First Missions Are Cursed
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First Missions Are Cursed
by KatieComma

Summary

As a CSI working in the Forensic Department for The Phoenix, Nick has the most field experience of any of them.

So, when something suspicious happens and they need someone to process an old bunker in North Dakota, Matty asks Nick to hop a plane.

There's just one thing: the bunker's at the bottom of a mineshaft.

Notes

I MADE THIS MATURE FOR SOME OF THE PTSD THEMES... AND HUGELY BECAUSE OF THE STORY JACK TELLS. THERE ISN'T ANY SEXUAL CONTENT.

Thank you N1ghtshade for reading Murdoc and making sure he was in character!

Thank you lavendersblues for reading the bits and pieces I would send you out of context and giving me advice.

Thank you BlackVultures for reading over my PTSD stuff and letting me know I wasn't
And above all, this whole thing probably wouldn’t exist without the George Eads Thirst Club and their constant angsty/whumpy conversations lately that inspired a lot of this.

Mac walked the halls of Phoenix with a determined bounce in his step. Matty had asked to see their newest addition to the team in the war room. And she’d asked for him by name. So Mac was on his way to find Nick, and bring him to the director.

When he reached the lab he paused at the glass door. Several techs were working in the lab, tables buzzing with people. But at the far end of the lab, Nick was standing at a station with Jill.

Mac watched for a minute. He loved watching Nick work. There was something about the way he became engrossed in an experiment that put the most earnest, beautiful expression on his face.

It was a delicate balance though, watching Nick. They hadn’t told the team about their living situation yet. Nick was currently just their “roommate” while he looked for a place of his own and got used to the city. The three of them had discussed it and thought it best. Nick hadn’t wanted to walk into the Phoenix that way, their relationship the brush he was painted with. He wanted to make an impression and then tell everyone. Mac and Jack had agreed. It felt wrong to lie to the team, to their family, but they wanted to ease everyone into the idea; let them get to know Nick so no one would pass judgement when they finally let the cat out of the bag.

So there was no intimacy shared at work; no touches that could be construed as anything but professional; no terms of endearment, or sweet words between one another. That had all been easy, even after they’d started dating Mac and Jack had always left that stuff out of the Phoenix by default. A few “I love you’s” before or after a near-death experience not withstanding.

So Mac watched Nick from a distance and hoped no one noticed.

This time was different though. Nick pulled back from the microscope he’d been hovering over and looked over at Jill. Her lips moved and the two broke into hysterical laughter. Nick put a hand to Jill’s shoulder as they almost doubled over with it.

A feeling swelled up in Mac’s gut; a stab of jealousy. If anyone looked into the lab, with Nick’s hand still firmly resting on Jill’s shoulder, and their shared laughter, would they guess the two of them were dating? Or just flirting? It wasn’t just jealousy that Nick might be attracted to Jill. He just stared at the hand resting on her shoulder and his jealousy twisted tighter in his stomach, that Nick could touch her and not touch Mac that way.

Before anyone caught him staring, Mac opened the door and walked halfway down the lab. He tried not to sound rattled. “Hey Nick?”

Nick kept laughing, kept his hand on Jill, and turned toward Mac. The smile on his face was like sunshine; Mac felt warm just having it directed at him. “What’s up Mac?” Nick asked, through subsiding laughter.
“Matty wants to see you,” Mac said. “In the war room.”

Nick’s face sobered, and he let his hand drop. “Yeah, alright.”

Mac realized that his face must still look grave, so he did his best to smile. “It’s a good thing,” Mac said, hoping his smile didn’t look like a grimace.

“Be right there,” Nick said.

Mac waited in the hall for Nick to lose his lab coat and clear up what he was working on. Normally Mac would have stayed in the lab and chatted with Jill, but he felt like a fool, ashamed, and opted to wait by himself.

They made their way up to the war room. Jack was already waiting there.

Matty didn’t even say anything to Nick. “Close the door,” was the closest she got before she jumped into the briefing.

“This is Fritz Hauke,” Matty said, clicking a button to pull up a dossier on the war room screens. There was no photo.

“This’ who Matty? You’re just showin’ me words,” Jack said, waving at the screens. “Give me a visual. Where’s the guy’s ugly mug.”

“You gonna let me finish Jack?” Matty asked, narrowing her eyes at him.

“Yeah, sure,” Jack said, unphased and sinking into a big leather chair.

“As I was saying: Meet Fritz Hauke. He’s a mercenary and killer for hire who’s responsible for countless kills in countless countries. He’s even been heavily involved in a few genocides over the years. He does not discriminate; kills anyone who gets in his way: women, children, anyone. We recently got intel that led us to a bunker in North Dakota where it looks like he’s been holed up for years. Much like Murdoc, this guy’s been flying under the radar for his entire career. Nobody has any idea what he looks like, we just have descriptions.”

“So what’s the plan?” Mac asked, taking a step away from Nick so they weren’t standing conspicuously close.

“We’re gonna get him,” Matty said simply. “We got Murdoc, and we’re gonna get this guy.”

“Well, we got Murdoc and then he got away,” Jack added.

Matty just glared in his direction before turning her attention back to the screens. “This guy has done a lot of damage, and we’re going to make sure it stops,” she said.

“Ok, so I’m not sure what exactly you need me for Matty,” Nick said, shifting his feet. “I mean, this guy’s way above my pay grade. I don’t know how you think I can help.”

“You’re the most experienced CSI I’ve got Nick,” Matty said. She walked to the screen and swiped, bringing up a set of photos.

“Woah, where’s the hurricane?” Jack asked.

The photos showed a series of rooms that were overflowing with papers, books, boxes and just about anything else imaginable. There was even a small kitchen in the back with a kitchen sink.
“This,” Matty waved toward the screen, “is why I need you, Nick. We need to find this guy. And I think going through this bunker with a fine tooth comb is the best way of doing that. He’s kept himself off the radar for his entire career, the only thing we know about him is what’s in that bunker. So I’d like you to go process the bunker and help us find this guy. He’s probably headed to his next job, or target, and I’d like to stop him before he causes any more mayhem.”

“Yes ma’am,” Nick said.

Mac’s jaw dropped a little, but Jack spoke up before Mac could.

“Woah, woah, woah,” Jack held up his hands and stood up. “Wait one second here. Nick ain’t a field agent.”

“I’m fully aware of that Jack,” Matty said, “but as of today he is. As long as you’re alright with that Nick?”

“I’ve worked in the field a long time, I’ll be alright,” Nick said with a confident smile, accompanied by a tiny glare shot in Jack’s direction.

Jack was not paying attention, eyes all for Matty. “Well he ain’t going alone,” Jack said.

“Of course not,” Matty said. “I’m sending you, and a tac team with him. If this guy comes home while you’re there… well, I’m not taking any chances.”

“I’ll go too, I can—” Mac started.

“You’re staying here blondie,” Matty said.

“But I can—”

“Listen Mac, don’t get me wrong you’ve definitely proven that your skills are useful,” Matty was putting on what Jack referred to as her “mama bear” voice. “But sometimes, you can get a bit messy when you improvise, and this job needs a particular attention to detail and… how do I put this delicately—”

“She don’t want you blowin’ anything up Mac,” Jack said simply.

Matty rolled her eyes. “Basically, yes. Nick’s got the experience and training to process this scene in minute detail piece by piece. Not something you’re good at.”

Mac shrugged and smiled. “You got me there,” he said, “we’re usually the ‘go in hot and barely get out alive’ kinda guys.”

Matty just nodded. “So you’ll stay here while Jack and Nick take this one.”

Nick nodded, and Mac watched him from the corner of his eye, noting the heavy swallow as the responsibility of the mission settled on his shoulders.

“Alright, this is priority guys,” Matty said. “You guys are wheels up in thirty.”

“We’re leaving in thirty minutes?” Nick asked, looking at Mac with a little shock. “For North Dakota?”

“You bet cowboy,” Jack said, walking toward the door. “I’ve got some extra spare clothes you can borrow, you’re about my size.” Jack left to hit up the locker room and grab his things.
“Great,” Nick said quietly to Mac. “I’m gonna spend the next few days looking like a Motorhead roadie.”

Easy laughter bubbled up out of Mac at that comment, which in turn got Nick grinning in his direction conspiratorially.

Matty glared at them. “Chop chop boys,” she checked her watch, “twenty eight minutes and counting.”

“Come on,” Mac grabbed Nick’s forearm lightly before he remembered himself and dropped it. He didn’t glance at Matty to see if she noticed, his face would have given him away. “I’ll help you get together what you need.”

The lab was quieter, most of the techs having gone for their regular lunch hour. Mac wondered what it would be like to work a nine to five job, with scheduled breaks and a regular home time, and immediately thought that he would hate it. Not just the thrill, but the varied time and subject of their work kept Mac in check. If he worked at the same place day in and day out doing the same types of things, he’d probably go postal.

“Hey Nick,” Jill greeted when they walked back in. “Oh! Hey Mac. Haven’t seen you down here too often lately?”

Had he really stopped coming to the lab as much? To avoid being seen with Nick? Great, in trying to avoid raising suspicion, he’d done it anyway.

“Busy,” Mac said simply, unable to think of anything better.

“We really should get back to looking at that voice analysis program sometime,” she said.

Mac nodded. “Yeah,” he said, “that was a great idea. We should.” And he was being genuine. He couldn’t remember what had even drawn his focus away from that side project. “Well, I’m grounded for a few days. Nick here is taking my place in the field, so why don’t we play with it this week.”

Jill’s smile widened, and he gave up his jealousy. That shared laughter was just Jill, happy go lucky Jill. “Really?” She asked.

“You bet,” Mac committed. “First thing tomorrow morning if you’re free.”

Jill nodded, her glasses slipping down her nose a little before she pushed them back up. “Have fun in the field Nick,” she said. “I’ll take care of the rest of that cockroach experiment for you while you’re gone. I know it’s time sensitive.”

“Oh, thanks,” Nick said absently.

“I’ll see you tomorrow Mac,” Jill said, all cheer and happiness and naiveté. She left them alone in the lab to join the other techs for lunch.

