Two Paperclips and a Stick of Gum

by TheGirlWhoRemembers

Summary

Unrelated one-shots written for prompts/requests.

Latest update:

BFFs, for Harceus Mjalga.

“Fun like the water-balloon cannon, fun like the time you made lightning in the Gym or fun like last week when we spent two hours chasing Archimedes ‘round the neighbourhood?”

14-year-old Bozer’s BFF has a surprise for him.
Or, Mac expresses his love through DIY.

Notes

This is set in the *Paperclip Charms* AU, a little over six months after the end of that story.

See the end of the work for more notes.
The Grey Goose Chase

Chapter Summary

For Dinah. Mac is captured by bad guys who attempt to neutralize him with vodka. Even the brightest of minds can be addled by enough ethanol, after all. Being Mac, he manages to escape. It's what happens afterwards that leads to a big mess for Thornton to clean up. Or, drunk Mac on the loose.

NOVEMBER 2018
WAREHOUSE
BOSTON

Mac cursed inwardly as he slipped into the warehouse full of printers and computers and other equipment for creating counterfeit documents, having picked the lock.

They were attempting to take down a syndicate that was preparing falsified documents for over half a dozen terrorist organizations.

He’d evidently just located their base of operations.

Thankfully, it was empty, as Jack and Riley had lured the syndicate members away by posing as potential buyers. It’d been a fairly extended mission; he, Jack and Riley had been in Boston for almost two weeks, along with Bozer and Beth, who were currently at a local FBI office (the FBI was back-up on this one), investigating and establishing cover identities for Jack and Riley.

Suddenly, he heard Jack’s voice in his earpiece.

‘They haven’t showed, Mac, we’ve been made, get out of there-‘

That was the last thing he heard before a syringe was jabbed into his neck.

When Mac came to, he was cuffed to a chair with an IV coming out of his arm, feeding a clear liquid directly into his bloodstream.

He blinked blearily, feeling rather light-headed. Also strangely warm, considering that it was late fall and he was in Boston and was only wearing his customary leather jacket and these particular bad guys hadn’t invested in heating for their base of operations.

Chief Bad Guy, as Jack had taken to calling him (the guy’s actual name was Thomas or Timothy or something like that- for some reason, it was eluding him), smirked at the blonde agent.

‘Well, well, what have we here, Mr MacGyver?’ The older man took a step closer to him, leaning down to Mac’s level. ‘You know, I thought you’d be harder to catch, you know. Your reputation
precedes you.’

Mac smirked back.

‘Catching me isn’t the hardest part. It’s holding me.’

Chief Bad Guy (he really couldn’t remember the guy’s name, though he was sure he’d corrected Jack just that very morning) laughed darkly.

‘Oh, we’ll see about that, Mr MacGyver.’ He gestured to the IV. ‘Even the brightest of minds can be addled with enough vodka.’

*Vodka. Really. It had to be vodka.*

*Remember what happened last time I had too much vodka?*

*For the record, last time wasn’t exactly a party, but it was definitely more fun than this time.*

Mac just smirked at Chief Bad Guy again.

‘I once worked out how to escape a hospital bed in a locked room while injured and under vigilant guard using Jell-O. I’ll get out of this, and even if I don’t, my team’s got my back. They’ll get you.’ Mac’s smirk widened and he leaned back somewhat, looking up at Chief Bad Guy. ‘And they’ll be mad. And you don’t want to see them mad.’ He gave a wry smile. ‘You won’t be taken in gently, in fact, you’ll probably get thrown around a bit, and your whole business and all your assets will be wiped out with just a few keystrokes. And a character based clearly on you will die a horrible on-screen death, and you’ll get lectured on the harm that excess alcohol consumption causes the liver. And that’s before my boss gets to you.’

Chief Bad Guy (it was really getting on his nerves that he couldn’t remember the guy’s name, but he wasn’t going to let it show) gave a snort of laughter, taking into account the red flush that was creeping up Mac’s cheeks as the alcohol worked his way through his bloodstream and his metabolism.

‘It’ll be most amusing to watch you fail, Mr MacGyver.’

Mac just glared at him.

‘It’ll be fun to prove you wrong, Chief Bad Guy!’

The older man just laughed, and Mac realized his mistake. He cursed inwardly as Chief Bad Guy (what was the guy’s name?) left the room and locked the door behind him.

Mac looked around, trying to focus. He had to escape.

They’d taken his Swiss Army knife, and the paperclips he kept in his pockets, and even the two bobby pins he’d stolen out of Beth’s hair.

His gaze fell on the IV line coming out of his arm. More specifically, the needle coming out of his arm.

*Now, if I can get out of these cuffs, I know that I can get out of this room; I can use the cuffs to pick the lock if nothing else…*

Mac threw the improvised Molotov cocktail he’d made out of the (half-empty) bag of vodka in
front of the bad guys’ getaway car.

He was a bit shaky and his aim was off, so instead of striking right in front of it, he was a few feet off, but the explosion was still enough to throw off the driver and get him to drive the car into the brick wall of the warehouse.

Mac ran as best as he could (the world was looking a little funny and gravity seemed a lot more disordered than usual) over to the car. The bad guys, including Chief Bad Guy, he noted with satisfaction, all seemed very unconscious and were trapped by the airbags that had deployed.

He grinned and, pulling out his Swiss Army knife, which he’d recovered along with his paperclips and bobby pins, popped open the trunk of the car.

He examined the contents.

*Counterfeiting equipment, counterfeit stuff…Groceries.*

*Well, I guess even bad guys have to eat.*

He pulled out a potato and shoved it into the car exhaust pipe and seized a roll of cling-film.

His grin grew wider.

*I have always wanted to try this.*

*It’s going to be fun!*

Mac stood and looked over his handiwork.

The bad guys wouldn’t be going anywhere anytime soon.

He looked around again.

*Actually, I think I recognize this place.*

*I don’t think it’s all too far from that auto parts shop that my engineering buddies and I went to all the time back in college, trying to get parts for our solar cars…*

*Which means that that really amazing burger place is just a few blocks’ away.*

*I’ll go pick some up for Jack and Bozer and Riley and Beth. Since they’re a great team and incredible friends and girlfriend and all.*

*Maybe I’ll even pick one up for Patty.*

*Who doesn’t love a good burger?*

Fifteen minutes later, Jack, Riley and a couple of local FBI personnel pulled up at the warehouse.

They’d had to deal with a nasty ambush, and while they’d emerged unscathed with the bad guys all taken down, thanks to help from their FBI back-up, it had eaten up time. As soon as they’d been able, they’d taken off to Mac’s last known location, hoping that their friend and teammate had pulled off his usual miracle and was unharmed.
Both Phoenix Foundation agents stared at the cling-wrapped crashed car, full of weakly-stirring bad guys, before them.

Riley walked around to the open boot and bent down. She pulled the potato out of the exhaust pipe and stared at it.

‘Well, this is definitely Mac’s work.’

Jack’s eyes were sweeping the area.

‘But where’s Mac?’

The two friends exchanged a worried glance. Jack’s eyes hardened, and he pulled out a knife and cut through the cling-film. He reached into the car and seized Timothy Meyers, or, as he liked to call him, Chief Bad Guy, partly because it annoyed Mac when he did so.

‘Where is my partner?’

The criminal mastermind just smirked, ignoring the fact that Jack’s hand was fisted tightly in his shirt, as one of the FBI agents put cuffs on him.

‘Mr MacGyver? No idea.’ The smirk grew wider and Jack fought the urge to punch the now-defenceless man square in the jaw. ‘But he’s had a lot of vodka, and even the brightest of minds can get a little muddled under the influence…’

Jack almost growled and practically threw the man into the hands of the agents. He walked over to Riley, who was patching them into a conference call with Thornton, Bozer and Beth.

‘The good news is that we got Meyers and the rest of his friends, Patty. Mac left them as a present for us, all wrapped up nicely.’

‘Literally.’

Thornton’s voice was crisp and dry as ever when she spoke, though they could detect the slightest hint of concern.

‘And the bad news, Jack?’

‘We have no idea where he is. And he’s apparently under the influence. Apparently Meyers thought it’d be a good idea to get him out of commission by plying him with vodka.’

Beth sighed.

‘It had to be vodka, didn’t it?’ She paused for a moment, focusing herself into her doctor headspace, pulling away from the woman worried about her boyfriend. ‘At least it seems unlikely that he has alcohol poisoning. Boss, I’m going to have to commandeer a breathalyser and a few other supplies. I didn’t prepare for this.’

‘Commandeer whatever supplies you need, Doc. Jack, Riley, find MacGyver and get him to Doc safely, before he gets himself into trouble.’ There was a silence for a moment, before she continued. ‘Oversight is going to hate this. I’d better go start pre-emptive damage control.’

The Director hung up, leaving Beth and Bozer on the line with Jack and Riley.

The two agents in the field fanned out from the warehouse and the car, leaving the still-woozy criminals in the capable hands of the FBI, searching for clues as to where their friend could have
gone. Unfortunately, he hadn’t exactly left footprints on the asphalt, and Riley found his phone, smashed beyond all use, in the warehouse.

Suddenly, Bozer spoke up.

‘Wait a moment…I’m looking at your location now, and I think I recognize the area…Beth, isn’t the warehouse just a couple of blocks away from Mac’s favourite burger place from college?’

Riley and Jack exchanged a look.

‘You seriously think he went off to get burgers?’

They could both practically hear the shrug and the worry in Bozer’s voice as he responded.

‘There has to be some kind of reason for him to leave the bad guys, and he doesn’t make much sense half the time when he’s sober…’

The two sighed, glanced at one another again, and the nodded.

‘Well, it’s as good a lead as we’re going to get.’

‘Which way to the burger place?’

Unfortunately for his friends, while Mac had been heading towards the burger place, he’d been side-tracked.

As he’d made his way towards it, something in a shop window had caught his eye.

One of those men’s wool cardigans that Bozer was very fond of wearing.

I really don’t understand fashion.

It’s such an ugly cardigan.

It was a very interesting shade of puce.

I have to buy it for him.

He walked into the store, pulling out his wallet, which he’d also recovered from the bad guys’ warehouse.

Jack and Riley ran towards the burger joint, following Bozer’s instructions. (Beth was occupied attempting to source a breathalyser and the necessary medical supplies.)

They ran right past the clothing store with the puce cardigan in the window.

A minute after they ran past, Mac, holding a bag with a puce cardigan in Bozer’s size in it, walked out.

He paused for a moment, and looked towards the burger place. He could just about make out Jack and Riley in the distance.

Timothy Meyers and counterfeiting and terrorists were completely lost from his alcohol-fogged mind. He smirked.
A little extra in-field training never hurt anyone.

Besides, they need some daddy-daughter bonding time.

And this is going to be so much fun!

Instead of heading towards his friends, he headed towards the grocery store across the road.

Mac walked towards the teenagers, a boy and a girl, who were busy stacking cans of peas in the grocery store.

‘Hi, that looks rather boring, would you two like a hand?’

The two teenagers looked over at him, taking in his relatively lanky frame, fairly smart clothing, friendly smile and young age.

Mac might be drunk out of his mind, but he didn’t look it.

‘Uh…’

‘Um…’

When the two teens didn’t protest, Mac grinned wider at them, and moved past them and started rapidly stacking the cans.

The two grocery store employees could only exchange glances and watch.

Ten minutes later, Mac took a step back, looked over his work, and nodded, satisfied.

He glanced around the grocery store, grabbed a large bottle of Coca-Cola and a packet of Mentos, and handed ten dollars to one of the teens.

‘Keep the change!’

And he practically ran out of the store.

The two teens just stared, dumbfounded.

Three minutes later, Jack and Riley burst into the grocery store. As they hadn’t found Mac at the burger place, Riley had worked her magic and hacked some CCTV cameras and traffic cameras, and they’d tracked Mac to the grocery store. (Though, not before agreeing that they’d have to return to that particular burger joint at some point when they weren’t on a wild goose chase after their intoxicated, crazy, brilliant friend. It smelled heavenly. No wonder it’d been Mac’s favourite during his college days.)

