knock. The door is open, and really Mac needs to get better security, being an agent makes people some dangerous enemies. Her own house has the same system that protects the CIA headquarters.

The team is clustered around a bright firepit. Matty smiles, leaning back on a door frame and watching for a moment. *They look like a family.* Riley’s scarfing down a piece of buttermilk pie, Jack has his arm around Mac’s good shoulder, and his bandaged leg stretched out along the bench he’s sitting on. Mac’s leaned up against Jack, and unless Matty is very much mistaken, she recognizes that very worn Dallas Cowboys sweater Mac’s wearing...and if she remembers correctly, that was always his favorite.

Mac steals a bite of pie off Jack’s plate, and when Jack smacks his fork away with his own, Mac *laughs.* A real, genuine, happy laugh. It’s the most comfortable Matty’s seen him yet, he’s always so quiet and reserved around her. *He’s afraid of me.* And now that she can be sure Mac isn’t just a carbon copy of his father, playing along with them to further his own agenda, she wants to change the way Mac sees her.

Riley scrapes her fork across her plate, scooping up the last few crumbs. “Before today I never knew what buttermilk pie was. Now I never want to stop eating it.”

“I guess I’ll have to call the Coltons and put in an order for the missus?” Bozer asks, laughing as he sits down with his own slice.
“Oh no. The sooner you forget about the newlyweds thing, and the stupid pet names that went with it, the better.”

“He gave you pet names?” Jack looks just a little murderous.

“It was mutual!” Bozer throws his hands up in not-so mock surrender. Jack treats Riley like his own flesh and blood. And he totally lives up to the scary dad whenever someone messes around with her. Matty thinks pairing those two might have been the best decision she made in her life. Although looking at Mac and Jack leaning on each other, smiling, she thinks maybe there’s a tie for the title of ‘best’.

“I gave him one. He gave me like a dozen.”

She steps out of the shadows. “Well, I need to hear those and that’s an order.”

Bozer drops his plate.

“Relax, I’m kidding. We’re off the clock. So stop pet-naming Riley and cut me a slice of this pie that Jack won’t stop yapping about.” She takes the plate, and a bite. Jack is right, it’s heavenly. Maybe she’ll send a request, with the Coltons’ bounty money, for the recipe. At least for a four million dollar pie, it’s a good one. She’ll have to add it to the list of stress baking recipes. I’ll probably have to make ten after explaining that expense report. “So what are you all playing?” She hopes it’s not Monopoly. I hate that game. The only person who could ever get me to play it... She cuts off that train of thought fast, before it takes her someplace she doesn’t want to go tonight. Tonight is for forgetting about those things. It’s about this little family I have right here, right now.

“Truth or Dare,” Bozer says, picking up his plate.

“I love Truth or Dare.”

“Oh I know you do.” Riley grins. “Let’s do this.”

“Don’t get too excited, Davis. I know all your secrets, remember?” Jack laughs. “Yours too, Jack.”

Jack winks. “I’ll go dare all night.”

“Bring it on, Dalton.” Matty grins.

“Bust out the hot sauce!” Bozer yells, and Matty grins as Jack’s face goes absolutely white. This is going to be fun.
Jack was beginning to think he was never going to see a time when one of Mac’s inventions failed to come through. He guesses he jinxed them. Because when Mac’s little makeshift flamethrower ran out of propane, and Jack and Riley ran out of bullets, they didn’t stand a chance.

He winces when one of the men interrogating them slams a fist into Riley’s ribs. They figured out early on that Jack’s weak spot was the people with him. Interrogating him was going to get them nothing, but hurting the people he feels responsible for... I need to be less obvious about it. But he’s not sure he could have ever held back the enraged snarl when one of the guys knocked Riley’s legs out from under her and then kicked her in the side. Or when they twisted Mac’s arm, the one with the still-healing shoulder, behind his back and pulled.

Riley coughs, but straightens up with a glare and a smirk. “You’re gonna have to do better than that. Really, you’re embarrassing yourself at this point.” The next hit is to her jaw, and Jack sees a trickle of blood drip from the corner of her mouth.

They’re all trying to keep the focus off Mac, who’s cutting the ropes tying him up with the piece of broken glass he grabbed from the floor when he goaded one of the men into hitting him so hard his chair fell backward.

Jack’s learned that the more he fights back, the more the other two get punished. So he’s been trying not to say a thing. But Riley’s learned more than enough from him to keep a running line of insults and goading up. “What, are you pulling your punches cause I’m a girl?” She grins, and there’s blood on her teeth. Sometimes it scares Jack how much like him she is.

I want to protect her. But she’s too much like me to be protected.

He has a feeling both of them with end their careers either in a shallow grave or with a hell of a lot of very impressive scars.

But really, he doesn’t get to decide what happens to Riley anymore. Matty’s upping Riley’s status to a Level 6, the same as Jack’s. His baby girl is all grown up. She’s the youngest Level 6 agent in Phoenix, and she deserves the honor. Really, it should have happened before this, but the whole Como mess was such a setback.

Riley spits a mouthful of blood onto the floor. “Getting tired already?” The man just folds his arms and glares at her. And then he walks deliberately over to Mac.

Hell no. Jack may no longer be directly responsible for Riley in the field, but now he is assigned to training Mac. And if anything, it’s only made him feel more protective. Sure, it comes with a ton of paperwork, since Matty’s a stickler for doing things by the book, but Jack doesn’t mind filling out monthly evaluation reports as much as he claims he will. It’s as close to a parent as Jack will ever probably get to be.

“Hey, you big jerk, pick on someone your own size!” Jack shouts. If he did, he’d have to leave the room and go find someone else. The guy looks like a combination of a basketball player and a sumo wrestler. His buddy’s a little less intimidating, but he’s carrying a cattle prod so that sort of makes up for it. Jack can already feel the electric burns on his ribs.
The big guy glances at Jack, then back at Mac. “No, I think you are not so much fun.” He swings a fist at Mac’s cheek...and then pulls his hand back with a short, strangled scream of surprise. There’s a wicked-looking shard of glass embedded in it. Mac’s cut himself free.

The kid jumps up and spins around to grab the chair with a surprising amount of grace for someone Jack watched trip up the stairs to the Phoenix jet twelve hours ago.

Mac swings the chair, hard. It’s metal, probably to prevent someone from knocking it over and breaking themselves free, and it’s actually a pretty decent weapon. Jack cringes at the sound when it connects with the big man’s jaw. He’s gonna have some broken teeth to show for that.

The second guy switches on his cattle prod and steps forward, but Mac catches him across the arm, and Jack hears bone break.

Both guys are now out for the count, and Mac turns around, panting, fingers a little bloody from the broken glass he was using to cut the zipties. He quickly works Jack and Riley free, and catches Riley when she stumbles slightly getting to her feet.

“I’m okay, really,” she insists, and Jack feels like facepalming. My entire team, including me, are idiots who won’t admit when they need help. But he trained these particular idiots, so maybe it’s his fault?

Mac rubs his shoulder, it’s got to be aching like crazy. Really, they shouldn’t be back in the field yet, but this op had their skill sets written all over it. Jack looks at both of them and sighs. This bought them some freedom, and a reprieve from the beatings, but it didn’t get them out of this alive, not yet. There are still hallways of really scary dudes with guns between them and freedom.

He turns to Riley. “I need the truth, are you good to move?” She straightens up and brushes a loose lock of hair out of the drying blood from her cut lip.

“Yeah, I’m good.” She’s a little shaky, but if she was clenching up the way Jack showed her, those blows to her stomach shouldn’t have done too much damage. Jack really hates the fact that she knew the rudimentary logistics of how to take a punch with the least amount of damage before she ever joined the CIA. If I ever get my hands on the guy who made her childhood hell, he’s going to pay. Jack knows Elwood comes around from time to time, but Riley makes it a point to keep him and Jack apart, and he can respect that. She can handle herself, if Elwood ever tries to hurt her. And honestly Jack sometimes thinks it would be better that way, to let the man see that the girl he abused turned into a strong, independent woman fully capable of kicking his ass. Yes, I have some pent-up resentment, I know.

“Well, all we have to do now is get past three floors of armed guards and we’re home free,” Jack mutters sarcastically.

“We could just go over their heads,” Mac says, nodding to a ventilation grate in the ceiling. Clearly this room wasn’t designed with keeping people like Mac inside. Or they figured anyone they put in here would be too badly beaten up to try anything...

Mac retrieves his knife from one of the knocked-out goons, and in a few minutes all three of them are in the slightly cramped ductwork. If Jack thought the room was hot, the ducts are insane. The building’s been abandoned for a while and apparently these terrorists are too cheap to get the A/C turned back on.

They take one corner, then another, headed for what Jack assumes is the stairwell they were brought up in, judging by the direction and the route he remembers. He’s a little too good at telling direction
“Okay,” Mac says suddenly, and then he begins carefully working on the grating below him. He’s holding it with one hand, and loosening bolts with the other, but then one of the corroded ones gives him some trouble. Unfortunately, the second it loosens, the grate falls into the stairwell with a loud clatter, banging down at least two flights by the sound of it.

Mac looks back at them with wide, guilty eyes, but there’s no time to blame anyone or worry about it. “Go,” Jack says shortly, and Mac drops through the hole. Jack helps Riley through and then slides down himself, only to be met with Mac’s apologetic stare.

“I’m sorry. It’s my fault.”

“No, it’s not,” Jack says automatically. “It’s definitely not your fault we got bad intel and walked into an ambush, and it’s also not your fault these guys are cheapskates and leave their propane tanks almost empty instead of filling them up for us to use.” That gets a weak grin, which he guesses is good enough. “And neither was this.”

There’s a window in the stairwell, and Jack has an idea. They’re going to be in a killbox in a second, but not if they aren’t here to be shot at.

Jack rushes to the window and glances out. There’s nothing but water below them.

“Hey kids, how do you feel about a little swim?”

Riley grabs the flashdrive they were using to record the terrorists’ conversations out of her boot, and Jack hands her the waterproof bag he keeps in one of his tac vest pockets for his phone. Well, at least I don’t have to worry about that anymore. One of the goons smashed it when he first found them.

Jack kicks out the window, just as there’s a clatter from the lower stairwell and the pounding of boots in the hallway. They have to go. Now.

“Jump!”

THE PHOENIX FOUNDATION

THE AIR CONDITIONING WORKS HERE

Riley’s a little surprised to see that Bozer’s in the room for their mission briefing this time.

“What’s going on? We need masks for this one?” She whispers.

Bozer shrugs. “I’m as confused as you. Jill said Matty wanted me to come to the War Room.” he looks jittery. I would be worried about that too. Getting called in by Matty is nothing to laugh at. She wonders what Matty’s got a problem with. Bozer’s been doing good work.

Matty pulls up the screen and Riley moves away from Bozer. If he is in trouble she doesn’t want to cause him more. She might get upset at him for distracting me if she’s already upset at him. Matty doesn’t seem to be focusing on Bozer at all, though. Her attention is only on the picture in front of them all, a middle aged woman who looks professional and focused.

“Olivia Pryor. Member of Dutch parliament and known for championing education reform and fighting corruption.”

Riley smiles slightly. “I like her already. Is she in trouble?”
“She may be the trouble. According to the CIA, Pryor’s been leaking state secrets to a terrorist group.”

“Well, then, what’s the problem? They have the intel, so where do we come in?” Jack asks.

“The CIA isn’t even sure their intel is accurate. They’ve been having trouble verifying it. And they need airtight evidence to take anything to the Algemene Inlichtingen- en Veiligheidsdienst.”

“Gesundheit,” Bozer mutters. “What was that?” His voice is quiet, directed at Riley, but Matty catches it and turns.

“The intelligence services of the Netherlands?” Matty frowns. “Let’s just call them Dutch Intelligence and move on.” Bozer nods, swallowing hard. Whatever’s going on he just did something to make Matty more upset...

“The CIA believes Pryor will be meeting with her contact tomorrow in Amsterdam at this location.” Matty points to the picture of a small cafe, along with map coordinates.

Jack folds his arms, smirking. “But since this is all happening off the record, this is technically spying on a close ally, so…”

“We get to do their dirty work,” Riley finishes with a small wry smile.

“You are going to record the meet and get concrete proof.”

“Observe and report.” Jack salutes dramatically. “Yes ma’am.”

“I’m sending Bozer with you, there’s a contact of ours in the Netherlands working on a new kind of synthetic moldable polymer I’d like him to touch base with.” She turns to Bozer. “He might have the solution for your waterproofing problem. And you’ll get a chance to see some field work, which Jill tells me you’ve been interested in.”

Bozer looks suddenly shy and relieved at the same time. “It was a few comments about being stuck behind a desk while all the excitement is happening…” He swallows. “And I might have said I worried about Mac whenever he was gone. I might have said that a lot. Jill’s a good listener, what can I say?”

Matty smiles. “I’m not angry at you, Bozer.” Her voice is softer than it usually is. “I know how hard it is to be stuck behind a desk while you watch friends in trouble halfway around the world. So this time, you’re going. And we’ll go from there.”

“Sounds good to me. An all expenses paid flight to Amsterdam, and all I have to do is take notes from a fellow artist?” Bozer grins. “Sounds like heaven.”

“This isn’t a vacation, Bozer. This is work,” Matty reminds him.

“Ah, c’mon, loosen up a little, Matty! It’s the closest you get to a vacation around here, for all of us! We get to just park the van, sit back, and watch.”

Riley shakes her head. “Yeah, until you get bored and start playing stupid games of ‘who would win in a fight.’” Jack for some reason thinks it’s fun to make each of them pick someone, real or fictional, and then argue their reasons for why their choice would beat the other person’s (with the stipulation that Riley’s not allowed to look up things like superhero stats with her computer, unfair advantages or something like that). It backfired in a big way once when Patty was still on comms with them and Riley chose her...
“It’s always Bruce Willis, man!” Jack sounds offended. “That’s like a rule or something. If Bruce Willis is involved he automatically wins, hands down.”

“Against a t-rex?” This is gonna be fun. Riley smiles at the others. A family vacation, more or less. This should be fun. Sam would tell her that was jixing it. She’ll just be jealous she’s not on this op. Riley still doesn’t know exactly why Sam’s refusing field missions. She just says it’s safer for all of us.

THE PHOENIX JET

THE CLOSEST BOZER THOUGHT HE’D GET TO THIS WAS HIS MOVIES

Bozer isn’t sure what to make of all this. First he’s sure Matty’s going to fire him. Yes, telling Jill I worry was a bad idea. But when I heard they lost contact with the team in Cape Town, I was terrified. Mac’s come too close to dying too many times.

Bozer’s not sure he’s a field agent. Not by a long shot. But he feels useless behind his desk, making masks while Mac goes out and gets shot at. It’s just like it was when we were younger. He takes all the risks and all I can ever do is help clean up the aftermath. At least this time they have proper medical facilities to help with that.

Now he’s being told to pack a go bag for a flight to Amsterdam that leaves in an hour. He’s being handed fake papers and IDs, and a passport with his picture but the name James Carter. This is insane. “All this for a surveillance op?” he asks when Riley gives him the papers.

“Yes, because if we went into that country with our real names we’d be pegged as US operatives in a second.” She flips through her own fakes. “This way we get in and get out and no one’s the wiser.”

Now Bozer’s sitting on a plane somewhere over the Atlantic... and damn that sounds like the title card to a great spy flick, with Mac and Jack and Riley. This is insane. Bozer’s kind of afraid to touch anything. Spy planes in movies always have stuff like ejector seats that catch the overly curious new guy unaware.

Mac finishes talking to Riley and Jack and comes to sit across from him. It’s weird to Boze how comfortable Mac looks here. He fits in. “We’ll be landing a few hours before Pryor’s meet is supposed to happen. Your contact was supposed to be meeting us at the airport and picking you up directly, but a European ops team needed a rush order and he’s going to be a little late. Matty okayed you joining us on the stakeout until then.”

Bozer glances around. “This plane won’t, like, electrocute me if I touch the wrong button, right?”

“No,” Mac laughs. “We do have a fingerprint access weapons locker, which apparently Jack insisted on, but that’s the coolest thing in here.” He leans back and glances out at the clouds.

“I thought you hated heights.”

“I do. Flying’s different. Statistically, it’s the safest way to travel.”

Trust Mac to bring math into it. Bozer stares out at the pink and white clouds and the water glimmering below them. “This is freaking insane.”

“I felt the same when I got in here the first time. It was crazy. Like some billionaire’s private jet.” That would have been right after Mac got released from prison. Would have been even more of a
shock for him than it was for me. Mac’s still looking out the window, smiling softly, and Boze can’t help but wish that freedom came with fewer strings attached. Yeah, this mission is pretty safe. But some aren’t. He’s not over Phoenix sending Mac back to prison, even if that was a traitor’s decision. Who’s to say it won’t happen again? He doesn’t know Matty that well, and she scares him even now. If she thought it was in the agency’s best interests, she might okay sending Mac back inside.

Riley yawns, across the aisle, and curls up on a couch. She’s probably a veteran flyer, this isn’t anything amazing to her. The farthest Bozer’s flown was to see Uncle Mick in Baton Rouge. He’s never been out of the country, they never had the money for travel like that. My first passport stamp...and it won’t even be for my real passport.

“So you were worried about me?” Mac asks suddenly, startling Bozer out of his thoughts.

“Well, you know, when you guys go and get shot at every other day…” He feels badly about making Mac feel guilty. I never wanted him to know I was afraid something could happen. Not when he was the Phoenix, and not now.

“I appreciate it.” Mac leans forward, smiling a little more. “Boze, I know this has all been hard for you.”

“I just don’t want to lose another little brother.” There. I said it. What I’ve wanted to say for the past six years. He watched them put Jerry in the ground. He doesn’t want to watch that happen to Mac. Although if something did, they might not even get a body to bury, not in Mac’s line of work.

“I’ve got a good team watching my back,” Mac says softly, glancing at Jack and Riley, who are now both asleep, leaning against each other. Jack snores. Loudly.

“I know.” Boze knows those two would do anything to keep Mac safe. And logically, he knows that Mac could just as easily die doing anything else. Fatal car accidents happen in LA almost every day. People get cancer, or they get mystery diseases, or they have heart attacks. It’s not like keeping Mac out of the field is a guarantee of keeping him alive.

But the longer Bozer works in the lab, the more stories he hears. He used to think the techs exaggerated, that they made up crazy scenarios to scare each other like kids telling ghost stories at camp. But some of the guys who come in to pick up gear...Bozer’s seen the scars. And he’s seen the haunted looks in eyes. And he’s heard the stories in the lounges where the techs and ops teams mingle. And he’s starting to think those stories were anything but exaggerated.

He doesn’t want to think about Mac being captured and tortured. But based on the nightmares he’s heard coming from his housemate’s room sometimes, it’s too late for that hope. He used to think they were about prison, and that was horrible enough to imagine. He’d listen to Mac screaming “No, stop, please!” and cover his head with his pillow because he knew trying to wake his friend would only panic him more. I always knew what happened to him inside. He tried not to let me find out, but he couldn’t hide the nightmares.

But sometimes Mac doesn’t just beg for something to stop. He’ll start repeating “I don’t know anything, I don’t, I swear. Please, I don’t know!” And Bozer’s pretty sure what people wanted from him in prison wasn’t information.

He leans against the window and tries to force his thoughts to go back to his first trip overseas. He’s not technically going to be able to tell a lot of people about it, but most of his friends are his coworkers at Phoenix anyway, and he can tell them. He plans on taking a lot of pictures.

Mac even falls asleep at some point, and Bozer feels like the odd man out again, the only one awake
on this flight. The jet is a lot faster than a commercial airline, but he’s still hungry. He doesn’t know if they were supposed to pack food and he doesn’t want to wake anyone up to ask. He settles for drinking some more of his water.

They land, and he follows the team to a van that’s parked at the edge of the airport area. He wasn’t supposed to be coming with them for this and he feels a little on edge, like he’s intruding on something. Jack and Riley are laughing about something related to one of their previous stakeouts and dragging Mac into some kind of ongoing argument they have, and Bozer doesn’t get the joke. It’s like being in a school cafeteria and not being part of the popular groups. He has no idea what’s going on and he feels like an outsider. They fit so seamlessly together. Mac and Jack and Riley, the Golden Trio. And then there’s me. Bozer doesn’t have anything to add to a field mission. Granted, Jack said all they’re going to do is sit around and videotape that Dutch politician, but still, Bozer feels like the third wheel. Well, in all actuality, he’s technically the fourth.

They pile into the van and Mac turns around, as if he’s only just remembered Bozer’s there. When he’s with them, he doesn’t need me. Bozer will be the first to admit it’s one of his less admirable traits. He wants to be indispensable. He wants people to need him around. It’s why he tries to always be there. Heck, it’s why he started cooking.

I have to get used to the idea that Mac’s an adult now, he can choose who he wants to spend his time with, who he wants to depend on. He tries to snap himself out of the moodiness and enjoy this. After all, he’s in a foreign country.

It doesn’t feel as cool as he thought it would. The city looks like any other city. The only difference is that a lot of the people are speaking a language he doesn’t understand. And he could find that in the right part of LA. He still hears English mixed in occasionally.

“Where are the windmills? And the dikes? And the tulips?” he asks.

“That stuff’s for the tourists. We’re going to the business district.” Jack turns down a side street, then stops. “There’s the cafe. Now all we have to do is sit back, turn on some good music, and wait.”

“I got a perfect playlist on my phone.” Bozer’s mask making soundtrack isn’t obnoxiously loud, but it’s fun and upbeat and good for keeping him awake when he’s bored. Which is what he’s sure he’s going to be.

“Nope. None of that digitized garbage. CDs are always gonna sound the best.” He pulls out a large zippered case.

“You know they only say that about vinyl, right, Jack?” Bozer asks.

Riley grins. "He's got like ten Willie Nelson live CDs. Get used to it." Jack pops one in and country music suddenly fills the van. Boze doesn’t exactly dislike country, but he can only do about two or three songs. He wishes he’d had the foresight to bring headphones like Riley did. She’s pulling them out of her backpack, and handing something large and red to Jack.

"And I already inflated your seat cushion." Riley hands it over with a tiny smirk, and Jack shoves it underneath him. And then the cushion makes a very loud, very impolite noise. She pranked him.

"RILEY!" Bozer’s laughing too hard to hear the rest.

AMSTERDAM

TWO AND A HALF HOURS AFTER LANDING
Jack’s still got the Willie Nelson going strong, Riley’s bopping along to something playing on her laptop through her headphones, and Mac and Bozer have managed to find a worn deck of cards in the van, missing the Jack of Spades and with the Ace of Hearts almost torn in half, and have been playing War for a solid hour. So far Bozer’s winning. This is the one game it’s technically impossible for Mac to accidentally cheat at. They’ve tried playing poker but Bozer can’t hide his tells and Mac keeps more or less accidentally counting cards.

Suddenly Riley jumps, yanking her headphones down around her neck and forcing her seat back straight.

“Match on Pryor at our 3 o’clock. Blue sweater and pearls.” Jack shuts off the music and they all look out the window.

“Okay, let’s get eyes on her. Mac, you’re up.” Mac nods. He fits the general population profile the best, and he’s the least likely to be memorable in the crowd. He takes the tiny camera from Riley and clips it to his jacket, then steps out of the van and into the square.

“Remember, Matty needs video of her handing over the information,” Riley says as the door closes. Mac nods. That means he has to get close enough to not be blocked at a crucial moment by pedestrians, but he also has to avoid attracting attention. Easy. Piece of cake.

“See if you can ID her contact.” Riley’s voice is tinny through the comms; fortunately half the people here are business executives talking constantly on little bluetooth earphones so Mac doesn’t seem out of place to be doing that too.

“She’s checking her watch. I think he’s late,” Mac whispers.

“Well, she looks as nervous as a long tailed cat in a room full of rocking chairs.” Jack chuckles slightly. “Her contact could be anyone in the square. Keep your eyes open.” Mac glances around. There’s a lot of people here. A lot of people standing around with newspapers, people with coat collars turned up. All the stereotypical ‘hiding something’ signs that aren’t exactly danger signals in the real world. Our guy probably won’t be that obvious.

A waiter walks out and hands Pryor a phone. “Guys, I think our intel might not have been totally accurate. I think her contact is on the phone.” Mac glances at the woman. She looks as surprised as they are. She wasn’t expecting it to not be a meeting in person.

“I can hear what she’s saying, but not whoever’s on the phone. And all she’s saying is “Yes”, “No”, and “I don’t know”.”

“Can’t you just hack the phone?” Bozer’s asking.

“It’s a landline. Taps on those take a lot longer to set up.”

“Not necessarily,” Mac mutters. There’s a newspaper stand to his right, and the kid selling papers is listening to a fairly old radio with headphones on. Mac rushes over. “How much for that radio?”

The guy gives him a very confused look, but names a price. It’s kind of steep for the old thing, but Mac doesn’t care. He starts ripping it and the headphones apart immediately, pulling open the phone exchange box at the edge of the square. He connects the wires to one of the junctions, then fiddles with the radio a bit more.

“Did you just tap the phone lines with a radio?” Jack sounds more than a little impressed.

“Yeah, but don’t get too excited. Tere’s at least a hundred junctions in here and it won’t do any good
if I don’t find the line they’re on before the call’s over.” Mac fiddles with the wires some more. “They’re all speaking Dutch. I can’t tell which line is the right one.” He’ll explain later that he figured it out while playing around with the house landline. And how he accidentally found out that Grandpa was going to the doctor for lung cancer, not just regular checkups. He hasn’t been keen on listening in on phone conversations since.

“Yeah, well, we can hear it through comms and translate it. Keep trying.”

Mac does, tapping into wire after wire. Each time, Riley tells him to keep going. “That’s a grandmother. That’s a marital spat. That’s someone reporting a plumbing problem. That’s…” Her voice trails off. “That’s it, Mac. That’s the one.”

Mac doesn’t understand a thing, but clearly everyone in the van does, because there’s a sudden sharp inhale from Riley and Jack mutters “Clock is ticking? That doesn’t sound good.”

Pryor stands up and reaches into a red planter, pulling out a purse with some difficulty. “Is that her payment?” Bozer asks, muffled. He’s probably back in the back of the van now. “Not unless she’s getting paid in gold bars. That looked heavy.”

“No, no, no.” Jack’s voice in his ear is tinny and stressed. “I saw that all the time in Afghanistan. That’s what people look like when they’re carrying an IED.”

Mac feels suddenly cold. Something about this whole situation isn’t right. Is someone blackmailing her into planting a bomb? Maybe in the Parliament offices? He knows from the intel they got that she’s scheduled to be making a speech today. In a few hours, actually. They can’t let her walk away.

“Should I stop her?” He asks.

There’s a silence from the other end of the comms. He knows they’re trying to decide what the best move is. Calling an audible in the field is incredibly stressful. And then Jack speaks up. “Do it. I don’t care if it tips our hand. We don’t know the target. We have to neutralize the threat now.” They might catch hell from Matty later, but it’s better than holding back and letting someone die because they’re waiting to catch the bigger fish.

Mac drops his phone tapping device and starts to run. He jumps over the fence around the edge of the square, doing that is still basically muscle memory even though he hasn’t been running around as much as he used to as a vigilante. He slows down once he gets to the sidewalk, there’s no telling how the bomb is triggered and he doesn’t want to risk it being set off prematurely if Pryor panics.

The woman’s walking purposefully, eyes fixed ahead. Jack told him, in one of their training sessions, that most bombers fixate. They can’t think of anything but their target, especially if they’re suicide bombers. They don’t look around, they don’t really pay attention to the crowds. No response to being talked to or waved at. They have a mission and that’s all.

But Pryor isn’t exactly a suicide bomber on an errand of death. She’s scared and nervous, and every once in a while she glances around frantically, as if she’s afraid of being seen. And when she catches sight of Mac, she drops the purse and begins to run.

There’s no question of priorities. Mac lets her disappear into the crowd and kneels beside the package, grateful that the impact didn’t set it off immediately. He pulls it open and the second people around him see the wires and the clock (really, how dramatic, there are much less cliche builds) they begin screaming and pushing to get away. His mind automatically begins syncing the countdown sequence, like he’s done a hundred times before. He doesn’t need to look at the numbers to know
how much time is left.

4:25

Either the target wasn’t Parliament or the bomb’s trigger was activated when Pryor dropped it. Mac glances at the wires; this is a complicated design and he’s not sure he can disarm it in time. “Jack, I need a ride. I have to get this bomb out of the square before everyone dies.”

3:46

Jack must have already been thinking that, because it’s seconds later that the van squeals up beside him. The door slides open and Bozer glances out. “Boze, get out!” Mac shouts.

“Hell no! I’m not going anywhere and you don’t have time to argue!” Mac sighs and jumps in, and Jack guns the engine.

3:08

“Riley, find the least populated area within a mile.” Mac sets the bomb on the small worktable and starts searching the van for things to contain the blast. “This thing is all booby traps. It’s like someone knew someone like me would be trying to disarm it.” He finds the case Jack carries a disassembled sniper rifle in, I’ve never been so grateful for his overpacking; and I’m never going to tease him again about bringing more than we need for a mission, dumps out the gun components, and shoves the bomb inside. The disguised suitcase is military grade ballistics rated, it’ll at least decrease the impact of the bomb.

2:17

“Mac, how’s it looking back there?” Jack yells.

“Looking at a pound and a half of MP10, two pounds to be safe, so...pressure wave velocity of one thousand thirty feet per second.”

“Mac, I’m gonna tell you what I told my EOD techs, the only thing that’s gonna make sense to me is how fast do I gotta run if things go bad!” Jack shouts back. “Where do I have to park this thing?”

1:58

Mac continues mumbling to himself, calculating blast radius and how much containment the van will be with the bomb left inside it. He shoves the suitcase into the equipment locker and packs that with anything loose he can find in the van, while running the last of the mental math in his head. Pena always said if you can’t disarm a bomb in time, you have to minimize the damage it can do. He thinks this is the best they can do.

1:20

“Two hundred feet!!! I need a space of two hundred feet!”

“I got something!” Riley yells. “Next left, wide street, closed for repairs.”

Jack swings the wheel and Mac slams into the locker, Bozer falling against him. Ouch. He pushes back as Jack slams on the brakes. They’re in the middle of a parking lot, it’s the best they’re going to get.

0:45
“Out! Now!” Jack and Riley scramble out, and Mac shoves Bozer ahead of him out the sliding door, slamming it shut behind them. He’s done the best he can, now all he can do is pray he deadened the blast enough that the concussive shock doesn’t blow out their ears and the debris doesn’t kill them.

0:13

They run as fast and as far as they can. And when Mac’s brain tells him there are two seconds left on the timer, he tackles Bozer to the ground. He dimly notices Jack doing the same to Riley.

0:00

Riley is about to yell at Jack for being an idiot and protecting her by making himself a human shield when the world explodes in heat and light and an ear-ringing blast. She ducks, instinctively shielding her head with her arms. How sad is it when knowing how to minimize eardrum damage is second nature? She feels a wave of searing heat roll over them, and Jack makes a muffled gasp where his face is pressed into her hair. She hopes he wasn’t hit with shrapnel. At least not in anywhere vital.

And then it’s over. Jack’s tense muscles relax and Riley starts pushing herself to her knees as he rolls off her. Ow. Her battered ribs protest the hard contact with the ground. This was supposed to be a milk run, after the Cape Town disaster.

“Jack!” She shouts as he groans, rolling over. “You okay?”

“Yeah. Feel like I got sunburned and sitting’s not gonna be fun for a while. I was just getting over that bullet, too.” He glances at Mac and Bozer, who are also getting up slowly. Boze’s eyes are almost comically huge.

“We got blown up!” He gasps. “We got blown up. Nobody’s dead, are they?” He pats his hands along his chest. “I’m not dead, am I?”

“No, you’re not.” Mac reassures him. He’s probably got some cracked or bruised ribs. But he’s taking it all pretty well, for a civilian. No screaming, no running around in a headless chicken panic. Riley’s seen worse on ordnance training day at the Farm. Okay, this is good. This is fine. And then she sees the battered hunk of plastic and metal that was her computer.

“Damn. Nobody got killed but the blast cracked my rig. The only proof Pryor is a terrorist is gone.” She grabs it and shoves it in her backpack anyway, even though it’s scorched and the data’s probably corrupted.

She can hear sirens. And there’s a white car speeding down the street. “Guys, we’ve got company,” Bozer says, and she resists the urge to laugh. “What do we do?”

“Pretty sure they think we just set off a bomb in their capital,” Jack says.

“There’s a plan for this though, right?” Boze asks.

“Yeah. Run.”

AMSTERDAM

NOT A FUN PLACE TO BE WHEN YOU’RE WANTED FOR TERRORISM

“Wait, so, the cops think we set off that bomb?” Bozer asks as they duck into an alley.
“Yeah, so keep your voice down,” Jack whispers. “The only proof we didn’t was on Riley’s rig, which is now dead, courtesy of said bomb.”

“But doesn’t Phoenix know what happened? Can’t Matty like, call someone?”

“We’re operating in a foreign country without permission.” Riley’s voice is flat, Jack can tell she’s both hurting and angry. “Getting us off the hook for a bombing would just get us back on for spying on our allies. Either way, we’re an international incident. Even if we could convince the cops we aren’t terrorists, we’re still here illegally so we still...go to jail.”

Jack glances at Mac, the kid looks absolutely horrified. As much of a nightmare as being in an American prison was, he’s got to be a thousand times more terrified of going to a foreign one. And they wouldn’t be kind to someone caught spying. He reaches to put an arm around Mac’s shoulder and his phone rings. It’s Matty. Of course it is. The woman has the world’s worst timing.

He answers as all four of them duck into the doorway of a closed shop “Yeah, Dalton. 7652 Longhorn.”

“Jack, I’m seeing a massive heat spike in the Amsterdam business district via satellite. Please tell me that wasn’t your team’s fault.”

Jack decides to hedge a little and try to avoid the direct answer. Not that that’s ever really helped him. It’s just force of habit at this point. “Yeah, everything’s fine. We got proof that Pryor is a terrorist. Except there was kind of a bomb in her purse and it exploded, destroying said proof, and now the cops think we did it.”

“That is the exact opposite of fine, Dalton. You’re about to be in the middle of a serious international incident. I’m enacting emergency protocol and sending exfil coordinates now.”

Riley takes the phone. “On the bright side we did confirm she’s a traitor. And I don’t think anyone got a good look at us.”

“I think they got a very good look. Dutch intelligence just launched a nationwide manhunt for four suspects with your description.” Jack watches Mac collapse into himself even more, taking deep, shuddering breaths. Kid’s probably on the verge of a panic attack. Jack decides to let Riley handle Matty’s ire and moves to stand next to Mac, letting their shoulders brush. Mac visibly calms, but he’s still clenching and unclenching his fists. Jack pulls a paperclip out of his pocket and hands it over, and Mac begins fiddling with it immediately.

Riley hangs up and hands Jack back his phone. “We’ve got exfil location. Now we just have to get there without getting caught.” There are sirens screaming somewhere behind them.

“What’s the location?” Mac asks. Riley hands over her phone. Mac glances at it and then wanders out toward the street. There’s a young couple walking, holding hands, both of them with phones out snapping either selfies or pictures of the buildings. Clearly tourists. Mac walks the opposite way and casually, as he passes them, lifts a map of the city from a side pocket of the man’s backpack. He rejoins them, opening out the map and spreading it over the window.

“You know, I could have pulled one up on my phone,” Riley says. “I need to be able to see the whole thing at once.” Mac taps a street corner with one finger. “This is where we are, this is where we want to be.” He draws a line across to the open square where Matty’s set up exfil.

“That’s not too far,” Bozer says.
“Yeah, that’s the problem. Jack, where is our exfil pilot coming from?”

“Probably Germany. We don’t have anyone in the Netherlands right now, but we have a team on the ground in Lotte. That’s…” Jack pauses “Probably at least an hour, hour and a half flight for one of the evac choppers.”

“Exactly. To a location that for us is a fifteen minute walk. We can’t just loiter around an open square that long. I have to find us a safe spot to hole up for a while.”

“Don’t we have a safe house or something?” Bozer asks.

Riley shakes her head. “No, those take weeks to set up. This was supposed to be a one day observe and report.”

“There’s a park here,” Mac points. “It’s a little out of our way but it’s going to be way less populated.” He bites his lip, glancing over the map. “In LA, I’d know how to get there without taking any major roads, but I don’t know the traffic patterns here. So I’ll just have to guess.”

The park isn’t too far from where they are, and it's barely ten minutes later that they’re walking along a path, trying to look like curious tourists. Mac and Jack are out front, Mac with the map and faking an argument with Jack, and Riley and Bozer are behind them, holding hands. Hopefully, to anyone watching, they look like two separate groups of people.

Mac flinches visibly when the sound of sirens starts getting closer. A lot closer. The kid breaks into a fast walk, headed deeper into the park, then stops when a police car pulls up and a couple officers start in their direction. He turns around, but there’s a car coming toward them from that way as well. Jack can see the hunted animal look in Mac’s eyes, and he knows they’re in a lot of trouble.

There’s a heavy windbreak of trees to their left. Jack pulls Mac in, and after a second Riley does the same.

“How’d they find us so fast?” Bozer asks.

Mac points to a video camera barely visible through the branches. “Street cams. Was hoping there wouldn’t be as many in a park.” There’s an officer walking toward them, and Jack assesses the situation quickly. I can let him go by, hope he misses us, or we can start getting proactive. Once the man is out of view of the cameras, Jack pulls him into the bushes, choking him out quickly and lowering him to the ground. “I do not envy you the headache you will have when you wake up,” he mutters, and Riley gives him the evil eye. What? That was a contextually appropriate Princess Bride quote!

Jack pulls the man’s radio off his belt and listens for a minute. “Ze waren daar een minuut geleden. Ze kunnen niet ver zijn gegaan.” They were there a minute ago. They can’t have gone far.

"You were right, Mac. They're using the cameras."

“Jack speaks Dutch?” Bozer asks. Riley just nods.

“Hey, what’d you think, I was just another pretty face?” Jack asks, grinning. He picks up the radio again. “Ze vertrekken naar het noorden. Ik ga ze volgen.” They’re leaving heading north. I’m going to follow them. It might buy them a little time. When he sees the foot patrols and the cars following his false lead, he nods to the others and they start walking in the opposite direction.

Matty’s going to have a heart attack if things like this keep happening. She knows working with Jack
Dalton is always a gamble; the man is a human trouble magnet. But this is taking it to a whole new level of bad.

*I just have to get them out of the country. After that we can work on what comes next.* Matty’s got some strings she can pull on. Asking for favors right now is risky, she’s already burned a lot of bridges keeping the CIA from outright absorbing Phoenix. *I wasn’t sure, at first, if that was the right move, but it’s paid off.* The problem is, somehow they always seem to put themselves right back on the razor’s edge of getting dissolved. And Dalton and his team are usually right in the middle of the disaster of the week.

“I need a backstopped cover for the exfil pilot and his chopper. It doesn’t have to hold up forever, just enough time to get Jack and his team through Dutch and German airspace.” She knows the tech team can get it done. The chopper is already inbound, they have half an hour maximum before that cover needs to be ready to roll. *I was expecting to do this to pull our team out of Germany in a week, not Amsterdam in a day.*

Andie knocks on the door, and Matty barely stops herself from snapping at the woman for the interruption. What happened half a world away isn’t her fault.

“I have the US national security adviser on the line for you.”

“Transfer it to my phone.” Matty turns back to the screen.

“I’m sorry, it’s not a phone call.”

The directors of the CIA, Defense Intelligence Agency, and the NSA are already online when Matty walks into the War Room, and the security adviser looks a bit frustrated by Matty’s delay.

“Dutch intelligence claims four terrorists detonated a car bomb two hours ago. I’ve reviewed the identity of the suspects and have good reason to believe at least two of them are US operatives.” *Jack and Riley.* “But before I ask if they are yours, let me remind you that if an operative is caught spying on US allies, the consequences to your agency will be severe.” Matty knows they already know Jack and Riley are former CIA. And Mac...she shudders. If they haven’t already found out, they’ll realize soon that Mac is a convicted felon in an off the charts awful parole violation. *If we don’t fix this, he goes to prison no matter what country he’s in.*

“Would anyone like to claim these people as agents?”

“The CIA has no affiliation.”

“The DIA has no affiliation.”

“The NSA has no affiliation.”

Those echoes shake Matty to the core. This isn’t the first time she’s had to make the choice on whether or not to disavow an agent. Or more than one. It never gets easier. *They do the most dangerous jobs in the world, and expect us to have their backs if things go wrong.* It feels like breaking a promise to leave agents to their fate. *They swear to do whatever is necessary to complete a mission, for the good of the country.* *They know the risks.* *But abandoning the people who risk it all for us doesn’t feel right.* Matty’s disavowed three agents. Two have never been seen again. *Losing Jack and Riley and Mac and Bozer would be almost unthinkable.*

But Matty knows she can’t let emotion rule her choice, as much as she hates to cut ties with the team. If Phoenix takes another hit right now, after the Chrysalis disaster, they’re done. But that’s not the only consequence claiming these agents will cause. If Matty admits that Mac was in any way
involved, he’s never getting out of this. He’s already been convicted of terrorism on US soil. No one is going to care how good their reasons were for what they did, Mac is going to pay for it. If the US government has to explain having operatives there, they’ll make Mac the scapegoat, and get themselves out from under the gun by putting him in the line of fire. Jack, Riley, and Bozer might be expendable to them as well. To cover their own backs, they would be more than willing to let Mac spend the rest of his life in a Dutch prison.

The team’s best chance is to clear their names themselves. “The Phoenix Foundation has no affiliation.”

Riley consults her phone as they step out of the last alley on the route Mac found. *He got us here with minimal camera exposure and no cops finding us.* “Exfil should be just around the corner.”

There’s an open, brick-paved square just ahead, but no sign of their pilot or the helicopter. Jack is the first one to say what everyone’s thinking but doesn’t want to admit out loud. “I don’t see the chopper. So unless we're leaving in Wonder Woman's jet we have a problem.”

“Maybe he's late?” Bozer asks.

Riley shakes her head. “Not Van Horn. He’s our dedicated Western Europe exfil and he is *never* late. I’ve worked at least twenty ops with him, if anything he’s early every time.” And then her comms buzz with a staticky screech that hurts her ears. She yanks the device out. Shit. There’s only a few reasons for comms to go dead in the field. Losing signal (they’re not underground or in a remote location), damage of some sort (if the explosion fried them they’d have gone out a long time ago), or remote deactivation. The kind of thing that’s protocol in a disavowal situation.

Jack pulls out his phone, dials the Phoenix, and states his code in phrase. There’s nothing but buzzes and beeps on the other end. He tries once more, and then shakes his head, looking like he wants to throw the phone to the ground in frustration.

“No code in, no comms, no exfil…” he mutters.

“We've been disavowed.” Riley sighs.

“Wait, what?” Bozer asks. “Is that as bad as it sounds?”

“Phoenix has completely abandoned us. Matty severed all ties.” Riley tilts her head back and closes her eyes, the headache she’s been holding at bay is crashing in full force now. Out of the corner of her eye she sees Mac fold in on himself, shuddering. For someone who already has serious abandonment issues, being disavowed must be absolutely horrifying. Mac's swallowing hard, looking like he's trying not to start crying.


“We survive,” Jack says quietly. Riley glances at Mac. *He’s the only one of us with experience in this kind of thing. He’s run like this before.* Hiding from cops and criminals alike is no new ground to Mac. But that doesn’t mean he’s going to be okay with this. It probably just means he’s the most worried of all of them.

“Why would they do that?” Bozer asks.

“Phoenix has 44 more agents around the world, in deep cover. And claiming us could give the government an excuse to dissolve the whole Phoenix and leave them with no resources and no
backup. She has to put the best interests of all of them first.” Jack glances around. “But we can talk about details later. Right now we have to get off the streets. And I think I know a place.”

Riley feels jumpy walking around the city. Like there are eyes on her all the time. It’s only been a couple hours. How did Mac do this for years? She can’t imagine the kind of stress that would have been. Wondering if anyone might have found out who he really was, wondering when he was going to make a mistake and get caught... He did everything he did without an agency backing him. With the full knowledge that getting caught meant going to prison. She’ll admit the thought of not being able to fix this is scary. I like to think I can handle anything. But the truth is, it was always really reassuring to know an agency had my back. To know someone could pull me out of a bad situation. Not having that safety net is more traumatic than she expected.

Jack’s still talking. He always rambles when he’s nervous; sometimes Riley gets frustrated but more often than not it’s kept her alert and alive until a medevac arrived, so she’s not complaining. Just another thing we won’t have. We get hurt, there’s no one to help us but ourselves. It’s a little humbling realizing just how much she depends on someone else to be there for her. She shakes her mind off the worry and focuses on Jack’s voice. “I knew a guy from the Farm who got disavowed. Spent four years in a Chinese prison and still didn’t get to go home. Now he’s got a job working as one of those dudes who stands in line for people.”

Bozer gives him a skeptical glance. “That's a real job?”

“Apparently in Shenzhen it is.”

“Remind me to change careers,” Riley mutters. “Sounds like a lot less getting shot at.”

“Ah, c’mon, you’d miss running around and almost dying on a daily basis.”

“I might anyway, if we don’t find a way to fix this.” She can hear sirens. “Jack, how far away is this plan of yours? Because I think we’re going to get caught before we get there.”

“Just another street down. If she hasn’t moved.” Jack pulls them down a side street and knocks on the door of a rambling house. Riley fidgets with the straps of her backpack while they wait for someone to answer. She doesn’t like this. The sirens are getting closer and closer.

The door opens and a brunette woman in a long robe pushes it open. Jack smiles. “Hey honey…” He gets a slap in the face for his trouble. And then the woman starts babbling in rapid-fire French and pulls Jack into an almost bruising kiss. Riley rolls her eyes. I knew this was coming from the minute he said it was a 'she' we were visiting.

“Jen, can we talk about this inside?” Jack asks. She appears to be considering it, and more than a little skeptical. Jack turns back to the others, whispering quickly.

“Seven years ago I was here on an undercover op for the CIA. She was part of my cover.”

“Who are they?” The woman asks, folding her arms.

“My crew. This is Bozer, he's really cool, he's the gaffer. Riley's the stylist, she can make anyone look good. And the kid here, that's the model, ol' blue eyes, Mac.” Mac shrugs with an awkward smile. “Listen, I’d really rather not fight in the street, okay?” She nods slowly.

Jack stops them before they walk inside. “Listen. I’m a fashion photographer from Miami, you guys are my team. I hate westerns and my name is Bryce Villanova.” I guess after a while they learned not to let him pick his own code names.
GENEVIEVE’S APARTMENT

JACK HAS MORE SECRETS THAN EXPECTED

“I don’t know! Just went out for breakfast one morning and kinda kept walking…” Mac sits on the edge of a couch and listens halfheartedly to Jack arguing with his old flame. He’s too jittery to focus on anything for long. He hates the particular brand of adrenaline surge that comes with running from law enforcement.

Somewhere along the way he dropped the paperclip Jack gave him, and he’s too skittish to look around for one in Genevieve’s stuff. Her whole apartment looks overly pristine and staged, like she’s showing off for someone. And there are more pictures of her face around than Mac finds comforting. He doesn’t think rummaging through drawers would go over well. And they don’t need to get kicked back out on the streets.

He jumps when Bozer sits down next to him. “Mac? How are you holding up?”

He just shrugs. He doesn’t really know how he feels. “It hasn’t really all sunk in yet.” He shrugs. “Are you okay?”

“No.” Bozer sighs. “So this is what it’s like.” He glances at the window. “Riley says if they knew we were here they’d have come for us by now. But it doesn’t make me feel any better.” Mac looks up. Riley is leaning against a wall, watching Jack and Genevieve argue, with a small bemused smile.

“You know what’s really funny?” Bozer asks. “We’re running from everyone, we almost got blown up, and we might go to prison, and I’m just really craving a hamburger.” He rubs at his stomach with a weak chuckle.

The mention of food makes Mac’s stomach churn. He’s already feeling dizzy, and his hands and feet are oddly cold. If I don’t calm down I’m going to pass out. He takes a few deep breaths, clenching his hands into fists. Matty abandoned us. She doesn’t want us. She left us to be captured, to go to prison...she doesn’t want me.

“When we get home, I’m gonna marathon the Mission Impossible movies just so I can point out all the ways they got it wrong,” Bozer says with a forced laugh. “Maybe I’ll write my own. I gotta come up with a cool character name though. ‘Wilt Bozer’ just doesn’t have the same flair as ‘Ethan Hunt’.” He frowns exaggeratedly. “Wait, I got it! Double-oh-Boze.”

Mac chuckles half-heartedly, the knot of tension in his stomach easing just a little. Maybe everything’s falling apart, but some things never change. Like Bozer. He’s stuck with me no matter what. Even when I didn’t deserve to have him stay. And his team, Jack and Riley, they’re not going to abandon him. We’re going to be okay, right?

“I wish this was a movie. At least we’d know it was going to end okay.”

Bozer nods, then shrugs. “Actually, in a movie, the ending’s already written. In real life...we get to write it ourselves.” He glances at Mac. “And if anyone can improvise their way out of something like this, it’s you.”

“So maybe I should be the hero of your next movie, then,” Mac mutters, nudging Bozer’s shoulder gently.

“Well…” He rubs his chin. “I guess...but you’re gonna need a very different name. Hate to break it to you, but ‘Angus MacGyver’ is just never going to be one of those iconic household names.” Mac
laughs, a little more genuinely this time. And then there’s a thud from the room behind them and he looks up to see Jack walking over.

“Think I smoothed things over with Genevieve…” A yelled French curse and a high-heeled shoe come flying after him, and Jack grimaces.

“I don’t blame her,” Riley says, folding her arms.

“What? So just because I go out and lasso a golden unicorn on assignment, I'm the evil George Clooney here?”

“Clooney’s married,” Boze points out. “To a brilliant attorney.”

“Yeah, well, he hopped on a lotta lilypads before he settled on that one,” Jack mutters defensively.

Riley punches his shoulder. “You're not supposed to just leave people hanging.”

“You are if your CIA cover is compromised and you've got a bunch of angry mob muscle breathing down your neck.” He gives Riley a pleading look. “What was I supposed to tell her? ‘Yeah, so, I’ve been lying to you for the last three months, and now there’s a bunch of guys who want to kill me, and the fact that I’m talking to you means they probably want to kill you now too’?” He glances at Riley. “And you just have latent hostility because I never called your mom back after I missed that one date.”

“She actually liked you!”

“She liked ‘Jack the tile salesman’.” Trust me, I learned the hard way, dating under a cover identity’s just asking for trouble.”

“So now what?” Bozer asks, ever the practical one. “Are we just gonna live in her apartment for the rest of our lives? Cause the second we walk out that door, it’s over.”

“We’ll stay long enough to make a plan,” Jack says. “I still have an emergency stash here, with a fake ID and enough cash to get by. Never had the chance to get it back after the op went bad. I’ve got a few contacts too, they’d probably be willing to help us out, for a price. It would be close, but I think we could make it out.” He shrugs. “They trained us to disappear.”

It sounds too good to be true. And what did Grandpa say about things that sound too good to be true? They usually are. And Mac can see the glaring flaw in this plan already. “I can’t do that. The rest of you can, and maybe you should. But I can’t.”

“Mac, that’s the only option I see left,” Jack says quietly. “We could start over. Would that be so bad? What’s left for you to go home to?”

“I can’t.” Mac shakes his head. “It would work for the rest of you. You came here with fake IDs and being disavowed means all records of you ever having worked for the government are going to be gone. You’re all faces without a name, you’re forgettable. In a couple months there will be bigger fish to fry and you’ll be a memory. And Bozer doesn’t have a criminal record, he won’t show up in any database. But I do.” He glances at his hands. “If they haven’t found out already, they eventually will, when they run my picture through enough databases. If they think I’m responsible for not one but two terrorist attacks, in two different countries...no one is ever going to stop hunting me. I’m going to become the kind of person we got sent on missions to bring down. And sooner or later they’re going to win.”
Riley can’t say she’s too keen on spending the rest of her life on the run. Not that she can’t wipe every trace of their existence from the internet, but the kind of places you have to live to avoid being found aren’t exactly the ones that get a lot of Yelp stars. And looking over her shoulder for the rest of her life...well, she’s doing enough of that already. Running from the enemies she’s made over her career and government agencies as well doesn’t sound too good. And my money’s on the people who tend to be on the shady side finding us first. Without the protection of an agency, they’re sitting ducks for the assassins and terrorists and mobs they’ve crossed.

What Mac says is only the last brick in the wall to Riley’s case against cutting and running. He’s absolutely right. The fact that his face and name are already linked to one conviction are going to make him a priority target. He’s right. That profile is exactly the kind of person the Phoenix would mobilize a team after. The fact that the second incident was on foreign soil, in an ally country...Riley can say she literally knows what an operation to find him would look like. She’s been part of more than one. The profile would say he’s high risk, that he needs to be caught before there’s a third incident. It looks bad.

If Mac is found, with two counts of terrorism against him, a death sentence would be merciful. More likely, he’d get shipped to some black site hole where...she can’t imagine that happening to Mac. None of it.

Riley glances at the TV, Pryor is giving a speech about something. She doesn’t know enough Dutch to understand what they’re saying. But it does give her an idea. Maybe we don’t have to jump to the most drastic solution yet.

“We don’t need everyone to believe we’re innocent. We just need one person to prove it. We need Pryor to admit she’s the one who was carrying the bomb.” It’s a little crazy, but...

Jack shakes his head. “Without Phoenix backup, even a phone tap is a risk.”

“We could meet her in person.” Mac speaking up startles Riley. “We still have her schedule from the mission briefing.”

“But we can’t go outside. The cameras are going to see us.” Bozer looks confused. “Are we going to send Genevieve?” Jack grimaces and shakes his head.

“We just have to make sure the cameras don’t see our faces.” Mac glances at Bozer. “Don’t tell me you forgot about the glasses.” A slow smile spreads over Bozer’s face.

“Oh hell yes!”

Mac feels better when he’s got something to tear apart. He doesn’t envy Jack explaining the demise of every remote control in the house to his former girlfriend, and he gets the feeling saying “at least it wasn’t your phone this time” didn’t help, but he’s got something he can actually do now. It makes him feel a little more in control.

“So what are these magic glasses supposed to do again?” Jack asks.

“Humans can only see visible light. Cameras can see both visible and infra-red, which is how they boost images at night and in low light. With the LEDs from TV remotes, I can make sure the cameras only see light.”

“Good with remotes is one thing, kid…” Jack grins as Mac starts ripping them apart. “But I guess it’s the closest we’re gonna get to ‘these are not the secret agents you are looking for’.” He waves his hand dramatically. Only Jack...and Bozer...would quote movie lines in the middle of a disaster.
Mac chuckles. “Bozer and I used to spend a lot of time in junkyards. Problem was, glasses were kinda easy to lose.” He pulls three pairs out of a drawer absolutely stuffed with them. How many pairs of sunglasses does one person need?

Bozer fishes out a fourth pair, with comically large lenses and zebra striped frames. “These don’t really have the sleek lines I prefer in my eyewear but I think I can make it work.”

Mac gently removes the glasses from his hand. “Bozer, you’re not coming.”

Boze pushes Mac’s hands off his arm. “Yes I am.”

“Matty would never have sent you if she knew it was going to be this bad.”

“Yeah, well, I’m here now.”

“I would never have agreed to this if I knew what would happen! I didn’t want you here!” Mac stops, suddenly aware of the words echoing in the silent room. That was the wrong thing to say. The wrong way to say it. Bozer, Jack and Riley are all staring at him. “Boze, I’m sorry, I didn’t mean it like that…”

“Yes you did. You don’t want me in this part of your life.” Bozer’s voice is stiff, empty. “You want to push me out of this, just like you pushed me out of your vigilante work.” He glares at Mac. “You think I’m not good enough! You’d rather spend time with the people who do the same thing you do, the way you do it, and not have me getting in the way.”

“Boze…” Mac leans in and puts his hands on Bozer’s shoulders, but Bozer shoves them away.

“Don’t tell me that’s not the truth. Yeah, I’m not Captain America like Jack here, and I can’t hack anything in five minutes like Riley, but I’m not stupid. And I’m not weak. And I’m not scared. ” He stares at Mac. “I’ll stay here, if that’s what you really want. I’m not selfish enough to come running after you and get you all caught. But I am hurt. I’m your best friend, Mac. And I don’t want to watch helplessly anymore.”

“He’s right, Bozer.” Riley steps in gently. “If we get caught, it’s over. And we don’t want you to get caught. You’re not in as deep as us. If you go to the cops and tell them you got kidnapped, that we forced you into this, you might stand a chance of getting out of this.”

“I don’t want to get out. If you go down, I want to go down right with you. I spent two years wishing I turned myself in with Mac. Thinking there might have been something I could have done. I’m not watching him go to prison again and not being right there with him.”

Mac sighs. Today is only getting worse and worse. Now, not only are they wanted fugitives again, he’s made Bozer mad at him. Again. I guess there’s a direct correlation to being on the run and pissing him off.

“Ohai, I’ll stay here.” Bozer says, tossing the glasses back down. “Because clearly I’m just deadweight.” His voice is bitter, resigned. There’s an equal amount of anger and disappointment. He’s been holding onto this for years. Mac knows Bozer wanted to be more involved when he was a vigilante, but it just wasn’t safe. The Bozers weren’t losing another son, not on his watch. And the same is still true. This is dangerous. And Boze is all Deja has left.

“No, that’s not true. I just...I don’t want you to get hurt. If something happened to you, Boze, I’d never forgive myself.”

Bozer stares back at him, his dark eyes a sea of pain and dejection. “Yeah? Well, did you ever think
maybe that’s how I felt about you too? But I never wanted to let my fear stop you from doing what you knew you had to do.” He walks away, leaving a hollow of pain and anger in his wake.

Mac picks up the fourth pair of glasses and gets to work. When he’s done, he quietly hands them to Bozer. At first, Boze won’t even look at them. He just stares at the closed drapes and keeps his hands tightly folded in front of him. And then, ever so slowly, he reaches out and takes the glasses from Mac’s hand.

Jack’s actually really impressed they haven’t gotten caught yet. He wonders what’s going to happen when the batteries Mac wired to the LEDs run out. But they’ll burn that bridge when they come to it. He’s mangled cliches so often to drive Riley nuts on stakeouts that now his modified versions are more familiar to him than the real thing, and he can make himself smile with them. And he’s going to need every bit of lightheartedness he can get right now, because Mac is the human personification of a little black raincloud.

That’s what happened the last time he and Bozer fought too. Jack feels guilty for being glad this fight wasn’t about him and Riley. At the moment, Bozer actually seems to like them better than Mac. Once he criticized Mac for only letting him come out of pity (that was a no win situation, leaving him behind left him to stew and letting him come felt like condescension), he’s stuck to Riley like glue. The two of them are using Jack’s old camera equipment to check the street for Pryor’s car, while posing as a couple travel photographers.

Jack looks both ways before crossing the street, it would be just his luck to survive everything else today’s thrown at them only to be hit by a car. There are police sirens, but they’re not close and from the sound they’re getting farther and farther. “Your little glasses are doing the trick. All quiet on the western front here.”

He knew that would get a reaction from the kid. And he’s not disappointed. “Well, the western front is actually about to hundred miles east of here... Yeah, this isn’t the time for a history lesson.” Unfortunately not as much of a reaction as he hoped. Getting Mac to launch into a half-hour tirade on the geography of World War I would have been a welcome distraction. The kid’s still replaying that conversation with Bozer in his head, Jack can tell.

Jack pulls them around a corner where they can’t be seen by the street cameras. “How long you think it’s gonna be before someone notices four people walking around with halos for faces?”

“Cameras are running on a computer algorithm. They’re searching for faces, not anomalies. It took hours before LA cops noticed issues, and by then I was always long gone.” Mac shrugs. “I don’t know if the Dutch police are any different. But I think we still have maybe an hour.” More than enough time for Pryor to show.

Mac slumps against the wall. He looks dead on his feet, and Jack doesn’t blame him. Not only are they all exhausted and in various states of injury, Mac’s emotionally drained as well.

Jack knows the kid won’t start talking about this, so he decides to lead off, as awkward as it feels. “Mac, Bozer doesn’t hate you. He’s just a little mad right now, but he’ll get over it, just like last time. He knows you’re worried; that you didn’t mean it.”

“But what he said…” Mac bites his lip. “He wasn’t wrong. I try to protect him because I’m scared. Because he’s not the kind of person who...who…” it sounds like he’s searching for a less painful way to say the kind of person who doesn’t belong in this job.

“Listen, Mac, Bozer’s a big boy now. He made it two years on his own without killing himself. You
remember the kid who was still grieving his brother and trying to keep a dying mother from falling apart. He’s grown up. He let that make him stronger.”

“I know. But that doesn’t mean he knows how to fight.” Mac looks up with anguished eyes. “I know what he means and it sounds good. Being the underdog, it’s always great in the movies, right?” He laughs but there’s nothing happy in that. “But I’ve seen what happens to people like him. To people better at the life than him.” Pena. “And all the enthusiasm and love and devotion in the world don’t mean he won’t be just as dead when bullets start flying. He was right, real life is nothing like they make it out to be.”

