How far will I go?

by Fangirlcinder

Summary

The KX7 formula is complete. What price is Phoenix willing to pay to try to track down the drug? Certainly not the life of a blond agent, if his family has anything to do with it!
Chapter 1

The blond moaned softly as the needle pierced his neck.

"That'll keep him under for a few more hours." The man dropped the syringe into his pocket and stared at the sleeping form on the bed. "Wonder what he's done to piss Jonah off?"

His companion shrugged, pulling up a chair next to the bed. "Dunno. The boss wanted him alive, so I'll check there's no bleeding when I clean him up." He placed a bowl of water on his lap and dipped a cloth in before wiping blood off the kid's jaw. The cut on his chin had already begun forming a protective layer. He pushed a tangle of bangs off the youngster's forehead to dab around the open skin on the hairline. If this had been a medical clinic, they would have stitched the wound; he would just clean and cover it with gauze and a plaster.

"How old do ya think he is?"

"Nowhere near old enough to fight like he did earlier!" The other man folded his arms and leaned against the wall. "None of us in the warehouse expected a skinny kid like him to be nearly as fast or as strong! And guns were off limits to our guys in the warehouse 'cos we couldn't risk him gettin' shot. It's not exactly how we're used to doin' things, so it took three of us to take him down!"

"It was good thinking to separate him from his partner, or things might not have gone so well," the seated man said thoughtfully, as he rinsed the cloth and squeezed it out, before wiping the kid's neck. Two pink spots on pale skin were all that remained of the needle punctures.

"Yeah," the man chuckled. "His partner couldn't resist the little gun fire we had goin' on outside to tempt him out, and the kid told him he was gonna catch up with him. He was almost done riggin' some kinda explosive in plastic bottles with aluminium foil when we jumped out and grabbed him. He didn't see us comin' and put up an impressive fight, but eventually we got him on the ground. Two of us had to hold him before we could put him to sleep. Before that, the kid managed to throw a trash can lid at Donny, and now Donny's nursin' two broken fingers!"

The seated man raised his eyebrows. "If you're sayin this kid's some kinda badass wonderboy, it's better that we keep him restrained. At least we'll have no surprises if he wakes too soon!" He wiped the kid's arm, lifting it the few inches the cuff allowed. There was a gash on his wrist. Not very deep, just long. He reached for a small bottle of sanitiser from the first aid kit on the floor. At least the kid would not feel the sting in his cut.

"So how'd ya deal with his partner?" He rinsed the cloth again. The water in the bowl was red, but the cloth was still doing an effective job.

"It was easy to take the kid out the back without him seein' us. The van was parked at the exit and we blew up the place as we left. Just like the kid was gonna do. With all the smoke and noise, nobody would've noticed anything. His partner probably thinks the kid blew himself up with his own bomb!" He grinned and leaned with one hand on the headboard.

"I can't imagine him making bombs," the seated man murmured, unbuttoning the kid's shirt to check for injury. The kid looked so innocent, so peaceful, in the drug-induced sleep.

He whistled softly. The bruising on the kid's torso was heavy. Above the marks was an unmistakable scar.
"He's been shot before!" The seated man ran his fingers over the raised skin, then felt his way down over the blond's ribs. "Seems like the kid likes gettin' into trouble! It's surprising he has no broken bones!"

Pressing two fingers on the blond's neck, he picked up a soft, sluggish pulse. Either the dose they were giving him was too high, or the sedative was stronger than they thought. He frowned.

"How often can he be doped without risk?"

"Not sure," the other man shook his head, feeling in his pocket for the vial of straw-colored liquid. "I've never used this cocktail before. Jonah will know. You should see the new range of drugs in his lab. One is apparently kinda awesome. Turns people into superhumans! He keeps that one under lock and key. But if there's a problem, we won't give the kid any more of this for now. Besides, the boss'll probably have some business to discuss with him, so we should let him wake up."

"Well, I'm done here." The seated man buttoned the kid's shirt, picked up the bowl and the first aid kit, and stood up. The coppery odour in the room was making his stomach queasy. "I'll come back in an hour or two to check on him. You gonna update Jonah?"

"Yeah. I'll wait till he gets back from Gomez's funeral." He checked his watch. "I'm meeting him at the airport at 3."

"Maybe Gomez's murder has something to do with why he wanted the kid so bad. When Gomez's nephew took over the cartel, he put a price on the heads of the Americans who had a hand in his death. A hefty sum too! He wants to avenge his uncle's death. That'll send a warning that nobody should mess with him."

"That might be. But taking the kid might also be Jonah's way of getting revenge on his nemesis. A partner from years ago. Long before Jonah joined up with Gomez, he was developing drugs with this partner, who then tried to destroy the research. Jonah was pissed! Ever since then his nemesis has been huntin' him. Came to Mexico a few months ago and burnt Jonah's lab to the ground. Now the ex-partner's got this kid and his partner blowin' up Jonah's warehouses!"

"Whatever the reason, this kid's gonna be in for one helluva ride!"

xxx

Jack had taken cover behind a stack of wooden crates outside the warehouse. Men were shooting at him from different positions in the parking area. Presumably the men coming to collect the drugs. He frowned. Mac was taking far too long. He should have finished his explosive concoction a while ago and been out by now.

"Mac! Where are you, buddy?" He glanced over his shoulder every few seconds. Static buzzed in his ear, making Jack more edgy.

"Mac! Talk to me!" He fired a few rounds in the general direction of the gunmen, then decided to go back. This would be risky, considering these goons could move in on him. And Mac was about to detonate the place. But the kid's silence worried him. It was unlike Mac not to respond. Something was wrong. Then there was an explosion, and a blast of heat burst through the door. Mac had still not appeared. The gunfire abruptly ceased, and Jack raced inside.

"Mac!" he yelled. "Mac!"

Yellow clouds of smoke hung thick in the air, stinging his eyes and lungs. Probably poisonous as hell. Only Mac would have known what was in those chemicals he blew up. But where was the kid?
He wouldn't have made a mistake... No, he would never have set off an explosion if he wasn't clear!

"Matty, I can't find Mac!" Jack was panicking. There was no way he could search the warehouse with these fumes. But he also couldn't leave Mac in there.

"He's not at the warehouse," Riley's voice was shrill in his ear. "He's about half a mile away. And it looks like he's waiting there!"

"How's that possible?" Jack wiped his hand on his shirt. He was shaking. The thought of Mac lying injured – or worse – in those fumes terrified him.

"Are you sure, Ri? I mean, I didn't see him leave. Unless..." Unless someone had grabbed him! Someone could have come in through the back. But Mac would have seen them and alerted him. Unless they had been there all this time! He'd been searching the building, which had been locked and appeared deserted, while Mac was mixing his bomb. Until shots outside had drawn him to the entrance. Guessing at what had gone down, he cursed softly.

"I'm gonna go find him! Ri, where is he?" He leapt into his car and sped up the road. Within a minute he was at Mac's location.

"The kid's not here! There's just an empty field!" He parked on the side of the road and strode over to the black object lying several yards away in the grass. Mac's cell. With a cracked screen. Whoever had Mac had thrown it away so they couldn't be followed. Jack took it and ran back to his car. Mac had passed here just minutes ago. If he was quick enough, he would be able to catch up and get his partner back. He raced on until he reached a T-junction. No! No! No!

"Riles, which way?" He slowed and let the engine idle, every second of waiting ticking like an eternity. Left or right? If Riley couldn't tell him, he was going to choose. It was better to do something than nothing at all, especially as Mac wasn't too far away.

"Jack, come back to Phoenix now!" Matty's bluntness cut through his thoughts.

"Matty? We can't let them get away with Mac!" His frown deepened, and he scrubbed his hand through his hair.

"I'm aware of that, Jack. Oversight has called for an urgent debrief, so I need you to come back now!" Her tone made it clear there was no room for argument.

Jack shook his head in disbelief. His kid was in trouble and he was being ordered to turn back! He desperately wanted to ignore Matty and do what his heart urged. But he didn't know for sure which way Mac had been taken. And Oversight was getting involved – something he so rarely did – so there had to be something more.

Jack hesitated a while, conflict warring in his thoughts. "Okay, I'm coming!" he growled, his jaw tight as he did a three-point turn and headed back the way he had come. Oversight's reason for the debrief had better be important; important enough to warrant not following his son!
"We've got this, Matilda!"

"For all our sakes, I hope you're right!"

The muffled voices in the interrogation room went silent as Jack knocked and entered. He pulled out the chair opposite Oversight. Facing the man directly was hardly what he wanted but, with Matty at the head of the table, he was almost expected to sit there.