“Ok, so what do you need?” Mac asked, looking around the lab.

“I’ll have to pack a new kit,” Nick said, motioning toward the well stocked room at the end of the lab.

“Hey nerds!” Jack came into the lab carrying two go-bags, followed by Riley and Bozer.

“Hey Nick,” Riley’s smile was wide and warm, she’d liked Nick immediately. “Heard you’re
headed off on your first mission. Exciting.”

“I remember my first mission,” Bozer said solemnly as he walked up. “We were all disavowed. You all remember that?” He sounded panicked.

Mac put his hands up to prevent Boze continuing with the story. “That’s not gonna happen Boze.”

“Oh yeah? And why not?”

“Well, first of all cause we ain’t goin’ outside the states,” Jack said, “and second cause he doesn’t have your bad luck.” Jack chuckled a little and shared a conspiratorial look with Riley. “Plus it’s just a nerd trip. CSI mumbo jumbo.”

Nick looked a little pale.

Mac tried to reassure him. “Don’t worry, it’s fine, Boze really does have the worst luck,” he said. “And it wasn’t even that bad.”

“Not that bad?” Bozer said.

Riley cut him off. “Anyway, we just wanted to come wish you good luck, not that you need it.” She winked, and pushed Bozer towards the exit before he could do anymore damage.

“Yeah, right, good luck!” Bozer called back.

Alright baby,” Jack flipped from serious soldier over to caring boyfriend. It was a transition Mac had seen him make many times since they’d started their relationship and agreed to be professional at work. Jack stepped forward and gripped Mac’s shoulder as he kissed his lips softly. It didn't matter that Riley and Bozer were still in the room, or that anyone walking past the big glass doors of the lab could see; everyone knew Mac and Jack were together. It was just Nick's secret that needed to be kept. “Now, don’t do anything stupid while I’m gone like gettin’ shot at or blown up or any’a that stuff that you know I wouldn’t miss for the world, alright?”

“You got it Jack,” Mac said, giving Jack another kiss.

“Ok, Nicky, me and you got a date with a jet plane in T-minus fourteen minutes. So haul some ass boy.” Back to soldier mode.

“I’m just gonna help him get his stuff together and I’ll send him down to you,” Mac said.

“You got it,” Jack said, heading for the door. “See you shortly cowboy.”

Mac followed Nick into the storage room. They grabbed an empty kit from a lower shelf and started filling it with supplies.

Mac checked his watch just as they were latching the case shut. “Ok, you’ve gotta go.”

Their eyes met and Nick looked desperate.

“Nervous?” Mac asked.

Nick nodded. “A little, but Jacky’ll be there to have my back,” he said. “I’ll be alright.” He glanced around as though someone might be watching before he quickly closed the door of the closet.

“Nick, what-” Mac couldn’t get any more words out before Nick was kissing him so softly, fingers in the hair at the back of Mac’s head, holding him steady.
“I just wanted to say goodbye,” Nick said against Mac’s lips as he pulled back. “Properly.”

Mac put his arms around Nick’s waist, kissed him again, and then pulled him into a hug, resting his head on Nick’s shoulder. “You won’t be gone long,” Mac said, pulling back to look into Nick’s eyes again. “That is, unless you totally suck at your job. Then it might take you a year to find anything in that place.”

Nick laughed, and the lines that travelled up his face with that laughter melted Mac’s core. What the hell had he been jealous about earlier? He couldn’t even remember.

Nick looked at the old steel elevator cage that would drop down the North Dakota mineshaft and shivered. That elevator that was going to take them down deep underground and keep them there. Nick’s grip tightened on the handle of his kit, his palm slippery.

“You look like you’ve seen a ghost Nick, you alright?” Jack asked.

Nick just nodded, unable to form words.

“Erickson, clear the perimeter!” Jack barked, using his military voice.

Erickson started giving orders to the rest of the tac team and they moved out to sweep the area.

“Riley?” Jack said aloud, their comms hot. “You see anything on sat view?”


“Don’t say things like that Riles,” Jack said. “It’s when you say things like that, that something goes wrong.”

“So superstitious,” Riley said under her breath, but her mic still picked it up.

It was weird having the little earpiece in, being able to hear everything the team was saying. It was almost distracting. But Nick was quickly adjusting.

What he wasn’t adjusting to was the idea of being a couple hundred feet underground. Why hadn’t he realized this when they’d told him it was in a mine shaft?

“All clear,” Erickson’s stiff voice came back through comms. “On our way back to you.”

“Alright, I’m gonna head down with half the team and clear the place,” Jack said. Nick marvelled at the way Jack fell into military mode, he didn’t even need to think about it. Decisions just made themselves in his head, the logic of the situation coming easily to him. “Nick, you stay up here with the rest’a the boys until we’re done.”

“Hey Jack?” Mac’s voice echoed, bouncing off a satellite and into their ears all the way from the war room in L.A. His voice was tinny over the comm system, losing the warmth it had in person.

“What’s up Mac?” Jack asked.

“You’re gonna lose comms when you go down there,” Mac said.

“What do you mean we’re gonna lose comms?” Jack growled.
“I’m looking at the specs of the mine, and because of the depth, the satellite signal can’t reach through the rock. Radio signals won’t work either. It’s just too deep,” Mac’s voice was so steady and sure. The confidence and authority he spoke with were absolute, but no overbearing. “So you’re going to be dark once you get about…” he paused and Nick heard papers shuffling. “Halfway down it’s going to cut out.”

“Aw hell,” Jack said, “well, we wouldn’t want everything to go according to plan right?”

“Right,” Mac said, and Nick could hear the smile in it. "Where's the fun in that?"

These guys loved this stuff. The danger and excitement and adventure of it all. Nick would probably feel the same if it were anything but going down deep into the earth for several hours. All that rock crushing down from overhead.

Nick closed his eyes and breathed deep. Fresh air; while he could still pull it into his lungs he sucked it back like an addict. Soon it would be stale air.

“Alright, let’s get a move on boys,” Jack said. He picked out the members he was taking with him, and they climbed into the elevator together and disappeared down the shaft.

Nick didn’t have the heart to get close and watch the elevator descend, instead he found a rock to sit on and put his head between his knees.

“You alright Mr. Stokes?” One of the tac guys asked, his feet crunching the ground underneath as he approached.

“What? Yeah, I’m fine,” Nick said, sounding anything but fine.

“Stokes?” Matty asked. “What’s going on?”

“Just waiting on Jack,” Nick said.

“You ok, Nick?” Mac asked. Nick could hear the concern in his voice, the longing to help.

“Listen, I’m fine,” Nick snapped, well aware that everyone was listening, but unable to help himself. The waiting was killing him. “I just want to get this over with and get back home.”

They waited a half hour for Jack to come back up.

“It’s pretty cluttered down there,” Jack said. “And the only entrance or exit is this here elevator. So I’m gonna go down with Nick and leave the rest of the team up here.”

“Agreed,” Matty answered through their earpieces.

“Erickson,” Jack commanded, “every 30 minutes I want someone down there to check on us and then back up to report to Director Webber.”

“Yes, sir,” Erickson said.

They set up a perimeter, and Jack climbed back into the elevator. He turned around, and by the look on his face he was surprised and confused that Nick hadn’t been right behind him.

“Nicky?” Jack asked. “You comin’ or what?”

Nick just nodded, unable to speak as he took slow shaky steps onto the dirty steel plate of the elevator floor.
As soon as the elevator descended far enough to be out of sight of the tac team, Nick laced his fingers with Jack’s and held on so tight he was sure their knuckles were white. But Nick couldn’t look down to check.

The elevator was just a steel cage, the walls of the shaft visible through the mesh on all sides. Jack operated the small control panel that sent them down. The ride down took too long, the rocky walls of the mineshaft rising up around them until the sky above was the smallest speck above them. Nick watched that sky recede and recede, squeezing Jack’s hand tighter and tighter. He felt dizzy, he felt sick, he felt afraid.

A staticky buzzing filled their ears.

“Best shut your comms off unless you wanna listen to that all day,” Jack said, reaching up and pressing the little button on his earpiece.

Nick followed suit.

“Alright, now that we’re alone, you wanna tell me what the hell’s going on?” Jack asked, turning toward Nick.

Nick shook his head and nervously licked his lips. “It’s nothin’ Jack.”

“Now see, if it was really nothin’ you’d be smilin’ and callin’ me Jacky boy.” Jack put his free hand to Nick’s cheek, the rough fingers massaging his jaw. “You can tell my Nicky.”

Nick let go of Jack’s hand and stepped away. “I’m fine man,” the words came out angrier then he’d intended. But he couldn’t talk about it. He vowed to tell Jack afterwards, but he just couldn’t talk about it, or the whole thing would creep under his skin and paralyze him with the fear that was currently just crawling around his gut.

“Alright, alright,” Jack said, “if that’s the way you wanna do this. Then let’s do it that way. Always too stubborn for your own damn good.”

Nick let that one go. He had more important things to focus on.

They passed level after level of shafts that opened horizontally off of the elevator. But they didn’t stop at any of them. Instead they rode all the way to the bottom.

They stepped out into a small space that was surrounded by dark craggy rocks. Small trouble lights hung from wires strung around the little space, illuminating a door set into the stone across from the elevator.

Jack threw back the elevator gate with the whining sound of metal on metal. Hand on his sidearm, he strode purposefully to the door opened it, leading Nick into a space that felt like a nice studio apartment. It was sealed off from the stone around it, walls and ceiling all drywall with lights inset. Once the door closed behind them, Nick could start to pretend that they were in a windowless building, and not several hundred feet below the earth.

The small set of rooms were just as the pictures, and Jack had described them: overfilled with piles and piles of junk. Nick did a cursory walk around. The main room contained a desk, a few chairs, and a small kitchen that was spotless but also piled with non-kitchen items (papers and books); there was a small bathroom with a little shower stall that was piled with boxes; The last room was a bedroom, barely big enough to fit the small cot inside it. Nick took pictures as he went through.