Jack sighs. He can’t deny that Mac is right. But then again, he thought the same thing about Mac when the kid was starting out. “You may have learned how to scrap in prison, Carl’s Jr., but trust me, a two-bit drug lord and a trained Somalian merc are two different things.” Mac’s come a long way since then, but that’s thanks to Jack’s training and some good old fashioned learn on the job field experience. And Jack can’t quite forget the skill Bozer patched him up with after the Colton job went bad. He’s more competent than people think. But he’s always been outshone by everyone around him. Jack can sympathize.

“Listen, kid, if this goes belly up he’s gonna be in trouble whether you left him there or not. Sooner or later someone’s gonna connect me to Genevieve. And Bozer’s not the type to cut and run and vanish. He doesn’t have the training or really the personality. But he is making one hell of a field agent right now.” Jack catches Mac’s eyes and makes sure the kid’s listening. “When this is over, if we’re not all in prison, he’ll be able to decide if he wants to stay in the labs or not. I’d be willing to recommend Matty considering him for field. Take it from someone who knows agents, he’s got what it takes.”

“I just…” Mac slumps. “I know that, Jack. I know he would have been right beside me as a vigilante, too. He could have done it. But he was...he was important.”

“And you still think of yourself as the expendable one.” There are no words for how deep a wound that just cut in Jack’s heart. “Mac, listen to me. You’re not seeing yourself or Bozer right. Both of you are way more important and capable and competent than you think. And if you think for one second that that boy would be okay with you going and getting killed in his place…”

“I know!” It sounds almost like a wail. “Jack, I know all of that!” Jack sighs and forces himself to calm down. Scolding the kid doesn’t solve anything, because Jack can tell it’s the truth. Mac is well aware that Bozer’s doing a fantastic job for a raw recruit. He just can’t shake the lies that have been possibly literally beaten into him since he was five. It’s not the kid’s fault he’s got a messed up view of himself. Mac wants everyone to be safe...by throwing himself in harm’s way, and even though he factually knows that other people feel the same way about him, it’s pretty much unfathomable in his thought process. James made him believe he was worthless, that no one could or should ever put themselves to any trouble to help him. And so far no one’s been able to undo that damage.

“I’m sorry kid. I know you know. But someday you’re just gonna have to accept that as much as you love someone, you can’t always protect them.” He sees Riley stop breathing in Cairo, in the water at Como, bleeding out in the back of a car because of Nick. He sees Mac limp and burned under a stopped train, flinching and terrified in a Mexican drug lord’s compound, and struggling to breathe in the Kazakhstan forest. As much as we want to, we can’t always spare them pain. “It takes time to learn. No one blames you for that. Hell, I’m not good at it yet and I’ve been in this business a lot longer than you.” Mac cracks a tiny smile.

“Is that right old man?”

“Yeah. So you might wanna listen to this geezer’s advice.” And then Mac’s smile gets wider.
“What? Kid, I’m imparting bona fide Jack Dalton wisdom right now, you ain’t gotta laugh at it.”

"It’s just really hard to take you seriously with those glasses on." Mac chuckles, then glances past Jack. “Left shoe was the signal, right?”

“Guess she’s on time for once. A punctual politician. What’s the world coming to?”

Bozer leans on the clear wall of a bus stop, watching Riley fake snapping pictures of the local architecture. He feels a little lightheaded and isn’t sure if that’s from the faint buzzing of his glasses or the argument he just had with Mac.

I can’t believe I yelled at him like that. He remembers the last time he fought with Mac, right before Christmas. It was painful and ugly and he’d never wanted to put them both through that again. And he just did. And on a day when Mac really didn’t need added stress.

“Bozer?” Riley’s voice snaps him back, and he jumps, stumbling, when he realizes she’s nearly in his face. He barely avoids stepping off the curb into the street. Riley catches his arm and pulls him back to safety, faking a laugh at her supposed boyfriend’s clumsiness while whispering rapidly.

“You’ve got to keep an eye on what’s going on around you. Agents can’t let anything be a distraction.”

That tips the scales. Boze can’t help the bitterness that spills out. “Mac’s right. I don’t belong here. I don’t belong with you.” He clenches his fists in his coat pockets, trying to ignore the stinging feeling in his eyes. He’s extremely grateful for the sunglasses right now.

I think I’m more worried about hiding my emotions from Riley than about hiding my face from the cops.

Riley puts down the camera. “I’m not going to stand here and say anything about that one way or the other. Because the thing Jack told me, when I was ready to quit, when I wanted to ditch the CIA and go somewhere else, was that it was my choice. No one else got to tell me if I was good enough or not.” She smiles a little. “Coming from the family I did, that was a hard thing to hear.” Riley doesn’t talk much about the past, but from the little Bozer has heard at get-togethers at Mac’s place, her dad was a real jerk.

“It was selfish of me to ask to come,” Boze mutters, scuffing a foot on the cement. “I could get you all caught, and then it would be my fault again that Mac went to prison.”

“You know, you’re as stubborn as he is,” Riley mutters. “I’m not sure which one of you rubbed off on which, but both of you are really fond of taking responsibility for things that were well beyond your control.” She leans against a sign advertising the week’s upcoming concerts and events. “Whether you become a field agent or stay a lab tech, you’re going to have to come to terms with the fact that sometimes, awful things happen and we can’t do anything about it.” She chuckles. “Jack and I are the worst people on the planet to give anyone that advice, but I like to think I’m a little better at letting go of things that aren’t my fault than Jack is.”

“Are you trying to make me feel better?” Bozer asks, smiling rather weakly.

“All I’m saying is, don’t discount your potential to be a field agent too fast. Because Jack and I? We make the same mistakes as you do. We just don’t make them as often, and that comes with practice. I still get distracted, I got shot a couple months ago because I was focusing on Nick Carpenter and not the mission. And Jack blames himself every time Mac or I get hurt. It’s not that field agents are these perfect robot creatures with no human failings. We just learn to control our reactions. And to live with the consequences of the life.” She sighs. “I’m not going to lie to you, it’s not easy. But at the end of the day, I go home knowing I made a difference. That people are alive because of me. And I
wouldn’t trade it for the world.” She glances at the street, and then her whole body goes rigid. “Pryor’s here.”

Bozer glances at the black car turning onto the street. Riley bends down to tie her shoe, and Boze sees Jack unfold a map and start walking directly into traffic. Pryor nearly hits him, slamming on her brakes just in time. Jack starts waving his hands and yelling something, and Bozer sees Mac dart out and start jimmying the car door with the strips of metal he pulled out of drawer tracks at Genevieve’s.

He and Riley rush across the street just as Jack climbs in the passenger door and Mac slips in the back seat.

“That was fast,” Riley mutters.

“Yeah, when Mac worked at a mechanic’s in high school, he was part of their unlock team. Used to say he could get into any car made in under a minute.” Bozer’s had to call on that expertise a few times himself. What? Us creative types, when we get an idea, all the practical stuff like car keys is a secondary concern.

He and Riley pile into the backseat as well.

“Nice to see you again, Olivia,” Jack’s saying. “How ‘bout a little road trip?”

AMSTELPARK

A GOOD PLACE TO TALK IN PRIVATE

There’s only a few people wandering the park in the overcast, slightly rainy weather. They find a small shelter that gets them out of the falling mist, and then Jack stops Pryor with a hand on her arm.

“Okay, time to talk. Why were you carrying a bomb around the business district?”

"I did not even know there was a bomb until I got there. " The woman’s hands are shaking. “You must believe me.”

"Come on, Olivia, you can drop the act. The CIA knows you've been working with terrorists." Jack folds his arms. She doesn’t know me. I can come off as intimidating. If he does this with Riley, or now even Mac and Bozer and Cage, they’re distinctly unimpressed. But he can still put a healthy fear into strangers.

Her face goes white. “I would never!”

“Then what were you doing at that cafe?” Riley asks.

The woman twists her hands in the hem of her sweater, her face truly distraught. "A few weeks ago, someone sent me photos. Of my daughter. My husband. Me. At our house. At her school. At his job."

Jack freezes.

"And then I got a phone call. A man who said if I wanted my family to live, to do as he asked. I spent the next two weeks terrified. And then he called again and told me to go to that cafe. I thought he was going to ask for money. I thought he was going to tell me to vote against the upcoming referendum." Her voice shudders. “I didn’t know he was going to ask me to carry a bomb. But he knew about my family. He would have killed them.”

Riley pulls Jack aside. "That means all the CIA intel is wrong. Pryor was never leaking any secrets
to anyone. She was just being blackmailed. Recently. Jack doesn’t like this. It sounds like a setup if he’s ever seen one. And he’s seen a few. Rooted out more than one bad apple from finding out things like this. But this isn’t just some field post agent handing off lucrative secrets on one hand and blaming his local hire secretary on the other. This made it to the highest levels of the CIA. This is someone in a dangerously strong position.

"The man on the phone told me to get the purse from the planter box and carry it on the street. When I see someone follow me, drop it and run."

Mac’s come to the same conclusion Jack and Riley already have. "They knew we were coming. We were set up."

"Someone manipulated the CIA with false information and gift wrapped this mission for us," Riley says. "They made it a classic Phoenix op. An ally country, observe and report surveillance...that’s a specialty." She looks disturbed. “Not only are they well-placed with the CIA, they knew about Phoenix. Both its existence and its preferred choice of ops.”

“Do you know anything more about the man on the phone?”

"He called himself ‘Pop’."

“Pop?” Riley mutters. “Like what you called your dad, Jack?”

"Like soda pop?" Mac asks.

“Snap, crackle, pop? Like Rice Krispies?” Bozer shrugs. “What, everyone else was saying random things!”

"Pop is a Dutch word. In English it means..." Jack stops; this was one of the ones that always tripped him up with this language. "Well, it can mean doll, or puppet, or a hen, even. But a lot of times it refers to insects. Like a caterpillar, or a cocoon. A Chrysalis.” He glances at Riley. “This...this has got to be Walsh.”

“Who’s Walsh?”

“Up until a few months ago, our boss.”

THE WAR ROOM

IT FEELS AWFULLY EMPTY

Matty glances down at the dossier files on her tablet. Jack’s picture, his goofy half grin and signature mohawk familiar, even if the hair is somewhat sparser and greyer now, stares up at her from the CIA transfer file. The chip Riley was carrying on her shoulder is clearly evident in her own ID picture, her edgy frown and messy hair and punk-rock leather jacket. Matty remembers that girl. And even though those were some of the roughest years of her career, she almost misses when she had these files open in a different office. At least they were never disavowed then.

She flicks past those to MacGyver’s file. The picture on it is still the one from his LAPD booking. Matty suppresses a small shudder at what the boy with the innocent fear in his eyes was about to go through. It’s absolutely unfair that he’s the one who pays for the good he tried to do. When his father’s still a free man. She can’t imagine how afraid he probably is right now. He knows if they get caught, he’s the one who stands to take the most blame. And the thought of him living that hell again, in a foreign prison where he’s even more an outsider, even more a target...She flicks past the
file before the image blurs even more in front of her eyes.

Bozer’s file is the only one that’s fully Phoenix integrated, since he has no prior government employment and no arrest record. His own photo makes her smile, he looks like he’s trying to be serious and strike a pose, but he just looks like he should be on the poster for a comedy buddy-cop show. Her chest squeezes with guilt. I sent him with them because I thought he’d be safe. And now he’s trapped in the middle of a spy’s living nightmare.

Andie opens the door. "Every file with intel on Dalton, Davis, MacGyver, and Bozer has been deleted. Including the backups."

"So the only digital proof of them as agents is on my tablet?"

"And you should delete those fast. Dutch intelligence just discovered they made a call after the bombing. They're trying to retrieve and piece together fragments right now. Eventually they’ll be able to ID your voice on the call."

Of course. Matty knows plenty about the Dutch surveillance on communications, after a couple ops where she tangled with the local agencies over jurisdiction. They record everything running through their cell towers, even comm activity. We had to figure out another way to communicate to avoid leaking intel accidentally. Matty has an idea. The only reason they can track her down is that they keep recordings of all cell traffic...and Riley’s signature move is routing her surveillance through cell towers to get lost in the chatter. Maybe we can use what they’re using against us.

"Andie, unless you'd like to be an accessory to violating the espionage act, I suggest you leave."

Andie sets down her tablet. “All due respect, ma’am, but I’m your personal assistant. Whatever you need, I’m here to help. You’re stuck with me, whether it’s in this office, or in jail.” Matty smiles.

She pulls out her phone and dials a familiar number. The voice on the other end sounds distinctly put out when they answer. Matty doesn’t care. "Do you recognize my voice? Good. Then you remember I saved your ass in Myanmar. Time to return the favor."

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GENEVIEVE’S APARTMENT

NOT REALLY THE BEST PLACE TO KEEP ANOTHER WOMAN

Riley sits and fiddles with her laptop, listening to Jack and Genevieve arguing.

"She's not my girlfriend. She's just a member of Parliament we kidnapped.” Yes, Jack, that's so much better. “If you don’t believe me, go talk to her!”

“Maybe I will! If she’s spent any time around you, she will need a sympathetic ear!” Jen flounces off and Riley stifles a giggle.

“Wow, didn’t realize the French had such a good ear for a burn,” Riley chuckles.

“Yeah, yeah. How’s analyzing those blackmail pictures coming?” Jack asks, joining Riley on the couch.

“Not great. The photos were sent from an untraceable email. But Bozer says the encryption key matches the one he and Patty saw on the Chrysalis emails.”

Jack sighs and lays an arm across the back of the couch, behind Riley’s shoulder. "Walsh is getting
us out of the way as mess-free as possible. He knew we're tough to kill, so he made sure if the bomb didn't get us we were still going down."

“Well, he’s doing a good job. The only people who can definitely prove that this is his encryption are Patty and Bozer. And Patty’s unreachable and Boze is also wanted.” She sighs. “And Pryor’s too scared to take this to the police. With good reason. Walsh didn’t do this alone and we have no idea who he might have in his pocket.”

“Why don't we just track the original source of the CIA intel?” Jack says. “That’s eventually got to lead back to Walsh.”

“We'd need Phoenix access and support for every step of that.”

Bozer continues to pace. “Why not just march Olivia into a police station and make her tell her story?”

“Only problem is, we still don't have evidence we were here on a government mission.” Riley jumps when something rattles at the door. Bozer makes a strangled yelp. Mac drops the paperclip he was making into a teapot, and it clatters on the coffeetable.

A yellow envelope slides through the door, and Jack and Riley jump to their feet instantly, running to the door, pulling it open, and glancing out. Whoever left it is long gone.

Riley sighs. “It was probably just a delivery for Genevieve.” She turns around to see Bozer picking up the envelope and turning it over. He looks up at them, and there’s absolute confusion on his face.

"It’s for you, Jack. What is this? Our mission, should we choose to accept it?” Bozer hands Jack the envelope.

"How could someone know where to find us?” Mac asks.

Jack holds the envelope up to the light. "Matty was my handler for the CIA op I did here. She probably figured I’d hit up Genevieve." He opens the envelope. A flashdrive falls out, and he hands that over to Riley. She wants to check it out immediately, but she wants to be sure it’s not a trap. So she glances over Jack’s shoulder as he reads the letter that was included with it.

7652 Longhorn

Sorry I couldn't do more, but you can help yourselves.

“Well, it’s got to be from Matty. That’s my Phoenix code-in,” Jack says. “Riley, it should be safe to run whatever’s on the drive.” She nods and plugs it in, then begins opening the three files that load.

“It’s a dossier on the Director of Dutch intelligence, Harlan Wolff, blueprints of their headquarters, and details on their digital surveillance.”

“Why would Matty send us info on the people hunting us?” Bozer asks.

“Probably wants to help get us out of the country,” Mac says. “The more we know about what we’re up against, the better we can avoid them.”

Riley shakes her head. “Matty risked her entire career sending this. It has to be more than just helping us run.” She keeps scanning through the information. Come on, Matty, what are you trying to tell me? There has to be a connection between these three things. Harlan Wolff. Reformed the Dutch intelligence community in the wake of the rise of terrorism. Major focus on prevention of incidents,
on keyword searches of data streams, on algorithms to catch communication about attacks. The blueprints of the HQ building. Wolff's big project was turning this into a digital analytics site. Installed the latest in predictive computer technology, turned it into a data hive. The last piece of information in the set is the plan for how that data mining works... Yes. That's it.

Riley begins talking, processing aloud as she fits the final pieces together. “Dutch intelligence is a real Big Brother. They record all cell calls, all CCTV data, and all electronic communication across the country, and funnel it back to a database at their headquarters here.” She glances at the intel, and then up at the others. “I know how to clear our names!”

“That’s awesome. Care to elaborate on that?” Jack asks.

“Back at the cafe I was disguising the signals of our comms and wireless cameras as normal cell traffic, routed through towers of a local Dutch telecom. That whole video I lost was being routed through there. Matty's intel just told us they save ALL cell data.” She grins. “I can reconstruct the video I took, and clear our names.” She shrugs. “Granted, that means the US government has some explaining to do, but it gets us off the hook for terrorism.”

“So we just have to break into the offices of the people trying to catch us. Easy peasy.” Jack sighs and stretches his legs out on the table. “Last time I checked, the only one cool with wearing his sunglasses inside is Jack Nicholson. So how are we gonna pull this off?”

Mac glances at Bozer, then Jack. “I think I might have an idea. Lucky, Bozer and I made a lot of truly awful home videos in high school.”

Bozer gives him a wounded glare. “The acting was awful. The prosthetics were amazing.”

“Exactly.” Mac grins. “Do you think you could do that again?”

“They would have to be my best work.” Bozer says quietly. “This isn’t a good enough monster face to win the local short film festival awards. This has to be perfect.”

Riley looks at the others. “We're not Phoenix agents anymore. No one is giving orders. Of you want to walk away, now is the time. But plan or no plan, I’m going to try and clear us.”

“I’d rather go down fightin’ than runnin’,” Jack says.

Mac doesn’t say anything, but Riley can see that he desperately wants to make this okay again. He’s already living with the shadow of one false accusation over his head. Of all of them, he’s the only one who understands the kind of life running away would mean. *It would mean we always had to think of ourselves as criminals, even though we didn’t do anything wrong. Even though we saved lives.*

Bozer’s pacing. “Okay, let me see if I’m getting this right. Option one, we flee Amsterdam and try to run for the rest of our lives. Option two, you all put your trust in me and maybe end up in jail because I wasn’t good enough.” Riley shakes her head at him. He’s blaming himself again.

Mac steps in front of his friend. “Boze. What happened; it wasn’t your fault. I’m the one who went out there and put myself in danger. What you did kept me from getting caught for a long time. It was when I stopped letting you help me that everything fell apart.” His voice is slightly shaky. “I was trying to protect you when I asked you to stop helping me. I pushed you away, and tried to do everything myself, and that’s when it all went wrong. If you’d have still been making masks for me, if I’d still let you know what I was doing…” He sighs. “Maybe it would have been different.” He shakes his head. “It’s too late to go back and change that, but...” He smiles. “This is just the same as
it always was. Just us, no government resources, and if we get caught it’s all over. And I still need you to help me. Somewhere along the way I just lost sight of that.”

Bozer pulls Mac into a forceful hug. “I know. I know all you wanted was to keep me safe. But I didn’t want to be. Jerry was my brother too. And I couldn’t do what you did, but I still wanted to help.”

Mac’s voice is muffled in Bozer’s sweater. “I just didn’t want to lose another brother either.”

“And you won’t. Because we both know that if anyone’s going to save us with prosthetics whipped up from cooking supplies, it’s gonna be me. You’re useless in the kitchen, Mac.” Mac chuckles, and Bozer lets go of him and straightens his back. “Prepare to be one upped, Tom Cruise. Mission Accepted.”

Riley watches as Bozer begins pulling ingredients out of cupboards. “Hey Mac, remember when Mama got mad because we used up all her tapioca and didn’t tell her?”

“I think she was madder that I left the monster mask in the garage and Deja got so freaked out she dropped the fishtank she was supposed to take to school,” Mac chuckles.

“We didn’t even place in the film festival either. And she still made us replace all the kitchen supplies we used. If we’d have won we could have paid for a whole ton of tapioca.”

“It was like a hundred dollar prize,” Mac shakes his head. “But I guess when we were kids it felt like a million.” He smiles, and Riley sees a whole lot of longing for a time when things weren’t so stressful. When the biggest problems were a scolding parent and some nosy siblings.

“You know the most disappointing thing about all of this?” Bozer asks. “I never did get to find out if that prosthetics guy knew how to waterproof masks.”

“Well, we know this kind won’t be. Remember that time you made one for me when I was casing that dealer’s warehouse and it rained the whole night I went out?” Mac starts to stir something boiling on the stove, and Bozer slaps his hand away with a scowl. Probably for the best. I’ve seen him come close to literally burning water.

“Yeah. The mask got ruined before you left the neighborhood, and you got bronchitis.” Riley shivers. She’s been on particularly nasty stakeouts before; she knows the feeling. Watching Mac and Bozer working in the kitchen together, she thinks she’s getting a glimpse of what it must have been like. Before Mac was outed as the Phoenix.

She doesn’t want to intrude, so she wanders over to where Jack is recording a play by play of how to get to the server room. She picks up her laptop and starts to mock up a fake ID for herself. She’ll need a partner, and she knows she should take Mac; chances are good they’ll need his skill set to get her into the server room. But to ask him to go into the lion’s den...this mission has hurt him enough already. I don’t want to terrify him more.

She jumps when she feels a hand on her shoulder. “Make sure when you take the picture for this you catch me from my good side.” It’s Mac, and he’s smiling softly. “Jack said he always tells you that.” He must have asked Mac if he would go in with me. That’s a lot of trust on Jack’s part, to be okay with sending Mac and not going in himself. But Mac’s proven he can be trusted time and again.

“I didn’t want to ask…” Riley begins.

“I know. But I’ll be okay.” He kneels down beside her. “I want to fix this.” She nods, then closes her computer and turns to look at him directly.
“I can’t believe this is what you live with every day. Feeling watched and hunted like this. It makes me sick, and it’s been less than twenty-four hours.” He just shrugs. “And I’m scared to death of going in there and messing up, because we have no one to turn to if things go wrong. And you did that for four years. How did you survive all that time working alone?”

Mac wraps his hands around hers. “On my best days, I saved hundreds of lives, and no one knew I was there. On my worst days…” he pauses. “I almost died alone.”

Riley wraps her arms around him, hugging him tightly. “We’re gonna fix this. I promise.”

“Hey, you two ready to suit up?” Bozer asks. “Because we gotta get this on your faces, get pictures for your IDs, and break into one of the most secure buildings in the city. Mac, you know how quickly this stuff breaks down. You’re gonna need to move fast.”

“You said it was going to be an impossible mission…” Mac stands up, smiling. “Ok. Let’s do this.”

ALGEMENE INLICHTINGEN- EN VEILIGHEIDSDIENST HEADQUARTERS

MATTY WAS RIGHT, CALLING IT DUTCH INTELLIGENCE IS EASIER

Mac takes a breath of relief when the service doors he and Riley are standing in front of unlatch with a soft whoosh. “Fake ID badges worked like a charm. Now time for the real test.” There’s a security camera up ahead. Time to see if Bozer’s mask work is going to be up to the challenge.

The smell of the tapioca and homemade glues is eerily familiar. Mac feels dizzy, and not from the smell itself but from the feeling that he’s gone back in time. And the stress and tension of the situation isn’t helping. He shudders as they walk under the camera, trying to seem calm and relaxed. They’re going to catch us. They’re going to come.

“Remind me to market them my Friar program when we get out of this one,” Riley says quietly. “That would have been able to make an extrapolated match from the unaltered features.”

Mac grins and takes out the phone they’re carrying, pulls out the earbuds, and puts one in. He hands the other to Riley, then presses play on the recording.

“Testing 1, 2, 3... this is your pal Jack here...but I guess you already knew that. Hold on, Riley, how do I delete and make a new one? Fine. Be that way. I’ll figure it out....” His voice cuts out for a second. “Ok. If you’re listening to this you’ve made it past security. Now take a left at the end of this hall. Since we don’t dare transmit signals into the freaky deaky Dutch HQ, I will be your automated tour guide today with the help of this handy little device.”

There’s a keypad access door ahead of them. Riley pops off the cover and starts working on it while Mac blocks her from the view of the cameras.

“All you gotta do is follow the sound of my voice...wait, that's not cool. Sounds like a horror movie.”

Jack coughs. “Hopefully you won’t get arrested, or like shot to death, or...wait that just all sounded bad can I do a do over?”

“Well, he doesn’t have a future in voice-guided tours, but he did get us in.” Riley pushes open the door and steps inside. “Let’s just hope Dutch intelligence’s data mining scooped up the video we need.” She bends down next to the computers and gets to work. Mac paces slightly. So far, they’re okay. So far, everything’s fine.

He starts to get nervous as time goes on. Sooner or later someone’s going to realize that that cleaning
crew shouldn’t have gone in the server room. Riley’s still typing, a film of sweat across her face. She reaches up unconsciously with one hand and Mac catches her. “No, no, no, don’t wipe your face. You’ll take a piece of it off. I forgot how much faster that stuff degrades in added heat.” He still remembers the debacle from the summer they decided to film a movie about aliens on a day the temperature absolutely soared...

“Yeah, these servers aren’t exactly air conditioned.”

“How much more do time you need?” Mac asks.

“Best guess? Ten minutes.” Mac looks at the cleaning cart. He’s got enough here to keep these guys on their toes for a while. But that’s going to mean putting all of them at a lot more risk.

He needs to get in contact with Jack. He pulls out the radio in the cart and calls Jack. They’re about to make some noise anyway, it doesn’t matter if the signals let anyone know they’re here.

He tries to speak quietly, Jack is with Bozer and he doesn’t want Boze to panic. “Longhorn, Black Hat needs more time. Get the Scientist out of here.”

He hears chatter on the other end. “Scientist? That’s me, isn’t it?”

“Yeah. Something went bad. We gotta go.”

“I got them into that building. I’m getting them out.” Then Bozer’s voice comes in clear over the radio. “Scientist will buy Black Hat time.”

“No, no, Boze, I got this!” Mac’s already got a plan. He’s got about a fifty-fifty chance of being caught if it goes right. Bozer has a one hundred percent chance of getting caught. But it sounds like he’s already gone. Jack’s got the radio again and it seems like he’s yelling at Bozer.

“What are you gonna do?”

“Improvise.” And then the connection goes dead.

Mac grabs some of the bottles off the cleaning cart and gets to work. He shakes up a couple bottles of knocked-together chloroform, and another two that will explode on impact. And he has a mop handle, and some cleaning rags. He shoves open the door and darts into the hall.

He turns, checking for the door they came in. He pushes it open…

And almost runs headlong into one of the guys there. The man looks like he’s only mildly pissed at a klutzy member of the cleaning crew, but then he glances at all the bottles in Mac’s hand and clearly finds that suspicious. Mac drops one of the chloroform ones, covering his own face with one of the rags he tied around his neck. The guards start coughing, and he rushes past them for the next door, smacking one of them with the mop handle when he reaches for Mac.

He reaches the door, but now there’s alarms going off, and it won’t open. There’s another corridor down the hall, and that door has a normal lock, not an electronic one. He pulls a twisted paperclip out of his pocket and leans down in front of it, starting to pick the lock. The door behind him slams open and he hears yelling, there’s guys in black tac gear rushing toward him. He flings one of the exploding bottles, and the men jump back. But he’s only just gotten the door open when they’re coming again.

This was a mistake. He’s on a catwalk now and there’s guys coming from all sides. The area isn’t closed enough for the chloroform to have any effect, and if he throws the other explosive bottle he
might make these guys think he’s dangerous enough to shoot at. If they don’t already. He runs for
the stairs, but he can hear someone yelling below him as well, and his heart sinks when he realizes
it’s Jack.

“Who is that handsome devil on screen right there. Is that a young Bruce Willis with hair? Who
wants an autograph? Hey man, don’t all mob me at once!” Mac rushes down the stairs, only to be
met by a group of men coming up. He stops, flinching, and catches Jack’s eye. He knows the panic
must be clear on his face. The men grab him and yank away the rag over his face. Bozer’s prosthetic
work comes with it. Mac sighs.

One of the men grabs the bottles still attached to his belt, yammering in Dutch. Mac figures they’re
putting two and two together from the reports the other guards probably radioed in about chloroform
and explosions.

The punch to the stomach is a surprise though. Mac doubles over, gasping, nearly falling down the
stairs, as a couple of the guards wrench his hands behind his back. From below him, he hears an
angry yell. “He was cooperatin’! You didn’t have to do that!” Jack sounds like he’s fighting tooth
and nail to get free of the men holding him. Mac winces as one of the guards throws him sideways
into the stair rail, jarring already sore muscles. And then the guy goes down hard and Jack is standing
there, panting and bruised. “Hey Mac, let’s go, huh?” And then there’s an ominous click and Mac
turns to see more guards closing in, helping up the guys Jack just destroyed, and aiming a lot of guns
in their direction.

When they slam him face-down on the floor and one of the guards straddles his legs to start cuffing
him, Mac can’t help it anymore. He starts shaking, and he figures there are probably a couple tears
rolling down his face. It feels too much like too many times before, but he’s not having such a bad
flashback that he’s forgotten where he is. No, that’s the problem.

He knows exactly what’s going to happen now. He’s going to go to prison here. And the thought is
absolutely terrifying. Beside him, Jack whispers. “Mac, I’m sorry, kid. I’m so sorry.”

“But your fault,” Mac says softly. It’s not. None of this is any of their faults. Bozer looks absolutely
crushed, and Mac shudders. This is exactly what I wanted to spare him from.

And then a very, very familiar voice crackles over the PA system. “May I have your attention,
Director Harlan Wolff? This next jam's for you.” And then every monitor in the building starts
playing the video of Olivia Pryor picking up the bomb, and then dropping it when Mac runs up. Mac
sighs, watching his breath fog against the cold tile floor. It’s not over yet. But now they know the
truth. He breathes an even deeper sigh of relief when the man straddling his legs steps off him and
pulls him to his feet. Nothing’s going to happen to me. It’s okay. I’m okay. He leans up against Jack,
and even though the older man can’t hug him, Mac feels the warmth of his contact and that’s good
enough. It’s going to be okay.

THE PHOENIX FOUNDATION

YES, THEY’RE BACK

Bozer’s not quite sure what he expected coming home to feel like. After all, nothing else about being
disavowed has been as advertised. So when Jack and Mac push open the Phoenix doors and Bozer
sees the agents lining the halls, clapping and cheering, he stumbles a step back. Okay, now this, this
is like the movies. Which gives him the perfect chance for the overdramatic moment he’s been
holding onto since Riley played that video in Dutch HQ.
“Mission...Accomplished!” Bozer pumps his fist in the air. “I always wanted to say that,” he whispers to Riley. She rolls her eyes.

It feels surreal, walking the gauntlet of congratulations to the War Room, where Matty’s waiting with the smile that always takes Bozer by total surprise.

“Didn’t I disavow you people?” she asks, shaking her head.

“You can’t get rid of us that easy,” Jack chuckles.

Mac glances at the floor, then Matty. “We got your message. Thank you. We couldn’t have done it without you. Thank you for...for not abandoning us.” Bozer can tell his friend is dangerously close to tears.

Matty sniffs slightly, as if insulted that anyone would think it was ever possible to do anything without her...or she's fending off some tears herself. “I just got off the phone with your new friend Harlan Wolff. The man who left the bomb was a freelancer hired by the Organization. He was picked up this morning and confessed to everything.” She glances at Jack and Riley. “He says Walsh hired him personally. So at least we have a possible lead on his location. I’ve already sent Cage to interrogate their suspect, see if she can learn anything more. She at least isn’t on the Netherlands no-fly list for the foreseeable future.”

“It’s really over?” Bozer asks.

“Yes. But I would avoid Amsterdam for a while.” Matty shakes her head. “You would get accused of terrorism in a city with one of the largest international airport hubs. How am I supposed to fly you guys to western European missions now?”

“Phoenix jet every time,” Jack says with a satisfied grin. “No more commercial airlines for Dalton and company. Man, if I knew getting blacklisted from Amsterdam was gonna mean I didn’t have to fly commercial, I woulda done that the last time I was there...” His grin suddenly fades. “Oh man. I told Jen we were going for groceries. And then kinda left the country forever.”

Riley shakes her head. “It’s probably for the best she never hears of ‘Bryce Villanova’ again. I don’t ever want to hear that name again.”

Jack pulls out his phone. “I’m at least gonna explain...”

Riley rushes after him out the door. “Wait don’t call her. You'll make it worse. Jack, don’t call her!”

Matty turns to look at Mac and Bozer. “You two performed above and beyond expectations. You handled the situation as well as agents who have had years of field experience. Bozer, Dalton recommended you, in his report, for field training. I will be taking that under advisement if you want to proceed.”

Bozer glances at Mac. “That was one of the scariest things that’s ever happened to me,” he says quietly. “And if that’s what the field is like, all the time, then...” he pauses. “I don’t want to let Mac keep going out there without me. We’re a team. It may not have felt like it lately, but I guess it took something like this to remind us.”

Mac nods. “It’s thanks to him that we were able to get that evidence and clear our names.”

“And you’re comfortable with him joining the field team?” Matty asks.

“I...” Mac pauses. “That’s not my choice to make. I’ve been trying to make Bozer’s choices for him,
and the last time I did that I ended up in a supermax. So I think I’ll pass on running his life this time around.” He smiles at Boze.

“Then I’m game.” Bozer smiles.

“You need to understand, it will take some time. Just keeping you on as a Phoenix hire took major pulling at the CIA. Until this Walsh situation is resolved, we can’t officially proceed with training. However, I will be assigning some ‘informal’ sessions with Dalton and Davis, in addition to your lab duties.” She smirks slightly. “I would suggest you prepare for bruises.”

Bozer’s still grinning. He turns to Mac, who’s smiling as well. “Hey, don’t worry too much, Mac. I already survived getting disavowed. It’s all gotta be downhill from here, right? Like, I’m probably gonna get bored.”

“You’d be surprised,” Mac says, chuckling. “But I’m glad this is what you want.”

“It is.” As much as he loves the lab, loves his job, Bozer knows that where he’s really meant to be is with Mac. Things don’t go well when he doesn’t have me. It might seem like he’s bragging, and maybe he is, a little, but there was something about this mission...yes, it scared him. Yes it was truly insane. But in an odd way, it felt right. Him and Mac and Jack and Riley against the world. Like it’s meant to be.

Once they step out the door, out of Matty’s sight, Mac pulls Bozer into another hug, and holds on like he never wants to let go. “You brought us all home. Thank you.”

“That’s my job, Mac.” And he really, truly means it. He’ll never be the hero, never the one who saves the day in the visible way. But Bozer’s okay with that. Because as long as Mac comes home, that’s all he needs to know. And now he doesn’t have to just sit back and hope. He knows Mac’s in good hands, that Jack and Riley would protect him with their lives. But it doesn’t hurt to have someone who really knows him watching his back. Mac needs all the adult supervision he can get.

And then Bozer feels a tap on his leg, and looks down to see Matty. “Cute heart to heart. But you have an unfinished robotic arm in the basement that won’t create itself.”

Bozer chuckles. And just like that, we’re back. And it feels good.
There’s a strong possibility my area will lose power tonight and in the foreseeable future, so this is getting posted early...I’d rather post it now than miss my normal Friday schedule by being LATE...so you can thank the storms for this early chapter!

118-Flashlight

SOMEWHERE OVER THE PACIFIC OCEAN

NOT THE PLACE FOR THIS CONVERSATION

Mac finds it kind of funny that Matty seems to have taken to categorizing their missions as ones Bozer can go on without causing an international incident, or ones she’d rather not risk. The last one fell into the category of the former. Matty’s apparently a firm believer in learning on the job. Mac can’t complain. Having Bozer along helped. A lot.

But he does want to sleep. And Jack is bothering him. Matty was wrong. This wasn’t a mission she could send Bozer on without an incident. Because they may have averted a small international crisis in south Asia, but Bozer somehow let slip that Mac’s birthday was coming up...and Jack has too many suggestions.

“Karaoke?”

“No,” Mac mumbles sleepily.

“Laser tag? Bowling?”

“We just stopped a brutal dictator from deploying a chemical weapon. Can’t this wait till we get back?”

“Vegas?”

Riley shoves off her own blanket and joins the conversation. “Jack, stop suggesting things you want to do. It’s his birthday, not yours.” She shrugs. “But what about something low key? Like, we could all just go out to dinner somewhere if you want.”

“Trust me, Riley, I have tried suggesting everything,” Jack says. “Mac’s just boring. Like, he’s got something against birthdays or something.” Mac just tugs the blanket someone threw over him a little tighter around himself. He’s tired and he doesn’t want to have this conversation ever, least of all right now. They were having a good time. A successful mission, no one critically injured...and then Bozer had to tell everyone Mac’s birthday is tomorrow.

Riley wrinkles her nose. “Birthdays are awesome. Cake, presents, what’s not to like? Well, maybe surprise parties when your partner,” She leans over the seat and punches Jack, “thinks its a good idea to hide behind the door of someone trained in three different forms of martial arts.”
“You’re all wasting your time,” Bozer mumbles sleepily. “Been trying to get him to celebrate a birthday since I met him.”

“Birthdays make no sense. We are aging every second of every minute of every day.” Mac hears Bozer sigh, okay, I’ve used the same argument a few times. Well, more than a few. But never on Jack and Riley. “And for some reason we pick one day to celebrate being one year older, all because some pope made a calendar in the sixteenth century.”

Bozer groans. “Mac, we know. Now will you stop giving us explanations for your weirdness and let me sleep? I don’t think I’ve slept in three days.”

“Well, we definitely haven’t showered in three days,” Riley says.

“Wait, he’s on a roll,” Jack says. “Honestly hearing Mac try to wiggle out of birthday celebrations is way more entertaining than an in-flight movie.”

Ok, if you want to laugh at my logic, try this one. “If we were on Mars, I would be fourteen years old and my next birthday wouldn’t be for another...two hundred and thirty-one days.”

“Yeah, well, you look about fourteen,” Jack chuckles. “And seriously, you’re using Mars as an argument against birthdays?”

“All I’m saying is, they’re irrelevant.” Mac rolls halfway over so he doesn’t have to face Jack anymore.

“No, they’re not. Dude, birthdays are precious. Every day on this earth is. Especially in this line of work. Birthdays are like those signs in those factories that say it’s been x amount of days since the last fatal incident. So we’re celebrating.” He squints. “What about monster trucks? You like cars. And what’s not to love about a bunch of trucks smashing each other up?”

The phone rings, and Mac groans. All I really want for my birthday is to be left alone to sleep for a few hours in peace. Can I ask for that? Jack answers, sounding just as frustrated as Mac to be interrupted, even though he clearly wasn’t trying to sleep. At least maybe whatever it is will make him stop asking me about my birthday.

“Hang on Matty, lemme put you on speaker,” Jack says, and then he sets down the phone.

“I’m sorry to have to do this to you so soon after an op, but you’re being rerouted.”

“Come again?” Jack says. Mac knows it’s not unusual for teams to work missions back to back if their skill sets are needed.

“A 7.2 earthquake just struck five hundred miles from your current location, off the coast of Hawaii. Hilo took the most direct impact.”

“Any casualties?” Riley asks.

“Not yet. But FEMA teams on the ground are asking for all available help.”

“Of course.” Riley says. “We’ll do what we can.”

HILO, HAWAII

NOT QUITE PARADISE...
Jack’s been in a lot of war zones. But there’s something that’s especially unnerving to him about the sight of natural disasters. Wars are...well, you can come close to control, in a situation like that. Good intel can tell you if you’re going to be bombed, if you’re smart you stay out of the way of snipers and IEDs. But when the earth itself turns on you... There’s no reasoning with a force of nature, no out-thinking it. Jack likes an enemy he can fight. Something he stands a chance of beating.

As they climb out of the jeep that was waiting for them at the closest open airport, Riley pulls out her phone and holds it up, frowning. “Zero bars. Cell towers are down.”

Mac glances around them. “Power grid too. And with the roads in the state they’re in, these people need a lot of help.” He looks a little overwhelmed, and Jack has to remind himself that the kid isn’t familiar with the level of destruction all around them. The worst things he saw in his life were the LA streets and the inside of a supermax. Horrible in their own way, but nothing to prepare him for the rubble and destruction they’re seeing here. I guess when you spend half your life in parts of the world where this is their daily existence, you start to take it in stride. Jack’s seen a lot of bombed-out towns, and there’s very little here that’s any different.

He gets a handle on the flashbacks before they start sneaking into his mind. He doesn’t need to be thinking about Afghanistan right now. The problem is, this whole place looks too much like a forward base. Especially the crowded medical tent.

He shakes off the thoughts, and reminds himself that the humid Hawaiian air isn’t the dry desert heat of the Sandbox. As long as he can remember that, he thinks he’ll be fine. It wouldn’t be an issue if I wasn’t sleep deprived and jumpy as hell after that mission. At one point he thought Riley was going to get shot point blank, and Mac almost set off the chemical weapon while disarming it.

Inside the main tent, there’s a chaos of activity, and Jack watches as a man in a blue shirt pushes his way forward to meet them. “Sam Hopkins, regional FEMA director. You’re all volunteers?”

“Yes. From the Phoenix Foundation.” Jack starts pulling out his ID.

“You boss called to say you were coming. Although I’m not sure what a think tank will be able to do...” The man mutters skeptically. Jack sees him judging every member of his team. Riley, with her sleep-mussed hair and ripped jeans, Bozer yawning a little and still wearing the dress clothes he had when they infiltrated their target compound, and Mac, shuffling his feet, already nervous at the scrutiny. Don’t treat my team like a bunch of ignorant nobodies.

Riley seems to have picked up on the man’s skepticism. “How about I start by getting an ad hoc network up and running and getting your cell phones functional again?” She walks over to the computers, opens her laptop, and starts typing.

“And I’m about two thirds of the way through an advanced first aid course,” Bozer offers. “I can help medical staff.”

“And you two,” Hopkins says. “Director Webber was very vague on exactly what your skill sets are.”

“A little of this, a little of that,” Mac says, glancing around the tent.

“Just point to the problem, we’ll make it go away,” Jack adds. He could go on for hours about what exactly Mac is good at, but he gets the feeling this guy is more a show than tell person.

As if to help him make his point, the electricity in the tent flickers and goes out altogether. Hopkins sighs. “Call Randall and have him come back over, if you can get him on the radio.”
“Generator?” Mac asks. “Where is it?”

“Are you an electrician?”

“Kinda.” Jack grins. *I remember when the kid saying something as vague as that would piss me off to the point I wanted to smack him.* He knows how Hopkins is feeling, but he can’t bring himself to have too much sympathy for the guy. *But then again, I wasn’t any too nice to Mac myself, when he started.* Something Jack still feels guilty for on a consistent basis. And possibly the reason he gets irrationally angry when someone else does the same. Hopkins points out the location of the generator and Mac hurries toward it, nearly slamming into a couple of concerned medical techs on the way. Jack grimaces.

“Sorry, excuse me.” Mac makes his way through the chaos of the temporary command center to the generator set outside. He checks the fuel tank and lines and then pulls out his knife and begins taking apart the engine.

“Looks like your electrician already replaced the carb and switched out the filter.” He grins. “And you’re not out of fuel.” Hopkins looks insulted. *Really though, sometimes it really is that simple a fix.* Jack once picked up a lawnmower with Pops that had been sitting by the side of the road. It turned out that the only problem was an empty fuel tank. *Pops used to say he wondered if the owner had just gone back to the house for a gas can and came back and his mower was gone. He’d joke that that was the closest he came to breaking the law, possibly stealing a lawn mower.*

Hopkins is getting increasingly more nervous as Mac continues removing pieces of the generator. “Guys, I really appreciate the help, but...you really shouldn’t be messing with that if you’re not a certified…”

Jack cuts him off. “Oh, don’t worry, Mr. Hopkins. He’s certified. In everything.” *And possibly certifiably insane too.* Mac continues ripping the machine apart and Jack has a moment to be grateful Mac hasn’t asked for his phone yet, when the kid turns around with that look that means he knows what he has to do.

“I need a vehicle. And jumper cables.” Jack nods and turns to Hopkins. “Trust me, getting that car will be the best decision you made all day.” Jack could go and get their jeep, but he doesn’t want to leave Mac alone with Hopkins and risk the guy getting sharp with him. It’s not that Mac can’t take criticism, it’s that he shouldn’t need to.

Jack leans down and tries to see exactly what Mac’s doing. He’s fixed his share of small engines in his time, the stock watering pump was always breaking, and he doesn’t know how many times the lawnmower croaked. But generators are new ground, and it looks like Mac’s problem isn’t with the engine. “What’s goin’ on, Hoss?”

“So, a generator has a magnet inside. Sometimes, if it loses strength, it needs to be re-magnetized.” He glances at Jack. “Normally, the magnet generates electricity. But if I’m doing this right, I can reverse the process and use electricity to recharge the magnet.” Hopkins pulls a car up beside them, jumps out, and hands Mac the jumper cables. He still looks pretty unconvinced that this will work.

Mac attaches the jumper cables to the car battery. “This should hold you for a while. But I’d look into getting a new generator as soon as possible. This fix is only temporary.” He attaches the cables to whatever contraption he’s wired to the magnet. “Give it some time to charge, and then try restarting it.”

When, about five minutes later, the generator whirs to life and the lights come back on in the tent,
Jack reaches his fist toward Mac, and the kid returns the fist bump, grinning.

Riley jumps a little when someone taps her on the shoulder. She’s been so focused on fixing the absolute disaster these systems are in that she hasn’t been able to spare a thought to who’s around her. *My situational awareness should be better than that, damn it.* The tall young man glowering at her doesn’t look happy. “What are you doing? I’m running IT here.”

Riley shakes her head. “Generous to say you’re running anything. Your network is a mess. I recoded your node boost transcripts so they auto-install, and now I’m switching from a reactive routing to a hybrid system.” She stops, waiting for Jack to tell her to use English or stop talking and fix the problem. But this guy’s just kind of staring in awe, rather than confusion. *Well, he knows something about IT anyway.*

“I’m Riley, by the way.”

“Kalei.” He sits down beside her. “I’ve never seen that software before.”

“That’s because it’s mine.”

“You built one from scratch?” He’s clearly impressed.

“Yes, it’s a secure communications system.” She’s been debugging it for months, creating something that should allow agents who’ve lost traditional communication channels to get back in touch with handlers or exfil. But it should also work to restore the downed cell network.

“That’s insane.”

“Working at a government-funded think tank has some perks.” She grins. She’s almost got the system live, she just needs a few more things and they should be ready to test it. Thanks to Mac getting the power back online in the tent. She has no idea what he did, but she’s not going to question it. “I’m going to need your phone number.”

“That’s the most direct pick-up line I’ve ever heard.”

“I need to test the network.” She grins. “But if you’re not comfortable giving your number to mysterious strangers, I’ve got friends. Hey, Jack, I’m gonna try to call you in a couple minutes, okay?”

Jack walks over from where he and Mac have been systematically reassembling part of a pump running water to the medical tent. She grins when Kalei immediately moves a little further away from her and looks down at his computer. Jack’s protective dad vibes are pretty strong. *It’s twice as bad since the mess with Nick.* She’s pretty sure the next time she introduces him to someone she’s serious about, he’s going to ask Matty to interrogate them. *He doesn’t need to worry. I’m not in a hurry to get burned again.*

The radio Kalei is wearing on his belt crackles, then buzzes, a staticky voice emerging.

“Requesting immediate assistance. We have survivors trapped in a building that could come down any minute.” Jack glances at Mac.

“Hey Mac, you about done?”

“Yeah, it should be working fine now.” Mac wipes his hands on his shirt, leaving streaks of grease all down the front. “Wanna go dig some people out of a building that’s about to fall on them?” Mac
gives him a slightly wry glare, but nods.

Jack walks up to Hopkins, who’s just getting off the radio himself. “We’ll take that call.”

Riley knows she should be working on the last few steps of getting the network live, but she can’t help listening in on the conversation.

“We can’t risk it. The kind of equipment we need for that job can’t get in on these roads, it’s too heavy.”

Mac sets a paperclip that Riley thinks looks vaguely like an excavator on the table in front of him. “We’ll walk in on foot and make what we need when we get there.”

“Is he serious?” Hopkins asks.

“Always,” Jack says. “And he’s probably those people’s best shot at getting out alive.”

“What about hedgehog races? You know, for your birthday?” Mac just shakes his head. They’re on their way to try and keep people from literally being crushed to death, and Jack won’t give up on the more and more outlandish ideas for how to celebrate his birthday.

Once this is over, he’s actually just going to sit down with Jack and tell him the truth, or the man’s never going to stop bothering him. He doesn’t know why it’s so hard to tell any of his team, it was forever ago and it’s not even close to the most humiliating or horrible thing they know about his life. But somehow it hurts the most. He’d rather tell them everything about prison than tell them about his tenth birthday, and he can’t even figure out why.

He tries to change the subject by pointing out the condition of the building they’re currently approaching. “Cracks in the foundation. They weren’t kidding. This place could go down any second.” He half walks, half slides down a pile of debris to where a small team of what looks like local police of some sort are inspecting a section of the wall. He crouches down to get a better look at the depth and pattern of the cracks.

“Jack Dalton?” Mac looks up just in time to see a guy who looks like the slightly taller equivalent of Jack, tac gear and all, rushing over, grinning. “Man, what are you doing here?” He pulls Jack into a crushing hug.

“Volunteers for the cleanup effort.” Jack’s returning the hug with equal force, Mac swears he can hear bones cracking.

“You know, in the Navy, they teach you not to volunteer for anything,” the man smirks. “You Army guys are suckers.”

“Well, our boss kinda volunteered us without our say-so.” Jack sounds humorously defensive.

“So it actually takes a natural disaster to get you to fly out here to see me?” the man punches Jack in the shoulder, and Jack sidesteps, with a half-hearted swing of his own. Mac takes a few steps back, staying out of the way of the tussle he can imagine is about to happen.

Mac’s never been fond of false aggression. Jack and Riley use it as a way to celebrate after a good mission, and it’s almost the default for how Jack interacts with everyone. But from Dad to the cartel guys in LA to the criminals in the supermax, Mac’s only experience with aggression is that it’s intended to hurt. He’s glad Jack picked up on how uncomfortable Mac was with that early on. But who knows if this guy’s going to do the same? At least he doesn’t have to deal with him long.
Jack cuts off the mock fight, turning around and reaching for Mac’s shoulder.

“Mac, this is my old military buddy, Steve McGarrett, former Navy SEAL. Steve, this is MacGyver, but he goes by Mac.” Mac lets out a breath he didn’t know he was holding. The mood Jack’s in, he half-expected him to make a joke about “Angus” or worse yet “Carl’s Jr.”

“Nice to meet you, Mac.” Steve holds out his hand, and Mac takes it, matching his firm grip. The man’s blue eyes are intense but friendly. Mac would be a little afraid of him if he didn’t sense the kindness hiding behind the stern facade. He’s a lot like Jack.

Steve cups his hands around his mouth and yells toward the rest of the team inspecting the wall. “Hey! Look who showed up to help!” A young woman jogs over, followed by two men. Mac glances at all three of them, none of them seems as intimidating as Steve.

“This is Kono Kalakaua, Chin Ho Kelly, and the little Jersey native with the big mouth is my partner Danny.”

Mac glances at the three, they look like they’re as familiar with each other as he and Jack and Riley. Probably more so. Working with a good team helps.

“This is Jack Dalton, former Delta Force. He saved my neck in Kuwait. Came back for me when I got hit, even missed exfil to do it. And then dragged my ass five miles to a safe house.”

Mac thinks he hears Danny mutter under his breath, “Shoulda done us all a favor and left him there.”

Mac can sense the old war buddies’ reminiscing session about to start, so he decides to try and keep the focused on the real reason they’re here, especially because even the brief time he had to assess the cracks told him the situation is bad. “This is the wall you radioed about? And you’re sure there are still people trapped inside?”

Kono shouts, “Hello, are you still there?”, and there’s an answering metallic tapping. Mac glances at the wall, then at Jack, who’s picked up a sledgehammer that was laying nearby.

“Well then, let’s get ‘em out.”

“No, no!” Steve says; he holds up his hands and gestures frantically for Jack to stop. “There’s a reason we’re not already doing that.”

“He’s right,” Mac adds. “One wrong hit and you’ll bring the whole thing down. We have to remove a section while keeping the load bearing pieces intact.” He’s already got a decent sense of what parts can be removed, there’s a three foot by two foot section that should be able to be cut away and pulled out without destabilizing the whole foundation. He looks around, and when he sees the fertilizer spreader and weedwhip abandoned on the lawn, he has the beginnings of an idea.

“How fast can we get fifty pounds of sand up here?” He asks, and the looks of confusion coming from everyone but Jack make him smile, just a little, in spite of everything.

“Sand?” Chin asks.

Jack grins. “Just trust me, get the kid what he asks for. Yeah, he’s a weird dude, but I think he’s got it figured out.”

OF ALL THE DISASTER SITES ON THE WHOLE ISLAND…
THEY HAD TO WALK INTO STEVE’S

Jack will admit that he feels guilty this is the first time he’s seen Steve in literal years. *He’s right, it really shouldn’t have taken a natural disaster to get me out here to see him.* But life’s been busy. The last time he was in Hawaii was...before Riley, actually, now that he thinks of it. When Steve’s father died, Jack had flown out for the funeral. *And then he came for Pops’s.* The two men had died less than a year apart, and for a while Jack and Steve talked to each other a lot, even if they were too far away to go out for beers on a Friday night. But then life got busy, and there was Riley to worry about, and Steve’s world got crazier...and they drifted apart. Jack’s always had an excuse for why he can’t go to Hawaii each time he happens to think of it. He’s going to have to do better.

At least Steve doesn’t seem to really hold it against him. Actually, Steve seems far more interested in what Mac’s making than in Jack’s lame reasons for keeping his distance. “What exactly is this plan of yours, kid?”

“As long as the water main isn’t broken, I think I can cut through this wall. I just need some sand and some water.” Mac’s carefully disassembling the lawn equipment, setting pieces aside and then running off to dig through the rubble for random junk.

“Well, that’s reassuring,” Danny says. “But I still don’t see how a pile of yard tools and a fire hose is going to get us through three inches of concrete.”

“Oh no. It’s not. The water jet cutter I’m making is going to do that.”

“This thing is going to cut through that?” Steve asks skeptically, nudging the hose with his toe.

“I just need to get the water to shoot out at a hundred and fifty psi.” Chin and Kono are coming back with a truck and some sandbags, and they haul them over and drop them next to Mac. He glances at them. “The water pressure combined with the sand grinding will eventually cut through the concrete.”

“And you know this is going to work?” Chin asks.

“Probably?” Mac hedges, glancing at Jack.

“Probably is as sure as he ever gets,” Jack says. “But at this point I’d be willing to stake my life on one of his ‘probably’s. Actually I already have.”

Mac snatches Jack’s sunglasses. “Hey!” Jack protests. The last time the kid took them, he broke them. But Mac just puts them on, the massive aviator lenses making him look only slightly less ridiculous than Genevieve’s sunglasses in Amsterdam.

“Everyone apparently decided they didn’t need safety glasses at a disaster site,” Mac mutters, and at least Chin and Kono have the good sense to look slightly chagrined.

Danny just snorts. “Yeah, Steve’s such a stickler for following all the OSHA regulations.”

“Ok, for this to work I’m going to need your help. Kono, when I tell you, turn on the water. Danny, keep feeding sand into the spreader hopper, try to make sure there’s a steady flow of it.” Mac shoves Jack’s glasses a little farther up his nose. “Okay, go.”

For a long minute it looks like the only thing Mac’s accomplishing is getting the wall wet. And then Jack sees the steadily growing gouge in the concrete. Mac slowly moves the end of the hose up the wall, then over, and then down. Danny runs out of sand when they’re about halfway down the second side, but Mac scrounges around the area for a few minutes and finds a piece of sheared off I-
beam that makes a passable wedge, and with a couple hits from Steve’s sledgehammer, the chunk of concrete breaks loose.

“Okay. We need to move this.” Jack and Steve tug at the edges of the concrete slab while Mac and Chin slide pieces of broken rebar through the cuts around the edges to help pry it out. They move it a few inches before toppling it over. Steve reaches inside and helps a woman in a white lab coat to her feet. She’s battered and bruised, and there’s blood running down her face from a cut on her forehead, but it doesn’t look bad. Jack breathes a sigh of relief.

Chin helps the woman over to one of the vehicles and pulls out a first aid kit to start cleaning up the immediate injuries. “Okay, let’s get you to the evacuation center.

The woman’s eyes have been fluttering open and closed, but as soon as Chin mentions leaving she blinks wide awake, and starts babbling almost incoherently.

“We can’t leave yet. My co-workers are still down in the lab. I was only up here to make a phone call.” Lab? Down? This was supposed to be some kind of upscale hotel. What’s going on here?

“Okay, let’s get you to the evacuation center. The woman’s eyes have been fluttering open and closed, but as soon as Chin mentions leaving she blinks wide awake, and starts babbling almost incoherently.

“We can’t leave yet. My co-workers are still down in the lab. I was only up here to make a phone call.” Lab? Down? This was supposed to be some kind of upscale hotel. What’s going on here?

“How many?” Kono asks.

“Fifteen. Four floors down.” Four floors underground? Jack’s seen a lot of sketchy stuff in his day, and a supposed hotel that apparently had no guests or staff to account for during the quake, and a deep basement level, screams suspicious to him. But not illegal suspicious. More like government covert ops suspicious. After all, when the DXS was just getting off the ground, they had temporary space in a building that was set up to look like an insurance agency. Jack remembers fending off a few inquisitive passers-by even though the sign in the window said clients by referral only.

This screams some kind of projects lab. The hotel is the perfect cover to bring in large numbers of visiting scientists, even internationally. But at the moment, it doesn’t matter who the people in there are. They’re people, and they’re going to die if no one does anything.

“We’re going to get them out,” Jack says, glancing at Mac, who nods. He doesn’t want to give up on anyone. Neither do I.

“Now, can you explain to me how you think that might be possible?” Danny asks, waving his hands around in front of him to emphasize each word. "Because it seems to me, and I'm not structural engineer here, but it seems to me that this building is going to fall down at the actual drop of a hat. And while I'm sure Steve here would love to rush in there and get crushed to death in all his Navy SEAL glory, I just don't see how we're going to be able to get down to those people. Cause that sounds like crazy talk to me."

Chin says something Jack can’t even begin to comprehend. Jack only knows the occasional random Hawaiian word because of Steve. He doesn’t speak it fluently enough to know what just happened. “What did you just say?”

Steve glances at him. “That’s an old Hawaiian proverb. Literally, it means not to undertake what you don’t have the ability to accomplish.”

“Well, there’s an old saying we have where I come from too. ‘This ain’t my first rodeo.’” Jack grins. “I’m pretty sure walking into a building that’s about to collapse is only the tenth dumbest thing I’ve done in my life."

“Hooyah, brother!” Steve says, turning to Jack with a grin and holding out a fist. Jack bumps it with his own and then grabs Steve’s hand in a tight handshake; he’s sliding back into the familiar pre-
mission routine easily.

Mac glances up at the building, and as they watch, a few more chunks of concrete tumble to the ground. Jack wonders how scared the kid is, because the only thing he sees in Mac’s face is determination.

“Good news is, if things go sideways, your birthday celebration is the least of your concerns.”

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FEMA COMMAND CENTER

NOT QUITE THE WAR ROOM, BUT IT WORKS.

Hopkins carries in a stack of blueprints, then sets them down on a worktable. “Computer room in the city offices may have caved in, but the room storing the paper files is still standing.” Mac glances through the papers until he finds the one labeled SB4, and spreads it out. He sets the other three sub-basement plans aside as well, he might need to find alternate routes down if the main stairwells are damaged.

“Sub basement four. That’s where the scientist we rescued said her co-workers were trapped.” He gives the plans a quick glance.

“Eighteen rooms, six hallways, that’s over five thousand square feet.”

“That’s a lot of ground to cover. Is there any way we can narrow that down?” Danny asks. “Are all those rooms separate labs? Are those people spread out all over that floor?” Mac wishes he has answers to those questions, but he doesn’t. He’s right. That’s a huge area to cover with a building ready to come down on our heads.

“Search and rescue is a slow process,” Hopkins says. “If we’re not careful we could miss them entirely.”

Mac leans on the table and tries to think. They don’t know which of these rooms is the lab, and the woman they rescued has lapsed into a coma, her head injury proving to be much more serious than they initially thought. She’s being airlifted to a hospital now, but she can’t tell them which of these rooms might be labs where the scientists could be. Which makes this job exponentially harder. Mac can narrow it down a little, based on the electrical, gas, and water piping to various rooms, but they can’t rule out the bathrooms, in case someone was in them at the time the quake hit, and they can’t rule out what might be a lunch or break room. These people aren’t necessarily all in one place, and they’re going to have to search the whole level.