"Sir!" Jack nodded, catching his breath. Oversight looked up from the papers in front of him, acknowledging him with a brief nod. He glanced at Matty. Her breath was a little sharper, but her face revealed nothing of her conversation with Oversight; words that had not been meant for his ears. Somehow they bothered him.

She took that as her cue to start and outlined the mission context, which he already knew. The tip-off about the suspicious warehouse registered to a non-operational medical holding company. Deliveries that took place at night. Medical supplies that never reached medical centres. Fake employee records. It all pointed to the typical cover for an illegal drug operation.

Jack groaned silently. It was beyond him that James prioritized Phoenix business over his son's safety. All he wanted was to find Mac, who was getting further and further away. He would do his darned best to get through this quickly!

"What was in the warehouse, Dalton?" Oversight stared at him expectantly.

"Besides the usual trash, 200 unmarked boxes containing small bottles of liquid, sir. Same as what we found in the last warehouse. Angus checked the liquid, and the results showed it contained similar illegal substances to the last finding. Angus could provide all the details…" if he was here! He felt a lump rise in his throat.

"Do you have a sample of the liquid? Or Angus's results?"

"No, sir." Jack swallowed. "He packed them in his bag before mixing the chemicals to blow up the boxes. It was not possible to see at the time if anything remained after the explosion."

Oversight looked irritated for a moment and rolled his shoulders. "Tell me, Dalton, when you were looking for Jonah Walsh a few months ago, what did you find out about him?"

Jack's head tilted in surprise. How had Oversight known about that? He had done a few stakeouts in his private time and persuaded a few unwilling people to talk, but hadn't found much to go on.

"Walsh spends his time in Mexico, sir, but he travels to the US every six weeks or so on business."

"Business in Los Angeles!" Oversight added. "It seems you and Angus were in another of Walsh's warehouses today. He leaned forward. "The premises Angus destroyed last month had Walsh's fingerprints all over it. And the drug found there was developed in Mexico."

"You did not think to mention that before, sir?" Jack clenched his teeth. Had he known they might be trespassing on Walsh's turf, he would never have taken his eyes off Mac!

"You are given the details for missions on a need-to-know basis, Dalton," Oversight snapped. "Walsh's connection to today's mission was unconfirmed until now!"
"If you had a suspicion about somethin' that might've been material to the mission and let us know, sir, your son might've been sitting here with us! Now, instead, Walsh has him!" Jack growled, clenching his fists.

Oversight straightened. "You know Walsh completed the formula for KX7. I assure you, it's one of the most dangerous drugs anyone can get their hands on. I've been searching for Walsh for years without success. Right now, Angus is our only lead to find Walsh. He's our best chance to locate the man and destroy that drug!"

Jack frowned. Chasing down drugs was not a typical assignment for Phoenix – other agencies focused exclusively on this – yet he and Mac had raided two warehouses in so many months. Oversight was looking for Walsh's KX7. Then an opportunity had presented itself… Jack's brain ground to a halt as the realization hit him: Walsh had dangled some bait, and Oversight had released fish into the pond. He hoped his spidey senses were terribly, terribly off.

Consequences be damned, he had to know.

"If I understand, sir, when Phoenix got the tip-off about the warehouse, you figured Walsh might have wanted something from Phoenix. So you sanctioned the mission. You figured your next best option to find Walsh was to let him find Angus!"

"Jack!" Matty glared at him. "A word with you outside!"

Oversight held up his hand to stop them from leaving. "I don't take such accusations lightly, Dalton! I would not willingly place my son, or anyone else, in danger! Right now, we are thin on options. Angus is well aware of what KX7 can do. Do you think he would have turned down the mission if he had a chance to stop Walsh?"

Jack grimaced. Oversight was painfully right – Mac would never turn away from saving the world. But then, at least Jack was there to make sure the kid got home.

"That doesn't make it right, sir. Angus didn't know what he was getting involved in today. He should have been able to make that choice for himself."

"Don't underestimate my son, Dalton!" Oversight's voice was icy. "Angus is a trained agent; he knows the risks that come with the territory. And he knows what the right thing is to do!"

"I don't underestimate him for one second, sir!" Jack's face flushed with anger. He had seen more than enough to know the kid was capable of pulling off the impossible. "But he's in the hands of your enemy, which in my books means he's in danger!"

"Agents have put themselves in danger for lesser reward many times! The important thing, Dalton, is the bigger picture. That drug will have significant implications for countries, regions, the world, if it is made available. We need to utilize all our resources to find and stop Walsh!"

"Even if it means putting an agent's life on the line? An agent who happens to be your son?" He searched Oversight's face for the remotest trace of compassion. Surely a father could not be so entirely detached that he would deny all his feelings for his son?

Oversight lifted his chin. "Dalton, you need to understand that I cannot favor one agent above another, even if one happens to be my son."

"With all due respect, sir, you can't be harder on him either!" He could never risk someone's life in the crosshairs; even more so if it was his child's. Jack shuddered. Oversight's coldness was seeping into his bones.
"We need to focus on finding Angus!" Matty's eyes were dark with concern. She scanned Oversight and Overwatch, men fiercely passionate about their roles. She had expected conflict would arise over Mac; it had just been a matter of time. She would do her best to ensure both achieved their objectives. If she couldn't, for any reason, she knew exactly what choice she'd make.

Oversight turned to Matty. "Knowing Walsh, he'll want to gloat, so we need to be ready to trace Walsh's call. No doubt he'll have demands and conditions. Sooner or later he'll slip up and we'll find him. Or Angus will devise a solution."

Jack shook his head. Mac was in trouble and Oversight's plan was to improvise! There were too many variables and nothing substantial to go on, like it so often happened when Jack was with Mac in the field. But this was different: Jack trusted the kid with his life. Brilliant as Oversight was, Jack couldn't say the same about Mac's father. Oversight had not confirmed Jack's take on events; neither had he denied it. Perhaps Mac had been right not to trust his father. He should never have encouraged the kid to come back to Phoenix!

xxx

"Hold here," the man nodded to the other as the kid stirred. He unlocked the cuffs, drew the kid's wrists to his chest and re-cuffed them together. The kid's eyes opened and he blinked several times. Disoriented and finding his arm movements restricted, confusion turned to panic; he struggled weakly and cried out in distress.

"Easy, kid!" the man backed off a bit.

The blond focused on him and blinked, a little more awake, nowhere near fully aware. He rolled over onto his side. The drug was still in his system, and he lacked the strength to sit up.

"Here, I'll help ya." The blond watched, eyes wide with mistrust, as the man approached slowly and pulled him into a sitting position. Spooking the kid any further would make his job difficult.

"There's someone who wants to talk to ya." He pulled the kid onto his feet and the other man stepped to the other side to help support the kid's weight. They left the room, made a few turns in the passage and entered another, larger, room. They turned the kid and placed him in a chair. His eyes were mostly open now, but his face was pale and he looked ready to slump over.

A man rose and perched on the edge of the table in front of the kid, casually passing a bullet between his fingers.

"Nap time's over, Baby Mac!"

The blond squinted at him, exerting an effort to stay upright. The light was too bright and the voice too loud; he was struggling to make sense of his surrounds. "Too much muscle relaxant," he mumbled.

"You wanna tell me how to fix my sedative?" Jonah's mouth cracked up. "You MacGyvers just don't stop messing with matters that don't concern you!"

Mac forced his eyes open. "You want to talk about your lab in Mexico?" It was the only memory linked to Jonah Walsh that surfaced through the haze in his head.

"And killing Luis Gomez. And destroying my warehouses! Come on, Angus, I know all about your and your daddy's involvement," he snarled. "Want me to refresh your memory?"

Mac lifted his head. "We didn't kill Gomez; we wanted him alive." His eyes were watering, and he
wiped his face on his arm. Something in the drug was making him overly emotional.

Walsh stood up and paced angrily. "You and James took Luis prisoner, and he was in your custody when he died. That makes you and him just as guilty as the scumbag who took his life! There's a price to pay for that. Luis was my partner for many years. He was more like family than James ever was. But maybe James is making an effort now."

He turned to Mac and grabbed his chin, forcing him to look up. "What's it like to work with your daddy, Baby Boy?"

"You should know! He was your partner." Mac tried to scowl, heart thumping in his chest. His father was hardly his partner. That was Jack's position. Always was and always would be.

"Then I'd advise you'd be better off not trusting him. Bet ya didn't know you were raiding my warehouses. But bet ya he knew!" Walsh chuckled dryly as Mac closed his eyes; his arrow had hit the kid's heart.

"In any event, it's too late to do anything about that. You and your daddy have gone too far. And since you two don't know when to stop, I'm gonna end the harassment! So, want to say a few last words to your daddy?" Walsh picked up a burner cell from the table and smiled mockingly.