Having something to focus on helped Nick forget the fear coiling in his gut. He put his kit down,
opened it up and went to work. He sifted through piles and boxes of papers and journals; cupboards of schematics, and bookcases stacked with a little bit of everything; more journals, books, jars full of nails and bolts, a cat skull. It was a strange little place.

Nick heard a crinkling sound behind him and turned to find Jack trying to pick up a stack from a chair.

“Stop!” Nick all but yelled. “What are you doing?”

“Movin’ some of this crap so I can rest my weary feet,” Jack said, “what’s it look like I’m doin’?”

“Put it back Jack,” Nick said. He’d gotten so used to working with people who knew all the rules: don’t touch anything until it’s been processed, preserve the scene. Jack didn’t know anything about that. Jack knew how to shoot first and ask questions later.

“Sure, whatever,” Jack said, tipping the pile back onto the chair.

Nick smiled a little. In the end he was beyond glad it was Jack with him and not Erickson, with his cold, stiff demeanour. “Sit over there by the wall,” Nick suggested.

“On the floor?” Jack asked.

“It’s the only option,” Nick said.

Jack did as suggested, sitting on the floor, legs tented, forearms resting on his knees.

Nick stopped for a second, staring at Jack. The tac gear, chest holster for his gun, thigh holster for his second gun, sitting so casually like wearing tac gear was an everyday occurrence; sitting easy like a soldier at rest.

Suddenly Nick forget everything else but how much he loved Jack Dalton, and just how much Jack had been through that it meant wearing two guns and a bullet proof vest was comfortable for him.

He was also preoccupied with just how damn good Jack looked in his gear.

“Hey Nicky,” Jack smiled. “Best pick that jaw up off the floor cowboy.”

Nick smiled in return. “Can’t help it when you’re sittin’ there lookin’ so good Jacky boy,” he said.

Jack smiled wider and shot him a wink, but didn’t say anything more. Nick turned back to his work trying to ignore the Texan distraction sitting against the wall in the corner.

Nick was in the middle of cataloguing a stack of papers when Jack said: “Somethin’s not right.”

Nick looked up. “What?” He looked around to spot the danger. Nothing had changed.

“It’s been 31 minutes and nobody’s come to check on us,” Jack said, pushing himself up off the floor. "I don't hear the elevator movin' either." His Delta Force demeanour was back in place, stern face, dark eyes. He approached the door and pulled the gun from his chest holster.

Nick unbuttoned the thumb break on his holster, prepared to pull his gun if needed. He carefully set the stack of papers down and tensed his body, ready for action.

Jack opened the door and entered the little cave-room outside. “All clear,” he said.

Nick followed him into antechamber.
The elevator still sat at the bottom of the shaft. They hadn’t called it back to the top.

“Leave your stuff,” Jack commanded, “we’re gonna go check on them boys. See what kinda trouble they got themselves into.”

Nick climbed into the elevator, and closed the creaky gate behind them. The rock walls around him were making him shaky, making him sweat, making him remember. He closed his eyes and breathed in deep; air that tasted like dirt and filled his lungs but didn’t satisfy.

Nick heard a click, but nothing happened. Another click. Nothing. He opened his eyes. Jack was playing with the controls, pressing buttons, but nothing was happening.

“What’s going on?” Nick asked.

“Elevator’s not working,” Jack answered.

“Let me try,” Nick said, pushing Jack aside, suddenly panicked. He clicked the buttons, but nothing happened.

“Yeah, I tried that already Nicky,” Jack groused. “Probably why the boys haven’t been down to us. Elevator’s dead as a doornail.”

Nick gripped the control panel of the elevator hard. His lungs wouldn’t work. He was trying to breath, but nothing was happening. The stale air wasn’t good enough, there was no oxygen in it, he just knew it, he was suffocating down here with no way out. He gripped the control panel tighter, and the rough metal edge on the underside cut into his fingers painfully, but if he let go he’d fall. He was so dizzy, the rock walls were spinning around him and all he could taste was loamy dirt and ants crunched in his teeth so they wouldn’t bite his tongue and throat, and terror and then everything went black.

“What do you mean the elevator’s not working?” Mac asked Erickson.

“We tried to call it back to do the 30 minute check that Agent Dalton directed us to,” Erickson replied, “but nothing’s happening. There doesn’t seem to be any power to it.”

“What do you mean there’s no power?” Mac asked. “It was working just fine a half hour ago. And there wasn’t any problem when the site was originally scouted.”

“Woah,” Riley said from the other side of the room. “You guys-”

“Not now Riley,” Mac dismissed. Jack and Nick were trapped at the bottom of one of the deepest mine shafts in North America and his thoughts were completely bent on getting them out. He paged through schematics on the war room screen, trying to brainstorm quick ways to get them up. If the power source was down or interrupted then-

“This is important Mac,” Riley said, “I think you’re going to want-”

The war room screen changed just as Mac was flipping to another schematic. The screen filled up with a face he really didn’t want to see.

“Sorry Riley,” Murdoc said, “I just couldn’t wait for you to pick up my call. I’ve always been one to
jump the gun.”

Riley didn’t reply, didn’t take the bait.

“Murdock?” Mac asked. “You know, any other day I would welcome another chance to catch you and put you behind bars, but I’m kinda in the middle of something.”

“Oh, I know Angus,” Murdoc smiled. “That’s what I wanted to talk to you about.”

Mac had to step back from the screen to get away from that smile, way bigger than life size and making him want to gag.

“Let me guess, you’re currently trying to figure out a way to reroute power to a malfunctioning elevator at a very deep, dark, remote lignite mine in North Dakota.” The grin on Murdoc’s face was unsettling to say the least.

Matty turned from the screen toward Riley and pitched her voice low: “Riley, can you track the call?”

Riley shook her head. “He’s bouncing the signal around too much.”

“Well then get someone on this video, analyze everything about it, and see if we can figure out where the hell he’s calling from.” Matty’s voice was stern even at a whisper.

“Now, now, Matilda,” Murdoc chided. “No passing notes and no secrets from the class. But I’ll save you the effort. You won’t find me. Not in time to save Jacky boy and your best and brightest new CSI, Nicholas Stokes.”

“What do you want Murdoc?” Mac asked, gritting his teeth.

“I heard about your little domestic arrangement Angus,” Murdoc said, ignoring Mac’s question. “It’s all anyone’s talking about. Scandalous. So you understand, I just couldn’t resist getting both of your boys in the same place at the same time.”

Mac’s teeth creaked he was clenching them so hard. He looked down, away from Murdoc, and tried to catch a glimpse or Riley or Matty or Bozer out of the corner of his eye. This wasn’t how he’d wanted them to find out. And how the hell had Murdoc learned about it anyway? They hadn’t told anyone.

“Enough Murdoc,” Mac returned his eyes to the screen. “What do you want?”

Murdoc’s eyes flicked from Mac to the others. It seemed like they were standing all the way across the room, a gap separating them from Mac; the truth they couldn’t understand, a wall between them.

“No!” Murdoc’s eyes lit up and his grin grew wider. “Don’t tell me you didn’t tell the fam all about your little three-way love fest? Oh, this is too good.”

“Murdoc,” Mac’s voice was all threat.

“Alright, alright,” Murdoc said, still unable to hide the excitement from his face. “Down to business then, shall we?”

Mac’s shoulders relaxed a little, not a lot because two of the most important people in his life were still trapped down a mineshaft with Murdoc somehow in control, but moving the attention away from his unconventional relationship was helping him think a little more clearly.
Murdoc’s face shifted suddenly from glee to the psychotic grimness he put in place like a mask. It was an instantaneous shift, and like always, it creeped Mac out.

“I want my son,” Murdoc said simply. “That’s the deal. Take it or leave it. Cassian for your boys.” The statement was directed at all of them, but Mac felt it at his core. His boys.

“What makes you think we’re going to hand over an innocent boy to-” Mac started.

Murdoc cut him short. “Because if you don’t, Nicky and Jacky boy die at the bottom of that mineshaft,” he said seriously. Then a grin returned to his face, the one that came out when Murdoc hurt people. “See, that mine has been closed for so long, there was lots of time to block up the ventilation shafts. The only air coming and going to the bottom of that mine is circulated by a generator that runs on the same power as the elevator. And as we all know by now, that power has been interrupted. Not to mention I’ve filled the mineshaft with explosives.” Murdoc held up a small remote detonator. “I’ve underestimated you too many times before Angus. Had to make sure this time.”

“How the hell do you know so much about Fritz Hauke’s safe house?” Matty asked, cutting in before Mac got really angry and said something he’d regret.

“Oh Matilda,” Murdoc said, turning his attention to her. “You didn’t seriously think you unearthed all of my aliases did you? I’ve still got so many secrets up my sleeve, you wouldn’t believe.”

“You’re Fritz Hauke?” Matty asked, raising an eyebrow.

“What? You don’t believe me?” Murdoc asked. “My German accent is flawless. But we’ll save that for another time.”

“So you dropped the intel,” Mac said. They’d fallen into another trap of Murdoc’s. Mac silently cursed himself.

“It wasn’t hard,” Murdoc said. “I had to word the dossier just right to imply that processing the bunker would lead to the whereabouts of Fritz, and you guys did the rest. I am very good with the pen. It is mightier than the sword they say.”

Mac opened his mouth to speak, but he didn’t know what to say.

“Here’s the deal,” Murdoc said, “I know this whole ‘negotiating with terrorists’ thing is frowned upon. So I’ll give you a half hour to think it over, and then I’ll give you a ring. Until then, Angus, you stay put right there. If I find out you’ve jumped a plane for North Dakota, I’ll blow the mine.” He held up the little device to emphasize his words. “Talk to you soon.”

The screen cleared.

Mac turned to Riley. “Did you get anything? Narrow down the location at all?”

Riley looked at him with those big puppy dog eyes that she somehow shared with Jack even though he wasn’t her real dad. “Sorry Mac,” she said, “he’s got the signal bouncing through too many fake IPs. I just couldn’t track it.”

Mac growled and walked to the windows looking out on the courtyard at the back of the room. His mind was racing. He couldn’t go help, and the only guys he had on the ground weren’t equipped to try any of the stuff Mac would if he were there.