But he might be able to cut that time down a little, if he remembers that article he read in one of the science magazines that was laying around the Phoenix break room one day. It was a project he’d meant to suggest as an actual think tank one.

“A radar gun would help. Like the ones in police cruisers.”

“To find people in a building?” Hopkins asks.

“Yes. I just need that, and either a tablet or a phone for the software…” He looks at Jack, who immediately shakes his head, putting a hand protectively over his pocket.

“There’s a couple tablets over here,” Riley offers, reaching over the guy working with her to pull one out of a tote. “What software do you need?”
“Um...just a second.” Mac says. He walks over to stand closer to her and on the pretense of inspecting the tablet, whispers, “It’s...um...NASA.”

“Consider it done,” Riley says with a grin. “After the Pentagon, NASA’s like a three minute job. I think I might still have a backdoor in there from ’08, actually.” Mac decides he’s better off not asking. “Happen to know the project name?”

About eight minutes later the required software is downloading and Riley is erasing all evidence of her presence. Mac turns to Hopkins. “Have a cruiser with a radar gun and a FEMA emergency team meet us on site. We’ve got fifteen people in there and we’re not leaving until we get them home.”

Bozer’s trying to focus on the bandage he’s wrapping around a teenager’s arm, but he can’t help hearing Riley and the guy she’s working with. “This clearly isn’t the first time you’ve hacked the firmware on a router.”

“Nah. Stopped counting when I was twelve.”

“Glad you’re one of the good guys.”

He jumps when the kid whose arm he’s bandaging pulls back. “Is it supposed to be this tight?”

“Oh. I’m sorry.” Bozer readjusts the bandage. “You’ll need to keep this clean, and if you see swelling, see a doctor immediately.”

“Yeah, yeah, this isn’t even as bad as the time I fell off my horse at my uncle’s,” the kid says. “Now that was a sick scar.” He jumps off the table and rushes off.

“Wait!” Bozer runs after him, he has to sign the kid out before he moves on to the next patient. But this kid is fast. He’s already climbing away over a pile of rubble, his fluid movements reminding Bozer of when Mac trained himself in parkour when he was first starting to think about becoming a vigilante. I’m never going to be able to catch him.

He decides faking one crazy kid’s signature isn’t the end of the world.

He’s turning back to the tent when he hears it. A whining whimper, coming from the pile of concrete his patient just disappeared over. He should be going back to the tent, but he can’t bear to leave an animal to suffer and die. He begins digging through the chunks of concrete and wood, and the trapped creature starts to bark frantically.

It’s a dog trapped in the rubble. He pulls aside a couple more chunks of concrete and wood, and then reaches in to lift out the shuddering, whining animal.

“It’s okay, little dude.” Bozer’s always been good at calming down scared creatures. He had half the stray cats in their neighborhood eating out of his hand and following him around at any given time, he’d brought home at least a dozen stray dogs Mama firmly told him he wouldn’t be allowed to keep… and he vividly remembers using the same soft voice and slow motions to coax Mac out of his huddle in the corner of the junior high boys’ bathroom, the first time they met.

He sets the dog down gently when it begins to squirm, but it’s immediately apparent that his left foreleg is hanging loose. He’s not putting any weight on it, and every time it touches the ground he whimpers.

“I think your leg is broken. Don’t worry, I got this.” Bozer runs over to the medics’ supply truck. The supplies aren’t even close to the veterinary equipment he actually probably needs, but he might be able to improvise. I used to all the time when Mac came home hurt. Not that he ever attempted to
splint any broken bones. Mac always went to Carlos for that. Then had to explain the cast. Fortunately it only happened three times, at least serious breaks.

He rifles through a basic supply bag, grabbing anything he thinks might be useful.

Tongue depressors and band-aids. Mac would be able to make this work. He snatches a roll of gauze bandage and runs back to where the dog is sitting. He’s not really sure how he’s going to make the little guy hold still for this, but then he sees one of the paramedics walking past. “Hey, can you help me a minute? Just hold him steady?”

The man looks from Bozer to the whining dog and nods. He picks the little fellow up while Bozer tapes a few of the tongue depressors together with band-aids and then carefully wraps the splint around the dog’s leg.

The dog whimpers and yelps, but when Bozer’s finished, he moves his leg slightly, then turns and starts licking Bozer’s face enthusiastically. Boze smiles.

Jack’s watching Mac pull the electronic guts out of the radar gun, grinning because for once it’s not his phone being destroyed. He’s kind of hoping to make it through this mission with this one intact. He’s already reached his free replacement limit for Phoenix requisitions and it’s only the end of March.

Jack trusts that Mac knows what he’s doing. Steve’s team seems less than impressed, even though they just watched him make a water cutter out of lawn equipment. “Fifteen people running out of oxygen, trapped under four floors of rubble, with every minute we waste meaning they might not make it out alive, and you’re gonna what? Give ’em a speeding ticket?” Danny asks.

“Heyyyy.” Jack chuckles. “I can tell you’ve been working with Steve way too long. Only he can bring out that level of snark.”

Mac doesn’t seem upset in the least, and Jack’s pretty sure the kid is just used to people acting like he has no idea what he’s doing. He does start to explain, though. “NASA recently invented a device that uses low-powered microwaves to locate cave-in survivors trapped underground. We don’t have one of those, but with a little rewiring and some custom software, I can build a radar detector that can sense a human heartbeat through twenty feet of concrete.” Mac continues to work, but his movements are tense and he keeps looking up at everyone staring at him, until Jack realizes that probably means he wants to be left alone. He starts to move back, and the others follow suit. Steve keeps glancing back at where Mac is ripping apart the radar gun.

“So, where did you find this kid?”

Jack glances at Mac, then at Steve. He pulls Steve aside, lowering his voice. “California Correctional.”

The only sign of surprise he gets is slightly raised eyebrows. “What was he in for? Patent theft?”

“Domestic terrorism and murder.”

“That’s one hell of a rap sheet.” Steve glances from Jack to Mac, clearly trying to decide how on earth someone like Jack ended up with a person with that kind of past. And why Jack clearly trusts him. I know. We spent our entire careers chasing people who fit that description. To anyone who doesn’t know the circumstances, that’s a hell of a shock.

“He what?” Jack forgot how much Danny is Steve’s shadow. When he and Steve stopped talking
much, all Steve did was complain about the new guy he was working with. It took Jack the better part of an hour to remember that this Danno is that guy. They still bicker and fight, but Jack can tell they’re basically inseparable at this point. “So, you’re telling me, that we’re letting Mr. “I can make anything out of anything, but I was also a terrorist in my not so distant past”, play with God knows what over there unsupervised? The guy could be building a bomb for all we know.”

“Yeah, well, he didn’t do it.” Jack’s shocked at how easily a defense of Mac rolls off his tongue. “Well, I mean, the blowing up a warehouse full of illegal guns part, yeah, but not killing anybody.”

Steve looks more surprised at that part than anything else. Danny basically explodes, waving his hands wildly as he talks, glancing at Mac like he expects something to blow up near him any second. “I was joking about the bomb. But now, I’m watching him sitting over there fiddling with wires and batteries and I’m starting to wonder if your friend coming to town was a good idea, Steven.”

“Kid was a vigilante in LA, for four years.” Jack relishes the surprise and respect that cross Steve’s face.

“And he lasted four years?” Steve looks more than a little shocked. “Don’t take this the wrong way, but Jack, he looks like the kinda kid Coronado chews up and spits out.”

“He’s pretty damn tough.” Jack wants to brag up everything about his kid for some reason, he feels like an obnoxious parent at a softball game or a PTA meeting. But he can’t help himself. “But he’s smart enough to figure out a way he doesn’t even have to fight. Kid’s a freakin’ Einstein.”

Steve shakes his head. “And Jack Wyatt Dalton’s hanging around with a geek. Never woulda seen that coming.”

“Well, I didn’t see you running a task force with the guy you wouldn’t stop complaining about, but here we are.” Jack grins as Steve slaps him on the shoulder.

“Hey, if it weren’t for me this idiot would have died years ago,” Danny says, but he stops what sounds like it’s going to be a running list of the dumb things Steve’s done for the past few years as Mac hurries over, holding his mangled radar gun and smiling.

“Jack?” Mac asks. “I think it’s done. Ready to go find some scientists?” Jack feels more than a little awkward. After all, he just spilled Mac’s life story to people Mac barely knows. And Mac has no idea. But I don’t want them to act like Mac’s some ivory-tower trust fund kid who’s out here playing hero. Because that’s the furthest thing from the truth.

They start at the corner of the building where Mac found the first scientist, and move along the side slowly, checking for signs of life. Jack keeps an eye on the walls above them, bits of concrete and other debris fall every now and then and he doesn’t want anything to hit one of them.

Unfortunately, it turns out that the enemy is the ground, not what’s above them. Mac trips over a heap of broken cement, nearly dropping his radar contraption. He manages to catch himself before he falls flat on his face, but Jack watches his cheeks go red.

“I’m sorry, I’m not normally this clumsy…” He trails off, glancing at the others, probably waiting for someone to start laughing. Jack refrains from saying that yes, Mac is normally tripping over his own feet. The kid doesn’t need any more embarrassment.

“Well, unless you manage to blow out your knee you’re doing better than Danny,” Steve says, chuckling slightly.

“That was absolutely and entirely your fault for doing crazy Super SEAL stuff,” Danny says. “You
do realize that’s why I refuse to be your backup on rooftop chases anymore, right?”

“Guys. I think I got someone.” Mac sweeps the radar gun back and forth, and there’s clearly a heartbeat behind a pile of rubble. Chin and Kono start pulling away the fallen chunks of concrete.

“I’ve got a hand, and a pulse,” Chin says. “You keep going, we’ll dig out until the FEMA team gets here. One down. Fourteen to go.

Jack doesn’t like walking into the building. He’d say it’s just the fact that it could come down on their heads any minute, but there’s something else that’s just...off. Like in the space of time that they left to regroup and plan, the building became more dangerous. He knows that probably is the case, but he’s not sensing natural disaster so much as he is something genuinely malicious.

“What’s your gizmo say?” Danny asks. “One of those scientists breaking the speed limit down there?”

“I’m just picking up us,” Mac says. “You all need to stay behind me or all this is going to read is your heartbeats.” Jack nods and they move in behind Mac. Jack wonders if the man they found upstairs might not have been alone, and he wanders in the direction of that section of the wall. Maybe those scientists were smart enough to figure out a way up and out of there.

He stops, with the prickling feeling that something is wrong washing over him. It’s the same kind of feeling he got before they spotted sniper nests on Delta ops, or before Charlie uncovered an IED in the Sandbox. He turns, following the source of the soft swishing sound raising the hair on the back of his neck. When he sees it, illuminated in the blue glow of the tactical light he pulled off of his gun, he freezes.

“Jack.” Steve’s voice is tense.

“Yeah. I saw it. Tactical ladder.” He doesn’t like that. This place was unstable, FEMA was holding off rescue teams until their group got back. “Mac…” Jack glances back at where the kid’s heading straight for said ladder. He’s too focused on his little radar thing. He didn’t see it.

And then something dark drops into the stairwell, and Jack flinches at the gleam of light on a gun barrel. Mac gasps and jumps back, but the ground is uneven and he stumbles a little, unable to quite get as far as he clearly wanted to. The guy lays into Mac with a hard hit that sends him flying back into a wall. Danny yells and throws himself at the guy, wrenching the gun out of his hands and flinging it away.

He really has been hanging out with Steve too long. Because that is a one hundred percent Steve McGarrett move. Jack yanks his gun out of his belt, but Steve beats him to the punch, literally, smashing his own gun into the side of the guy’s helmet. Jack grabs his neck in a chokehold, and the man struggles for a few seconds and then goes limp.

Jack immediately lets go of him and rushes over to where Mac hit the wall. Please don’t be hurt. Please. Mac slid to the floor from the force of the hit, but he’s already back on his feet, leaning on the wall, panting and clutching his side. “Kid? You okay?” Jack gently rests a hand on Mac’s shoulder.

“Yeah.” His voice is hoarse and raspy. He’s definitely hurting. Jack quickly runs his hand down Mac’s injured side. The kid hisses, but he doesn’t flinch too badly, and Jack doesn’t feel any broken ribs. Just got the wind knocked out of him, and a nasty bruise.

Steve and Danny are tying up the guy they just knocked out. When Danny grabs his hands to put zipties on, Jack catches the man’s arm and turns it so the others can see the tattoo there.
Steve recognizes it instantly. “That’s Chinese special forces insignia. He’s not search and rescue, that’s for sure.”

Danny snorts. “Yeah, genius, we kind of figured that out when he started attacking Mac. I’m pretty sure the goal of search and rescue is to not hurt people?” Jack begins checking the guy over for weapons when he hears a buzzing and then voices.

“Throat mic. I’ve got someone speaking Chinese.”

“Want me to translate?” Steve asks, taking the mic.

Jack nods. Steve is far more fluent in Mandarin and a couple other dialects than Jack will ever hope to be. That came in handy more than a few times on ops.

Steve takes the mic and listens for a few minutes, answers in rapid Chinese, then looks up, face tight with worry. “They’re asking him to report back, asking if there’s anyone inside the building. And then I have about five other voices overlapping, talking about timetables and a safe. I think they’re here to steal something. I told them everything was quiet down here but that I’m staying to make sure no one comes in. That way we won’t spook them until we figure this out.”

“What kind of place is this?” Danny asks. Jack wishes he had a good answer.

Jack’s really glad Riley has the cell networks up and running again, because the second Steve sees Matty on the video call, Jack watches the man flinch. I ran one op with him after I was out of the Army and working for the CIA. Matty was none too happy that the CIA ended up paying damages for what we did to that Japanese bullet train. Matty fixes Steve with the glare that’s usually reserved only for Jack, and he barely manages to suppress a chuckle. Steve’s the one who originated the nickname “Matty the Hun”. She’s never forgiven him. “Steve McGarrett,” Matty says. “I thought I told you the next time I saw your face you were going to need a better explanation for a derailed bullet train than ‘At least we caught the terrorists.’” She sighs. “What have you managed to drag my people into now? And before you ask, the Phoenix Foundation will NOT be covering expenses for anything you damage.”

Jack shakes his head, watching Steve cringe like a new recruit in boot camp getting chewed out for not keeping his bunk neat enough. “We’ve got a Chinese Special Forces merc here, inside a building that’s about to fall down, and that has some sort of weird underground lab with a bunch of scientists trapped in it.”

“Send me the location, I’ll make some calls.” Matty mutes the call for several minutes, and when she comes back online there’s a new frown of concern in her forehead.

“According to my sources, that building you’re at is a front. The DOD calls it Facility H9. The basement levels house a top-secret DARPA lab conducting top secret research for the US government.”

“Wait, so those people down there are DARPA scientists?” Chin asks.

“Yes. Some of America’s best and brightest are currently trapped forty feet underground.” And another one’s trying to figure out how to get them out.

Jack shakes his head. “But those mercs were going up.”

“The scientists house some of the projects in a vault on the fourth floor. Normally, it’s ultra secure, but…”

Mac cuts in. “With the power out and the city in chaos…”
Jack finishes. “They seized the opportunity.” These guys moved in fast and they were prepared. Jack wonders if the earthquake just gave them a better opportunity than their original plan. There’s no way they got here after the quake fast enough. This was planned, they just got an unexpected assist.

“Do we know what these guys are after?” Steve asks.

“No. Records barely admit the place exists, let alone tell us what’s up there.”

Kono glances at the unstable building. “Well, up is a very dangerous direction to be heading, so whatever they’re after, it must be one heck of a payoff.”

“Which means that whatever they’re after, bad things are gonna happen if they leave this island with it.”

“So don’t let them leave the island. I’m going to make some more calls, see if i can find out exactly what you’re dealing with.” Matty hangs up and Jack turns to the others.

What’s the plan?” Kono asks.

"We split up,” Steve says, as if it’s the simplest thing in the world.

"You do know that's what people say in horror movies right before something terrible happens, right?” Jack has seen enough of these scenarios to know that this is exactly the setup to someone getting killed. He doesn’t want that to be any of them.

"If you don't like splitting up, you're definitely not going to like the part of the plan where we all get shot at," Danny says. "That's standard McGarrett operating procedure."

Mac surprisingly doesn’t completely instantly veto the plan like Jack expected. He was hoping to have the actual genius backing him up. Instead, it seems like he’s agreeing with Steve. “He’s right though. We have two big problems and they both require our immediate attention. We have to get to those scientists before the building collapses, which it could do at any time, and we have to keep those thieves from getting away with whatever it is they’re after. Jack, you and Steve and whoever else needs to should handle the mercs upstairs. I’ll go after the scientists.”

"Mac..." Jack is not in the least comfortable with even having the kid inside that building, much less with them splitting up like this. I'm supposed to watch his back.

"I'll be fine." Mac says. “There were at least five other mercs, that we knew of. They’re heavily armed and stealing something we can’t even identify. We stand a better chance of catching them if we send everyone who’s trained to deal with that kind of threat to stop them.” He sighs. “Chances are I won’t even be able to make it past the first sub-basement, if I’m being honest. We just...we have to try to save those people too.”

“Not saying you shouldn’t. But I think I should be down there with you.”

“Jack, you and Steve are the best chance we have to stop those mercs. That’s where you need to be. And besides, at this point, going up is more dangerous than going down.” He shrugs.

"I'll go with science guy." Kono says, and Chin follows her. “Don’t worry, Jack, he's gonna be in good hands.”

"Actually it’s MacGyver. I think Science Guy's already trademarked?” He smiles. “Although I did try to broadcast a knock-off version of Bill Nye once. I was nine.” Jack remembers the story Mac told him when they were in Mission City, about getting caught breaking into the science lab in his
school because he was broadcasting accidentally on the police dispatch frequency. *Most kids do dumb stuff like smoking out back or graffiting the place. Only Mac would get in trouble for trying to produce his own version of a science show.*

"And we are not done talking about this birthday thing!" Jack calls as Mac walks off. "If you live, we’re celebrating!" He tries not to think about the alternative. *It’s fine. We’ll be fine. But letting the kid walk away from him feels wrong. He shakes off the superstitious churning in his stomach. Stop thinking like that. Don’t jinx it.*

Bozer’s discovering that multitasking is not his thing. Trying to keep a dog from causing chaos in the medical tent is a full-time job, and he kept having to run off from helping with stitches or wound cleaning to chase the little guy down before he tripped someone. He’s resorted to hanging onto the dog and directing people when they first enter the tent.

"If you are in pain or need medical attention please move to this side of the tent and a doctor will see you as soon as possible. And if anyone knows anything about this dog, I’d appreciate the information.” He leans down, hoping his voice is keeping the little fellow calm. “We’re gonna get you home, buddy."

"Lotta strays on the island, brah. He might not have a home.” Bozer jumps about a foot in the air at the unexpected voice. The dog starts sniffing the air and barking, short, sharp, excited sounds.

“Yeah I smell it too, bud,” Bozer says, turning toward where the smell of food and the voice both came from. A man with a yellow shirt that has some sort of red logo on it steps out from behind a table where he’s arranging foil pans of something that smells absolutely divine. Bozer’s stomach rumbles and the dog makes a muted howl.

“He does look hungry. Shrimp always hits the spot. Even if you walkin’ on four legs.” The man walks over. “And Kamekona’s never had a dissatisfied customer yet.” He peels back the foil on one of the trays and pulls out a few pieces of shrimp. Bozer smells butter and coconut. The man sets down the small paper tray he’s just filled with shrimp, and the dog begins to scramble excitedly. Bozer sets him down, and he starts munching. Bozer’s stomach growls again.

The man chuckles. “Sounds like you as hungry as your dog.” He fills a second tray and hands it to Bozer. Boze doesn’t care if his hands are grimy and covered with dog hair. He’s *starving.* He takes a bite of the shrimp and stops, savoring the delicious and absolutely perfect sauce on it. He doesn’t bother to wait until his mouth isn’t full to

"This shrimp is insanely delicious. You got a restaurant around here?"

"No. Couple o’ food trucks.” The man grins. “I’m Kamekona.”

“Bozer.” He’d shake the man’s hand but he’s too busy chowing down on shrimp.

Riley’s laugh filters through the chaos to him, and he instinctively glances over to where she’s working with Kalei. *She’s happy. I shouldn’t be upset about that. But I am.*

“Worried about your girl?” Kamekona asks, following Bozer’s line of sight.

“Oh, she’s...she’s not really my girl. I wish she was. Like, I like her. A lot. But she’s perfect.” He shrugs. “She can do a lot better than me.”

“But does she want to?” *Okay, never thought about it quite that way. But still.* Riley is a government agent who could definitely kill him ten ways with her bare hands. Girls like her falling for guys like
him only happens in the movies.

Kamekona begins talking in what Bozer thinks is Hawaiian. It’s beautiful, it sounds like some sort of ancient spell, but he has no idea what the man is saying.

“That was beautiful. What does it mean?”

"Squid from the deep blue sea has a peculiar lunch."

"That made no sense." He chuckles.

“Made you laugh.” Kamekona smiles, and Bozer grins back. Yes, it did.

The hotel creaks and rumbles ominously as Jack makes his way down a hallway. Off in the distance, he can hear muffled explosions as construction teams bring down damaged buildings that are beyond repair and pose a hazard if they’re not demolished intentionally. The muted bangs sound like distant shelling, or the explosions of IEDs

As if I needed another reason to be reminded of a war zone. Clearing this building with Steve’s voice in his ear is taking Jack right back to more past missions than he cares to recall. At least at this point the slight paranoia is justified. If they run into these guys, Jack’s definitely going to be ready.

“So whose brilliant idea was it to pair you up with a geek? Or was that punishment?” Steve asks.

"Actually it’s been workin’ out pretty darn well. Kid's problem is, he thinks too much. I'm here to keep him from missing the forest for the trees." Jack smiles. Mac gets lost in that head of his sometimes. Jack sometimes really does wonder how he made it on the streets. Sheer dumb luck more than likely.

“Well, that’s the exact opposite of Steve’s problem,” Danny says. “You’re lucky you have a partner who thinks through things before he charges in guns blazing.”

“Mac doesn’t even use guns,” Jack chuckles. “Unless he’s tearing them apart to make something else.”

"Can we trade?" Danny asks. "Because I would definitely consider a trade, if that's something you'd be interested in."

“I’m offended, Danny.” Steve’s voice comes in over the comms. “You want to trade me in for the kid who makes everything he touches explode?”

“You almost get me killed on a weekly basis, with your crazy stunts that you always manage to drag me into the middle of. It couldn't be worse.” Jack rolls his eyes even though they can’t see him. It's a good thing Danny gives as good as he gets. Honestly, Steve’s mellowed out some, for all his jokes and slightly reckless behavior. If Danny thinks it's bad now he should have seen Navy SEAL Steve on ops.

“You’d be bored out of your mind if I didn’t.”

“I’m not sure if getting shot to death is really that much of an improvement over being bored to death.” Jack can tell there’s no real anger behind the words, and the second someone actually tried to split these two up there would be hell to pay. His own friendship with Steve has always been that way. On the outside, it looks like one dropped match will send the whole thing up in flames, but in reality, there’s a deep trust and respect that it would take a catastrophe to shatter, if anything even
could.

“I haven’t gotten you killed yet.”

Jack’s absolutely ready to respond with a cutting jab, *I think Danny is going to ask for my phone number when this is over so he has a new source of ammunition to deal with Steve*, when he hears a scuffling sound, and then a whine like a dentist’s drill. “Guys, I have movement.”

“On our way.” Steve’s voice has gone from joking Steve to SEAL Steve. All the snark is gone, replaced with a cold determination. Jack’s watched that happen over and over on missions.

Jack’s always wondered if people notice when he switches on the Delta side of himself. If there’s a noticeable difference between the Jack he usually lets everyone see and the one he reserves for emergencies. *Probably almost the same as it is with Steve.*

He peeks around a corner, and sees six heavily armed mercs in front of a safe. *Okay, three on six ain’t bad odds.* And then he sees the white lab coat nearly hidden by two of the men. *Damn it. A hostage.* This just got a whole lot more complicated.

Bozer’s not having much luck getting his new friend to sit still. "Good boy. Just look at me." The dog barks enthusiastically and wiggles all over, panting and snuffling. He holds up his camera and tries to catch the dog’s attention long enough to snap a good photo, but by the time the shutter clicks the dog’s already turned his head away.

“Having trouble?” He jumps when he hears Riley’s voice behind him.

“Yeah. I’m trying to put his picture up on the missing persons page, see if anyone knows anything about who his owner is.” Bozer sighs. “But he’s moving around too much for me to get a good picture.” He shows her the last twenty pictures on his camera roll, all blurry motion shots.

"Ty dangling a treat in front of the camera." Riley snags a piece of shrimp from the table behind them and holds it up. “Yeah, this smells good, doesn’t it? Yeah, just be a good boy and let the nice human take your picture and then you can have it, okay?” Her voice has instantly gone into that soft wheedling tone that it seems like most people can’t help but use around small animals and small children.

He snaps a picture, and it’s perfect, a full-on headshot that shows the markings on the little guy’s back too. “Definitely insta-worthy. I’m gonna upload this and see if we can find his owner.”

“Now that the internet’s actually live again, should work fine.” She glances back at the table covered with computer parts and wires, where her work partner is doing something to a router.

“You and Kelly having a good time?”

“It’s Kah-lay,” Riley says, “and yes. It’s nice talking to someone who knows the difference between mint and ubuntu.”

“Well, you know, fresh breath is important.”

“Those are operating systems, Bozer.”

“I know, I know.” His jokes just aren’t working. He’s tired, and he feels absolutely useless. There’s nothing he was doing in the medical tent that someone else couldn’t take over for him and do better at, he’s seeing that now. He’s pretty sure he’s so fixated on finding the dog’s owner because that’s
about the only thing he feels like he might actually succeed at doing well. Splinting the little guy’s
dleg and taking care of him feels like the only thing he’s been actually good at all day.

He knows it’s the exhaustion talking, this is what used to happen when he was taking film classes
and holding down a full time job at Tony’s restaurant as well. He’d told himself he should just quit
trying to make movies because he was never getting higher than a C in classes and at least he could
make a mean BLT at the restaurant.

But when he’d finally told Tony about it, the man had sat him down and asked if burgers and fries
were what he dreamed about at night. What got him out of bed in the morning. What he wanted to
talk to people about constantly. When Bozer told him that wasn’t it, Tony’d just shaken his head.
“Then don’t make it your life. If it’s not what you love, don’t tell yourself it’s all you can do.
Because if you really love something, you’ll be able to find a way to do it well. You’re not a failure.
You’re a student.”

And then of course Bozer’d had to ask if Tony dreamed about the restaurant. “All the time,” he’d
answered, and then finished with a chuckle. “Though more often than not it’s about fifteen customers
placing orders at once and the stock room being out of everything but a can of beans.”

Bozer isn’t really sure what he dreams of right now. He doesn’t dream of movies as much anymore.
He dreams of being a spy. But he already knows he’s never going to compare to someone like Riley,
or Jack, or even Mac. *Unless it’s like Tony said, and I’m just still a student. Still learning.*

Riley doesn’t seem like she’s in any real hurry to get back to her computers. She’s sort of fidgeting,
spinning a shrimp in her fingers but not eating it.

“Riley? Is everything okay?” She jumps like she was caught with her hand in the cookie jar.

“Yeah, I’m sorry. I’m just...I guess I’m too nosy for my own good and if he doesn’t tell me, he has
his reasons.”

“What?” Bozer’s genuinely confused now. “Do you think surfer dude has a girlfriend on the side, and
he’s just playing you?”

“No!” Riley says, cracking a small smile. “Trust me, Bozer, I’m not even thinking about that right
now. This isn’t about Kalei.” She shakes her head. “I was just...wondering...Do you know why Mac
has such a problem with his birthday?”

“He never told me. But I found out from Mama who found out from his grandpa.” Bozer says
quietly. “His dad skipped the day he turned ten. He was supposed to be on a business trip. Guess
Mac expected him to come home. And then his grandpa had to sit him down and tell him that wasn’t
going to happen, and that Mac was going to need to move to LA with him.” Bozer sighs. “It really
messed him up. I met him about a month later, and he was...well, he was lost.”

Riley’s biting her lip, eyes shimmering with tears. “Elwood, my dad, skipped when I was fifteen. I
cried for days. Even though he was an abusive jerk, he was the only father I had, you know?” Bozer
nods. His dad died before he even really knew the man, but he does feel that sense of missing
something important. Mama had a long-term boyfriend at one point, but he stopped coming around
after Jerry died and Mama got depressed. He just couldn’t deal with all of it. Boze wasn’t sorry to see
him go. *If he couldn’t be there to support us when we needed him, he wasn’t the father we deserved.*

“Now I feel guilty for teasing him,” Riley says, and visibly droops. “Jack always made sure I wasn’t
alone every year on the day Elwood left, and he sure as hell would never have made me have to
remember it.”
“You didn’t know. Mac doesn’t like to talk about it, and it’s not your fault.” She smiles, and then yelps as the dog takes the opportunity to snatch the shrimp from her lowered hand.

“You little rasca!” She scolds, and Bozer smiles.

Mac ducks under a tangle of wires that are hanging from the ceiling, careful not to touch them. He can hear a low hum coming from them. “Guys, the backup generators are running. They’re supplying emergency power to some low lighting and probably some of the lab equipment. Be careful not to touch anything with wires, you might get electrocuted.”

“Thanks, good to know,” Chin mutters. “Just how I wanted to spend my weekend.”

“It could be worse,” Kono says. “Remember that time Steve…”

“Don’t say that, cousin. You’re going to curse us.”

Mac chuckles and shakes his head. “Okay, I think if we sweep from the north wall to the south we should be able to cover most of the area. With all the debris and metal my radar detector’s having some trouble getting a good signal, so I guess we’re doing this the old-fashioned way.” He’s not giving up on the contraption just yet, though. If he gets close enough he’ll probably be able to find them directly.

“Okay, the bathrooms and the rooms I assume are labs are that way,” Mac points to the right. “This way is mostly probably storage rooms, and one break room. It’ll be easier to clear that side first, less likely to have as many people there.”

Kono nods, and she and Chin follow him down the hallway. The first two storerooms are clear, but as Mac turns toward what he assumes was a break room, his radar gun begins picking something up. “Guys, I have something. At least one heartbeat, this door, over here.”

“Hello!” Kono calls, and there’s an answering shout from behind the door.

“We’re going to get you out, just hold on,” Chin shouts. “Okay, MacGyver, what’s the plan?”

There’s a massive I-beam laying directly in front of the door. Mac glances at the door, he can see hinges; at least that explains why these people hadn’t been able to get themselves out. “These doors are made to open out because they’re fire safety access. Since we’re underground the only access to the surface is by the stairs, so people have to be able to get out in an emergency. Except that in this case it’s working against them.”

“So we can’t get them out until we move that beam.” Chin says. “And I don’t know about you, but I think my back’s going to give out before we budge something that massive.”

“You’re right, we can’t lift it. But we don’t have to. All we need is a lever.” Mac glances at the fallen beam. “We only need to move it enough to swing the door.” And there’s plenty of smaller metal pieces lying around that will work nicely.

A few minutes later, Mac and Kono are both leaning on chunks of rebar as Chin slides the beam sideways. They manage about a foot of door swing space before Chin calls a halt. Mac switches places with him, and when they’ve got almost a foot more, they stop. He pulls open the battered door and glances into the room “Hello? Is anyone here? We’re here to get you out.”

A man and a woman peek out slowly from the corner. “Oh thank God,” The woman says. “I didn’t think a rescue team would be able to get to us. The door was blocked, how did you find us?”
Mac waves the radar gun, then realizes that’s not a satisfactory explanation. But the man glances at it. “Wait, is that...you modified a radar pulse to detect vital signs?” Right, DARPA scientists. Some of these people could have worked on that exact project, or at least known about it. The man looks extremely impressed. “And you guys are with FEMA?”

“Oh, not exactly.” Mac’s saved an awkward explanation by a subtle but ominous creaking. All three of them step back into the hallway.

“Are you both alright?” Chin asks, glancing them over.

“I think so,” the woman answers. “We were getting coffee, and then...the whole building felt like it was falling in.” The two of them look badly shaken and a little bruised, but they’re still alive. “We were able to take shelter before the worst, but then when we tried to leave the door was blocked.”

Kono puts a hand gently on each of their shoulders. “Okay, You’re going to be fine. The stairs are still intact until the second basement, and there’s a tactical ladder there that will get you the rest of the way.” The two nod. Twelve to go.

The bathrooms are cleared, but there’s water running in the sink in the men’s. Mac wonders if that’s where the man they found upstairs was. He was unconscious when Kono and Chin pulled him out, so he wasn’t able to tell them how he’d ended up on the ground floor. There’s clear access from the bathrooms to the stairs so Mac figures that’s the explanation.

But beyond an empty lab space, the hallway is blocked by a huge pile of debris. Mac moves a little closer, and the radar gun starts going wild, unable to keep up with the input it’s getting.

"Multiple distinct hits on the other side of this wall. Think I found them.” Mac sighs. He’s got something tangible, but those hits are on the other side of a heap of concrete and steel beams.

"Don’t suppose you can make a jackhammer?” Chin asks.

"I could...but I’d need a lawnmower engine, a tank of compressed gas...” He shrugs. “And anyway, that would probably destabilize that whole pile and who knows what that would do?” He turns around to see them both slightly gaping at him. Oh, I guess that was a rhetorical question.

There’s a sort of tunnel through the pile, but it’s blocked by another fallen I-beam.

"I need to find a way to lift this out of the way," Mac mumbles, already thinking. A lever isn’t going to do much good here, he needs to have something he can move past. And then he notices a massive bolt lying on the ground, and an idea starts to form.

He knows how to make a makeshift screw-operated lift jack. He took apart the ones in Weathers’s to repair them often enough. “I have a plan.”

Jack watches the mercs fiddle with the access panel to the safe, and then jam their hostage’s face up to the retinal scanner. At least they didn’t just rip his eye out. Jack really doesn’t want to see that movie scenario in real life.

This is bad, this is really bad. For one thing, they’ve just gotten access to the safe, with whatever in there they want to steal. For another, Jack’s pretty sure that hostage just reached the end of his usefulness to them. Unless there’s another layer of security past that scanner, they won’t need him anymore. If Jack doesn’t do something fast he’s going to be watching these guys pop the poor man off right there.
Yes, this is stupid. But I do have the element of surprise. He steps out from behind the corner, trying to focus on the situation but also slightly amused by the fact that Danny will almost certainly decided Jack is as big an idiot as Steve.

"Hey fellas, how’s it going? No, no, don’t touch that. Bad choice, trust me. Now I really wanna do this the easy way. I’m a pretty cool guy. We’re gonna have to drop our guns, let the hostage go…and yeah, you’re all under arrest.” Jack just has to stall long enough for Steve and Danny to get here, that’ll even the odds.

The second he sees one of the mercs’ hand moving, he knows this was a bad idea. He sees the grenade incoming, and under normal circumstances he’d try to toss it back, but he can’t risk the hostage’s life. So he tugs a metal filing cabinet away from the wall, pulling it between himself and the grenade as the explosion rocks the building.

Jack’s ears are ringing from the blast. He stumbles to his feet, and wonders just how close he was to that grenade because it feels like the building’s rocking all around him. Great. A concussion is just what I need.

He stumbles again, resting his hand on the desk in front of him, that’s now splintered and scorched from the explosion. He’s seeing double, just a little, but the mercs are definitely leaving the safe now. He tries to radio Steve and Danny, but the blast’s knocked out his comms, and all he’s hearing is static and white noise.

The mercs start jumping out a window. Jack pulls his gun, but the last of the guys is already out, and he hears a scream as they pull the hostage with them. He rushes across the floor, that feels like it actually is swaying under his feet, and looks down, fighting vertigo. The hostage is hanging by his hands from a ledge, screaming almost incoherently, and the mercs are just disappearing around a corner. Jack glances from them to the terrified scientist.

“I’m coming to get you, just hold on.” He shakes his head and some of the swaying dizziness clears. I’m not going to let him fall.

FOUR FLOORS UNDERGROUND

MIGHT AS WELL JUST SAY SIX FEET UNDER RIGHT NOW

Mac’s pretty sure it’s just his nerves that are making everything look like it’s shaking. I’m the one shaking. It’s fine, I’ll be fine, I just have to get through the tunnel and then it’s going to be okay. He takes a deep breath, but if anything, the shaking only gets worse. Okay, not me.

"Aftershock!” Kono yells, and Mac flinches as debris rains down on him. He has to get out of this tunnel. It was unsteady to begin with, and now with all the added vibration it could collapse at any second. Slow and steady isn’t an option anymore.

He’s going as fast as he can, but the rough concrete tears at his elbows and knees, and there’s broken ends of rebar everywhere. If he gets caught on something...He can’t afford to panic, but he’s not a fan of small spaces and he’s scared of getting buried alive down here under this building. The thought of dying slowly of suffocation or being impaled by a piece of rebar and bleeding out, or just being crushed to death is horrifying. Jack, where’s Jack...he’s not here.

He scrambles a few feet further, and his head and shoulders are out. He braces himself to slide the rest of his body and then there’s an awful rumble and something lands directly on his back and legs. He cuts off a yelp of surprise and pain.
Fortunately, that’s the only thing that falls. The shaking decreases, and then, over the pained buzzing in his ears, he hears the voices on comms. “Mac! Are you alright?”

"I'm...through, but the wall just collapsed." He decides that telling them half his body is currently pinned under the rubble isn’t going to help anyone. Chin and Kono can’t do anything about it. Jack would get me out. If he had to move this whole pile with his bare hands to do it.

He glances back, but at the angle his body is pinned he can’t really see what the problem is. Nothing hurts too badly, at least not yet. So either he’s lucky...or something crushed his spine. He’s really hoping for the former.

“Hello?” Someone says, and he looks up to see a group of people slowly making their way toward him. A woman with a dark ponytail kneels down. “Are you alright? What happened? Where did you come from?”

Mac coughs, choking on the settling dust. “Uh, I’m Mac...I was kind of supposed to be getting you out?” This is beyond humiliating. They’re never going to believe someone who just got himself trapped under a bunch of rubble is going to be able to help them. Mac kind of wishes the whole cave in would just have buried him completely.

Fortunately, as it turns out, apparently only one chunk of concrete really pinned him, and with five of the mostly uninjured scientists lifting it to take the pressure off, he’s able to scramble out from underneath it. His legs still work, and his back seems to be in one piece. He’s going to be sore and feeling this for a while, but it’s a lot better than it could have been.

"How are you and the scientists?" Chin asks.

"We’re...good, all things considered..."

"I don’t know if we’re going to be able to get to you. The aftershocks shifted things a lot."

Mac sighs. He knew he was on his own the second the tunnel began to collapse, but hearing it is just another reminder that now he’s in the same situation as these scientists, and they haven’t been able to figure out a way to escape yet..."There’s no telling when another one might hit. Just get to the surface. We'll find our way up."

Kono says something that sounds like laki maikaʻi, which Mac thinks means “good luck” if he remembers the tiny bit of Hawaiian a kid in his high school Economics class used. And then the comms cut out and he’s on his own.

He looks around the room at the worried huddle of scientists. Most of them are bruised and bloodied, and one man’s arm is in a makeshift sling, but none of them look so seriously injured they’re incapable of moving.

"Is everyone stable?"

A woman whose lab coat has a more complex design on the chest than the others answers him. "We’re alright. We’d be a lot better if we could get out of here."

"Yeah. I think my way in was a one way trip." He shrugs. “I guess we just have to find another one.” He’s trying to keep it light, disguise how terrified he is that this is where he’s going to die, trapped forty feet below the surface, buried alive."I'm good at getting out of tight spots." He’s reassuring himself as much as them.

"You don’t think we’ve already tried everything? You're looking at eleven PhDs. What are you
going to think of that we didn't already try?"
"Don't know. Haven't thought of it yet."

There are still tactical ropes hanging from the mercs’ rapid descent. Jack doesn’t have a carabiner, but he does remember plenty from climb training with the Deltas, and in a few minutes he’s rappelling down the wall to the ledge where the scientist is holding on for his life. He reaches for the gasping, panicking man, keeping his voice calm and steady. “Hey man, I got you. Just hang on a sec, okay?”

The man doesn’t respond, aside from glancing at Jack and beginning to breathe even faster, he’s probably hyperventilating at this point. His fingers are slipping, probably sweaty. Jack readjusts his grip on the cable, it’s not going to do either of them any good if he catches this guy but then falls.

And then the man’s grip slips entirely and Jack has no more time to prepare. He catches the man’s jacket as he falls, and pulls him toward him. The guy clutches him like a cat that’s been pulled out of a pond, clinging to any surface he can get his hands on. Jack swears he hears his shirt tear.

“Okay, I’m gonna have to let go of you so I can pull us both back up, but just hang on tight and don’t panic, okay?” Jack says. “Let go of my shirt and wrap your arms around my waist, and grab onto my belt.” The man nods, and follows his instructions.

There’s a tug on the rope, and Jack looks up to see Steve. “Need a little help?”

“I've been doing just fine without it so far,” Jack snarks back. “What took you guys so long to show up?”

Danny shrugs. “The aftershock dropped a lot of debris right in our path. We had to find a way around, because apparently even Mr. Super SEAL can’t lift a thousand pound steel girder out of the way.”

Jack stops the hand over hand climb, suddenly cold despite the sun beating down on him. That was an aftershock. Mac was in the basement. In the adrenaline rush of the fight, he’d disregarded the aftershock’s effects, he thought it was a concussion, but… I gotta get to him. Now. Jack doesn’t care that the mercs are on the move, possibly escaping with some kind of advanced tech. Steve and his team can take care of that. It’s their island, their job. My job is to keep that kid alive.

“Okay, fine, pull me up!” Steve hoists them to the window level and Jack pulls himself and the scientist inside, collapsing to the floor for a second and then scrambling to his feet.

Danny’s shaking his head. “I thought it was just Steve who threw himself out random windows.”

Jack just shakes his head. “Have you heard from the rest of the team?”

“Chin and Kono came back to surface a couple minutes ago. Mac made it through a tunnel in the debris to the lab where most of the scientists are, but the aftershocks closed off the route he was using. He told them to go back and he’d find another way to get them out.”

Jack sways, and for a second he’s terrified it’s another aftershock, but it’s just the concussion combined with the news about Mac. He’s trapped down there, in a place at least ten scientists with Phds haven’t been able to escape. Mac is smart, but Jack’s afraid of the time the kid’s going to overestimate himself and get in over his head. And I’m not even there to try and keep him calm. Jack just told Steve and Danny his job is to keep Mac from thinking himself into a helpless cycle. And now Mac’s trapped, without Jack, and probably pretty damn scared. If he short circuits and can’t
figure out a way to get them out, that's on me.

He’s dimly aware that Steve is helping the scientist to his feet and leading him over to the safe. "Can you tell us what's missing?"

"All my work is still here. But I can’t speak for the other departments."

"So either they left empty handed or they knew exactly what they wanted. Efficient shoppers." Jack can’t focus on any of it. Whatever was in there, whatever might be missing, it doesn’t matter if his kid doesn’t make it out. **Whether what they have could end the world or not, it won’t matter, because if they pull out that kid in a body bag, my world is gonna end right there.**

Mac glances around the lab. There’s a lot here to work with, really, but he has to be smart about this. And he’ll admit, he **is** intimidated. What is he, a college drop-out, going to think of that all these people with doctorates haven’t? He wishes Jack was here, because Jack would remind him that sometimes common sense is a whole lot better than book smarts. Jack never looks at him and sees a failure.

Mac shakes himself out of his thoughts and keeps looking for a solution. "Plenty of chemicals, but we can’t risk blasting our way out. What about your air ducts?"

"Twelve inches wide. We tried already."

Mac walks back through the room, thinking about the blueprints he saw at the FEMA base and trying to mentally overlay them with the rooms. There was another room beyond this one that led to the...

"Elevator?"

"Elevator shaft. With the power out, it’s useless." Mac shrugs.

"Nothing’s useless," he says quietly, remembering what Mr. Weathers said when they were breaking down junk cars. There were boxes and boxes of random parts in that shop that always seemed to come in handy when least expected.

He wedges a pair of scissors from a table into the gap in the door and then pries it open once there’s space to get his hands in. He glances up into the blackness, then down. When his flashlight hits the roof of the car, he smiles. **Ok. This will work.**

He turns around to the others. "Good news. The car is below us."

"How is that good news?" One of them asks. **The thing about people who have the chance to work with equipment that’s actually designed to do the thing they’re doing with it means they’re not used to improvising. The elevator doesn’t go up and down the way it’s meant to, therefore it’s totally useless to them.** But he doesn’t need it to work the way it’s supposed to. He just needs the parts.

"If it was above us, then my plan wouldn't work." Now that he knows what he’s looking for, searching the lab for what he needs is easy, and in five minutes he’s finished the makeshift gear they’ll need to make this work. He holds it out to show them as he makes his way back to the elevator.

"This is an ascender rig. Attach these wires to the elevator cables and someone can go up the shaft to get us some gear lowered down to get the others out." He’ll do it if he has to, but four stories is a long way, when he’s bruised and aching already, and he really, really hates the idea of falling that
"Like rock climbing," someone says.

"Except grasier, darker, and our lives depend on it." Mac secures his wire rig to the elevator cable.

One of the scientists raises her hand. "I've done some climbing at Kilauea Ike? When I get to the top I can tie us off." Mac waves her over and hands her the wires.

"When you get to the lobby, pry the doors open like I did." he mimes the way he pulled his hands apart. "Anyone else who’s confident in climbing can follow her. If you’re not, wait for the rescue crew to lower gear.

Whoever the climber is, she’s fast. It’s barely ten minutes later that Mac hears the shout that means she reached surface, and that the FEMA rescue crew are on their way. A half hour more, and everyone’s out. Even securely buckled into the harness as he’s being lifted out, Mac feels dizzy at the drop below his feet. But when the second aftershock hits and dust and debris fly from the room below him to fill the shaft, making him cough, he’s glad he’s not still there.

The second he gets out the door, Jack’s there, hovering worriedly, glancing Mac over like he has x-ray vision and can see any potential broken bones.

“Hey, Jack.” Mac pats some of the dust off his shirt, although that’s basically no use at this point. It, and his pants, are a total loss, covered in grease and concrete dust and torn up in several places. When I see Riley I’ll tell her I was trying to match her grunge punk style. Mac figures she’ll think that’s funny.

“Good to see you didn’t get crushed.” Jack’s slight humor is belying the serious panic and concern in his eyes.

“Not for lack of trying.” Mac rubs at his bruised legs ruefully.

Jack turns to the assembled group of scientists, who actually look a lot more battered in the sunlight. "Okay, I know you're all anxious to get outta here, but can we borrow the highest ranking scientist for a minute?"

The woman with the fancier lab coat raises her hand. “Barbara Spencer. Site manager.”

“Okay, Barbara. I took a video of the entire inside of the safe. Can you tell me if anything looks out of place?” Steve holds out his phone.

The woman takes it from him and watches the screen with a frown of concentration. Then she gasps and taps pause, pointing to a blank section of shelving. “Project 23 is gone.”

The second Dr. Spencer tells them what this “Project 23” is, Jack calls Matty. “You might as well stop calling around now. We know what those mercs have, and it’s not good.”

Mac steps in, he’s been interpreting Spence’s tech-speak into something everyone there can actually comprehend. “It’s a smart bullet. Next generation weapons. The people who designed it said the bullets are laser guided, can change course mid flight, and they have over 99 percent accuracy.”

“I read a DOD briefing on these.” Matty’s voice is the scary kind of calm. “They’re supposed to turn a first time shooter into an expert marksman.”
Jack knows that this is bad, that these things in the wrong hands are a recipe for disaster, but honestly they wouldn’t have this problem in the first place if people just got good at things the old-fashioned way. Jack’s way. He’s proud of his record and something like this, well, hearing they’re making it easy stings. “It’s cheatin’, man. Snipers train for years, get real good, and then bam, government decides to make something that lets any old dumbass hit the target. That ain’t fair.”

Mac’s clearly trying to redirect this back to the issue at hand. “If they had even just one, they could disassemble it and recreate the design, as many times as they wanted, and they have a box of twenty prototypes.”

“And the prototype of the rifle that fires them,” Dr. Spencer puts in. Great. This is getting better and better.

“You can’t let them leave the island,” Matty says firmly.

“They’ve got an awfully big head start,” Danny says. “And thanks to them flinging their hostage out a window as a distraction, we don’t even know which way they went.”

“No, but we do have a Riley.” Jack calls her, and the second she picks up he starts filling her in on the exact nature of the problem. And yes, maybe he does whine about replacing human skill with technology a little much, but he thinks he deserves to be given a pass on that. If you’d just train good snipers you wouldn’t need to make something anyone can steal and use. That’s Jack’s pet peeve about automated technology. If anyone can use it, anyone can abuse it. You can’t hack a well trained soldier, but you can hack a drone. Okay, Cage might disagree, but she’s a freaky Jedi mind reader so it doesn’t count.

“Ri, you got the bird’s eye view. What do your elf eyes see?”

“Not including you, I’ve got nine vehicles near Hilo. Five FEMA, three police...and an unmarked panel van. They’re heading for the beach, although they’re zigzagging a lot. Looks like their planned route probably got demolished in the quake and they’re having to adjust for damage. It’s slowing them down, but I don’t think it’s gonna be enough. You better hurry, you got vog rolling in.”

“Vog?” Jack asks.

“Like smog, but from the volcanoes. They’re going to use it as cover.” Steve explains. “Whoever they are, they’re smart. And they know how to use the island.” Mac says as he and Jack rush for their jeep. “This really, really isn’t good.”

“That’s the understatement of the year, kid,” Jack says, gunning the engine and following Riley’s directions. We’d better not be too late.

“There’s a shortcut up ahead.” Riley says. “It’s a service access road to a beachfront, it’s gonna be rough but it’ll cut a lot of time off your drive. And I’m rerouting a couple of the police cruisers in the cara as well. And it’s not in bad shape, there weren’t any buildings near it to collapse and block it.”

Jack spins the wheel and pulls onto the pothole-splattered trail. This is just like driving the work jeep in the pastures back in Texas, with those damn gopher holes. He’d bounced himself around in that thing so much it was a wonder he kept all his teeth. Pop used to say running fence to the back pasture was like driving through a minefield, and that he ought to know cause he’d done that in Nam. But they did get really good at avoiding holes. And everyone on the ranch tried to beat the last guy’s record for making the back pasture run. They never beat mine. Jack’s got this.

Mac’s really, really glad their jeep has doors on it, because if it didn’t he’s pretty sure he would have
been flung out, seat and all, a long time ago. Jack’s driving like a wild man, avoiding some potholes with terrifyingly sudden swerves, and hitting others so fast there’s only a small thud to tell that there was anything in the way. He doesn’t want to have survived an aftershock and being trapped under rubble only to die in a car accident.

Mac takes a deep, steadying breath when they finally screech to a halt, next to a black vehicle that’s already been abandoned. “There they are.” There’s a few black shapes hurrying across the sand.

Jack jumps out, just as the Five-O team’s car slides to a stop next to them. Danny looks slightly wild-eyed, and Steve’s still yelling that Danny should have let him drive. “Okay, we’ve got this. Stay here.”

“No! I’m coming with you!” Mac insists, shoving Jack’s hand away.

“For once in your life, kid, listen to me.”

“There’s no time to argue, they’re getting away!” Mac won’t admit that the problem here is that he doesn’t want Jack to leave him again. All he wanted, trapped behind that wall of concrete, was Jack, but Jack had listened to him and gone off with Steve to stop the mercs. He’s not going to ask Jack to leave him again, and he doesn’t want Jack to do it either.

The second they come around the corner of the small surf supply shed that’s hiding the mercs from view, Mac thinks he might not even live long enough to regret his decision to tag along. Because one of the mercs is crouched in the sand, he’s got one of the experimental rifles help up to his shoulder, and Mac’s pretty sure from the trajectory of the barrel, that it’s aimed at him.

“Cover!” Jack yells. They all start to dive in behind the stacks of swimming and surfing gear. Mac moves, but he hears the shot fire, it’s not going to be fast enough...and then someone tackles him and he’s falling out of the way. Whoever grabbed him grunts, clearly struck by the bullet meant for him, and Mac cringes.

They shouldn’t have done that. Not to save me.

Mac’s battered ribs scream in protest as he crashes sideways falling onto the wooden deck. But he immediately turns to his rescuer. It’s Kono, and she’s lying still. Too still. And then she coughs and pulls herself in beside the others, a hand pressed to her side. “It hit my vest. Hurts, but I’ll live.”

Mac glances out. These guys know now that they’re under attack, and it looks like they’re preparing to fight back. They have nineteen bullets left and they only need one.

“Okay, is it just me or is everyone else getting really, really tired of being shot at?” Danny asks.

Jack sneaks a peek around the corner. “They’re not playing. They know they hit one of us, but they probably don’t know if she’s dead or alive. But they’re not going to mess around again. Next time they’ll probably go for a headshot.”

Mac has an idea, one he’s had since Dr. Spencer explained the bullet’s design. It’s not a very good idea, but it’s all he has. They have to end this before these guys decide that they might as well just leave rather than get involved in a standoff. They might even send someone else off with a prototype while the rest hold off pursuit. He has to keep their attention on himself and the rest of the team.

“Steve, can I borrow your tactical sight?”

“Jack, I thought you said the kid didn’t like guns?” Steve asks.

"I don't like guns. But I love lasers.” Mac holds out his hand.
“Just do it and be glad he ain’t askin’ for your phone,” Jack says. Mac takes the sight and starts pulling it apart.

"Lasers are stronger than we want them to be. So the manufacturers build in potentiometers to regulate them. If I can burn that out..." He pulls out the magnifying glass on his knife and catches the sunlight, watching smoke sizzle upward.

Jack seems to catch onto his plan. "We have a stronger laser and we make that smart bullet follow OUR directions. Outsmarting robo bullets. I like this."

Mac hands Jack the laser sight. “Jack, you’re going to have to use this to recalibrate the bullet. You have to put it in the exact same spot as the targeting laser, and then move it as soon as they fire.”

“Hey!” Steve says. “I’m clearly the one who should be doing that. I was top of my class at Coronado as a sniper.”

“Yeah, well I broke the Delta records for long-distance sniper and I was best in my class at the Farm.”

Danny throws his hands in the air. “And here we go again, and this is wonderful, I’m gonna die because these two Army hotshots are starting an anything-you-can-do-I-can-do-better fight.” Steve glares at Danny and looks ready to fight him.

“Guys!” Mac shouts. “Can we argue about who’s a better shot when we all live through this? Steve, you’ll still get your chance to be a hero. Jack and I are going to be the distraction. And I need you to shoot out the motor of their boat, while they’re shooting at me.”

“Wait, shooting at who?” Jack asks.

“We have to keep their attention over here while Steve takes out the boat. But for this to work, I have to make them shoot at us. Well, me.”

"That’s crazy, Mac. You don’t even have a vest..."

“Wouldn’t help. You said it yourself, they’ll probably go for a headshot this time.” Mac is absolutely terrified, if he’s being honest. There’s a better than fifty percent chance this won’t work. Jack might not be fast enough, he might not have estimated distance and time until impact properly, the bullet might not course correct in time. There’s a good chance he’s going to be seriously injured or killed. But if he thinks about it any more, he’ll be too scared to do this.

Jack’s staring at him with wide eyes, clearly just as scared as Mac is. “Jack, whatever happens...it’s not your fault, okay?” His thoughts are flashing back to the back of a fake news van, a bomb he’s not sure he can disarm. “I trust you.”

“Mac, don’t do this. Please.” Jack’s already watched his kid almost die today. Or more accurately not watched him. I’m supposed to be looking after him and I let him go and almost get crushed under that building. And now I’m gonna sit here and take his life in my hands, literally. He’s not sure which of these is worse, to be separated from Mac and helpless, wondering if he lived or died, or to be watching it all, still helpless, as a bullet smashes into his kid’s heart. Either one. Either one is unacceptable.

“Jack, I have to.” And then he’s running out there. Jack can’t afford to panic. If he panics, Mac dies. He takes a deep breath, checking for where the laser’s sighting his kid’s body. He’s always been good at knowing angles, and they’re not going for a headshot, they’re still aimed at his chest. He
doesn't have a vest, so they're not risking failure, and it's a larger target.

He aims the laser directly on the gun’s target, and the second the gun goes off he’s moving it. *God please let this work. Don't let me be the reason he dies.* And then there’s a crack of the bullet smashing into the palm tree Jack redirected the sight to, and at the same time the gas tank of the getaway boat explodes in flames. Jack drops the sight and rushes to join Steve, Danny, Kono, and Chin in the fight that’s ensured on shore. He’s vaguely aware that Mac is running, too. *Get out of here, kid, you've almost died enough times already.*

Jack has plenty of pent up anger to charge into this fight with. *These guys are the reason I wasn’t with Mac in the aftershocks. And they’re sure as hell responsible for almost shooting him twice.* He lands a solid punch and feels the merc’s weight shift, and a good kick to the knee takes him down fast. He can see Steve out of the corner of his eye, going berserk on two guys at once, Chin and Kono are taking down another merc, and Danny is hanging onto one’s neck, hanging from his back and kicking him in the legs. *Mac? Where’s Mac?*

And then he sees the kid, making his way through the chaos to grab the box of prototype bullets. One of the mercs sees him and starts running toward him. Mac unlatches the box and flings it as hard as he can into the ocean. *Water’ll ruin the smart components. Good thinking, kid.*

The merc chasing Mac yells something unintelligible, and then he tackles Mac into the surf, rolling the kid over and trying to hold his head under the water. Mac’s fighting like a wildcat, but his hits aren’t doing much good on the guy’s body armor. Jack doesn’t even hesitate. He pulls his gun and shoots the merc square in the helmet. The man goes down from the impact, splashing into the water. *Not dead, but he’s gonna have one hell of a headache.* Jack splashes into the waves and pulls Mac to his feet. The kid’s gasping and spitting out seawater, but he’s okay.

“Guess you're lucky a real marksman will always be better than a magic bullet, huh?” Jack says, smiling. On shore, Steve and the others have forced a surrender, and they’re cuffing the captured mercs.

Mac and Jack splash toward shore, both of them dragging an arm of the unconscious guy Jack shot. They drop him on the beach and wander up to where the Five-O team are leaning on Danny’s car, watching the police cruisers arrive to take the mercs into custody.

Kono hangs up her radio. “It’s official. All teams reported in. Hilo's been cleared. Lots of injuries but zero fatalities.” She sighs. “We’re getting asked to assist with a situation in Pepeekeo. Sorry to run out on you guys like this, but it looks like the police station lost most of their security system and they have a couple prisoners unaccounted for.”

“Oh, Jack, I have just one question,” Steve says. “What’s the address of that think tank, because I want to know where to send the bill for my laser sight.”

Mac gives him a sympathetic grimace. “I could fix that. With some resistors and chewing gum…”

“I think I’ll pass.”

“What do you need a sight for anyway?” Danny asks. “I thought you were the best shot in the Navy. Can’t you just use your superhuman sniper skills or something?” Jack chuckles, listening to the argument continue as the car disappears. *If they don’t end up killing each other someday, I think I’ll actually be surprised.*

“Sorry your birthday was kind of crappy,” Jack says, bodily hauling Mac over to one of the beach chairs so he can get the kid to rest for five minutes. He wants to check the kid over for injuries, but
he has the feeling Mac would put up a struggle, and he doesn’t need any more reasons to trigger fight-or-flight today. Also, Dr. Spencer said they had to pull Mac out from under a chunk of concrete that had fallen on his back and legs, so trying to see the extent of that damage would be more than a little embarrassing.

“I mean, it’s not bad, as birthdays go. I think most people would be happy just to say they spent their birthday in Hawaii.” Mac grins and leans back, smiling and closing his eyes.

“Yeah, well, that would be because they went swimming, or hiked, or spent the day lounging on the beach. Not crawling through earthquake rubble and getting shot at by terrorists.” Jack sighs. He deserves better than this life.

“I mean, I did kind of get to go swimming.” Mac wrings water out of the sodden hem of his shirt.

“Nearly being drowned by Chinese mercenaries does not count, kiddo.” Jack ruffles Mac’s wet, sand-filled hair, and Mac grins, pushing his hand away. “But seriously. If we’re not gonna have a party for your birthday, can we have a party to celebrate that we all survived this not-mission? Because Riley and Bozer texted and said they’re being handed literal armloads of shrimp to bring back with them, and it would be a shame to let that all go to waste.”

“Okay, fine. We can have a party. But nothing over the top, okay?”

“Can I get you a birthday cake?” Mac sighs. “I promise, it’ll be classy and understated and really nice.”

“Okay, fine. One cake. But no balloons, and no party hats, or anything else like that.”

“No firecrackers?” Jack asks, and when Mac’s face lights up just a tiny bit, Jack shakes his head. “Yeah, those are definitely not a good idea. No, no, I’m not getting you anything that can explode.”

Mac laughs and leans back a little further in the chair, and Jack shakes his head. You’re one weird kid. But I wouldn’t trade you for anything.