They stared at the scale model of the White House, made out of tins of peas, in the middle of the store.

‘Yeah, he was definitely here.’

‘You ever wonder what it’d be like to be inside his head, Riley?’

She just cocked an eyebrow at Jack.
‘Like I’d want to go down that rabbit hole, old man.’

They turned and returned the way they came.

At the exit, they caught a flash of a distinctive brown leather jacket and blonde head.

‘Mae!’

‘Come on, stop this, brother!’

A moment later, they were both showered with a fountain of Coca-Cola.

‘Damn it! This shirt is new, brother!’

Riley gave a snort, looking at Jack’s black shirt, then back down at her cream one.

‘Oh, yeah, like anyone’s going to notice, old man.’

Jack looked down at his own shirt, then at the young woman.

‘That it’s new or these stains courtesy of Mac?’

‘Both.’

‘What do you mean, both? It’s-’

Riley just rolled her eyes and cut him off, pointing in the direction that Mac had gone.

‘Come on, old man, we’ve got a runaway genius to catch.’

Jack grumbled, but ran after the young woman anyway, talking into the sat-phone as they went.

‘We getting hazard pay for this, Patty?’

Thornton’s voice was as composed as ever when she responded, but Jack swore he heard a note of amusement in there.

‘I’ll see what I can do, Jack.’

Mac grinned as he came up to a little bakery not too far from the grocery store and the burger joint.

This place made great pies.

His girlfriend adored pie.

To a really rather weird extent.

*But who am I to judge? I get excited by weird things too.*

*Dr Seuss wrote something along the lines of: Everyone’s a little weird. When we find someone whose weirdness is compatible with our weirdness, we fall in mutual weirdness and call it love.*

*I like that quote.*

The bakery door opened, and the distinctive aroma of pumpkin pie wafted out the door.
And pumpkin pie is her absolute favourite.

And she did love the pie from this place back in college.

Mac walked inside.

As he pulled out his wallet to pay for the pumpkin pie, which the nice old lady behind the counter had boxed up for him, he heard cursing coming from the back.

The woman took his money, handed him his change, and with an apologetic smile, walked into the kitchen.

Mac, curious, leaned over the counter slightly and peeked into the kitchen, eavesdropping on the older couple who ran the bakery.

Apparently, their dough-roller was broken.

I can fix that!

My grandfather always said that we should always try and help when we can.
‘This is going to sound weird, but I’m pretty sure I can repair that for you…’

A couple of paperclips, a bobby pin and a whisk later, the dough-roller was fixed and the two bakery owners were giving Mac very grateful smiles.

The blonde pocketed his Swiss Army knife, and glanced around the kitchen.

His eyes fell on two very particular containers, one plastic bottle and a cardboard box.

He indicated the two to the older couple.

‘Mind if I have those?’

The bakers exchanged a rather confused look, but shrugged and nodded.

‘Go ahead, young man.’

‘It’s the least we can do, you’ve saved us at least a few hundred bucks.’

He grinned at them and grabbed the baking soda and vinegar in his right hand, the pie and the cardigan bag in his left, heading out the back door.

‘Thanks!’

Jack and Riley coughed and blinked rapidly as they were caught in Mac’s smokescreen.

‘Mac, brother, I love you, but I’m getting you back for all this!’

‘I’m getting you back twice for this!’

Mac’s voice, almost sing-song and childlike, drifted to them through the smoke.

‘It’s good training! Besides, you could do with some daddy-daughter time!’
Jack and Riley simply shared a look.

‘We’ll get him back, old man.’

‘Oh, we’re getting him more than back, kid.’

Mac made his way through a local park. Eventually, he came to an area near a high school, and ducked into an alleyway for a moment, peeking around the corner for signs of Jack and Riley.

He positioned himself behind a dumpster, brain ticking over as he plotted his next move.

His thinking was interrupted by two large teenage boys in letterman jackets pushing a skinnier, younger boy into the alleyway.

The taller of the bigger boys raised his fist…and was hit high on the right shoulder with a pumpkin pie. Pie splatted all over his face. A moment later, the other bully flailed, thrown off balance as he attempted to strike the younger boy when his head was suddenly covered with a puce cardigan.

*I was aiming for a headshot with the pie…but I think it’ll do.*

Shaking off the pie and the cardigan, the two bullies stalked towards Mac, who was standing by the dumpster.

‘Oi! Don’t you have somewhere to be, Pie-Face and Puce-Head?’

The two bullies turned and looked at Jack, clad all in black, cracking his knuckles, and Riley, hip cocked to the side and arms crossed, and ran.

Their intended victim glanced between Jack, Mac and Riley.

‘Uh…thanks…um…’

Jack gave the boy a smile.

‘Go home, kid. Maybe sign yourself up for some karate classes or something.’ He leaned over and stage-whispered to the boy. ‘And maybe don’t tell anyone about this. They’ll all think you’re crazy.’

The boy just nodded, and darted out of the alleyway.

Before Mac could escape again, Jack and Riley walked over to their friend, Riley updating the rest of the team as she did so.

After a moment and a shake of his head, Jack leaned over and hugged the younger man tightly. Riley reached up and clasped Mac’s shoulder.

‘You’ve gotta stop getting yourself into trouble like this, brother.’

‘I’m with the old man on this one, Mac. For once.’

Mac hugged Jack back just as tightly. He blinked a few times, suddenly rather confused by his friends’ behaviour and the concerned tone in their voices. He gave voice to a thought that he didn’t really know the origin of.

‘I think vodka is bad.’
Both Jack and Riley let out a snort of laughter at that. Mac did have a rather bad track record with Russian potato-based spirits.

‘No more vodka for you, brother.’

‘Definitely no more.’

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**JET**

**SOMEWHERE OVER THE MID-WEST**

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Mac, a goofy grin on his face, looked around at his friends; at Jack, who was seated opposite him, at Bozer and Riley, who were in the seats on the other side of the aisle, and at Beth, who was sitting next to him and coaxing him into drinking strawberry-flavoured Gatorade (he hated the strawberry flavour, it tasted like chalk, but it was all that she’d been able to get at short notice). By some miracle, he didn’t have alcohol poisoning and wouldn’t really be any worse for the wear, except for the worse hangover of his life tomorrow.

‘I love you guys.’

All four non-intoxicated persons grinned. Bozer and Riley exchanged a glance, and then Bozer pulled out his phone to record the rest of the flight for posterity.

‘We love you too, brother.’

Mac’s grin grew wider. Beth took the opportunity to get him to drink more of the Gatorade. He pulled a face, but a moment later, smiled rather goofily at her. Wordlessly, Bozer handed his phone to Riley, who was closer, so that they could get a better angle.

‘I love you, even if you make me drink that horrible concoction and steal all my MIT T-shirts and made me stay in bed and rest when I had the flu and never let me escape the infirmary.’

Beth just laughed, her eyes soft and fond, and held the Gatorade bottle up to his lips again.

‘Love you too, Mac. Even though you’re the absolute worst patient I’ve ever had.’ Her smile turned more wry. ‘And a ludicrously sappy and very difficult drunk, apparently.’

He drank the Gatorade, without making a face this time, and he took the bottle from her when she held it out to him. Then he turned to Jack.

‘I love you too, old man. Even though your singing sounds like a dying cat, and you love country music and have dreadful taste in shirts.’

Jack looked down at his shirt, then at Mac.

‘You just don’t appreciate great music, brother. And coming from someone with your fashion sense? I’ll take that as a compliment.’ Jack’s grin grew softer, and he reached out and ruffled Mac’s hair, ignoring the blonde’s resultant glare. ‘And I’ve said it twice already today, not going to say it again. Can’t have you thinking I’m going soft, can I?’

Riley snorted. Bozer smirked, and Beth shook her head fondly. Mac’s goofy grin simply widened,
and he turned to Bozer and Riley.

‘And I love you too, Riley, even though it’s your fault that Bozer never makes waffles anymore because you like French toast more, and of course I love you too, Bozer, even if you wear really ugly cardigans.’ He made a face. ‘And even though I caught you two defiling the kitchen. Multiple times.’

Riley, still recording Mac on Bozer’s phone, ignored Jack’s expression, biting her lip to stifle her giggles instead, while Bozer looked affronted at Mac’s jab about his fashion sense.

Mac frowned, seemingly realizing something.

‘I bought you a cardigan, Bozer. It was puce and really, really, really ugly…I don’t know where it went…’ He shrugged, seemingly satisfied that the cardigan was simply temporarily misplaced or had disappeared into thin air, and continued. ‘And she’s not here, but I love Patty, too, she’s part of the family, even though I made her caller ID a mushroom cloud.’ He considered for a moment. ‘Maybe I should change that.’ He cocked his head to the side, and obediently took another drink of Gatorade when Beth poked him. ‘Have you guys noticed that she has like three of the same jumpsuit in different colours?’ He seemed to have a sudden realization. ‘Oh, and Riley? You’re definitely right about the whole Jack/Patty thing.’ He leaned over and stage-whispered rather poorly to Beth. ‘Jack was making eyes at her before we left for Boston.’

Riley and Bozer smirked and turned to Jack like sharks sensing blood. The older man shook his head.

‘Making eyes? Really? You’re using your grandfather’s words again, kid.’

Mac nodded, unflustered and unrepentant, and when Beth cocked an eyebrow at him, he took another drink of Gatorade. After a moment, he frowned.

‘I feel a bit funny.’

Beth, Jack, Riley and Bozer all exchanged a rather exasperated, fond look.

‘Only you, Mac, could get yourself into this situation. Only you.’

‘Bro, you’re the only person I know who would wind up captured and hooked up to a vodka IV by crazy bad guys, and then escape and cling-wrap their car…’

‘…And then lead us on a crazy wild goose chase around Boston, ruining my brand-new shirt in the process, might I add, brother…’

‘…And causing a mess that our boss is going to have to spend the next twelve hours trying to clean up,’

Jack, Bozer and Beth all winced in sympathy at Riley’s comment. None of them envied Thornton at the moment.

Mac looked very sad, much like a scolded and kicked puppy.

‘I’m in trouble, aren’t I?’ He seemed to decide that appealing to his girlfriend would be the best way to get himself out of trouble. He turned to Beth and looked at her with wide eyes. ‘I bought you a pie! A pumpkin pie! You love pie! Pumpkin pie especially! That gets me out of trouble, right?’ Mac glanced around, and then his brow furrowed. ‘Well, I think I bought you a pie, but I think I’ve lost it. It’s the thought that counts, right?’
Beth, holding back laughter, nodded with a smile.

‘Yes, Mac, it’s the thought that counts. Thank you for the pie.’

He wasn’t placated.

‘I should buy you a new pie.’ He tried to get up from his seat. ‘Then you’ll be happier.’

Riley and Bozer exchanged broad grins. By now, Riley had handed Bozer back his phone, and pulled out her own, to get a second angle.

Jack just laughed and smirked at his partner.

‘Happy wife, happy life, brother.’

Mac nodded sagely. Jack smirked and shot a significant look at Beth, who focused her attention on getting Mac to take another drink of strawberry Gatorade and stay put, a light pink tinge to her cheeks.

‘Sit down, Mac. You can buy me a replacement pie later, when we’re not at 40,000 feet. I don’t think there are any bakeries in the lower stratosphere.’

‘So you’re not mad at me?’

The doctor nodded.

‘I was worried, but I’m not mad at you, though I can’t speak for anyone else.’

‘We spent all afternoon chasing you, brother.’

‘And you ruined my shirt, Mac.’

‘And mine!’

‘It’s black!’

‘It’s new!’

Ignoring Jack and Riley’s bickering, Beth turned back to the blonde.

‘This is much better than having to pump your stomach and treat you for alcohol poisoning.’ She smiled wryly. ‘Besides, it’s an awful lot more entertaining.’

Seemingly satisfied, Mac yawned and closed his eyes. He suddenly felt very sleepy.

The last thing he heard before he fell asleep was Beth talking to Jack and Riley.