Mac hung his head and set his forehead to the cool window. “Matty?” He asked. “Is there any way
we can do what he’s asking?”

The silence hanging in the air was Mac’s answer. There was no way they could negotiate with terrorists. No way that Mac would hand a child over to Murdoc, not to save anyone, he knew that in his heart.

“See, I’m tellin’ you,” Bozer piped up, breaking the heavy silence, “first missions are cursed man.”

“Don’t worry Mac, we’ll get them back,” Riley said.

“How?” Mac asked, his breath fogging the window. He felt lost, both of his anchors trapped at the bottom of a cave in North Dakota, nothing to hold him steady. He couldn’t even talk to them.

“We’ll improvise,” Matty said, her voice full of confidence.

“Nicky?” Jack’s voice echoed hollowly off the rock walls around them. “Nicky, baby?”

Nick lay unconscious on the ground. When he fell, Jack hadn’t seen it coming, hadn’t been able to catch him before he’d scraped his arm open on the control box of the elevator tumbling to the ground. Nick’s breathing had been erratic, his pulse too fast, but once he’d blacked out, everything had steadied and returned to normal. The scrape on his arm bled lightly for a little bit; the bleeding had stopped, but Jack was more concerned with sterilizing it because of the dirty, rusty surface it had come from. Without supplies though, he couldn’t do a thing. Best shot was to get Nick back to the surface.

“Nicky?” Jack tried again, leaning close to listen to Nick’s breathing. He took Nick’s face in his hands and held it lightly. “Baby, come on.” Jack was beyond glad to be off comms. He wasn’t sure if he’d be able to contain the emotion in his voice for their little charade with the crew.

When Nick didn’t wake, Jack started to look around for a way out. But he knew there wasn’t one. He’d come down and cleared the place with the tac team; the elevator was the only way out.

Jack stepped back to assess the situation, looking up the mineshaft. The elevator scaffolding was climbable, but they were so deep that Jack didn’t want to risk that climb. He’d have to stop on every level of the mine on the way up to rest, and it would take him a good long time. Plus he didn’t want to leave Nick alone and vulnerable. No, they’d just have to wait for Mac to find a way to get them out. Mac would get them out.

Nick groaned on the ground, immediately reaching over to his hurt arm instinctively and hissing at the touch of his hand.

Jack rushed to him. “Nicky? You with me?” He asked, touching Nick's shoulders, then sliding his hands up to Nick’s neck.

“Jacky boy,” Nick groaned out, his voice vibrating against Jack’s hands on his throat. Then Nick opened his eyes, and as the misty-sleepiness cleared his eyes went wide and darted around the space above him.

“No, no, no, Nick,” Jack commanded, moving his hands up to Nick’s face and pulling it back so their eyes met. “Stay here with me Nick.”
Nick swallowed hard and closed his eyes. “Jack? Keep talking. Please?” Nick’s voice was broken, high pitched and cracking. He sounded like he might cry. Jack had never seen him in such a state.

“I don’t know what you want me to say, but I’ll keep on going and going like the Energizer bunny if you need baby,” Jack said, “don’t you worry about that. If there’s one thing that’s true about Jack Dalton, it’s that he could talk his way out of a paper bag. Mama always said-”

“The ranch,” Nick said desperately, bringing his hands to Jack’s biceps and clinging on desperately. “Tell me about the ranch.”

“I don’t know what I can tell you that you ain’t already heard Nicky,” Jack said.

Nick’s breathing was starting to level out again. “The sky at night, like that time I took you out to watch the stars.”

“Ain’t nothin’ more beautiful. Rolling grassland, and sky so big that it feels like you could fall into it forever.” Nick’s fingers relaxed where they clutched at Jack. So he continued. “That bright blue cloudless sky that goes on forever-” Jack faltered, thinking maybe he was starting to understand what this was all about. Nick’s reluctance to enter the elevator and his strange behaviour, taking Jack’s hand; the way he panicked the moment their only way out was removed.

“Jack?” Nick ventured, opening his eyes.

“I’m right here Nicky,” Jack said, leaning down and kissing Nick’s lips, tender and soft.

“We need to get back inside the bunker,” Nick said when Jack pulled back.

“You sure?” Jack asked.

Nick swallowed hard and kept his focus on Jack, staring right into his eyes. “It’s the…” he took a deep breath. “The rock out here. If I’m in there I can pretend we’re not underground.”

Jack stood up, easily pulling Nick’s bulk up with him. He put an arm around Nick’s middle to guide him to the room, in case he felt anymore bouts of dizziness. Jack wouldn’t let him fall again.

Once they were inside the bunker, Jack leaned Nick against the wall and let him slide down to sit on the floor.

“Head between your knees if you think you’re gonna pass out again,” Jack said.

Nick’s eyes flicked toward the open door. Jack closed it gently. Jack knew how to deal with PTSD triggers, he’d seen them plenty. He just hadn't known Nick had any, and that made him more than a little sad. Triggered by being underground; Jack’s brain was rampant with possibilities, none of them pleasant.

“Can you just…” Nick faltered before he finished the request. “Keep talking?”

Jack slid down to sit next to Nick on the floor, keeping their shoulders pressed together, but not putting an arm around Nick like he wanted to. Being touched during an episode was usually a no-no for most people.

“Let me tell you a story about a friend’a mine. We go way back. I’ve known Steve for years. Served here and there together off and on. Got to know each other pretty well.

“So we’re stationed together in Shandong province in China. And man, I gotta tell you, they grow
some damn fine peaches in China. Rival the great state’a Georgia any day. So Deacon brings in a barrel full one day that he bought for almost nothin’ at all. And that’s the day we learned that Steve hates peaches. Hates ‘em. But we’re stayin’ in this place where they’re just fallin’ off the trees right? So after about a week, we’re all sick of ‘em, and they’re just chokin’ us we’ve got so many. So we start playin’ pranks on Steve right? Soldiers’ll do that. Make jokes, play pranks, to take your mind off things. So we start leavin’ ‘em in Steve’s pillow, or one day he went to take a shower and the shower stall was full up; stuff like that. And every time we got him, Steve would get so worked up.

“I didn’t find out ‘til later, after we were split up again, that Steve had been the escort for a civilian supply drop in Vietnam one time. And they were offloading in this little town. All these half-starved kids gathered around, excited to get fed. And these local militants attacked. Just rainin’ down bullets on Steve and his team; bustin’ up all the crates of food. Steve crawls under the truck, shoots back, but after all’s said and done he’s wounded and layin’ there waitin’ for exfil and all he can smell is peaches. One of the crates was full, and it’s all over his skin, that sticky sweet peach juice. And it’s in his nose and he’s looking around at his dead men, dead kids, and all he can taste and smell and think of is peaches.”

Nick turned to look at Jack, keeping their shoulders pressed together, his jaw was hanging open a little. “Jesus Christ, Jack.”

“And the thing is, if the bastard had just said somethin’ to us, you know, nobody would’a bought anymore peaches,” Jack said with a grin. It wasn’t something to smile over, but when you’d seen the things Jack had, everything became a grim humour. “We were all so sick of ‘em anyway. But see, by keepin’ us in the dark he just made it so much worse. You know?” Jack sent a meaningful look Nick’s way.

Nick didn’t look away, or look ashamed, afraid, or chastised, just sad. He nodded to Jack, but didn’t say a word. “I can’t,” he said simply, memory and hurt crinkling those lines at the corner of his eyes. “Not… right now.”

Jack nodded in return. There was no use pushing somebody with trauma, that was no way to help them work through it and talk. Jack knew that from days and days spent down at the VA working with vets young and old.

“You just…” Jack faltered. Nick wasn’t supposed to have any of this pain. Mac and Jack, sure, they’d seen combat. But not Nick. He should have been saved from any of that kind of suffering and it crushed Jack’s heart until he thought he might break down to think that Nick had ever suffered. He swallowed hard to restart his breaking heart, and clear his throat. “Jacky boy’ll always be here to talk. You know that right?”

Nick nodded again and licked his lips nervously like he did often. “Thanks Jack.” He pushed closer, shivering a little with the shock he’d put himself into, their situation had pushed him into.

Jack threw an arm around Nick’s shoulders, tentative and gentle at first, until Nick relaxed into that hold, and then Jack tightened it, holding his boy close.

Mac’s brain was going a mile a minute, working on modifications for the tow line on the military hummer to make it long enough for what they needed.

Riley sat at her computer, working on trying to clean up parts of Murdoc’s video to see if she could
get any clue as to his whereabouts.

Bozer paced the floor nervously. There wasn’t anything he could help with at the moment, but he wanted to be there for support.

Matty had gone to work with the video techs, and make some calls to see if they had any leads on Murdoc.

Mac’s head buzzed: tensile strength of the rope they had; elastic and structural stretch of both the cable and the rope; approximate weight of Nick and Jack, alone and together. Calculations flitted through Mac’s head, spinning him in circles and rendering him useless for anything but thinking.

In the middle of a particularly creative idea that involved getting Erickson to build a pulley system, Murdoc called back.

“It’s him,” Riley said simply.

“Bozer, I’m in the middle of…” Mac struggled for words that weren’t calculations.

“Don’t worry, I’ll buy you some time,” Bozer replied. “Anything to be able to help.”

Mac took the laptop, and paper he’d been using for manual calculations, and moved into the corner out of view of the camera. And then he zoned out again, focused on numbers; any miscalculation could send Jack or Nick or both plummeting down a long deep mineshaft. But he couldn’t think about that.

He vaguely heard Murdoc and Bozer’s voices; just background noise to his thoughts.

“Wilt, how lovely to see you,” Murdoc’s voice chimed.

“Yeah, can’t say the same Murdoc,” Bozer said.

And then the voices faded, and Mac closed his eyes to concentrate, picturing the mineshaft in his mind. The rough walls, the old elevator scaffolding, the hummer at the top with its tow cable.

“Angus!” Murdoc’s voice cut through his thoughts. “Come out, come out, wherever you are.” The creepy voice bounced around the room.