MAC’S HOUSE

RILEY’S PRETTY SURE THEY LET BOZER DECORATE

Riley’s perched on the deck railing and making headway on her second root beer float. It’s not that she’s not enjoying the party, because this is great. It’s fun, not too crazy, and it feels very Mac. It’s pretty small, the only ones that Riley doesn’t immediately associate with their little family are Jill Morgan and Penny Parker. Mac specifically asked both of them to come, and it looks like they’re having fun. Jill is discussing Mac’s radar gun contraption animatedly with him, and Penny’s talking to Matty.

The only one missing is Jack, he went after cake. Riley got scared, after a while, that maybe he got in an accident or something, but she pinged his phone and his car is moving, it’s just on the far side of town. I thought the bakery he liked getting stuff from was a lot closer. Maybe they were closed or couldn’t do a rush order. In any case, he’s not dead and he is on his way back now. She feels silly for worrying, but it’s Jack.

Mac’s sitting next to her, working on his own root beer (without ice cream because apparently he thinks that’s disgusting, although he does have a bowl of rocky road next to him on the wide railing). Inviting Penny meant making sure there wasn’t any alcohol around; she’s sort of obligated to report something like that. But no one cares, they don’t need alcohol when they have good friends...and
more than a little sugar. Bozer’s already hopping around with more than his usual energy, which is saying something.

“Happy birthday!” Bozer shouts, sliding onto the railing beside Mac and shoving a box into his hands. Mac shakes it experimentally and it rattles.

“What is this?”

“Bunch of metal doodads I found at a yard sale. Figure you could turn ‘em into a clock or something.” Riley grins. Her phone buzzes and she pulls it out, a text from Kalei asking her if her flight back was good.

“Is that Jack explaining that he’s late because terrorists took over the bakery?” Bozer asks.

“Actually it’s Kalei.”

Bozer looks a little wide-eyed and hurt. “He has your phone number?”

“We scratch built an ad hoc network. We had to test it by making calls.” She shrugs. “He’s just a friend. For now.”

“Don’t let Jack hear you say that. He’ll probably threaten to rip the poor man’s arms out of their sockets,” Cage chuckles, joining them. “Next time you get called out to Hawaii, I’m hopping the flight with you. I haven’t had shrimp this amazing since I was in Australia. And this is only reheated, so I bet fresh is absolutely out of this world.” Riley smiles.

Sam’s been tense lately, ever since Oversight turned out to be a traitor and Matty came in. She’s been gone more often too, and Riley’s not sure why. Cage has her file tagged as not-for-field. She shouldn’t be leaving the country, and yet she is. Riley knows better than to pry; she’ll get nothing for the trouble. But she’s worried. *What game is Matty playing, and why does Sam seem to be her most important piece?*

“You need to stop bringing home food from missions. You’re going to spoil everyone,” Matty says, but Riley sees that she’s piling her plate with at least three different kinds of shrimp. “Jack’s not here yet?”

“He’s on his way,” Riley says.

“I think we should sing Happy Birthday before he gets here,” Riley suggests. “I know it’s a little unorthodox to do it without the cake, but we’ve all heard Jack’s singing voice.” She starts, as does everyone else, but it’s pretty clear that not only are half of them off key, they’re also not all singing the same song. As if by agreement they all stop at once, listening to Cage, who’s singing over all of them, and definitely not the normal arrangement.

“Why was he born so beautiful? Why was he born at all? Because he had no say in it, no say in it at all.” Cage stops when she realizes everyone’s staring. “What?”

“What the heck was that?” Bozer asks, his face a mask of horrified shock.

“You’ve seriously never heard that?”

Riley has, Cage sang it at *her* birthday party back in June. She sort of forgot about it, though. “Apparently it’s an Australian version. A little weird, like everything else from down under.” She punches Cage’s shoulder.
“Well, when I worked at a summer camp we had this song that went something like “Happy birthday, oh happy birthday, now you’ve grown another year, surely death is drawing near, happy birthday,” Penny says.

“Okay, you and Cage are freaks, you go sit in the weirdos’ corner away from the normal people,” Bozer says, steering her off to the side of the deck with her glass of root beer.

Mac looks like he’s somewhere between wanting to slink away and die of embarrassment, and wanting to laugh at Sam and Penny. Riley just grins and launches into the actual song again.

They still don’t make it through, but this time the interruption isn’t a disturbing rendition of an unknown song. Matty’s phone rings, and she steps aside to take it. Judging from her face, it’s work. Riley sighs. *Just when we were having a good time. Probably some terrorist cell got hold of a dirty bomb or something.*

Riley’s going to get another plate of shrimp before they have to go. She’s wiping her fingers on her jeans, since her napkin disappeared a long time ago, sacrificed to the cause of Mac explaining radio wave physics, when Matty hangs up.

She doesn’t look like she does when she has to announce a new mission. She looks oddly on the verge of tears, and Riley wonders what just happened.

“Hey Blondie?” Matty says, and Mac looks up, narrowly avoiding choking on his root beer. “I’ve got something for you too.”

“Matty, that really wasn’t…” She cuts him off, but not angrily, it’s almost too soft a voice for the Matty Riley knows.

“That was Agent Robinson from the FBI. He’s assembled conclusive proof that your bomb didn’t kill George Ramsay. It took some time to get the LAPD to cough up the official coroner’s report, but after some…well…strings were pulled…he was able to examine it and found proof that Ramsay was killed *after* the time of the explosion. His body couldn’t have been in the location described if he had been caught in the blast. You’ll still need to appear in court for the final hearing, and you’re not totally cleared of all charges, but murder and domestic terrorism will be dropped. You’re still accused of arson and destruction of property, but as you’ve already served two years’ sentence and are working off the remainder with the Phoenix, it shouldn’t affect your current circumstances at all.”

Mac doesn’t say a word, but Riley can see tears rolling down his cheeks. *He’s finally going to be free of all this.* She reaches over to hug him, as does Bozer. Mac clings to them for a moment, but then lets go and kneels down to face Matty. “Thank you,” he whispers. “For everything.” Riley knows he knows Matty was behind those strings being pulled.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about, Blondie. I had nothing to do with it.” But when Mac gently pulls her into a hug, she doesn’t resist, and she holds on tight for what seems like it might be forever.

Mac doesn’t even know what to think. His world is shaking more than the aftershocks ever caused. *They’re going to prove I didn’t kill that man. They’re finally going to clear my name.* It doesn’t even feel real. Not after almost three years. *To be able to look people in the eye again, to think that they won’t hate me the second they hear my name*… It seems unreal. Like he’s going to wake up and nothing will have changed. He used to dream about it all the time in CCI. Of having someone show up to his cell telling him they’d found proof he wasn’t a killer. That he could go free.

What Phoenix did for him was a close second to that. They got him out, and they’d said they’d work
on proof. But when weeks turned into months, he really had begun to wonder if it was a game. And when Oversight turned out to be a traitor, and Patty had to leave, he’d been afraid any work on proving his innocence was gone forever. He thought Matty hated him at first, and even if she has started to care, this...he doesn’t think he can ever repay her for what this means. *I don’t think anyone else will understand what it feels like right now. To know that finally, finally, I won’t be Angus MacGyver, terrorist and murderer. I’ll just be...me.*

It doesn’t fix *everything*. It doesn’t fix the two years he spent paying for a mistake he didn’t make, and it doesn’t change the fact that some people will probably always think he was guilty. But it still means the world.

He sits in silence on a bench by the fire for a long time, the chatter around him buzzing in his ears as the others congratulate him. Penny says she’s going to miss him, and oddly that’s what finally makes the tears spill over. He wipes them away before anyone else gets to see, but Penny sits there with him a long time, saying nothing, just keeping her hand on his knee and smiling.

Eventually, his awareness begins to tune back in, like a radio coming back to frequency, and he can hear individual things people are saying. Matty, as usual, is complaining about Jack. “Jack planned this party, and he’s late for it. How predictable.”

And then there’s a knock on the door and Mac jumps. Bozer runs to answer it, and yells “Hi Jack!” so loudly that Mac’s pretty sure Jack will be temporarily deaf. “You already missed the singing, sorry!”

Jack is lugging a box that looks rather heavy. “Please tell me that’s not the cake,” Mac groans, because Jack was *supposed* to be picking up the one he’d ordered. He insisted, even though Bozer had said he was willing to make one. *Jack was bound and determined to control one aspect of the celebration.* He’s pretty sure there’s going to be some cheesy pun or a *Die Hard* reference on it...

Jack sets the box on the floor and opens it. He pulls out a fluffy, slightly squirming ball of black and brown fur, and hands it to Mac.

“What…”

“I saw how you and Bozer both felt about leaving that pup Boze found. This little guy’s all yours.”

Mac can’t really think of anything coherent to say. He knows he ought to say thank you, but the first thing he can get out is “Why?”

“A friend of mine trains trauma support dogs. This one made it through all the initial training, but he didn’t quite qualify to be trained as a certified service dog, and he needed someone to take him home. They said something about slightly destructive tendencies and a lot of energy.” He smiles. “I think he’s going to be a perfect fit for you.”

Mac buries his face in the dog’s fluffy fur, grinning when it turns to nuzzle and lick his face. *You and I both didn’t quite get to be everything people thought we ought to be. All the potential they saw; most people are going to think it’s been wasted and that we never lived up to it. But that’s okay. We can be just as good, just differently.*

“I had a dog for years that came from them. Got him after a bad tour with the Deltas. A buddy of mine, Worthy, brought him home to me. Said if I wouldn’t talk to him, or to a therapist, maybe I’d talk to someone who wouldn’t ever talk back. McClane was the only reason I got off the couch for a good two months. He wouldn’t let me bum around the apartment, had too much energy and he woulda destroyed the place if I didn’t get out and walk him. After a while, I started enjoying doing
stuff with him. Started running with him, teaching him to do tricks like the dogs I had when I was a kid on the ranch.” He sighs. “Had him a good fifteen years. Ri, you remember him.” She nods. Mac thinks he’s seen a picture of a German Shepherd in Jack’s apartment, now that he thinks about it. “I called the woman who trained him on the flight back from Hawaii to see if she had any dogs. I was gonna get one of the fully trained ones, but then she said she had one puppy she just couldn’t get placed. And all I could think was that he had to be meant for you.”

“You named your service dog after Bruce Willis’s character in Die Hard?”

“All that, and that’s what you choose to focus on?” Jack shrugs. “Well, are you gonna name this guy? I think they were calling him somethin’ but I’ve already forgotten what it was.”

Mac looks at the puppy. He’s an adorable ball of fluff now, but in a couple years he looks like he’ll be a pretty distinguished looking animal, probably leaning a lot more toward his German Shepherd side than whatever the rest of the cross-breeding is. So no cute silly baby names that he’ll grow out of in a few months. Mac knows what it’s like to be saddled with a ridiculous name that doesn’t suit, and he can’t bring himself to do it to anyone else, not even a dog.

He also doesn’t think naming the dog something that sounds like a tough guy is the right fit either. Sure, he’ll be a big, strong dog, but he’s not a police dog, or a military one. He’s a service dog, and meant to be a calming presence, not a frightening one.

The puppy yawns, and his pink tongue curls perfectly, and then he glances up at Mac with huge, innocent brown eyes. *He’s a masterpiece. And that’s it. He knows the perfect name. “I think I’ll call him Michelangelo.”*

“All that, and that’s what you choose to focus on?” Jack shrugs. “Well, are you gonna name this guy? I think they were calling him somethin’ but I’ve already forgotten what it was.”

Mac looks at the puppy. He’s an adorable ball of fluff now, but in a couple years he looks like he’ll be a pretty distinguished looking animal, probably leaning a lot more toward his German Shepherd side than whatever the rest of the cross-breeding is. So no cute silly baby names that he’ll grow out of in a few months. Mac knows what it’s like to be saddled with a ridiculous name that doesn’t suit, and he can’t bring himself to do it to anyone else, not even a dog.

He also doesn’t think naming the dog something that sounds like a tough guy is the right fit either. Sure, he’ll be a big, strong dog, but he’s not a police dog, or a military one. He’s a service dog, and meant to be a calming presence, not a frightening one.

The puppy yawns, and his pink tongue curls perfectly, and then he glances up at Mac with huge, innocent brown eyes. *He’s a masterpiece. And that’s it. He knows the perfect name. “I think I’ll call him Michelangelo.”*

“Okay, so you pick on me for naming mine after a truly iconic action hero, but you name yours after a Ninja turtle?”

“I’m naming him after the painter.”

“You could always call him Mickey for short,” Jack suggests. “And i’m not just sayin’ that because that’s what *my* dog’s nickname was.” He smiles, and his eyes are shiny. “I think the little guy really likes you, Mac.”

The puppy twists around and begins to lick Mac’s cheek and nose excitedly, probably looking for the salty tears starting to run down his face. That only makes him cry harder.

*He trusts me. And he loves me already, no matter what.* Something so vulnerable, so innocent, trusts him to take care of it. And someone else decided he could be trusted with this precious little living thing.

He hasn’t had a pet since Archimedes died. He didn’t have time to take care of one, with work and school and being a vigilante. But when the puppy swipes its tongue across his face again, he realizes how much he missed this. Someone he can talk to who will never judge him, someone he can tell anything to who won’t ever use it against him.

It takes about two minutes for the puppy to decide a dropped cup on the floor is far more interesting than Mac. He lets go and watches the little fellow bolt across the deck, knocking the plastic cup with his paws and becoming comically confused when he actually catches it and manages to get it stuck on his nose.

Jack returns to the car and comes back with a canister of tennis balls. He hands them to Mac, and Mac spends the rest of the evening dividing his time between chatting with friends while playing
fetch with Mickey, and trying to keep the little guy away from the table of shrimp. Despite Jack’s warnings not to spoil a working dog, it seems like no one can resist handing over a piece of shrimp when Mickey wanders over and gives them literal puppy eyes.

Finally, probably slightly too full, and clearly getting tired, Mickey loses interest in both the tennis ball and the shrimp and wanders over to Mac, pushing his nose into Mac’s hand. Mac picks him up and sits down on one of the wooden chairs.

The puppy yawns, and Mac pulls it a little closer to his chest, feeling the warm weight. The little fellow is getting heavy, but he isn’t struggling and Mac doesn’t want to put him down. He’s happy right here. I’m not going to make him feel like I don’t want him. He leans back against the chair and closes his eyes.

Jack doesn’t really mind cleaning up after the party. Sure, he grumbles about it when the others start handing him plates and trash bags, but really, this was his plan so he doesn’t mind the work associated with it...too much. Penny leaves fairly early, she has an eight o’clock meeting with a parolee tomorrow. Jill leaves around the same time; she’s not much of a night owl any time and she has a bunch of degraded blood samples to prep tomorrow to ship to some Boston MIT nerd working on DNA sequencing.

Riley and Cage bugged out, and Bozer’s doing dishes in the sink. Matty went home with two half-full tins of shrimp in her car. Jack knew she was going to enjoy herself tonight, seafood is her weakness. He picks up a few more napkins, and a cup that’s been liberally punctured by puppy teeth, and then glances at the culprit.

Mac and the puppy are both asleep, looking equally innocent and peaceful where they’re resting on the reclined chair. He walks over to get a better look, and to snap a few pictures. Riley will never forgive me if I fail to provide her with blackmail material of this. Mac stirs slightly, and the puppy whines and stretches, but neither of them open their eyes. Jack goes inside, grabs a blanket off the end of the kid’s bed, and unfolds it, spreading it gently over the boy and his dog.

The puppy yawns, then snuggles a little closer into Mac, who sighs softly and wraps his arms a little tighter around the puppy. Jack smiles. Aw kid. You deserve something that makes you so happy. You deserve the world. And maybe Jack can’t make everything perfect for his kid, but he’s going to do everything he can. You deserve a parent who cares. And I’m gonna try to be that. 
“You know what this reminds me of?” Jack asks, trying to ignore the truly disgusting smell inside the dumpster. *It beats getting our heads blown off, though.*

“You’re gonna say Star Wars, aren’t you?” Mac is currently digging through the bags of trash like an oversize raccoon. “You do realize that if we’re going with that reference, that makes you Princess Leia cause you picked this hiding spot?”

Jack guesses he asked for that one. “Well, somebody has to save our skins. And kid, you call me Princess again and you’ll be digging your way *out* of that pile of trash instead of into it.” Mac grins, teeth startling white against the grime on his face, and then the smile disappears as there’s a creaking groan and Jack begins to feel like the walls are closing in. Literally.

“Okay, I regret saying this reminds me of Star Wars,” Jack says. “Because now it really does and I don’t like it. Hey, you think we can get outta this the same way they did, Mac? Can we brace it with something?” There *better not be some eerie trash monster in here waiting to eat us. Or even a snake.* So far all he’s seen are a few lizards and a truly disgusting number of flies.

Mac turns around, frowning. There’s even more grime on his face than before, Jack guesses he wiped away sweat without thinking. *Matty’s gonna be mad when we get the exfil vehicle filthy.* They’ll probably need to clean up and change before getting in the jet. “Jack, they got out by calling the droids for help.”

“Right. Well, lucky for us, we’ve got backup too.” He taps his comms. “You gettin’ me up there, R2?”

“I asked you never to call me that again unless it means I get to curse at you in binary. Well, I got good news and bad news for you guys. Good news, the general’s men don’t seem to know where you are.”

“Then why are they trying to turn us into pancakes?” Jack asks.

“They’re not. The compactor’s automatic. It's on a timer.”

He turns back to Mac. “See, told you this was a good hiding spot.”

“It’s a terrible hiding spot.” Mac shakes his head. “In about...five minutes, that sled’s going to hit that wall, so either we climb back out and take our chances with the guards, or we die in here. And it won’t be pretty.” Mac’s got a handful of random items he dug out of the trash bags, but he doesn’t seem to be doing anything with them, and his hands are shaking slightly.

“If you guys come out of there, you’ll be shot on sight. There’s three trigger-happy looking guards right next to that dumpster.”
They’re running out of options and Jack refuses to die in a dumpster. Half because it’s not going to look good on the mission report, and half because this really is his fault and he’s not going to let Mac die an agonizing death because of him. “Riley, can you hack the controls?”

“Nope. Pretty much everything in this place predates wifi, Jack.”

Bozer speaks up. “There’s only three guards, we could take them out, get to the controls.”

“Stand down threepio, you're going to get yourself shot in the face.”

“Wait, I'm the droid who does nothing but complain?” Jack tunes him out and turns back to Mac, who looks like he’s at a loss, staring around the shrinking room like a door is going to magically appear. Jack moves toward him, maybe if he goads the kid enough it’ll kickstart something in his brain. His foot hits a pipe, and he picks it up. It’s long enough that it would give them enough space if it held the wall back. Mac already said that wasn’t an option, but if Jack brings it up again maybe Mac will start arguing with sciency words and figure something out.

Jack’s learned that the best way to pull the kid out of freezing up is to get him to start thinking in big words. When Mac goes into science mode, it’s like the problem he’s solving ceases to be a real-world one and is something he’s working on in a lab or out of a textbook. He stops seeing the life-threatening parts and starts seeing the possibilities. Jack just has to wind him up by proposing something scientifically inaccurate, get him started on a physics rant and let him go.

“I'm just gonna do what Han did, maybe we’ll get lucky.”

“Sorry Solo, it didn't work in the movie, it's not gonna work here. The compressive strength of that pipe is five hundred megapascals. That things not gonna be enough to stop this sled from hitting that wall, with us in between it.”

“Ok, I was wrong, you’re C-3PO. Stop telling me the odds and tell me how we’re gonna get outta here?” It worked. He can see the wheels turning in the kid’s head, Mac just got an idea.

“See those rivets? There should be a hydraulic line just on the other side of them. If we can puncture that, we can stop this thing.” Mac pulls out his knife. “I will need that pipe though.” Ja opens the knife and jams it into the pipe. “We’re going to have to put a lot of pressure on it to break through those rivets, so I’m gonna need your help.”

“Of course. Whatever you need.”

“Put some of those bags around your hands and try to shield your face. You don’t wanna get hydraulic fluid sprayed at you under high pressure.” Jack nods. Pops used to tell him that when they worked on the tractors. He digs out some bags and wraps them around his hands, trying to ignore the slimy something in one of them. Better that than getting hydraulic fluid under my skin.

“Riley, can you create a distraction?” Mac asks.

Jack hears some tapping, and then a sigh of relief. “Yeah, something should go boom on the far side of the complex.”

“Better be ready to do it fast.” Mac positions the knife on the rivet. “Because when this goes, we need those guards gone.” He forces the pipe forward, and Jack leans in as well. The compactor is creaking and the trash it’s catching is swishing; it’s hard for him to hear anything else Mac says. He thinks the kid says something about normal, he hopes that doesn’t mean getting caught in dumpsters used to be a normal occurrence for him.
And then a few things happen at once. There’s a pop, hydraulic fluid sprays out, and Jack lets go of the pipe with one hand to shield his face with the other. The pipe kicks back, probably from the pressure, and Jack feels his arm tense, and then something snap with a white-hot pain that absolutely blinds him. He stumbles backward, clutching at the injured limb but also afraid to touch it.

Mac throws down the pipe and rushes over to him, and Jack’s dimly aware that the sled has stopped moving. *Thank God for small miracles.*

“Jack! Are you okay? Is it broken?” Mac’s eyes are wide with panic, he reaches for Jack’s hand, trying to get a look at the damage.

“Kinda can’t think straight right now…” Jack groans, curling up and clutching his arm. “But yeah.”

“Guys, are you alright?” Riley’s voice is strained. “Because those guards are getting a little suspicious. I think they just heard the compactor shut down.”

“Okay, cue the distraction,” Jack says. “I’m good to move now.” The pain has dulled to an aching throb. “I’m ready to get outta this thing. And I thought they smelled bad on the outside.” Unfortunately, his joke doesn’t make Mac even crack a smile.

There’s a muffled explosion in the distance, and Jack hears a lot of yelling getting steadily fainter.

“Alright, they’re on the move.” Bozer’s voice over comms sounds distinctly worried.

“Way to go man, that was a topically relevant Obi-Wan quote.” Jack starts to scramble up the trash pile, it’s rough going with only one good hand.

“Does that mean I get to be Obi-Wan?”

“Not a chance.”

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**THE WAR ROOM**

**MATTY MIGHT HAVE TO HAVE THE FURNITURE STEAM CLEANED**

Matty takes a deep breath before turning around. It’s less that she needs to calm herself down (although she is a little frustrated at losing a key member of her best field team to injury) and more that the minute she does turn around her nose is going to be assaulted. She’s already seen both Riley and Bozer moving to the far side of the room. She’s kind of surprised Mac isn’t trying to get away from himself; the combination of ripe garbage and hydraulic fluid isn’t pleasant. But he looks like he’s too upset to care about the rank smell. Or he’s gone nose blind.

“You got out alive, and managed to recover the stolen data. But Jack is in the infirmary with an axial fracture to his left radius.” That upped the timetable of exfil, and also meant that when they landed in LA, Jack went straight to Medical, and Mac came straight to debrief with the rest of the team.

Mac speaks up before Matty has a chance to say anything more. “This is on me. I was...kind of starting to panic, and I was so focused on stopping that compactor I didn't notice Jack had his hand in the wrong spot on the pipe. And I was sort of...talking in physics terms that were over his head.” He sighs. “I’m sorry, I should have been able to focus better. It’s my fault.”

He’s sitting there with his head hanging like he’s a kid who broke a window with a baseball. He looks so young, and she remembers what it was like to be there, to feel like the weight of every failed mission, every injury, every death, was on her shoulders. To be unable to accept that sometimes, the
unexpected happens. She’d consider hugging him if he wasn’t absolutely covered in unidentifiable filth.

“Listen, Mac. It's no one's fault. I was listening on comms. Jack was the one who pulled you both into the jaws of death. He's lucky you were there to get him out alive.” She sighs. “I’ve worked with Jack a long time, he’s one of the best agents in the field. But even the best agents can make a bad call.”

“I should have explained it better. I told him to hold the pipe normal to the wall.”

“Yeah, about that, I'm confused,” Bozer says.

“Normal means perpendicular,” Riley whispers, and Mac nods.

“But I didn’t tell Jack that.”

He’s probably been beating himself up for that since they got out of that dumpster. For the brief minutes she saw Jack he’d been watching Mac worriedly. She guesses Mac was probably avoiding him out of guilt. “Mac, there’s no guarantee that would have been enough to keep him from getting hurt. There’s no guarantee he even heard what you said or would have been able to do that in the moment. He was more focused on getting you both out alive than on coming back uninjured, and you know he doesn’t blame you.”

Mac looks at the floor and mumbles something. Matty can’t be sure, but it sounds an awful lot like “If anyone should have been hurt it’s me”.

“Okay, Mac, I’m going to stop you right there. Because if it was you in that infirmary, Jack would be in here right now saying the same exact thing to me, except he’d be pacing and yelling and I’d be worried he was going to have a heart attack.” Matty walks over, trying not to gag on the smell (how the team handled this on the jet all the way back, and Jack with a broken bone and the nausea that comes with it, she has no idea) and waits until Mac looks up at her. “Missions go wrong sometimes. People get hurt. That’s not your fault. And you don’t get to control who gets hurt and who doesn’t. As much as I hate to acknowledge it, your turn is going to come soon enough, if your past missions are any indication.” She literally met him in the Phoenix medical wing recovering from massive internal injuries. Honestly I was a little surprised when they told me the medical notice on this exfil was for Dalton and not MacGyver. She’s never seen someone so injury-prone., and she once thought she’d reserve that statement for Jack himself.

“Now get out of here and go take a shower. You’re giving me a headache, Blondie. Actually, at this point, if I didn’t know you I wouldn’t be able to tell what color your hair was.” Mac gives her a tiny half-smile, and then bolts. Matty shakes her head. I’m going to need to air out the room.

MAC’S HOUSE

IT LOOKS MORE LIKE A REPAIR SHOP

Mac’s tearing his bike apart in the living room again when his phone rings. He’s got some time off while Jack recovers, and even though it’s been less than a week since the failed mission, he’s getting restless. He’s already torn the toaster and the hand mixer apart, and before he left for the labs this morning, Bozer warned him off touching anything else in the kitchen.

“It’s not that I don’t appreciate you wanting to help, but Mac, I’d like to be consulted before I’m handed a three speed blender that now has five speeds, one of them one no human being should be using.”
He wonders if it’s Bozer calling to make sure Mac’s behaving himself, or Riley to ask if he wants to join her for a run, or Jack to tell him how much he hates mandatory rehab and that he wants Mac to come get him out of this place.

It’s none of them. It’s Valerie Lawson, and Mac suddenly feels guilty. He missed his weekly call with her because they were in Argentina, and then he forgot all about it when Jack got hurt.

“Hi Val. I’m so sorry I didn’t call earlier.”

“That’s okay. I just need to talk to you.” That doesn’t sound good. Mac puts down his wrench, slides his phone to his other hand, and crawls out from under the bike, pushing an overly enthusiastic Mickey out of the way. The dog seems fascinated by whatever Mac happens to be doing, and he’s been crawling all over under the bike with Mac, constantly getting in his way, licking his face, and knocking things over. On the bright side, he’s learning to fetch dropped wrenches.

Mac fends off slimy dog tongue and stands up. “What’s wrong?”

“I have an English test tomorrow and I failed the last one and if I fail this one I have to go to summer school.” She sounds really upset. “I didn’t want to show Dad when I failed the last one. It made him kind of sad.”

“Trust me, your dad doesn’t care if you make all A’s. He just loves you.” From what Mac knows of Mr. Lawson, he’s a good guy. And Mr. Ericson said he’s been coming in a lot to see Val’s projects, and if Mr. Ericson seems to like him that’s good. He never liked Dad. He avoided him whenever he could, and he was never friendly with him.

“I’m good at math. And science. Not writing stuff.” Valerie’s voice trembles a little. “I hate English.”

Mac has a sudden vivid memory of a particularly unfortunate class where his teacher called him up to the front and told him, sternly, that book reviews were not places to argue the scientific inaccuracies of classic literature. All I was saying was that H.G. Wells had a few fundamental flaws in his understanding of vivisection and mutation. “I hated it too, when I was your age. I even made fake smoke a few times to make us evacuate before I had to take tests.”

“Really? How?” Mac groans, biting his tongue. They were right, you ARE a bad influence, Angus MacGyver.

“Uh, take it from me, don’t try that. When the school found out who was responsible, they were really mad.” So was Dad. “Do you have someone to study for it with?”

“I guess I could ask Jesse for help. He’s always doing well in that class. I just...I don’t want to tell him I’m not good at it.” Mac can understand that. When your entire identity rests on how you perform in classes, admitting something is getting the better of you hurts. I don’t tell many people about that C in high school biology.

Mac’s phone begins to beep, he has another incoming call. He pulls the phone away from his ear and glances at it. Matty Webber. He has to take it. He can’t risk upsetting her. “Val, work is calling, I have to go. I’ll call you later if I can, but i might not be able to for a while. Okay?”

“Uh huh. I’ll talk to Jesse like you said.”

“Good luck with that test. You’re gonna be fine, it’s okay.” He hangs up and picks up Matty’s call on the last ring.

“ Took you long enough, Blondie.” Matty sounds a bit frustrated. “I’d like to see you in the War
“Okay.” Bozer has the car and Mac’s not legally allowed to drive anyway, so he has to call an Uber. Normally, this is never a problem, but Jack’s in rehab and he’s not really allowed to drive either. Cage or Riley are supposed to be chauffeuring him to his medical appointments, but Mac’s pretty sure he’s breaking the rules on that one, at least when he goes to the offsite doctors. He knows neither of those two will let it slip. But he’s not going to be the one who gets Jack outed for breaking the rules.

The drive to Phoenix takes longer than usual, he’s used to Jack putting the pedal to the metal when he can, and taking any shortcut he knows. Mac is fully ready to apologize to Matty for the delay, but she doesn’t seem as upset as he was expecting when he walks into the War Room.

There’s a picture of a smiling young woman, Mac guesses probably in her early thirties, on the screen. Beside the photo is a collection of newspaper clips and photos that look like an arson crime scene. Mac flinches. It looks like some of the evidence Charlie’s sent them from the Ramsay case. They have a court date now, and even though it’s almost a month away, Mac still feels relieved. This whole nightmare is almost over. But for someone else, it looks like the nightmare is just beginning.

“Rosalind Franklin ‘Frankie’ Mallory was an MIT postgraduate student working on a new gene sequencing technique to restore degraded blood samples.” Matty sighs. “She was close to a breakthrough. And then last night a fire broke out in her lab. She was killed.”

“Is this connected to one of our ops?” Mac doesn’t remember anything about this. He thinks Jill might have said something about prepping samples for shipping to Boston, at his birthday party, but he isn’t quite sure.

“We had sent several samples from Phoenix for testing. We’d like to get them back, and I doubt the police will be too interested in handing over evidence from a crime scene.” Matty pulls up eighteen case files, all marked “evidence inconclusive”. “If we lose those samples we lose our best chance of catching five terrorists, three murderers, and a ring of human traffickers.”

Mac nods, he still doesn’t see why he’s important to this. None of the case files look familiar, he and Jack and Riley weren’t involved in any of those ops.

“It’s a simple in and out operation. We just need to get some very sensitive evidence back where it belongs.” Matty looks at him. “I’m sending you to Boston to do this one.”

Mac doesn’t think he’s heard her right. I just got assigned to Jack for training. I’m definitely not ready for a solo op yet.

“You’re sending me?”

“Yes. Do you feel like this is something you can’t handle?” Matty asks, and Mac really, really, doesn’t want to tell her the truth. If she wants me to do this, how am I supposed to refuse? “It’s a very basic operation. Actually, it’s a perfect first solo operation. Minimal risk and nothing out of the country.”

It does make sense, but still, Mac is probably the most junior agent in the Phoenix aside from Bozer. “Why me, Matty?”

Her face softens, the sternness of mission briefing falling away to be replaced with an almost parental smile. “Bozer told me you’d wanted to go to MIT. Might as well get a chance to tour the campus. Once you get those charges dropped, you’ll be able to do anything you want. Including going back
to school. I have connections who could arrange for you to get some scholarships and make sure you’re able to afford it.”

The thought stops Mac cold. *Once my name is cleared I could leave the Phoenix.* He’s sure Matty will make sure he gets any job he wants, despite his past record. *I could go to college. I could get a degree.* The thought is overwhelming. He’s not used to making his own decisions...

But is this really going to be his choice, or is this Matty’s polite way of telling him this is where she’s sending him? *Does she want me to go?* He thought he was doing well here, and he’d also assumed he’d made himself...well, sort of hard to replace. Maybe he’s been fooling himself, thinking he’s worth more to them than he is. *If she’d be fine with letting me leave the Phoenix, clearly she’s not too desperate to hang onto me.*

As usual, MacGyver, you’re overthinking everything. He can’t read Matty’s mind. “I-I…”

“I know it’s a bit of a surprise. But in a few more weeks, the Phoenix won’t be your only option anymore. And you need to start thinking about the rest of your life with that in mind.”

He’s about to say something more when Matty changes tone abruptly. “You’re wheels up in twenty so grab anything you need and get going.” He leaves the office, nearly colliding with the edge of the door. He can’t think or walk straight, this is too much to process, all at once.

He wants to call Jack. But if he calls Jack, that means telling him Matty is sending him on a solo op. And Jack will freak out, he knows he will. *But this one’s going to be easy.* For a first solo mission, it’s not bad. *Get in, get the samples, get out...* The scariest part of this is the thought that in a few months he might be on that campus as a student. If that’s what he wants...if that’s what Matty wants...

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LOGAN AIRPORT, BOSTON

Mac steps out into the chilly Boston spring air. It feels like rain is coming, and he regrets not bringing a warmer coat than Dad’s old leather jacket. Not that he’s going to be able to wear that on campus anyway. He’s going undercover as a student, he has a hoodie and t-shirt in the bag Matty left for him in the jet.

He had to take the Phoenix jet even though it’s a relatively small op. No sense taking the risk that he’d be recognized if he was flying commercial (he has no idea if three years is a long enough time for his photo to have gone out of the circulation of potential terrorists that the airlines should be watching for), and fake IDs are harder to come by than one might think. Blowing a perfectly good cover on a small time op isn’t worth it.

The jet felt terribly empty with just him inside. He’s used to Riley and Jack playing card games and arguing about it, or Jack snoring away the flight and Riley tapping away on her laptop. Even Bozer’s presence has become more of a familiar one, it doesn’t feel so out of place to see him in the jet now. But having it empty seems wrong.

His phone buzzes in his pocket, and when he pulls it out, there’s an invitation to join a video call, from the War Room. He wonders what’s going on. When he opens the video, both Matty and Riley are there. “Hi Matty, Riley, what is it?”

“There’s been a further development in the Mallory case; it could mean some complications we weren’t aware of when I assigned this mission to you. I just want you to be aware of everything you’re walking into.” This definitely doesn’t sound good.
“A video was sent to Boston PD with an untraceable IP,” Riley says. “It suggests that Mallory’s death was no accident. I’m uploading the video file to you now, and I’m working on untangling the encryption protections to see if I can get a location on the sender.”

Mac clicks on the link that just popped up, and a video begins to play. The woman sitting on a lab bench is definitely the one from the War Room photo, but now she looks stressed and panicked, body tense, constantly glancing over her shoulder.

"Ok, maybe I'm just paranoid. I'm still upset about Dr. V. But I think I'm being followed. My lab was broken into, and I've installed new locks and a camera. So if you're watching this, and something bad happened to me, it wasn't an accident. Someone killed Dr. V and they're trying to kill me.’’

“That sounds an awful lot like she predicted her own murder.” Mac closes the video, feeling a pang of grief for the frightened woman on the other end. What if we would have known sooner? Could we have helped her?

“The problem is, that’s not what the reports show.” Riley sounds as confused as Mac feels. “According to arson reports the fire started in an unidentified electrical box located on the south wall. Which ignited lab chemicals that created the accelerant that caused the explosion. The victim's remains were found five feet from the south wall. Its assumed she was knocked over by the initial blast, and the chemicals turn caused a flashover that burned hot enough to consume the lab equipment and the victim's body.” Riley sounds clinical. “It sounds like a simple accident, which directly contradicts that video.”

“That's not what happened.” Mac flicks through the crime scene images. The chemical labels are badly scorched but some are still readable, and the report details the probable others based on what trace elements were found. “I’ve used those chemicals, in that combination. They couldn't cause a flashover like that report describes unless someone intended them to. Mixing them in the right proportion to burn like that...it has to be done on purpose. There’s no way they accidentally combined and ignited.”

Matty cuts in. “Mac, I didn’t send you there to open a murder investigation. I sent you to get those samples.” They’re fortunate the samples weren’t being kept in that lab, for security reasons Frankie was required to keep them at her workspace on the MIT campus, in a lockbox in the secure labs.

“I know.” Boston PD’s job is to determine if Frankie Mallory’s death was accident or murder. Mac’s job is to go get those samples back, before Boston PD ups the timetable on this. A murder investigation is going to push getting more information about what she was working on to the top of their priority list. But the police will need a warrant to get access to that lab. All Mac needs is a little time and a convenient cleaning crew...

PHOENIX PHYSICAL THERAPY

JACK’S SECOND LEAST FAVORITE PLACE IN THE BUILDING

Jack picks up his sling and slides his arm back in. Mandatory rehab is the bane of his existence. He knows it’s necessary, but Dr. Modi misses no opportunity to berate him for being one of her most frequent patients.

“I’m keeping you in business. Job security,” he says and he pushes open the door. She just flings her crocheted cap, today a neon orange and white, at him. Dr. Modi was diagnosed with breast cancer last year, and while she’s in remission now, she still keeps her hair shaved and wears the hats her
daughter made for her while she was in chemo.

Jack was more upset than he would ever admit to anyone when he found out she was sick. He actually went and visited her at the hospital, telling her she had to get better because who else was going to be able to actually make him show up to therapy? She still swears he scared the cancer right out of her.

It hasn’t slowed her down at all. She’s still the same energetic, pushy little woman from before, rushing around the PT clinic and yelling in her familiar Indian accent at Jack for not doing the exercises properly. As much as he hates being in rehab, he knows he’d hate it twice as much if Dr. Modi ever retired.

He picks up his phone from his locker and calls Mac, the kid’s probably still sequestered in his house. He’s been acting off since Argentina; he definitely thinks Jack’s broken arm is his fault. *I’m gonna take him out to lunch and make sure he actually talks to me about it instead of avoiding the topic like last time.* Jack’s been by the house a couple times, but Mac is an expert at avoidance strategies when it comes to talking about things that are bothering him. Jack’s found that if he gets Mac out of his comfort zone, the kid’s actually a little more likely to crack and admit the problem. So far, taking him to get food is the thing that’s worked best; like at that diner in Atlanta. And Jack also gets to make sure Mac actually did eat at least one square meal in the day, so it’s an added bonus.

Mac’s phone rings through to voicemail. *He probably set it down somewhere and is tinkering around with something and didn’t even hear me. Or maybe he left it and took Mickey for a run.* But Jack can’t shake the rising concern. There’s no reason to think anything is wrong...no reason except that unidentifiable twisting in his stomach that he’s come to associate with one of his kids being in danger.

He’s just going to run by the house. If Mac’s fine, he’ll be right there to pick him up to go get food. And if something’s wrong…

Cage drove him over, so Matty wouldn’t yell, but she’s interrogating someone today and she can just get a ride home with Riley. He’s okay with catching hell from Matty over this. He can’t wait around when Mac might be in trouble. He’s tempted to call Mrs. Schwartz to go over and check on him, but in their line of work the trouble Mac’s in could be *anything*, and as tough as that little old lady is, Jack doesn’t want to be the reason she walks into some kind of hostage situation or something else equally awful.

When he walks past the War Room, Matty and Riley are inside, it looks like they just hung up on a video call. Riley looks concerned enough that Jack stops. He’s just got the feeling this has something to do with Mac.

He tries to keep his tone light as he steps inside. “Hey, what am I missing?”

“Just mission updates,” Matty says. Jack can tell she’s hiding something, and when he looks at Riley and sees the strain on her face, he thinks he knows why.

“Where’s Mac?” His voice has slid into the deadly calm he hears it take on when he’s about to interrogate someone. The confidence that sooner or later he’s going to get the answer he needs, no matter what he has to do to do it.

Matty glares at him. “He’s in Boston, at MIT, recovering a set of samples our lab sent for DNA analysis. The post-grad we had working on the sequencing died in a lab accident yesterday; it’s a simple in and out operation before we have to fight Boston PD over jurisdiction issues. However, a new piece of evidence suggests that she may have been murdered, and I felt it was important to share
that with him before he continued.”

“And Mac is on the ground there?” Jack can’t believe this. If that scientist was murdered, possibly because of the work she was doing, Mac could be walking right into the middle of a very dangerous situation, and he has absolutely no backup. “Matty, you sent him on a solo op? And now it’s possible he’s involved in something people were prepared to kill for?”

“The evidence doesn’t in any way mean conclusively that Ms. Mallory was murdered, it’s simply a possibility. All Mac has to do is retrieve those sensitive samples before the local PD impound them and we lose all that evidence. He’ll be on a plane back by morning.” Jack sees Riley wisely hiding behind her computer screen and avoiding all involvement; back in the CIA she used to call these “Mom and Dad fights”.

“Matty, you can’t just do that. I’m still training him. Mac is good but he’s not even close to being at the level of training that’s safe for a solo mission. What were you thinking, sending him out alone?”

“You’re in no condition for a field op, Dalton. And you weren’t needed on this one.” Matty shakes her head. “He’s not a child, Jack. And he’s not your average green recruit. The process isn’t the same for him as for someone out of the Academy. Have you forgotten he worked alone for four years before we recruited him?”

Jack hasn’t forgotten. He can’t. Not when he sees the scars that cover Mac’s body every time he thinks of those four years. After what he saw and heard in that locker room, he has no idea how Mac is still alive. He should never have had to take those risks. And now that he has a team to back him up, that should never, ever be an option.

“Matty, I need to see whatever it is that you just sent him.”

“This isn’t your mission, Jack.” Matty’s voice is firm.

“Yes, it is. Because Mac is out there, and he might be in danger, and he’s always my mission.” Something in his voice must get through to Matty, because she looks at him and he can tell she’s caving. “Whether this is safe or not, he shouldn’t be there alone.”

Matty queues up the video, and before it’s even over Jack’s heading for the door.

“Riley, get me a ticket on the next flight to Boston. I don’t care if you have to beg, borrow, or steal it, I need to get there now.”

“I’m on it.” He looks back once at Matty, she looks slightly disappointed but not surprised, and she’s making no move to stop this. Mac’s probably going to be disappointed too. He’ll think I don’t trust him to do the job on his own. And as much as that’s going to hurt him, Jack would rather have an emotionally wounded but alive Mac than a dead Mac.

By the time he grabs his go-bag, Riley has a ticket for him; apparently the flight had a couple empty seats and it wasn’t hard to get what she needed. He doesn’t look back as he rushes out the door. That vague unsettled feeling in his stomach has grown, and he’s pretty sure that that video he saw was right. He’s also pretty sure that whoever murdered Frankie Mallory will be going after Mac next.

Bozer’s eating with Riley in the break room when her phone goes off. More than once. She picks it up, and immediately grins, starting to type back a response. He hasn’t seen her smile since she told him Mac got called out for a solo op.

“Who’s that?” he asks, although he has the feeling he already knows. Her Hawaiian hacker friend
has been blowing up her phone lately.

“Kalei,” she answers, and then laughs. Bozer suddenly isn’t hungry. He wraps up the remainder of his homemade club sandwich, usually one of his personal favorites, and pushes it away.

Riley doesn’t seem to notice. She’s completely focused on the conversation going on on her phone. Logically, Bozer knows it’s probably a welcome distraction from a very stressful day, since Kalei in no way reminds her of all the reasons today went wrong, but he’s still jealous. Why can’t I make her smile and laugh like that? He thought he had a pretty good humor game.

His phone buzzes, the reminder that his lunch break is over. He collects his things, and Riley stands up and leaves as well, still smiling at her phone. She walks down the hall, and Bozer stares after her. She didn’t even say goodbye.

He’s staring after Riley so fixatedly he doesn’t see Matty until he almost runs into her.

“Bozer, watch where you’re walking.” Matty’s voice is sharp, and he flinches.

“Sorry, I was just...distracted.”

“You still have a thing for her, don’t you.”

“Um, no, no thing...there’s like a rule against it or something, right?”

“Yes. But Bozer, there’s no it here. You don’t know her like I do. And what I know about Riley is that she takes a long time to trust people. Her coworkers, her boss, and her partners. You don’t know the whole story of what happened with her and Nick.”

“The jerkface who got her shot?”

“Actually, he got her shot twice.” Matty pulls him aside, back into the lunchroom. He wonders if he can say he was late coming back from lunch because the director wanted to talk to him. “Nick joined the agency before it was called the Phoenix. It was undergoing a massive overhaul two years ago, basically starting again from the ground up. That’s when Jack and Riley transferred, by my recommendation actually, and when Nick was hired from the NSA.” Matty sighs. “I knew the CIA had approached him for some reason, his file came across my desk at one point. If I’d started digging, I could have saved Riley a lot of pain. But I had...other things on my mind.” Her voice is strained, and Bozer doesn’t know why. There’s something deeply painful there. “Nick was a charmer. The perfect choice for a sleeper agent. He made himself an agency darling. And...he made himself into the person Riley wanted. He led her on, and then he lied to her, and almost got her killed.”

“If he wasn’t in witness protection I’d like to smash his face in.”

“So would I. I can’t give you details of exactly what his operation entailed, or what happened when he betrayed the team. But he set them up to get his in with the Organization, and Riley paid the price.”

Bozer remembers Riley at the house right after Mac got out of prison. She had a loose tank top on...and there was a twisted scar on her left shoulder just visible. He’d barely noticed it at the time, he’d been more focused on her face... what, she was cute! But now that he thinks about it, he saw the same scars on Mac from gunshot wounds.

“He shattered her trust. And believe me when I say that Riley’s trust is something hard-won and easy to break. Her father damaged her in ways I can’t even begin to imagine. Bozer, she lost Nick for
good a few months ago. She isn’t ready for anything else.” He nods. “Don’t push her. When she’s ready, she’ll make her own decisions about who she wants in her life.”

MASSACHUSETTS INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

NOT REALLY HOW MAC IMAGINED BEING ON CAMPUS...

Mac blinks through the steadily increasing sleetly rain at the MIT campus buildings. Lights are still on in a couple dorms, probably some students pulling frantic all-nighters. The academic buildings are faintly lit with ghostly blue security lighting, and he can see the red glow of emergency exit signs in a few.

He glances at the windows with the lights on, wondering what it’s like to stay up until two a.m. to finish a paper or a project, instead of to chase criminals in back alleys. What would my life have been like if I hadn’t become what I did? He could have been one of those kids. He still could be, if he wants to, thanks to Matty. But a part of him feels like he lost that chance years ago. Like when he chose the path he did, he turned his back on a normal life forever.

Case in point, he isn’t even touring the MIT campus like a normal prospective student. No, he’s skulking around in the bushes, preparing to break into a secure lab at one of the most technologically advanced schools in the world. Easy.

The doors and windows are all alarmed, and every door requires a security access badge. Fortunately, he knows exactly how he’s going to get one of those. There’s no reason to waste time and risk getting caught breaking in when I can just let myself in the front doors.

Thanks to a program Riley installed on his phone, all he has to do is get close enough to someone who does have an access badge, and the phone will scan the badge and then replicate its RFID signal to get him through the door locks.

He’s been waiting until the night cleaning crew comes out. It’s been a long time, and for a while it was easy to pretend he was a student, sitting on campus with a backpack, a physics textbook, and his phone, but once it got late, he’s had to keep moving, hoping to avoid running into campus security.

When he sees a man in a raincoat and a pair of plain green coveralls walk across the lawn, he steps out from where he’s hiding and starts walking toward him, blatantly ignoring the sidewalk a few feet away. It doesn’t matter, his tennis shoes are already soaked, and it adds to the impression he’s trying to make. He keeps his head down, staring at the wet grass, until he’s steps away from the custodian. Then he fakes tripping over his own feet, at least that’s something I’m familiar with, and falls directly toward the man.

Mac stumbles against the guy, acting like he’s trying to keep himself upright, slurring his voice on purpose. “Heyyyyy. You’re not Maggie. She said she was gonna be here...”

“You’re the only one out in this rain, kid,” the man says, and the way he says ‘kid’ sounds so much like Jack that Mac blinks. “There’s no one else around.”

“She told me, she texted me,” Mac says, waving his phone slightly before letting his hand drop so that the phone’s resting almost directly on top of the custodian’s security badge. “She was gonna meet me right here, tonight. I’m only a little late, I lost track of time at the party...” He glances at the phone again, 82 percent, gotta stall a little longer... “It’s not really two thirty, is it? Oh man she said midnight, she’s gonna hate me, I gotta text her. Is it too late to text her?” The little notice that says the scan’s complete pops up, and Mac clicks it away and then shoves the phone back in his hoodie.
pocket. “I really messed up, oh man.”

The man mutters something about ‘dumb frat boys on benders’ and shakes his head. “Listen, kid, you better get back to your house and sleep this off, okay? Which one are you in?”

*Oh no. Why did he have to be a decent human being?* Mac was hoping the guy would just be disgusted and leave him, but apparently he’s determined to make sure this supposedly drunk student gets somewhere safe. *Now I feel even worse about stealing his badge to break into that lab.* He’ll try to convince Matty to make sure that’s resolved without hurting this man’s job. *He’s looking out for these kids and trying to help.*

“It’s okay, I can get back.” Mac pulls back, trying not to seem quite as incoherent as he did a few minutes ago. “I’m fine, just needed some fresh air.”

“It’s fresh all right,” the man says. “You really shouldn’t be wandering around out here in a storm like this. Especially not dressed like that.” Mac’s well aware, his hoodie, t-shirt and jeans are getting soaked through, and even in April, Boston is chilly.

“I’m okay, I can get back. It’s fine.”

“You sure you’re okay?” The man asks. “Is something wrong?”

“No, no, I’m fine.” Mac starts walking again.

“Kid, the houses are that way.” The man points.

“Oh. Right.” Mac makes a show of heading in the right direction, making a large circle back around once he thinks the man’s stopped watching after him. He finds the lab without a problem and swipes in, hoping this guy has access to the upper-level spaces.

He doesn’t, but with a pen and some paperclips swiped from one of the secretarial desks, Mac’s able to pick the lock on the lab doors and let himself in. The space feels eerie, and Mac shivers, both from the chilly room and the empty rows of lab spaces. It looks like a mad scientist’s lair.

He tries to shake off the feeling. Jack would make a joke about this looking like a scene from a horror movie, and Mac would laugh, and they’d both feel better, because Jack would remind him how ridiculous it is to be afraid of the place. *It's fine. I'm used to working alone. It's not going to be a problem.* But working alone was a necessity, before. He didn’t have any other options, not without dragging Bozer into that life too. But he’s gotten used to someone having his back.

His wet tennis shoes squeak on the tile, and it sounds absolutely deafening in the room. He really hopes security isn’t coming through; maybe he can claim he’s here looking for some supplies for an experiment he just thought of? He’s not really sure what he’s going to say if he gets caught. Especially if they ask for an ID.

*All I have to do is find Frankie Mallory's workstation, get the samples, and go.*

He finds the desk with her nameplate on it easily, and if that wasn’t enough, there’s a black lockbox underneath it, bolted to the floor. The box has a code lock, but Mac’s easily able to bypass that with his knife and another of the paperclips.

The box is empty. Mac’s got a feeling of deja vu. This is too much like that safe house with Nick; and when that box was empty…

Mac spins around, but he’s not quite fast enough. There’s a sudden splintering pain in the back of his
head, and then nothing.

Jack turns up his coat collar against the sleety rain falling and glances around the MIT campus. He’s got a decent idea of where Mac should be, but still, he doesn’t want to get lost. This campus is huge.

“Hey Ri, can you tell me where Mac’s at?” He’s really begun to worry, even though there’s been no reason for it. Matty and Riley have been updating him regularly and Mac’s never called in to say there’s a problem.

“His ankle tracker says he’s in the lab, so I’m guessing it’s all okay.”

“Okay, send me location.”

“Jack, he’s probably fine. If you show up you might make things worse.” Jack sighs. She’s right, if Mac is sticking to his plan, Jack could get him caught. The more people there, the more chance a guard notices, or that one of us sets off an alarm of some kind.

“Did you ever find out where that video was sent from?” Jack asks. The only thing he can do now is see if he can track down whoever sent that evidence. Because whoever it is, they know something about Mallory’s death. They might also know who could be after Mac.

“I was able to trace the last login the IP made. It’s in a building on the MIT campus, but the funny thing is, it’s part of a cluster that’s been closed down for a long time. They’re vacant,” Riley says.

“Maybe Mallory had a student assistant?” Jack says. “In my experience, abandoned buildings are a prime spot for partying off the record.”

“Well, whatever it is, it logged on there just half an hour ago.”

“Looks like it’s time for me to go crash a kegger,” Jack says. But he can’t bring himself to make any further jokes, not even one about karaoke. If Mac was here Jack would start singing just to annoy him. But he’s not, and their answer to where he is might be in that building.

The closer Jack gets to that cluster of buildings, the more he thinks this isn’t a party. There are no lights, no music, no yelling. I really hope I’m not gonna run smack into a crazy make-out session. This doesn’t look like the most fun place for that, though. When Jack pushes open the door, the rain is dripping almost as much inside the building as out.

“Okay, Jack, the signal was coming from ahead and to the right.”

He starts carefully clearing hallways, there’s no sound aside from the rain beating down and the wind howling around the corners of the building. It feels haunted. But there’s no fun in pretending he’s worried about ghosts when he doesn’t have Mac and Riley to make fun of him for it.

He’s clearing the second hallway when he sees it. Two years in the Sandbox taught him how to see tripwires anywhere. And there’s definitely one attached to the stairwell door. “Riley, I got a door wired up here.” He may not have Charlie around, but he did learn a thing or two from his EOD tech. He glances through the door, then pushes his phone, flashlight and camera on, underneath the door, shoving it sideways with his knife. He glances through the stairwell window to see what’s on the phone, it’s...a cell phone. A blackberry style. But he doesn’t see anything for it to detonate.

“I’m gonna cut the wire, Ri.” He knows enough about these kind of devices to know that pulling the wire will set it off, but relaxing pressure on it shouldn’t have an effect. He breathes a sigh of relief when the snip of his knife through the string doesn’t make anything explode. Thank for being so
chatty on comms with me, Charlie.

He makes his way as carefully down the stairs as he can, trying not to make any noise. Riley thinks the owner of the device that signed into the network is on an underground level based on signal strength.

He comes around a corner, and there’s a soft glow of light ahead. He moves a little slower, holding his gun in his good hand. It feels odd without the other hand to brace it, but this isn’t even close to the first time Jack’s had to work without the benefit of both hands. He’s just glad the bad one is his left.

He hears movement, and then a hooded figure steps out of the room. Jack really hopes they don’t look his way. Unfortunately, his luck is about the usual. Which means of course they look. And then run.

“Hey! Stop! I just wanna talk to you!” Jack yells. They’ve got a head start, and clearly they know their way around. He doesn’t think he’s going to be able to catch them. Mac would have thought of something… He also would have explained it in terms that Jack can’t pronounce, but something about the little guy has been rubbing off, because Jack finds himself glancing around for anything that could be used to stop the person, preferably without injuring them in the process.

There’s an electric cable running the length of the hall, probably an extension cord to get power inside a building that’s been decommissioned, judging by the lights he saw on. Jack grabs the cord and whips it over the floor, catching the hooded figure’s legs. The person falls with a soft grunt, slamming into the floor, and Jack runs toward them. They’re already getting to their feet by the time Jack catches the figure’s slender wrist and pins the person to the wall. “Hold on, I’m not gonna hurt you, I just wanted to…” The hood of their coat falls back, and Jack recognizes that face. “Frankie Mallory?”

“Let me go!” She shouts, and slams her free hand into his bad arm. He gasps and doubles over at the sharp pain, and she breaks free, starting to run again.

“Ow! Dammit lady, I don’t want to hurt you, I’m trying to help!!” Jack hurries after her, trying not to jar his injured arm again. “I’m with the Phoenix Foundation, I’m a government agent! Listen, I have a gun, and if I wanted to shoot you I already would have!” She stops. Yeah, you’re an MIT grad, you’re smart enough to realize that.

“You got the message?”


“Yes. I was getting desperate, I thought sending it might make the person who tried to kill me nervous.”

“Okay, you’re gonna have to take this from the top, because fifteen minutes ago, I thought you were dead.”

Frankie nods. “Why don’t you come in and sit down?” She walks into the little room, which is pretty comfortably furnished for a hide-out.

“Nice digs,” Jack mutters.

“Thanks. I spent a lot of time in here as an undergrad.” She smirks at the expression Jack is sure he’s wearing. “Not like that. The “Tombs” were a spot a lot of students snuck off to to do unsanctioned
science projects. Professors have a strict policy on explosions.” *Mac woulda taken to this place like a fish to water.* Which reminds him, his pyromaniacal little partner is running around out there somewhere on campus, with no way of finding him.

“About that video, what did you mean about someone trying to kill you?”

“Exactly what I said. My faculty advisor died, and I thought it was an accident, but then someone broke into my lab. And then I found the bomb…” She trails off.

“Do you have *any* idea who it might have been?”

“No. What’s going on?” Mallory asks. “I thought the Phoenix Foundation was a think tank. Why do you have a gun?”

“Well, I really don’t have time to explain everything. But the short version is, we’re a covert government agency and those blood samples we sent you could be the key to putting away some of the worst people on our watchlist. We couldn’t afford to lose them, so we sent an agent here to pick up the samples you have stored at the campus lab; he’s working on that right now. Everyone thought you were dead and we didn’t want the cops to impound our stuff.”

“He’s at the lab?” Her face has gone dead white. Jack feels a chill colder than the rain shoot down his spine. *Something’s wrong.* He knew that since he got here. He just didn’t want to be right. “Oh God. They’ll think he’s working with me. They’ll kill him.”

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Mac blinks. Or tries to. His eyes won’t open.

The moment of utter and paralyzing panic fades when he blinks again and the lashes do separate, at least over one eye. He weakly raises a hand to his face and brushes at the other one, suddenly aware of how absolutely painfully cold he is.

His lashes are frozen shut, but resting his hand over them for a few seconds allows him to open both eyes and look around. Wherever he is, it’s pitch black, and freezing cold. *Actually, correction, actually a freezer.* The floor under him is the sort of composite that usually lines industrial freezer units, and the steady hum he can hear is probably the chiller unit.

He blinks again; having his eyes open isn’t much better than the darkness. He stumbles to his feet and fumbles along the wall beside the door until he finds the handle. The door has a safety release. Either these people are idiots or they weren’t counting on him waking up. He grabs it, ignoring how badly the metal burns his skin, and tugs. The latch releases, and he pushes it. The door latch activates an automatic light switch, and the fluorescent lights click on with a hum. He’s almost blinded by the brightness and his headache ratchets up a little from mild annoyance to actual pain.

The door catches on something and refuses to budge another inch. *Okay, not idiots.*

Another round of dizziness hits, and Mac stumbles, gasping in shaky breaths that burn his throat, resting one hand on the wall to steady himself. The door has a safety release. Either these people are idiots or they weren’t counting on him waking up. He grabs it, ignoring how badly the metal burns his skin, and tugs. The latch releases, and he pushes it. The door latch activates an automatic light switch, and the fluorescent lights click on with a hum. He’s almost blinded by the brightness and his headache ratchets up a little from mild annoyance to actual pain.

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The other round of dizziness hits, and Mac stumbles, gasping in shaky breaths that burn his throat, resting one hand on the wall to steady himself. There’s something really heavy in front of the door, and it doesn’t feel like it’s going anywhere. He takes a deep breath to try and steady the room from swaying, and all he gets is another lungful of ice. He’s shivering so hard he can see his hands vibrating.

*I don’t even know how long I’ve been here.* His phone is gone and he wasn’t wearing a watch. He shivers and rubs his icy hands over his face, trying to wake himself up a little. His fingers brush against a tender spot at his forehead, and he gasps softly with the pain.
His fingers come away red, but none too sticky. *The good news is, cold stops blood flow, so this head wound should already be closing. The bad news is, a concussion is definitely going to accelerate how fast I succumb to hypothermia.* He broke into the lab at three. Assuming the first classes happen to start as early as 6:30 AM, and that’s a big assumption, he’s probably going to spend more than three hours in a freezer that’s hovering between 0 and -5 degrees Fahrenheit, and it’s not helping that his clothes are still damp from the rain. *I’ll probably freeze to death long before they open the door. Definitely before I run out of air, in a room this size, and the door might be open far enough to let air past the seal.* Even if it isn’t, if he doesn’t panic, doesn’t waste oxygen, he probably has six or seven hours’ worth. But that won’t help if he freezes, so he’ll be better off to try and find a way out.