‘And trust me, how he’ll be feeling tomorrow will be punishment enough, though I expect he’ll buy you new shirts in apology…’

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**MACGYVER’S RESIDENCE**

**LA**

Consciousness returned to Mac rather slowly.
Vague memories of being half-carried into his house and into his room by Jack, and then helped into an old MIT Solar Car Competition T-shirt and a pair of basketball shorts by Beth, drifted through his mind.

He opened his eyes, and winced at the brightness.

Slowly, his eyes adjusted, though he had a pounding headache, rather queasy and generally felt rather awful. The only source of light in his room, though it felt like it was painfully bright, was actually just the sunlight coming in through the half-open blinds.

He turned his head towards the side, and noticed Beth sitting in his desk chair, reading one of his books on Ancient Greco-Roman engineering. She smiled when she noticed he was awake, and put down the book as he worked himself into a sitting position. She grabbed the bottle of lemon-lime Gatorade (his favourite flavour) and the packet of paracetamol tablets resting on his desk, handed him the bottle and two tablets, and gave him a look.

He opened the Gatorade, took a drink, then downed the two tablets and washed them down with a third of the bottle.

‘How awful do you feel?’

*Apparently, my level of resistance to healthcare and how bad I feel are inversely correlated.*

He groaned.

‘Like I’ve been hit by a car and then clobbered three times on the head.’

She snorted.

‘And you would know how that feels.’

He took another drink of Gatorade.

‘Nothing that some rest and Gatorade and maybe some food won’t cure. And I’ll feel better once the painkillers kick in.’

She smiled fondly at him, shaking her head.

‘You know, if you keep talking like that, you might fool people into thinking that you’re actually not a terrible patient. Or even that you have a medical degree.’

He shook his head with a smile, and took another drink of Gatorade. Eventually, his brow furrowed.

‘What happened, actually?’

‘You really don’t remember?’

Her voice was concerned. He could practically see his girlfriend pulling herself into her doctor headspace. She got up from his desk chair and took a half-step towards him.

*And then, it hit me.*

It all came flooding back.

Mac leaned back against the headboard with a groan as he recalled getting captured by Timothy
Meyers, the vodka IV, cling-wrapping the car and shoving a potato in the exhaust, and the absurd wild goose chase he’d led Jack and Riley on, and then that conversation on the jet…

‘Kill me now. Please.’

Beth sat down on the edge of his bed, relieved, and gave a snort of laughter.

‘I’ve sworn to do no harm, Mac.’

He threw off the covers and sat up properly, putting his feet on the floor.

*Best to get it over with, like ripping off a Band-Aid.*

Now that he focused on it, he thought he could hear his friends in the living room. More precisely, he thought he could hear their laughter.

He groaned again.

*I am absolutely never going to live this down.*

Beth leaned over and kissed him chastely, before giving him a wry smile.

‘Before you go out there, remember that I love you unconditionally, and they do too. Even if it might not seem like it right now.’

*They’re like family, and we do love each other, unconditionally.*

*But probably because we’re family, I am absolutely, definitely, certainly, never going to live this down.*

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Mac walked into the living room. He found Bozer, Riley, Jack and Thornton seated on the couch and a couple of stools, watching a video of him on the plane from yesterday. Jack, Bozer and Riley were practically in stitches with laughter, and even Thornton wore a light smile of fond amusement on her face. Beth made her way over to the kitchen to organize some breakfast for the two of them (from the dishes on the coffee table, it appeared that everyone else had already eaten).

He shook his head, a wry smile on his face despite himself, and addressed his boss.

‘I expect this sort of thing from them.’ He gestured to Bozer, Riley and Jack. ‘But you too? I thought you were above this.’

The older woman’s smile widened somewhat at his teasing and grew more wry. She took a sip from the very large cup of coffee in her hands.

‘I have spent most of the last eighteen hours dealing with the mess that this mission caused. A good deal of that involved dealing with the mess you caused while, shall we say, severely judgementally-impaired and inhibition-challenged. I think that gives me the right to some amusement at your expense.’

With a small chuckle, Mac returned her smile, and sat down on the couch, next to Jack, at the end closest to Thornton’s stool.

‘Thanks for covering for me, and cleaning up my mess.’

Her smile widened, and she reached over and clasped his shoulder gently.
‘I’m your boss. It’s my job to have my team’s backs.’ She hesitated for a moment. ‘Besides, what are friends for?’

Mac smiled at her, locking eyes with her for a moment, understanding that she knew he considered her part of the family, and that she considered herself part of the family too.

She released his shoulder, and turned her attention back to the cup of coffee in her hands and the TV, on which Bozer was replaying the plane video for what was probably the fifth or sixth time, as Jack and Riley launched into another retelling of the wild goose chase Mac had led them on.

With a smile up at her, Mac accepted the bowl of cinnamon-spiced oatmeal from Beth, who perched herself on the arm of the couch beside him with her own bowl of oatmeal, and ate his breakfast, as his friends sat around him and laughed.

_They say that in vino veritas._

_That’s Latin for, in wine, truth._

_I’m amending that._

_I say, in vodka, trouble._

_At least I have friends who will always get me out of trouble, vodka-induced or not._

_At least I have family who will always have my back, and who will always love me, even if I force them into a wild goose chase, ruin their shirts, am a terrible patient or cause so much trouble, that they have to spend all night cleaning up my mess._

_And I’ll always have their backs, and I’ll always love them too. Even though they’ll never let me live this down._

_That’s family._
A Magnet for Trouble

Chapter Summary

For Tinkerbella. On a rare day off, Mac goes to the bank to fix an issue with his mortgage. Of course, on this particular day, that particular branch is subjected to an attempted robbery. And of course, our hero has to save the day.

Chapter Notes

Set in some sort of nebulous more-or-less canon universe where canon moved on in a more predictable fashion without any of the major plot twists after 1.11, Scissors, a little over a year after Scissors actually occurs.

I headcanon that Mac actually owns (or is paying the mortgage, at least) on the house that he and Bozer live in (exactly how he has the money, I don’t know- maybe Mac is secretly wealthy because he invented some expensive and/or best-selling gadget or once saved the life of a really rich and very grateful person, or invested really well in stock, or maybe he inherited the money or even the house), and that Bozer’s rent (which Mac doesn’t really care about and gives him a really good deal on) is put towards the mortgage. This would probably explain why Mac is not worried about Bozer’s rent, why Bozer, who was a burger-flipper, can afford to live in a very nice house in LA, and why everyone seems to call it Mac’s house, as opposed to Mac and Bozer’s house.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

MACGYVER’S BANK

LA

Mac shook his head as he walked towards the doors of the bank. There’d been some sort of problem with his mortgage payments, so he’d had to come into the bank on a rare day off to sort it out.

*One day you’re saving the world, next day you’re dealing with a bank bureaucrat about your mortgage.*

*Welcome to the glamorous life of an international super-spy.*

Unfortunately, just as Mac had almost reached the door, two men clad in black, *Friday the 13th-* style hockey masks covering their faces, each waving a Glock, strode into the bank.
‘All of you, get down!’

‘Sit on the floor, eyes on the ground!’

‘Now!’

One of the men fired a warning shot into the ceiling. Plaster dust rained down.

The terrified bank customers and employees complied hastily.

Near the entrance, partially concealed behind a large pot plant, Mac complied too, not wanting to draw attention to himself.

His brain was already ticking into overdrive.

*Now, they might be armed, but they don’t really know how to use those Glocks properly.*

*They definitely can’t shoot even a tenth as well as Jack.*

*I might not use guns, but I do know how to tell if someone knows what they’re doing.*

*And these guys definitely don’t.*

*And those hockey masks?*

*Good for scaring people, good for concealing your identity, but definitely not very protective.*

*A good hit in the right spot will knock them out of place and restrict their sight.*

*And it’d hurt.*

Mac pulled out his belt and rolled up the thick magazine-like brochure that the bank employee had insisted he take.

*Jack’s going to start rambling about me being some sort of trouble magnet again.*

*And Bozer’s going to swear that he’s never going to let me go anywhere alone again.*

*And Riley’s going to agree with them, mostly.*

*And Thornton’s going to be pissed.*

*But what am I supposed to do?*

*Let them get away?*

*Let them hurt any of these innocent people?*

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**MACGYVER’S HOSPITAL ROOM**

**GOOD SAMARITAN HOSPITAL**

**LA**

The petite, young, female doctor shone a light into his eyes, carefully examining the reaction of his
‘What’s your name?’
‘Angus MacGyver.’
‘Age?’
‘Twenty-five.’
‘Today’s date?’
‘January 25th, 2018.’
‘Do you know where you are?’

Mac rolled his eyes, thoroughly sick of the questions. He was not concussed, as he’d told the doctor. Repeatedly. He was fine. Mostly. He’d stopped throwing up at least fifteen minutes ago.

Dr Taylor simply cocked an eyebrow back at him, waiting for his response.

He sighed.
‘Good Samaritan Hospital in L.A.’
She nodded, satisfied, and straightened up.
‘Well, you don’t have a concussion.’
‘Can I go home now, then?’
She narrowed her eyes at him.

‘No, Mr MacGyver. You don’t have a concussion, but you did take a knock to the head, and you have bruised ribs, minor bruising to one of your kidneys, and too many other contusions to count, including what is going to be a very impressive shiner. Given your earlier nausea and kidney injury, you have to stay on an IV.’

Mac sighed. He had a feeling that he wasn’t going to manage to escape this time.
‘Mr MacGyver is my dad.’

There was silence for a moment as Dr Taylor focused on updating his chart. When she was finished, she looked up and gave him a small smile.
‘Would you prefer Angus?’

He made a face.
‘Call me Mac. Please.’

Her smile widened a little in amusement at his expression, and she nodded and made a quick note on his chart. Then, she indicated his phone, wallet and Swiss Army knife, which were lying on a little shelf right beside the head of his bed.

‘Alright, Mac. Is there anyone you’d like to call, to let them know where you are and that you’re
okay, relatively speaking?’

He nodded.

‘I’ll give you a moment to do that, then.’ She started towards the door, and then turned back to
him. ‘And nothing else. Attempt anything else, and I’ll have no choice but to sedate you, which
I’m sure you won’t like. You are clearly a terrible patient. Press the call button when you’re done.’

She walked out the door.

With a sigh, Mac reached out, fingered his Swiss Army knife for a moment, decided against it, and
picked up his phone and dialled Jack.

‘Hey, brother. How’d it go at the bank? All fixed?’

‘Yeah, it was just an error in one of their systems. All fixed, now.’

Mac could practically see the look on Jack’s face in response to his false-casual tone. (He wasn’t
going to hide something like this from Jack, not when they weren’t in the field, but he didn’t
exactly want to come right out and say it either…)

‘Mac…’

He sighed.

*Like ripping off a Band-Aid.*

‘As I was leaving, these two guys might have attempted to rob the bank, and I might have stopped
them, and now I might be in hospital…’

Mac gave Jack a fairly abridged version of the events.

‘I’m telling you, brother, you give off zeta rays or something and draw trouble to you like a
magnet.’

The blonde rolled his eyes.

‘There is no such thing as zeta rays, Jack.’

‘That anyone knows of.’

Mac just shook his head. He was pretty sure that Jack did this half the time to wind him up on
purpose; the older man wasn’t stupid by any stretch of the word, even if he couldn’t recall the
difference between Nosferatu and Nostradamus.

‘You know, Patty’s going to be pissed.’ Mac snorted in response. ‘I’ll bet you ten bucks that I’m
going to have about six missed calls from her when you hang up.’

‘No bet, old man. I’m not going to just give you my money.’

‘Eh, it was worth a shot. Call me when you find out when you’re getting discharged, alright? And
be good for the doctors and nurses! Especially the pretty lady ones!’

Mac rolled his eyes again (*why* his friends refused to stay out of his non-existent love life, he didn’t
know), said his goodbyes to Jack, and hung up.
He pulled up Bozer’s number from his contacts list.

‘Bro, I am seriously never letting you go anywhere alone again! You go off to the bank to sort out the mortgage, and end up single-handedly stopping a bank robbery – good job, bro – and get yourself put in the hospital!’