“I’m tellin’ you man,” Bozer continued to stall, but his voice was getting panicky. “He just… went to the bathroom, he’ll be right back. You can’t expect him to sit in here all day with no bathroom breaks. It’s inhuman!”

“I’ll tell you what’s inhuman Wilt,” Murdoc’s voice got deadly serious. “Dropping a mineshaft on top of two Phoenix agents.” There was a soft beep.

Mac knew that sound. It was a PF47 detonator safety being deactivated.

Mac jumped up and ran in front of the camera. “Sorry to keep you waiting Murdoc,” he gasped, panic making his breath come quickly as though he’d just run a marathon. He held his hands up like he was trying to calm a rabid dog. “Why don’t you just…”

Murdoc smiled and clicked the safety back into place. “Ah Angus, so good to see you. Have you thought about my proposal?”

Mac nodded. “Yeah, of course,” he said, lying his ass off the way Thornton had taught him so many years ago. “Matty’s gone to make the arrangements now. We just need to know your terms. How
and where you want the exchange to go down.” He could feel Riley’s eyes on his back; her stare questioning this dangerous game he was playing.

Mac didn’t care. He needed to save Jack and Nick.

“This all seems far too easy,” Murdoc said. “You wouldn’t be… lying to me, would you Angus?”

Mac shook his head. “Of course not,” he said. “Can’t risk it.”

Matty’s footsteps sounded softly on the carpet behind him. Riley had probably messaged her the moment the call had come in. Mac knew the sound of her tread well, it was determined but somehow soft and sneaky at the same time.

“You’re stalling for time, aren’t you?” Murdoc asked. Then his voice got joyously cruel. “Well, let me tell you that every minute, every second, that you waste trying to delay this, Angus, is one more second that CSI Level Three Nick Stokes is stuck down in that mine. Surrounded by miles of rock pressing down on him. Just think about the havoc that’s going to wreak on him. The psychosis he’s going to suffer. All because you wanted to keep a man from his son.”

Confusion crossed Mac’s face. Psychosis? What was he talking about? And why only mention Nick? Jack was down in that mine too.

Murdock’s face twisted back to pure joy. “Well if it isn’t my lucky day,” he said. “Two secrets in one day! You don’t know about what happened to poor little Nicky in Las Vegas? Well, I’ll leave that secret behind closed doors until you give me my answer!” The last came out in a growl.

Matty spoke up from where she’d crept up beside Mac. “Send us the details for the exchange Murdoc, and we’ll make it happen,” Matty lied through her teeth. If Mac didn’t know her as well as he did, he wouldn’t have been able to spot it.

“I’ll take it that you’re a man of your word Matilda?” Murdoc said.

“I just want my boys back Murdoc,” she said.

“I’ll send you the instructions shortly,” Murdoc said. “But if you’re even one minute over the rendezvous time…” He brought the detonator into view of the camera and flicked off the safety again, that soft beep echoing over the speakers.

Mac’s eyes went wide and he took two steps forward, as though Murdoc was standing in front of him, and he’d be able to stop him.

“Ah ah ah,” Murdoc said, before he flicked the safety closed again. “Follow the instructions and you’ll have them back. And don’t dare jump on that plane Angus. If I call back and you’re not there, you know what happens. And no more bathroom breaks.”

The screen went blank.

Mac wanted to sag back into one of the leather chairs, but there was too much to do. He turned toward Riley. “Can you get me a video call with Erickson? I think I might have figured out a way to get them out of there.”

Riley nodded. “Do you need video? It’s going to take another three or four minutes until the next satellite comes over for video uplink.”

“Video would be best,” he said. “I’ve got some strange knots I need to teach him to tie.”
“Alright, give me three minutes,” she said, typing furiously.

Bozer continued to pace.

Matty stood at Mac’s side. “Risky gamble telling him you’ll comply,” she said. “You should have stalled for more time.”

“There is no more time Matty!” He snapped. Then he closed his eyes and took a deep breath. “I just…” he looked at the ceiling, unable to meet her eye. “When he pulled out that detonator I just… couldn’t think straight. You know?”

“I know Mac,” she said. “It’s ok, cause you’ve got a plan to get our boys home, right?”

He looked down at her. “I think I do.”

“Then don’t let Murdoc get in your head,” she said.

“It’s hard,” he said quietly. “He’s so infuriating. And what was all that about Nick and what happened to him in Las Vegas? I wish he wasn’t so damn convincing.”

“About that… “Matty looked around to make sure Bozer and Riley were still across the room out of earshot of her whispers. “He’s not wrong. I read about it in Nick’s file.”

Mac fell into a chair at that news, so he could be face to face with Matty. When would people ever stop keeping secrets from him? “Read about what?”

“I can’t go into detail now, and I don’t even think I should. It’s Nick’s story to tell,” Matty said apologetically.

“I get that, but if there’s something…” Mac couldn’t form words anymore. Stress, calculations, and engineering schematics were all blended together in his head.

“If I tell you, you can’t let it affect your judgement on this thing, ok?” Matty warned.

Mac just nodded and swallowed hard. If Matty was this nervous about it, it must be bad.

“It happened about five years ago…”

“We’re never gonna get out of here,” Nick said suddenly, jumping up out of Jack’s grip.

Jack reached after him, like he could hold on and make it better. But Nick wandered across to the other wall and started pacing back and forth.

And then the babbling started. “It’s not… I can’t breath, I just can’t breath. Can’t you feel it?” He asked, turning toward Jack as though it were a real question. “The air’s too thin. It’s getting hot, right? Condensation… because there’s no air flow.” His jaw clenched and he was shaking. “I can’t breath, I can’t breath!”

Jack jumped up, sure Nick was going to faint again. Jack tossed a pile of papers from an old, ratty, orange velvet chair straight out of the 70’s and turned to Nick, who had stopped dead, staring at him like he’d just kicked a puppy.
“What?” Jack asked.

“That’s evidence man!” Nick said, pointing at the mess on the floor.

Jack sighed. “Whatever dude, I couldn’t really give a rats ass right now,” he said. “You know what? Watch this.” He grabbed a pile from the desk and held it over his head, ready to toss it at the wall.”

Nick held up his hands, a pleading look on his face.

“Tell you what hoss,” Jack said, “I’ll put this right on back down where I found it, if you come on and sit in this chair here.”

Nick nodded and let out the breath he was holding. “Alright, alright,” Nick said, flopping into the chair, which sent up a little poof of dust.

The dust got Jack thinking: the whole place was full of dust. Their intel said this was the safe house this Frans guy lived in on a regular basis. But everything pointed to the place having been abandoned for years. Jack was starting to think they’d been set up. A good old fashioned wild goose chase.

Nothing he could do about that though, so he turned his attention to Nick.

“Alright dude,” Jack put on his “Sargent Jack voice,” all command. “Head between those knees.”

Nick rolled his eyes at Jack, but did as instructed for a few minutes until his breathing had totally returned to normal. Jack crouched next to him, watching Nick’s back expand as his lungs inflated.

Nick sat up and put his elbows on his knees. “Thanks Jack,” he said, looking at Jack out of the corner of his eyes, like he was ashamed of what he was feeling.

Jack wanted to scream at him to never be ashamed of his feelings, it made him who he was. Instead he put a hand on Nick’s forearm and squeezed a little. “You got it. That’s what I’m here for.”

“I thought you were here to be the badass ex-Delta with a gun,” Nick smiled.

Cracking jokes: good sign.

“Well, I’m a man’a many talents Nicky boy,” Jack smiled.

Then suddenly that fear returned to Nick’s eyes; panicky, like a wild animal cornered. His big brown eyes searched back and forth across the far corner of the room as though he could see something Jack couldn’t. A shiver went across Nick’s whole body like a cold gust of air had crossed his path.

“Can’t you feel it?” Nick asked, and then his eyes slowly traveled to the ceiling and stayed there.

“Feel what Nick?” Jack asked, tightening the grip on Nick’s arm.

“It’s like I hear it creaking,” Nick said softly, “and the little… the sound of little pebbles coming loose, just a few at first before everything comes crashing down and-”

Jack moved between Nick’s knees, grabbed his face and turned it toward him, away from the ceiling.

Jack shook his head. “No I don’t Nick,” he said. “I don’t hear anything like that. You know what I hear?”

Nick’s eyes were welling up and he was shaking again.
“I hear your breathing,” Jack said, moving one of his hands to Nick’s chest. “In and out, deep and even. And your voice… I could listen to you talk all day. And I hear my heart beatin’, cause whenever I’m in the same room as you it just goes crazy all the time.” He took one of Nick’s hands and moved it to his chest.

Nick’s face broke suddenly into a grimace that wanted to hold back the emotions, but they burst forth anyway. Tears flooded down his face. “God Jack, I’m sorry…”

“None’a that now,” Jack said. “You got nothin’ to be sorry for.”

“I’m sorry I’m broken,” Nick sobbed. “I didn’t want you to know I was like this.” He gasped in a wet breath.

Jack’s heart felt like it was shattering, but he held his own emotions in check so he could be Nick’s anchor.

“You listen here Nicholas Parker Stokes,” Jack said firmly. “There ain’t nothin’ broken about you. You are absolutely perfect y’hear? And I wouldn’t have you any other way.”

Nick grabbed at Jack, as though holding him was a life or death situation, and pulled him into a hug. Jack pressed between Nick’s thighs, circling his waist. Nick’s arms wrapped around Jack’s shoulders, hands fisting in the t-shirt that stuck out of his tac vest at either shoulder.

Come on Mac, Jack chanted in his head while he rubbed what he hoped were comforting circles on Nick’s back. Come on baby, get us the hell outta here.

A pinging sound echoed across the elevator chamber just beyond the safe house door, followed by the distinct sound of a rock hitting the ground.

Mac sat back in one of the leather chairs of the war room, feeling like he hadn’t relaxed a muscle in his body in days. He’d just finished walking Erickson through the building of the pulley system he’d devised with what they had on site. Video feed through the entire build let Mac keep a close eye and make sure nothing was out of place. And then the satellite had gone over again, and now they were left with audio only.