Mac shook his head. Walsh's words about James stung. Had his father been sending him and Jack on Walsh's trail without telling them? How could anything involving James surprise him anymore? If this was to be his last conversation, he'd have it with the person who meant the most to him.

"I'd rather speak to my partner."

"Guess I can't blame ya, kid. You have 20 seconds. And don't say anything stupid." He put his gun on the table facing Mac as a warning. "What's his number?"

Walsh pressed the combination of digits so familiar to Mac and passed him the burner. Mac hoped Jack would answer his cell.

"Dalton!"

"J'ck!" He felt tears welling up in his eyes.

"Mac, you okay?" Jack was gentle and concerned.

"I'm 'k. Just want to say thank you. For everything."

"Mac, I'm gonna find you, brother! We're going home together. You hear me, Mac? Just hang in there a little longer! Okay?"

"'K, J'ck!"

Walsh held out his hand and Mac reluctantly returned the burner, unstoppable tears pouring down his cheeks. He missed Jack, and the drug was intensifying his emotions.

"Take him back to his cell and make sure he's ready to leave for Mexico in the morning," Walsh addressed his men in the room. He was going to let Diego know to expect a prisoner.
Chapter 3

Mac was saying goodbye! Jack rubbed his face. He would not accept that! They survived the odds on missions. Outsmarted bad guys. Made narrow escapes. Cheated death. Hell, even lived through Cairo! That’s how things worked for them. No, brother, this is not the end of the road for you!

He peered over Riley’s shoulder. “Could you trace him?”

“Call wasn’t long enough.” If the connection had held for a just few more seconds, Mac’s location would have blipped onto her screen. She bit her lip as Jack turned away, running both hands over his head. Riley was relieved not to have caught his eyes. Mac had been taken before, so she knew the depth of pain and worry that would reflect there now. This time it was not Murdoc, who played with his victims. From what she gathered, Walsh was more direct, presumably quick to deliver a final blow. There was no telling how much time Mac had. She so much wanted to give Jack the solid lead he sought, but Oversight’s rogue partner covered his tracks well.

Matty glanced round and Riley replayed the conversation on speaker. There were no background sounds, no clear clues from Mac. Just a kid sounding so alone and his very concerned partner.

“He’s not plannin' on letting Mac go!” Jack growled. “But why go through all the effort to take the kid when he could've ended things at the warehouse? It’s not like Walsh needs him to finish making the drug. And Walsh isn’t asking for anything. There’s gotta be something else!” He sat heavily on the couch, silently cursing Oversight for the thousandth time since the debrief.

“Run an analysis on the recording,” Matty instructed Riley. “There might be something we’re missing.”

She turned to Jack. “There’s nothing more you can do now. Go home. Get some sleep. We’ll pick up again in the morning.”

“You know I can’t do that, Matty.” He would not be able to rest until Mac was safe.

“Yes, you can, Jack! I need you back here fresh tomorrow. If anything comes up tonight, I’ll let you know.”

He got up, stifling a yawn. Matty’s brows were furrowed and her shoulders tense. She looked uncharacteristically worn. If anyone needed a rest, it was Matty.

“Matty, are you okay?” He wondered if she was withholding further info about Walsh at Oversight’s request.

“Get out of here, Dalton!” She turned away quickly, drawing a sharp breath. She had to pull herself together. Some things could not be shared with her team. Like the fact that her job had good days and bad days, and today was among the worst. She found herself increasingly disagreeing with Oversight’s decisions. Mac had proven there was always another way and Oversight should have had an alternative. Now her top agent was in danger, and the consequence of following orders was weighing on her. She had never wanted Mac to be in harm’s way. All her decisions relating to this golden boy had only ever been to protect him. Until today.

xxx

The sounds coming from the room raised his suspicions. If anything happened to the kid, it would be on his head. He rose stiffly from the plastic chair and unlocked the door, peering in. The kid wasn’t
on the bed, and part of the mattress had been ripped up. He opened the door wider and saw the movement from the side too late. A chair hit his head and he crumpled to the floor.

Mac stepped out shakily from behind the door, heart racing, and peered into the passage. It was clear. The man had come in too soon; Mac had not finished twisting the bed springs into a cannon. It had been difficult to peel back the mattress fabric without a pocket knife and remove the metal coils, but not impossible.

He leaned over the man and felt in his pockets. “Gotcha!” he smiled; the man’s cell was exactly what he wanted. He left, following the route he had been taken to see Walsh. An exit arrow on the wall confirmed he was going in the right direction. The passage was wide enough to move merchandise on a trolley, and the fluorescent lighting and lack of décor made him guess he was on the underground floor of a large corporate.

Voices were approaching and the passage offered no cover. He tried a door to the right; it was locked. Unless he wanted to go back, Walsh’s interrogation room was the only other option. The door was unlocked and he slipped in quietly, noticing too late the security camera at the back.

Men were shouting now – they knew where he was! There was no other way out and the sparsely furnished room offered no cover either. He considered climbing into the ceiling, but without his full strength he would not be able to pull himself up. The narrow window of opportunity to escape had closed. He moved to the back of the room as the door opened and several men entered. He had to contact Jack before they reached him. There was no password protection on the cell, and he texted ‘MEXICO’ with trembling fingers, pressing ‘Send’ as the device was knocked from his hands.

Mac did not resist. They grabbed his arms and pulled them tightly behind him, then turned him and shoved him against the wall. He felt the air leave his lungs with a soft hiss and closed his eyes. The room was spinning; had they not pinned him there, he would have fallen. His wrists were roughly cuffed. Someone was yelling at him, then someone was pulling him away from the wall towards the door far too quickly. He stumbled and fell on his knees, gasping. Suddenly he was being lifted onto his feet and half dragged back to his room.

The fallen guard was gone and the mattress and springs had been removed. They seated him on the floor against the bed frame. Then Walsh was there with the cell Mac had dropped, flicking through the logs.

“You almost impressed me, Baby Mac! Building a weapon. Escaping. But ‘Mexico’?” he scoffed, “Is that the best you could do? You think your partner’s gonna find you after telling him that?”

There had been no time to do anything more. Mac couldn’t even have told Jack where he was. But Jack came through for him every time. Even when the trail was a crumb.

“My partner doesn’t let me down.” Mac breathed heavily. “If he doesn’t find me, he’ll find you!”

Walsh crouched in front of his prisoner and drew his gun, enjoying seeing the kid flinch. He couldn’t help but notice James’ features in the kid, enhanced by his mother’s genes. His eyes were entirely Ellen’s, and it seemed he had inherited her sensitive nature. It was almost a lifetime ago when he had first met James’ impressionable young son. Angus would have been his godchild had the boy’s grandfather not stepped up. So much had happened since then. Who would have thought the boy would become his enemy?

He tapped the cold metal against the kid’s cheek. “Try that stunt once more, Angus, and you won’t be going anywhere!”
Walsh stood up and left the room. The door lock clicked and Mac let out a ragged breath. His wrists were cuffed too tightly and the smell of the untouched plate of food against the wall made him feel sick. He had to get away before Walsh could take him out of the country. How could he even hope Jack could find him then? He would try to escape again once he stopped shaking.

xxx

If Matty didn’t need him, Jack would do some of his own research. He went to the drawer under his coffee table and took out a blue folder. Pulling the table closer to the couch, he laid out the material he had gathered on Walsh while Mac was in Nigeria. Previous hangouts. Travel patterns. Property he had owned. A business he had once operated… ‘Walsh Enterprises.’ Jack had even visited the premises on the outskirts of the city. He picked up a photo of the place. It had been standing empty for years and was now defaced with graffiti. A faded signboard fixed above the crumbling entrance bore a diamond shaped logo with a greying square in the centre. Walsh had been importing Mexican goods back then. Seemed like old habits didn’t change!

His cell vibrated and he picked it up. The one-word message made his heart leap; he knew it was from Mac. Had he escaped? He called the unknown number. Come on, kid, answer! The call went directly to voicemail and fresh worries surfaced. If Mac had been discovered using the cell, what would Walsh do? And what did Mac’s message mean? Was Mac in Mexico, or was Walsh taking him to Mexico? Oh, kid, we need to find you fast!

He called Matty.

“We’re onto it, Jack. Riley is tracing the owner of the cell. I’ll text you the address.”