Mac flinched slightly at the loudness of his best friend’s voice. Bozer had started yelling at him the moment he’d picked up; evidently, he’d been informed about his rather eventful trip to the bank, likely by Thornton (she was the best spy in the business, of course she’d found out what had happened).

‘And seriously, bro, you’ve got terrible timing! Riley and I were in the middle of something, and she’s just had to rush off to work to help clean up your mess! Seriously, bro, we were just getting to that epic Kaiju-Jaeger fight in Hong Kong Harbour!’

‘We can all re-watch Pacific Rim tonight, Bozer.’

‘Pretty sure you’re not going to be discharged until tomorrow, at least, bro.’ Bozer was quiet for a moment, and Mac could practically see the smirk growing on his best friend’s face when he responded. ‘Hey, look on the bright side! Gives you more time to pull the moves on a pretty nurse! Or a doctor, of course. Maybe you’ll get a number before you get out of there!’

Mac groaned.

Right then and there, he resolved that, when his friends inevitably interrogated him about everyone he’d interacted with while in hospital, attempting to discern if he’d met anyone interesting, he was never going to reveal the fact that Dr Taylor was both about his age and also rather beautiful, even in scrubs.

God knows what his friends would make of that.

Mountains out of molehills, or really non-existent hills, indeed.

Mac, his phone conversation with Bozer finished, put down his phone and pressed the call button. A minute or so later, Dr Taylor re-entered his room.

‘All done?’

He nodded.

She walked over and picked up his chart and made a couple of notes.

‘You’re staying overnight for observation and treatment, but you’ll be discharged in the morning.’

‘I’m fine, mostly, I can go home tonight-‘

The little doctor narrowed her eyes at him.

‘You know, even if you had a medical degree, which you don’t, you wouldn’t be allowed to make calls like this on your own health.’ Her expression softened. ‘You’re not going to be here for much longer, just another eighteen hours or so. Hopefully you’ll be able to sleep a good chunk of that time away. The more you rest and look after yourself and generally be a good patient, the sooner you’ll get better.’ He gave her a wan smile in response. ‘You’ll have to take at least the next week
or so fairly easy. Where do you work?’

‘At a think-tank.’

She nodded.

‘Shouldn’t be too difficult to take it easy, physically, then.’ Her brow furrowed. ‘Wait. You work at a think-tank and you single-handedly stopped two armed bank robbers? Using, apparently, according to the police who brought you here, your belt and a bank brochure?’

Thornton’s already pissed, I can’t give her another reason to be mad…namely, a doctor figuring out that my cover’s just a cover…

He shrugged and gave a small smirk.

‘And a couple of other odds and ends. I’m ex-Army, and I did win twelve science fairs.’

Dr Taylor mulled it over for a couple of seconds, and seemingly bought it. Mac gave an internal sigh of relief. She replaced his chart and gave him a smile as she walked to the door.

‘Impressive. I only ever managed nine.’

Yeah, definitely never telling Jack and Bozer and Riley that either. No matter what.

The next day, Mac made his way out into the entrance hall of the hospital, accompanied by a pretty, young, female nurse who’d been fussing over him (unnecessarily) since shift change and had insisted on accompanying him out to his friends, lest he attempt to escape or do something else to compromise his recovery (also unnecessarily, and not good on the teasing front). Apparently, Dr Taylor had left a note on his chart saying that he was a terrible patient, according to a chuckling Dr Garcia, the middle-aged, male hospitalist who’d checked over him before discharge.

Jack, Bozer and Riley (who looked rather sleepy and was holding a large takeaway cup of coffee in her hands) were waiting for him.

‘Glad to be free, brother?’

‘Very glad, Jack.’

‘I reckon he’s right, bro. You’re a trouble magnet.’

Mac glanced over at Riley, hoping to find an ally in the other more scientifically-inclined mind on the team. The hacker shook her head, raising an eyebrow and giving him a look.

‘They’re not wrong, Mac.’

The blonde just shook his head and kept walking towards the exit, his friends trailing behind him.

None of them missed the rather disappointed look on the pretty nurse’s face.

All three exchanged rather exasperated looks behind Mac’s back.

Well, at least they could tease and interrogate him about the nurse later.

MACGYVER’S RESIDENCE
Thornton, also nursing a large cup of coffee, like Riley, was waiting for them.

More specifically, she was waiting for Mac, and she caught him with a deadly stare as soon as he entered the living room.

‘You go to the bank to fix a problem with your mortgage and end up stopping a bank robbery single-handedly, get hospitalised, and nearly find yourself splashed all over the national news. Do you have any idea how difficult it was to keep your cover intact?’ She took a step closer to him.

‘You are an agent for a highly clandestine organization, MacGyver.’ She took another half-step forwards. ‘And you are honestly more troublesome than all of my other agents. Combined.’

Jack looked mildly put-out at that.

Mac pulled a paperclip from his pocket and started playing with it. He looked his boss square in the eye as he did so.

‘I’m sorry for the hassle, boss, but…I did what I had to do.’

Her expression softened and she shook her head at him with a small smile.

‘Off the record, none of us would have just sat there and done nothing, me included.’ She reached out and clasped his shoulder for a moment. ‘Good work, Mac.’

He returned her smile, and there was silence for a few seconds. Then, her expression turned firmer again.

‘No fieldwork for the next week, and you are taking the next two days off to recover, non-negotiable.’

Mac sighed.

‘Yes, boss.’

‘And you are not to leave the house in those two days. You need to rest.’ A wry look fluttered across her face. ‘And trouble seems to find you far too easily.’

With a wry grin, Mac nodded, and there was another comfortable silence, which was broken by his roommate.

‘Now that the little family bonding moment’s over, who wants waffles?’

They all turned to stare at Bozer, who was grinning broadly.

Riley rolled her eyes fondly, while Jack and Mac simply exchanged a grin and a shake of their heads. Thornton raised an eyebrow elegantly.

Riley indicated her boyfriend to her boss with a tilt of her head.

‘He does make the best waffles.’

Thornton took another sip of her coffee, and then her smile widened slightly.

‘Coffee alone does not make a good breakfast.’
Chapter End Notes

I tried to balance oblivious!Mac with Mac-who-is-clearly-not-entirely-hopeless-with-women, as well as by-the-book!Thornton with Thornton-who-clearly-cares-for-her-team-and-actually-gives-them-lots-of-freedom. I hope I succeeded! Tinkerella, I think this was probably less whumpy than you wanted, but I hope you liked it!

If you have a prompt/request you’d like me to write (fair warning, it’ll probably end up at least somewhat AU like this one, since I seem incapable of writing strictly canon-compliant), just leave it in the comments/in a review!
Responsibility

Chapter Summary

For Dlwells51. When Mac is badly injured on a mission, his team, his friends, his family, are all there for him, but none more than Jack. ‘He’s my partner, my responsibility, Patty.’

Chapter Notes

This is set in the AU off 1.12, Screwdriver that I created in THREE in Permutations, about three years after its events.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

JUNKYARD

SOMEWHERE IN LA

Jack cursed as he searched through the maze of wrecked cars and old tires and ancient appliances. Apparently, the drug ring that had recently started moving into arms dealing that they were trying to take down had cached some of their merchandise somewhere among all of this junk.

Since it appeared to be abandoned, with no sign of the syndicate’s members, and the junkyard was huge, he and Mac had split up to complete the search faster, with Riley coordinating from the van.

Unfortunately, while they’d been searching for almost half an hour, there was no sign of said cache.

Mac’s voice rang out suddenly from his earpiece.

‘Jack, I’ve found it, I need back-up!’

Mac was one of the bravest men that Jack knew, if not the bravest. He was also an absolute master at compartmentalizing and able to face certain death without even blinking (even if he broke down afterwards).

There was genuine fear in the younger man’s voice.

He heard growling in the background.

Jack’s heart raced, and he started running.

‘Riley-‘
‘Take the next left, and then right…’

‘I’m coming, Mac! Hang on!’

He ran faster.

For a second, Jack’s heart stopped as he spotted his partner and skidded to a halt.

Two large, vicious-looking dogs were lying, motionless, on the ground. One had a length of old steel cable wrapped firmly around its neck. The other was next to a piece of cracked metal pipe.

They, however, barely registered in Jack’s mind.

Instead, his attention was firmly drawn to the third, largest dog, which had his partner practically pinned to the ground, and its teeth firmly sunk into his neck.

The blonde agent was struggling determinedly.

‘Stay still!’

He’d never get off a clean shot with Mac moving like that; there was too much of a risk of hitting his own partner.

It was a sign of the absolute trust between them, the absolute belief that the other would keep him safe, that Mac went still.

Jack fired off the shot.

He didn’t miss, and the third dog stilled.

Mac struggled weakly, and Jack, not even pausing for a moment, ran up to his partner. Looked down. Saw the blood. Heard him wheeze, struggling to speak, struggling to stay awake, struggling to breathe.

At that moment, Riley came into view, took one look at Mac, and spoke rapidly into the sat-phone she held.

‘Boss, we need medical back-up, now!’

The words barely registered for Jack as he did everything he could to concentrate on all the first aid he knew.

‘Come on, brother, you did a real good job, you’ve got to tell me all about how you did it, using Archimedes’ Rule and Pythagoras’ Theory and the sixth law of thermodynamics…’

Mac was barely able to glare at him.

Jack pushed away the horrible feeling settling in his gut, and focused on doing his best to treat his partner instead.

SECURE FBI MEDICAL FACILITY

SOMEWHERE IN LA
Jack paced around the staff breakroom that was currently being utilized as a sort-of waiting room, since the facility had no dedicated waiting room of its own. Bozer sat by the window, staring at his phone, the door and his girlfriend alternately. He was trying to play a game on his phone, which kept making game-over sounds, since he hadn’t actually managed to tap the screen even once. Riley and Thornton were bent over Riley’s laptop, making a valiant, fairly successful effort to concentrate on taking down the arms-dealing drug ring. The younger woman kept looking up towards the door, and then at Jack and Bozer, every few minutes, and they could all see the worry in the eyes of their all-business, consummate-professional boss, even though she was clearly focused on her work.

Mac was currently in surgery.

Jack paced around the room again.

At least his partner was in the best hands he could be in. The medical facility was essentially a hospital, as well-equipped as any Jack had ever seen. It was also far busier than he would have expected; apparently, LA was something of a hotbed for covert operations.

He made seven more laps around the room. Bozer’s phone ran out of battery, and the younger man didn’t even notice. Riley and Thornton narrowed down their leads to only two, but could get no further, not based on what they had so far, and Riley looked at the door another six times. Eventually, after exchanging a look with Thornton, she got up, closed her laptop and walked over to sit beside Bozer, who silently reached out and took her hand. Jack continued pacing.

Finally, after what seemed like an eon, the door opened. In stepped a middle-aged male doctor, still mostly scrubbed in from surgery.

All four Phoenix Foundation employees immediately stared at him.

The doctor smiled and nodded at them.

‘Mr MacGyver is going to be fine.’ They all relaxed a little, some tension leaving their bodies. ‘He’ll need time to recover, and he’s going to be in pain and he definitely won’t be very talkative for a while, but there should be no lasting damage.’

‘Well, at least we don’t have to listen to him rambling about Ent-parties and thermodynamics for a while.’

Both Riley and Bozer gave snorts of half-laughter. Even Thornton smiled, slightly.

Jack himself gave a wan smile as some more of the tension and worry drifted away. (He was really quite sure that Mac never rambled about Ent-parties, even if he couldn’t remember what the younger man did ramble about. But he didn’t really care, and it annoyed the hell out of Mac and amused everyone else, so of course he kept saying it.)

The doctor (now that he thought about it, Jack was pretty sure his name was Dr Garcia) smiled a little wider and continued.

‘Someone, and only one someone, can sit with Mr MacGyver; he should be awake in about an hour.’

Bozer, Riley and Thornton all looked instantly at Jack, who glanced over at Bozer. The younger man shook his head.

‘You’re his partner. You guys were out in the field together, and he’s going to need to know that
you’re okay as soon as he wakes up, or he’ll freak out.’