They’d sent down a note attached to a rock with a little handmade parachute to let Jack and Nick know the plan. The parachute was intended to slow the descent of the rock enough that if Jack and Nick were standing in the shaft when it hit bottom, it wouldn’t do anyone any serious damage. Without the parachute and gravity taking over, it could have killed one of them.

Matty leaned against the chair beside Mac and used her remote to change the audio feed to one-way only. They heard Erickson, but he couldn’t hear them.

“They’ve got this Mac,” Matty reassured. “Erickson will get the job done.”

“But what if-”

“No what if’s Mac,” she commanded. “Erickson is ex-FSK. If there’s anyone I’d trust with my life outside of Jack Dalton, it would be Erickson.”

Mac nodded. “How much time until the meet with Murdoc?” He asked, feet shuffling, knees
bouncing nervously.

They’d sent a decoy truck, with no Cassian inside, to the meet with Murdoc. They hoped it would buy them some extra time.

“Everything’s under control, taken care of,” Matty said. “There’s nothing else we can do but wait Mac.”

Mac ran his hands through his hair, pulling at it a little. He hated waiting while someone else did the dirty work. He wished, more than anything, that Matty had sent him out to the mine with Nick and Jack. He would have had the pulley built much sooner than Erickson had done it, and he’d have Nick and Jack back in his arms already. He’d be laughing with his boys at 35,000 feet instead of cooped up in the war room worrying.

A sudden realization hit Mac and he looked around the room. Matty at his side, Riley typing away on her rig, Bozer listening intently to Erickson, hands twined together. All of them had found out his secret, Nick's secret, and none of them had said a word. No doubt it was on all of their minds, and nobody had said a thing to him. Instead they’d been intent on saving the two men he loved.

“I’m sorry I didn’t tell you,” he said to everyone at once, eyes fixed on the floor. “We… decided together… it’s complicated.”

He finally summoned the courage to look up and met Matty’s eyes first. She was smiling wide at him.

“I’m the director of a spy organization Mac,” she said kindly. “I had you guys made the moment Jack made that call from Vegas to get Nick a job here.”

Mac smiled, but then looked over to Bozer and Riley. Riley’s smile was full of sympathy and kindness. Bozer looked confused.

“But isn’t it weird though?” Bozer asked.

Mac immediately felt defensive. If he’d been a wolf his hackles would have gone up. “See… this is why we didn’t want to say anything.” He moved forward to the edge of his seat. He felt like he wanted to bolt. His best friend was weirded out by his current living situation, Mac wasn’t sure what to do. “Listen, we get it, it’s not… conventional. That’s why I wanted you guys to get to know Nick first. I thought maybe if you warmed up to him you’d—”

“That’s not what I mean,” Bozer shook his head. “I mean, like, isn’t it weird because they kinda look alike, don’t they?”

“Who?” Mac asked, confused and completely thrown off.

“Nick and Jack man!” Bozer said as though it was super obvious.

Mac frowned and shook his head.

“I don’t see it,” Riley said, a look on her face like she was trying to summon up pictures of Jack and Nick in her head side by side. “And I definitely hope they don’t, cause I always thought Nick was kinda cute.”

“Really?” Bozer asked.

“Well not anymore,” she said, curling her lip up in disgust. “Not now that you’ve given me that
comparison to think about. And now that I know he’s taken.” She shot Mac a wink on her last comment.

Bozer looked to Matty like he was hoping for backup.

“I don’t see it,” Matty said diplomatically.

“Ok, that’s it, I’m pulling up their staff photos and we’re gonna take a look,” Bozer said, rushing to the war room screen, “cause I ain’t crazy. And I just think that it would be weird.”

“Can we not talk about this?” Riley asked. “And just be happy for Mac instead?”

Mac felt a blush rise to his cheeks. “You guys are… really ok with this?”

Matty cocked her head to the side and smiled. “Does it make you happy Mac?”

Mac smiled. “It really does.”

“Then of course we’re ok with it,” she said.

The sound of that rock tumbling down the mineshaft and hitting the bottom sent Nick’s whole body into overdrive.

Fight or flight.

Sink or swim.

The elevator shaft was collapsing. That was the only reason for a falling rock.

His heart sped up until he actually thought it might burst.

He was having a heart attack.

Sure he was feeling pain down his left arm he opened his mouth to speak but instead it was nothing.

No air.

The room was spinning around him and he couldn’t-

Jack left him.

The body heat was gone away, Jack’s soft t-shirt ripped from his fingers.

His lungs weren’t drawing air.

His skin felt tight and full of bugs - needed to get it out, that feeling.

Instead he resisted and closed his eyes, trying for those deep breaths that they’d taught him years ago in therapy after…

Dirt leaking in-

Ants everywhere-
Warm wet box under the earth-
Biting his skin all over. Little legs crawling and then: sting; sharp bites everywhere, every piece of skin. Nothing was sacred.
The smell of earth and gunpowder-
No air-
Couldn’t breath-
Jack’s hand on his arm.
Nick’s eyes opened suddenly, and he’d forgotten they were closed.
Garbled words he couldn’t hear. It sounded like another language. Didn’t Jack know another language? French? Dutch? Both?
“Nick,” Jack’s voice sounded so good around his name. And his name was the same in any language. But the words that came after were foreign.
Jack held up a rock, and Nick remembered why the world was spinning.
The walls around was shaking-
The world tilted-
The mine was collapsing-
His body struggled to breathe, but how could it breathe when there was no air?
Jack’s firm hand between his shoulder blades-
Don’t touch me! Just a thought? Or screamed aloud?
Jack pushed him forward again, hard, no care for what Nick wanted.
Head between his knees and still his gasps came up empty.
His stomach dropped out.
The world faded.
Asphyxiation they would say; the rock crushed him and he couldn’t breathe.
Black took over.
Nick let go.

Mac twisted a paperclip in his fingers, but he wasn’t making a shape, he was just nervous.
The clock was ticking. The meeting with Murdoc was scheduled for nineteen minutes.
Erickson called out over comms, coordinating his men as they pulled up the line on the pulley system. “Dra! Dra! Dra!” The Norwegian for “pull” chanted over and over again, echoing around the walls of the war room.

Mac wished they had video. He pressed his hands together forgetting he was holding the paperclip, and it bit into his palm before he dropped it, forgotten to the floor.

A hand squeezed his shoulder and he looked up to find Bozer smiling down at him. “It’s all gonna work out Mac, I can feel it,” he said.

Matty leaned forward and knocked on the wooden table.

The chanting stopped, and there was a scrabbling sound over comms; the shifting of dirt under boots, the clink of the makeshift pulley, voices all scrambling together.

“What’s going on?” Mac demanded, trying not to sound panicked.

Erickson’s voice came back immediately. “Stokes is secure,” he said, “repeat: Stokes is secure. Over.”

Mac let out a shaky breath.

“Agent Stokes?” Erickson’s voice. “Agent Stokes, are you alright?”

No answer from Nick.

“Hustle Erickson!” Matty commanded. “Less than twelve minutes to try and get Dalton outta that hole!”

“No problem director.”

“I need to-” Mac’s voice stopped, and he grabbed at Matty’s sleeve. “I need to talk to Nick. Right now.”

“It has to wait Mac,” Matty said, all boss. “Jack’s number one priority right now.”

“Of course,” Mac said, twisting his fingers together nervously. He just wanted to make sure Nick was all right. He should still be on comms, but he hadn’t said a word, and after what Matty had told him about what had happened to Nick before… Mac wished more than anything in the world that he was there.

The chanting started again, all the men synced together in one effort to pull Jack up from the depths of the earth.

“Dra! Dra! Dra!” It started to lull Mac, to ease the worry in his chest, if only for a few minutes.

There was a staticky hiss for a second before: “You all better not’a been worried about little ole me,” Jack’s voice came over comms. That welcome deep voice filled the war room with warmth.

“Good to hear your voice Dalton,” Matty said, all sarcasm in her voice, but a smile on her face.

The chanting continued as the team continued to pull on the line tethered to Jack. His comms would have gone live about halfway up the shaft, so they still had about halfway to go.

“You do sound worried Matty,” Jack replied. “That ain’t good for your health, you know.”
“You’re not good for my health Jack,” Matty replied.

“I’m just sayin’, I’ve gotten outta way worse scrapes than this,” Jack said. “This wasn’t nothin’. Mac knows. Right Mac? You there dude?”

Mac wanted to cry he was so happy, but they weren’t out of it yet, and the warring emotions of worry and happiness pressed in on him making it hard to talk. “Yeah Jack,” he choked out. “I’m here. Glad you’re safe man.”

“Oh come on now, you sound worried too!” Jack only sounded halfway mad. “Nobody’s got any faith in me anymore.”

“For the record,” Riley spoke up from the back of the room where she was still typing away on her rig, “I definitely thought you’d make it out. You’re way too stubborn for Murdoc to take down.”

“Murdoc?” Jack asked. “Really? This whole thing was all because’a that wacko?”

“You’ll get all the details in debrief Jack,” Matty said, “for now, just get your ass back on that jet and come home.”

“Aye aye Director Webber,” Jack said.

The familiar scrabbling and jangling of the pulley crackled over comms.

“Dalton is secure,” Erickson said. “Repeat: Dalton is secure. Over.”

“Dalton, Erickson,” Matty addressed the leaders of the group, “get those men the hell outta there. No telling what that detonation could do to the surrounding area. Get clear as quickly as you can.”

“Yes ma’am,” Erickson said.

More voices came and went over comms, Mac didn’t recognize them all, but he listened intently:

“Agent Dalton, it’s Stokes-”

“Where is he?” Jack’s voice, calm, commanding.

“Over here sir.”

“We can’t get him to move, he won’t listen to anyone.”

Jack’s voice again. “Nick, come on man, we gotta haul some serious ass outta here. You gotta stay with me man. Look up. Big, ugly, cloudy, North Dakota sky right? We’re back up top.”

Nothing from Nick.

“We need to move Agent Dalton,” Erickson’s voice. The cold tone of a soldier, trying to get the job done.

“Alright Nick, no choice man, we gotta roll.” Jack, followed by a grunted sound.