Jack was in his car when he got Matty’s text. It included directions to a house in a neighborhood some 20 minutes’ drive away. He passed by slowly. The place was in darkness. He parked down the street; if Mac was here, he would need to come in quietly. The lounge window was slightly open. He pulled it wider and moved the curtain aside. The silence and stale cigarette smoke made him think nobody was home. To be sure, he drew his gun and circled the house. Still hearing nothing, he kicked the front door, shattering the lock. He moved through the house. Empty beer bottles lined the counter, scatter cushions were on the floor and the sink was full of dirty dishes. The bed in the master bedroom was unmade. A mess doesn’t seem to bother Bill Sheashby.

“There’s nobody here, Matty!” he sighed. But this couldn’t be a dead end; Mac had used Sheashby’s cell. They just had to find the guy. He ruffled through the pile of papers on the bedside cabinet. Unpaid bills. Sales catalogs. Till slips. And Sheashby’s business card.

“It seems Sheashby is a rep for LG & Associates.” He picked it up and looked again at the logo.

“I think we might just have another lead!” He needed to get back to Phoenix quickly. He had something for Riley to research and would need to make a few calls. Time to call in some favors!

xxx

James had read the text on the Phoenix communication feed and was waiting for further intel before deciding on the next move.

He leaned back. This mission involved calculated risk, but it was the most effective way to achieve his objectives. He had had to brief Matilda selectively; it seemed her loyalties had shifted ever so slightly in recent months and he suspected she would waver in directing this mission had she been fully informed. But based on all the reports that had crossed his desk, and having seen his son’s field skills first hand, he was certain Angus was sufficiently competent to complete the task.
Admittedly, his son was a far better agent at his age than he had been. He had trained Angus well: dropping him into the deep end from an early age, his son had learned to swim. All he had had to do was keep him focused in the right direction.

Now that his son was coming into his own, there was one hitch. Dalton. The man had been good for Angus, but his son relied on him far too much. The morning’s debrief had convinced him of that. He couldn’t have the former Delta holding Angus back from reaching his full potential. He would need to think about how to deal with that once the mission was wrapped up.

xxx

The kid was sitting on the floor, knees pulled up to his chin. He warily watched them approach, tensing as he saw the syringe.

“It’s just another dose of the same stuff, kid. At least ya get to sleep through a borin’ road trip.”

He stepped over and held the blond’s head to the side. “Just relax, kid.”

Mac shuddered as he felt the solution enter his bloodstream; his muscles softened and his eyes closed.
Chapter 4

The van crossed the border and the driver pulled away on home ground, his curled moustache peaking up on the sides. He had passed the point of greatest risk without a hitch. Had he been stopped, Felipe would have skimmed over the routine check. Nobody would have noticed, as the inspection station was always busy. And Felipe would have jingled extra money in his pocket at month end. The passengers relaxed and laughed, passing around bottles of water. One passenger lay fast asleep in the back, breathing softly, covered to his neck with a light sheet, oblivious to the jovial mood. Empty boxes had been stacked in front of him, so he would not instantly be spotted if they had been asked to open the van’s back door. It was good to know people in the right places who would turn a blind eye to their activities!

But another man had noticed the vehicle. As the van accelerated away, the man in the administration office stepped outside and moved quickly behind the building to make his call in private. He scrolled through the app on his cell to double check that the branding on the van matched the image of the logo he’d been sent. Satisfied, he pressed the digits of Sarah’s friend’s number.

“Dalton!”

“Jack? It’s Rodriguez. The vehicle you’re looking for has entered Mexico. It’s a white delivery van with three people sitting up front. I’ll text you details of the license plate.”

“Thanks, man!” Jack could have hugged him! Contacting people he knew at border points, and people who knew people there, had been a shot in the dark. After all, what were the odds of a vehicle travelling into Mexico, branded with the logo of LG & Associates, the same logo of Walsh Enterprises, hours after getting Mac’s message? Jack was grateful for his spidey sense, which seemed to be spot on when he needed it most.

“Did the driver or passengers match the guys I’m looking for?” It was unlikely they’d let a hostage sit in front, but perhaps Sheashby was with them. It was clear now that the man worked with Walsh. And he still hadn’t gone home. Jack doubted Walsh would travel by road; too many cameras linked to facial recognition software would pick him up as a criminal wanted by Interpol. Besides, from what Jack had gathered, Walsh preferred to fly.

“Sorry, none of them was blond or bald,” came the rough Mexican accent.

“Okay. Thanks! We’ll take it from here.” Jack ended the call.

“Ri, can you see the traffic heading south on Highway 1? We need to track a white van with that logo on the side.” The license plate info pinged on his cell, and he forwarded it to Riley. “Can you also trace the owner of the vehicle?”

Riley’s fingers were nimbly flying across her keyboard, fuelled by adrenalin and caffeine. She had spent most of the night at Phoenix. Jack had returned shortly before midnight, and she had searched for details of Sheashby’s employer while he had made calls. They had left in the early hours of the morning. She wasn’t sure when Matty had left, if she had even gone home at all.

Matty ended a call and turned to her agents, frowning. “We’re not going to get to talk to Sheashby. LAPD recovered his body from a dumpster downtown early this morning. Forensics said there is a gunshot wound in the back of his head.”

“So Walsh tied up a loose end,” Jack growled. “Just to make sure the guy couldn’t lead us to Mac!”
His jaw was tight. The grim reminder of the deadly lengths Walsh went to achieve his aims etched up his worries for Mac.

“Found the van!” Riley smiled triumphantly, and the image she’d picked up from street cameras along the main thoroughfare into Mexico appeared on the big screen. As long as the vehicle stuck to the main roads, it would be fairly easy to track. Right now, it could be headed to any of the three premises from which LG & Associates operated.

“The van is registered to Carlos Gomez.” She suddenly glanced up, drawing Matty’s and Jack’s attention.

“What is it?” Jack asked, a feeling of dread creeping up his spine.

“Carlos is the older brother of Luis Gomez!”

A wave of anxiety crashed over him. “Walsh is handing Mac over to Gomez’s cartel! Matty, we need to get him out now!”

“Gather a tac team, Jack, and be ready to leave in 10!” Matty knew about the brutality of cartel members; Mac had almost been killed twice by their trigger-happy leaders. And Gomez’s cartel had a score to settle with Phoenix. She would do whatever it took to rescue her agent.

xxx

The driver stayed off the toll roads and took back streets where possible to avoid road blocks. Into the last few miles now, he turned onto a badly maintained dirt road and maintained his speed, eager to reach the end of the long journey. The violent bumping from riding into potholes brought some of the boxes in the back of the van tumbling down. Mac opened his eyes.

Jolted around like the rest of the cargo, he realized how sore his body felt and curled onto his side. His throat was parched. Finding his hands cuffed together in front, he instinctively placed them under his head to protect it from hitting against the metal floor, then began piecing together sketchy memories to figure out where he was.

When the van stopped, his anxiety returned with a vengeance. The back door swung open and boxes were flung out until two men had enough space to get in and haul him out. Narrowing his eyes in the bright light, his heartbeat spiked: the Spanish villa tucked into the hillside, sprawling outbuildings and heavily armed men sulkily lolling several yards away screamed cartel.

“Take a good look, Angus, because this is where your journey ends!” Walsh grinned, sauntering over from the shaded patio. Ignoring the kid’s scowl, he wandered to the side entrance of the largest outbuilding and went inside.

The men supporting Mac followed, dragging him, half stumbling, down a long narrow passage. Grimy glass panels on the left offered a glimpse into Walsh’s kitchen. Plastic drums of chemicals lined the far wall, while glass flasks sealed with pipes bubbled above rings of blue flame. Men wearing gloves and face masks bent into the steam that curled over a large pot, ladling the contents into test tubes. Bottles of liquid, similar to those he and Jack had found in the warehouses, were neatly packed on a table in the center.

Walsh opened a door off the passage to the right and waited for his men to bring his prisoner. He smirked at Mac’s expression.

“What… you disapprove of my day job, Angus?” He held his hand over his heart in mock offence, then pointed to the laboratory. “This is where history has been made!”
“And you’ll go down in history for screwing up the future!” Mac rasped, recoiling weakly as he saw the small room with blood spattered walls. Shards of concrete littered the floor, shot out of the wall at close range; some of the bullets were still embedded in the concrete. This was where KX7 had been tested! His stomach turned, and he shuddered as the men dragged him in and sat him on the floor between two heavy chains set in the wall.

“Pity you’re not gonna live long enough to have a future,” Walsh gloated, removing the cuffs and fastening the thick metal bands at the end of the chains to Mac’s wrists. He wondered if the tremble in the kid’s arms was a side effect of the sedative. More than likely, though, the kid was scared, and he had good reason to be. He tugged on each chain to test that it was still solidly fixed to the wall.

“Afraid I’ll escape again?” Mac breathed. “Burn down your lab again?”