Jack gave Bozer a very grateful look, and followed Dr Garcia out of the room.

Contrary to all medical expectations, as usual, Mac woke up twenty minutes after Jack arrived at his bedside.

And, as usual, the kid (Jack really had to stop thinking of him as a kid; he was twenty-seven now.) took a moment to try to determine where he was, then immediately started trying to pull the oxygen mask off his face and sit up.

Jack immediately leaned over, closer to his partner.

‘Woah, woah, brother. Stop that! Keep that mask on, and don’t try and speak! Don’t look at me like that! You’re in hospital, and you got pretty banged up, you gotta stay put and rest and follow the medics’ instructions.’

A moment later, Dr Garcia walked into the room, having been summoned by Jack pressing the call button as soon as Mac had shown the first signs of consciousness.

The blonde, the oxygen mask back on his face, lying fairly still on the bed, glared at Jack, who simply shook his head, grinning with relief. (If Mac didn’t try and resist medical care, didn’t try and get up and didn’t get mad at Jack for summoning a doctor…that would be when it was really bad. Like Cairo bad. Or after Nikki’s ‘death’ and getting shot in the chest bad.) The older man reached out and gently ruffled the hair of the younger, which made Mac’s glare worse and Jack’s grin wider.

A few minutes later, after Dr Garcia had left (having impressed on Mac that it was imperative that he rested, did not pull out his IV, kept the oxygen mask on and did not try and speak, or he would have both Thornton and the facility’s scariest doctor come and scold him), Jack pulled his chair a little closer to Mac’s bedside. The initial rush of relief, that initial rush of bright, light emotions, was beginning to fade, and his mood was starting to return to what it had been in that makeshift waiting room.

‘I’m sorry, brother.’ Jack looked down at Mac, who looked, as always, about five years, maybe even ten years, younger, lying in a hospital gown in a hospital bed. ‘We shouldn’t have split up.’ He bit his lip. ‘I should have run faster. You’re my partner, I shouldn’t have let you get hurt like that-‘

Mac just shot him a look, and started tapping out a pattern on his bed with his finger. A pattern of dots and dashes. Jack watched as the younger man tapped out his message, translating the Morse code into words in his head.

*Not your fault. Did your job. Saved me. Best partner. Thanks.*

‘Mac, brother…’

Mac just looked up at him, blue eyes firm, resolute and insistent. He started tapping out another message.

*I mean it. All of it. Promise.*

Jack gave a wan smile and reached out and squeezed his partner’s shoulder gently.
‘Thanks, brother, and right back at you, all of it.’

Twenty-nine hours later, Jack was sitting in his chair by Mac’s bedside, having just woken up from a short nap. Mac was asleep, just as he had been when Jack had gone to sleep.

Thornton had persuaded the doctors to allow someone to sit by Mac’s bedside at all times, arguing that it would keep him calmer and ensure that he stayed in bed and rested, which was necessary for his recovery. Aside from a handful of hours, during which Jack had done his best to help with the mission from the facility, while Bozer and Riley had taken turns sitting by their friend, chatting to him about various innocuous topics (like Bozer’s next movie idea or how amazing his new eight-layer chocolate cake recipe was) that didn’t really require Mac’s input, since neither of them were fluent in Morse code (though Jack had made them learn some), Jack had been by his partner’s side continuously.

He was grateful that Patty understood, without him having to say it, that he needed to be with the younger man, even if the doctors all said he would be fine, eventually. She hadn’t summoned him back to work, hadn’t dropped any hints that he needed to leave Mac.

The older man shifted in his chair; his back was stiff and sore.

‘I’m getting too old for this.’

‘Don’t let him or Riley or Bozer hear you say that.’

Jack jumped a little in his seat.

‘Patty, would it kill you to make some noise?’

His boss, who’d evidently returned from the Phoenix, where she’d been hard at work on the mission (and, Jack suspected, keeping oversight off his back), ignored his comment, and reached out and put a hand on his shoulder instead.

‘Come with me, Jack. You’re going to eat some food and go for a short walk. And take a shower.’

‘I had one…’ He glanced at his watch. ‘Thirty-two hours ago?’

She simply quirked an eyebrow at him.

‘You don’t smell like it.’ Jack gave a small, wry smile – Patty did have a sense of humour, as he was always telling the others, before he glanced over at Mac, still asleep and oblivious. Her expression softened. ‘It’s not going to do him any good, you running yourself into the ground worrying about him.’ She paused for a moment. ‘Bozer’s just arrived, he’s got some clothes and books and the like for Mac. I’m sure he’d like to keep him company for a while.’

Bozer and Riley had headed home the night before. The hacker had stopped by early in the morning, and paid Mac a short visit before heading to the Phoenix to keep chasing the arms-dealing drug ring, while Bozer, who’d come in with Riley that morning, had gone back to his and Mac’s place (which was really becoming more Mac’s place now, since he spent a lot of time at Riley’s) to pick up some things for his best friend.

With a sigh and another look at his partner (he was still sleeping soundly), Jack nodded and got up, following Thornton out the door.
Jack mechanically took another bite of his steak and eggs and fries (Patty had ordered it for him, and ordered eggs on toast for herself, and coffee for the both of them. Of course, she knew exactly what to order him.). He took another sip of his coffee, glancing up at the woman sitting opposite him, silently eating her own food. He took another bite, and chewed and swallowed, taking his time.

‘He’s my partner, my responsibility, Patty. I should have had his back.’

Despite Mac’s reassurances, despite knowing that this same situation (and its mirror image), these same conversations, had occurred far more often than Jack really wanted to think about, that little niggling worm of guilt was still buried deep in his mind, just like it had been every other time this had happened.

‘You did, Jack.’ She locked eyes with him, gracing him with a small, somewhat wan, smile. ‘You always have, and always will. You won’t always be able to keep him safe, you know that, but you’ll always give it your damn best shot.’ She hesitated for a moment, her eyes taking on a softer quality to them. ‘You’re a good man, Jack. The best partner Mac could ever hope for.’

Taking another bite of his food, Jack chewed and swallowed thoughtfully, before returning her wan smile.

‘Thanks, Patty.’ He ate another bite (he was really hungry, now that he thought about it). ‘You’re pretty great yourself.’ He grew more serious for a moment. ‘I appreciate it, all of it, really do.’

He didn’t need to specify exactly what it was. (Letting him stay by Mac’s side, covering for him with oversight, like she always did, giving their team a long leash, showing up exactly when they needed her, even dragging him out for a short walk to the diner and some food.) She got the message, loud and clear, the smile on her face growing just that little bit broader.

Maybe he was imagining things, but they had known each other a long time now, and as hard to read as she was, he was getting better at it, but Jack swore he saw gratefulness in her dark eyes.

He ate another couple of mouthfuls, and leaned back in his seat as he drank some of his coffee.

‘You know, being the good partner I am and all, maybe I should try and get him to ask out the pretty young lady doctor who worked on him first.’ Jack smirked. ‘She bossed me around a bit, she’s got spunk; I like her. Seems on the young side to be a doctor, too. Might be good for him.’ In all honesty, Jack didn’t remember much about the ER doctor who’d first seen to Mac on his arrival at the medical facility. Well, he’d evidently taken something in about her, but he hadn’t really paid her any attention, his focus on his partner. He really hadn’t noticed that she was quite pretty, though far too young for his tastes, until she’d checked in on Mac while on rotation. (Since the medical facility wasn’t actually a hospital, and predominately was staffed by doctors with ER or trauma surgeon training, as well as some orthopaedic surgeons, there wasn’t always a hospitalist on shift- the other doctors picked up the slack in that department.)

Thornton shook her head at him, but there was a wry little smile on her face anyway.

‘She graduated from college early and did a year with the MSF.’ Jack shot her a look. ‘She is also happily engaged to a JPL engineer, Jack.’
'Damn. Poor kid has no luck in love.' He took another drink of his coffee. ‘Did you really vet all the medical staff, Patty, in an FBI medical facility?’

She, too, took another drink of coffee, meeting his eyes with a resolute and steady look in hers.

Since Nikki’s attempt to convince them that she was deep-cover CIA (almost completely successfully), they were all a little less trusting than they’d been before her. A little more paranoid.

‘You said he’s your partner, Jack. Your responsibility. My team is my responsibility.’

He nodded, and they shared a look of understanding, before Jack smirked again.

‘Can’t say stuff like that too often, Patty, or people will think you’re going soft.’

She simply took another sip of her coffee, quirking an eyebrow at him over the rim of her coffee cup.

‘I’d like to see them dare.’

SECURE FBI MEDICAL FACILITY

SOMEBEWHERE IN LA

Four days after Mac’s arrival in the medical facility, Jack sat by his partner’s bedside. Riley and Thornton had finally tracked down a good, solid lead, and a plan had been concocted to take down the ring.

The robotic voice on the tablet that Mac was using to speak rang out. (It read the messages he typed out on it for him, albeit rather slowly, much to the younger man’s frustration. Still, it was better than typing out notes for people, and he was trying to be a good patient and not try and speak and do more damage to himself. As the doctors kept telling him, he’d heal faster and get his voice back sooner if he didn’t push too hard now.)

‘Go, Jack. Get them, take them down. Stop them from hurting any more people.’ A pause. ‘For me. Please?’

‘You going to be okay, brother?’

They’d be leaving him alone, when they went to finish the job. For the first time since he’d been hurt, Mac would be without him or Bozer or Riley or Patty. It was an all-hands-on-deck sort of op. (Bozer was no field agent, but they needed his prosthetics expertise on this one.)

‘I’ll be fine, Jack. Stop worrying.’

‘You’re not going to get bored and decide to escape?’

‘No. I have this to keep me busy.’

Mac held up the tablet, indicating the YouTube videos he had queued up. Jack looked at the title of the first one.

‘Learning sign language, brother?’

Mac nodded and started typing again.
‘It’s better than using this. And even though I’ll be able to talk again soon, it might be useful one day.’

‘Can’t argue with that.’

Jack grinned at the younger man and reached out to ruffle his hair. Mac glared at him.

‘Do that again and I will turn all of your clothes orange.’

Jack just shook his head with a grin (he wouldn’t actually do it…probably…) and got up.

‘I’ll see you in a couple of days, brother.’

‘See you, Jack. Come home safely, all of you.’

‘Will do, brother.’

Jack and Thornton, the mission debrief finally over, walked through the halls of the medical facility, until they came to the large glass window that served as the interior wall to Mac’s room. (It could be fogged for privacy, like the ones back at the Phoenix, but it was currently completely transparent.) Mac, who’d managed to pick up sign language reasonably fluently in the three days that they had been gone, was trying to converse with Bozer and Riley (who’d been dismissed from debrief early, thanks to Thornton’s efforts- she hadn’t been able to do the same for Jack, unfortunately- being the most senior and only gun-carrying agent, aside from her, had its downsides) using his new skill. Bozer was looking signs up online, while Riley was trying to code some sort of app to translate sign language to text or voice. All three were smiling, and as the two older people watched, they laughed at something Bozer signed, or, at least, attempted to sign.

The two of them exchanged a glance, before looking back at the three younger team members.

Jack knew, now, that he’d never have little Jacks. There’d be no wife and kids and white picket fence in his future. Not with the life he lived, and not with the past he had. The fledgling relationship that he’d tried to rebuild with Diane, three years ago now, had died the day Sarah’s wedding invitation came in the mail, with the realization that he really, really wasn’t over her like he’d thought. (He’d truly thought he had been, truly was, really, when he and Diane had gotten together. Both times. Then she’d swept back into his life and proven him wrong. Twice.)

He’d never have that, but he’d realized of late that this odd little family he’d somehow acquired more than filled that hole in his life.

He glanced back over at the woman beside him.

Patty was hard to read, always had been. She kept a lot wrapped up tight.

Jack knew that there’d be no children for her, either. He wasn’t Mac or Riley, but he knew enough about biology to know its limitations.

He had no idea if she’d ever wanted any anyway, but in a way, she’d found them too.