He tucks his hands under his arms, shuddering. He needs his fingers functioning if he wants to try and do anything to get himself out. He wishes this was chemical storage, because then he might be able to find a way to blow the door open. He tries prying it open with one of the legs of a shelf, but whatever they shoved in front of it is heavy, and he’s none too coordinated. *Definite concussion.*

He leans against the wall, hugging his legs to his chest. Maybe he’ll get lucky and the cleaning crew will come through and realize something’s wrong, or a campus patrol will happen to walk through. But he doesn’t trust his luck that much. He shivers, listening to the soft crackle of ice, the fans whirring, and the hum of the motor running.

Maybe if I can get to the motor, I can sabotage it, make it shut down. It won’t make the place any warmer, at least not for a while, but it’s all he can think of. At least it would give him a chance, maybe… He really, really hates the idea of freezing to death in here.

He tugs a heavy tote out from under one of the shelves and shoves it up against the back wall, so he can stand on it and get high enough to see past the fan shaft. He doesn’t really know what he’s going to do yet, but once he sees what’s back there he’ll have a better idea. He hopes. He has some paperclips in his pocket, and he still has the leg of shelf pipe he was trying to pry open the door with.

Climbing onto the box is harder than it should be. His whole body feels stiff from the cold, and his head is spinning. If he falls off this and knocks his head again, he probably won’t wake up. Being close to the fan and the coolant coils is only making him colder. His sweatshirt is stiff with ice, and he can’t raise his arms without it crackling and making odd creaking noises.

Except that not all the creaking sounds are coming from his clothes. Someone’s outside, in the lab, he thinks. It sounds like whatever’s in front of the door is moving. He hopes it’s the cleaning crew, but he’s afraid it won’t be. He scrambles off the box, curling as far as he can behind one of the shelves. *Did they realize just locking me in a freezer was sloppy and come back to finish the job?*


“H-hey Jack.” Mac pokes his head around the corner of the shelf.

“Riley, I got him, we’re good. He’s okay.” Jack sounds incredibly relieved. “Hey kid, I knew college was rough, but when did they start giving practical survival exams?” Jack reaches for him, pulling Mac into a hug. His body heat is the most welcome thing in the world, and Mac leans into him, feeling himself shivering uncontrollably.

“How’d you get here?” He doesn’t even really care to know the answer, it’s good enough that Jack is here, and now he knows everything is going to be okay.

“I had some help from someone who knows access codes and happens to have a card key. Granted, that’s gonna make some people scratch their heads in the morning…” He tugs Mac out into the lab
room, and the air that felt so chilly before feels like a furnace now. Mac takes a grateful breath of air that doesn’t freeze his lungs and huddles into himself even more.

There’s a soft gasp of shock and relief, and he turns to see someone holding the lab door open. Mac recognizes the woman in the doorway. “Frankie Mallory?”

“I promise I can explain everything. But not here.” Frankie glances around. “The campus patrol will be coming through soon, we need to be gone by then.”

“You okay to walk, buddy?” Jack asks. Mac nods, not trusting himself to speak. His teeth are chattering so hard he thinks they might break. “Riley traced the location of the IP that sent that video. I followed her lead and ran into Frankie, and when she heard what you were doing she figured you were probably in danger.”

They stumble across campus, Frankie leading the way. The rain is still coming down, and Mac wants to laugh at the irony that the sleety water feels warm on his skin now. He’s so cold.

Jack keeps up a steady stream of chatter. “We’re heading for Frankie’s place. It’s got a real atmosphere, I think you’ll approve of the decor. Although I personally don’t think I would have stayed anywhere that someone decided to nickname the ‘Tombs’. Unless...hey Mac, you think she’s actually undead? Like a vampire or a zombie or something? Cause then living in the Tombs would make total sense.”

Mac can tell Jack’s trying to get him to talk, but he’s got enough to do to concentrate on walking. The ground is slick and slippery, and it’s dark, and his concussion is starting to make things seem really wobbly.

Jack’s right, the old building Frankie leads them to is eerie. Dark and echoey and with the wind howling outside, absolutely horrifying. “You should charge admission,” Jack says when they brush through a patch of spiderwebs. “This is better than the haunted house I paid twenty bucks each to take the nieces and nephews to one year.”

Mac shudders, he just wants to go somewhere warm, but the whole building is damp and drafty. He can see water leaching through the walls. Jack helps him down the stairs and into a small room, and when Frankie flicks a switch, a few lightbulbs hung from a push-broom click on, and Mac immediately sees what Jack meant about him approving of the decor. Everything is makeshift, cobbled together from apparently whatever was handy.

“Frankie, you got some blankets and a first aid kit down here?” Jack asks. The woman grabs a couple of wool blankets from a shelf. They look like old army issue; like the ones Harry always had stashed in the cedar trunk. She starts digging around in a crate under her desk, and then pulls out a white box with a red cross on it.

Jack wraps a blanket around Mac’s shoulders, tucking it tightly and then rubbing his hands up and down Mac’s arms, maneuvering him over to a chair to get him sitting down. “We’ll get you warm and then we’ll try and figure out what happened ok?” Jack sounds like he was almost frantic from worrying. “How long were you in there?”

Mac glances at Jack’s watch. “About half an hour. Maybe a little longer.” He thinks his cheeks and ears are mildly frostbitten, and his fingers definitely are.

“That’s not great, kid.” Jack takes Mac’s hands in his own. “This looks like frostbite to me.”

“It is. It’s not bad though.” Mac says, but he doesn’t pull his hands away. The warmth hurts, but in a
He can’t stop shivering, and his whole body feels like ice. *I’m not even that badly hypothermic.* But the fact that it’s not severe means he hasn’t gone totally numb or passed out, so he has to feel miserable instead. *Better than on the verge of dying, but it doesn’t mean I like it.* It doesn’t help that this building is cold and damp. The small space heater that Frankie turned on and pointed in his direction isn’t doing as much good as he wishes it was.

Jack pulls some antiseptic wipes out of the first aid kit and begins cleaning up the gash along Mac’s hairline, it stings fiercely and Mac grits his teeth. “What did they hit you with?” Jack mutters.

“I-I don’t actually know. It was so fast...probably part of the lab equipment.”

“Whatever it was was sharp enough to lay open a nice slice there, Mac.” Jack sighs. “And now that you’re getting warm, it’s bleeding a lot.” He continues cleaning it, then pulls out a packet of butterfly bandages. “I don’t think it’s deep enough to warrant needing stitches, and head wounds always bleed a ton and make it look worse than it is. The whole side of your face was a bloody mess, man, you shoulda seen yourself. On second thought, maybe it’s better you didn’t.” He chuckles a little. “At least you fit right in with the whole haunted house aesthetic.”

“I’m sorry about the accommodations.” Frankie says. “It was the only place I knew no one would be able to find me. I made some coffee,” she says, holding out a mug. “I’m sorry, all I can do is black.” Mac doesn’t care. He’d drink anything warm at this point. He wraps his fingers around the mug, and the heat stings the faint frostbite. It’s not bad, nothing worth the worry in Jack’s face when Mac told him it had happened. He won’t lose any fingers. Just some skin.

Jack finishes bandaging Mac’s head, and then stands up and begins to pace. “Whoever wanted to kill Frankie wants to kill you too, and we have no idea who it is.”

“Someone who isn’t very good at it,” Mac mumbles. 

“Something for which we’re all very grateful.”

“No, I mean, someone who isn’t very good at wanting to kill people. Locking me in that freezer was definitely not the easiest way to get rid of me.” He shrugs. “For someone who built a bomb sophisticated enough to be disguised as a lab accident...it doesn’t add up.”

“Actually I did that.” Frankie says.

“What?”

“I was in the lab early one morning, I’d had an idea and I wanted to recalibrate the spectrometer. I opened it up and found the bomb inside. I knew they wouldn’t let me walk away a second time, so I decided to fake the explosion.”

“Who was the body?”

“I sort of borrowed one of the medical research cadavers.” She shrugs. “I was already on campus to get the lockbox with the samples, I just made an extra stop.”

“So your samples weren’t even in the lab.” Mac was going after a dead end, and so were the men who attacked him. They’ve all been outsmarted.

“For all the good it does me without sequencing equipment...” Frankie pulls a handful of fake plants out of a pot on the desk. Below them are rings of test tubes, each with a dried smear of blood in them. “I’ve been keeping them with me since Dr. V died.”
“You talked about him on the video,” Jack says. “Who was he?”

“Dr. Vanketesh was my faculty advisor for the project. Two months ago he ran his car off the road in a snowstorm and crashed into a tree.” Frankie leans on the edge of her desk.

“We all thought it was an accident. He was seventy-five, his vision was failing, it seemed like a tragic mistake. And then other things started happening. My workspace was rifled through, so I started working at my home lab instead of the campus one. I thought it was just someone trying to steal my research at first, since it’s pretty cutthroat here and people certainly aren’t above it; I’ve taken serious precautions since I was a freshman, so I knew they wouldn’t get anything. But then I found the bomb in my lab and I knew it wasn’t just someone trying to steal my ideas. Whoever it was wanted me dead. I faked a fire hot enough to burn up a body beyond identifiability, and then ran. Figured I’d get away, have a chance to regroup and then find out who wanted to kill me. And then your friend here showed up.”

Mac glances at Jack. “Why are you here?” Matty never said anything about sending Jack too…

What if she sent him to keep an eye on me? What if this whole mission was a test? And then when I failed, Jack had to step in to save me? He feels like an idiot for not thinking of that. The whole time, Jack’s been watching my work, he’s been keeping tabs on me. And now he’ll have to tell Matty that I failed. Maybe this is Matty’s way of telling him he really doesn’t belong at the Phoenix. If I can’t handle a simple retrieval mission, how am I ever going to hope to be a good field agent? Maybe he should just accept that.

He realizes Jack’s been talking and he’s been missing it. “…So I told Matty if she thought this wasn’t my job she was crazy, because my job is to have your back. And I made Riley get me a plane ticket and here I am, end of story.”

That doesn’t sound like he was supposed to be keeping an eye on Mac. It sounds more like Matty was trying to convince Jack not to come. But that doesn’t make him feel any better. Jack doesn’t even think I can do this by myself. Not that he’s wrong… Mac’s lucky someone showed up. But I feel like an idiot for letting this happen…

He must have said that last part out loud, because Jack turns around and puts his hands on Mac’s shoulders. “Mac, you’re not an idiot. You’re the smartest person I know. Things like that happen, that’s why we have a team. Matty didn’t seem to understand that, but I do. You don’t have to do things alone. That doesn’t make you weak or incompetent. Because the smartest thing you can do is stick with people who will have your back.”

THE TOMBS

JACK’S STILL NOT SURE THEY’RE NOT LIVING WITH THE UNDEAD

“So can you think of any reason someone would want to kill you because of your research?” Jack asks. He’s got Mac settled with a bowl of canned soup Frankie heated on a bunsen burner and another extra blanket, but the kid looks like he’s lost in his own head. Jack’s going to talk to him, make him explain what exactly is wrong now, but that won’t do them any good if they’re all dead.

“You tell me, apparently your people sent me blood from mass murderers.” Frankie sounds pretty put out, and Jack can understand why, it’s always a shock to find out what the Phoenix really does. Maybe he shouldn’t have told her everything, but he still thinks it was the right choice, given the circumstances.
“Who knew you were working on this project?”

“A lot of people. My advisor, my department head, couple dozen graduate students and post-docs.” She glances at him. “It wasn’t exactly like my research was secret.” She glances at the samples. “But it’s not like I knew anything more than a case number. I never got anything but the labeled tubes. No case files, no information on the investigations.”

“Is there any particular case that you were working on when you started to suspect that someone was trying to stop you?”

“Boston PD subject 835B421707. It was the first one I was going to try.” She shrugs. “I’d just finalized the process, and I was going to test on one of the least degraded samples I had.”

“Smart,” Jack says.

“I emailed the usual people; Boston PD because I was going to be running their sample, my sponsors, any students who’d been involved with the project. I always send out updates, and I was excited to be starting to work on something big. And that night, my lab was broken into, most of my equipment was stolen, and my research data was wiped from my computer.” She shrugs. “I keep physical backups, so it wasn’t a major loss, but I was afraid it was someone trying to copy my method. I built most of my specialized equipment from scratch, so I had to put a halt on the work while I got what I needed and put it back together. I notified my mailing list again when I’d completed restoring it, I trusted everyone on there implicitly, none of them would have done something like that, I was sure. And then I found the bomb.”

“So it’s probably one of the people you reached out to.” Mac stands up, joining Jack and Frankie at the desk, a couple blankets still wrapped around his shoulders. “Someone on that mailing list has to be our killer.”

“I can’t believe any of them would do that. I know everyone who worked on this project with me.”

Jack thinks Mac’s onto something, he’s been thinking the same thing himself. “But both times, the incidents only occurred after you sent out a progress update. Someone you told either did this, or told someone else about it.”

“Or were hacked,” Mac suggests. “Someone could have been intercepting the emails. If MIT is as competitive as you say, Frankie, what if it’s another student who hacked one of your assistants’ computers?”

“But then there would have been no reason for the bomb. If they had the equipment, why try to kill her?” Jack asks.

“Taking out competition?” Mac asks. Jack honestly has no idea what they’re looking at here.

“What if someone didn’t want this case solved?” Frankie asks, cutting in. “It’s a cold case, I wasn’t given anything under ten years old. Maybe someone thought they got away with it. Boston PD did a promo piece for a couple of the big papers and mentioned they were working with me to bring the latest technology to some department unsolved cases. What if someone read that and thought their case might come up?”

“Then maybe if we solve the case, we find the person who’s after you too?” Jack asks. Frankie nods.

“Dr. V was the one who suggested that I reach out to various law enforcement agencies for samples. And then two days later, he died. It only made me more determined to do what he said, honestly. But
now I’m wondering if someone wanted him to stop pressing the suggestion.”

“It’s worth a shot, I guess.” Jack pulls out his phone. “I’m going to call some people back at the Phoenix. They might be able to help us with this.”

About twenty minutes later, Jack, Mac, and Frankie are watching Riley’s search results pop up on Jack’s phone.

“I did some digging, found the Boston PD file this sample was linked to. Victim's name was Ronald Manning. A reporter found shot to death in his backyard. The police found signs that he struggled with his killer, including blood under the fingernails, but the body was outside for a week and it had rained, so…” She trails off.

Mac picks up the train of thought. “So that’s why they handed it off to Frankie. And the minute she informed someone that she was going to be working on that sample, someone tried to stop her.”

“I’ve been running a remote scan of your computer as well,” Riley says. “I found some spyware on there, recently downloaded. About two months ago. I’m trying to see where it came from, but it appears that it was recording your emails and most of your other communication.”

Frankie looks remarkably victorious, for someone who just got told most of her communication has been being monitored by an unknown party. “I told you no one I trusted was behind this. Someone else has been listening in. That newspaper article was from about two months ago. I’m sure whoever this was learned my name from that and sent me something bogus to get the spyware on my laptop.”

Riley’s voice comes through. “Now we just have to find out who. I’m trying to find the origin of the software, but when your research data was wiped, they also cleared some of your email backlog. I’m trying to restore files deleted on that date, but whoever did this really cleaned up after themselves. I think your best chance of finding this person is that DNA sample.”

“If we had a way to sequence it,” Frankie replies. “My lab was incinerated and clearly I can’t go anywhere near campus.”

“Well, I still have an access card let that could get someone inside. And they haven’t seen Jack…” Mac looks at him, shrugging. “If all you’re missing is a lab, why don’t we just build our own?”

Jack’s not sure exactly what Mac’s got in mind “We can’t walk out of an MIT lab with a bunch of science equipment in broad daylight.”

“Not all of it. But we can improvise the rest.” Mac looks at Frankie. “What do you need?”

“I still don’t know how we’re going to be able to do it down here.” Frankie looks decidedly skeptical. “This isn’t exactly standard laboratory conditions.”

“No, but we’ll make it work.” Jack’s glad to see that Mac’s confidence is on the upswing again. Once you give him something to do, he’s fine. But sooner or later, the job will be over, and they’re going to have to address the problem. They can’t just keep Mac busy and distracted on a permanent basis.

“Jack, I’m going to try and make a list of what we need in normal person terms.” Mac says. “If you need to know more about something we can probably google pictures of it…”

“Are you kidding? I went through a phase in high school where I wanted to be a crime scene investigator. I know what all that stuff looks like.” Jack’s grinning. “This is gonna be fun.” I wanted to turn my room into a crime lab but Momma said the formaldehyde wasn’t coming in her house.
Still, he’d gotten pretty good at being able to determine what a cow had died of...

“Well, things look a little different now than they did when dinosaurs walked the earth,” Mac says, and Jack glares at him.

“Man, if you didn’t have a concussion, I’d punch you.” At least the kid’s feeling up to being snarky. This is better than the walking on eggshells silence and concern that’s been radiating off the kid for the past week.

“What size test tubes were you using?” Mac asks, grabbing a pen and a sheet of paper off Frankie’s desk.

“1.5.”

“We’re gonna need one for the sample and one to balance the centrifuge.” Mac says, and Frankie looks impressed.

“Once we separate the cells from the serum we need to collect as much as possible and then prep for electrophoresis.” Frankie pinches the bridge of her nose. “I’m going to need...unflavored gelatin. At least two packets. That should be a decent substitute for what I use in the lab.”

“Now you’re getting the idea,” Mac says, smiling. “

They continue down the list, some things that Frankie insists are non-negotiably needed from a lab, and some that she and Mac try to find viable replacements for. In the end, Jack’s got a decent list.

He’s just coming out of the local grocery store with a handful of bags when his phone rings. He sets the bags on the bumper of his rental car and digs the phone out of his pocket.

“Bozer?”

“Mac’s okay?” Bozer asks. “Riley said something happened, but everything was fine, but I got worried.”

“Yeah, Mac’s okay. Someone caught him in the lab and locked him in a freezer, but I found him, and he insists there’s nothing worse than minor frostbite. I think he’s right; I’ve worked in Russia before and I know frostbite.”

“Thank you for going to get him.” Bozer sounds relieved, and Jack hears a soft huff that sounds like a dog breathing. He’d bet anything Bozer’s been worried about Mac and was curled up on the couch with Mickey.

“Hey, you never have to thank me for doing my job.” Jack says. “I always look out for my kids.”

“Um...about that...” Bozer sounds suddenly hesitant. “I’m kinda...worried about Riley too. Like, ever since Hawaii, Captain Aloha’s been blowing up her phone, and she doesn’t seem to mind. And it’s kinda scary that she’s so into him so fast, cause I’ve known her for months and I’m still stuck in the friendzone...”

Jack shakes his head. “Okay, hey, I’m gonna stop you right there. One, ‘Stuck’ implies that you deserve to be in a different zone, and that ain’t up to you, man. That’s always up to the girl. Two, anyone who can call Riley Davis a close personal friend is insanely lucky. And three, if you don’t leave my girl alone, I’m gonna go all wookie on you and rip your arms off.”

There’s no sound from the other end of the line. Then a quiet, “That’s what Matty said too.”
“Wookie and all?”

“No, just about her getting to make her own choices.” Bozer sighs.

Jack chuckles. *Of course he asked us both.* It’s like the kid who tried to play Mom and Dad off each other to get permission for something they know they’re not allowed to have. “Well, Matty’s a lot smarter than I am, so now you know you better listen.”

“I just…” Bozer’s voice trails off. “If she’s still heartbroken why is she so into this guy?”

“You know, that’s a question you should maybe ask *her?* Maybe you’ll actually learn something about women if you talk to them instead of running around complaining to everyone else.”

“But what if this guy breaks her heart again?”

“Then she lives and learns.” Jack sighs. “Bozer, just be her friend. If that’s what she wants from you, then that’s how you’re gonna make her happy. And if you really care about her, her happiness is always gonna be more important than yours.” He pushes a thought of Sarah away, and picks up the grocery bags again. “I have to go help Mac and our undead scientist friend catch a murderer.” He smirks at the sound Bozer makes right before he hangs up. *That should give him something else to think about.*

Mac’s working on what Jack scrounged from the MIT campus labs while he waits for him to come back from the grocery store. The only major piece of equipment they couldn’t carry out is a centrifuge, and if he remembers Mr. Ericson’s class properly, that’s not going to be a problem. He has a cardboard box that Jack brought all the supplies over in; that’s a start.

He grabs a couple pencils from the desk, and a rubber band, drawing a circle on the top of the box with his makeshift compass, before cutting it out with the scissors on his knife, and punching a hole through the center. He draws a line across it with the edge of a book, and then punches two more holes, equal distances from the edge, to stick the test tubes through. He’s going to need a long piece of string to spin it with...his shoelaces will probably work. He pulls them off, knocking off some of the caked-on mud onto Frankie’s floor.

“Sorry about that,” he mutters as he starts stringing the laces together the way he needs them to work. “I’d sweep it up, but your broom’s sort of your lamp right now.”

Frankie chuckles. “If this works, I’ll be sleeping in my own bed tonight, so make all the mess you want.” She glances at the strings in his hand. “I’m not really sure what you’re doing, though…”

“This.” Mac feeds the laces through the piece of cardboard and pulls. It spins rapidly, pulling the laces into a spiral against it.

“Did you just make a centrifuge out of cardboard?”

“I know it doesn’t look like much, but it’s going to spin at 20,000 RPMs. Enough to separate those blood cells.”

“All this…” Frankie glances at the space Mac’s managed to turn into a laboratory. “I can see why you work for a think tank. Where did you learn to do all this? What was your degree *in*?”

“I…” Mac doesn’t want to tell Frankie the truth. “I learned how to do this from my middle school science teacher. I basically built my own chemistry lab in an old treehouse.” He wonders if Val passed her test. He’ll have to call her when he gets a new phone. He hasn’t told Jack his is gone,
Jack’s probably going to think that’s absolutely hilarious. “I...actually didn’t go to college.”

“Sometimes I wish I’d taken a gap year or two.” Frankie sighs. “Seen some of the world before I locked myself in a lab and got serious about saving the world.” Mac doesn’t know how to answer that. *I was serious about saving the world too, just in a totally different way.*

He decides talking to someone new might help him think through his options. *I want to know what an actual MIT grad thinks of my chances of doing well here.* He knows Jack and Riley and Bozer will all tell him it’s perfect, but they care so much about him they’re biased. *What if it turned out I wasn’t good enough for a place like this?* “I’m thinking about coming here. I have some friends who said they’d help me find scholarships and stuff.”

“It seems like MIT would be the perfect fit for you. Anyone who can make a centrifuge out of garbage from a dumpster has a future in engineering.” She smiles. “I can see why a think tank recruited you. Except that they seem to be a whole lot different than what I was told.”

“Yeah, but it’s a good different.” Mac shrugs. “They’re good people. They took a chance on me when no one else would have, and...” He doesn’t know if he can leave. *MIT would be a wonderful opportunity. But...it would feel like I had to lie about everything I was in the past. I’m ashamed to tell Frankie the truth, I wouldn’t want to tell anyone else...but I’d have to, or they’d find out another way. He knows his reputation would follow him anywhere he goes. I can’t imagine what would happen if the wrong people found out about my past.*

Because maybe the person he was a few years ago would have thought this was the chance of a lifetime, but the person he became...the person he became thinks the Phoenix is that.

He’s about to just come clean, to tell Frankie all the reasons he doesn’t belong here, when the door opens and Jack walks in with an armload of grocery bags.

“How’s it coming, Dr. Frankenstein?” Jack asks, and Frankie glares at him.

Mac chuckles. “Well, you are kind of rebuilding the blueprint of a human being from a bunch of pieces, so it kind of fits. Surprisingly accurate choice of reference, Jack.”

“Even a blind squirrel gets a nut once in a while,” Jack says, setting down the bags and pulling out the packets of gelatin. “Okay, who’s ready to get cooking?”

Jack was honestly joking about the Frankenstein reference, he just thought it sounded close enough to “Frankie” to be funny. But as he watches her slot the final alleles into the genome she’s completed, he really does feel like she’s approached the level of recreating a human being. *She kind of just did, if you think about it, because that’s the entire genetic code of our murderer.*

“There is it.” Frankie turns her laptop slightly so they can all see. “I can’t believe we actually did this in a basement.” She glances at Mac. “I’m beginning to think MIT should offer a class in improvised lab equipment.”

Mac grins. “You don’t need a class. You just gotta learn to think outside the box. Or, maybe just think about how to turn the box into a centrifuge.”

Jack holds up the mostly empty, slightly smeared tube that held the blood sample. “Hey, if Matty decides to fire me for going AWOL, I totally have a future as a CSI, right?”

Frankie laughs. “You do realize you stood there and watched while Mac and I did the heavy lifting.”
“Only because of my bad arm!”

“Don’t celebrate just yet. Wait until Riley gets us our CODIS match,” Mac says. “We’re sending it to her now.”

Unfortunately, Riley sound disturbingly grim when she calls them.

“No match.”

“Try the foreign databases.” Jack suggests.

“You don’t think I already did that?” Riley sounds slightly insulted. “Jack, this DNA isn’t recorded anywhere.”

“So it’s a dead end?” Jack asks. *We really did all this for nothing?*

“Not necessarily,” Frankie says. “Those databases only check for thirteen genetic markers. We have the full genome. And there’s programs for something called phenotype prediction. With a full genome you can predict sex, hair color, eye color, facial structure, even approximate age.”

“I’ve heard of that. It’s early stage development, but I’ve been keeping an eye on the applications for it,” Riley says. She glances at Matty and Bozer, who are standing behind her in the War Room. “Give me a couple hours, and I’ll hack a program and we’ll be able to tell you anything you want to know about our killer.”

“Actually, if you send *me* that info, I think I can do you one better.” Bozer says. “I can build them.”

While they wait for Riley to steal a genetic prediction program, and Bozer to build them a mask of the suspect, Jack suggests that they all try to get some sleep. Mac tries to protest, but Jack shuts that down. “Your concussion ain’t that bad, kid. And half an hour of unconsciousness doesn’t count as sleep.”

Frankie curls up in her sleeping bag, and Jack snags one of the blankets and spreads it out on the floor. Mac’s still got one of the blankets wrapped around his shoulders, and looks like he’s already half-asleep right where he’s sitting against the wall.

Jack moves over to sit next to him. “Here, it’ll be warmer if we sit on the blanket than on the floor.” Mac nods sleepily, and then leans over onto Jack. He’s still shivering occasionally, but Jack thinks that’s more because of how cold and damp it is down here.

Jack puts his good arm around Mac’s shoulder and sighs. “Sleep tight, kiddo.” He’s still worried, still wonders why Mac seems so agitated and stressed, but as the kid falls asleep right there, the worry softens away and Jack just wants to hold him close forever.

He wakes up with a start to his phone ringing. He blinks, digging it out of his pocket and holding it up. “H-hey guys.” He feels like slapping himself in the face when a yawn manages to slip out.

“Sorry to disturb your beauty sleep, Dalton, but Bozer has a completed model.”

“I’m still working on the hair. But with the rest of what I have, this...is the face of our killer.” Bozer holds up a clay mold. Jack snaps a screenshot. Mac blinks at the shutter sound and rubs his eyes, and Jack tries not to grin too much at how adorable he looks, like a teenager who didn’t want to be dragged out of bed yet.

“We’re about to run it through facial rec,” Riley says. Jack hears Frankie’s sleeping bag rustling
beside him, he must have woken her up. Footsteps wander over, and then Frankie’s leaning over him, looking at the video.

“Once we get a match to this guy, you’ll be able to go home and get your life back,” Riley says.

Frankie gasps at the sight of the clay mold. “Can you bring that closer?”

“Sure thing,” Bozer says. “I mean, it’s no Michelangelo, but I like to think it’s some of my better work.”

“Oh my God. That’s Richard Sang.”

“Who’s he?” Jack asks.

“One of the most powerful men in Boston. And the biggest sponsor of my project.”

VANKETESH-MALLORY RESEARCH FACILITY
PROBABLY BUILT WITH BLOOD MONEY

Mac twists a couple of paperclips into the shape of a DNA strand while he and Frankie sit in the back of Jack’s rental car. Sang is unveiling a new research lab at MIT today, and they have the beginnings of a plan to catch him.

“So he funded your research, and then tried to kill you because you were going to prove he was a killer?” Jack raises an eyebrow. “Talk about irony.” He grins.

Mac looks up from his phone. “Riley’s got more evidence against him as well. The reporter he killed was about to expose him for massive fraud.”

Frankie leans forward. “If I get a sample of his DNA, I can make a conclusive match, and we have an airtight case.”

“What do you need? Strand of hair, some skin…” Mac’s pretty sure they can get that in a crowd like this. The guy’s probably going to be out working the crowd, shaking hands and kissing babies after his speech. Makes himself look good. Mac wonders if all the sudden generosity began after the murder. If in some twisted way Sang was attempting to atone for what he did. But then he threw that all away when he started killing again to protect himself.

“Unfortunately my technique is designed to work on blood.”

Jack smirks, and Mac recognizes the gleam in his eyes. “Drawing blood’s my specialty, sweetheart.” Jack’s been wanting to punch someone since he found me in the freezer. Mac still feels more than a little embarrassed that he had to be rescued on what was supposed to be a ridiculously easy op, but he’s glad Jack’s got his back. If I left, I’d miss that. He doesn’t want to start all over, to find new friends, make a new family. He loves the one he has right now.

Jack steps out of the car, and Frankie and Mac follow him. Mac shudders at the sight of the campus security team patrolling the edges of the crowd. People in law enforcement uniforms make him irrationally panicked now. He’s afraid of what will happen when he gets his license back and has to drive past police cars on the road.

Frankie pushes her way through the crowd. “Do you think this new facility will continue to explore the Vanketesh-Mallory sequencing technique, or is that avenue of research dead?” She sounds so
much like a reporter that Mac can tell for a moment Sang isn’t aware of what’s happening. Then his eyes lock on her and his face goes slack.

He forces a smile a second later. “Frankie. It’s good to see you alive and well.”

“No thanks to you,” she snaps. “We have evidence to prove that you killed a reporter twelve years ago, and tried to kill me a few days ago.”

Sang steps down from the platform, and a couple of his security detail follow. Mac wonders if one of them was the one who hit him and locked him in the freezer. The taller of the two men has a slightly confused look in his eyes when he turns Mac’s direction. Didn’t expect to see me still alive, did you?

The two men are joined by another pair, who move deliberately toward Frankie, Jack, and Mac. They’re going to throw us out. And then Jack’s moving, fast, pushing his way past the goons and heading straight for Sang.

Snag realizes what’s happening, but he’s too late to prevent Jack from landing a solid right hook. “That’s for having your guys hurt my partner,” Jack snaps. “You’re lucky I found him, cause if he was dead, they’d be scraping you off the ground with a dustpan.” He steps back, shaking his hand slightly, as a couple of the campus security guards start pulling him away.

“I’d like to confess to assault via sucker punch. Don’t suppose either of you rent-a-cops has an evidence bag on you?” He holds up his hand with the bloodied ring. “Hungry like the wolf, son!”

Jack’s hand still aches by the time everything’s straightened out with the police and they’re calling Phoenix. He hopes he broke Sang’s jaw; the man deserves it for what he had his people do to Mac.

Riley’s smiling. “The blood on Beowulf was an exact match to the sample Frankie reconstructed. Sang is being taken into custody as we speak.”

“Well, look at that. Another successful one for the scrapbook,” Jack says, grinning. He didn’t get a selfie with Sang, but there were plenty of news cameras going, he’s sure there’s a good picture of him getting that punch in. And he can always take a selfie with Bozer’s creepy clay head if he wants.

Matty appears, her frown and glare easily interpreted. “Excellent work. For a mission you were never officially on.”

“Listen. If it weren’t for me and my CSI skills, those two nerds would still be spinning their wheels.”

“Very funny,” Mac says. “But Matty, honestly, I couldn’t have done this without him. And I’m sorry I messed up so badly. I know this was supposed to be easy.” He looks like a kicked puppy and Jack’s heart clenches.

“We sent you into a situation where we didn’t have accurate or complete information. It wasn’t your fault.” Matty says, and Jack can tell she’s gone from frustrated to reassuring in a split second. She’s so damn good at that.

“Very funny,” Mac says. “But Matty, honestly, I couldn’t have done this without him. And I’m sorry I messed up so badly. I know this was supposed to be easy.” He looks like a kicked puppy and Jack’s heart clenches.

“We sent you into a situation where we didn’t have accurate or complete information. It wasn’t your fault.” Matty says, and Jack can tell she’s gone from frustrated to reassuring in a split second. She’s so damn good at that. “You did nothing wrong. You actually wanted to take more action on the intel than I advised, and maybe if I had let you, the incident at the labs would never have happened.” Matty says. “We’ll discuss all of this further in debrief. I want to see you both on the jet in an hour, on your way home.”

“Yes ma’am.” Jack hangs up, just as Frankie walks out of the police station. “Well, how does it feel to be the walking not-dead?”

“ Weird.” She shrugs. “It’s going to take some paperwork shuffling, but I did finally manage to
convince the police it was me, in the flesh, and that their investigation had been totally inaccurate. I thought they were going to have to take my DNA.”

“I’m glad you can go back to a normal life now.” Mac smiles. “I guess you’ll have to rebuild your lab again.”

“Yes. But I might be making some modifications. Working with you made me look at thinking outside the box in a whole different way.”

“Well, I’m gonna leave you two nerds to get excited about polymorphous isotopes or whatever it is gets geeks excited, and I’m gonna bring the car around.” Mac seems like he’s having a good time talking to Frankie, they get along well. She’s a little old for him, maybe. But not too old to be a good friend. Mac needs good people like that around him.

He can still hear them talking as he walks away. “So will I see you around again?” Frankie asks.

“Maybe.”

“Good, because I could use someone like you around the lab, especially if I happen to break a centrifuge.”

“You want me to come here so you can have your own personal lab lackey?” Mac grins. “Besides, you already know how to make a centrifuge. But building a microscope from scratch is even more fun.”

“Well, if you do decide to come to MIT, I’ll have a lab space waiting for you.”

Jack stops. So that’s what’s been on his mind. Mac didn’t tell him he was thinking about leaving the Phoenix after his hearing. But I guess he can. He can do whatever he wants, once they clear his name. Jack wants to be excited. I was just thinking he fits in well with people like Frankie. He deserves to be somewhere that really appreciates his genius.

But the thought that Mac might not be content where he is stings, as much as Jack wants to tell himself it doesn’t. It feels like we’re not enough. Like...like I’m not good enough. This kid is quickly becoming everything to Jack, and he has the sudden harsh realization that maybe the same isn’t true for Mac.

I just want him to be happy; he deserves the world and he deserves to do something he loves. But can I be happy for him if the life he really wants doesn’t include me? He remembers his conversation with Bozer earlier and wishes he could take his own advice. If you really care about someone, their happiness will always come before yours.

Bozer shuffles around the War Room, waiting until Matty leaves to deal with something about the FBI on a phone call, leaving him alone with Riley.

He picks up his clay head and then sets it down; he doesn’t know what to say and he’s not sure how to tell Riley what he has to say. Mama used to say I’m sorry isn’t the answer, it just starts the conversation. So he guesses he’ll lead with that.

Riley’s phone buzzes, and she smiles at it, and Bozer feels the knife twisting in his heart a little more. He has to get this over with, he has to say it, because then at least he’ll have some closure.

“Hey Riley, I’m...uh, I’m sorry. For not taking any of the like billion hints. And for making things weird about us. I let thinking about what could be blind me to what I already had. And what I have is
pretty great.” He glances at the floor, then up at Riley.

She’s smiling a little, and shaking her head. “Okay, aside from the fact that you’re talking like one of your cheesy scripts, that was actually...really nice.”

“And I’m sorry for saying what I did about Kalei.”

“You know, he’s just a friend too, Boze.” Riley sighs, setting down the phone. “I’m not ready for anything else, not right now.” He notices her hand rest on her side, where her scar from a few months ago is. “I’m not looking for anything more than some good friends. And good family. And...you can count yourself both, especially now that you’ve been honest with me about all this.” She grins. “I’m an actual spy, did you think I wouldn’t notice you had a massive crush on me?”

He shrugs. I guess it was really horribly obvious. He feels sort of pathetic all of a sudden, what if Riley’s just been laughing at him behind his back this entire time. “I guess it was pretty stupid.”

“You know, I’ll take it as a compliment. I’d rather it was you interested in me than some backstabbing traitor. At least I know you’re being honest when you said you liked me.” Matty was right, there’s still a lot of bitterness and resentment in Riley’s tone. She definitely isn’t over Nick.

“So...friends?”

“Yeah.” Riley smiles. “Let’s grab a burger and talk about Resident Evil 7, then.”

Bozer grins, at least she still wants to spend time with him after he confessed to being one step shy of a stalker. “On one condition. You give me some tips. Because I think my game could use a few tweaks.”

“Yeah, a few.”

“Here and there.” She grins. “But we’d better finish before Sam comes home or she’ll cream us both. I swear that woman used to be a sniper. I can’t beat her high score in anything. Not that I could beat Jack very often either, but he’d let me win. Sam is ‘no quarter asked or given’.”

MAC AND BOZER’S HOUSE

HOME...AT LEAST FOR NOW

Mac’s sitting by the fire, with Mickey sprawled halfway across his lap and a blanket around his shoulders. The California night is far from cold, but he hasn’t felt warm since he got locked in that freezer.

He jumps when he hear someone at the door, standing up quickly, as does Mickey, and the dog makes a soft, half-muffled bark. The key scraping in the lock reassures Mac, as does the heavy clump of tactical boots across the floor. It’s Jack. He hears Jack stop at the fridge and help himself to a drink before joining Mac at the firepit.

“Hey kiddo.” Jack says, taking a drink of his beer before setting it aside. “Riley told me Bozer’s still at her place, apparently he’s refusing to leave until Cage teaches him how she’s been winning some video game. I figured you could use some company.”

Mickey whines, and Jack rubs the dog’s head. “Okay, bud, human company. Not disparagin’ you or anything.” Mac chuckles a little at that. He knows he should talk to Jack, but he doesn’t know where to start. Sorry I got you injured in Argentina? Sorry you had to fly all the way to Boston because I’m
an incompetent field agent? Sorry I’m considering leaving the Phoenix?

“I hear Matty sent you to check out the college in case you wanted to go. After your hearing.” Mac’s been avoiding telling him that. It never felt like the right time to bring up possibly leaving, especially after Jack flew across the country just to make sure he was okay. Okay, that wasn’t where I wanted to start this. But if he doesn’t start talking, he’s never going to say anything. And Jack deserves to hear the truth.

“Yeah.” Mac sighs. “She’d pull whatever strings she had to to get me in if that’s what I wanted, she told me herself.”

“You deserve it,” Jack says. His hand is warm and solid on Mac’s shoulder. “You should be able to do whatever you want.”

“I don’t know what I want.” A few years ago, MIT would have been his dream. But after everything...

“You deserve to be with people who can really appreciate what you do.”

Why are they all pushing me to go? He thought he fit in here, he thought he belonged, and suddenly everyone is making plans to send him away as soon as they can? He almost wishes they’d never gotten the records from the LAPD, that nothing was going to change.

He wonders if this is Jack’s way of saying “You don’t belong in the field. You should find somewhere else where you do fit in”. After what happened at the lab, maybe Jack is right. But Mac doesn’t want that to be true. What I’m doing, right now...it’s everything I wanted. Sure, some part of him dreamed of going to college. But he wouldn’t have become a vigilante if an even bigger part of him didn’t want to help make the world a safer place by facing the dangers in it head on. I could change the world somehow, if I went and got a degree. But right now, I’m changing the world in ways that few other people can. There’s a lot of smart people out there, and a college degree is the way they’re going to make a difference. But I think I’m doing the most good I can by doing what I do now. And he’s never going to find anyone else like the people in his life right now.

He digs his fingers into Mickey’s warm fur, and the puppy snuggles closer against his feet. “I want to stay here with you.”

He sees tension melt out of Jack’s shoulders, and suddenly his voice is more relaxed, even though it sounds like he’s still trying to convince Mac he should go. Was Jack afraid I wanted to cut and run? That I wasn’t happy here with the team? “Mac, I know that sounds good, but listen, kid, this life is hard. And dangerous. I’m lucky I’ve lasted as long as I have. I’m scared to death for Riley, and you, and now Bozer too, every time we go on a mission.” Jack sighs. “You have the chance to get out. You should take it.” But it doesn’t sound like he means it. It sounds like Jack wants to plead with everything he’s got for Mac to stay. Both of us are trying to tell ourselves that me leaving is for the best. But we both know that’s a lie. And someone has to acknowledge that.

“Why haven’t you?” Mac asks. “You could get out too. You could go straight back home to Texas and run the ranch. Or work at the car repair. You could do anything else you wanted, too.”

“Nothing else...nothing else feels right,” Jack admits.

“I don’t think I could go to classes, and write papers, and...and do normal college student stuff, and not feel like I was wasting something important,” Mac says quietly. “Not after what I’ve seen. What I’ve been able to do with Phoenix. And...I don’t know if I could live on campus. Or with a roommate anywhere else.” Sharing space with someone he barely knows is a very, very unpleasant
thought. And very few people would want to put up with someone like me. With all the emotional baggage and the PTSD... He’s lucky Bozer does, honestly.

“Kid, no one’s gonna make you do anything or go anywhere. This is up to you.” Jack says, and Mac realizes he’s slowly been sliding closer. Now instead of just his hand on Mac’s shoulder, his whole arm is draped around him and Jack’s leaning against him. “You do whatever is gonna make you happy, you hear?”

“What makes me happy is you. All of you. All my family is here, Jack.” Mac whispers, turning so that Jack’s extended arm wraps him into a hug. “I don’t want anything else.”

“And that’s okay.” Jack pulls him close, and Mac leans against his warmth, feeling safe. This is home.

Chapter End Notes

If anyone's interested, Frankie's full name, "Rosalind Franklin" is actually a reference to a real early DNA researcher (Which I literally learned yesterday while shelving books at my library) . I'm attaching the link to the Wikipedia article in case anyone's interested in learning more...

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rosalind_Franklin
**Hole Puncher**

Chapter Notes

TW for mentions of past self harm and past non-con, as well as threat of non-con, in this chapter...

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**120-Hole Puncher**

**BEHIND THE FENCE AT THE BALL PARK**

**NOT WHERE JACK WANTED TO BE DURING THE GAME**

Jack yells encouragement as Mac steps up to bat. The annual softball game with the local NSA post is...well, things aren’t looking good. Jack hopes Mac’s crazy physics skills extend to calculating pitch speed and angle on the fly. *He’s good at pool, he should be good at this too, right?*

Jack’s not allowed to play. His arm still has two weeks of recovery time; this is why he really, really hates broken bones. He tried to get Dr. Modi to approve softball as a therapy regimen. She refused. “I do not want to see you coming back into my office for another six weeks because you slid into home and broke that arm again,” she’d told him.

He doesn’t really want to spend more time in PT, but he really wanted to get in there and play. And even though he knows it’s probably illogical, he thinks maybe if he *was* playing, they wouldn’t be losing quite so badly.

It’s not that the team isn’t good. He’s been polishing Riley’s game for years, Bozer’s shockingly a pretty skilled pitcher, and Jill Morgan played softball in college. But that doesn’t mean the Phoenix isn’t getting their asses kicked out on the field.

Cage is proving surprisingly poor at the game, but Jack thinks it’s probably because where she comes from, they play cricket. Apparently the rules to that are different enough that she’s struggling. And she’s definitely not going to be allowed to be the sub pitcher any longer.

“Come on, Mac, you got this!” he shouts. Riley’s on second, if Mac gets in a good hit they might still get two runs this inning. The pitcher winds up and throws…

And Mac swings hard, catching the ball nicely and sending it over into left field. He’s already running, and so is Riley.

Unfortunately, the NSA team has a very good outfielder. He snaps the ball up and tosses it to the second baseman, who tags Mac out, and then throws the ball to home. “Riley! Slide, get down!” Jack yells. She does, but it’s too late. She’s out too.

Mac and Riley look pretty dejected as they plod back to the benches, Riley slapping dust out of her shorts and shirt. Jack decides it’s time for an old-fashioned Dalton pep talk.

“Now listen up. Last time we played the NSA Listening Post Number 27 Panthers, we were pretty pathetic.”
Matty cuts him off. “We’re fourteen runs down, Jack, I think pathetic applies here too.”

“Whoa, whoa, little less Debbie Downer, boss lady, hey? We still have a chance to win.” Jack purposely avoids looking at the scoreboard and seeing just how big a liar he is.

Mac, of course, looks directly at it, then turns to Jack with a frown. “Uhh...with the runs, the outs, the innings...I’d say our current win expectancy is...”

“Okay, okay, C-3PO, don’t tell me the odds. The important word in that sentence is “expectancy”. We gotta expect to win or we’re not gonna be able to do it.” He can tell they’re not convinced. He’s not convinced. “Now softball is a team sport. And if you take “team” apart...you have “me”.” He looks around, pointing at each of them. “You’re a me, and you’re a me, and…” He stops at Matty’s withering glare. “I just meant, all those me’s need that extra ‘t’ and ‘a’ and then they’re a team. A winning team.”

Yeah, well, what does the ‘t’ and ‘a’ stand for then?” Bozer asks.

“Ummm... ‘Try’ and...uh…”

“Ardor?” Jill asks. When Jack frowns at her, she shrugs. “I read a lot of harlequins…” Her cheeks go almost as red as her jersey.

“Okay, we’ll go with that cause I can’t think of anything better.” Jack starts tugging people’s hands into a circle. “On three, “Trial and Ardor”.”

“That sounds like the title of one of your romance novels, Jill,” Riley giggles.

Matty isn’t amused. “Wrap it up Lombardi. Any longer and we forfeit for delay of game.”

“Lombardi was a football coach, thank you very much.”

Jack’s about to start the counting when Matty’s phone buzzes. She hushes them and listens for a second, and then hangs up. “We have to forfeit.”

“No! We just got our battle cry! We’re gonna bury the Panthers now!”

“If we don’t get back to the Phoenix immediately, we might be burying someone else.” Jack doesn’t like the look on Matty’s face. It isn’t often something worries her this much. Something really bad is about to happen.

Mac has to force himself not to pull a paperclip out of his pocket and start bending it as Matty begins talking. He can feel the tension radiating off of her as she begins loading the briefing.

“We just intercepted intel that an emerging terrorist group known as Omnus is gearing up for a major attack.”

“Omnus?” Mac doesn’t recall that name popping up before.

“They’ve been on our radar about four months and they’ve been pretty active ever since.” Matty gestures to the images of bomb sites and shootings. “They’re too well-organized to be that new, our intel points to a very patient group of people who’ve been waiting in the shadows until they were perfectly prepared to begin their plan. Which makes them highly dangerous, and difficult to track. Unlike most emerging groups, they’re very careful.”

Riley nods. “There’s chatter about them all over the dark web, but nothing solid up until this job
offer. They’re not even recruiting through it. So there’s no way to find an access point to even begin trying to hack them.”

Jack nods. “Okay, back to the ‘major attack’ part. We got a what, when and who on that? I mean, I don’t really need a why, not when we’re dealing with psychos like this, but…”

“Our best bet at finding out all that is for us to find the man they want killed.” Matty opens a dossier that is blank aside from a label at the top. “We learned that Omnus has offered ten million dollars for the assassination of someone they code-named ‘The Architect’. While the identity of the Architect remains a mystery, the identity of the assassin hired to kill him is not.” Matty pulls up a screen. “Our agents, when they intercepted the message, replied to it. Using the IP and one of the aliases of our old friend Murdoc.”

Mac sees the rest of the team shudder slightly when the grinning mugshot of the assassin pops up onscreen. He’s glad he’s not the only one with a case of the creeps. Although I doubt any of them have as much reason to detest him as I do.

“Who smiles in a mugshot?” Riley asks, twisting her necklace tightly in her fingers.

Jack turns to Matty. “Ok, I see what you did there. Pose as a real assassin and buy us enough time to find the Architect, because this Omnus thinks someone's on their way to kill him, so they won’t send anyone else.”

“Wait, what happens when they realize Murdoc is in jail?” Bozer asks. “Won’t they know this isn’t legitimate?”

Jack shakes his head. “Since we kept our arrest of Captain Banana Boat under wraps, nobody but us knows he’s not available.”

Mac glances at the screen, at the blank silhouette that they’re hoping to fill with a face and a name. “And then when we find the Architect, we get him into witness protection under cover of an assassination, and then use what he knows to get ahead of whatever Omnus is planning. And he gets to start his life over, free of Omnus searching for him.”

Jack shakes his head, staring up at the screen. “Ok, this sounds too good to be true. Save the Architect, stop a terrorist attack, get some intel on this freaky new group. So where’s the catch?”

“The only people who know who he is are Omnus. And they’re not going to willingly give that information up to anyone but Murdoc.”

“Wait.” Riley glances up. “What’s the one thing everyone knows about Murdoc?”

“Is that a trick question?” Bozer asks. “Because nobody except us really knows what he looks like, or his real name, not that Murdoc even is…”

“Exactly. The one thing everyone knows about Murdoc is that no one knows anything about him.” Riley stands up. “We intercepted Omnus’s communication and posed as Murdoc once. What if we kept doing it?” She taps her laptop. “I’ve scanned through his emails we retrieved from his phone, I think I could imitate him, right down to typing pattern and speed with the right algorithms.”

“There’s no guarantee this communication is going to remain online,” Matty says. “Omnus never specified what their method of contact with Murdoc would be. What if they ask for a phone call? Or a meeting in person?”

“I could do it,” Cage says, and there’s suddenly no trace of her heavy Aussie drawl. “I’ve talked to Murdoc, I know his verbal tics, his mannerisms. And you know I can sell them a stone cold killer.”
Riley shakes her head, she’s gone back to skimming the briefing on her laptop. “Apparently they’ve worked with Murdoc before, in their correspondence they said they hoped this time he would live up to his reputation. He’s crossed them before, and they’re taking a chance. They said the method of contact ‘remains the same’, and nothing else. The IP that sent the original message traced back to an internet cafe in Shanghai, and its security system was hacked at the same time the message was sent. There’s no way to identify the person behind it.”

“I’ll get everything we need,” Cage says. “I just need an approval to interview him, Matty.” Mac can see that she’s shaken at the thought of this meeting. She’s said little about her interview with him when they were trying to catch Chrysalis, but whatever it was made the normally unbreakable woman afraid of him.

“I’m sorry to have to ask you to,” Matty says. “But this is our best chance.”

Jack doesn’t like the sound when Matty calls to say Cage has information. It’s been too soon for her to have gotten through to Lord Nutbar, if he factors in the travel time to get to the prison Murdoc’s being held at. He apologizes to Dr. Modi for running off in the middle of their PT session and heads upstairs to join Riley, Mac, Matty, and Bozer in the War Room.

Matty’s got a video call running, and she nods when Jack walks in. “We’re all here. What’s your status with Murdoc?”

“He says he’ll only talk to MacGyver.” Cage glances at Matty. “His exact words were, ‘I don’t share trade secrets with anyone. So unless your name is Angus MacGyver, I’m afraid you’re out of luck.’ And ‘If little Angus decides he wants to come out and play, I’ll give him everything he wants to know. He knows I’m a man of my word.’ That’s all I could get out of him.”

“Oh hell no.” Jack snaps. “He’s not going in there with that freak.” He slams his good hand onto the table. “Let me go up there. I’ll get him talking.”

“Jack, that’s not going to do anyone any good,” Matty says. “He can’t tell us what he knows with a broken jaw.”

Cage nods. “Murdoc isn’t going to respond to threats. And he’s too good a manipulator to let me get inside his head again.” She’s visibly shaken, which isn’t helping Jack’s worry at all. If he’s getting to Cage, I can’t imagine what he could do to Mac. The kid’s tough, but his mental state tends to teeter on the edge of fragile, for good reason. And Murdoc would know how to take those tiny cracks and bust them wide open.

“I’ll do it.” Mac, ever the self-sacrificing idiot, speaks up. I knew he was gonna do something like that. “What he knows is the only way we’re going to be able to save the Architect and have a chance at stopping Omnus.”

“No way. Mac, I can’t let you do that.” Jack moves in front of him to catch Mac’s eyes. “I’m not letting you get subjected to his every whim. All he’s going to do is play mind games. If he won’t talk to Cage, he won’t talk to anyone. He just wants to mess with your head. And we’re not giving him the satisfaction.”

“He said he’s a man of his word, Jack. That’s what he said before the junkyard, too. When he promised not to kill you if I came.”

Jack shakes his head. Mac, I get that you want the best possible outcome. But this is a certifiable psychopath we’re dealing with here. He can’t be trusted. “And I kinda remember Patty getting shot
and all of us still having some pretty big guns trained on us until you beat his thingamajig with some rock and roll, so I’m not too sure I’d put much stock in his word.”

Matty sighs. “He won’t be alone, Jack. If Mac really does go through with this, I’m going in with him.”

“He won’t talk to me if you’re there,” Mac says.

“Maybe not. But he needs to understand the ground rules. If he doesn’t play nicely, I can make his life so much worse.”

PELICAN BAY STATE PRISON

NOT EXACTLY A TOURIST DESTINATION

Matty can tell Mac is uncomfortable. Actually, that’s much too mild a term for the pure terror that filled his eyes the moment they drove through the prison gates. Thanks to some phone calls, the prison authorities turned a blind eye to the former convict walking through their doors, the only name that will ever be listed on the visitor logs is an “Alex Summer.”

But the fact that he’s able to freely walk these halls isn’t doing a thing to make Mac calmer. He jumps at every slam of a door, and he keeps his head down as they walk. Matty can tell he’s surprised that the hoots and whistles are kept to a minimum, and are almost evenly split between being directed at him, her, or Riley. Because he’s not as clearly a possible victim for them to look forward to. She can’t imagine what it’s been like for him to walk halls like this in the unmistakable prison clothing. To know he’s not going to be able to go back out those doors and out those gates at the end of the day.

She can see him steeling himself against flinching at every voice, every movement from the cells they pass. She wonders if the prisoners can sense a former one of their own, if Mac’s reactions give him away. Fortunately, Jack’s doing a very good job of keeping things under control. His reaction to every whistle, every comment, every leer directed at any of them, is to basically snarl and glare until the offender decides Jack might not care if he joins them in here on a murder rap.

Once, when she looks back, she sees Riley flinch at a particularly lewd comment, and then wrap her fingers into Mac’s. She’s probably thinking of the same things we all are. That it’s horrible to live with for only fifteen minutes. That a lifetime would be unbearable, and that even those two years were a living hell.

When they get to the empty hall that houses interrogation rooms, Mac relaxes, if only a little. It’s quieter here, and he’s not going into the room alone. Matty enters first, and as arranged, she’s the first to talk, making sure she gets to set the ground rules for how this goes.

“Listen, highlights, whatever snarky comment you’re about to make, I’ve heard it a million times before, so good luck trying to get a rise out of me. I’m Matilda Webber, director of the Phoenix Foundation.”

“Ah, Patricia’s replacement. I hope she didn’t retire on injury, that shot to her shoulder should have healed perfectly. If she claims she’s suffered permanent damage, she’s lying to you. And just to be clear, Director Webber, I have nothing at all disparaging to say about you. I know what it’s like to be different. But since what makes me different is all up here,” he taps his head, “I have learned to...hide it from the world. For the most part. You haven’t been afforded the same luxury. You have my highest regard.”
“I don’t think a compliment from someone like yourself is exactly the kind of thing I’m going to put in my scrapbook,” Matty says. “Your words mean nothing to me. Unless you’re telling me how to find Omnus.”

“I like her, MacGyver. I like her a lot.”

“Flattery, like insults, will get you nowhere with me.” Matty sits down in one of the chairs, and Mac hesitantly takes the other. She pulls a manila folder out of her purse and sets it on the table.

“Don’t bother telling me why you came, thanks to Miss Cage I know everything I need to about your little plan to fool Omnus. So you want to have someone pose as me to get that information? You want me to tell you how to find them so that you can save this ‘Architect’, and such a cute nom de guerre, by the way.” He laughs, and Matty would almost think it was genuine if she didn’t know him. “I do love watching a bloody car wreck as much as the next guy. Well, more than the next guy. But even if you people could pull this off, I have absolutely no reason to help you. It’s simply a matter of...motivation. I don’t have any.” He smiles. “At least not at the moment. But some alone time with Angus...without these cuffs...” he rattles the chains against the table and raises his eyebrows. Matty watches Mac shiver. “Now that...That would constitute proper motivation.” He sighs, as if he’s just come to a satisfactory decision, and then continues in a voice that’s as casual as if he was ordering lunch off a diner menu. “If you want the Architect alive, I want MacGyver. Just half an hour, the two of us. Call it a conjugal visit.”

Mac clenches his fists, knuckles going white. *He’s crossed the line. Now it’s time for me to cross mine.* Matty can’t say she wasn’t anticipating this. The way Murdoc talks about Mac, some of the things Cage has said, all of it has left her with the pretty fair idea that the man is obsessed with the young agent, and also of what he might want from him.

“MacGyver, leave the room. It’s not a request.” He glances at her, confused. “I’d like to talk to him. Alone.” She watches until the door closes behind him. *He doesn’t need to be subjected to this monster’s taunts.*

Murdoc waits until the door has closed before turning on her. “So what’s the play here, boss lady? Send Angus away so he doesn’t have to hear you sell him out to get what you want? So you don’t have to watch the look in his eyes when you tell me I win? When he realizes what’s in store?” He laughs.

Matty just stares at him, until the laughter dies off.

“MacGyver is a son to me. What would you do...for your son?” She pulls opens the file she was carrying and slides it across the table, and smiles just a little at the faint flicker of surprise in his eyes. *We’re a step ahead of him, for now.* The papers are laying open to the photograph of a black haired boy, probably about eight years old.

Murdoc leans forward, hands folded, eyes boring into hers. “And what do you think this means to me, exactly? You may have noticed that unlike you, I am rocking a rather serious case of antisocial personality disorder. So what makes you think that I care if some child lives or dies?”

“You want people to think you’re not human, Murdoc, but you are. If you weren’t, you wouldn’t have gone to such lengths to hide your son away at one of the most expensive private schools in Switzerland. You pay for his room, his board, his education. He even gets gifts on Christmas. It makes sense that you want to keep your son safe. He’s an innocent, in a world of dangerous predators, who wouldn’t think twice about going after him. And whatever you would do to keep your son safe, I will do to protect mine.”
“You’re threatening a child?” Murdoc asks. “And here I thought you were supposed to be the good guy.”

“Only saying that if you hurt my family, I come after yours.” Matty smiles coolly. “Of course I wouldn’t put Cassian in danger. A Phoenix tac team is taking him into protective custody as we speak. But if you put a toe out of line, you will never hear a thing about your son ever again, and he’s going to find out the truth about what his daddy does for a living.”

Murdoc stares at her for a long minute. She can tell he’s trying to decide if she’s the kind of person to follow through on this. Trying to decide if it’s enough motivation for him. I’m not convinced he’s completely heartless. He’s just twisted.

“You win, Matilda. I won’t touch your precious boy genius. Not so much as a hair on his head.” He shrugs. “But I do have a counteroffer. I need to talk to him alone. Without Mama Bear breathing down my neck. Or Papa Bear either.” He smiles. “Or I walk away, and so does your chance of finding the Architect.” She nods, slowly. She’ll be outside watching the whole time, but she knows Murdoc isn’t lying about this. She walks to the door, but turns around when Murdoc speaks up one more time.

“You’re wrong about one thing, Matilda. I don’t pretend I’m not human. I embrace my humanity. Because the human is the only creature with the capacity for true evil.”

The door buzzer makes Mac shiver. He’s heard it too many times. He knows he’s turning into a nervous wreck in here. His hands are shaking and he’s even taken the risk of digging a paperclip out of his pocket, shaping it into a tiny raven. Jack and Riley and Cage seem unsettled too, but he’s pretty sure that’s mostly due to Murdoc.

Every time he hears the distant clang of a door, he flinches. Once he even dropped his paperclip, and he made no move to pick up the half-finished sculpture because he knows how filthy the floors are. And besides, bending down is dangerous. Never put yourself in a position that leaves you vulnerable. Every protective instinct is on high alert all over again. The distant yelling, the smell of the cheap cleaners, the unidentifiable aura of the prison itself, all of it is absolutely horrible. He feels like this is some trick and they’re going to shove him in a cell, lock the door behind him, and leave. He knows that’s absolutely ridiculous, but the last time he was in a place like this he had to stay.

He tries to remind himself that in a few weeks he won’t have to worry about that again, but he can’t help wondering what happens if Charlie’s evidence isn’t conclusive enough. What if we make things worse? He’s pretty sure that won’t happen, but he can’t shake the thought of being led out of the courtroom in cuffs again, taken back to prison and this time with no chance of being let out to work. He shudders.

He tries to hide it, but Jack notices immediately and puts a hand on his shoulder. “You don’t have to do this, Mac. We can walk away right now. Find some other way to catch this Omnus. We don’t need that creep.”

And then Matty opens the door and steps out. “He’s agreed he won’t ask for anything physical again.” The look in Jack’s eyes is pure murder, and Mac flinches. “But he does want to talk to you alone.”

“Matty…” Jack begins. Mac cuts him off.