Walsh’s mouth twisted. Images of flames engulfing years of work, and the sharp reprimand from Luis, were still fresh in his mind. The thoughts made him seethe. But, despite the major setback, which was all the MacGyvers’ doing, he completed the KX7 formula anyway. His moustache twitched, and his dark eyes narrowed in anger at the kid in chains.

“That’s not gonna happen, Baby Boy! These restraints have held men twice your strength! And be assured, nobody’s gonna let you out this time; my men don’t make the same mistake twice. Neither will you, Angus, because tomorrow you face your own demise. At sunrise, you’ll be lined up in front of a firing squad!” He watched with amusement as what little colour was left in his prisoner’s face drained away.

“You could have ended my life at the warehouse,” Mac met his eyes. “So why this?”

“Execution?” Walsh chuckled. “Giving a cartel leader a gift seals a deal. And a traitor who was involved in a family murder makes the perfect present, don’t you think? It shows my new partner how committed I am to building alliances with him!”

He clapped a firm hand on Mac’s shoulder, as if sharing a moment of friendship. “Making your daddy worry would kinda be pleasing too, but we both know he has more important matters on his mind. How ironic that you get to spend your last hours in a place that should make you think of your daddy, because KX7 was all his idea!”

Mac tried hard to swallow, but there was no moisture in his mouth. He blinked, thankful there wasn’t even moisture for tears. It felt like Walsh was sucking out the very last drop of his life essence. More likely, it was the drug wreaking havoc on his body. Perhaps he wouldn’t even last long enough to face death by bullet.

Walsh picked up a concrete chip and rubbed it until powder fell from his fingers. “So, Angus, now that you know how it’s all gonna end, there’s one more thing to do.” He left and returned with a large clock, which he leaned against the wall opposite his prisoner. “Just so you can keep track of time,” he grinned. He stood at the door and looked back. “See you at 7 tomorrow!”

Mac stared at the hands on the timepiece as Walsh’s footsteps faded away. He had little more than 15 hours to escape, or for Jack to find him. He licked his lips, tasting the dryness; he was desperate for a drink of water. Walsh had forgotten to close the door, or maybe it was left open so they could check on him. Make sure he would be there for Walsh’s morning meeting. No! He shook his head. He could not think it would happen! There had to be a way out! ‘You go kaboom, I go kaboom,’ Jack said; that seemed a far more reasonable option to this. And because Jack was not here, death could not happen!

He shifted to sweep away some of the sharp debris from under him; if he was going to be here for
some time, it might as well be less uncomfortable. He couldn’t bring himself to lean against the wall and hunched his shoulders instead. The chains clinked and he heard someone approaching. His heart sped up. Did they think he was trying to escape? A man entered with two bottles of water and set them down next to him, then left, locking the door. Mac grabbed a bottle and opened it. Droplets of condensation, merging into tiny streams, dripped down his hand as he drained the contents. Walsh was making sure he would live for another 14 hours, and he guessed he should be glad. At least time would be more bearable without having to deal with thirst!

Feeling a little less shaky, he scanned the room for something; anything that could be used to remove the restraints. There was so much on the floor, all of it useless apart from the clock, and that was out of reach. He huffed in frustration. It was because of KX7, his father’s ill-conceived project, that he was here. Sealed in a room where the smell of sweat and fear and anger and death hung in the air. A drug that his father had envisioned, and Walsh had completed; the blood staining the walls a stark reminder of the people who had paid for it with their lives. His blood, too, would be spilled if Jack didn’t come.

The seconds hand ticked over in another rotation, then another two, then another five. Mac sighed. If only there was a way he could slow time. To explode nanoseconds into milliseconds, and those into seconds, an hour could become a day, a month, a year. It would allow Jack enough time to search an entire foreign country for a small square room hidden in a drug lab. But could he expect Jack to succeed in 10 hours when James had spent years searching for Walsh?

He closed his eyes and breathed deeply. It still hurt to think James had never stopped searching for his ex-partner, not even when his own son had needed him most. When Murdoc had kidnapped him, when he lay in hospital at death’s door, when his life was in danger so many other times, his father had done nothing for him. Never reached out to him, cared for him, encouraged him, loved him. Instead, his father had ignored him, his warped idea of protection. Now he was facing death again and James would still do nothing to save him. He could only count on Jack to come. He was just not worth his father’s effort; never was then, never would be!

Perhaps, just perhaps, Jack would also realize he was not worth the effort.

Mac bit his lip. Thoughts like this had no right to sneak into his mind! He knew it wasn’t true.

But what if?

His death would come. He would die like a criminal at the hands of criminals and be forgotten. Perhaps he had never meant anything to anyone and it was just meant to be that way. Tears slipped down his cheeks. Nothing really mattered any more. It was too tiring to sit upright, and he sank back against the blood stained wall.

It was after midnight now and the silence was punctuated by rhythmic puffs of breath. He would surely hear if Jack was coming down the passage, but there were no gunshots, no footsteps that would indicate his presence. What did condemned men do the night before their execution? His training had never covered that point. But one thing he knew: if there was something worse than death itself, it was the wait. Perhaps he should try to sleep, to let time pass a little quicker. But would sleep come when the mind was so wound up? Perhaps he just had to be patient. He had disarmed bombs seconds before they exploded; Jack could stop this from happening, right up to the last second.

And if Jack didn’t, at least he’d been able to thank him. He’d really meant it. Jack had always been there for him; he’d looked out for him in every way possible, and Jack had filled a gaping hole in his heart that he hadn’t even been aware of. Nobody could’ve had a better person in their lives than Jack. Or a better friend than Bozer, who still made the best waffles and burgers, and fussed over him.
and looked out for him. Riley and Matty were brave and kind; he trusted them too with his life. Intelligent, gentle Jill had also been there, always ready to help without expecting anything in return. He was truly grateful to have been part of the lives of some of the most wonderful people.

He picked up the other bottle of water. There was no point in keeping it now. He opened it and drank it all, spilling some of it down his shirt and enjoying the feeling of wetness. It meant he could still feel. He was still alive. Suddenly he heard the rattle of keys. He sat up straight. Was it Jack? A key turned in the lock, and the door swung open. Two men came in and began removing the bands from around his wrists while a man with a rifle waited outside.

“It’s not time yet!” Mac stuttered, feeling the painful grip of panic spreading through his chest. “There’s still an hour!”

“I know!” the shorter man said, exasperated, cuffing Mac’s wrists together. “Someone’s arrived to see you.”

Mac’s heart knocked against his ribs as they pulled him onto his feet. Please don’t let it be Jack!
Chapter 5

The thought that Walsh might have Jack filled him with horror and weighed like a stone in his gut. Jack would only have come because of him! His fate was a risk of the job, but to be the reason for Jack’s death, or worse, Jack having to watch him die, was too terrible to consider.

His steps crunched heavily on the stone path as he was taken into the darkness outside. He scoured the surrounds for any signs that Jack might have come, hardly aware of the early morning chill biting his face. It was still too dark to see more than the shapes of the buildings in the compound, silhouetted against the inky black sky. He could hear the murmuring of men in the distance, presumably the gate guards. Other than that, there was the peaceful silence of a regular morning about to break.

They were heading towards the porch where Walsh had waited the day before. A row of lamps fixed along the front wall of the villa glowed dimly, while a door closest to the side of the home was slightly open. One of the men knocked softly and pushed it wider. The other tugged lightly on Mac’s arm to get his attention, then opened a rough fist, revealing in his palm two white pills.

“These will take the edge off. Make it easier. You want?” he encouraged.

Mac’s eyes narrowed. He shook his head and swallowed. He’d never taken chemicals to help him deal with life threatening moments. Never even considered it. Did they think he needed the numbing power of narcotics now? Perhaps what was waiting for him was way worse than he’d imagined!

“You sure, kid? Most of the others took them.”

“Others?” Mac felt the uncertainty tighten his chest.

“Don’t think you’re the first!” he laughed. “But it’s fine if you don’t want. It’s your choice,” he shrugged, dropping the pills into a crumpled plastic bag and drawing Mac into the small, brightly lit room.

Mac’s heart thumped. A quick glance revealed Jack wasn’t there! Jack wasn’t there! He released the breath he was holding and some of the weight rolled off his shoulders.

A figure in robes rose from his knees and turned to face the men, eyes falling sympathetically on the kid with messy hair. A simple wooden cross was fixed on the wall behind him and a candle burned on a shelf below. A man lifted a chair and set it behind the priest, who rearranged his garments and sat, placing his Bible and prayer book on his lap. He motioned for the kid to approach, and Mac was brought forward and left kneeling in front of the elderly man.

Heavy footsteps approached from behind. Mac’s pulse picked up. He turned to see the newcomer and scowled.