Riley had become her protégé of sorts; while the hacker still went out into the field (and, in no small part thanks to the older woman’s work with her, become a very competent fighter), she also helped run a lot of ops from headquarters. Jack privately thought that she had a very bright future at the Phoenix. Maybe she’d be Director of Operations one day.
She and Bozer (who was doing very well in the labs with his top-notch prosthesis work, and whose immense and almost bizarre knowledge of accounting and the associated filing had come in handy more than once) looked like they’d have a happy future together. It warmed his heart that at least two people in his life had had luck with love.

Though, Jack thought, at least Mac was doing much, much better now, since they’d taken down Nikki and her organization. The younger man had finally gotten her out from under his skin; somewhere between her second betrayal, her attempt to set up Patty, and taking down her organization, Mac had finally managed to wrench himself free from her grasp, managed to break that hold, that power, that she’d held over him for good.

He was still young.

Jack held out hope that even though he’d never get that white picket fence happy ending they’d both yearned for, Mac would find it one day.

Watching Mac, Riley and Bozer chatting in somewhat-clumsy sign language, occasionally raising eyebrows at each other, smirking and grinning and jogging one another with their elbows, Jack grinned.

‘The kids are alright, Patty.’

She simply nodded, a smile on her face, looking at the three with a softness in her eyes, a softness that Jack knew was unusual for her, but something that he saw more and more of late when she looked at the younger members of their team, their family.

‘Yes, yes they are.’

Unbeknownst to them (neither of them knew sign language), the ‘kids’ were having a rather interesting conversation of their own using their (varying levels) of signing skills.

Bozer grinned.

‘Mom and Dad look happy!’

Both Mac and Riley shook their heads, amused smiles on their faces. They’d long grown used to Bozer’s insistence that Jack was Team Dad and Thornton (or Patricia, now, outside of work) Team Mom.

‘I always thought you two were crazy…but maybe not.’

Bozer and Riley exchanged a grin, before Riley smirked.

‘Finally, bro, you’ve seen the light!’

‘I called it first!’

Chapter End Notes
As far as I can determine, the FBI does not hire its own physicians, and I really don’t think it actually has secure medical facilities well-equipped enough to conduct surgery, if it has any at all. I also know that sign language isn’t like ‘normal’ speech in terms of syntax and the like, but I’ve written it like it is to make it easier to read. I also don’t think Bozer and Riley could pick it up fast enough to have that conversation with Mac. Please just suspend your disbelief and roll with it?

The different uses of Patty/Thornton are meant to try and differentiate at what points we’re inside Jack’s head, and what points we aren’t.

Dlwells51, thank you for your constant support, and I hope you like it! (It turned out less whumpy and more Team-as-Family with a healthy dose of Team Dad!Jack and Team Mom!Patty, I think…)

Ankita, I’ve written your request, but it might not be the next one published (depending on whether I get more requests/prompts). It’s set in the Just Another Patriotic Guy AU, after the end of that story, so I need to finish posting it first!
A Time for Family

Chapter Summary

For helloyesimhere. Six Thanksgivings with the Dalton-MacGyver-Thornton-Davis blended family. Or, the one in which the team is an actual family, not just in spirit.

Chapter Notes

For helloyesimhere.

Okay, so this is set in a very, very alternate AU: the AU in Bozer’s dream in Mac is a Star, Again, a chapter of Best Days of Your Life. (Which, I guess, is kind of an AU within an AU…)

The short version, if you haven’t read it, is the following: Jack and Mac are half-brothers with a twenty-year age gap; they share a father, but do not know each other at first- Jack is not on good terms with his biological father and considers his stepfather to be his dad. When Mac’s father and grandfather are killed in a car accident when Mac is eight, Jack leaves Delta Force to raise him in Mission City, becoming a mechanic. Patricia, an Assistant District Attorney in LA, and Diane Davis are half-sisters, and when Diane is killed in a home invasion, eight-year-old Riley is taken in by her. Eventually, Jack and Patricia (now a District Attorney) meet and fall in love when Mac and Riley are fifteen. Mac and Riley are not happy with this development initially.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

2015

‘Last night, you washed the table linens, Jack, and you brined the turkey.’

Patricia gestured at the pile of bright orange linens and the fluorescent purple turkey behind her on the kitchen bench, an eyebrow raised, shooting her boyfriend a very pointed glare, the kind of deadly stare that made defendants and their lawyers quake in the courtroom.

Jack just put his hands up in supplication, shaking his head. He’d tried to help out with Thanksgiving as best as he could (he was a terrible cook; Mac cooked most of their meals, had for years, because he was that bad), since Patricia’s job was so taxing and she rarely got any time off, he’d wanted her to have the most relaxing Thanksgiving possible.

That appeared to have backfired.
‘I swear I did it properly, Patty, I got no idea how-‘

‘And this morning, I didn’t even get a sleep-in, despite the very, very rare opportunity to do so, because you insisted on singing loudly and terribly in the shower at six am!’

‘That wasn’t me, Patty, I swear! I knew you were trying to get a sleep-in-‘

‘I felt you get out of bed very, very early this morning-‘

‘I got up to do my business and then I heard footsteps and saw lights and went to investigate!’ He was still a little paranoid at times from his Army days, even though it’d been seven years now. ‘I went downstairs and found Mac and Riley trying to make us breakfast, as a surprise, and thought that since I was up and had spoiled the surprise, I might as well help.’

‘Then how do you explain coming back into my bedroom with wet hair, if you didn’t have a shower?’

‘I did, because when I went to mix the pancake batter up, the mixer went all crazy and I wound up covered in that stuff, but I used the downstairs bathroom, and I didn’t sing, I knew you were trying to sleep in and I didn’t want to disturb you.’

‘Then how…’

Both adults’ anger at one another faded instantly, as realization dawned on their faces. Inwardly, they each scolded themselves for not seeing this sooner. (Jack blamed his exhaustion due to a drive down from Mission City that had taken three hours longer than expected, which he’d originally blamed on a malfunctioning GPS that had given them the wrong directions once they’d reached LA, and also directed them to the most traffic-heavy routes. He now realized that the GPS hadn’t been malfunctioning, but rather, Riley had done her hacker thing to it. Patricia blamed her heavy workload of late, too many late nights spent working to ensure that she could have Thanksgiving off, and the pressure she felt, trying to pull off their first Thanksgiving together. She thrived under the high-pressure environment of her job, but these emotional matters were a whole different story. How could she have been so blind? She prided herself on her skills of deduction and observation.)

‘Angus…’

‘…And Riley.’

2017

Mac, having finished his Thanksgiving dinner (complete with seconds and thirds; he was a still-growing teenage college student, after all, and homemade Thanksgiving dinner was way better than anything served up in MIT’s dining halls), looked up, around the table at the people he considered his family.

He took a deep breath and spoke as the conversation lulled.

‘I’ve decided, and I’m joining the Army after I graduate. I’m going to become an EOD tech.’

There was silence for a moment after his announcement.
Mac knew it wouldn’t come as a huge shock to any of them; he’d discussed this decision, as a maybe, as something he was considering doing, with Jack, and Bozer and Riley and even Patricia. But still, this was him making it official, in a way. Making a definite decision, a definite announcement.

He looked around the table.

His best friend’s face was a mixture of pride and worry, not an altogether too unusual expression for him in response to anything that Mac did. After a moment, he smiled and reached out to clap Mac on the back.

‘The ladies love a man in uniform, bro.’

Mac snorted, and beside her boyfriend, Riley rolled her eyes, before looking over at the blonde, that same curious blend of concern and pride in her eyes. A moment later, she grinned.

‘NASA’s going to be disappointed. And Tesla. And SpaceX. And like fifty other companies.’

Mac just shook his head again (there was probably a little bit of truth in Riley’s teasing; he always did draw crowds at the undergraduate engineering showcase or the solar car competition), and then glanced over at Jack and Patricia.

The dark-haired woman, to pretty much everyone outside this room, would have looked as composed and cool as ever, but Mac could tell that she, too, shared Bozer and Riley’s feelings.

She graced him with a smile, which he returned, and then he focused his attention on his older brother.

Truth be told, it was his reaction that mattered the most to Mac. And concerned him the most, really.

He’d discussed his decision to enlist with Jack the longest and most in-depth, of course.

And he knew that while his brother would of course be proud of him for serving, for dedicating his life to protecting others, he also knew that there was a good part of Jack who didn’t want him to enlist, who didn’t want him to put himself in danger, who would always, always want to protect him and keep him safe instead.

But, Mac was sure, he knew that Jack, of everyone sitting at this dining table, would always understand his decision the best, too.

His older brother locked eyes with him for a moment, and pride and worry and that understanding passed between them.

Jack nodded and smiled. After a moment of silence, he spoke, voice a little hoarse, a little rough, with intense, mixed emotions.

‘I’m proud of you, brother. Real proud.’ He glanced around the table, and his smile widened. ‘We all are.’

2021
Mac (who was currently between deployments), Riley (who was newly-graduated from Caltech, a year early, and had recently started working at JPL as a software engineer), Jack and Patricia sat in Jack and Patricia’s living room. (Bozer had insistently taken over the preparation of Thanksgiving dinner and was in the kitchen, from which a delicious smell was emanating.)

They were looking at Jack and Patricia’s wedding photos from several months’ back. Mac had been able to get leave to be Jack’s Best Man. Of course, Riley had been the Maid of Honour.

They came across a photo of Bozer and Riley dancing at the reception, and Mac took the opportunity to jog his friend (well, they were related, somehow, sort-of, now, but they couldn’t be bothered working out exactly what they were) with his elbow, giving her a significant look.

‘You’re going to be up next, right?’

Riley shook her head, but there was a softness in her eyes as she glanced towards the kitchen for a moment. Then, she smirked, and jogged him right back with her elbow.

‘We’ll see. Maybe if you bring a girl home next Thanksgiving, Mac…’

He groaned. (He really should have seen that one coming.) Jack turned to him, a smirk on his face. (The mention of the words ‘girl’ and ‘Mac’ in the same sentence tended to set him off.) Patricia just picked up her wineglass and took a sip, leaning back somewhat, as if to get a better view of what was about to happen, an enigmatic little smile on her face.

Unfortunately, at that moment, Mac’s phone, which was sitting on the coffee table, went off.

Jack seized it before he could, and read the text message. Riley, a grin on her face, leaned over and read it over the older man’s shoulder.

Mac groaned again (he was pretty sure he knew who it was from), as Jack and Riley turned to him with wide smirks.

‘So…’

‘Cindy, eh?’

‘Who thinks you have a cute butt.’

Even Patricia was quirking an eyebrow at him.

Mac sighed.

‘We’ve been on one date. She’s funny, intelligent and beautiful, and we had a good time. We’re going out again next Friday.’

Riley and Jack exchanged a look (it involved waggling eyebrows), and then looked at Mac again, smirks still firmly in place. The blonde just shook his head, and held out his hand for his phone. Jack handed it over after Patricia shot him a quick look. (Sending a reply to Cindy on his brother’s behalf was a pretty tempting notion…)

At that moment, Bozer, still clad in an apron, burst into the room.

He took one look at the smirks on Jack’s face and his girlfriend’s face, and his best friend’s still-shaking head.

‘Aw, come on! What did I miss?’
At that moment, after exchanging a glance, Jack and Riley burst into laughter. Despite himself, Mac chuckled, and Patricia cracked a fairly-wide smile.

That’s family.

2024

‘You okay, brother?’

Jack walked up to his younger brother, who was standing on the deck, staring up at the night sky, all alone.

That previous June, Mac had been badly hurt in the line of duty. Taken a gunshot wound to the chest and a load of shrapnel to boot.

He was pretty much fully recovered, physically at least, now, but he’d also been honourably discharged from the Army, due to a combination of the fact that the six-year commitment he’d made on enlistment was up and the fact that there were concerns about his abilities to perform as a soldier, as an EOD, due to his injuries. (Jack privately thought that his brother would have been able to prove them wrong, if he’d been given the chance, but a significant part of him was glad that Mac was back home and out for good. Safe.)