Erickson again. “Heller! Help Dalton get Stokes in here.”

Mac opened his mouth to say something, anything that he could to help comfort Nick. But before he could say anything Matty shot him a look and shook her head.
In whispered tones she spoke. “Mac, if you can’t let these men do what they have to do, I need you to leave.” A little apology filled her eyes. “I know it’s hard. But you need to let them do their jobs. You know what could happen if-”

Riley spoke up. “Murdoc’s calling.”

Matty stood a little taller and walked toward the war room screens. “Mute the tac team line and bring it up.”

Murdoc’s face swam into view, Mac’s jaw clenched at the sight.

“Murdoc. You’re early,” Matty said.

“Well, see, I just couldn’t wait,” Murdoc said. He was grinning.

Mac wanted to punch him in his stupid happy face.

“You didn’t think I was stupid enough to base all of my threats on just our phone conversations did you?” Murdoc asked. “Of course I have the mine on video feed. And I just had to call and congratulate you on getting your precious men free Angus. I’m just surprised you were able to talk Erickson through the building of that stupid contraption. I honestly pegged his intelligence lower than Jack’s.”

Mac stood up and walked toward the screen. He just needed to keep Murdoc talking. Keep him from blowing the mine while the tac team was still sitting right on top of it. Mac opened his mouth to use all of the interrogation tactics that he’d been taught to keep Murdoc talking for as long as he could, give the team time to evacuate.

Instead, Murdoc pulled out the detonator, flipped the safety off and flicked the detonator switch. The sound it made was small: just a little click as the toggle switch move from one side to the other, completing the circuit. Such a small sound for something so dangerous.

Mac turned to Riley, who had put her headphones on so she could listen to the tac team and Murdoc at the same time.

Mac felt frantic, he didn’t know what to say, what to do. He moved to Riley’s side, still faced away from the monitor, afraid of the look of triumph on Murdoc’s face.

Riley looked up at him, and whispered so Murdoc wouldn’t catch it. “There’s nothing Mac, they’ve left site and they’re driving south. Nobody’s reported an explosion, everything’s fine.”

“Now you didn’t really think I’d had a whole mine rigged with explosives, did you Angus?” Murdoc asked.

“Yeah, except everyone’s still alive Murdoc,” Mac countered.

“You really think I would have had the heart to kill old Jacky boy?” Murdoc asked. “You don’t know me half as well as you like to think. You guys are just way too much fun to take off the board in the middle of the game.”
“It’s not a game!” Mac said, angry.

“Then you’re doing it wrong,” Murdoc said, serious, until his features changed suddenly back to his grin. “Now, I have a proposal for you. Since I seem to be just awful at this whole arch-nemesis thing, I was thinking: do you have room in your stable for one more? I mean, I do seem to be your type: tall, dark and handsome.”

“Cut him off,” Matty commanded.

Riley cut the feed and the screen went black.

They kept the windows open for him on the drive to the airstrip, and the cool, fresh air washing through the back of the hummer began the long, tedious job of clearing the fog from Nick’s brain.

The day was getting dark, and Nick thought he should probably want to sleep, he felt so tired. But his brain was buzzing, still high on adrenaline from being underground. He wanted to speak, talk to Jack, or even say something to Mac over comms. But comms weren’t private, and all of the things he wanted to say needed to be kept, their secret needed to be kept.

Nick’s brain wasn’t ready for conversation anyway, it was still trying to sort out the tangled mess it had made in his head; thoughts and fears and memories overlapping into an awful mess that he was still wading through.

They couldn’t sit right next to each other, because there was a console between them in the backseat of the military hummer, but Jack’s arm reached over that console and held lightly onto Nick’s arm. That touch said: I’m here, I’ve got you. And Nick was grateful for that little bit of silent communication.

The landing strip was deserted except for their little private jet, warm light flooding out of the open door into the growing darkness.

“You boys go on ahead,” Jack instructed the tac team when they’d all filed out onto the hard asphalt.

Jack put his hands on Nick’s shoulders, holding him steady; intimate, but not too intimate for friends. Jack glanced to the little plane. “You gonna be ok?”

The implication was clear: are you going to be alright closed up in a small private jet for several hours?

Nick nodded.

Jack pulled out his comm piece and turned it off before tucking it into a pocket.

Nick reached up to his own ear and realized he didn’t know where his earpiece had ended up. Maybe Jack had taken it?

“Man,” Jack said, dead serious and as worried as Nick had ever seen him. “I need you to talk to me. I gotta make sure that when we’re soarin’ at 30,000 feet in a tin can you’re not gonna lose it on me.”

Nick cleared his throat, and when he spoke it felt like he hadn’t spoken in years. “I’m good Jack, I promise,” he said. “It’s not small spaces. It’s…”
“Bein’ underground, right?” Jack asked.

Nick looked down, feeling ashamed that it affected him so badly. But then he looked up and met Jack’s eyes and there was no frustration there, only caring and concern. “Yup,” Nick said, “I’ll be good. I promise. I’m just worn out man.”

“I feel that,” Jack said. “Let’s go home.” He leaned in almost like he was going to kiss Nick, but then he looked back at the plane, concern for being watched no doubt, and pulled back.

“Let’s go home,” Nick sighed out, thinking of the lofty 20 foot ceiling of their bedroom, and Mac's warm body next to him.

They joined the tac team on the small jet. Jack and Nick shared the couch, but sat far enough from each other that they just seemed like friends, bros. Nick hated it. It wasn’t that he was all about cuddling and cute stuff like that, but he wanted that warm comforting body sitting next to him, pressing into his side. That was all. Nothing fancy.

Jack grabbed the First Aid kit and patched up the scratch on Nick’s arm. Nick hissed at the disinfectant, but before long there was a bandage wrapped around it and the sting faded.

Once they were in the air Jack’s cell rang. “Jeeze,” he said, fishing it out of his pocket, “I damn near forgot I had this thing. Not used to coming home with a working one.”

Jack hit accept on a video call from Mac.

“Hey baby, how’s it shakin’?” Jack asked when Mac’s face lit up the screen.

Nick felt a sudden surge of awful jealousy. Jack and Mac got to share open affection around the team and the crew. Why couldn’t he have that?

Mac sighed, but he smiled wide. “Come on Jack, you’re still on mission, we talked about the pet names and stuff while we’re working.”

“You know what baby darlin’ sugar,” Jack joked, “it’s been a long ass day and I’m just happy to see your smilin’ face, so what say you give ole Jack a break on this one?”

“It’s a deal,” Mac said. Only a beat before he added: “Where’s Nick?”

“Right here Mac,” Nick said.

Jack turned the phone.

Mac visibly relaxed, his shoulders lost their tense shrugged up look, and his jaw stopped clenching. “Are you alright? Matty told me…”

“Jack,” Matty’s “Director Webber voice” cut Mac off, the camera jerkily cutting to her face as though she’d pulled the phone in her direction. “Can you take this call somewhere more… private?”

“Yeah, yeah, a’course Matty,” Jack said. He grabbed Nick’s forearm and pulled him toward the back of the plane.

The sleeping quarters were empty, the rest of the team choosing to sit up for the four hour flight, and just fall asleep in the comfortable leather chairs.

Jack closed the door between the two compartments, and sat down on one of the beds, motioning for Nick to join him.
Matty was on the call, so Nick sat at “bro distance” again, when all he wanted was to reach out to Jack. Maybe he did want a little bit of cuddling and cute stuff, but who could blame him? He’d been through a lot.

“Are you guys alone?” Mac asked, his face filling up the screen again.

“Yuppers,” Jack said.

Mac sighed. “Matty told me what happened to you Nick,” he said. “I can’t imagine… are you ok?”

Jack tried to hide the hurt on his face as he turned the phone back to Nick, but he didn’t do it well. Nick could see it all laid bare: how could everyone else know? People who hadn’t been there to go through it with him? But not Jack.

“I’m better,” Nick admitted, not ready to admit that he was ok. If he was ok, he’d be able to discuss it with Jack, tell Jack everything. Even the thought made Nick’s chest feel like it was closing up.

Before Mac could say anything else, Nick spoke: “Matty?”

“I’m here,” she replied, stealing the phone back from Mac again.

He looked at Jack as he spoke, a steady gaze. “Do you have a digital copy of my file?” He spoke to Matty, but his eyes were still for Jack.

“Of course,” she said.

“Can you send Jack the… applicable section?” He asked.

“Nick…” she said his name warily. “I don’t know if that’s-”

“Do you need my written permission or something?” He asked, looking back at the screen.

“If you’re sure,” she said as though she really wanted him to think it through. But he had thought it through. “I can send it through.”

“I’m sure,” he said, voice steady and calm.

She handed the phone back to Mac, whose face filled up the screen, those bright blue eyes reminding Nick of the wide open skyline of LA on a bright sunny day. Not that he could say any of that. Not with Matty listening.

“Alright Jack, you should have it soon,” Matty said.

Jack’s phone pinged quietly in the background of the call, a notification popping down from the top of the screen.

“I’m gonna give you guys some time,” Matty said.

Nick heard the door close behind her.

“Hey Mac, I’m just gonna look this over, alright?” Jack said. “I’ll keep you on the line, but-”

“Of course Jack,” Mac said. “I’m so glad you guys are alright.”

“Thanks to you baby,” Jack said before he paused the video-part of the call and moved over to his secure message centre. He downloaded the file in a blink.
“Whoever wrote this is way more thorough than me at writing reports,” Jack said. “We best settle in for a long one.” He stretched out on the bed and pulled Nick down with him.

Nick was so grateful for the contact. The bed was small, but he curled up along Jack’s side and put an arm over his chest, and a leg over Jack’s. Jack put one arm around Nick and used the other to scroll through the report; the report that told everything, all the details, about the 24 hour period in which Nick had been kidnapped and buried in the ground in a plexiglass coffin that had filled with fire ants and stale air.

Every time Jack came to something he didn’t like, Nick could tell, because the soft circles Jack drew with his thumb on Nick’s shoulder would slow or stop, his grip tightening.

“What the hell?” Jack asked fairly early on in the report.