“Padre,” Walsh greeted cheerfully. “Just wanna make sure our prisoner poses no threat to you while you counsel him!” He held out a chain and one of the men took it and wrapped it around Mac’s ankles, fixing it to the floor.

“You mean no threat to you?” Mac growled.

“Trust you rested well, Baby Boy?” Walsh smirked. “My partner likes to do things the proper way, and it’s better not to leave anything to chance.” He nudged Mac’s legs with his foot. “Not that you could do anything now anyway! I’m gonna finish my coffee, and as soon as I’m back we’ll attend to
our business!” Walsh turned and left.

Mac huffed, frustrated at his helplessness. He was still unable to do anything to save himself! He would need to wait for an opportunity. And there was still time for Jack to come, but he was cutting it fine!

“You can leave us,” the priest instructed the other men in Spanish. With respectful nods, they turned and departed, closing the door softly. He focused on the kid in front of him, whose eyes were clouded with angst.

“My son, I am here to listen to your confessions…” he was struggling to find the right English words.

Mac took a breath. Did he have to be interrogated now when he needed to think about escape? But this was not exactly an interrogation. Or maybe it was, only this time it was about him. Somehow, that was more unnerving. He could remain silent; not divulge the info he never shared with anyone. The stuff that Jack had figured out. Like the fears that haunted him after the missions he couldn’t talk about. That he slept with the light on; that heights freaked him out; that he didn’t like guns. That he wasn’t ready to die!

“… confessions of your sins.”

Mac sighed deeply, desperately wishing he had a paperclip to twist. He rubbed his thumbs over his jeans, finding the texture a distraction, but nowhere near enough to forget the guilt that weighed on his heart. Yes, he had regrets. Pena had died instead of him! Zoe. He just couldn’t save her! He had done things that hurt Jack. And his father had left because of him. If he had only thought more about others, put in more effort, done things differently, things might have worked out better for the people in his life. Dad might even have stayed!

“My son?”

The soft, comforting touch on his shoulders snapped him out of his thoughts. It was the same tenderness and concern he had only felt from one person. Jack. Damn, he so much wanted to live!

His eyes lifted with a flicker of hope. “Padre, can I borrow your Bible and have some time alone?”

The priest gazed at him intently. “This book, it brings life!” He held out his Bible, then stood and left with a soft swish of fabric. Mac flicked it open to the ridge of silver and slid the metal bookmark off the page. Twisting the point, he inserted it into the lock on his cuffs, wriggling it until the clasp sprang back. He unlocked the other cuff then worked the point into the lock at his ankles, accidentally dropping the chain with a clatter. He held his breath, heart beating frantically; he was so close to getting away! Nobody came. Rising swiftly, he slid open the narrow window and squeezed out, feet landing on the dry earth below with a soft thump. He exhaled with relief.

It was still dark enough that he wouldn’t easily be spotted, and too early for the men to be around. But it wouldn’t be long before they noticed he was missing. He moved across the compound to the open garage where the vehicles were parked. Crouching at the back tire of the van, he twisted the cap off the valve stem and jammed a stick against the metal pin. As the air whooshed out, he moved to the other side and let the other back tire down. When all but the SUV’s tires were flat, he would drive out the gate. They wouldn’t realize he had escaped until it was too late, and then they wouldn’t be able to follow him.

But there was something he had to do first. With boxes of drugs ready for shipping in Walsh’s lab, there was no way he could leave it standing. No doubt, KX7 was in there too – he had seen syringes
on the table in a fenced off section of the lab. Shushing Jack’s voice in his head telling him it was a bad idea, he cautiously made his way back across the open ground. The cost of KX7 being distributed outweighed the risk of being discovered, he reasoned with the Jack in his mind. Another setback for Jonah would give them more time to shut his operation permanently. Besides, he would be quick.

He peered through the side entrance of the building housing the lab. The passage was clear. Nobody was in the lab yet and the door was unlocked. Walsh had an impressive stock of chemicals on the shelves; there was potential to blow the roof off the lab and the villa! Grabbing some of the bottles, Mac emptied the contents into an empty bucket. Now he would need to lay a fuse long enough to give him time to get back to the garage. Near the roller door at the back was a coil of thick rope. That will do! He dumped it on a table and fed one end into the bucket of chemicals on the floor. Then he saturated the coil with another liquid, which would seep down the fibers in minutes and drip into the bucket. Once the chemicals came into contact, the reaction would be spectacular!

Mac turned to leave. It was still quiet; it seemed they hadn’t missed him yet. He stepped outside and headed for the garage. Although the sun hadn’t risen, it was light now.

Light enough to see Walsh pointing a gun at him!

Mac froze. Walsh strode over, eyes dark and dangerous, and punched him in the gut. Mac doubled over with a strangled gasp.

“You’ve been in my lab, haven’t you, MacGyver?” Walsh fumed. “If you’ve done anything, you’re gonna pay for it this time!”

Several men came rushing over, rifles in their hands. “Go check the lab! Now!” Walsh yelled at them and they scurried off towards the building. He punched at the kid’s midsection again. “What did you do, Angus?”

“Why don’t you go… see for yourself?” Mac hissed through clenched teeth, protectively wrapping his arms around his stomach.

“Tell me!” He aimed a blow at the kid’s jaw. Mac pulled back, but the impact still caught his lip and blood dripped down his chin. Walsh lunged forward, further angered, and grabbed his arm, pressing the gun into his chest. “Maybe I should have ended your life in the warehouse after all!”

A man returned from the outbuilding. “Jonah, everything’s fine.”

“You sure?” Jonah snapped, keeping his eyes on his prisoner and his grip firm. It didn’t sit right that a MacGyver had set foot in his lab and done nothing.

“Yes, it’s all good,” the man nodded.

“Right, get the men together and let Diego know it’s time! This is the end for you, Angus!”

xxx

“Two more down!” Jack wiped the sweat off his forehead and reached for the bottle of water from his backpack. He took a swig and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

“There’s another one heading your way, Jack! He’s in a tunnel to your left, about 25 yards away.”

“Thanks, Ri!” he packed the bottle away and looked back. “Ready?” The two guys from the Phoenix tac team nodded and shouldered their backpacks. Jack picked up the radios from the fallen
cartel members and put them in his pocket, then the three moved swiftly to the intersection, guns in hand.

“He’s running towards you,” Riley warned, “Like he knows you’re there!”

“He must have heard us. But that’s okay, we’ll stop him,” Jack confirmed as he peered into the tunnel. He would wait for a light that would give away the man’s presence. Instead, shots rang out, deafeningly loud as the sound bounced off the walls. Bullets sprayed into the ceiling above them and a shower of dirt fell.

“Get back!” Jack yelled, and the three retreated as a deluge of dirt and debris came down, blocking the entrance to the tunnel on the left, as well as the way forward.

“You all okay?” Riley was worried. She had heard the gunfire and the thud as the ceiling collapsed.

“We’re fine!” Jack spat out a mouthful of dust and shook sand out of his hair. “But we can’t go forward unless we do some digging. We also don’t want to wait around too long for more company to join us.”

“There’s another way,” Riley said. “It’s a little longer, and it might be narrower, but you come out at the same exit.” She knew Jack and the men were tired; they had been in the cartels’ secret maze of tunnels for most of the night, heading towards the compound where Walsh had taken Mac.

“Fine,” said Jack. Walking a little further would be easier and quicker than digging their way through who knew how much dirt with their hands. “Where do we go?”

“Go back and take the next tunnel to your left. From that point, you’re minutes away from the exit.”

“Team 1, are you ready?” Jack checked in with the guys who were on standby near the entrance to the compound. The moment he located Mac, the tac team would need to move in. Matty had made sure they had enough fire power to take down the cartel with some to spare.

“Roger that, Jack!”
Chapter 6

Mac’s hands were pulled behind him, his back leaning against a wooden pole set in the ground some distance from the villa.

Walsh stood impatiently with folded arms, gun still in hand, as two men fastened the kid’s wrists with rope. Before he could check on his lab for his own peace of mind, he would inspect their work to ensure there was no chance for Angus to escape a third time. It was pure luck he had spotted the kid leaving the outbuilding and been able to recapture him so quickly. Angus was way more slippery than James ever was; how the kid had escaped from the Gomez’s prayer room was still a puzzle. Although he didn’t know the priest, he was sure it was not his doing. Diego’s idea of allowing prisoners a last confession was far too risky; Angus had proved this point. But Diego insisted on doing things differently to Luis. While he was still building a relationship with the new cartel leader, he wasn’t in a position to throw his weight around. He needed the cartel’s manpower and connections to grow and protect his drug trade. Walsh ground his teeth. He didn’t like to depend on the cartel. He also didn’t want to adapt to Diego’s ways. He would have to convince the Mexican that his way of doing things was better.