“I’m going to do it.” He can’t explain, not even to himself, why he feels like he has to do this. Closure, maybe? Seeing someone else in there and not me? Being able to walk out of that room a
And then Murdoc’s voice drifts through the door. “Oh MacGyverrr, let’s get to wo-ork.”

He shivers, but he walks through the door when the guard opens it. He notices his hands instinctively finding the position they’d be in if he was cuffed, and he deliberately moves them apart, holding them at his sides with his fist clenched tightly. *I’m not the one chained up, not this time.*

“Well, well. It’s good to see you again MacGyver. Tell me, how does it feel to be the one on that side of the table for a change? It must all be so surreal for you. Would you be more comfortable in the jumpsuit and handcuffs?” He raises his manacled hands and rattles the chain holding them to the table. “I’m sure that can be arranged.”

Mac pulls out the chair and sits down, resting his arms on the table the way Jack did when he came to talk to Mac in CCI. “I’m perfectly fine right here.”

“Oh, is this what it felt like? When they came to recruit you?” Murdoc’s smile is much too wide. “A welcome relief from that silent little box in solitary? Oh wait, that’s right, you wanted to be there. You chose it.” He smirks. “I wonder why…”

“We’re not here to talk about me. We’re here to talk about you.” Mac needs to keep this conversation focused. While Matty was negotiating with Murdoc, Cage was quickly running Mac though a few key things he’ll need to know to keep this interview from going badly. Although there’s no guarantee they’ll be enough.

“Talking about you, talking about me...It’s all the same in the end, though, isn’t it?”

“I don’t know what you mean.” Mac is genuinely a bit baffled. *Is he really convinced that the fact that now both of us have spent time behind bars makes us the same on some level?*

“Don’t pretend we’re nothing alike, Angus,” Murdoc hisses. “I know who you are. Under all the pretending, all the lies you tell yourself, you and I are the same. We make problems go away. You know as well as I do that the law,” Murdoc drums his fingers on the table, “is...unreliable at best. Corrupt at worst. Only people like you and I have the courage to do what needs to be done.”

Mac leans on the table. “We’re nothing alike. Don’t tell me any differently. You know it. You’re just trying to make me believe your lies.”

“Ohhh so they didn’t throw you to the wolves completely unprepared. Looks like you’ve been taking some lessons from Miss Cage. I must admit, *that* alias is growing on me.” Mac resists the urge to get caught up on a rabbit trail about Sam. Clearly Murdoc knows plenty about her mysterious past.

“All we need to know from you is how to contact Omnus.”

“Oh, no, no, no. That’s not *all* you need, Angus.” Murdoc shakes his head. “You can’t just call Omnus. They’re not the sort of place with an answering service and all that. You need to prove you’re good enough to work with them. You have to play their game.”

“Apparently you’ve played it before. And won. So tell me what to do.”

“And then what? You weren’t planning on letting Miss Cage pose as me, were you?” He chuckles. “Oh, I would have loved seeing her face when she realized who Omnus is, but...well, I’d rather kill her myself. So I’m going to give you all a little hint, and say that if she shows up pretending to be me, they’ll know they have the wrong assassin.”
“So they meet in person.”

“Let’s just say they like to see who they’re working with.” He smiles. “They’ve only seen me from a distance, that’s a condition of all my contracts, of course. If you so much as suggest a face to face, they’ll know you aren’t me, but oh, I assure you, whatever meeting they plan, they will be watching. And, well, it’s hard to tell under all those layers, but I think you’re a close enough figure. The height...that’s a bit of an issue, but nothing you can’t come up with a clever way to solve, I’m sure.”

“Wait.” Mac’s still trying to grasp what exactly Murdoc means. “You’re saying I have to pose as you?” This must be some sick joke. He’s still playing with me, trying to convince me we’re equals somehow.

“If you want Omnus to believe it’s legitimate. Unfortunately, Jack, bless his heart, doesn’t really have the acting skills for a job like this. Oh, I’m sure he could play their killer to perfection, but he doesn’t have that extra...flair. The panache. He’s a soldier. He gets the job done, but there’s no signature. No pleasure, just duty. You, on the other hand...well, a vigilante who called himself the Phoenix...you could probably pull it off.”

“I didn’t actually choose that name.”

“No, but you embraced it.” Murdoc shrugs. “Of course, I’ll have to do plenty of tweaking, but...I can work with this. But first things first. You’re going to have to lose that ridiculous jacket.” The way he says it, Mac can sense the underlying desire for a lot more than the jacket to be removed. The look in Murdoc’s eyes is unmistakable. Mac’s seen that hunger, that predatory want, far too often. And he can’t tell himself that the only thing Murdoc finds fascinating about him is his mind.

“I’d rather talk about something other than choice of wardrobe.”

“Oh, MacGyver, how cute. Don’t you know that clothes make the man? Or, rather, the assassin?” Murdoc smiles. “Now, really, I’ll admit, it’s partly Hollywood’s fault, but the black trench coat and the leather gloves...well, it kind of gives you an automatic respectability. It takes so much of the work out of convincing them you’re the man for the job. Now really, how much would I frighten you if I was wearing a sweater vest and glasses?” Mac wants to say that Murdoc would be terrifying if he was wearing a hawaiian shirt and bermuda shorts, but that’s because he knows the man. To a potential client, that might not be the case. But still, he thinks anyone who looks into Murdoc’s eyes would know in a minute that the man is a cold-blooded monster.

“But I did mean what I said about that jacket. It’s distracting. I don’t work well with distractions.” Mac doesn’t like the way Murdoc’s eyes follow every move as he slides his arms out of the leather jacket and hangs it on the back of the chair, or the way he licks his lips before he begins talking again. He shivers, feeling suddenly naked, and fights a completely illogical desire to grab the jacket and cover himself from Murdoc’s gaze. It wouldn’t do any good, what he’s seeing is all in his head anyway. Mac doesn’t let himself dwell on what he probably looks like now in Murdoc’s mind.

“I can’t tailor the suit till I see how it fits.” His eyes rake over Mac’s body again, and Mac shudders. “So indulge me, won’t you?”

“What do you mean?” Mac struggles to keep the crack out of his voice. He can’t be asking me to...to strip for him. He can’t do that, he won’t. He’ll just walk out that door. But that’s how he already sees me.

“The evidence room still has the clothes from when I was booked,” Murdoc says. “I’d like you to change into them. You’ll need to look the part when I send you on a dry run.”
"A dry run?"

"Something completely unrelated to this case. There's always a job floating around for me. My west coast contact in San Francisco will probably have something you can do. One of his "little perfect jobs" as he likes to call them. Give him a ring. Oh, and I would suggest using the alias you met me under...he knows Kurt, not Murdoc." Murdoc grins. "Let’s see what raw materials I have to start with, shall we?"

Riley was definitely not expecting the people in the back booth to be a middle aged suburban-looking couple. They want to hire a hitman?

Getting in touch with Murdoc’s west coast contact was surprisingly easy. After pulling the contacts list off his phone, Riley called the one listed as L. Marquez, with a San Francisco area code, and got her ear talked off by a chatty Hispanic man who was more than willing to give her all the details, including plenty she didn’t need to know, about how he’d tracked down a couple named Morse who wanted to hire a hitman. She was able to decipher a location and meet time in amongst the random chatter about a Cousin Diego and something to do with a pottery exhibit at a museum. She thinks there was something about an ex-girlfriend in there too, but she’s not entirely certain. Her head is still spinning a little.

She doesn’t like being the middleman in all of this. Murdoc needs to be able to see what Mac is doing, so he needs the video feed from the restaurant security camera she hacked. And she’s not leaving her rig alone with him.

She can’t forget that a few months ago this guy had her, Jack and Patty at gunpoint. But he’s shockingly calm around her. Only a “good to see you still alive, Agent Davis, I was a bit worried after that whole mess with your boss Chrysalis,” and then he turned to a singleminded fixation on the video feed. He’s talking Mac through the whole thing, and Riley hopes no one notices the mini comm unit Mac’s wearing. "Try to remember you're not there to get a cat out of a tree. You're here to get a name to turn into an epitaph. And never, never let them see your face."

"Good morning, Mr. and Mrs. Morse."

"Hello, Mr…" The man trails off, sounding incredibly confused. He sounds like he’s trying to hire a house painter, not a contract killer.

"I've collected many names, but I've always been partial to Murdoc." Mac’s voice is chillingly similar to Murdoc’s tone, and Riley shivers. "I’m sorry for the secrecy, but I’m sure you understand that someone in my line of work can’t allow himself to be recognized."

"Good work, Angus," Murdoc practically purrs. "Now get them to tell you a story."

"Why are we here?"

"This is our daughter, Anna. A year ago she was murdered." The woman slides a photo along the windowsill, and Mac takes it to lay on the table in front of him. "This is her with her husband Brad."

Mr. Morse speaks up. "We know he did it. So do the police. But they couldn’t find a murder weapon. Or enough evidence to charge him." Riley sees the muscles in his jaw clench. "He beat her. The detective who came to the house cried when he told us. They wouldn’t even let us see her face."

Mac’s hand, on the table, curls into a fist. The leather gloves he’s wearing, Murdoc’s gloves, because
the creep insisted on Mac wearing his clothes for this, make that action look shockingly dangerous.

"Lock up your feelings, MacGyver. They came for a killer, not some hero."

"I can handle this for you. We just need to settle on my...fee."

Both of them blanch. "N-no, there must be some kind of mistake..." the woman stutters. She gathers her jacket and both of them start to slide out of the booth.

“I’m sorry, you thought I was going to do a job like this for free?” But they’re already gone. Mac is speaking to an empty room.

Mac can’t hide the anger seething under the surface when he opens the door and walks into the holding room. He knows Murdoc probably relishes the visible fury in his face and voice and posture, but he can’t bring himself to care. "You kill people...for free?"

Murdoc chuckles. "Oh, poor MacGyver. You didn’t have all the information. Well, get used to it. You never have all the information. Clients lie, jobs go sideways, you...have to improvise." Murdoc lifts his hands. “Oh, I thought that was your specialty. Was I wrong?”

Mac paces, too frustrated to sit down.

"The truth is, and you know it, you lost that job long before you asked about a fee. Mr. and Mrs. Morse walked in that restaurant looking for a dangerous predator. Every species instinctively knows how to spot one. If you don’t make something in them crawl the minute you open your mouth, they’re gonna know you’re not the real deal. This isn’t starring in some middle school play. It's not enough to pretend to be me. You have to become me."

“So tell me how.”

“You have to believe that what you’re doing is not only fun, and lucrative, it’s right. ”

Mac shakes his head. “Murder for hire as a moral code? Sorry for finding that funny.”

Murdoc simply leans back with a smile. "So self righteous, MacGyver. Don't pretend you didn't do that too. Don't tell me every one of those cartel thugs survived.” Mac feels the hot anger churning in his stomach being replaced by a cold pit of guilt. “Oh, you tried not to kill, but it wasn't always an option, now was it?” Murdoc smiles. “Oh, it certainly wasn’t the planned precision of my work, but the meth lab that not all those El Diablos members escaped, the Meridas lieutenant who crashed his car trying to flee the police, because you blew out his tire with some little contraption…” Mac clenches his fists around the back of the chair. I didn't want to kill any of them. Sometimes things just go wrong. But at the end of the day, those men would have killed if they hadn’t been stopped. What they were doing was destroying thousands of lives. He’d been able to live with it, until...“And oh, of course, we can’t forget poor George Ramsay. Maybe you’re right about us being different, MacGyver. I don’t go around blowing up innocent janitors. I only kill the people who deserve it.”

Mac takes a deep breath. Even though he knows the truth, it doesn’t make it any easier to listen to this. What if it was my fault? “I didn’t kill Ramsay. And my friends found evidence to prove it. In a few weeks, everyone will know the truth.”

“Ooh, so defensive. Do you really think I care if you’ve killed or not? Do you think that matters to me?” Murdoc twists his fingers in the chains holding his hands. “It only matters to you. Honestly, MacGyver, do you think when people find out, it’s going to change anything? This trial won’t make headlines. It’ll be shoved into the back pages with an article on pollution in the Pacific Ocean. No
one cares, MacGyver. People want stories of blood and gore, not innocence. No one wants to hear that you’ve been cleared, and no matter where you go, you’re still always going to have that prison sentence attached to your name. Might as well just start wearing the orange jumpsuit again, because that’s all anyone’s ever going to see when they look at you.”

Mac knows better than to say anything. If I open my mouth, he’ll find a way to twist my words, to use them against me. So it’s better if I let him talk himself out, and then try to get this conversation back on track.

“Your only chance of acceptance is with those people you call a team. And if you want them to like you, I can help with that. Make this mission a success, make them see how much they need you. So sit back and let me teach you what you need to know.”

The jacket is gone today, left in the hands of that loyal guard dog pacing the hall, and Angus’s sleeves are rolled to his elbows, the shirt collar undone by one button. That alone makes a swallow or two and a tiny, controlled shake of the head necessary before Murdoc is capable of speaking in a normal tone. Such a tease.

Green is definitely his color. Well, Murdoc’s fairly sure there isn’t one that he can’t pull off, but green brings out the sharp blue in his eyes so well. Although I’d love to see him in orange.

Today, they’re supposed to be talking about the correct words and phrases to use when negotiating and accepting a contract. But that will take five minutes, MacGyver’s mind is like a sponge, he’s a fast learner. But that means they have the better part of a day to spend in a more...pleasurable conversation.

“Yesterday was a good lesson, MacGyver. Now you know how much you don’t know.”

“Which is why I’m here.” Angus is clearly anxious, he’s got one of those paperclips he’s turning into something. Murdoc can’t tell what it is yet, it’s mostly hidden in the boy’s long clever fingers. “So you can tell me what I need to know to make Omnus believe I’m the real thing.”

“No, that’s not really it, is it?” Murdoc asks. MacGyver looks up sharply. “No, I think the real reason is much simpler. It’s that your team needs something, and they told you to walk into my parlor to get it.”

“I volunteered. They didn’t make me come here.”

“Oh, because that’s what they let you think. But the truth is, they chose to talk about this case in front of you, did they? They didn’t need to tell you I was only going to talk to you. But they did. They let you hear it, and they knew you would take that bait.”

“They don’t do that. They would never manipulate me.”

“Oh but they would. Because everyone does. Oh, it’s nothing against them personally, I’m sure they’re very nice people. But no one can resist when someone so...pliable...is in their hands. Poor little MacGyver, always so eager to please. To make the problems go away, to make everyone like him. You did it for Daddy dearest, didn’t you? And I’m sure you did it all the time in prison.”

Angus is grinding his teeth together, and the half-finished paperclip sculpture has fallen to the table. It looks vaguely like a window.

“I’ve heard the stories about you, beautiful,” Murdoc whispers. “Do you remember a Marco Alvarez?” The boy shudders, and his fear is deliciously intoxicating. “Because he remembers you.
Oh he remembers.”

“I thought I was here to learn more about you.” He’s still fighting back, still trying to be strong. Perfect. I love a fighter. It’s so much more satisfying when they finally break and beg for it to be over.

“Oh, didn’t you know, it’s not a one-way street. And since you don’t seem to want to tell me a single thing about yourself, I’ve had to ask around. You know, most people are just dying to talk about themselves and their petty little lives and problems and successes. As if I care. But you, you fascinate me. And yet you never tell me anything.”

MacGyver stiffens. “There’s nothing to tell.”

“Oh, I beg to differ. I hear a lot of things. I have an antisocial personality disorder, yes, but that doesn’t mean I’m always an introvert. I talk to people. I get to know them. And they tell me things.”

“Then you don’t need to hear it from me.” The boy is losing ground and he’s desperate.

“If you want to hear about me, you’ll have to indulge me a little. So I can tell you about yourself.” He smiles. “When you share a cell wall with someone, you learn what they dream about. What they fantasize about.” He licks his lips and watches the boy cringe. He wants to think he’s free of that place. Of that past. But the truth is, he’ll never disappear from the minds of everyone who’s had him. MacGyver might have walked out of the prison, but he’s left pieces of himself behind.

Murdoc would be lying if he said he didn’t want one of those pieces for himself. Like the pilgrim travelers who spent everything on what hawkers claimed was a piece of the cross of Christ. He’s always been fascinated by what people treasure, by what they yearn for. They wanted to feel connected to something, to carry a part of it with them. He thinks he might finally understand it.

MacGyver is clenching and unclenching his fists. “When this case is over, all you’re going to be is a memory. Just like everything else in my past.”

“Oh, I can assure you, I’m not like the others. They didn’t know what a good thing they had. They took you for granted.” Murdoc sighs. “But you would never be just another prison whore to me, Angus.”

“I wasn’t…”

“Oh, don’t lie to me. With a face like that, I’m sure you were the one everyone was dying to get their hands on.” Murdoc smiles. “Did they let you keep that lovely long hair inside? It’s really quite a good look for you. Lets everyone who sees you believe you’re still innocent. Still a child. Tell me, how long did it take them to come for you? A week? A day?”

MacGyver flinches.

“And I wonder where it happened…Was it the showers? Someone who couldn’t resist such a pretty thing there for the taking?” He swallows thickly at the mental image the idea presents. But clearly he wasn’t right, MacGyver’s reaction wasn’t visceral enough. Not for it to have been his first time.

“No…wait, I think it was your cell.” The sudden wide-eyed fear tells him he’s gotten it right. “Poor frightened little Angus, all alone with nowhere to run to…”

“Stop.” His voice has gone harsh, but not a cold harsh. Not like his father’s. No, the son’s anger is a hot anger, like a fire. Like all those explosions he caused; and it’s wonderful, Murdoc feels like basking in the heat of it. But the anger is only a sham. Below it is fear. The boy is begging, and it’s even more beautiful than Murdoc could have imagined.
“It’s precious, that even after all this time you still think someone will listen when you tell them ‘stop’. If all those men never paid attention when you screamed it, what makes you think I will now?”

Angus doesn’t answer. He slams his hand on the table and turns away, but not before Murdoc sees the way his shoulders shake with suppressed sobs.

*His tears are so beautiful. It hurts to want him so much, to be so close. To imagine what it would be like to have him.* The boy is beautiful, precious, even if he is damaged. Murdoc feels a sudden surge of rage at every single man who has been given the pleasure he’s denied. *I’d love to tear them all apart with my bare hands.*

They didn’t appreciate him, of that Murdoc is certain. *Very few people can see the true masterpiece in pain and fear. They had something sublime, and all they cared to gain from it was the pleasure for their own body, or the power that comes with proving they were strong enough to take what they wanted.* He’s certain none of them ever bothered to appreciate how lovely the boy’s face would be covered in tears; the pure delight of what he would look like trembling in fear and flushed with shame. *They’re fools. They’re like men who had a Rembrandt in their hands and sold it for the price of a loaf of bread.* They got what they wanted, but they’ve wasted so much.

He can’t help studying the boy’s body, the way he moves when he walks into the room, the way his fingers constantly fumble with the small piece of wire he holds. *Such clever hands. Always busy.*

He wears clothes that suit his slender body, and it’s not terribly hard to imagine what he must look like without them. Murdoc’s fingers itch to touch soft skin, to run his fingers through that golden hair. *He’s beautiful, even now. But it would be so much better to see him scream.*

But Murdoc can be patient. After all, the best things are the ones waited for, and anticipation is half the pleasure. He won’t be in here forever, and once he’s free, there will be no place that the boy can hide from him. Not even his precious guard dog will be able to save him then.

Murdoc half-expects Angus to leave. After everything, after the tears, he should be bolting, ashamed to have shown weakness. That’s what everyone else Murdoc has turned interrogations around on does.

But instead, he scrubs at his face with his sleeve and turns back. “Are you finished harassing me? Can we get down to the real business now?” *Oh, my dear lovely Angus, I wish we could.* But it will just have to wait.

Murdoc nods and leans back. “Of course. What would you like to ask today? I’m an open book.” Just for today, he will truly be. The boy’s earned it. He’s stronger and braver than anyone Murdoc has met. *I like him. I like him a lot.*

Jack paces the halls until Matty tells him to either stop or leave. He tries stopping. But then he can hear Murdoc’s voice as he taunts Mac, and he can’t stand it. *He’s trying to turn him against us. Against the only family he has.* Jack’s sure Mac won’t believe the lies, but what if some small part of him does? What if he starts to question his place with them, wonder if they only want him for what he can do for them? If they’ll abandon him the moment he proves less than useful?

*Who are you fooling, there’s more than a small part of him that already believes that. And Murdoc is tearing at it.* Jack’s not afraid that Mac will turn on them. What he is afraid of is that Mac will think they’re going to turn on him.
“Matty, you have to pull him out.” Jack doesn’t know how she can stand there and listen to this. How she can think it’s okay to let that monster torment Mac like this.

When she turns around, her eyes are damp. “And what, Jack? Make him believe the lie? If we storm in there, he’ll know we’re watching every move, listening to every word. He’ll think that it’s proof we don’t trust him. That we think Murdoc will break him. We pull him out now, we make everything worse.”

From the standpoint of cold logic, Jack knows she’s right. They can prove that Mac can trust them by trusting him to handle what Murdoc throws at him, by making it clear that they believe he’s competent. But Jack’s never been a cold logic man, and what his heart is telling him is that his kid is in there being ripped to shreds by a cruel, callous monster who knows just what to say to damage him.

Jack can’t stand here and listen to this. He hurries out, and he knows he seems awfully much like a kid stomping his feet as he’s dragged to somewhere he doesn’t want to go, but he’s too angry to care. So write me up for insubordination. He wants to punch something, but his arm’s still not fully healed, and he knows a cinderblock wall would do more damage than he can afford. They still have a terrorist ring to take down and an Architect to save, and he’s damn well not going to take himself out of commission when it looks like Mac’s going to be the key to the whole operation. I have to have his back.

Jack waits in the car. For a while, he listens to a couple of the Willie Nelson CDs he brought with him, but it doesn’t feel right without Mac there to criticize his singing when he joins in on the choruses. He misses Riley, but she’s running tech from their hotel. He doesn’t blame her. Yesterday shook her up. Spending time in the same room as that creep... He doesn’t want either of his kids in there. It should be me. He wants to break some bones.

He jumps when Mac knocks on the window. “Done for the day,” he says quietly. “Matty’s staying to talk to him. She told me to go on back with you, she’ll get a ride.” Jack doesn’t feel any better about hearing that. Whatever happened, she felt it was worth risking the chance of his cooperation to make her point.

Mac is shivering violently, and Jack’s sure it’s from more than just the chill in the cell. Matty wouldn’t have let him get away with anything...right?

“What did he tell you today? How to torture someone?” Jack wonders what it is that left Mac so shaken, but asking the kid outright is only going to make him shut down.

“Something like that.” Mac climbs in and Jack watches while he buckles his seatbelt, a habit he’s learned to acquire since a near-disaster in Yemen. He starts down the road, and the second the prison gates fade out of the reaview, Mac seems to collapse. He takes a deep, shuddering breath, and his shoulders sag forward, making him look like he’s curling into himself.

“Hey kid, you hungry? I saw a decent-looking coney place on the way in today.”

Mac just shakes his head. Jack was pretty sure that was going to be the response. Luckily, they have food in the room, and not just Riley’s chips and dip. Jack made sure she had something substantial while they were gone; he feels like he’s raising a teenager sometimes with that girl’s affinity for junk food.

Mac huddles up in the seat, knees to his chest. “Jack, he knew. About...about...” Jack doesn’t need to hear it.
“Oh Mac.” Jack stops, pulling the car over into the first parking lot he sees, he hears the brakes screech as he stops. “I’m gonna strangle him. You’re not going back there.” He was afraid of this. The way Murdoc looks at Mac, the tone of voice he uses, the faint suggestive things he says; it all pointed to this.

“I have to. We need…”

“No. Whatever the Phoenix and Matty and anybody else need is not your problem. What you need is to never see that psychopath again.” He sighs and leans his head on the steering wheel. “I told them this was a terrible plan. I should have insisted…” He sits up with a start when he feels the hand on his shoulder.

“Jack, I’m going to be okay. I’m not there anymore. He can’t hurt me. None of them can hurt me. I’m never going back.” He sounds like he might be telling himself that too. “In another few weeks this whole thing will become part of my past.”

“It’s not worth tearing yourself apart for, Mac.”

“I’m going to be okay.” Mac looks up at him. “I have to be. I have to be able to look him in the eyes and know he can’t touch me. And make sure he knows it too. The only way I’m ever going to be able to move on is if I remind myself the past can’t hurt me anymore.”

Jack reaches for his shoulder. “I get it. If this is what you have to do to get some closure, that’s okay. Just don’t be going in there for the wrong reasons. Because I guarantee you, trying to make us happy and get us what we want isn’t a good enough reason to be in the same room with that psycho.”

“Don’t worry. I’m not going to let him get to me.” Mac’s shaky breaths and trembling hands say otherwise, but Jack isn’t going to push it.

“You sure you don’t want a coney?”

“I don’t want to share a room with you after a chili dog.” Mac chuckles, and the tension starts to leave his face and eyes. Jack grins. We only have to survive this a little longer.

Riley needs something to focus on besides the fact that Mac is trapped in a room with Murdoc. She hates the idea that Mac is anywhere near a prison again. Nothing is going to happen to him. He’s not an inmate now, they can’t hurt him. But what if something goes wrong, if somehow their work to cover his tracks isn’t good enough…

She has to stop thinking about this, and there’s nothing here to distract her. Trying to trace Omnus’s communication is a dead end, and there are only so many times she can read a dossier about an unidentified target.

For lack of anything better to do, she starts reorganizing her workspace. She shuffles through papers, putting them in stacks of things she still needs, and things she can throw away. A small post-it flutters down from one heap as she taps them into order.

It’s the contact information for the job Murdoc had Mac test. The one the San Francisco contact gave them. Riley prepares to crumple the paper and toss it away, but she finds herself unfolding it again and staring at the name and the meet details.

She hates that the Morses felt desperate enough to hire an assassin to get justice for their daughter. She can’t help Mac, but maybe she can do something for this family grieving and having to watch a murderer walk free.
Riley can’t imagine what it would be like for a family to lose a child to that kind of brutality. She also knows what it’s like to witness it, sometimes to be on the receiving end. But Elwood was no killer.

As much as she despises everything the man did, Riley knows he wasn’t vicious. Broken, angry, yes. But it wasn’t the animal ferocity of this case. Yes, he could have done something accidentally. But it would never have been this bad. She can’t stomach seeing the crime scene photos anymore. There must be some way to make that man pay for what he did. There must be.

Mac feels like screaming in frustration. Murdoc is the sort of person who talks in circles, making his point only after a rambling string of insults, degrading comments, and pointless stories. They’re three days in, and he still barely knows more than he did to begin with.

Murdoc is still rambling on in strangely poetic descriptions of his craft. It would be chilling if Mac wasn’t so desensitized to Murdoc’s personality by now. It scares him how quickly he’s learned the man’s speech patterns, and how easy it’s become for him to imitate them. Murdoc is strangely both repellant and unforgettable.

“You have to become a shadow, in the bright sunlight. You have to learn not to leave behind a trail. Nothing financial, nothing biological, nothing digital.”

“I’ve been a vigilante and a government operative. I know how to cover my tracks.” They need something more useful. Like the details of how Omnus is going to contact them.

“I beg to differ, MacGyver, you got sent to prison, remember?” Murdoc laughs. “Oh right, that was your conscience talking. You turned yourself in, and you confessed the second you were told about that nice piece of evidence from the passing Google Street car.” He chuckles. “I must say, I’m surprised. Apparently your father left a little too soon to turn you into his mini-me.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Mac asks. How could he possibly know about that much of my past? The Ramsay case was all over the papers, everyone in LA knew. But only a handful of people know my father walked out.

“Oh Angus. All this time and you still don’t know a thing about your precious missing father.” The man laughs, a hollow, chilling sound. “Didn’t you ever wonder why he never came back for you?”

Mac grits his teeth but forces his voice to stay calm. “I’ve stopped wondering. He’s gone. And I’ve moved on.”

“I could tell you so many stories. I’ve met him. But you know, he never talked about a son.” Murdoc shrugs. “Didn’t you know you existed until I found out about the hit on you.” Mac feels like someone’s holding him underwater. Murdoc knows my father? He can’t fathom these two ever meeting...but then again, James MacGyver was a very secretive man, Mac doesn’t think he ever really knew him.

Murdoc’s clearly picked up on his confusion. “Oh, look at this! Boy genius didn’t know what Daddy did for a living. All those smarts, and it never once dawned on you? You never even suspected the truth?” His smile is all teeth. “Daddy dearest and I worked together, for a while. Well, I suppose that’s a bit generous to say. We...crossed paths. Sometimes a job required combined skill sets. I must say, I’ve never seen anyone who could build a better bomb.”

Mac shudders. I wonder if I ever defused his work. If any of the cartels ever hired him. He assumed the bombs’ makeshift nature was because cartel members couldn’t be bothered to make something sophisticated when a phone and a few wires would do the trick. But what if it was because someone like him was making them?
“You know, I think I understand now why he left you behind. Why he never talked about you. What kind of criminal wants to admit he has a son who turned himself in to the police and plead guilty?” Murdoc shakes his head. “You have his skills, but you don’t have what it takes for him to want you.”

“You know, I think I understand now why he left you behind. Why he never talked about you. What kind of criminal wants to admit he has a son who turned himself in to the police and plead guilty?” Murdoc shakes his head. “You have his skills, but you don’t have what it takes for him to want you.”

“Why would I want someone like that to want me?” But even as Mac says it, he feels like something’s shattering inside him. *All these years, everyone’s told me that that’s not the reason my father left. And now I know it is.*

“Maybe you don’t see it now. But there are certain advantages to living on this side of the law. You wouldn’t have had to sit in a cell for two years if you were what he wanted. He could have rescued you easily; I’ve seen him break men out of far more difficult places. But he left you there. And do you want to know why? Because you were a disappointment.”

Mac slams his hands on the table. *I was a disappointment? For having a heart? For being human? What kind of a monster is my father?*

“Oh, look at that. Maybe you are more like him than he thinks.”

Mac shudders. *Could I really become someone like that?* But when he remembers what he was like, the months after Pena’s death, when he came the closest to cold-blooded killing he ever had. *I lost a mentor. He lost a wife. And it terrifies Mac that the next person he loses could push him over the edge. If it was Bozer, or Jack, or Riley... The truly horrifying thing is that he knows he would kill. For them. Because of them.

“But you shouldn’t be angry at me, Angus. You should be angry at Patricia. And Matilda. All this time, they’ve known the truth. And they kept it from you.” Mac feels like his whole world is falling to pieces underneath him. *Is he really telling the truth? Murdoc is a pathological liar, Mac’s sure half the things he’s heard these past few days are fake. But what does he have to gain from lying about this? All he would do would be to ensure that I didn’t trust another word he said. This lie, unlike the things Mac’s heard about peanut allergies and random victims Murdoc’s had over the years, involves people who could prove him wrong. The rest of his lies have been about himself. This one isn’t.*

“I’m sure you don’t believe me. Why don’t you go ask Matilda yourself?” Murdoc gestures to the door. “Oh, aren’t you just dying to know if it’s true?”

The moment Mac opens the door, Matty knows the question is coming. So she beats him to it. “I’m afraid everything he told you is true.” There’s a long pause. A very long one, where the air seems to get colder and the hallway lights look dimmer and further away than they are. And then Mac takes a deep breath and comes the closest to shouting that Matty’s heard from him yet.

“Matty, why didn’t you tell me?” She sighs. *I was afraid it would come to this. She’s always known that sooner or later, Mac would find the truth for himself. She just wishes it hadn’t come at the hands of Murdoc.*

“Because James MacGyver is one of the most wanted criminals in the covert operations world.” She doesn’t see any sense in beating around the bushes anymore. “Your father was a rogue operative. He was an agent for the DXS when it was still the OPI, but after his wife’s death he became more and more volatile. There were suspicions that he was dealing his weapons designs under the table to anyone who would pay the right price, but no one was ever able to definitely pin an accusation on him. And then fourteen years ago, he vanished without a trace. As did every project he had been working on for OPI. A couple weeks later, one of his bomb designs was identified at the site of a blast that killed forty-eight civilians and three OPI agents. He’s been a CIA, NSA, OPI, and every other alphabet soup agency priority target ever since. But despite the fact that his work keeps turning
up, we’ve never been able to catch him. I just didn’t want you to think that everyone saw you as the
son of a man like that. I didn’t want it to affect how you saw yourself. Because trying to live down
your father’s reputation would be a sad waste of the person you are.”

Throughout the whole thing, Mac’s only reaction has been to clench his fist tighter and tighter. Now
Matty can see red staining the gaps between his fingers. At first she thinks he’s held his hand tight
enough to cut himself with his fingernails, but when she turns over his hand in her own and opens it,
she sees the edges of a small paperclip. It’s been so badly squeezed and mangled she has no idea
what it was originally. It’s just a jagged, bloodied twist of wire.

“I’m sorry,” he whispers, and she can’t tell if that’s about breaking the ‘no paperclips’ rule, about
getting angry with her, or about his dad being a wanted criminal.

“It’s not your fault.” Matty gently turns his hand over, taking away the bent wire and inspecting the
small cuts on his palm. None of them are deep, but they should be cleaned and treated. “You are in
no way responsible for your father’s actions.” Mac is nothing like the monster they’ve chased for
over a decade. Matty isn’t quite sure how he managed to avoid being corrupted by James’s presence
in his life, but she won’t question it.

“I should have known,” he whispers. “After everything you taught me about how to identify an
enemy agent, everything should have made sense. The trips he went on with people I didn’t know.
The way he took us to the middle of nowhere. The way he wouldn’t let me into his workroom. All
the phone calls, the meetings…”

“Mac, it’s okay. You were ten years old, nothing made sense then. And it’s hard to see the past for
what it really was. We see what we want to see in the people we love. Even when they hurt us.” She
knows that all too well.

Mac was a child when his father turned. I was a trained government
operative, and what Ethan did, I never saw it coming.

She can’t in good conscience blame Mac for
not seeing the signs. Not when she missed them.

“But maybe I could have helped…”

“It’s not too late to do that now. But that’s for another time. We’ve been hunting him fourteen years.
A few more days won’t make any difference.” He nods. “You don’t have to go back in there, Mac.”

She’s told him the same thing for the past three days. And every day it’s been the same response.
“Matty, we need what he knows, and I’m the only person he’ll talk to. I’m just doing my job. If it
was Jack he’d talk to, Jack would be in there. There’s no difference.” He shakes his head, running
his good hand through his hair. “I don’t want you to protect me. Please.” She can respect that. He
doesn’t want to be seen as broken, as needing to be sheltered. She remembers feeling the same after
Ethan. I didn’t want pity. I wanted to be allowed to do my job like I was any other agent. I wanted
them to stop treating me like I was fragile, like they were going to hurt me when things came up in
briefings. She and MacGyver aren’t so different. But that also means she knows that when he
breaks, he’ll go down hard.

“Okay. But I’m going to talk to him first. He’s not helping us at all if all he does is stray off topic to
aggravate you, and there’s no point in you being put through it if that’s all he’s going to do.” She
leads him down the hall. “Let’s go take care of your hand.”

INTERROGATION ROOM D-4

THE MOST INTERESTING PLACE IN THIS BUILDING
Murdoc’s been dragging this out as long as he can, but he has the feeling Matilda is onto his game. She told him just before MacGyver returned with his hand bandaged, that if he continues to play games, he can consider his help dismissed.

Honestly, there isn’t that much more to teach. Murdoc can help Angus look like a killer, but really selling it is totally up to him. There’s really only one more thing he knows that might be considered helpful. Okay, understatement. It might be the difference between success and failure. Not that it really matters to him, either way he won’t be getting to see MacGyver again. So he’s going to make the most of the opportunity he has.

He spent half the night planning this one. It’s so perfectly marvelous in his imagination.

“There is one more thing about Omnus that might be of some value to you. I think your team would be quite...interested to hear about this new little development.” He leans back and smiles. No sense in overselling it.

MacGyver leans forward. “So tell us. You said it yourself, you have a vested interest in keeping me alive. The more we know, the safer I am, right?” Oh how precious. He’s trying to play my game now. But so simplistic. He’s focusing on the end result I want, and none of the motivations behind it. MacGyver is an amateur. Watching him try to figure out how to beat Murdoc at his own game is like seeing a child try to tie a parent’s shoes on his own feet. It doesn’t suit him at all. He’s too honest, too direct, for that kind of manipulation. But also, it’s just cute. It’s absolutely adorable that innocent little Angus thinks he’s figured out how Murdoc’s mind works. This will be so much fun.

“Oh but MacGyver, I don’t always work for free. You know, I’d really like to have some compensation for all this. Dragging me out of my room, interrupting my incredibly pleasant time...I think I deserve a little more than some fuzzy good feelings about ‘saving a life’, don’t you?”

Angus stiffens. It’s clear he already has a general idea of what Murdoc means. “What do you want?”

“Nothing much. Well, nothing much for someone as experienced as you.” He shrugs. “Just a little lap dance.” MacGyver’s face goes white.

“No.” His voice is too quiet, cracking under the strain.

“Oh I’m sure you’re very talented. You certainly have the figure for it. I’m sure with those slender hips and those long legs, you’d be perfect. Haven’t you done it before?” He smiles, wider, teeth showing. “I’d even let you keep your clothes on. Well, some of them.”

“You know I don’t have to sit here and listen to you.” Mac moves as if to stand up. “You promised to cooperate on the terms Matty gave you. You can’t ask for that.” His voice is shaking, no matter how strong he tries to sound.

Murdoc twists his lips into a fake pout. “What, are you going to run back home to Mommy Matilda and dear old Papa Jack to tell them that the bad man asked you to do something that made you feel wrong?” He laughs. “When are you going to grow up and learn to deal with your own problems, MacGyver?”

Angus flinches, hands curling into fists. He’s so incredibly vulnerable. It’s delicious.

“And what’s your precious Mama Bear going to do? She said I couldn’t touch you, boy scout. She didn’t say you couldn’t touch me.” He nods to where Mac’s almost snapped the paperclip he’s bending. “And I’m just dying to know how talented those hands really are.” He sighs, they really did drag him away from the most pleasant little fantasy, and that reminds him, he wishes he knew the
scars MacGyver has. It would make everything feel so much more vivid. Right now, he has to imagine them all.

Angus isn’t speaking anymore. He just shakes his head.

“Oh, but you’d feel so good.” he smiles. “I should know, I’ve imagined it enough. I’m sure you know how positively chilly it gets in those lonely cells. The thought of a warm body on mine really makes it so much more bearable. It’s almost as good as the real thing.” The look on MacGyver’s face is priceless, that perfect blend of horror and shame. “But it would be so much better to experience it in person. You know, when I picture you, it’s always in one of those hideous orange jumpsuits. Not that it doesn’t look perfectly fetching on you ...for a while. I wonder if they’d let you borrow one for this?” He can tell MacGyver is fighting not to yell, or cry, or both. “You know, I’ve heard that professionals at this sort of thing often have a preferred costume. I wonder what your stage name would be? ‘Smooth Criminal’ perhaps? And it would be the perfect excuse to break out the handcuffs…”

“Stop.” Angus’s voice is cracking with the strain, and Murdoc swallows audibly. “Y-you can’t…”

“Oh, I know I can’t make you. But now at least I know what shame looks like on you, and really, I’m quite fond. You’re quite the blusher, so attractive!” He shrugs. “I’ll just have to imagine the messy hair and the heavy breathing, I suppose.” The theatrical sigh he adds, he decides, is the perfect touch. MacGyver’s eyes actually start to fill with tears. Oh even better! He’s wanted to know what kind of a crier the boy is. If he’s a messy one, well, that just takes so much of the fun out of it. So disgusting when they get all snotty and gasping. But it looks like MacGyver is more apt to cry silently, and just when Murdoc thought he couldn’t possibly be a more lovely picture, the first tear slides down his cheek. “Oh, you’re so pretty when you cry,” he whispers, and MacGyver gasps, stumbling to his feet, tripping over the chair he knocks over in his hurry to get away.

Murdoc leans back and laughs. “I’m going to have such good dreams tonight, Angus.”

“I don’t have to listen to you. I’m leaving.” But he stops with his hand on the door handle when Murdoc calls out. Whether he wants to or not, he can’t help but listen to me.

“Oh, come on MacGyver, don’t you want to be able to go back and tell your precious team what they want to know?” He smiles. “You’re right, I do want you alive at the end of all this. But I could care less about Jack and Riley and Matilda. I’m sure you’ll be fine, just do what I told you and be prepared to improvise when the job doesn’t go as planned. But I’m afraid poor dear family don’t share your knack for that.” MacGyver looks stricken. His hand moves away from the handle of the door.

“Yes, that’s right. It doesn’t matter what happens to you, as long as everyone else is safe, right?” Murdoc whispers. He’s sure any second now Webber will come in and put a stop to this, he’s surprised that she hasn’t already. He was speaking low enough that it would have been hard for her to hear what was happening, but he’s surprised she didn’t respond to MacGyver’s panicked flinch that knocked over the chair. Would she actually let him go through with it? Would she sacrifice him to get the information I promised? The thought that he might actually get what he asked for is almost too good to be true.

And then MacGyver’s phone rings, and Murdoc has to work to keep the disappointment off his face. So close.

“Ooohhh. Saved by the bell.” He doesn’t bother to keep the husky longing out of his voice. Angus glances up at him, his face a mixture of relief and worry. “Omnus just contacted "you". They
"Well, I suppose it’s too late for our little deal then.” He winks. “Go give someone else a show.” He laughs when the door slams, and he doesn’t stop laughing for a long time.

ON THE WAY TO OMNUS’S MEETING

JACK HAS A BAD FEELING ABOUT THIS

“Mac. Are you sure you want to do this? Cause I can turn this baby around right here right now.”

There’s something wrong, really wrong, with the way Mac’s acting. He’s too focused, too wrapped up in the op. Too serious. He’s been like that since they got back from Pelican Bay.

Jack knows something happened in that interrogation room. But Matty is refusing to tell him anything at all. He knows her well enough to know that Murdoc didn’t do anything unforgivable, at least not physically. But Matty couldn’t hear all of what was being said in that room, and by her own admission she was temporarily on the phone with Phoenix about this meet.

“The Architect is the key to stopping whatever Omnus has planned. And the only person they’re going to give his name to is Murdoc.” Mac’s voice is so scarily flat and emotionless. He sounds more robotic than Sparky.

“I just don’t like this. Murdoc said they’d be watching, even though he refuses face to face meetings.” Jack shakes his head. “If they’re not going to give this information to anyone but Murdoc, they have to be prepared to take out an impostor, right?”

“Riley found someone backdooring the security cams in the building the way she was trying to. She’s trying to reverse hack them now.” Mac sighs. “It’s just a dead drop. I’m guessing they have the information rigged to be destroyed if they think something’s wrong. They could be watching from anywhere close enough to trigger a self-destruct.”

“I’m worried about how big that ‘self-destruct’ might be,” Jack says. “The one thing we know about Omnus is that they have a nasty penchant for shrapnel grenades. And I don’t want you anywhere near something like that.”

Mac just turns away, staring out the window for a moment and pulling the black baseball cap a little lower over his eyes. He glances back at Jack. “I should take the car myself from here. Murdoc works alone, and we don’t want them to have any reason to suspect something is wrong.”

“Okay. But I’ve got your back in there, kid. And remember, if anything seems the least bit suspicious, you get the hell outta Dodge, okay?” No mission is worth losing you.

Bozer always used to say the trick to playing a convincing role was to have an anchor, something physical or verbal you do to tie yourself to that character, something that, when you do it, allows you to become them. Fortunately for Mac, Murdoc gave them something already. His whistle.

Mac begins the chorus of “Home on the Range” as he walks into the office building, keeping his head down to avoid the cameras. His comms crackle, and Jack’s voice comes through.

"Do you have any idea how unsettling that is?” Jack hisses.

“Just getting into character.” Mac avoids the security guard at the end of the hall. He does need the man’s security badge to access the elevator he was told to take, but just walking up and forcing the
man to hand it over isn’t really Murdoc’s style. *He’d remember me.* Murdoc’s supposed to be a shadow.

Fortunately, the janitor closet is far less secure than the elevator, down the hall by the public restrooms. Mac picks the lock with a couple of paperclips and finds exactly what he needs. But this time, as he combines the chemicals he needs for chloroform, he wonders if this is something his father used to do. There’s a vague memory of James pulling out some bottles from under the sink and telling Mac very carefully what he was supposed to do, and then making him do it himself until he could do it properly. *How many times did he use this on the same people he used to work with? How could he do that? How could he betray them?*

Mac knows he should shove those thoughts away until the mission is over. But they keep intruding, and when he sneaks up behind the security guard and claps the soaked rag over his face, he sees Jack’s holsters and tac gear instead of the blue uniform and clipped on radio. And when the man crumples to the ground, he’s wearing Jack’s face.

Mac shakes himself out of it and grabs the ID badge. He only has a limited amount of time before someone notices this guy isn’t at his post and starts investigating. He needs to have the intel and be gone by then.

“Approaching the elevator.” He mutters into the comms.

He can hear Matty’s voice in the background. “Teams two and three reporting no movement. Jack, can you see anything?”

“Nope. Which is starting to make my spidey senses tingle like crazy. I don’t trust people who seem to trust us.”

“Any activity on the 24th floor?” Mac asks. That’s the one the instructions from Omnus told him to go to.

“All clear, hoss.” Jack says. Mac presses the button. The doors slide shut, and the elevator starts moving.

Immediately, a phone begins ringing. Matty’s irritation-tinged voice is barely audible over it on the comms. “Whose cell phone is that? Jack?”

“No ma’am. Mine’s on silent. Everyone’s is. We checked.”

“I think it’s coming from in here.” Mac glances around, careful to keep his face turned away from what might be a camera in the corner. The sound is definitely coming from the elevator’s emergency phone box. He opens it; and there’s a cell phone inside. “Yeah. There’s a burner phone in the elevator.”

“Guess dead drops have entered the 21st century,” Jack mutters. Mac picks up the phone, pulls off his glove, and slides the button to answer it.

The voice on the other end is slow and would almost sound friendly if Mac didn’t know it belonged to someone who wanted another man murdered in cold blood. "Murdoc. It's been a while. We haven't spoken since the El Salvador job."

He hears a sharp intake of breath from the other side of the comms, and then Matty’s voice. "Mac, that's Jonah Walsh. *Former Oversight for the Phoenix, Known associate of the Organization.* This has just changed the whole game. They’re not dealing with an unknown third party, it’s very likely they’re dealing with the Organization itself. And if he makes a mistake, they’ll lose the best chance
they have of bringing in Walsh. *Is this what Murdoc was considering telling me? That Omnus is the real name of the Organization?*

Mac’s always had a sort of uncanny knack for imitating voices. He hasn’t spoken yet, so he hasn’t given himself away. *But it’s possible I won’t be able to change my voice enough to be believable. And he knows what I look like.* Thank goodness it’s totally in character for Murdoc to be hiding his face from security cams.

“Riley, trace that call.” Matty’s voice is urgent. “Mac, keep him on the phone. If you can.” She knows as well as he does that they can’t afford to lose this chance. Mac takes a deep breath and tries to remember exactly what Murdoc sounds like. It’s truly chilling that he finds hearing Murdoc’s voice in his head, every response in exactly the words he would use, so easy.

"There was no El Salvador job. The last time you hired me was a hit in LA I was unable to complete because of some...complications."

“So I've heard. Pardon my...skepticism, but the last I knew you were in solitary, so I had to be sure I was working with the real you. Escaping a federal prison?” Walsh chuckles. “Nice work. And now I hope that you'll add those hits you failed to carry out to this job as well. Shouldn't be a problem, I assume?”

“Of course not. I don’t like to leave loose ends. They’ll be taken care of.”

“You'll find only one number in the contacts on the phone. Use it to send proof of death.”

“And the new target?”

“The dossier is being emailed to the phone as we speak. I'm sure you remember the others well enough. Since they’re the ones who put you in a cell. The clock on the Architect’s contract is twelve hours. Payment will be made in full once you deliver.”

Mac has the feeling Murdoc would want to hurry this up. “Proof of death. I know. Do you want me to fill out a W-9 too?”

“You’ll forgive me for being a bit less trusting after our last deal, I’m sure. And have fun with the others. I'm sure you want to make them pay.”

“Oh believe me, I’ve dreamed of them every night. Of watching them bleed, watching the life drain out of them drop...by...drop.” Mac shivers at how easily the words roll off his tongue. It’s scary how fast the man’s persona rubs off. He’s only spent a few days talking to Murdoc, but it’s almost as if being around him causes his mannerisms, his verbal patterns, his *mindset*, to bleed into whoever is nearby.

Suddenly, Walsh’s voice changes. “You've picked up a tail, Murdoc. It looks like Phoenix wants to put you away again.”

_He knows the tac teams are here. He can see them._ Mac tries not to let the concern bleed into his voice. “Don’t worry. I'll lose the tail and contact you when the job is over.”

“Good.” Walsh hangs up. Mac wants to collapse in relief, but he can’t. Someone is still watching. He has to get out of here. He has to stay in character until he leaves.

He pushes the button for the basement level parking garage. As he walks out, a man with a suit and briefcase walks in. Head down, Mac pretends to accidentally collide with him. When he walks away, he has the man’s wallet and car keys. He drops his comm to the floor and grinds it under his heel.
He carefully avoids looking toward the cameras as he opens the car, gets inside, and drives out. He stops to pay the machine for the parking with a credit card from the driver’s wallet, the less conspicuous he makes himself, the better. He pulls the car out into traffic and drives away.

Jack winces as there’s a feedback screech in his ear. He knows that sound all too well. When, a few minutes later, a black car pulls out. It waits an unduly long time for a large gap in traffic. When that car pulled in, it jumped across two lanes of traffic in the block before the office. That driver was careless. This one is nervous. Trying to be as careful as possible. That must be Mac.

“Ok, Matty, Mac just ditched his comms and stole a car. I think he's trying to sell the idea he's losing a tail. We gotta get air assets up right now.”

Matty’s voice is that kind of soft that Jack knows means she’s going to tell him something isn’t going to go down the way he wants. “Jack, I know you're not gonna want to hear this, but if we do that we put him in even more danger. Walsh has eyes on our actions. If he thinks Murdoc's situation is compromised, we have no idea how he'll respond. Mac's life could be in danger.”

Jack barely restrains himself from flinging his gun to the roof in frustration. Matty’s right. Walsh knows exactly how Phoenix operates. He wrote the manual on protocol. If he sees an air team go up, he’ll know they’re keeping eyes on an asset, and that even if it was Murdoc, that he’s working with the Phoenix. It’s too big a risk. Mac is on his own.

“At least tell me we have something on Walsh.”

Riley speaks up. “He was running that call through at least five false locations. I wasn’t able to finish untangling the mess he made of it completely, before he hung up, but I could tell he was in Shanghai.”

“Thornton is in Myanmar. I'll get hold of her and let her know about this development,” Matty says crisply. “I’m sure she’d love to have a solid lead on his location.”

Jack wishes he was with Patty. He’d rather be doing something, anything, than sitting here watching Mac drive away alone. This is all Walsh’s fault. I hope Patty breaks more than his nose for this.

Riley yelps when Bozer drives the golf cart over a bumpy spot. “Careful, Boze.”

He just nods, and then parks them where they have a decent view of the 10th green. A man who matches the photo Riley saw the Morses place on the table for Mac is standing behind a slim blonde woman, hands over hers as he shows her how to make a swing. Bozer shakes his head. “Man brutally murdered his wife, got away with it, and now he's out here golfing with some other woman?”

“He hasn't gotten away with it yet.” Riley pulls her rig out of her backpack. “Matty gave us permission to go ahead and try to get something on this guy.” Riley knows it was to get her and Bozer out of the office and thinking about something other than Mac out there on his own playing bad guy, but she appreciates it anyway. She really does want to bring him down, and with Mac off comms, Walsh’s call traced as far as she can, and the car he stole traced to a random alley, which Mac seems to have left on foot before disappearing into the crowds, she’d just be spinning her wheels in the War Room.

Matty tried to get Jack to take a break too, but he’s not leaving. He told Matty in no uncertain terms that he wasn’t going to do anything else until Mac was back with them. It was clear Matty knew she
wasn’t going to be able to make him leave, because when Riley and Bozer walked out, Riley had looked back long enough to see Matty putting her hand on Jack’s knee when he sat down in one of the chairs. The last time Mac went off alone, he almost got killed. Riley doesn’t want to think about that, but it is true. And now he’s doing this op solo as well, unless he decides to make contact again.

Mac would have wanted us to catch this guy. She could tell how distraught he was in that restaurant. He did want to help those people, just not the way they wanted him to. When he gets back, he’ll be happy to know they did something.

Riley pulls out her new signal booster and plugs it into her rig. Bozer glances at it.

“What’s this?”

“Something Mac made me. Boosts bluetooth signals over one hundred meters. Makes hacking way easier.” She opens a program on her laptop and begins a call. The automated voice will sound like any other telemarketing scam, but it will get her into his phone and hopefully give her program enough time to hack the protections.

It does, and within minutes she’s wading through a truly massive amount of information. This guy is addicted to Snapchat, that’s for sure. With good reason; he probably likes that the pictures disappear. But they don’t totally vanish for someone like Riley.

She finally gives Bozer a nod and they pull away to a quieter location where they can work without looking suspicious. Riley has a complete clone of his phone, complete with passwords and data.

“Alright. I got text messages, I got emails, I got an affair with his sidepiece dating back way before Rachel was killed.” She digs a little farther and then stops, quickly clicking out of the series of images that filled the screen. I did not need to see that.

“Well, look at this.” Bozer says, voice dripping with sarcasm. “I’m shocked.”

“Yep. Another sidepiece that neither the wife or sidepiece one knew about.” Riley glances at him. “Well, it’s a place to start.”

Mac watches from the third stolen car of the night as his target pulls into the driveway of his house. He’s written down the license numbers of every car, and where he left them. He’ll make sure the owners find them as soon as the op is over.

Joshua Khan is his target, a thirty-six year old employee of a cell phone company. Seemingly unassuming. But his code name to the Organization says differently. What could he have built for them? Electronic devices? Bomb triggers? Mac isn’t sure.

He watches the man walk into his house, then into a living room. His heart stops when a woman and a little girl rush into the part of the window Mac can see. The dossier said nothing about a family. And he couldn’t exactly contact Phoenix for more information. The phone scrambler Riley made blocks his location, but it won’t stop Walsh from snooping through any new contacts Mac makes.

The man picks up his little girl, swinging her in a big circle. Mac can hear her laughter from the car. We did the right thing, deciding to come save him. Because no matter what this man has done, his little girl doesn’t deserve to watch her father die. Or to die with him. An innocent child shouldn’t pay for what a parent did.

He knows he’s projecting his own situation onto this, but he can’t stop thinking about what Matty and Murdoc told him. He wants to tell Jack, he needs to, but there’s never been a right time to do it.
The op comes first, and this is why. *If I hadn’t done what I had to do to get us here, we might have lost our chance to save them.* It makes everything Murdoc has put him through for the past few days at least worth something. And once it’s over, he’ll be able to process everything.

He waits until Joshua comes out to throw away the trash, working the jumper cables he found in the car trunk into a makeshift noose. It feels wrong to be making something designed only to hurt, possibly to kill. Even though Murdoc’s gloves make tying the knots harder, he doesn’t take them off. He can’t watch his own hands do this. At least the gloves allow him to believe someone else is. *But that’s almost just as bad. It’s like Murdoc possessed me and he’s taken over my body. Like I have no control of what I’m doing.* He’s not watching any more paranormal movies with Jack for a long time.

When Joshua lifts the lid of the trash can to throw in the bag, Mac steps up behind him and slips the noose around his neck, pulling it just tight enough that the man won’t scream and alert anyone to the fact that he’s in trouble. Mac leans in toward his ear and whispers, and he’s utterly horrified at the low, hissed words that slip out. *How far into my head has Murdoc gotten?*

“This is a constrictor knot. The more you struggle, the more you choke. If you love your wife and daughter, you’re gonna come with me.” The man relaxes just a little in Mac’s hold. “Okay, good boy.” *I sound just like him.* The thought shakes Mac to his core.

He’s thankful the drive to the random motel he booked a room at earlier, under one of Murdoc’s aliases, gives him enough time to get the horror under control. Because he’s going to have to repeat the performance, and this time longer.

He doesn’t bother to keep his face turned away once they’re in the room. *It’ll sell the idea that I plan to kill him, if I let him see me.* He doesn’t want Khan to think he might just be being held for ransom or have some other possible escape that doesn’t end with a bullet in him. *Thanks to Hollywood dramatics, people pretty much instinctively know that if a potential killer lets the victims see his face, they’re as good as dead.*

He ties Khan to a chair with a piece of extension cord he found running to a fan that was probably being used to dry out the shed next to the pool. He’ll put it back later.

Joshua is clearly panicking now, his voice is shaking and cracking whenever he replies to one of Mac’s questions. “What Omnus? I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Joshua, we talked about this. I don’t like liars.” Mac is fighting to keep his own voice calm and under control. He feels like he’s splitting in half. A part of him is screaming at him to believe the man and stop this torture, but the other half...is almost finding a pleasure in seeing the fear in someone else’s eyes. To know that he’s capable of causing the same helpless panic that’s been inflicted on him in the past. He wants that part to disappear. *It’s not the first time I’ve felt this.* He’s known about this little demon on his shoulder since his days as a vigilante, watching the people he captured utterly confused and unable to react to whatever he’d done to trap them, watching those people who made their living out of instilling terror have that same fear and helplessness turned back on them.

He’s felt it in prison too, when he finally snapped and fought back, so viciously he knocked out the man tormenting him. *I was glad they put me in solitary for that. Because all I could think of, that night, was that I could have killed him. And that the next time, I might.* He hadn’t slept for two days afterward.

That’s always been what he hated most about the murder charge. That it was a constant reminder that some part of him is capable of doing the unthinkable, and always will be. *I could kill. But I don’t.* He’s worked hard to keep that the way things are. *Yes, sometimes accidents happened. But I tried so hard not to let them.* He has three scars to prove that he felt as badly about the deaths of the cartel
members as he did about the innocent bystanders he couldn’t save.

“I’m not lying. I don’t know them!” Khan’s face is red, either from the strain of fear or from the fact that the knot around his neck is somewhat tighter than it was. Mac needs this to be over quickly. He just needs to confirm that he’s not working with a member of Omnus. If he is, that’s going to affect how he proceeds from here. He twists the cord he’s holding, and then yanks it while kicking the chair over. It falls back with a harsh thud, and Joshua gasps.

“Well, they know you. Because they hired me to kill you. Why do they call you the Architect? Did you make something for them and then decide you’d rather keep the profits for yourself?” Mac stalks forward with each word, coiling the cord around his hand.

“What? I have no idea! I swear! I work in IT at a cellular company.” Joshua’s tied hands are shaking. “I don’t know anything about an Omnus or an Architect. Please! My wife and I, we have another baby coming. She can’t lose me now. You have to believe me!”

Mac opens his knife and bends down next to the man. Khan gasps and turns away as the knife moves toward his throat...and then blinks in shock and takes a deep breath when Mac only slits the knot around his neck.

“I do. I’m not going to hurt you.” Mac sighs, feeling like someone’s taken a noose off his own neck. He falls back against the wall, panting and shaking, knife falling from his hand to the floor. Did I just do that? What kind of a monster could I be? He can’t stop hearing Murdoc’s words in his head, the laugh when Mac lost control and slammed his hands onto the table.

“Maybe you are more like him than he thinks.”

When Jack’s phone rings, he’s answering before it even gets to the second line of “Fade to Black”. It’s not his ringtone for any of the team specifically, but the voice on the other end is the one he’s been waiting for hours to hear. Mac must have called from a random phone somewhere.

“I found him.” Mac sounds scared, and Jack doesn’t like it. Did he get into trouble out there? At least his voice doesn’t have the breathless cadence of being in pain. “But I don’t know why they want to kill him.”

“Maybe we can figure that out. What’s his name?”

“Joshua Khan.”

Jack nods to Jill, who’s already typing away. She’s standing in for Riley while she and Bozer are out hunting down the guy Murdoc was hired to kill by that family Mac met up with. “Okay, kid, I’m looking at what we know about him right now. He doesn’t exactly look like an Omnus operative…”

“That’s because he isn’t...” Mac’s voice is shaking. “Jack, he’s...he doesn’t know anything.”

“So you’re saying the Wrath of Khan here isn’t our guy?” Jack ignores Matty’s eye roll. He can tell Mac’s on the verge of a panic attack, and if he’s learned one thing about the kid, it’s that giving that big brain of his something to distract it, something dumb and random, can snap him back out of it, at least enough to make sure he’s still functioning. They can’t afford to have him freak out on his own. And Jack is pretty good at dumb jokes, mangled cliches, and terrible puns. Guess it’s a good thing we’re partners.

Mac chuckles weakly at Jack’s obvious joke. “No, he’s the Architect. Name, age, address, social security number, they all match the dossier Walsh gave me. He just doesn’t know why.”
“Jill, I need a new profile on this guy and I need it yesterday.” Matty says. Jill nods.