“Jack,” Mac hadn’t said anything, but his voice came in clear and Nick had almost forgotten he was on the line. “Don’t-”

“I’m gonna kill someone,” Jack cut Mac off, his voice cold and hard, all soldier. He pulled Nick closer, tighter against his body.

“Ain’t nobody left,” Nick said solemnly.

Mac ignored Jack, his voice hoarse with emotion as he talked candidly. “I wish you guys were home already,” he said. “I should have been there.”

“You were Mac,” Nick said softly. “You got us out.”

“It never would have happened if I was there in the first place,” Mac said.

“Don’t you talk like that Mac,” Jack cut in. He flipped the screen from the report back to Mac’s screen.

Mac was still holding the phone up, but his head was bowed, his fingers running through his hair nervously.

“You know the business we’re in,” Jack continued, “things’ll happen and it’s never your fault. Look at me.”

Mac looked up, a little startled to see the video back on.

“It ain’t your fault Mac,” Jack said again.

Mac smiled a little and nodded.

Jack tilted the screen so Mac could see them wrapped up together on the bed, and Nick smiled at Mac across the miles. Man, technology was insane. Talking to Mac as though they were in the same room when they were actually soaring above the clouds. It still didn’t satisfy though, because Nick just wanted to hug Mac, share warmth with him so they could both comfort each other.

“Now,” Jack said, “me and my boy Nicky here got a few things to talk about. So, if it’s ok with you we’re gonna sign off and see you when we get home.”

Mac’s eyes went sad, his smile fading a little. He coughed and brushed at his shirt as though he was brushing away the emotion he’d been sharing, and the mask he wore for everyone else fell into place; the mask he had that kept the emotion inside, let him be everyone else’s rock.
“Of course, of course,” Mac said, clearing his throat to lose the hoarseness. “I’ll be there to meet you when you land.”

“Can’t wait,” Jack said.

“See you soon,” Nick added.

They dropped the call and Jack threw his phone across the room. It smashed against the wall of the plane.

It startled Nick and he sat up in bed. “What the hell?”

“Guess I still ain’t goin’ home with a working one this time,” Jack smiled, but it was tainted. He sat up and grabbed Nick’s face in his hands. Before Nick could say anything Jack pulled him into a kiss. It was soft and gentle, lips fumbling, Jack’s scruff rubbing comfortably through the messy mixing of breath and tongues.

Jack pulled back. “I’m so sorry you had to go through that,” he said, putting his forehead to Nick’s.

“Me too,” Nick laughed, but it came out hollow, he rested his hands on Jack’s waist, suddenly so tired.

“Come here,” Jack said, pulling at Nick’s shoulders.

“I can’t get much closer than where I am now,” Nick said.

“You bet your ass you can,” Jack said. He laid back down and pulled Nick with him, until Nick was all but on top of him.

Jack held him close, both arms wrapped tightly around him. Nick’s brain finally stopped running in circles, and Jack’s warmth and soft breathing lulled him to sleep.

A knock interrupted Jack’s sleep.

“Agent Dalton,” Erickson’s voice carried through the door. “We’ve landed.”

Jack must have been some kind of exhausted to sleep through the landing. Normally that wasn’t possible, Jack was so alert about his surroundings. But in Nick’s arms, he just felt safe.

Nick was waking up slowly, rubbing his face into Jack’s shoulder the way someone did when they didn’t want to wake up.

“Be right there!” Jack called back, to avoid Erickson opening the door and finding them tangled together and sharing a bed.

“Alright Nicky,” Jack said softly, planting a kiss on Nick’s forehead, “let’s go home. Mac’ll be waitin’ for us.”

Nick suddenly perked up. “Right. Home,” he said. It came out like he wanted to say Mac but picked the wrong word. Maybe it was the right word after all.

Nick sat up and ran his hands through his hair to get rid of any bedhead. It didn’t work. Jack grinned.
They untangled their legs, Jack grabbed their bags, and they made their way into the main cabin.

The plane was empty, the rest of the team probably long gone already. It had been a really long day, Jack couldn’t blame them.

The moment Jack stuck his head out of the plane and into the cool California night he felt grounded. The smell, the dry air, everything screamed at him that he’d found his place and the world was right again.

He looked down at the asphalt and hadn’t seen a better sight in as long as he could remember. The GTO was parked at the edge of the runway, and standing next to it was Riley and Mac. Mac looked nervous, arms crossed, jaw clenched tight.

The moment Mac saw Jack at the top of the stairs he started to jog to the plane. Riley walked, cool, calm and collected with that slow badass strut of hers that Jack liked to think she’d taken from him.

Jack bounded down the small set of stairs and dropped the bags on the ground, Nick right on his heels.

Mac reached them, wrapped his arms around their necks and pulled them both into a tight hug, his face squished between theirs. Jack and Nick closed their arms around him and enveloped him.

Jack turned into Mac and nuzzled into the skin of his neck just behind his ear. Then he breathed deep, taking Mac into his lungs. Even after a long day sitting in the war room he smelled so good it almost hurt, and Jack’s grip tightened, emotion threatening him.

Every time he was gone it felt like this: like getting a limb back.

Mac’s grip tightened around him, almost too tight.

“Listen baby,” Jack squeaked out through laboured breaths. “I love ya and all that but you’re chokin’ me here.”

Mac didn’t jump back, instead he loosened his grip and pulled back slowly.

And then Mac did something Jack definitely hadn’t expected, not with Riley standing a few feet away; Mac let go of Jack, grabbed Nick’s face and pulled him into a kiss; a really intense, mouths open, tongues making dirty noises kinda kiss; a “coming home from the war” kinda kiss. Jack was surprised Mac didn’t turn Nick into a dip.

Jack tried not to let his jaw hit the ground and turned to Riley, his brain working overtime to try and figure out exactly how he could excuse that kind of behaviour between friends.

“It’s cool Jack,” Riley said, leaning against the railing of the stairs. “We all know now.”

“Know that…” Jack motioned to the two idiots in love making out next to them.

“That you and Mac and Nick are all together,” she said. “Like, together together. Yeah, we’re all on the same page.”

Jack relaxed a little, and watched as Mac draped his arms around Nick’s shoulders to pull him in closer, and Nick wrapped his arms around Mac’s waist.

Riley raised her eyebrows. “Wow, they’re really-”

Jack frowned and finished her thought. “Goin’ at it. Yeah.” He cleared his throat. It didn’t draw
anyone’s attention. “Alright boys, I think it’s about time we skedaddle.” He laid a hand on each of their arms and pushed gently to get them to part.

When they finally came unglued, their faces were red from lack of oxygen, and maybe a little embarrassment. But damn if the colour didn’t look good on both of them.

“Ok boys, Riley’s taxi service is leaving immediately,” she said grabbing one of the go-bags and heading for the GTO.

Jack grabbed the other bag and followed, throwing an arm around Mac and kissing his temple softly before they reached the car.

Jack sat in the front with Riley, Nick and Mac in the back ignoring their seatbelts in favour of sitting close, Mac with his arm protectively around Nick’s bulky shoulders.

The car was quiet, everyone exhausted from the long day. Jack let Riley take the wheel since he didn’t trust his own eyesight to be able to get them home in one piece. And he’d taught Riley her pursuit driving when she’d started at Phoenix, so he knew she could handle a regular old drive home late at night.

Jack watched familiar city scapes pass him by out the window of his favourite car, his favourite girl behind the wheel, and the two loves of his life in the back seat, headed back to the house he shared with both of them. His heart was so full it hurt.

“Well that’s the cutest shit I’ve ever seen,” Riley said quietly.

Jack turned to look at her, not sure what she was referencing. She hooked a thumb toward the backseat and he turned to see Mac and Nick leaned against each other, both fully asleep. Mac was even starting to snore a little. Nick was nestled in under Mac’s chin.

“Ain’t it just,” Jack said to Riley, eyes only for his boys.

“How come you never told me Jack?” She asked suddenly, her voice still quiet to keep their conversation private. There was hurt wrapped up tight in those words.

When he looked over she wore the hurt plain on her face while she kept her eyes on the road.

Jack sighed. “It wasn’t really a one-man decision Riles,” he said. “We talked about it and decided it would be best-”

“You mean easiest,” she challenged.

Jack didn’t have any more fight left in him. “Maybe you’re right… Easiest on everyone if you all got to know Nick before we pulled the trigger on this whole thing.”

“Jack…” Riley continued to stare at the road, but swallowed heavily. “You know I love you no matter what, right?”

Jack couldn’t even reply he felt so choked up.

“I would have understood,” she said. “Even before I knew him.” A pause. “Sure, it’s a little weird,” she admitted. “But it’s more weird that you let me get a crush on the guy before you told me you were dating him.”

The tension broke perfectly, and Jack barked a laugh. “Well he is pretty damn good lookin’.”
“Ok, ok,” Riley held out a hand for dramatic purposes. “Calm down already. Enough of that.” And then she tacked on: “I just wish you would have told me.”

“I’m sorry Riles,” he said. “I would’a if I could’a.”

“I know,” she smiled and turned her attention back to the road just in time to pull into the driveway.

“Home sweet home,” she announced loudly.

The boys in the backseat didn’t even stir. Jack and Riley had to crawl into the backseat and shake them both awake, before leading them like zombies into the house.

“I got it from here,” Jack said, not wanting to traumatize her further with pulling off boots and seeing them all into bed.

“I’ll bring the GTO back tomorrow,” she promised.

Something hung between them, and before Jack could figure out exactly what he needed to say to make it better, she pulled him into a big hug.

“I’ll always love you Jack,” she said, and before he could even respond she had turned and gotten back into the car.

Jack helped his boys undress, summoning the last of the strength he had, something he’d learned as a Delta. Sometimes there was a way to push beyond tiredness and just get things done. So he undid Mac’s belt, and pulled Nick’s shirt off over his head, and untied Nick’s boots, and pulled off Mac’s socks. He shuffled them both into bed, and then stripped his own clothes away before crawling in to join them.

With Nick between them, in their bed, all of their friends now knowing and understanding their relationship, Jack let go and drifted into one of the deepest sleeps he’d ever known.

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