The men stepped back and Walsh moved behind the kid, giving the bonds a rough tug. Pain shot up Mac’s arms and he grimaced. Satisfied with their handiwork, Walsh rounded on his prisoner, whose hair now glowed golden in the light of dawn. The rising sun reflected in the kid’s eyes as he lifted his gaze, watching Walsh draw a black cloth bag from his jacket and shake it out.

“Well, Baby Boy, you musta figured out by now your partner isn’t comin’.”

“He’ll come,” Mac growled, “So you’d better be watching your back!”

Walsh pulled the bag over the blond’s head, where it settled loosely on his shoulders, then placed a hand on the kid’s heaving chest, feeling the rapid heartbeat pounding under his fingers.

“That’s okay. I look forward to taking him down too! Goodbye, Angus!” Walsh turned away.

The men had gathered and were milling around with an air of expectation, waiting for Diego to arrive. As much as Walsh wanted to go to his lab, he needed to wait for the cartel boss to come out of his villa. He had gone to all this effort mostly for Diego, and this was the handover of one of the traitors involved in his uncle’s death. Reaching this point had involved a lot of trouble, but the result would be worth it. His mood lightened as he went over to join the men. Directly after this he would go and see what the kid had done in the lab.

As Walsh’s footsteps faded, Mac tested the bonds, twisting his wrists and struggling against the ropes. They had tied him tightly. He had to work himself loose. Fast! The rope bit at his wrists and the friction from the abrasive fibers burnt his skin. He swallowed the pain. There was still no give in the knots and the rope remained stubbornly fixed.

A gunshot sounded and Mac startled as a bullet whizzed past his head. The men laughed. The next one would be aimed at his heart and they wouldn’t miss!

He pulled frantically at the ropes. Straining! Panting! Sucking in air, the bag fixed itself over his mouth. Not enough air! No air! He was desperate to breathe! His lungs burned! He couldn’t tear the fabric away! Nobody knew he was suffocating! Couldn’t even scream! His body shook and tears flowed. He wanted to throw up. His head dropped and the material flopped forward.
Air!

He could breathe! He gasped a few times, filling his lungs. Emptying them. Filling them. He had to focus on the rhythm of breathing, slow his racing heart and ignore the voice that was ranting in Spanish about family, loyalty, justice and punishment, so he could work on free'ing his hands.

“Tres!”

No! No! No! Mac fought desperately against the ropes.

“Dos!”

Time had run out. He stilled and closed his eyes, focusing only on the countdown in the lab. Molecules should combust any moment now, unless Walsh’s men had removed the rope from the bucket. He held his breath, willing with all his strength for the explosion to happen.

And there it was: an ear-splitting kaboom. He imagined the power violently surging through the lab, the wave of heat and fire igniting other chemicals to further fuel the blast. The force would be enough to blow out the windows and damage the walls. Roof panels would collapse, smashing down on shattered concrete, and fire would lick its way towards the villa.

And in the panic, he would be forgotten for a while. Given more precious time to get loose.

Only problem was that the rope didn’t budge. He couldn’t untie himself!

Clouds of smoke, laden with chemicals, wafted across the compound, seeping through the bag on Mac’s head. His throat stung and he coughed.

xxx

Jack heard a muffled boom and the earth shook under his feet. A handful of dirt fell from the tunnel ceiling.

What the hell? He frowned. “That was no earthquake, that was an explosion!” It could only be Mac’s doing! If his partner was blowing up cartel property, Mac would need backup. They needed to find him fast! The men charged towards the shaft of light at the end of the tunnel.

“Jack, that was some blast!” a voice crackled in his ear. “There’s a lota smoke and a building’s on fire!”

“Stay where you are! We’re about to get outa this mole hole. Only move in at my signal!” Jack reminded the tac team. He had to make sure Mac was out of the line of fire before the guys entered with guns blazing.

The rusty metal sheet blocking the exit clanged as Jack shoved it away. He squinted in the morning light, taking in the chaotic scene. Flames burned on the structural remains of what was probably a small warehouse and thick smoke billowed across the grounds and into the sky. Men with extinguishers were spraying a wall of fire that was dangerously close to the villa. He recognised Walsh in the swirling smoke, but it was impossible to see if Mac was with Oversight’s ex partner.

Jack nodded to the guys behind him and the three scooted behind a stack of barrels that had been dumped a few yards away on the right. He eyed out the buildings in the compound that were not enveloped in smoke. None looked like it could hold a blond genius for long; Mac would most likely be in the villa.
Keeping low, they crept across the open grounds to the side of the home. In the chaos, nobody would be watching for intruders and it would be easy to slip in unnoticed. Jack lifted his gun and tapped it against a window pane. The glass shattered and he reached in to unlatch the catch. He pulled himself up the wall, scrambled over the window sill and slid into a bathroom, crunching on the broken glass that lay scattered on the floor, waiting for his men to catch up.

“It’s best if we split up.” Jack kept his voice low. It would be the quickest way to find Mac. He left his men to search the ground floor, then headed up the stairs, cautiously opening each door on the floor in turn. Smoke was creeping into the rooms and the heat was rapidly rising. He hardly expected to meet any cartel members as they would have evacuated by now. Mac wasn’t there either.

“Any sign of Mac?” he asked, readjusting his tac vest.

“No, Jack, nothing!” The guys had just finished searching the ground floor.

Jack frowned. Where were they keeping him? A coil of anxiety gripped his gut. Mac had to be here somewhere! The best way to find his partner would be to ask the scumbags who took him, and he was going to do just that! He peered out a window at the men fighting the fires. Some were throwing buckets of water onto the flames and others were beating the fire with bags. A few were watching with Walsh, bandanas covering their nose and mouth. One stalked away with purpose, drawing his gun from the back of his pants, and several men followed. Jack narrowed his eyes as they vanished into the smoke. He had a bad feeling and raced downstairs.

“Come!” he called, grabbing a cloth off a sideboard to cover his nose and mouth. His men did the same and charged out after Jack into the smoke.

The Mexican and his men were several yards away, their backs turned towards Jack. In the haze, he saw them aim their guns at a figure sitting against a pole, whose head was slumped forward, hidden under a bag. His heart skipped a beat. Mac!

He’d recognize his brother anywhere!

Jack’s arm wrapped around the Mexican’s neck and he shoved his gun into the man’s back.

“Drop it, or I’ll fill you with lead!” The man startled at Jack’s deadly tone and lowered his weapon before letting it fall. Jack kicked it out of reach.

“Now tell your men to drop their guns!”

Realizing something was up, the men looked towards Diego for direction.

“Do what he says! Put them down!” the Mexican ground out angrily. “You know, American, you’re not going to get out of here alive!”

“Oh yeah?” Jack turned the Mexican to see the Phoenix tac team burst through the entrance. “You’re not gonna be alive for much longer if my partner’s hurt!” he growled. He pulled out cuffs and secured the cartel leader’s wrists, then moved over to Mac and knelt beside him.

“Mac! Told ya I was comin’ for ya!” He lifted the bag carefully off Mac’s head, concerned that the kid hadn’t moved. His partner’s eyes were closed and his breathing hitched. Blood from his lip had dripped down his chin onto his shirt.

Mac opened his eyes a crack and he tried to sit up straight. “J’ck! The smoke!” he rasped.

“We’ll get ya outta here now, brother!” He untied Mac’s hands, noting the injured wrists, and gently pulled the kid’s arm over his shoulder. “You okay to walk?” Mac nodded, then broke into a coughing fit. He wrapped his arm around Mac’s waist and pulled his partner up with him. He needed
to get him out of the smoke, but not into the hail of bullets that was being exchanged across the compound.

“Jack, take Mac directly to exfil. There’s a medic team waiting there if he needs one,” Matty instructed.

“Ready to go,” Jack confirmed and headed towards the open garage. He would gladly have joined the tac team in taking down the cartel, wanting to thump Walsh for taking his partner, but his priority was to make sure the kid leaning heavily on him got to exfil. Mac’s silence worried him and his breathing didn’t sound good.

An SUV raced in, spun round and stopped next to Jack.

“Look at that! Matty’s organized us a lift to exfil! We’re goin’ home, brother!” Jack grinned. He opened the back door and helped Mac in, sliding onto the seat next to his partner. The driver pulled off as Jack shut the door. Mac wheezed. His eyes were red. Jack grabbed a bottle of water, opened it and offered it to Mac. He accepted, and took a few sips.

Jack glanced at his partner with concern. He couldn’t see too much physical injury, but that was not always an accurate assessment.