Jack knew that all of these events weighed heavily on his brother, to say the least.

The blonde turned around, and looked inside through the glass sliding doors, into the dining room. The two brothers watched in silence for a moment, arms around each other’s shoulders, as Patricia meticulously set the table, while Riley ferried some cold dishes (including two salads and a loaf of bread) into the room from the kitchen. Bozer’s head poked out into the dining room to check that everything was up to scratch occasionally.

Mac smiled slowly.

‘I’m okay, Jack.’

2026

‘Bro, have you seen the turkey baster?’

The blonde in question looked rather sheepish.

‘I might have used it for something last week?’

His best friend glared at him.

‘Not cool, bro! First Thanksgiving we’re hosting and all, so the turkey’s got to be absolutely, absolutely perfect!’

Jack and Patricia were coming to Mac, Bozer and Riley’s townhouse in Pasadena (both Mac and
Riley worked for JPL now, and Pasadena was close enough to Hollywood for Bozer’s film career) for Thanksgiving. (Though, it wasn’t going to be their place for much longer; Bozer and Riley were newly engaged and planning to move out together, so it’d just be Mac’s soon.)

‘I’m sorry, Bozer. I’ll make you a new one; just give me ten minutes?’

Bozer shook his head, but grinned, then smirked, exchanging a glance with Riley, who was chopping cabbage on the other side of the kitchen.

‘I’ll forgive you, bro, on one condition: tomorrow, you go ask out The Girl Next Door.’

Mac groaned.

Everybody was far too interested in his love life for his liking.

Bozer just jabbed the air in front of him with a wooden spoon, smirk still firmly on his face.

‘She’s smart, and I’m happily attached to my computer goddess, but she’s cute, too.’

Riley, who’d paused her chopping the moment that Bozer had glanced at her, smirked at Mac as well.

‘And she actually thought your automatic Roomba-style lawnmower, which went rogue, broke through the fence and went crazy in her yard, was pretty cool.’

‘I fixed the fence, and it didn’t go crazy, it just mowed her grass…in an interesting pattern…’

Bozer and Riley exchanged an exasperated glance, and then Riley pointed to the pumpkin pie that was resting on the breakfast bar.

‘And she baked you a pie.’

Mac shook his head.

‘She baked us a pie as a Thanksgiving present.’

Both Bozer and Riley looked very sceptical.

‘You are deep in a river in Egypt, bro.’

‘Both of you.’

A little voice in Mac’s head (which had been very chatty lately), chipped in, telling him that they weren’t wrong. He told it to shut up, and started trying to formulate a reply.

He was saved by the doorbell ringing, announcing Jack and Patricia’s arrival.

Well, he was saved until Bozer and Riley, rather evil smirks on their faces, raised The Girl Next Door over dinner.

(His vengeance was appropriately diabolical.)

(He went next door the day after Thanksgiving. She said yes.)

2035
‘Uncle Bozer!’

Bozer reached down and hugged the three-year-old, blonde, blue-eyed boy, with his best friend’s cleft chin.

‘Hey, Mini-Mac, how’s it going?’

‘Uncle Bozer, is Grandpa Jack telling the truth when he says that most babies are delivered by stork, but MacGyver babies are delivered by drone? I don’t believe him, because then why is Mommy getting fat?’

Bozer froze. Trust his best friend’s kid to be far too smart and far too curious for his age.

‘Umm…well…uh…’

He was saved by his wife.

‘Why don’t you ask Grandpa Jack when he gets here? Call him out if he’s lying; you know Grandma Patty won’t be happy if he is.’ She gestured to her five-year-old daughter. ‘Why don’t you two go work on that movie you were telling me all about last week?’

The two ‘cousins’ grinned and ran off into the living room, eager to continue their work on the movie they were making, using one of Bozer’s old cameras. (It involved aliens being fought and defeated with a toaster.)

Bozer turned to his six months’ pregnant wife with a grin.

‘You’re so devious, so, so devious.’

She just smirked.

‘And you love me for it.’

His grin widened.

‘That I do.’

She smiled back at him, and then Bozer made his way into the kitchen of his best friend’s house to join Mac, who was occupied with preparing Thanksgiving dinner, while Riley walked into the living room and took a seat on the couch.

‘Hey, bro. Need a hand?’

Mac was currently feeding potatoes into some sort of contraption that looked like it washed them, peeled them and cut them into quarters, ready for parboiling, all at once.

‘Hi, Bozer. Yeah, that’d be great, could you grab the carrots from the fridge for me? After the potatoes are done, I’ve just got to make a couple of quick modifications, and then they’re going into this too.’

Bozer went to the fridge and rummaged around for a bit until he located the carrots. He walked back over to Mac, stopping by the glass backsplash as he went.

‘You want me to put the backsplash TV on, bro, give us something to at least listen to as we
work?’

His best friend shook his head.

‘I’d rather not.’ He sighed and looked rather grim for a moment. ‘Everything, and I mean everything, on TV’s all about Watney right now.’

Bozer nodded, matching the other man’s melancholy expression.

‘Man, it’d suck to be his family or the Ares III Crew, today especially.’

Mac just nodded solemnly.

The potato washing/peeling/cutting machine went silent, and conversation drifted into the kitchen from the living room.

‘…the other night, I just really, really, really wanted chocolate with chilli sauce and sardines.’

‘On one hand, that sounds disgusting, on the other hand, that sounds really good…’

Bozer and Mac simply exchanged a glance.

Pregnancy cravings were weird.

Both couples had learned the first time to just roll with them and not think too much into the why. (Bozer and Riley had been pretty happy to just roll with it; after reading many peer-reviewed studies that weren’t conclusive and often contradictory later, the other couple had given up too.)

‘Bro, I’m going to be running to the store for sardines and chilli sauce sometime in the next couple of days, aren’t I?’

‘Probably. I’d give you some of ours, but…’

At that moment, the doorbell rang, signalling Jack and Patricia’s arrival.

Bozer grinned at his best friend, and started walking into the hallway, gesturing for Mac (who was tinkering with his contraption) to follow.

‘Bro, trust me, you’re going to want to see this. Your son’s got a choice question for his Grandpa Jack.’

Mac just shook his head, a smile on his face.

*It’s going to be a great Thanksgiving.*

Chapter End Notes

Yes, everything I write pretty much winds up ending (eventually, anyway) at some variation of *Thermodynamics*. (That’s why that story’s called *Thermodynamics*)!

I’m not exactly sure how the *The Martian* crossover snuck in, but it happened. (Mac would have been really, really helpful when it came to doing those rover and MAV modifications, IMHO.) And I know that Mac and Riley and Bozer’s kids are
ludicrously precocious, but then again, given their parentage, maybe that isn’t unbelievable…

helloyesimhere, I hope you liked it and don’t require a dentist/have diabetes after all that sugary fluff…
For a guest: Mac goes on a date with a beautiful, intelligent young woman who works in one of the Phoenix’s labs. As usual, he has no luck in love, because it turns out that the lady is his boss’s niece.

Set in the _Best Days of Your Life_ AU, six years after the end of that story. For those who haven’t read it, in this AU, the Phoenix Foundation is actually a think-tank and it is based in Boston. Mac and Thornton are the only ones from our usual team who work there; Thornton is the Director, and Mac one of the employees. (Jack runs Dalton Auto Repair in Boston, which is where Mac worked part-time during college, while Riley and Bozer live normal lives.) In this AU, Mac finished college at MIT in three years at the age of nineteen, and has worked for the Phoenix ever since.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

**JULY 2024**

**PHOENIX FOUNDATION HEADQUARTERS**

**SOMEWHERE IN BOSTON**

At 5 pm on Friday, Mac left the office he shared with a couple of other employees, and strode towards the car park.

(He often stayed late, if he was in the middle of something, particularly something really interesting, but not today.)

He had a date tonight.

Dr Vivian Ho, PhD, was a biochemist who’d recently joined the Phoenix Foundation. The Foundation’s younger employees (of which Mac was one, despite having worked there for six years) tended to eat lunch together, and sometimes, they went out for a drink after work or on the weekends. Naturally, she’d fallen into that group when she’d started a couple of months back, and after that couple of months…well, she was beautiful, and intelligent, and good company, and Mac was pretty sure there was something there.

Hence, date.
(He was so going to get it from Jack at the garage tomorrow, and Riley and Bozer when he Skyped them on Sunday morning, their time, as was their custom. They were all still really far too interested in his love life for his liking.)

Riley and Bozer lived in Pasadena now, as Riley worked for JPL as a software engineer. (She’d been offered a position at the Phoenix, despite her juvie record, but had declined.) Pasadena was also conveniently close to Hollywood, for Bozer’s film career. (Mac suspected that that might have been part of the reason Riley had declined, the other being that after years of hacking and white-hat work on the side as she’d studied, she’d wanted a change and a new challenge.) Bozer, Mac knew, also had a ring hidden in a pair of ugly socks (they were puce with old-fashioned cameras on them) that Mac had bought him as a joke.

It’s funny, actually, how small the world is.

My boss works out at the gym next door to Jack’s garage. She just happened to meet Riley there and took her under her wing.

Now, Riley works for JPL, and she’s somehow become good friends with Beth Taylor, the girl from the 2018 Solar Car Competition. Apparently, Beth’s engaged to her college boyfriend, who, by the way, turned out to be a guy on the team that placed second three years in a row in the Solar Car Competition. He works at JPL now too, and apparently still vividly remembers me.

And Thomas Davies, one of my engineering buddies, who ended up at SpaceX, works with Nikki, of all people.

And Charlie said that he ran into Penny completely by accident in some café in New York City last week…

Really, it’s a small world.

Six degrees of separation and all.

Mac walked past Thornton’s office. The glass was currently transparent instead of frosted, and he happened to glance over, into her office, as he passed.

His boss happened to look up at that moment, and, for some reason, regarded him with one of her probably-patented deadly stares.

He swore that he felt her eyes on his back as he kept walking.

Mac pushed down the little thrill of fear (Thornton could be terrifying) that resulted.

I haven’t done anything wrong; I’m not leaving work early, I got that report on her desk two days before the deadline, my last performance review was excellent…

Seriously, I haven’t done anything to earn her wrath.

She’s probably annoyed or angry at someone else, and I just happened to walk by at the wrong time.

ARCADE

BOSTON
‘…The strangest thing happened as I was leaving today. I was walking past Thornton’s office, and she seemed to give me one of her looks. I really don’t know why, I haven’t done anything…’

Standing beside him, next to the Whack-a-Mole machine, Viv looked up at him with a smile that was part-wry and part-sheepish.

‘She’s my aunt, Mac. That’s why.’

He froze with the rubber mallet in mid-air, about to whack a mole.

*You know, I did not expect that.*

‘We’ve tried very hard to keep it quiet; I don’t want people thinking that I got my job on anything other than merit.’

*I really didn’t see any resemblance at first…but now that I know, I kind of do.*

‘Well, handily, I take after my dad’s side of the family, and that’s a pretty standard reaction.’

The Whack-a-Mole machine made a game-over sound. Mac didn’t notice.

*I am a dead man.*

She rolled her eyes.

‘She’s not going to kill you. You’re one of her best employees; she’s quite fond of you, really.’

*I’m thinking out loud, aren’t I?*

She grinned and nodded.

‘Yup.’ The grin morphed into more of a smirk. ‘It’s kind of cute, actually.’ She glanced at the Whack-a-Mole machine, and then around the arcade. ‘Come on, let’s go play DDR, I’ve been looking forward to kicking your ass!’

*I am still so dead. And it really is a small world.*

‘No, you’re not, yes, it is, and thinking out loud again, Mac!’

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**PHOENIX FOUNDATION HEADQUARTERS**

**SOMETHERE IN BOSTON**

On Monday afternoon, as he stood to leave Thornton’s office, after a brief meeting during which he and a couple of co-workers had presented their latest report, his boss picked up his copy of said report.

He paused, and didn’t follow his co-workers to the door. She held it out to him as the others left.

‘Excellent, as always, MacGyver.’ She pinned him with *that* stare. ‘You’ve never given me a reason to doubt you in the slightest. I expect that will remain so, won’t it?’
He gulped.