“Ok, born in San Jose, degrees from Stanford and Columbia, works in IT at Televast Communications.”

“If this is a cover, it's a good one.”

“It's not. Jack...he...he thought I was going to kill him. He was terrified. It wasn’t an act; he doesn’t know who Omnus is. I…” Jack can hear the choked sob in the kid’s voice. “Jack, I went too far.” He gasps and Jack can hear the barely controlled tears.

“No, no, you didn’t. He’s still alive, it’s okay.” He hates everything about this assignment. Mac having to go spend time with that lunatic Murdoc, the kid having to pretend he’s the one thing he never, ever wanted to be, a killer. None of this is right or fair. “Listen, we’re gonna come get you, okay? Just hang tight.” Jack just wants to hold him, because it sounds like Mac is about to fall apart.

And then he hears something new. A phone ringing. Mac inhales sharply and Jack already knows what phone it is. Jack hears him set down the one he's holding and pick up the cell phone. He must switch it onto speaker, because the second he answers Jack can hear the voice on the other end.

“You tampered with our phone, Murdoc. We can't find your location.”

“What can I say? I'm a little paranoid since the last job you gave me landed me in a little concrete box.” Damn. The kid sounds like Murdoc. His word choices, his voice patterns...aside from the different, deeper tone of his voice that can’t be totally disguised, it’s such an eerie similarity. He thought the same thing on comms earlier, but now it seems to come even more naturally to Mac. No wonder he’s losing it. Jack’s gone undercover as the bad guy too many times to count, and he knows how far you have to sink into a cover ID to become them. It took months to totally shake Duke Jacoby’s penchant for betting on horse races, and he still knows how to play plenty of songs on the upright bass. You pick up their habits and vices when you pick them up, and if you’re them long enough, stuff stays with you. He’s started to lose track of what’s him and what’s a cover. It was Chad Palomino who smoked, but it took Jack forever (and the mustache Matty despised) to kick the habit when that cover was over. Sometimes he can’t help looking at someone the way Bryce Villanova would size up a possible model.

Their vices become yours. And unfortunately, Murdoc’s vices are torture and murder. But Mac won’t be undercover for long. Jack's going to get him, and then take the kid home and wrap him up in a blanket and get him hot chocolate and watch whatever Nat Geo documentary the kid wants (the last one about discovering new species wasn’t too bad, actually, Jack didn’t fall asleep through it at least). He’ll do anything and everything that reminds Mac who he is. That he’s not Murdoc, and he doesn’t have to be.

He’s snapped back to what’s going on in the conversation by Mac’s eerily wrong voice. “If you want someone gunned down in their front yard, you call the Mafia. I'm an artist.”

“Then I hope you're standing over a Jackson Pollock of spattered blood on a plastic sheet.”

Jack knows Mac well enough to hear the tiny hitch of concern in his voice. He’s got to make them think this guy’s dead, and he hasn’t done it yet. “Actually, I’ve decided the price of this little masterpiece has just gone up.”

“You're trying to re-negotiate?”

“Clearly the Phoenix Foundation is rather interested in me at the moment. I need to lay low for a
while; until they get tired of chasing their tails and decide to hunt someone else. And I'd like to make enough money from this job to do it comfortably.” He takes a breath. “You made a deal with the devil, did you really think it was going to be fair? If you're willing to pay ten million dollars, I have a feeling you can afford a few more. Say...fifteen?”

There’s a scarily long pause, and then Walsh’s voice comes through. “Okay. Fifteen, if the job is complete in the next thirty minutes. We'll wire the funds as soon as you send proof of death.”

“Two mistresses gives Brett motive up the wazoo, but it’s not the hard evidence we need.” Riley sets down her laptop and rubs at her eyes. She’s done all she can for now. The photos are cycling through the DMV database until they get a hit.

“Do you think she knew who she was married to?” Boze asks.

“Maybe, maybe not. People see what they want to see.” Riley leans on her hand, sighing and shaking her head softly. "I always told myself I would never, ever become my mom. She dated loser after loser, and she refused to listen when I tried to tell her they were no good. And then I go and date someone who lies to me for two years and gets me shot." She shrugs. “Compared to him, Mom’s boyfriends were nothing.”

Bozer puts a hand on her shoulder, shaking gently until she looks up at him. "Listen, Jack would have told you in a heartbeat if he thought something was off with Nick. Trust me. No one knew what Nick was. He was good at hiding it."

"It just scares me. That I could end up in the same patterns. That for all I've done to be different, I could still be too trusting." Maybe wanting to see the best in people runs in the family.

Truth be told, that’s why she’s avoided dating again. *If the only way I can keep myself from ending up like my mom is to stay away from people who could hurt me, that's what I'm going to do.*

“One mistake doesn’t make a pattern.” Bozer shakes his head. “I got mixed up with the wrong crowd in high school for a while. I was...I was tired of being the responsible one at home. Being the oldest sibling sucks. Everyone’s always worried about you all the time, you’ve got the family reputation to live up to…”

“Not too different as an only child, really.”

“I just wanted to have fun. To be able to break the rules a little. And we almost got into big trouble.” He shakes his head. “Fortunately, the teacher who caught us decided it was better to keep us in school where someone was watching us than kick us out. He asked me to help him after classes, and he got me into a community theater where he volunteered. He made sure I learned that my art was where I should be learning to deal with the things in my life. That processing that way was a lot more rewarding than just smoking a joint and temporarily forgetting about it.”

Riley just nods.

“Just because you did something once doesn’t mean that’s what’s going to define the rest of your life. So I smoked weed a few times as a kid, that didn’t set me on an inevitable path to being a junkie. You made one bad call in a relationship; that doesn’t make you your mother.”

“Thanks, Bozer.” She’s about to say more, but her computer pings. They have a positive facial match on Mistress Number Two from the DMV records and an actual name, Amanda Gilling. A few more searches and Riley hits pay dirt.
"Whoa. Amanda works at a place that sells GPS locator tags."

"Would be a huge break if this was the case of her missing keys." Bozer leans back.

"I think it might still help us. Looks like she sold a set to Brett. He let the subscription run out a week after Rachel's murder." That's not suspicious at all...

"They make them for golf clubs..." Bozer glances at the site's ads. "Fourteen clubs in a set. How many did he buy?"

"Fourteen."

"Cause of death was blunt force trauma. And police never found the murder weapon."

"I'll see if I can reactivate his old account." Riley’s fingers are flying now, it’s easy for her to get into this system. They really need a security upgrade. Within minutes she has Brett’s account back online. And the icing on the cake is that the credit card he used to pay for it is still active. He’s financing his own conviction. The thought makes her grin more than it should, especially when the tags come online.

"Thirteen clubs at his house...and one in the middle of nowhere."

MUSGROVE MATERIALS RECYCLING AND DISTRIBUTION

SOMEBEWHERE IN BOYLE HEIGHTS

Bozer carefully picks his way around the heaps of mangled metal in the junkyard. His tetanus boosters are up to date, but he still doesn’t want to end the night with a rusty nail in his shoe.

"This place reminds me of hanging out with Mac when he worked nights at Weathers's. He'd run the compactor and run lines for my acting classes with me at the same time." He chuckles. "Sometimes that backfired on us, though, because I’d need the background noise to remember a word or phrase."

Riley chuckles. “You two were really something else. You sound like the kind of best friends that only happen on TV.”

“I know. I still don’t know how I got lucky enough to have Mac around. I was always convinced he was gonna decide that he was too smart to hang around with someone like me, but he never did.”

“I think he knew he was just as lucky to have a friend like you.” Riley’s voice is absolutely sincere. I’m glad I didn’t ruin things with us. Bozer’s been trying to be okay with the ‘just friends’ thing, and it’s hard, but he’d rather have that than nothing. Jack was right, Riley’s an amazing person to have for a friend. And now that he knows more about her trust issues, he can totally accept that she’s not ready for a boyfriend. In a weird way, it actually makes me feel better, because I know it’s not about me. It’s about her family. He knew her aversion to relationships was at least partly because of what Nick had done to her, but hearing about her mom made everything make so much more sense. That’s why I don’t drink often and never drink alone. Only sometimes, when my friends are around to keep an eye on me. He doesn’t want to end up like Mama. He was more worried about it happening when Mac first got locked up. The guilt was almost unbearable. But I threw myself into my film work instead of into an addiction.

He can respect Riley worrying about family patterns. She knows herself better than any of the rest of us. She’ll decide when she wants to date.
But he can’t say she doesn’t look good tonight. Her hair’s messy and loose, and her embellished olive jacket makes her look equal parts cute and kickass. Especially when she picks the lock to the storage outbuilding the signal seems to be coming from and lets them both inside.

She holds up her phone, moving slowly in a circle to let it acquire the signal, then walks purposefully over to a large metal crate filled with various odds and ends.

"It's in here." She starts grabbing pieces of metal and tossing them aside, and Bozer joins her, reaching in to grab the handle of a battered golf club. He holds it up and Riley shines her phone flashlight on it.

"Does that look like dried blood to you?" She nods, and then holds her hand up. It takes a second for him to realize she’s going for a high five.

He’s just slapped her hand when her phone rings, and she hurriedly digs it out of her pocket. Despite the fact that it’s not on speaker, Bozer can still hear Matty’s voice distinctly. "Riley, we need you back here right away."

"On my way." Riley hangs up and turns to Bozer. “Guess we see how well I learned to drive in traffic from Jack.” Boze swallows.

I've been in cars with Jack when he’s driving in a hurry. He hopes Riley has at least a slightly better sense of self-preservation. But he highly, highly doubts that. I'm surrounded by crazy people. And he’s surprisingly okay with it.

“And call the police on the way,” Riley says. “I’m sure they’d like an anonymous tip about that case…”

Mac hangs up the phone, sighing shakily and running his hands through his hair. I scared myself. Again. He turns around to see Joshua watching him with the same kind of panic Mac thinks must be on his own face. “I thought you said you weren’t going to kill me? And now you re-negotiate the price?”

“I’m not actually going to kill you. My best friend and I filmed a lot of homemade monster movies as kids. I know how to make a pretty convincing fake death scene.” Mac smiles just a little at the memories of covering Deja and Jerry (always the unfortunate victims of everything from rampaging swamp monsters to invading aliens) in ketchup, and then better fake blood when Mac figured out how to make it more realistic while in chemistry class. Just as quickly, that happy memory is replaced by the fact that every time he thinks of Jerry, he can picture him dying on the sidewalk because he’s seen him covered in blood and gasping, even if it was all fake. I watched him die. He knows Bozer threw away all those tapes after the funeral. None of us wanted that image in our heads. We didn’t want to think that we could possibly have predicted it. He pushes that thought aside into the growing pile of things to deal with later. “And on the bright side, it’s gonna be a still photo, so you don’t even have to hold your breath.”

Mac knows at least four recipes for fake blood. One of them is bound to work with what’s available, and sure enough, the room’s supplies and the vending machine in the reception area have what he needs for one of the less complicated versions. Cocoa packets, soap shavings, and a bottle of some kind of red juice. The dark slurry it makes in the paper hotel coffee cup turns his stomach.

Fortunately for me, I don’t have to drink it. It just has to fool the camera.

He tears down the shower curtain and spreads it on the floor, then splashes some of the fake blood around on the walls. He saves enough of it to mix with the little bottle of complimentary hand lotion and mold into what appears to be a bullet wound in Josh’s head. Remind me to thank Bozer for making me watch all those do-it-yourself stage makeup tutorials with him.
"Okay, Josh, what were you saying?" He’s been trying to figure out exactly what this guy did to piss Omnus off enough to kill him, but unless they were disgruntled Televast customers, he can’t see the connection between them. All he’s getting out of this is a bunch of tech jargon that he really wishes Riley was here to translate; she’s not back to Phoenix from wherever she was when he called. He knows the basic terms, but some of this stuff is just...obscure.

"And then about four months ago we started getting calls from customers complaining about static in the calls." He continues talking as Mac dribbles more of the fake blood down his forehead, and then gets out his knife and starts scraping at the wall. "And for months I was going nuts, trying to figure out what was causing it. Wait, what is that for?"

Mac stops scraping plaster off the wall. "Have you ever seen a corpse that wasn’t pale? I promise, I’m not trying to give you lead poisoning from the paint. I would avoid opening your mouth while I’m putting this on you though. I don’t think this hotel’s been repainted in a while." He shrugs. “I’ll wait till you’re done telling me about this.

"So anyway, eventually I realized I couldn’t locate the source of the interference, because it wasn’t interference. It was data. Some kind of high frequency tone buried in the cell traffic."

*That's Phoenix's standard method of covering communication signals. Riley designed a method and...Oversight implemented it for the whole agency's comm traffic. That's standard procedure.* That’s the whole reason they were able to clear their names in Amsterdam weeks ago. He glances toward where the hotel phone is still off the hook

“Jack, Matty, are you guys hearing this?"

“Yes we are.” Matty says, and her voice is clipped. “Looks like Walsh decided to take some Phoenix programs with him when he split. But that does mean that we should be able to reverse hack it, since it’s based on our programming. We just didn’t know where to look.”

Jack speaks up. "That makes sense. They started complaining about the static on the line four months ago, right? We nailed Walsh four months ago. When he lost the ability to talk to his buddies through the Phoenix servers with his little VPN Boze found, he changed methods."

"Which worked until a network systems architect outsmarted him." Mac sighs. “Thus the choice of code name.”

“I think I know what they wanted stopped,” Josh says suddenly. “My decryption program.”

“You found a way to decrypt this?” Jack sounds incredulous. “Man, Riley is gonna be pissed. She’s gonna want to talk to you when this is all over and fix that little bug. It’s a wonder you were homing in on Omnus and not Phoenix comm traffic.”

“Who’s Riley?” Khan asks.

“*Our* network architect.”

Mac can hear Jill on the call as well. “Okay, I got us into Josh’s work files. What are we looking for exactly?”

“A file called HF static.exe.” Joshua says. “I was still working out a few bugs in the program, but it was close to being ready to be deployed on the whole network. It should turn the signals into something we can understand. I was hoping that could lead us to whoever was sending them.”

"Did you tell anyone about this?" Mac asks.
"It wasn’t a top secret project. It even went in the monthly newsletter we sent out to customers. So they would know we were working on a solution."

"When was this newsletter sent?" Matty asks.

"About a week ago, maybe a little more."

"That’s when the hit was placed." Mac rocks back on his heels. “Probably at least one member of Omnus is a legitimate Televast customer. When they got the newsletter, they realized their whole network was about to become a lot less private.” At least everything is falling into place now. "Once I send proof of death, Khan will be safe and you can come pick us up so we can start working on a way to use this signal decryption against them." He picks up the cell phone Walsh left him. “Okay, just lay still and look dead.”

Khan’s performance may not be quite Oscar-worthy, but the picture does look good. Mac’s pretty proud of his work, he’ll have to show Bozer. “Okay, should be done.”

There’s a sound that vaguely resembles running footsteps, and then Riley’s out of breath voice comes on. "Whoa whoa, Mac, don’t send that photo!"

"What if I already did?" Mac suddenly feels cold. What did I do?

"The scrambler on the phone blocks your GPS locator. But every photo you take has the GPS coordinates embedded in the metadata. You just sent your exact location to Omnus."

“Maybe we’ll get lucky and they won’t look?” Bozer sounds as out of breath as Riley. Where have they been?

“With our luck?” Jack asks. “Not a chance.” There’s a lot of overlapping chatter for a while, and then Riley’s voice comes back in clearly and alone. Everyone must have been bringing her and Bozer up to speed.

“Now that I know it’s based on my work, I was able to use one of my own backdoors to enable signal tracking on the network Omnus is using. And you have fifteen signals converging on your location.”

He hears Jack kick something and swear under his breath. "Something tells me they've known you weren't Murdoc this whole time."

"Walsh must have made me at the dead drop. But he played along because he wants me and Josh dead." Mac suddenly feels a lot less enthusiastic about his acting skills.

"And now there's a kill squad comin’ to clean your room, homie. Mac, you better get out of there. Now." He can hear Jack getting up. “I’m on my way to you right now. Just lay low and we’ll get you out, okay?”

“Yeah.” Mac hangs up and turns to Josh, who’s inspecting the rifle Mac brought as a prop.

“How many bullets do you have for that thing?”

“How many bullets do you have for that thing?”

“None. It’s just for show. I’m not a big fan of guns.” Mac glances around. There’s plenty to work with in a motel, he just has to decide what they want to do. Do I want to give us cover to run, play this defensive, or do I want to go on the offense? That might be more of an advantage, they might not expect it. But Walsh would have told them about my improvising... He doesn’t know what the best option is in this game now.
“But the people who are coming to kill us have guns.”

“Yeah, a lot. Which is why I’m not a fan. I’ve been shot at. A lot.”

“So what are we going to do?”

He’s asking the question Mac’s been asking himself. “Well, we have two options. Run and hide, or stand and fight.” Mac sighs. “I know run and hide sounds good. But we have no way of knowing exactly where those Omnus operators are, and we could run right into them. If we stay here, we have a tactical advantage, the team coming to get us doesn’t need to search for us, and we can make them come to us.”

“We want them to come to us?”

“We can make a chokepoint if we play it right. If we can make them come at us from the direction we want, we can fight back.” Mac’s done that more times than he can count with cartels. He’d deliberately show himself after setting up a gauntlet of traps, and they always seemed to fall for it.

“We still have a little time. I need to get some supplies. I need you to block off every access to the room but that staircase at the end of the building, okay? I don’t care how, just make sure they can’t come in any other way. Jam doors, stack furniture, whatever you need to.” Khan just nods. “We just have to slow them down long enough for Jack to get here.”

“Who is this Jack?”

“He’s...he’s the guy who’s always got my back.” Mac says. That’s so not even scratching the surface of what Jack is, but it’s all Josh needs to know right now.

Mac hurries down to the pool area and checks the recycling can next to the vending machine. He pulls out the bag of cans, and on his way back to the room grabs a cart from the housekeeping supply room. He can see a pile of chairs at the end of the hall. Good work, Josh.

“Empty cans and a cleaning cart? Seriously?” Khan asks as Mac starts spreading out his supplies on the floor.

“Just trust me. And put the soap in that coffeepot. As much as you can make fit.” He flings several bars at Josh, who does as he’s told. He concentrates on making as many small explosives as he can.

He really hopes they have enough time for this plan. He thinks he can hold them off, but he’s not sure. Just in case, he kicks out the window and runs the extension cord he was using to tie up Josh out of it. “If we can’t stop them, you go down that and run like hell. Don’t worry about me and don’t look back.” Mac feels oddly detached; this is like some kind of last stand in one of Jack’s action movies. And I’m the self-sacrificing hero who’s got about a fifty-fifty chance of living through it.

He still has to go back down to the pool for one last thing. But he doesn’t dare not go prepared, he doesn’t know how long he has left. And he can’t leave Josh alone in the room. So both of them hurry downstairs, each one carrying a couple of Mac’s homemade flashbangs, and the melted soap mixture.

Mac dumps the soap into the now-empty recycling can, and then puts the finishing touches on a fog machine. He’s made this enough times for Bozer’s movies for it to be second nature. And then he sees the black SUV’s pulling in. They’re out of time, it’s now or never. He plugs in the cord and the machine whirrs to life, filling the whole area with a white, swirling mist.

Joshua looks both stunned and impressed. “You built a fog machine? That’s a hell of a distraction.”
“Only if we live. Come on!” They have to get back to the room...but their chokepoint is only set up in the building. And these guys are swarming in from all directions...They’re stuck out here in the open with no cover. Mac can see operatives getting between them and the building. *We ran out of time and we’re on our own.*

Mac shoves Joshua in front of him toward the back of the building. They have to get out of here, that open area is what Jack would call a killbox. Bullets ping off metal and stone, scarily close and moving closer. Mac guesses these guys have some kind of thermal imaging.

“That didn’t slow them down long!” Josh gasps.

“No, but this will!” Mac lights up one of his flahsbangs and throws it, and the world behind them explodes in a blast of heat and light. They keep running, into a narrow alley, Mac flinging another one of the cans when he sees movement behind them.

And then he hears footsteps ahead of them. *They cut us off. We’re surrounded.* He prepares to fling another one of the flashbangs and try to buy Joshua enough time to run, when a familiar figure steps out of the shadows.

“Jack?”

“I just followed the sound of things blowing up, figured I couldn’t go wrong. Good to see you’re still upright. Unlike you—” Jack smashes into one of the goons, knocking him back, “Or you—” another Omnus agent goes down, shot in the leg.

Riley, behind him, carrying her own gun and wearing her kevlar, yells something about him not messing up his arm or he should hope these guys kill him before Dr. Modi gets her hands on him. “Just let me do the punching!” She shouts after him, taking down two more of the oncoming guys without breaking stride. *She and Jack have been itching for a fight since this whole thing started.*

Mac follows them, leaving Josh in the hands of a couple of the tac team. He still has a couple flashbangs left, and he can help.

He can hear someone talking on the balcony above him, and he breaks off from the others, climbing the stairs as quietly as he can. A man in a suit, instead of the tac gear the rest of the Omnus people are wearing, is pacing and shouting into his comms.

“Team leader, where are you? What’s your status?”

“Bleeding!” Mac lunges forward, tossing the last of his homemade grenades and throwing a punch at the same time. Disoriented, the man goes down, and Mac whips off his own belt to tie the man’s hands.

“Mac?” He can hear Jack yelling. “Where are you? We’re clear here, kid.”

“Up here!” Mac calls back, knowing it’s safe to announce his location now. He leans back against the railing with a sigh. *It’s over. We did it.*

Jack doesn’t like the way Mac stumbles as he walks down the stairs behind the tac team members dragging away the guy he knocked out. “Mac, are you okay?”

Mac shakes his head wordlessly. Jack puts a hand on his arm gently...and flinches when he feels something hot and slick under his fingers. “Mac, bud, I think you got shot.”
“No, I didn’t.” Mac shakes his head. “I would have noticed.”

“No, kid, you’re bleeding.” Jack sits him down on the stairs. “Adrenaline does a real good job of masking out the pain sometimes, but that’s definitely a gunshot wound, and it’s bleeding pretty nicely. Not that I’m worried about you ruining Captain Chaos’s jacket here, but I think we oughta take a look at that.” He helps Mac out of the coat, and Mac hisses softly when he moves his arm back to pull it out of the sleeve. Jack resists the urge to say “I told you so”. Mac doesn’t need that right now. Instead, he pulls a field kit out of one of his pockets and begins cleaning the shallow gash. “You’re damn lucky, kid. To get only a graze in a killbox like that, under the kind of fire I was hearing…” He doesn’t want to admit to how scared he was when he stepped into that alley and heard it. Hearing stuff blowing up was actually a relief, because it had meant Mac was still functioning enough to do his thing.

“I knew you were gonna say that.” Mac grins weakly before hissing at the pain. “That’s like your favorite word or something.”

“Only when it applies to the situation. And it did.”

Jack can hear Riley talking to Khan in the background, she’s going a mile a minute with the tech jargon. *Guess it’s nice when she finds people who speak her language.* Jack guesses for her that’s like what happens when he runs into a veteran in the grocery store.

He does finally understand some of what she’s saying, when she stops talking about encryptions and rotating daisy something or others. “You’re free to say no, but we’d like you to consider a job offer.”

“With your agency?” Khan sounds floored.

“Until we hunt down Omnus, you’re going to have to stay out of sight. And since you designed a way to listen in on their communications, we’d like you to help us sift the data.” Riley laughs. “And besides, you broke a secure US government encryption channel. We can’t just release you back into the wild. Who knows, you might accidentally expose the Phoenix instead of a rogue agency next time. We’ll make sure you and your family are given new identities and placed in protection.”

“Thank you.” The man sounds incredibly relieved, and Jack can’t blame him. *But I think Riley made a good call recruiting him. He’s had one hell of a night, and he hasn’t cracked up yet.* This guy might make a really good agent.

Mac shakes his head when a medic walks up to him. “No, I’m okay, Jack took care of it.” He turns back to Jack. “I don’t want to go to medical. Please, can I just go home?”

Jack takes one look at the wide, frightened, haunted eyes, and he can’t say no. “Yeah, kid. Let’s go.”

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The room is so cold. Mac shivers, the cold metal of the chair and the table and the cuffs is sapping all the warmth out of his body, the thin orange jumpsuit doing nothing to keep him warm. He’s all alone, the grey walls taunting him. He belongs here, he’s always belonged here.

And then there’s the familiar buzzing that sends an electric pulse up his spine, and the door opens. Murdoc stalks in, in the red prison clothes he’s been wearing every time Mac saw him.

“Well, look at this. So willing to sacrifice yourself for your team.”

“Let’s get this over with,” Mac says sharply. “And shouldn’t we take the cuffs off for this?” He doesn’t see how he’s going to be able to give Murdoc a lap dance when he’s the one chained to the table.
“Oh, you see, I’ve changed my mind about what I want. And dear Matilda won’t be interfering. She 
knows that what I have to say is more important than what happens to you, Angus. Besides, why 
should she care about someone whose father betrayed his own agency? She might as well get what 
she can from you while you’re still compliant.”

Mac shivers again, and he can’t stop. The metal is so cold on his skin, and when he looks down he 
can see why. He thought he was wearing a jumpsuit like Murdoc’s, but he’s naked. No wonder he’s 
so cold.

Murdoc stands up and walks over to stare down at him. Mac tries to move his legs to cover himself, 
to hold onto any shred of dignity he has left, but his ankles are chained to the legs of the chair. He’s 
trapped, completely exposed to Murdoc’s predatory, lust-filled gaze.

Murdoc’s hands run down his arms, and Mac gasps and shudders. “Oh Angus, this is going to be 
fun.”

“No, no, I don’t want this. Please, let me go.” This is too much, he can’t take this. Why would Matty 
let this happen? Where is Jack? Someone, anyone, please…

“Help me!” Mac cries out, thrashing, shoving the hands away from him. “No, go away! Please!”

“Mac, it’s just me, kiddo. I was just tryin’ to wake you up.” That’s not Murdoc’s voice, it’s Jack’s. 
Mac blinks and looks up to see warm, kind brown eyes looking down at him, instead of cold, hungry 
black ones. “You were shakin’ and cryin’. ” There’s a mixture of concern and pain in Jack’s voice, 
and it hurts.

Mickey jumps up from where he was crouching at the foot of the bed, rubbing his nose against 
Mac’s shoulder. Mac digs his fingers into the puppy’s fur and holds on tight.

“You scared him too. He was whinin’ and pawin’ and tryin’ to wake you up.” Jack says. “You 
scared both of us, kid.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Nothing to be sorry for.”

Mac shudders, pulling the blankets tightly around him, even though he’s wearing sweatpants and one 
of Jack’s t-shirts and the house isn’t cold. He still feels like he’s naked, unable to hide from Murdoc’s 
eyes.

“It was Murdoc. He was going to…going to…” Mac gasps back a sob.

“He’s not going to be able to hurt you, ever again. He’s locked away where he can’t touch you.”
Jack rests his hands lightly on Mac’s shoulders. “It’s over my dead body that that creep lays a finger 
on you, understand?” Jack says softly, brushing Mac’s sweaty hair out of his eyes, and holding him 
while he shivers. “Hey, it’s okay, Just go to sleep, I’m right here. No one’s gonna hurt you. I got 
you. It’s okay, Mac…”

“Mac?”

Jack looks down at the crimson soaking through his shirt. Mac shakes his head. This isn’t right. He 
was supposed to be faking Josh’s death, not Jack’s.

“Mac, I thought this was fake?” Jack looks up at him accusingly, more and more red welling up 
and spilling onto the shower curtain. That’s not right. Mac couldn’t have made enough fake blood
for that, there’s too much.

Jack’s been shot. Mac bends down and frantically presses a hand to the wound, only to feel something cold and heavy in his gloved hand. He looks down at it, even though he already knows what he’s going to see. A gun.

“Why?” Jack asks, and Mac can hear the blood bubbling in his lungs. “Why did you shoot me?”

“Because I could.” Mac can hear his voice, but it’s not him saying it. And then his arm raises without his consent, and his finger pulls the trigger, and Jack’s eyes go blank as a second wound appears in the middle of his forehead.

Mac hears a slow clapping behind him. Murdoc is standing there, in his black coat, smiling that eerie smile. “Wonderful work, MacGyver. The pupil may yet be like the master.” He kicks Jack’s outstretched hand with the toe of one boot. “I must say, I’m surprised you could do it. Your first kill, and it was your own partner. Riley and Matty and Bozer don’t stand a chance, if dear old Jack didn’t.”

He turns away, and Mac looks up to see himself in the mirror by the door. But that’s not his face, it’s James’s…

He bolts upright with a scream, and flails, his hand meeting something solid.

“Whoa, kid, easy on the arm. Dr. Modi’ll kill me if I made it through a firefight in one piece and then got my arm messed up by a skinny kid who barely weighs more’n a newborn foal soaking wet.”

“I killed you.” Mac chokes out the words like they’re burning his throat.

“No you didn’t. I’m right here. It’s okay.” Jack pulls him a little closer.

“But I could,” Mac whispers. “Murdoc...he told me my father betrayed the Phoenix when it was still the OPI, and he killed some of their agents, and now he works with people like Murdoc. He’s a monster, and I could turn out just the same. And I know Murdoc wasn’t lying, because Matty told me it’s all true.” He’s been debating, since the mission was over, if telling anyone else is the right thing to do. I know why Matty kept that secret. Because now that Mac knows the truth, what he did tonight scares him more than he’ll ever admit. And if the others know the truth about James, they would be afraid of me becoming that. He doesn’t want them to look at him that way again. He doesn’t want them to wonder when he’s going to snap. Because he’s worried enough about that for all of them.

Jack doesn’t look as shocked or horrified as Mac was expecting. “I was wondering about that myself,” He says quietly. “Some of that stuff you told me...it just screamed rogue agent.”

Was I the only oblivious one? That’s almost worse. Do they all already know, and they worry, but they didn’t want me to know they were wondering? He feels sick.

“Mac, are you okay?”

No. He can’t lie, not to Jack, not this time. “No, I’m not!” It comes out sharper than he means, and he flinches. “My father is a monster who betrayed the same people I work for, how can I be okay?”

He’s either going to scream or sob, and right now it seems like the scream is the choice his emotions are going for. “Nothing about this is okay, and I just want…” He doesn’t even know what he wants. Maybe for the last three days to disappear from his mind. To have never seen Murdoc; to not know these horrible things. “I just want everything to go back to normal.”
Jack pulls him up close against him. “Mac, things are never gonna be ‘normal’ when it comes to you. Not as long as you’re still blowin’ stuff up with chewing gum and shoestrings.”

“You know I need a few more things than that to make a bomb, right?” Mac asks. But the thought that follows that quickly kills the faint smile. “Everything I do, I do because my dad taught me. And now it’s just what makes me...me. Who knows what else he made part of me?”

“He couldn’t make you into something you’re not. And you’re not a killer,” Jack says quietly. “You proved that when you turned yourself in for what you thought happened to Ramsay.”

“Murdoc said that’s why he didn’t break me out. That I was a disappointment.” Mac knows it should be a good thing, but some part of him is still that child in the kitchen with an almost all As report card, hoping it’s enough to make his dad smile at him, just for a few minutes.

Jack sighs, and his grip tightens a little more. “It doesn’t matter what some creep who runs around blowing people up thinks of you. He may be your biological dad, but he was no good father to you. And for what it’s worth, kid, I’m proud of you. I’m so damn proud.”

Jack’s thought of Jack as the closest thing he has to a read dad for a while now, and knowing Jack feels the same way is always reassuring. He keeps wondering when Jack is going to give up on him like everyone else, but Jack never does. He never walks away. But knowing he has a parental presence who does like him the way he is doesn’t solve Mac’s real problem. That the way he is might make him dangerous someday.

“If he could go dark, who’s to say it won’t happen to me?” Mac shakes his head, shuddering. *What would it take to push me over that edge?*

“I say. You’re not your dad, okay? You’re you. And there’s way too much goodness in you to ever end up like Murdoc or your father,” Jack whispers.

Mac sighs. Jack may believe that, but Mac just can’t. *I’m always going to have the darkness inside me, and I’m terrified that one day it’s going to win.*

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**PELICAN BAY**

**IT BETTER BE THE MOST SECURE PLACE IN THE WORLD**

Jack knows this isn’t going to go over well with Matty. He’s not technically allowed to be up here, they’re supposed to have cut off communication with Murdoc after the op. And yet he’s taking a personal day, leaving Mac in the capable hands...and paws...of Boze and Mickey, and driving up to Pelican Bay to try and put the fear of God into the devil himself.

In between nightmares, Mac ended up spilling more about both his father and about everything that happened with Murdoc. He swears up and down that Murdoc never actually physically did anything to him, and Jack desperately wants to believe him. He hopes Mac’s not lying to him again.

*He never should have been put through any of that.* Jack is absolutely furious that Mac had to sit there and listen to that monster filling his head with the kind of horrible things that left the kid sobbing into Jack’s shoulder half of last night. Jack wants to cry at the memory of holding the thin, shivering boy and knowing that the second Mac drifted off to sleep he had to let go, before Mac’s shattered mind convinced him those hands were Murdoc’s. *That sick bastard might not have laid a finger on him, but he tore into Mac’s mind and left his scars there.*

Jack claims he’s here on official Phoenix business, and the guards let him through. He has to wait
while they bring Murdoc from his cell, and pacing the room only makes Jack more stressed. Seeing the inmates walking the yard only reminds him of what Mac’s already suffered. He shouldn’t have had to endure it again. Every time they let Mac go inside a prison, bad things happen. We shouldn’t have done this to him. If Jack has his way, Mac will never see so much as the gates of a prison ever again.

“Well, you haven’t killed me yet, so I assume MacGyver survived the whole thing.” Murdoc is killingly casual, leaning back in his chair with that self-satisfied smirk.

“Yes, no thanks to you. You knew Omnus was the Organization, didn’t you? You knew all along. And you didn’t think it was worth telling us.”

“Oh, I’m sorry. Did I withhold information again? Well, maybe if MacGyver had been a little better at that lap dance...” Jack goes stiff. No. No, no, no. He didn’t actually do that...did he? If that’s why Mac was acting so strange, Jack is going to kill this monster right here right now. Matty wouldn’t let that happen, right? But she had stepped away for that phone call...how long was it? What could Murdoc have convinced Mac to do?

“He didn’t.” Jack shakes his head. I have to believe Mac. Jack is certain that Mac would tell him if something had happened. He trusts me. I have to trust that. “Mac told me what you did, what you threatened him with. What you asked for. And he told me he didn’t do it.”

“Oh really?” Murdoc leans back, steepling his fingers. “And you believe him? Little Angus doesn’t want you to know what he’s done for you. He doesn’t want you to feel guilty.” Murdoc shrugs. “He wanted to help you. The only way he knew how.”

Jack almost, almost, believes it. That would be such a Mac thing to do. But there was nothing but honesty in Mac’s eyes last night. Honesty, pain, and shame. He told Jack the truth. Murdoc got inside Mac’s head in more ways than one. Not only has he damaged my kid, he’s learned what makes Mac tick. Instead of teaching Mac about him, his real goal this whole time was to learn about Mac. So he can use it against all of them. Jack is suddenly horrified. “You’re just lying to get a rise out of me. And it’s not gonna work, cause I’m not gonna give you the satisfaction. Mac didn’t do that.”

Murdoc shrugs, still smiling. “Yes, but he thought about it. If Matilda hadn’t called him, he would have done whatever he had to to get that information. Because he can’t disappoint his precious team. He can’t risk failing them. Making them decide they don’t need him.” Murdoc grins. “He’s so insecure, Jack. All that abandonment and the daddy issues. Not that I blame him, Daddy dearest wasn’t exactly parent of the year.”

“Yeah, well, he doesn’t have to even think about that man anymore if he doesn’t want to.”

“Oh, is Papa Bear trying to take that place?” Murdoc laughs. “You’re so protective, Jack. You want to keep precious little Angus safe from everything in the world. But you can’t. You can’t protect him forever. So you might as well just accept it.” He laughs.

Jack leans on the table, and he knows his voice has reached that absolutely lethal tone. “Let’s get one thing straight, Count Creepula. The next time I see you, I don’t care if it is in this concrete box, I am going to snap your twiggy little neck like a chicken. Comprende?”

Murdoc just smiles wider. “Oh Jack, you can believe what you want to believe. You want to think MacGyver is safe from me, that I’m never going to leave this place, never going to be able to touch him.” His fingers twine together and he leans forward. “But you have no idea what is coming.”
Matty paces the small interrogation room, eyes fixed on the man her team captured last night at the motel. “Your name is Daniel Horn. You were born August 5, 1975 in Chandler, Arizona. You attended Torrance Elementary and then Thomas Edison Middle School and High School. You grew up with a dog named Piper, a little pomeranian. Both your parents passed, you have a sister and a brother but you haven’t seen them in decades.” She pauses for a moment, letting what she’s already told him sink in. “You have a BA in poli-sci and joined the Army after graduation. Rose to cyber-command sergeant before a dishonorable discharge in 2009 for selling DARPA codes to North Korea’s Bureau 121 hacker unit. After that you fell off the grid, but we’ve matched your signature to over a dozen cyber attacks around the world. Most recently, a water treatment plant in Chile, on behalf of the group we now know as Omnus. You see, I know everything there is to know about you.”

Horn leans back in his chair, looking strangely calm for everything she’s just thrown at him.

“What you don’t know, Matilda, is that I wanted to be caught.”

Matty stares at him for a long moment. _He won’t be able to resist telling me something, he’s already gloating._ And then her phone buzzes in her pocket. There are only three numbers that are allowed past the “Do Not Disturb” setting she switched on before going into the interrogation. A call from any of them means something too important to miss is happening.

Matty steps out into the hall and answers the incoming call. “Hello, Patty.”

“Director Webber, I heard about what happened with Murdoc. I’m glad it was a success.” Thornton sounds tired, run ragged. But also energized in the kind of desperate way that operatives have when things on a mission are about to reach boiling point.

“I don’t think a simple congratulations warrants pulling me out of an interrogation.”

Patty takes a deep breath before continuing. “I’ve tracked Walsh’s whereabouts in Shanghai. But unfortunately, he’s eluded me once again. He boarded a flight to Los Angeles.” Patty sighs and looks down. “I think he’s coming back to take down Phoenix once and for all. I’m on my way, but I suggest you prepare. Because he’s not coming alone.”
"Now when he was a young man,
He never thought he'd see
People stand in line to see the boy king.
King Tut, How'd you get so funky?
Funky Tut, Did you do the monkey?"

Jack knows it’s a bit childish, but really, he can’t help it. The damn song is stuck in his head. And if he has to suffer, so does Riley.

"I don’t remember the rest of the words. There was something about a condo made of stone though...or was that Spongebob?"

"That’s a pineapple under the sea." Riley pries the lid off another crate and swipes a small device she rigged up on the plane over it. “Nope, nothing here but cat statues. I think they’re fakes, but we’re not exactly here to blow the whistle on artifact counterfeiters.”

"What’s the deal with all the cats?" Jack asks.

"They were sacred to Egyptian society. Sometimes supposedly incarnations of gods and goddesses."

"So that’s where they get the attitude from." Jack’s always been a dog person himself. Not that he didn’t have a soft spot for the little grey runt he found abandoned behind the barn. Jack thinks he’s got a thing for strays.

Sometimes Riley still reminds him of that skittish kitten; she’s stopped flinching when Jack claps her on the shoulder, but he sees a haunted look in her eyes after some missions.

Jack tugs on the edge of a sarcophagus. When it falls open, he jumps back as a bandage-wrapped corpse tumbles out at him. He catches it, and a cloud of dust engulfs him. Jack shudders in disgust and pushes the nasty thing back into the coffin.

"Oh man, Riley, we gotta get outta here. There's a mummy."

"So?"

"You know those things are always frickin cursed! It’s probably gonna come to life and kill us." Jack slams the sarcophagus closed.

“Jack, now is not the time for getting superstitious. We have a real, actual problem, and it’s a lot
more plausible than a three thousand year old zombie.” Riley swipes her phone over another crate, and stops. “I’m getting a reading. I think we got it.”

"Riley, don’t touch that one. It looks like the ark of the covenant.”

"Jack, the ark would have been a lot smaller than this." He shakes his head. She’s wrecking all his jokes today. And yes, they are here after a pretty nasty target, but all the more reason to keep it light.

"I just don’t want our faces to melt off.” Riley starts pushing the lid off anyway. “Your funeral...” Jack mumbles.

"No. It’s all our funerals." Riley’s little gadget is going wild now. Jack steps up and takes a look inside the box.

"Dirty bomb. Just like intel said." He’s seen his share of these things. And this one looks like a doozy.

There’s a beeping buzz, and Jack flinches. Did opening the box trigger a countdown? I told Riley she shouldn’t do that. The sound continues, and Riley fishes her phone out of her pocket, glancing at the screen.

"It's my mom."

"Well, answer it! It might be important!” Jack shakes his head. The last time Riley’s mom called on a mission, she was letting Riley know a kidnapper was holding her for ransom.

“More important than this?” Riley gestures to the bomb.

“I’m the one who worked with a bomb disposal crew, remember? I got this.” Jack can already see the way the wires are laid out, it’s a design he saw in the Sandbox with Charlie before. He pulls out his knife. Let’s get this over with and get on home.

Riley ducks into a corner, checking her watch to be sure the prayer bells won’t go off while she’s on the phone, and answers the call. It’s a video one, so she makes sure she finds a spot to stand that doesn’t show anything that looks suspicious.

“I’m sorry it’s late, baby.” Diane looks...really, really upset, somewhere between furious and devastated.

Riley almost asks what the heck Mom means, and then remembers the time difference between Cairo and Portland. Way to almost give everything away. She’s been doing this job three years and somehow still struggles to compartmentalize everything.

“What couldn’t wait until morning?” Riley asks, faking a yawn.

“I’m sorry, I just...I needed to tell someone.” Mom’s voice is a little uneven, and Riley immediately wonders who died. Please tell me Elwood isn’t home again. He’s been coming around more often lately, claiming he’s cleaned up his act. Riley doesn’t believe it for a second. He can’t lie to someone trained in advanced interrogation by Matty the Hun herself.

“Please don’t say anything to him when you go to work tomorrow. It’s humiliating enough that it happened. I didn’t even want to tell you, but...I couldn’t sleep on it. But please don’t say anything to Jack. Don’t even mention the date.”
“Wait, Jack stood you up?” Riley didn’t realize he was even planning on going out with her this week. She knew they hit it off when Jack came to stay after Riley banged up her hand, and they’d actually managed to go a couple dates since then, when Jack could squeeze them in around work.

“Yes! He said he would meet me tonight at eight, and he’s not here and it’s almost midnight. I’ve tried calling him, all I get is his voicemail.” Riley cringes. Jack fell out a two-story window and smashed up his phone several hours ago. “I think he’s trying to tell me he doesn’t want this to get more serious. He keeps saying he can’t see me each week and pushing it to another time. I feel like such an idiot for not seeing it sooner.”

"I'm sure he has a good explanation..." Actually Riley could explain everything, but that would mean telling Mom that she’s actually not the social media manager for Jack’s tile company, but she works for the CIA and is currently risking her neck halfway across the globe. With Jack. Which would probably make Mom break up with him anyway. There’s no good solution.

“I guess he’s not ready to get serious, and that’s okay. Just...let it die off, okay? Don’t play matchmaker, don’t guilt him into it. If he doesn’t want to talk to me he doesn’t have to. And I really hope this doesn’t ruin anything for you. I’m so sorry if it does. I never even thought…”

“Mom, he’s not going to fire me because he isn’t interested in dating you.” Riley shakes her head. “But it’s late, and I have to work tomorrow, so I gotta go, okay?”

“Okay, honey.” The call ends and Riley slumps against the wall.

“What was that all about?” Jack asks. He’s holding something that was probably the detonator of the bomb.

"My mom sort of broke up with you via me."

“What?”

"You forgot to call her and tell her you couldn't make it tonight."

Jack sighs and smacks his forehead. “Damnit, I knew I was missing something on the pre-mission to-do list. And she broke up with me over that?”

“Well, I think it kinda was the straw that broke the camel’s back, after all those other dates you backed out of.” Riley stops talking when she realizes she can hear crunching gravel outside. "Whoa, we have bigger problems. Those henchmen just found us."

“How did they do that? We lost them at that market!”

"They aren't here for us, they're here for the bomb." Riley glances at it. "Cover it up, we have to hide. They're blocking the only way out."

Out of all the hiding places in this building, Jack thinks this is the worst. But it’s not like he had much of a choice. He’d just gotten the lid back on the bomb when the door slammed open, and the unlatched sarcophagus was right there.

Jack can feel a sneeze coming on. Probably some freaky disease in the dust on this mummy. He wonders if he’s going to start bleeding from the eyes or something gross.

Unfortunately, what might kill him eventually probably won’t get the chance. Jack and the mummy won’t both fit in the same space...well, they might with some effort, but Jack is sort of a fan of his
personal space when it comes to sharing it with dessicated bodies. Which means that when a group of the armed rebels wanders around the corner, they don’t have to search to hard to find the partially opened sarcophagus. And Jack.

He’s dragged out, and the butt of the gun that smashes him in the back of the head was a little overkill, he thinks. He’s not going anywhere, not with this many guys training weapons on him. The leader is shouting in Egyptian, and Jack barely understands a word. He just knows how to tell people he speaks English, and how to ask where the bathroom is. What? I’ve learned, in over a decade with covert ops, that that is the single most important question you’re probably going to need an answer to. Especially when the country he’s in has questionable food safety laws.

He does think he gets the gist of what’s going on when they point a pistol at his head. He’s just trying to decide what the angle is, so he can grab it away from this guy, because for some reason baddies seem to like to get up close and personal and give him the perfect chance to take that gun away from them, when he hears Riley’s voice.

"I wouldn’t do that if I were you. You have two options, Farhad. One, leave. Two, die." He glances back to see her rolling the bomb crate forward. There’s a slow, steady beeping coming from inside. Jack sighs. Damn it, Riley, you were supposed to stay hidden.

Farhad just starts to laugh. "You’ve just done our job for us. The bomb was never being shipped to New York. The plan was always to detonate it in Cairo. You’ve only accelerated our timeline." He and his men shake their heads. “And perhaps your intel did not tell you that we had no intention of walking away from this.”

Maybe getting broken up with, over the phone, via Riley, is only the second worst thing that will happen to Jack today.

MAC’S HOUSE

FOUR YEARS LATER

The only one who answers the door when Riley knocks is Mickey, who barks a couple times before whining and clearly pushing against the door. She pulls out her key and opens the door, letting herself in and fending off Mickey’s enthusiastic greeting. Riley rubs the dog’s head as she walks past, he’s grown a lot the past couple weeks. He’s actually tall enough now for Riley to reach his head without bending. He licks her hand and she slips him a piece of pita from her handful of takeout bags.

She didn’t really need Jack to text her this morning reminding her it was Cairo Day, but it was odd going to get food without him. They’ve always gone together. But he’s spent the last couple nights at Mac’s place, and she can’t blame him.

“Mac? Jack? Are you here?”

“Patio.” Mac’s voice is oddly quiet.

“Wow, that was fast Ri!” Jack shouts from the kitchen. “You got it from the same place as last year, right?”

“Of course I did!” Riley hands him several of the bags. “Here, you asked for all this, least you can do is help me carry it.” They both head for the patio, Riley balancing the takeout while Jack snatches what bags he can while holding three cold beers in his hand.
Jack keeps up a steady stream of enthusiastic chatter. Riley can tell that it’s overzealous on purpose, probably because Mac couldn’t have had a good night last night. It’s only been two days since they finished the Murdoc case and what she knows about what happened horrifies her. *If I see Murdoc again I’m going to rip his tongue out for saying what he did about Mac.* No one, least of all kind, caring Mac, deserves to be treated like that. "Today is the anniversary of Riley and I not getting shot, nuked, snake bit, or flambeed in that vortex of death Cairo. And we figured we wouldn’t have made it to this anniversary without you, so you’re gonna celebrate with us."

"I'm...not really hungry."

"You will be when you see the giant Egyptian pyramid of food we're about to throw at you." Jack starts unpacking the bags, and Riley follows suit, taking her cue from Jack and talking as cheerfully as she can.

"We got kabobs, pita, some garlic sauce Jack isn’t allowed to eat anymore, and even baba ganoush." Mac doesn’t perk up one bit. Riley knows he hasn’t been eating again, not surprising after what happened with Murdoc. Bozer texted her this morning, worried. *He’s had so many reasons to freak out about Mac this year.* Sometimes Riley feels guilty for everything Mac’s been through since joining the Phoenix. *Still, it's mostly better than prison.*

"What, you don’t like Egyptian food?" Jack shakes his head. “Or you’ve just never had it, in which case you are missing out on the only good thing to ever come out of Cairo.”

"Remember this?" Mac holds up a letter with a dozen crossed off postmarks. The one he wrote to his dad months ago. Riley almost forgot about that. "Now at least I know why it never made it to him. My father is a globetrotting criminal mastermind."

Mac told them all what he found out from Murdoc and Matty. Riley has to admit she wasn’t in the least surprised. Not after she saw that file on Matty’s desk. *Someone like Mac working for the other side would be scary. No wonder he’s a priority target.*

“Mac, we talked about this. You gotta stop letting this eat at you. Either let it go, or if you want I’ll help you go after this guy. As soon as they overturn your conviction and let you get on airplanes again, you and Riley and I can go anywhere we have to to chase him down. I’m sure Matty would be totally on board.”

Mac sighs. “I appreciate it. But the CIA, FBI and Phoenix have been trying to catch him for years. So have other countries’ agencies. I don’t think we’re going to be able to find him unless he wants to be found.”

“Yeah, well, those other agencies don’t have you.” Riley says. “Mac, no one else thinks like you do. Except probably your father. You might see things no one else can, because you know what to look for.”

Mac nods. He’s still staring at the letter in his hand. “I guess...I think I knew, all along, that something wasn’t right. But I just wanted to be wrong, you know? I wanted him to be...I wanted him to have a good reason, to be one of the good guys.”

“I know.” Riley sits down on the railing beside him. “It’s hard to accept that sometimes the people who should be your role models, who should protect you, are the people you should never grow up wanting to be.” She twists her fingers into his, pulling the letter away and setting it down. “I know what it’s like, a little.”

“Your dad didn’t kill people he worked with.”
“I don’t know all of what Elwood has done.” Riley shakes her head. “But I do know what it feels like to finally realize the person you wanted to idolize isn’t worth your time. So if you want to talk, I’m here.” She shrugs and hops back down. “But I’m also hungry, and I don’t like having serious conversations on an empty stomach.” She unwraps the baba ganoush and digs in. Mac follows her down, and she smiles a little. *We’re his family now. Everything is gonna be okay, eventually.*

Mac’s about to bite into one of the kabobs when his phone buzzes in his pocket. He pulls it out and glances at it, it’s one of Matty’s group messages. *Why haven’t Jack and Riley’s phones gone off too? "Matty needs us."*

Jack stops eating, nearly spitting out a mouthful of pita and garlic sauce Riley tried to take away from him. "No no no. Riley. We gotta explain the tradition. See the thing about Cairo Day is, we don’t go to work on Cairo Day. It's bad luck." Mac fully expects Riley to laugh and tell Jack being superstitious is stupid, but she doesn’t. She just reaches for her neck, and Mac realizes suddenly that this is possibly the first time he’s seen her without either a necklace or a choker of some kind. *Did something happen to her over there?*

"Well, I wasn't part of your death defying adventure, so I think I'm obligated to go." Mac grabs a few pieces of food and starts for the door. *If Matty wants us it’s probably important. He wonders if they’ve learned anything more about Omnus. The sooner we end all that, the better.*

“Oh no. The only thing worse than going to work on Cairo Day is letting you go anywhere alone,” Jack says, grabbing some food himself. “Guess I’ll just put the beers back in the fridge.” He shakes his head. “Matty always finds a way to ruin our fun.”

Jack isn’t his usual maniac driving self on the way to Phoenix. He actually stops at yellow lights, doesn’t pass cars whenever the opportunity arises, and never breaks the speed limit once. *Either he’s in no hurry to get to Phoenix, or he’s not tempting fate by doing dangerous things on the road.*

Matty seems surprised when they get to the War Room. “Dalton, Davis, I didn’t expect to see you here.”

“Well, Mac here decided to tempt the curse of the Cairo mummy, and we weren’t gonna let him enter the jaws of death alone,” Jack says, chuckling. Mac grins, but the joking mood fades as he notices an unfamiliar face in the War Room.

Matty steps back, letting them enter and join Bozer. "I’d like you all to welcome the newest member of our temporary science division team, Dr. Milton Zito. He’s an expert in meta-materials and he’s going to be working on a research project in our labs.”

"What kind of research project?"

"That's classified,” Matty and Zito say in unison.

Zito steps forward, holding out his hand to each of them in turn. "I'm looking forward to working with you. Especially you, Mr. MacGyver. I've heard so much about your unique abilities." He smiles, and there's something indefinable Mac doesn't like about it. "I look forward to seeing how well deserved your reputation really is." Mac wonders if it’s just residual panic from the whole Murdoc situation and the recurring nightmares, or if the way this man says “reputation” makes Mac feel like he’s not talking about his improvising. *And how would he know so much about me, of all the people on this team?*

When he gets to Jack, Mac can already tell there’s going to be trouble. Jack has that ‘let me throw a
monkey wrench in the works’ look in his eyes, and he grabs Zito’s hand so hard to shake it that Mac hears bones pop.

"I'm Jack Dalton. The guy who made the Kessel Run in less than twelve parsecs." Jack must not like him either, and oddly that makes Mac feel a little better.

"You do know that parsecs are a measure of distance and not time?"

"You just don't appreciate classic movie lines." Jack shrugs, then looks straight at Mac and Matty. "You know, like...’I got a bad feeling about this’?"

"Please ignore Jack. He's been blown up a lot. Bozer, would you please escort Dr. Zito to the lab?" Matty shakes her head.

Bozer nods, and walks out with Zito following him. The minute they're gone, Jack turns to Matty.

“Been blown up a lot?” Jack rolls his eyes. “Really, Matty?”

She sighs and rests her hands on the table. “You were making it a little too obvious that you didn’t like him. Jack, if something is going on, I’d rather we have the chance to investigate him without him being suspicious?"

“IT wasn’t just me then.” Mac is getting the feeling this Dr. Zito rubbed everyone in the War Room the wrong way. Everyone except Bozer.

Finally, Bozer isn’t going to be the new guy in the lab. He’s relishing the chance to show someone else around rather than being the one having to be told for the third time which way to turn to get to the elevator banks. "The vending machine on the third floor has the best candy. But be careful, cryptography will talk your ear off. I don’t think they get out much."

Zito nods. “Of course, sometimes it’s nice to talk with scientists in another field. They can see problems from a different angle sometimes.”

“Yeah, I guess they can,” Bozer says. Mac’s always been the one in his life who does that. He’s like fifteen fields of study all rolled up into one.


This time Bozer actually laughs. "Community college film school." He relishes the shock on Zito’s face. I never get tired of surprising people. It makes him feel smart, which is a huge thing after spending so much time with Mac around him. Mac would make Nobel winners feel dumb, but honestly that’s not that comforting when he fixes in two seconds what I’ve been struggling with for hours.

He shows Zito how to swipe into the elevator and lab. “Your ID’s been programmed for the access you’ll need while you’re here. You’ll need to check in with Jill Morgan, the head of R&D, to get your computer logins.”

Sparky is on, propped in a chair while Mac figures out how to improve the hydraulic muscle groups. Mac’s been avoiding the lab the past few days, so Sparky’s been relegated to the chair. Bozer guesses Mac’s reluctance to do anything right now has something to do with finding out his dad is the one who should be in jail for murder and terrorism. How unfair is it that someone can walk around having done so much and never pay, and Mac’s done time for a crime he never even committed?
Zito makes a beeline for Sparky, examining the robot’s design and wiring. "This is the artificial intelligence project you mentioned."

"Yeah. The latest in enhanced bomb disposal. But we're still working out the kinks, so right now he's just helping me kick around ideas." Bozer had him switched on this morning running simulations of molecular breakdown of his new polymer when exposed to water. So far, Sparky hasn’t found an effective solution to the problem. Any waterproofing additive will either make the polymer too stiff or too shiny to be believable skin.

Zito moves on to the test mask Bozer has on his desk, feeling the surface carefully. "That's impressive."

"New polymer I've been working on. It mimics human skin. I just need to figure out a way to make it waterproof."

"A colleague of mine told me you were very skilled at making prosthetics." Not for the first time, Bozer thinks he has Jack’s ‘bad feeling about this’. Mac and I are the newest recruits at the Phoenix so why is he so knowledgeable about us? He shakes off the concern and moves toward the back of the room.

"Your workstation is over here..." Bozer points to the separate area of desks set aside for the temporary science staff. All outside personnel are required to use guest workstations, with computers that don't jack directly into the Phoenix mainframe.

"Thank you. I guess I'll take a look at my accomodations now.” Zito turns away, and that’s when it happens. It's the smallest motion, but Bozer sees it. Zito just plugged a miniature flash drive into his workstation’s computer tower.

Jack frowns at the video on the screen. In my experience, guys who want to get caught is never a good thing.

Matty pauses the video. "Cage is with him now, she’s been interrogating him for the past twelve hours. But we still have no idea what he means, and based on what Thornton told me, Walsh is already in the country. We don’t know what he's waiting for, and we think Horn is the key to it."

“If Cage can’t crack him, we’re up against a bad dude here,” Jack says. “And Patty's on her way?”

“She just landed in LAX and is on her way here now. Which is why I called you all in. The second Cage gets what she needs, I need the team ready to mobilize on it. Whatever Walsh is planning, it’s got to be important.”

“And we don’t know anything else?” Riley asks. “Why would Walsh come back? He had access to everything at the Phoenix. He could have taken anything he wanted.”

“Hopefully Cage can get us an answer to that.”

Andie pokes her head into the room. "Director Webber, I have a detective Moline on the phone from New York City."

"Put him on speaker." Matty taps the screen and the new voice fills the War Room.

"Matilda Webber? I'm reaching out regarding a homicide case I picked up last night. The victim had your name and number in his recent calls, as well as a plane ticket to Los Angeles in his room.”
Matty looks at Jack, and he sees a deep concern slide across her face. The next second, Jack knows exactly why.

"The victim's name was a Dr. Milton Zito."

"Go. Now." Jack’s already halfway out the door, with Mac and Riley right behind him.

“It’s Cairo Day, man, I’m telling you!” Jack yells as they sprint for the stairs. Riley just nods, eyes wide. “It’s cursed!” He just hopes they haven’t handed Bozer over as a sacrifice...

Mac knew there was something wrong. He knew Zito, or whoever this guy is who claims to be Zito, was up to no good. And he let them send him off with Bozer. If anything happens to Boze because of this...

Mac catches up with Jack as they get to the stairwell, and he’s the first one through the door and running to the lab level, taking two stairs at a time. By the time he gets to the door, he can tell something is wrong. He can hear yelling from inside the lab, and he shoves the door open and races for Bozer’s desk. He can’t see Boze at all, at least not until he looks down.

Sparky is repeating the same things over and over. "Medical attention needed." Jill is kneeling over Bozer’s still body, her lab coat bunched up and pressed against his stomach.

“What happened?” Mac asks.

“I don’t know!” Jill sounds almost hysterical. “I was at my desk and then I heard Bozer yell, and someone ran past me, and Bozer was bleeding on the floor.”

“Zito...he…” Boze gasps.

"Bozer, you gotta stop talking. We know it was Zito, it's okay. You're gonna be okay." Mac crashes to his knees beside him, it looks like Bozer’s been stabbed. I saw wounds like this all the time in CCI. Preferred method of shanking someone. His own scar feels like it’s throbbing in sympathy. Stabbing someone in the stomach meant a high likelihood of hitting a vital organ, especially nicking an intestine, without a lot of effort. Guys who got shanked like that had about a fifty fifty chance if they could get them to medical soon enough.

"He was...wearing a mask. I...fought him...tore it off." Bozer points to the discarded heap of flesh toned polymer. "He...plugged something...into a computer tower...I stopped him, Mac."

“Good job.” Mac grabs Bozer’s hand, his skin is cold and clammy. Not a good sign.

"Oh my God, Bozer!" Riley kneels beside Mac, grabbing Bozer’s other hand. "How is he?"

"The good news is, I think the knife missed his vital organs." Jill speaks up, sounding both panicked and clinical. “The bad news is, if we don’t stop the bleeding, he’s going to go into hypovolemic shock in the next two minutes.”

Mac looks up and Jack and Riley. "You two have to stop the fake Zito. Bozer said he stopped him from plugging a flash drive into the computers. Riley, whatever he wants we can't let him have it. You have to keep him out of the network. Jack, you have to find him." Jack nods, looking like he wants to say something, but he hurries toward one of the desk phones instead.

"Jill, I need your help. Keep pressure on that." Mac starts glancing around the lab, looking for something he can use to stop the bleeding. He pulls some cables from the back of a computer and
starts making them into a slipknot. *The more pressure we can put on the wound, the better.* He can vaguely hear Jack shouting into the phone.