“How you feeling?”


Jack put his arm around Mac's shoulders and drew him close, feeling some of the tension melt out of his partner's trembling form. It was a relief to have him back. If needed, he'd have walked to the ends of the earth to fetch his partner.

“You can sleep all the way back,” Jack soothed, “After you get checked out at exfil.” When that didn’t even earn him a look, he knew for sure something was off. What the hell had Walsh done to his kid?
Mac tried to remain still. His head throbbed and movement made it worse. After another coughing fit, Jack pushed a bottle of water into Mac’s hand and helped him hold it so the blond could drink. That seemed to offer a moment’s relief.

“Need oxygen,” Mac whispered. Smoke swirled in his lungs and he wasn’t drawing enough air out of every breath. Jack could sense Mac’s growing distress and grimaced at a bluish tinge forming above his partner’s lip.

“Come on, Mac, breathe! You hear me?” Jack ordered sharply, leaning the blond forward, his arm across Mac’s chest for support so he could rub Mac’s back. Reverting to Delta mode was a familiar way to deal with life and death situations.

“Can you speed up there, dammit?” he yelled at the driver. If they didn’t reach exfil within the next half minute, he would initiate CPR.

The driver looked briefly over his shoulder at his passengers. Doing what Dalton wanted was not an option, especially when the agent was concerned about his partner. He skidded around a corner, then floored the vehicle down the dirt road, screeching to a halt next to a Phoenix aircraft.

A doctor who had recently joined the Phoenix medical team flung open the door. Panic flashed across Mac’s face.

“J’ck!” he rasped.

“It’s okay, bud! We’re at exfil and doc’s here to help you,” Jack assured, gently squeezing Mac’s shoulder. Jack glared at the doctor. “He needs oxygen! He’s inhaled smoke and can’t breathe!”

The doctor had been expecting the agents, and everything about their arrival told him this was urgent.

“Can you get him on the plane?”

“Yeah!” Jack nodded, and was already moving the blond out of the vehicle when the doctor reached in to help. Jack supported Mac onto the plane and sat him on a couch while the doctor connected up an oxygen mask. Fighting for air, Mac’s body spasmed. “J’ck!” he choked, grasping his partner’s wrist. Then his eyes flew wide as the mask was placed over his face. Jack caught his hands as they reached up to dislodge the plastic.

“I’ve gotcha, bud! Just breathe. Deep breaths now. It’s gonna be okay!” Jack rubbed his thumbs over the back of Mac’s hands. He glanced at theanguished young man, sunk back in the seat, wrists rubbed raw, and swallowed back a surge of emotion. Aww, kiddo, this should never have happened to you!

As the blond gulped in the rich stream of oxygen, his breathing evened out and he slowly calmed. The doctor began a quick examination, then cleaned and dressed Mac’s wrists. When he was finished, Jack released one of Mac’s hands to the doctor to insert an IV.

“There, I’ve done what I can, Agent MacGyver,” the doctor said, checking that the oxygen mask still fitted snugly over his patient’s face. “Get some rest, and when we get back to Phoenix I’d just like to run a few tests.”
Mac hummed, his eyes remaining closed.

“Is he okay to fly back?” Jack glanced up worriedly. “I mean, once we take off, it’ll be a while before we can get to a hospital if he needs one.”

The doctor offered a light smile. Dalton took MacGyver’s care seriously. On his first day as a Phoenix employee, this was one of the things his medical colleagues had told him to expect. He was now experiencing it firsthand.

“His condition is stable. And I’ve given him something light for pain relief, so he should sleep through the trip. I can do anything else necessary at Phoenix.”

Jack felt some of the stress roll off his shoulders. “Thanks, doc!” He turned to Mac, lifting tousled blond strands off his partner’s forehead. “Want to lie down, buddy?”

Mac’s eyes darted open and Jack sensed his anxiety.

“I’m gonna be right here, Mac. I’m not goin’ anywhere,” he assured, squeezing the younger man’s hand lightly.

Mac hesitated for a second, then nodded and lay on his side, lifting his legs onto the couch. Jack placed a pillow under his head and covered him with a blanket, careful not to detach the IV.

“J’ck,” Mac murmured, his eyelids drooping.

Jack leaned closer to hear his partner. Mac looked pale and exhausted. “What’s it, bud? You okay?” he asked gently, watching the younger man relax and fall asleep. Whatever the doctor had given him worked fast!

Jack plopped down in a chair opposite Mac, rubbing a hand over his face. There were times when Mac scared him more than he wanted to admit. He shook his head. This was not the time to think about that. What mattered was that Mac was here. Safe and breathing. As he relaxed, Matty’s voice in his ear almost made him jump.

“How’s our boy?”

“Doc’s given him somthing for pain and he’s sleeping now.” He realized the doctor would have already provided a medical update. What Matty wanted was more than just a physical report. He sighed.

“Gomez was about to shoot him, Matty. It looked like it was meant to be an execution at dawn, so there’ll be issues. But I’ll talk to him and we’ll deal with it.”

“I know you’ll be there for him, Jack!” Matty replied softly, then switched to business mode. “It shouldn’t be long now before take off. Our team is wrapping up at the compound and the Mexican police are taking cartel suspects into custody. Unfortunately Walsh is not among them.”

“Damn!” Jack clenched his fists. “We need to get him!” The fact that Walsh was not on his way to prison meant more worry for Mac’s safety, especially as his partner had most likely succeeded in burning down Walsh’s lab for the second time. He tensed, feeling a spike of adrenalin and a strong urge to hunt down Oversight’s ex partner. “I’ll go find him, Matty!”

“No, stay with Blondie, Jack. Some of our men have already gone after Walsh. If we don’t get him now, if anything’s left of the cartel after this raid, the members should be keen to sever ties with him. And when news gets around, other cartels will probably not want to have anything to do with Walsh
either. Without their support, it’ll be easier to find him.”

“Sure,” Jack nodded, his lips pulled tight. He took out his gun and reloaded it. If Walsh showed up anywhere near the plane, anywhere near Mac, Jack would be ready for him. He stayed alert, even as the tac team, minus the men who were staying to search for Walsh, returned in high spirits after a successful mission. Only when the plane leveled out after its ascent into the sky, did he put his gun away. His eyes scanned over Mac once again. Satisfied with the regular rising and falling of his partner’s chest, he settled back and stretched out his legs, his body eager to sleep.

Well into the flight, turbulence rocked the plane. Jack was instantly awake and his gaze swept over to Mac. The oxygen mask was on the floor and Mac’s face was wet as tears flowed over his nose and down his cheek.

“Mac,” Jack placed a hand on his shoulder, picking up the mask, “You need to keep this on, buddy.” He wondered if Mac was even awake. The blond had most likely knocked the mask off in his sleep. Jack swiped away the tears with his thumb. Mac’s eyes opened and Jack saw the vulnerability and hurt of a 10 year old boy who had waited in vain for his father to return.

“You came,” Mac whispered, reaching out for Jack and clutching a fistful of his shirt. Jack’s heart shattered like it had been a piece of glass.

“Course I came! You know I always come! Wookiee life debt, remember?” he smiled through his pain.

“Sorry,” Mac breathed, letting go of Jack and moving to sit up. He wiped his face and swallowed hard, trying to regain some composure.

“You’ve got nothin’ to be sorry about, bud!” The only one who should be sorry is your father; Oversight has no idea what he’s put you through!

“Didn’t think you’d come in time; if you’d even find me.” Mac looked down, his voice thick with emotion. “Wasn’t even sure that I deserved you looking for me, as this mess is all my father’s doing.” His eyes lifted, soft and grateful. “But you came, Jack! You saved my life!”

If hearts could break twice, Jack was sure his did. He exhaled sharply, fighting back his own tears.

“No matter what your father did, Mac, I’m not gonna lose you on my watch! So if that means taking a trip to Mexico or Moldovia or anywhere else to find you, bud, I’ll be there. Just… try not to go back to Cairo!”

“I’ll try!” Mac gave a small grin, then stifled a yawn. Jack felt relief seeping in. He held up the oxygen mask. “Now how about you put this back on and get some more sleep?”

“Fine,” Mac rolled his eyes, taking the mask and slipping it back on. “But I don’t want to sleep!” He couldn’t deal with another nightmare so soon after the last one.

Jack shifted off his chair and sat on the couch next to Mac, putting his arm around the blond’s shoulders. “That’s okay, bud. You can just sit here and close your eyes.”

Mac huffed, then relaxed against Jack and was asleep within minutes. Jack moved a little to the side so his partner’s head could rest on his chest. He felt his heart beating under the mop of golden hair and smiled.

Healing had begun and Mac would be okay.
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