"Yeah, it's Jack Dalton. We have a hostile on site, I need the building locked down right now, and I need every available operative to meet me in the tac room, right now." Riley's heading for the door already.

Mac returns with his slipknotted cable and bends down next to Bozer. Boze looks up at him, coughing. "Mac, did you see that? She was holding my hand. Please don't let me die before I get to kiss her."

"I'm not gonna let you die." Mac slides the cable under him, and then pulls it up and tightens the knot, trying to ignore the panting gasps and yelps. *It's going to be okay. I'm going to make it okay. I have to.*

Jack’s never seen Mac look as stricken as he did when he saw Bozer bleeding out on the lab floor. *Probably thinking of another of those siblings gunned down in the street. Except this time, he’s gonna blame himself if anything happens.*

Jack can almost hear Mac’s thought process, like the kid is right beside him, talking it through. “I dragged him into this life, it was my fault he found out about the Phoenix at all, he joined because he wanted to help me, and if he dies that’s on me.” Jack wants to shake imaginary Mac and remind him that things happen, that life can just be harsh sometimes, but Mac is back there in the lab and Jack is on his way to the tac room.

*If Bozer dies we lose Mac.* Jack already knows the kid will run as far and as fast away from the Phoenix as he can if that happens. *Not that I’d blame him.* Jack wouldn’t want to work in a place filled with ghosts. *That’s why I quit the Deltas.* If something happened to Riley or Mac, he’d quit the Phoenix too.

Jack grabs his gear from his locker, and he glances around the room at the other tac team members. He knows almost all of them by name. He knows these guys have his back, that they’re going to do whatever it takes to end this. He knows they’ll follow him anywhere.

"Ok gentlemen, this is a hard target search. Every floor, every office as of this moment everyone in this room has a blind security clearance. The target was wearing a mask, so we don’t know what he looks like. But we do know that attacking Wilt Bozer was not part of his plan. Bozer was an obstacle, and he's had to change his plan because he was caught in the act. That makes him vulnerable. We're gonna get this son of a bitch."

*We have to.*

Bozer’s pretty sure even appendicitis didn’t hurt this bad. But he thinks Mac is actually panicking more than he is. *He’s scared to death that I’m not going to make it.* And honestly, that’s the thing Bozer is most scared of; leaving Mac behind. *I mean, I don’t want to die, cause there’s a bunch of things I still want to do, but if I die, Mac’s gonna self-destruct.* He’s already seen what happened when they lost Jerry. *That time he fought back, he lashed out. And he paid the price. This time, he’ll just implode.* Boze is trying not to think like that, but the truth is, the one thing running through his mind right now is, *I can’t die because I can’t do that to Mac.*

But he’s pretty sure Mac can figure out how to save his life, he just has to get him to calm down long enough for his brain to kick in. So he resorts to his trademark humor. "I'm just...gonna come right
“Yeah,” Mac laughs weakly, his hands are covered in blood and Bozer feels sick. \textit{He’s going to see that blood on his hands for the rest of his life, no matter what happens.} Just like Bozer sees Mac’s on his own. \textit{Every time he came home hurt, I knew it was only because he was my friend. Because he cared about me and my family. Because of Jerry.}

“We have to seal off his wound.” Mac glances around the lab. “Jill, can you get me some super glue? A lot of it?”

“I can do you one better.” Jill stands up, her own hands smeared crimson, and rifles across an open desk until she digs out some vials. She rattles off names of chemicals Bozer can’t begin to pronounce as she returns, starting to measure chemicals into beakers. \textit{We’re developing this for the field, to treat major injuries. When the chemicals get inside the wound, they harden.} She picks up the pray gun Bozer uses to paint the base layers on his masks. \textit{This isn’t exactly the recommended method of administration, but it should work.}”

“You...been hanging around Mac...too long. Improvising.” Bozer gives her a weak grin.

“Hey, you’re my responsibility. I’m not letting you die in my lab, on my watch.” She finishes whatever she’s doing to tweak the sprayer. “This is gonna hurt. A lot.”

“Not as much as my paycheck...if you don’t replace that…” Bozer says, and then he can’t get anything else out because she’s right, it feels like his stomach is on fire. \textit{Yep, definitely worse than appendicitis.} He holds Mac’s hand in a grip that feels like it’s crushing bones. And then the pain fades, replaced by a dull ache that feels like he ate too much...well, if what he ate too much of was cactus spines covered in cayenne pepper sauce.

"It's working!" Mac gasps out, and Bozer lets himself relax a little at the relief in his friend’s voice.

"Please tell me that turned me into Iron Man.” He chuckles weakly.

Mac rocks back on his heels. “Is medical on their way?”

Jill shakes her head. “I called them, but with the building in lockdown it’s going to take longer because their first priority is securing all research samples held in their storage, and all of the records.”

“We could get him up there,” Mac says, wheeling over a rolling table. “Sorry, Boze, this is gonna suck.”

“Just...my turn...to take one for the team,” Bozer says as Mac and Jill lift him onto the table and wheel him toward the elevators. He grins weakly up at Mac. “I can’t...have you taking...all the injury leave. This time...you’re cleaning the house.”

“Ok.” Mac says. “I could try making your go-to recovery waffles.” He pushes the button for Medical level, and Bozer sees him shiver when his finger leaves blood on the button.

“No way. I’m not surviving...a stabbing...just to get killed by food poisoning.” Bozer shakes his head. And then the lights go out in the elevator, the whole thing shakes violently, and then the world goes dark.

“We can do this the easy way, Mr. Horn, or the hard one.” Sam leans across the table, meeting the man’s eyes unflinchingly.
“I assume your musclebound friend from the motel is waiting outside to show me the hard way?” Horn smirks in a self-satisfied way. The action sends a tingle down Cage’s spine. *He’s been too comfortable this whole time.*

“Oh no. I’m more than capable of showing you the hard way myself.” In the bag beside her is a file detailing the exact locations of his siblings, and their families. *I’ll play dirty if I have to to get what we need.* There’s a reason these rooms don’t have cameras.

Something about Horn has bothered Cage since Matty brought her in on this one. He handles interrogations like she does. Like he doesn’t have a thing in the world he can be threatened with. *Everyone has a breaking point, but he’s been well trained not to reveal his.*

Her phone buzzes. Only Matty’s set to be allowed to have a message come through during interrogations. She attempts to step into the hall before checking it, but the door doesn’t open. She pulls out her phone and looks at the message.

**Phoenix in lockdown. Hostile breach on premises, agent down. Remain with Horn and keep him in custody. Possible Omnus attack.**

Sam doesn’t bring her gun with her to interrogations. Too much of a risk, too much potential to have it taken away from her when she gets up close and personal. But right now, she wishes she had it.

She wipes every trace of worry off her face before turning back to Horn. “Now where were we? Oh yes, the hard way. Which involves the teams who just told me they’re watching your niece’s middle school and your nephew’s karate tournament.”

“Don’t pretend you’re like me. Your agency doesn’t attack children.” Horn laughs.

And then the door clicks open. *The only people with security access are the guards.* But Cage already knows that’s not who this is. She spins around, and this time, all the training in the world isn’t going to keep the shock from showing.

“Clearly, he doesn’t know you like I do, Deborah.” Jason Tennant flashes her a sadistically cheerful smile. “He doesn’t know he’s talking to the woman who decimated an Afghan refugee camp to find the wounded CIA agent they were protecting.” Sam fights to keep the rage down, to think of a way to catch Tennant off guard. He has a knife in his hand, and it’s covered in blood. *Who has he already killed to get here?* “I must say, I was more surprised to hear you joined the white hats than to hear you survived the hit I put out on you. You were always one of our best operators.” He shakes his head. “Now, are you going to come back where you belong, or do I have to make sure I kill you this time?”

He’s giving her a fraction of a second to decide, and she knows if she says the wrong thing, that knife is going to find a home in her chest.

“I’m getting a little tired of playing nice. Making empty threats like that. It gets boring knowing I can’t follow through.” She stands up, letting a smile slip onto her face. *He won’t buy it for long, but I don’t need long.* She turns around, takes one step closer, and then strikes. She slams her foot into Tennant’s hand, and the knife flies across the room, skittering into a corner.

She has to take him down fast. She aims a sweeping kick at his legs, but he anticipates it and flips her onto her side on the floor. She jumps back upright, this time simply going for his arm, pulling it behind his back. She shoves him toward the table, if she can knock him out she can hold him until someone arrives with backup. And then a foot hooks around hers, and now she’s the one being slammed down. Sam winces and nearly blacks out as her head slams against the side of the metal
The blow disorients her for a couple seconds, and that’s all the time Tennant needs. She hears a swish of leather and cloth, and then there’s a choking pressure around her throat. She tugs at the belt with her hands, but she’s still groggy from the head injury and she’s rapidly blacking out.

"You've gone soft, Deborah. Disappointingly easy to kill." That’s the last thing she hears before the world goes dark.

Jack’s got the nasty suspicion that this guy is somehow connected to Walsh. *Matty said he was coming back, and that he probably had a plan. This sure seems like the start of one.* Clearly this fake Zito knows how to avoid security feeds. They can’t find him on any of the cameras, and he’s been making his way through a lockdown search without raising red flags. *The only way someone would be able to stay this far ahead of us is if they knew SOP for situations like this. And Oversight pretty much wrote the manual on that.*

Which is why he’s leading his team straight to the holding level. *Dollars to donuts this is part of Horn’s plan. Why he wanted to get caught.* And when Matty alerts him that they’ve lost camera visual in holding, he knows he’s right. He just hopes he’s not too late.

When he pushes open the stairwell door, he can see a guard sprawled in the hallway and the interrogation room door wide open. *Cage was in here, doing the interrogation. Would she have tried to move Horn when there was trouble?*

And then he sees blond hair on the floor, just visible around the edge of the door. Jack rushes into the room, followed by two of the tac team members.

"We have agents down and no sign of Zito or Mr. Organization." The door guard is a lost cause, his throat slashed wide open. But Cage doesn’t have visible open wounds. And when Jack reaches for her arm, he feels her pulse, faint but there. But she’s not breathing.

Jack leans down and begins a round of rescue breathing, hoping he’s in time. *How long has it been since the cameras went down? How long has it been since she stopped breathing?* He doesn’t see any sign of their fake Zito or Horn.

He’s about to start another round of breaths when he feels Sam’s chest move under his hand.

"Cage?" She coughs, rolling over, and Jack sighs with relief. She coughs a minute longer, then sits up slowly, taking deep, shaky breaths.

“Damn it, I let him get the jump on me.” There’s a nasty knot at the edge of her hairline, and Jack can see red marks all over her throat. “He let Horn out too, didn’t he?”

“I’m afraid he did. Did you get a look at him, by any chance?”

"His name is Jason Tennant." Sam's eyes are coldly furious. "I used to do his dirty work. Looks like he's learned to do it himself." She grabs the edge of the table and starts pulling herself to her feet.

“Whoa, stay down. You’re in no condition to be up and running around.” Jack puts a hand on her shoulder, but Cage pushes it away.

"He’s tried to kill me twice now. I’m starting to take it personally." And then both of them cringe as the alert sirens begin blaring.
“What the hell is that?” Jack only put them in lockdown, not full breach level. No sense in inciting total panic, and honestly the alarms and the lights are only going to make any search more confusing.

“Comms are down, Dalton,” one of the tac team yells in. Jack pulls out his phone and fires off a text to Matty.

**What just happened?**

Matty jumps when the War Room lights go red and the alarms start blaring. Some things are just too startling to not react to.

“Dalton! I know we have agents down, but did that necessitate going to Defcon 1?” There’s no answer from the comms.

“He didn’t do this,” Riley speaks up, typing frantically into her rig. "Someone just used an old override code in the system. The building is going into full breach protocol."

“I thought you locked down the network,” Matty says.

"I did, but that didn’t mean the computers weren’t still running. Someone used an old admin code to access a computer terminal on the third floor, and the system recognized the old access commands from when Walsh was Oversight as an imminent threat. That's the built in response. I know, I programmed it myself."

"Can you undo it?"

"Not from here. I have to get to the servers on the fourth floor to enter my administrative override.” Riley says. “We have no comms until I bring us back online, and we have no cameras, so I guess I’m going in blind.”

It’s not five minutes from the time Riley leaves to the time Jack bursts through the doors. He must have responded to her text about reporting back the the War Room. She needs to be able to coordinate as many of her people as she can, because this situation is spiralling out of her control.

"Where's Mac?" is his first question.

"He and Jill were taking Bozer to medical. They’re currently stuck in an elevator almost at ground level, he texted me once the power cut out.” She’s worried about Bozer, but Mac said Jill sealed his wound and he’s stable. *As long as they’re in that elevator, they’re safe.* Elevators lock down, no one can get inside, and the doors are bulletproof. *As long as Mac’s inside there, he’s ok.* She worries about that boy more than she’ll admit. *Never seen anyone more likely to catch a stray bullet.*

Cage enters behind Jack, and she looks a bit shaky, and there’s blood running down the side of her face, but she’s on her feet. Matty’s wanted to talk to her ever since Jack told her he had her secured in the holding wing. *For someone to be able to take her down, we’re up against a very dangerous opponent.*

““The man who’s inside our building is Jason Tennant,” she says, and it simply confirms what Matty’s feared since her phone call with Patty. *Omnus and Scorpion are merging.* Alone, both shadow agencies were serious threats. Together, they’re a deadly force.

"Where's Riley?" Jack asks.

"Heading for the server room to try and override the breach protocols. Once she does we’ll have
comms and cameras again.”

“I’m gonna get Mac,” Jack says, heading for the door. “I’ll help him get Bozer to safety and then we’ll meet up with Riley.”

"I'm going after Tennant." Cage heads for the door. “Jack, I’m going to need you to swipe me into the tac room on the way, I need a gun.”

Once they’re gone, Matty sits down, trying to ignore the blare of the alarms in the background. She feels rather than hears the buzz of her phone in her pocket, and when she pulls it out and sees the text, from Mac, she frowns. She pulls her own gun out of her desk, checks the magazine, and then tucks it into her belt. This is bigger than we thought.

“Mac?” Jill’s pretty sure her voice is shaking. But she thinks she has a right to freak out. She’s in an elevator with someone she just stopped from bleeding out, and said elevator has just stopped and gone into emergency mode.

“It’s okay. We’re going to be fine.” Mac’s already bending down, undoing part of the table he set Bozer on. “We’re between the first sublevel and the ground floor right now. I think if we pry open the doors we can come out on the ground floor. He picks up the metal bar. “I’m gonna need your help, these doors are probably designed to stay closed in a lockdown, right?” She nods. “One of us will have to keep them open while the other one gets Bozer out, okay?”

He shoves the metal rod into the door and pushes, straining. Jill notices one shoulder of his shirt is turning dark. Did he reopen an old wound?

She jumps in and starts pushing as well, and finally the door slides back. Mac is taller than her, and he can actually see over the edge of the floor. Jill can hear a muffled clumping, like a lot of feet in the hall.

“That’s one of the tac teams.” Mac leans forward. “They’ll be able to help us.”

Jill can’t explain why, but she’s learned not to ignore her gut feelings. She stands on tiptoe and glances through the gap, and then yanks Mac backward, the doors he just managed to pry open closing back on themselves with a soft whoosh.

“Wh-” She claps a hand over his mouth, catching the metal pole he almost dropped with her free one, and listens until the footsteps die away. She can hear shouting, something about a change of plans and the data center.

“Those weren’t ours.” The helmet design was all wrong, and they didn’t have the new vest lights she just had R&D install in every set of tac gear in the Phoenix lockers. “I just supervised a team making gear upgrades. That’s not our work those guys are wearing.”

Mac lets out a shuddery breath as she pulls her hand away from his mouth. “I almost got us all killed.”

“It’s not your fault, you didn’t know they sent an army.” Suddenly her legs don’t want to hold her anymore, and she collapses against the table.

“I guess we’re safest in here, just waiting it out, then.” Mac pulls out his phone, probably texting an update on the situation to Matty. And then someone taps at the door, and Mac looks up, his face lighting up. He must recognize whatever the code is someone is using. He jams the metal bar back into the door and shoves it wide open. Above them, Jill can just make out the tip of a familiar
“Jack!” She’s never been so relieved to see anyone.

“Heard you guys were a little stuck.” Jack holds the door open so Mac and Jill can haul Bozer out. It’s more difficult than she expected; she has have Mac lift her up to get through the opening, and then he hands Bozer over to her and Jack to pull through. When he finally scrambles out, and Jack lets the door close, they all collapse on the tile, panting.

Mac is the first to speak up. “Where is everyone?”

“Matty’s back at the War Room, and Riley headed for the fourth floor to get this breach alert thing shut down so we can actually function. You two get Bozer to Matty, I’m going to go on to Riley. I didn’t see anything between you and the War Room to be a threat.”

“Riley’s on the fourth floor? The servers?” Mac asks.

“Yeah…” She can see the worried look on Jack’s face spread.

“Because a whole tac team ran past us, and I heard one of them say something about needing to get to the data center.”

“We were going to yell and ask for help when I realized they weren’t our guys,” Jill says.

“There were a lot of them, Jack. You can’t take them all alone.” Jill notices he’s avoiding letting Jack see his bloodied shoulder. “I’m coming with you.”

Jill struggles to her feet. “I’ll get Bozer to someplace safe. Go do whatever you have to to fix this.” She sounds braver than she feels. I never thought this would actually happen. She’s not a field agent, she never expected the danger to come inside the Phoenix itself.

“You’ve got this.” Bozer’s whisper is shaky, but he’s smiling at her. “You saved my life. Getting me to the War Room is the easy part.”

“So there’s hostile teams in the building now?” Jack asks. “We went into lockdown immediately, how did they get through?” Mac can’t tell if it’s a legitimate question or if it’s just Jack rhetorically complaining. But he does think he has an answer. Building security is always only as good as the people designing it. And people used to working with high-tech systems tend to forget about the less fancy options.

“Lockdown doesn’t include things like ventilation shafts, right?” Mac asks. “If they knew how to bypass the countermeasures on them...but that would mean they were from the Phoenix.” He knows the maintenance crew complains about having to disable the safeguards every time a vent fan needs repairs.

“Or working with Walsh. You weren’t there for it, but Cage IDed our fake Zito. He’s Jason Tennant, head of a shadow agency that we know Walsh was working with.” Jack shakes his head. “He broke our Omnus dude out of holding and almost strangled Sam. He’s nobody to mess with. And now he’s got even more guys inside.”

They turn a corner, and come face to face with a heavy magnetic door. Jack swipes his keycard, but nothing happens. “Damn it. Only admin access can get in here. And Riley and Matty are the only ones who have it right now. And I can’t text Ri and ask her to let us in, cause the server room has a closed system and a signal blocker. Makes it virtually unhackable from the outside, and also means
“Well, if that team got into our building without going through the doors, maybe we can too.” Mac points to the right, while he turns left. “Server rooms get really hot. All that air has to be vented somewhere, and maybe if we get into the ducts we can get to the one pulling the heat out of that room. See if you can find a vent shaft. Whoever finds one first texts the other, okay?”

Mac steps into one of the conference rooms, glancing around. Those ceiling vents might be accessible, if he can get to them. He pulls a chair out from beside one of the tables, and starts to climb onto it, when he hears a faint sound of breathing that isn’t his.

Mac turns around slowly, stepping back down from the chair. Behind him is someone he’s only seen in dossier photos; Jonah Walsh. The man pulls a gun, and Mac swallows hard. This is it. He’s going to kill me.

And then Walsh turns, aims the gun at the door access panel, and shoots it. There’s a scatter of sparks, and Mac hears the locks engage. Walsh grins, and his teeth look bloodstained in the red breach warning lights.

Walsh glances at Mac. “You’re as hard to get rid of as your old man.”

“You know, I thought you two might have been working together. Birds of a feather and all.” Mac’s just got to stall for time. There’s a lot of stuff in this room, he just has to be able to reach it. That blackboard cleaner could help…

Walsh’s smile turns into a grimacing snarl. “James MacGyver’s been a thorn in our side since we started. And by we I mean Omnus. And despite having both the resources of a shadow agency and the full backing of the US government, he’s slipped through my fingers every time.”

“And here I thought this was a case of ‘If you can’t beat ‘em, join ‘em’.” He’s trying to channel his inner Jack, because Jack is really good at getting people riled up and distracting them from what’s really going on.

“Oh, no. You didn’t think I was some jaded hero-turned-sour-from-losing, did you?” Walsh shakes his head. “Omnus has been my brainchild since I joined the CIA. Since I watched men die, because we weren’t able to do what was necessary. There’s too much red tape, too much bureaucracy. You know what it’s like to know what needs to be done and do it. The law is too top-heavy, and the world needs to be re-ordered, so people like you and me can save lives.”

“You’re sick.” Mac can see why this guy worked with Murdoc. They sound so much alike. Killing to remake the world, because they think that’s the way to make it better.

“No, I’m just a man who’s willing to do what others won’t to make the world a safer place. And I want you to be a part of it.” Mac guesses his horror must show on his face. “Oh, don’t look so surprised. What’s here for you? People who watch your every move, people who’ll never trust you, not really. To them, your past is a liability. To us, it’s an asset.”

“I’m sorry, but having a gun pointed at my face isn’t really convincing me that I’m all that valuable to you.” He’s been taking tiny, shuffling steps backward, he can almost reach that bottle of cleaner now...

“Who do you think gave your name to Thornton?” Walsh asks. “If it weren’t for us, you’d still be someone’s little bitch in CCI. You don’t owe the Phoenix anything. You owe me, and Omnus.” He wants to use me to catch my father. That’s probably been his game all along. But he also sent
Murdoc after me. And he sent me back to prison.

“You sent someone to kill me. How could I ever trust you?”

“Trust? Oh MacGyver, haven’t you learned anything yet? In this world, there’s no such thing as trust. Spies are, by definition, liars. Jack, Riley, Thornton, Webber, Cage, all of them have lied to you. All of them have used you. The only difference is, they use you to hold the status quo, to protect the balance of power. I want you to help me change it.”

“I won’t be part of this.” Mac can agree that the world is a screwed up place. But Walsh and Murdoc’s ideas of how to fix it aren’t the right way to go about it. I know from experience that going outside the law can get good, innocent people killed. And yes, once he thought that was the only way to make a difference, but the Phoenix showed him it didn’t have to be. “I’m never going to help you do this.”

“Then I guess you just have to die.” Walsh raises his gun. And then there’s a massive explosion, and Mac ducks and covers his head as pieces of glass and wood fly everywhere. He rolls for cover behind one of the tables, shaking. What the hell just happened?

Found one. Might be a tight squeeze for me, but if we get your scrawny butt in there you can tell Riles to open the door. Jack grins as he hits send. Mac’s gonna give him hell for calling him skinny again, but the truth is that kid hasn’t been a healthy weight since Jack’s known him.

When his phone doesn’t ping back with an equally salty reply in the next couple seconds, Jack starts to worry. He shoulda responded to that with at least a sarcastic tongue-sticking-out emoji. Jack steps away from the vent he just unscrewed with his knife, and runs toward the door.

Mac went into the conference room on the left. Jack wiggles the door handle, but it won’t budge, and the card reader and keypad are dead. What...

The voice on the other side of the door stops Jack cold. He’s heard “Oversight” a grand total of three times, every one for a mission he royally screwed up. The man’s voice is burned into his brain. Walsh is right here. He personally came to make sure the job got done.

And the second voice scares Jack even more. Mac’s sassing the creep back with a level of burn Jack can be well and truly proud of, but he also knows talking like that will piss anyone off, let along an unhinged psycho like Walsh. Jack’s kid is on the other side of that door, and he’s trapped in there with a monster. Jack needs to get to him, and fast.

Come on, what would Mac do? He glances around. Off to his left is the wing with the experimental greenhouse...Mac loves when they get their hands on fertilizer.

It takes him a little longer to make a breaching grenade than it would probably take Mac, but he’s pretty satisfied with the end result. He lights the fuse, throws it up against the door behind the two tables he’s tipped over to shape the charge, and ducks, covering his ears as the explosion goes off and shakes the room. Damn, I didn’t think it was going to be that intense. His ears are ringing, but he jumps up, scrambling over the scorched tables and across the shattered door.

Mac is uncurling from behind a table, shaking his head and rubbing his ears, but still apparently in one piece. Mostly. Jack can see a dark stain on the kid’s upper arm.

“He hurt you?” Jack asks, grabbing Mac’s sleeve. The whole shoulder of his shirt is soaked with blood.
“No. Just tore my stitches from the last op when I pried open the elevator.” Jack blames the dark material and the emergency lighting for why he didn’t see it sooner.

“Where’s Walsh?”

“He got away.” Mac is shaking. “I think he went out the other door.”

Jack runs through, into the second server access hallway. There’s no sign of Walsh…but the second server room door is missing. There’s scorch marks all around it, and the door itself is just...gone.

*Well, that explains why the whole place was shaking.* Somehow, Jack must have accidentally timed his explosion to the time someone else blew up the server room door.

There’s a gunshot, and his blood runs cold. *Riley’s in there. By herself. Against God knows how many men.* He races into the room and then stops cold when someone steps out from behind one of the server stacks and aims the barrel of a gun between his eyes.

When Sam hears the boots in the hallway, she stops. There are too many to be Tennant, and Jack’s last text clearly indicated he didn’t have a team on this floor. But he’d also said they knew of at least one group of six infiltrators. Cage thinks she might have found another.

She ducks into one of the inset doors, tucking her gun against her chest and glancing around the corner just enough to see what’s coming.

A group of four is clearing the hall, all in grey tactical gear. The gear itself is nondescript, no logos, insignias, or special modifications, but the sweep pattern they’re using to check hallways and corners in unmistakable to someone who led tac ops teams like this one for five years.

*These are Scorpion agents.* Tennant must have had backup, and a lot of it, standing by. *Once he got made, he probably decided to order them to breach, to make as much chaos and confusion as possible.* It’s a classic Scorpion tactic, to have multiple small teams in various places, playing a shell game of who’s the important one to take out. *They probably brought an extra set of gear for Tennant. He could be any one of them now.*

Sam takes a deep breath, despite the screaming ache in her throat. She really shouldn’t be preparing to take on a four-man Scorpion kill squad like this, but it wouldn’t be the first time she’s won a fight on pure adrenaline and spite. Except it’ll be the first time she’s facing off against Scorpion instead of fighting for them. *It’s only almost as bad as Kersk.*

Her only chance is to take them by surprise and use their own search formation against them. Walsh knew he was getting the best of the best. The only problem is, he didn’t consider the fact that he had one of their own already. *I know how they’re trained. And I know all their weaknesses.* She waits in the doorway until she sees the barrel of a gun come up level with her head. And everything from there on out is a blur of momentum and muscle memory and defiance.

Cage catches the first man’s gun hand and throws him against a wall to disorient him, using him as a human shield as she takes on the other three agents. Two go down with carefully placed throat shots, but the third one gets to her before she can squeeze off another round. He knocks the gun out of her hand, but his own assault rifle is useless in close combat aside from blunt force, so all she has to do is keep him from getting his hand on his handgun. She grabs his arm, spiraling out to twist it behind him and uses the momentum of her spin to throw herself onto his back, locking her legs around his neck and flipping him onto the tile, then bouncing back upright, ignoring the bruises, and snatching the rifle the first man dropped. There’s a brief moment of satisfaction when she slams the butt of the
gun into the man’s helmeted head.

*I’m still the best.* She hangs onto the assault rifle as she continues. They’re still using the same basic model, and it feels like an old friend in her hands. Tennant’s going to be sorry he decided she was a liability.

Riley feels rather than hears something wrong. She’s learned, after six years in the field, not to ignore that almost preternatural awareness that something bad is about to happen.

And then there’s a loud explosion, and the magnetically latched door flies halfway across the room. Riley recognizes the acrid odor of military grade breaching explosives. *How the hell did that Zito guy get them past security?* Unless he’s not alone. *Access to the system could have been to open doors and let these guys in. And then when things went bad, they probably just forced entry.* She leaves the command sequence to shut off the breach protocols without making the final keystroke, and steps behind a bank of servers.

She realizes she guessed right when three men in tac gear, followed by Horn, enter the room. *They realized their access code wasn’t valid anymore, and that they’re going to need to override the system from the mainframe.* Her one advantage is that they don’t know she’s here.

She’s going to have to have the best aim of her life. Hitting any of the servers could trigger a cascade failure and they’d lose everything in the room. Riley pulls her gun, taking a deep breath like Jack taught her and letting it go, and then pulls the trigger.

The first two enemy agents are down before they know what hit them. The third, and Horn, react rapidly, taking cover behind server banks. Riley flinches as a shot bounces off one of the server stacks, and something crackles and sparks. It feels like part of her got shot, watching these computers that have been her work for the past few years take hits. *I’m going to be working overtime for weeks repairing damage.*

When the tac-geared agent pops up again to squeeze off a shot, Riley fires back. She doesn’t think it was a kill shot, but even a hit to his body armor will slow him down. She wants to break cover and cuff him, but she doesn’t know where Horn is, and from the amount of bullets that were coming at her a couple seconds ago, she’d bet he has a gun too. But she can’t see him; last she knew he was taking cover behind one of the bunkers on the opposite wall. But she took her eyes off his spot to shoot the other agent...

It’s the faintest tap of a footstep behind her. She spins around and fires, just as a second shot echoes in the room. Riley flinches, ears ringing with the combined crack of gunfire. There’s blood spattering her face and chest, but she’s got no way of knowing if it’s hers. Horn collapses in what looks like slow motion.

It was almost a point blank shot. There’s no way he missed at that range. Riley looks down, dropping her gun, hands fumbling for the bullet wound that must be there. There’s blood spattering her chest, but she can’t feel the thick gush of it that should be coming from the wound. *Where did he hit me?* There’s nothing, *How did he miss, at that distance?* Jack would call it a miracle. Riley’s inclined to agree.

There are more footsteps from near the door. *Did they call for backup? Did the guy I shot recover?* She wheels back around, grabbing her gun, dropping her spent mag and clicking in a new one effortlessly.

“Riley! It's me it's me it's me.” Jack’s right in front of her, hands spread placatingly.
She shakily lowers her gun and pulls her finger back from the trigger, staring at him wide-eyed. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah.” All she can manage is a whisper. *He should have killed me. There’s no way I should be standing here right now.* Behind Jack, she sees Mac step into the room, and he looks about as shell-shocked as she feels. *We’re all going to be having nightmares after this for weeks.*

She bends down over the fallen Horn and starts checking his pockets, and sure enough, there’s a small flash drive. She wondered if there would be after hearing what Bozer said about Tennant’s ploy to breach the network.

She plugs it into one of the isolation servers, made for scanning potentially hazardous files without releasing a virus into the network, checks the flash drive’s contents. “I’ve got a virus here that was intended to wipe the system and override access protocols. It would have let them open any door with any card. Guess sending the system into lockdown while trying to deploy it really scrambled their plan.”

“So I guess we just go through and pick off whoever’s left?” Jack asks. “Looks like you’ve got a good start on that already.”

“There’s a second file on here. It’s a crawling search bot,” Riley says. “Programmed to hunt through our whole system for information on something.” She types as fast as she can. “I think I can figure out what they were looking for.” She activates the search bot, releasing it into the network, and when files start popping up on her screen, she feels suddenly cold.

“He’s after KX7.” Riley says.

“What?” Mac asks.

“It was an experimental performance enhancement drug that, after initial tests, didn’t go into development due to major issues with projected fatality rates.” The list of files popping up on her screen is sickening.

“We worked on something like that?” Mac asks.

“No, but Walsh was one of the early proponents when he was still with the CIA.”

“And let me guess, the CIA, when they took over Phoenix, used our storage as a catch-all for their failed projects.” Jack shakes his head.

“Exactly. They moved KX7 here a month ago along with several other scrapped CIA projects.” Riley shrugs. “But I don’t know how he would have known. I changed all of our access codes after I found out they cloned my computer. And none of our agents are moles…”

“It doesn’t mean they couldn’t accidentally be.” Mac sounds like he has an idea. “Riley, you wiped all of the computer access to this building. But what you can’t change is the infrastructure and standard operating procedures. Walsh probably decided to go old school. Surveillance on the loading dock where we always accept any incoming projects or samples would have told him exactly what we had.” Riley’s never gotten over how Mac thinks outside the box, even when it comes to things like this. *I’m so used to having the ability to do technology-assisted surveillance that sometimes I forget that it’s possible to work without it. But that’s what Mac used to do every day.*

Jack shakes his head. “So he’s gonna kill two birds with one stone and grab his Captain America super serum when he wipes Phoenix off the map.”
“Think more ‘Hulk’ than ‘Captain America’ and you’ve got it,” Riley says. “From what I can dig up, this stuff was nasty. Looks like the CIA didn’t have a problem with animal testing, and their lab subjects went...insane. Rats were gnawing through cage wire or beating themselves senseless trying to bodyslam through it.”

“Well, they never got the chance to find the location, right?” Jack asks. “So you can just boopity-boop the cameras and stuff back online, and we can go hunt them all down.”

“It’s not gonna be an easy ‘boopity-boop’, Jack. A couple shots damaged some of the servers. I’m going to have to figure out a workaround to shut down the breach protocols. And...” Riley stops. “We just lost door security on B9.”

“From the shooting?” Mac glances at one of the still-sparking servers.

“No. Someone breached the access panel.” Riley glances at Jack. “I guess they decided to find KX7 the old fashioned way.”

Riley may have said she wasn’t going to be able to just ‘boopity-boop’ everything back to normal, but she still shuts down breach protocols and gets the cameras back up in what he feels like should be world record time. She closes her laptop and starts to stand up, but Jack places a hand on her shoulder and pushes her back down in the chair. “Ri, you gotta stay here and be our eyes, okay?” She’s acting like she’s okay, but Jack’s pretty sure she literally just dodged a bullet. She needs a little time to regroup.

Riley opens her laptop again and pulls up the cameras as Mac and Jack hurry out. It’s nice to have comms back, her voice in Jack’s ear is reassuring. “There’s a group heading east. Down the hall on your right. Cage is handling another one on the second floor.”

“By herself?”

“She went all Black Widow on them, Jack. She’s fine.” Jack hopes the camera feeds were recording that. He’s only seen what Sam’s capable of in training exercises, but he’s got the feeling she’d be a hell of a field agent if she ever decides to come out of her self-imposed retirement.

He ducks around a corner and then flings himself backward as shots pepper the wall.

Jack yanks the kid back around the corner as Mac almost runs past him, he’s got too much momentum for his own good. Jack only got a split-second look at these guys, but he guesses these are the three left of the six-man team that was headed for Riley’s location. They’re outmanned, outgunned, and Jack is running out of ammo.

“Mac!” He quickly gives the kid’s body a once-over for injury, Mac is not properly geared up for this and on top of that he’s kind of an injury magnet. Thankfully, the only blood Jack can see is the reopened gash on his shoulder. In the now-normal lighting, the bloodstained sleeve is painfully obvious.

“I’m okay.”

“You know, when I got up this morning I planned on eating baba ganoush, not chasing a bunch of psychos around our own building...this is why we call it the Cairo curse, man!” Jack sneaks another glance around the corner, and suddenly there are shots coming from behind him. Damn it, they surrounded us...

But he’s not hit and Mac’s not totally panicking, so what...He turns around to see Matty and a very
familiar face, side by side with two members of the tac team behind them, laying down cover fire.

“Patty?” Jack asks. Her hair is longer, tied back in a shaggy ponytail, and she’s wearing battered Phoenix tac gear that’s been repaired and partially replaced. Her usually pale skin is tanned and there’s a new pink scar on her left cheek. But the fire in her dark eyes is all too familiar.

“I figured you could use some help.” She holsters her gun and smiles at Matty. “I showed up and saw the whole building lit up like a Christmas tree. Good thing Riley got the lockdown shut off before I got to the doors.”

“They’re heading for Cold Storage,” Jack says. “Riley found out what they’re here for. Some nasty super soldier drug called KX7.”

“Get to B9. We’ve got this.”

Patty's voice is icy, and Jack knows she's not going to let Walsh disappear again. He and Mac head for the stairs as Patty, Matty, and their team push back the remaining assault team members.

Mac yanks Jack through a stairwell door one floor up from where they need to be. Jack shakes his head. “Mac, I know you can do stoichi-whatever in your head, but can you count? Cause this is level B8.”

“I know. But there’s two of us and by Riley’s last count nine of them. I think we can make the odds a little more in our favor.” Mac smashes his elbow through the glass over a fire hose box and pulls out the ax, handing it to Jack. “Ask Riley how far from the cameras those guys are.”

“Hey Ri, Mac needs you to do something and tell us how far from…”

“I can hear him, Jack. I’m on it already.” There’s some clicking and tapping. “Okay, well, your Cold Storage breach team has split up, but there are three guarding the entry hall, about ten feet from the corner camera at the stairs.” Jack relays that info to Mac, who begins pacing off the length of the hallway from the stairs.

“I need a baseball sized hole right.. there .”

“Okay, but when Matty...or Patty...asks why there’s a bigass hole in the floor, I’m gonna tell ‘em it’s your fault, dude.” Jack starts chipping away at the concrete, stopping when Mac comes back with his hands full of chemical bottles and parts of the fire hose.

“Is that acid? Are you gonna melt a hole in the floor like Aliens?”

“No, I thought about that. Wouldn't work fast enough. This is nitromethane. That's ethylene diamide. Phoenix techs use it to make custom electronics. But when you mix a little of this with a little of that, you get a binary explosive called PLX. And when you put it in a contained space…”

“You get a bomb.” Jack grins as Mac soaks a piece of firehose in the liquid and then starts trailing it back toward the wall. Mac, however, looks surprisingly unenthusiastic, for being about thirty seconds away from setting something on fire. “Don’t worry, kid, I won’t tell the judge you were blowin’ crap up three days before your trial.”

“That's not what I'm worried about. If this goes wrong, it could possibly kill us both.” Mac looks seriously scared.

Jack puts a steadying hand on his shoulder. “You go kaboom, I go kaboom, kiddo; I mean that literally. Besides, that fuse gives us plenty of time to run for cover.”
“Um, that’s not exactly the plan. See, we're gonna light the fuse and run toward the explosion.”

“Okay, I can see how that might kill us.” Yes, Jack did literally mean what he said. And yes, he might be crazy, but he’s totally going to follow Mac to possible fiery death.

Mac lights the fuse and hands Jack a cord made from pieces of the fire hose. “Go!” Jack knows he’s yelling as they run for the explosion. He’s pretty sure Mac is too. *We’re gonna die. We are. I don’t really care if I look like an idiot while doing it.*

There’s a massive bang and then they’re falling, and Jack is definitely screaming now. But the floor they just blew out is definitely their unwanted visitors’ ceiling. And it’s fallen right on their heads. He’s only got one conscious guy to deal with. “Nice work, Mac.” He dusts his hands off, shaking his head at the dust in the air. “Okay that’s three, so we got six left. See, I can do math in my head too.”

There are four men in the hall. Jack slams into two at the same time, and Mac goes after a third. He may not have Jack’s strength or skills, but he didn’t survive on the streets and in prison totally by his wits.

The impact of the hit he gets in runs up his arm to his injured shoulder, and he flinches. He thinks he might have cracked a bone in his hand as well.

“Jack! They’re already inside!” He slams the door release and the first set of airlocks opens. The fourth goon tackles him from the back, slamming him all the way through the airlock space and into the second set of doors. Mac grabs the man’s arm as it goes around his throat, gets his feet on the door, and basically runs up it, flipping off it to pull the man attacking him over his head. He pulls out his knife, jamming it into the keypad to keep the outer door from opening, and then darts inside the second one just as the guy who tackled him does.

Mac freezes. The doors hiss shut with an ominously silent whoosh, and Mac is trapped on the wrong side of the glass, with three very pissed off bad guys who want nothing more than to see him dead.

All three turn on him, and Mac groans. *Guess they’re not going to be polite and wait their turn.* He tries to remember what Jack taught him about taking on multiple assailants at once, and to forget how this always ended in prison.

He’s actually doing pretty well, he’s gotten one guy on the floor and the second is one punch away from going down, when the third man hits him in the ribs hard enough to crack one, and sends him flying across the room over the cooled oxygen tanks. One falls with him and the release valve cracks, sending a faint stream of gas into the air. Mac tries to push himself to his feet, but his bad hand gives out with a crack, and he falls back to the ground, biting back a whine of pain.

They’re going to get away. His whole body feels like one massive bruise, and his hand hurts to bad he can barely think. And then he sees that when he fell, he hit the coolant system’s cover, and it’s half off, the pipes running the coolant to the radiators clearly visible. And he’s got an idea. He yanks one of the pipes out and pulls out the cigar cutter on his knife. It’s just about the perfect size to go around the tubing. He stands up shakily, just as the men inside close a drawer. One holds up a canister and then slips it into his vest.

*“Put it d-down, or I c-cut this and the c-coolant hits the O2.”* He tries to keep his hands from shaking, if he accidentally cuts that line he won’t be making an idle threat anymore, not that it is one anyway. . “I c-can’t let you walk out of here with that.” Mac can’t tell if he’s shivering from the temperature of the room, *they weren’t joking about Cold Storage*, or if it’s the realization that he’s probably going to have to make good on his threat. “I’ll s-save you the stoichiometry, but the short v-version
is, the r-room goes up in flames. N-now you have t-two options. One, you leave. T-two, we all die.”

“You’re bluffin’,” It’s Walsh himself, Mac is never going to forget that voice. “You’re just like your old man, you don’t wanna die for anyone else’s cause. You won’t do it.”

“Honestly, I d-don’t even know if I’m bluffing. But I do know I’m not l-letting you leave this room with that d-drug. And you’re wrong. I’m not my father.” He slices through the tube and flings it toward the leaking oxygen. The fire that blazes up is so instantaneous it knocks all of them backward.

Okay, first I was too cold, now this is way too hot. The last time he was trapped inside a freezer, Jack got him out. This time, it looks like he’ll have to save himself. Two of the goons are banging on the outside door already, but the third is down, and from the bulge in his vest Mac knows it’s Walsh. He grabs the straps of the man’s tactical vest and drags him with him toward the doors. I’m not my father. And I’m not Walsh either.

And then Jack is there, firing at the door with everything he’s got. Mac flinches at the bullets hitting the reinforced glass. He knows they won’t come through, but it’s still scary. He crouches below the level of fire, seeing Jack’s plan. He’s going to reduce the glass integrity to the point it will shatter.

Jack fires off every shot in his mag, then grabs one off a downed man and refills, continuing to shoot. “I’m out kid!” He yells.

Mac pulls out his knife, opens the hole punch, and slams it against the glass with a hit that he knows breaks the rest of the cracked bones in his hand. The glass shatters into fragments and Mac dives through with the two other agents, dragging Walsh behind him as well. He flings himself sideways, into Jack and down the side hall, just as the room behind them explodes in an inferno that he can feel scorch over him.

Jack sighs as the heat fades and they sit up. “Damn. Mac, what was the plan if you couldn’t break the glass?”

“What plan?” Mac shrugs.

“Of course.” And then there’s a hiss and Mac feels something splatter onto his head. “Nice going, kid, you set off the sprinkler system.” Jack shakes his head. Mac starts to laugh almost hysterically as water pours down on them, looking up at the ceiling and feeling the coldness wash away the fear and smoke.

When the lights click from red to normal, Jill releases a shaky breath. She glances down at Bozer, who’s still in the office chair she used to wheel him from the elevator to the War Room. As soon as she got inside, she’d blacked out the windows, hunkered down, and hoped for the best.

She pulls out her phone; she can finally make a call to emergency services and get Bozer a medical evac. Asking an ambulance to show up when they had the building in full breach would have been begging for them to blow their covers.

“Ok, I’m gonna get you to the loading dock and we’re gonna get you to a hospital.” She gets behind the chair and throws her weight against it to get it moving. She pushes the door open and then wheels them out into the hallway.

There’s a mass of people out there, all the non-combat personnel, Jill guesses. She tries to push her way through. “Medical emergency! I need room! Let me through please!” She’s almost to the outer doors when Bozer jackknifes to a sitting position and then falls back to the chair with a groan.
“What is it?” Jill asks. Bozer’s gasping and shaking, pointing at something. “You’re going to be fine. Riley got the communications back online, and there’s an ambulance on its way.”

“Mask!” He gasps out. “Mine!”

He’s pointing out into the hall, where the milling employees are still standing. And then there’s a click and hiss and the sprinklers turn on. Jill gasps at the sudden shower of cold water on her shoulders and head. Her glasses are instantly too wet to see through, but there’s the dim shape of a man coming toward them...and is his face melting?

Suddenly she realizes what Bozer was trying to tell her. He recognized a mask he had down in the lab that this guy must have stolen. *His masks aren’t waterproof...*

The man whips the mask off, and then grabs Jill, yanking her up against him. “You’re my ticket out of here, sweetie,” he says. “You’re gonna open those doors for me.” Jill gasps, fighting not to scream. “Or I’m gonna finish what I started with your little friend here.” When did this all go so wrong? Jill tries to fight down the rising panic and think; like every Phoenix employee she’s had basic combat training...

She drives her elbow into the man’s stomach, and when he bends over, she grabs for the gun. But she can’t see with her wet glasses, and she misses by the smallest margin. And now the only thing she can tell for sure is that he’s aiming that gun at her head.

All Jill sees is a dark blur, and then the man is on the floor, with Samantha Cage standing over him. *Where did she come from?* Jill didn’t even see her in the crowd.

Cage bends down and presses her knee into the man’s throat. “It looks like this scorpion just stung itself to death, Tennant.” Jill gasps out a shaky laugh, sinking to the floor as Cage cuffs the man and hauls him to his feet, then slams him brutally against a wall. “That’s for Brisbane,” she mutters, and then spins him around and punches him in the jaw. “And that’s for today.” The guy drops like a rock, and Cage walks over to Jill, giving her a hand to her feet. “Nice work,” she says.

“Thanks.” Jill can’t believe how close she was to dead.

“Maybe you should look into contact lenses,” Cage says with a small tilt of her head, and Jill begins to laugh, leaning on Bozer’s chair as the sprinklers soak them all.

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**THE WAR ROOM**

**THEY MIGHT BE ABLE TO REOPEN AS AN AQUARIUM**

Matty glances around at her team. They’re all drenched; Riley and Patty are squeezing water out of their ponytails, and Mac’s bangs are dripping water into his eyes. Mac himself is covered in soot and he looks like he’s spent too long in the sun, he’s lucky that’s the only side effects of his crazy idea. Jack told Matty in partial detail about Mac locking himself in Cold Storage with the Scorpion team; it’s a miracle he isn’t dead.

Jill is still sitting in a chair staring at nothing, according to Cage she almost died, so it’s not surprising. Cage herself is hauling Tennant down to interrogation, and if he has a few more bruises at the end of that, Matty isn’t going to raise an eyebrow.

Jack has his arm around Riley’s shoulder, and Matty notices for the first time that the hacker’s chest is covered in blood spatter. “Riley, are you okay?”
“Yeah. That’s not mine.” She still looks shaken. *To get that much spatter she had to be right in front of whoever she shot. “How’s Bozer?”*

“On his way to the hospital now,” Matty says. “As soon as he wakes up, I’m going to be there to offer my congratulations; it’s thanks to his observation that we were able to get ahead of Tennant’s plans. He’s a hero.”

“Actually you all are heroes. You saved a lot of lives today, and thanks to you, the heads of not one but two major dark agencies have been captured.” Patty looks around at them all. “Jason Tennant and Jonah Walsh will be interrogated and locked away in the darkest hole we can find.” Matty knows this is a major victory for her.

*She and Cage got their lives back today.* Thornton’s search is over, and Cage’s old agency no longer has any pull to order hits on her. *She can officially become a field operative again without worrying about endangering her team if Scorpion is involved in an op.*

And now that Walsh is captured and the last of the Phoenix traitors are behind bars, the Phoenix can go back to the way it was. Well, not entirely. “Patricia Thornton, you will be formally instated as Oversight.” Matty smiles. “Frankly I’m just glad to not need to do your job and mine any longer.” She glances at the woman. “I’d like to formally submit my candidacy for Director. Seeing as I’m currently only a temporary CIA placement.” She’s fairly sure Patty will say yes, but the truth is, the woman might have someone else in mind. *When I came, I thought of this as a temporary assignment. But now, can I really walk away if I have to? This is her family.*

“Application accepted, reviewed, and approved,” Thornton says. “You’ve taken good care of my team, Matty, and I can’t think of anyone I’d rather have watching their backs.”

“I guess since you’re still in charge I have to tell you...I’m sorry I blew up half your building.” Mac is doing the kicked puppy look again.

“I’m kind of a building-half-standing kinda gal,” Matty says, grinning. “And anyway, you flooded the other half, so I don’t think we have to worry about you burning that down any time soon.”

“It’s a good thing you still have a few more days before your hearing,” Patty says. “Hopefully that’s long enough to get rid of the smoke smell. Congratulations, by the way.”

“Unfortunately, I’m gonna have a cast for it.” Mac holds up a hand that’s reddened and starting to swell.

Matty glares at Jack; *punching things is your job, Dalton, that kid’s hands are valuable. I need him in one piece.* “All of you go get your butts checked out by medical. And then grab some mops.”

Bozer knows he’s in a hospital the second he wakes up. *I always thought all the noises were a movie cliche.* But he really can hear alarms beeping and nurses and doctors chattering. And Riley snoring.

She’s sitting in a chair beside his bed, what looks like a Dallas Cowboys snuggie spread over her. He tries to roll over to see her better, then groans. Riley wakes up with a sniff, tossing her messy curls out of her face.

“How long you been here?” Bozer whispers, his voice creaking. *Damn, another accurate cliche.*

“About a day.” Riley shrugs. “I’m in here myself, actually, I got a shattered eardrum from an explosion in a pressurized room, and then a gun going off right next to my ear. So you might want to speak up.” She chuckles. “Patty says I now have a good excuse for the next time I decide to blatantly
ignore an order in field.”

“How is everyone else?”

“Mostly in one piece. Mac broke five bones in his hand, he’s mostly pissy because it was his right and now he can’t fiddle with stuff until he gets his cast off.” She grins. “He did make you some flowers though.” She brings over a vase of duct tape roses from the windowsill. “He said they’re kind of crappy because he had to use his left hand for everything.”

“Well, he’s no green thumb, but he sure could teach Martha Stewart a thing or two about duct tape.” Bozer starts to sit up and groans slightly. “Damn. This has officially beat appendicitis.”

Riley chuckles. “Well, that’s kind of the problem, since you actually got stabbed almost directly over your appendicitis incision, so there’s gonna be one hell of a scar. But it missed anything truly vital because of that. Doctors said you’re lucky to be alive with the blood loss, but thanks to Mac and Jill’s quick work, you’re gonna be okay.”

“I don’t think I’m going to be wanting to be dicing onions for a while,” Bozer chuckles; he’s mostly joking but the thought of knives is going to make his stomach hurt for a while. How did Mac go back day after day to fight people who left him in this much pain? “Got a lot more sympathy for my burgers, I’ll tell you that.”

She reaches for his hand. “Don’t scare me like that again.”

“I’m not going anywhere.” He wraps his fingers around hers. “I had plenty of reasons to stick around. My family, my friends…” She smiles at him.

“You ever regret it?” Riley asks, leaning on the bed rail. Bozer thinks about it. Do I? Ever since he met Angus MacGyver, his life has been ten times crazier than he could ever have dreamed of. I thought stuff like this could only ever happen in movies. Which was kinda why I was always so obsessed with them. And then Mac brought the real thing crashing into my little boring dream world. Vigilantes and spies and government missions and near death experiences. No movie he could script could ever compare.

“Nah. Ignorance is safer, but it isn’t bliss. I wouldn’t trade this for anything in the world.”

LOS ANGELES APPELLATE COURT

POSSIBLY THE MOST NERVE WRACKING DAY OF RILEY’S LIFE

Riley paces the courtroom hall, chewing her thumbnail. Mac’s case has finally been brought to court. Technically, he pled guilty and shouldn’t have gotten an appeal at all. But Riley’s pretty sure the combined forces of Matty and Patty have succeeded in making someone dredge up some sort of legal loophole.

Because of the terrorism charge in question, the courtroom is closed to outside visitors. None of the team can reveal who they are, so a tile salesman, an IT tech, an accountant, a florist, an Australian barista, and a slightly maimed film student in a wheelchair are what people see congregated outside the doors. Riley’s tempted to pull out one of the surveillance mics she shoved into her purse out of force of habit, but they can’t risk doing anything to make this go wrong.

Jack couldn’t pull his “Roger Preston” act for this one. They’ve had to track down an actual lawyer. Thankfully, Matty knows people and strings have been pulled. Mac has the best he can get.
It’s driving Riley crazy not knowing how the trial is going. *Please, please let what Charlie found be enough to free him.* Charlie had said the evidence was airtight, that he’d proved beyond a shadow of a doubt that someone else killed the janitor, and was an opportunist who used the explosion to cover their tracks. *They figure it was La Ola, that either the guy was in their pay and got greedy, or that he stumbled on their operation and they silenced him.* That answer, they’ll probably never know.

She sits down in the hall outside the courtroom. Riley’s always been really good at listening through walls; and her hearing is actually recovering from the blast, although the doctors say she’ll need to be careful using her gun for quite a while, and that she should probably avoid explosions or airplane flights for a while. She leans her head back, closes her eyes, and prays desperately that she’ll hear what she wants to.

There’s plenty of chatter, a few things she can make out, like snatches of information from the evidence and some cross examination. *Please don’t be too hard on Mac.* He was so nervous this morning, dressed up as nicely as Riley’s ever seen him and tugging on his tie so hard she thought he’d strangle himself. She hopes they don’t ask about the cast, the story is so lame; that he tripped over Mickey in the house.

And then the room goes quiet. Riley holds her breath.

“This court finds the defendant, Angus MacGyver, not guilty on one count of murder in the third degree, and not guilty on one count of domestic terrorism.”

She doesn’t hear anything else. The buzzing in her ears isn’t eardrum damage, it’s sheer shock and amazement. She manages to nod when Jack kneels down in front of her and asks desperately if they won. But from there on out, it’s a blur until Mac steps out of the courtroom door.

“It’s over,” he whispers, and then practically collapses into Jack. “It’s actually over.” It sounds like he’s crying, and she doesn’t blame him.

They all make it down the steps, somehow, and to the minivan with the wheelchair ramp that Jack rented to get them all here. *We’re one big weird family.* Riley drives them to Mac’s house, because Jack is in the back, still holding onto Mac, and it doesn’t look like they’re going to let go any time soon.

There’s a lot of chatter, but between the shock and her healing ears and trying not to kill them in LA traffic, Riley’s only hearing a faint buzz. She manages to get the van into Mac’s driveway, and as she’s helping Bozer down the wheelchair assist, she feels a hand on her shoulder. When she turns around Mac is standing there, something in his good hand.

Mac smiles, and she can still see the tear streaks on his face but there’s something missing now, a weight that she didn’t even know could disappear until it has. She realizes she’s never seen Mac without the weight of his conviction hanging over him. *I didn’t think it would make such a difference. But it does.* Mac looks even younger, and he actually looks genuinely joyful when he smiles. “Since the more serious charges were dropped and I’ve kept to the terms of my parole, I’m no longer going to be meeting with my parole officer every week, just every month, for the next six, and then my sentence is over. And I don’t have to wear this anymore.” He tosses the tether to Riley. *Of course he got it off...even with only one good hand.*

“I say this calls for a celebration bonfire,” Jack says, throwing an arm around Mac’s shoulder. “Who’s with me?”

Sam cheers. Riley hugs Mac tightly. Bozer, from his wheelchair, raises a fist exuberantly. Matty looks at Patty, and then both of them break their cool composure and give a triumphant laugh.
LOS ANGELES APPELLATE COURT

THE FIRST DAY OF THE REST OF MAC’S LIFE

Mac tries not to think of how the last time he was in a courtroom ended. This time he’s wearing Jack’s old blue suit, not an orange prison jumpsuit, and this time, someone’s arguing his case, not just handing down a sentence. But he’s still scared that it won’t be enough. *What if they still want to call me a terrorist?* After all, the evidence doesn’t say he didn’t blow up the warehouse, just that he didn’t kill Ramsay.

The funny thing is that he’s mostly distracted by his broken hand. It aches, and his hands were all sweaty from worrying, so the ugly lime-green cast is twice as itchy and it’s driving him crazy. He really, really wants a paperclip right now. And he thinks if this goes on much longer he’s going to be sick.

He’s so stressed and distracted that he almost misses when the judge says his name. The only thing he really does hear is “not guilty”. There are other things, they’re still holding over the arson charge, but he can live with that. It’s not a life sentence. They can work with that, especially with him working off his sentence at the Phoenix, which he’s still going to be allowed to do.

He knows they’re going to tell the court to rise, that he has to get up and leave, but he doesn’t think he can stand. It’s more of a shock than the last time. Because last time, he knew exactly what was coming. This time, all he had was hope.

Somehow, he gets to his feet, and he’s at the door before he remembers walking to it.

Mac leans into Jack’s shoulder and cries. Because for the first time in a long time, he doesn’t have to be afraid anymore. The nightmare is over. He doesn’t have to worry about going back to prison, and he’s a qualified agent with the credentials to prove it. He belongs.

He doesn’t let go of Jack until they’re pulling into the driveway of his house. When he does, Jack hands him his knife back; Mac wasn’t allowed to have it when he went into court. “Guess I really can trust you with one now, kid,” Jack says, and when Mac flips the knife over before sliding it into his pocket, he realizes this isn’t the one Jack got him all those months ago. This one is new, no chips and scratches and dings, and the toothpick and tweezers are still in it.

And on the back of it is his name. Not his full name, just “MacGyver”.

“I seriously thought about puttin’ “Carl’s Jr.” on there man, I really did.” Mac laughs, and then, just like the tears, he can’t stop it. *I’m finally, actually free.*

He doesn’t think he stops smiling through removing his tether (this time legitimately) and handing it off to Riley (who behind his back promises Jack she’s going to find a way to get Mac to wear another one so they can keep track of him), through getting Bozer up their improvised ramp into the house and trying not to run over Mickey’s paws or tail in the process, and through lighting the fire, striking Grandpa’s flint with the new knife from Jack.

He’s glad that after the initial celebration, the team went back to business as usual. It would have been embarrassing having them keep talking about him all night. It’s starting to feel like a normal firepit post-mission evening, with the exception that both Patty and Matty are here at the same time. Bozer’s even failing to flirt with Riley again.

“Riley, listen, we must be soulmates. We have matching scars now and everything.”
“I have a through and through bullet wound to the left side, you have a stab wound in the stomach. I’m not buying it.”

Mac grabs them all beers from the fridge, setting them out on the counter. Jack grabs half of them, since Mac can’t carry them with his cast and not risk dropping them, and they walk out onto the deck together. Jack is laughing at something Matty said, and then he elbows Mac and grins, and everything just feels surreal and perfect and like something that would happen at the end of one of Bozer’s movies. Mac knows that it can’t stay this way forever, that things are going to happen, that life is going to knock them all down again, but it’s moments like this that remind him getting knocked down doesn’t last forever.

The moment fades faster than even Mac could have anticipated. Patty’s cell buzzes as Mac and Jack sit down and start handing around bottles. She sighs, but pulls it out anyway, glancing at the message. Patty looks up, her face unreadable, firelight dancing on the scar on her cheek. “That was Pelican Bay. Murdoc just escaped his cell, killing his guard in the process.”

Mac stops with his hand held out to Cage. No, no, no.

“He left a note in his cell.” Patty pulls up an image on her phone, and then hands it to Mac.

Angus,

I told you this wasn’t over. I must say, I’m looking forward to seeing you without handcuffs and a table between us. Oh, I know you’re not as enthusiastic. But if you ever want to find dear old Daddy, you’re going to need to come to me. Good luck, boy scout.

Jack growls. “Damn him. Mac, we’re gonna put that bastard back in his cage as soon as we can.”

“Jack, he just said he could lead us to James. We can’t afford to ignore the chance to catch someone who’s been off the grid for the past fourteen years.” Mac won’t say that note doesn’t chill him to his core. He knows Murdoc is more than capable of making good on his threats, and he’s not looking forward to being face to face with that monster again. But he needs closure. About Murdoc, but more importantly about James. I let him control my life even after he left. I’m going to put him away. For good.

“If that’s what you want to do, then I’m with you, bud. We’ll go wherever we need to to get him, and I’m gonna be right there with you, every step of the way.” He raises his bottle.

“Hell yeah, let’s get ‘em both.” Riley lifts her own, clinking the glass against Jack’s. Patty, Matty, and Cage raise their own bottles, and Bozer holds up his glass of water with a rueful grin.

Mac looks around the circle, through the fire, at the people who just a year ago were total strangers. This is my family. This is starting again. The phoenix is rising.

Chapter End Notes

I can’t believe this is the end of the first season. I honestly had no idea this story would become something so big when I started, and I’m absolutely blown away by all the enthusiasm for it and all the support I’ve had along the way! I’m going to be going on a brief hiatus for a couple weeks to focus on some neglected other projects, but I will be returning with Season 2 very soon…
Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!