‘Yes, ma’am.’

*Jack and Bozer and Riley are never, ever, ever going to let me hear the end of this.*

Chapter End Notes

Yes, this is silly and maybe a bit OOC for everyone involved (I don’t think that all-business Thornton would threaten one of her employees while at work, for example), but the entire point of this fic is humour and silliness and a touch of irony, due to the whole premise! (I made Mac play Whack-a-Mole, for example, solely because that mental image is amusing to me.)

Vivian Ho is inspired by the fact that Sandrine Holt, according to her Wikipedia page, was born Sandrine Ho and is half-Chinese. Thus, I decided to use that background for her niece.
The Tale of MacGyver

Chapter Notes

For Bozer (and helloyesimhere). Fantasy!AU. Angus MacGyver, Necromancer, and his friends, the healer Jack of Dalton, the mage Rileiieldavis, the Elf Bozer and Patricia-of-the-Thorns, set off on an adventure to rescue Princess Nikki of Carpentaria from the Dark Lord.

I cheated a little, no-one actually requested this, but I just had to write it! This is set in a fantasy!AU, and is inspired by a Tumblr post that I saw on the movie-magician-n-waffle-wizard Tumblr that helloyesimhere has created for Bozer, and the tags that she attached to it. The post is called smash those tropes and is by walkingbomb; it’s about subverting/smashing common fantasy tropes and is hilarious! You can find it on the movie-magician-n-waffle-wizard Tumblr!

Ankita, your request is up next, and Patty Beau Hammond, yours is the one after that (I’m sorry I didn’t see it earlier, for some reason, I didn’t get an email notifying me of your review…)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Angus MacGyver, known to all as Mac, Necromancer, looked thoughtfully at the notice that had been pinned up on the noticeboard just outside the tavern.

It looked like his chess match with his elderly orc friend, Orlov, was going to have to wait.

Princess Nikki of the neighbouring kingdom of Carpentaria had just been kidnapped by a Dark Lord. Brave and noble adventurers were wanted to rescue her.

He knelt down and scratched under the jawbone of his beloved childhood dog.

‘What do you think, Archimedes? Grandfather always said it’s important to help out a damsel-in-distress.’

The skeleton dog just wagged his tail.

The skeleton standing beside him shook his skull.

‘I’m standing right next to you, boy. Stop talking as if I’m not here.’

Mac smiled sheepishly up at his grandfather. (He’d reanimated him to ask him for advice about ladies; he was pretty sure that both Katarina, the wagon maker’s daughter, and Cindy, one of the serving wenches at Victor, kin of Lev’s tavern, were interested in him, and it was an awkward situation to say the least.)

The skeleton just shook his head again.

‘And can you make me dead again before you set off to rescue the Princess? I’m too old for that
sort of adventure.’

Mac laughed, and muttered an incantation. His grandfather dissolved back into dust.

Giving Archimedes one last scratch under his jawbone, Mac stood.

He set off for the house belonging to his friend, Jack of Dalton, a healer, but not before reanimating a falcon and sending it off with a message for his Elvish friend, whose Elvish name was unpronounceable to humans and hence went by Bozer.

They had a princess to rescue.

Locked in battle with a couple of demons, Mac muttered incantations as his skeleton army, composed mostly of dead rats and bats (they were in a cave, and it was always easier to reanimate life forms that had died nearby), attacked one of the demons.

A poorly-aimed arrow just missed him and completely missed its target, the demon.

‘Sorry, bro!’

(Bozer was a great friend, Mac’s best friend, perhaps, but he was not a very good shot, unlike most Elves.)

A moment later, a large number of flying forks embedded themselves in the demon, which gave a horrific scream and vanished.

Jack gave the other demon a very hard knock on the head with his staff, and Patricia-of-the-Thorns, the last member of their party, stabbed it with one of her knives, and it, too, screamed and vanished.

‘Does all the magic you know involve cutlery, kid?’

Their mage, Rilelieldavis, who insisted that they called her Riley, placed a hand on her hip and rolled her eyes at the older man. Patricia, who was very serious and never spoke, simply gave him a look, arching an eyebrow elegantly at him. Mac and Bozer shared a glance, rather amused.

‘Seriously, old man?’ She gestured at the spot where one of the demons had been only moments before. ‘Read the room!’ The mage crossed her arms, rather defensively. ‘I’ve been imprisoned at the Finishing School for Young Lady Mages for the last two years; I only know housekeeping magic!’

The adventurers stared at the unconscious corrupt taxman before them.

Ralphiel, his name was.

He was very, very annoying.

They were trying to locate the Dark Lord’s lair in order to rescue Princess Nikki. Following the gold was always a good way to find things, which had led them to Ralphiel.

Jack, who was standing above the unconscious man, his fist raised, just stared back at his friends.

They had just finished interrogating him, but a last, rather off-colour, comment about Patricia had
led to the healer punching the taxman square in the jaw.

‘Aww, come on, he deserved that!’

Jack dabbed a paste on his arm, and then some of a different paste on his side. He picked up his staff, and pointed the crystal at the top at his knee and muttered an incantation.

Sitting by the fire, next to his friend, Mac smirked, running a hand along Archimedes’ spine.

‘Lucky you’re a healer, old man.’

The older man just shook his head, rolling his eyes, and looked skyward.

‘How come I’m always the one getting hurt?’

Mac, too, shook his head, as his smirk grew wider.

‘Because you’re the one who likes to fight hand-to-hand, Jack.’

Jack jabbed his staff in the direction of Mac’s chest, and then flexed his biceps.

‘Hey, kid, I don’t spend hours working out just to impress the ladies.’

At that moment, Patricia exited her and Riley’s tent, and glanced at Jack, quirked an eyebrow at him, and then shook her head, before setting off towards the nearby stream.

Jack glanced over at the blonde Necromancer, waggling his eyebrows.

‘I think she likes me.’

Mac snorted.

‘Keep dreaming, old man. Keep dreaming.’

Jack glanced at Patricia, as the two chased the alchemist Sevchenko through the woods.

(The Dark Lord had hired him to give them a very nasty surprise, which Mac and Riley, with Bozer’s help, were currently neutralizing.)

‘Patty, why don’t you ever say anything? We’re friends, you can talk to us!’

The woman just shot him a look that very clearly said not now, so Jack just turned his attention back to the fleeing alchemist.

(Later, reading the message that she’d written in the soil using one of her knives, he would kick himself for not realizing that she was mute.)

(Hey, at least Mac, with his genius brain, hadn’t noticed either.)

(She kind of gave off that mysterious, strong, silent-type kind of air, after all.)

Mac’s grandfather repeatedly told him that things are often never as they seem.

It turned out that that was very, very true.
Princess Nikki, it turned out, hadn’t been kidnapped.

Instead, she’d pretended to be kidnapped, as part of a rather convoluted plan to take over the kingdom of Carpentaria, as well as the neighbouring kingdoms.

Part of that plan had involved kidnapping the so-called Dark Lord.

Who was actually a lady.

And not very dark at all.

Lady Penelope, the so-called Dark Lord, was a young woman in pink kitten heels and a long floral cape in pastel.

As Jack and Patricia dealt with Princess Nikki (who’d looked at Mac in a way that made him feel a bit like the beef that Bozer liked to make, which the Elf called pastrami) and Bozer and Riley carefully wrapped up the Dark Orb that the Princess had had with her, Mac unlocked the cage that held Penelope. (He was no smith or thief, but he had a bit of a knack with this sort of thing. Bat phalanges made excellent lock-picks.)

The young woman flung her arms around him as soon as he opened the door.

‘Oh, thank you, thank you, thank you!’

Quite hesitantly, and ears a little pink, Mac hugged her back gently.

‘You’re welcome, Lady Penelope.’

‘Oh, please, call me Penny!’

_________________________________________

‘You know, we wouldn’t have let you travel with us if we knew that you had a dragon on your tail!’

Cynthia, who was a trader, along with her husband Scott, yelled in the general direction of Mac and his friends as they drove their wagon convoy as fast as they could.

After delivering former-Princess Nikki (she’d been disowned and imprisoned) and Penny back to Carpentaria, the adventurers were returning to their own kingdom with the Dark Orb. (They were going to give it to a librarian-mage to be studied properly.) Cynthia and Scott had kindly allowed them to travel in their convoy in exchange for their help defending it from bandits.

Unfortunately, somewhere along the way, a dragon had started chasing them.

Mac sighed internally.

Well, we did set off on an adventure.

Guess we can’t complain when we get a little more adventure than we were hoping for.

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Mac, Bozer, Riley, Jack, Patricia, Scott and Cynthia all stared at the dragon that had landed right in front of them.

The dragon took a step forwards, and then grinned, showing all his teeth.
‘Finally, I caught up to you guys!’

They all stared.

The dragon reached into what seemed to be a little pouch in his belly, and pulled out a scroll of parchment.

He held it out to Bozer.

‘Bro, you dropped this.’ The dragon’s grin grew wider. ‘It’s pretty good, keep writing! I’d totally read the rest of *The Tale of MacGyver*!’

Bozer reached out and took the scroll, still somewhat dumbfounded, though, no-one else was any better either. They were all still staring at the dragon.

‘Anyway, I’m Charlie, it was nice to meet you guys, but I’ve gotta get going; I have to pick up my kids from school! They’ve been learning to breathe fire, and I’m sure they’re going to want to show their dad what they can do!’

The dragon waved, and took off.

(They all stared at the spot where Charlie had been for a good five minutes.)

(Afterwards, Bozer thanked his lucky stars that no-one seemed to remember the scroll’s title. It wasn’t quite finished, and he wasn’t sure if he wanted his friends to read *The Tale of MacGyver*, at least not yet.)

Mac walked into the library belonging to his friend and favourite librarian-mage, Bethany, the tailor’s daughter. He grinned at the young girl, her apprentice Valerie, who was going through a book, making notes, at a desk by the door.

‘Hi, Valerie.’

The girl grinned back at him.

‘Hi, Mac!’

‘How’s the necromancy-alchemy fusion going?’

‘It’s getting there; I’ve got a couple of questions to ask you about necromancy, actually…’

He smiled fondly.

He, like Beth (as the librarian-mage liked to be called), was very fond of the young apprentice. She was very, very bright and they both liked helping her out with her projects.

Mac raised the Dark Orb that he held in his right hand.

‘Give me about fifteen minutes?’

Valerie smiled and nodded.

‘She’s in the Healing Magic area.’
‘Oh, for Gods’ sake! This is the seventh Dark Orb this year! These are supposed to be rare, and then all you adventurer-types keep bringing them to me!’ The librarian-mage snorted and glanced at Mac. ‘The very fabric of reality must be ripping apart. Better make sure your affairs are in order and ask that tavern girl to the next village dance already!’

The Necromancer simply chuckled, and held up the pie that he carried in his left hand.

‘Well, I brought you a second gift, one that I don’t think all the other adventurers bring you…’

Beth’s eyes lit up and she gave him a bright, fond smile.

‘Oh, you brought me pie! Thanks, Mac!’ He handed it over to her with a grin (she had a really, really odd fondness for this particular foodstuff), and she put down the Dark Orb. ‘Did you see Valerie on your way in? She’s got some questions on necromancy, I tried to help her out, but it’s really your field…’

Mac made his way to Victor, kin of Lev’s tavern, where he’d said he’d meet Jack, Bozer, Riley and Patricia after delivering the Dark Orb to Beth.

He walked inside, and immediately spotted his friends at a table, mugs of ale in front of them.

He sat down, and smiled at Bozer when the Elf handed him a mug.

Looking at one another across the table, the five friends shared a smile (even Patricia was smiling), and clinked their mugs of ale together in a toast.

It was a good adventure.

A great adventure.

With even better friends.

Mac cocked an eyebrow at the healer, who had suddenly ducked under the table when the tavern door opened.

This was the third time that evening.

Bozer and Riley looked equally confused, while Patricia just smiled an enigmatic little smile (she always seemed to know more than the rest of them).

‘Jack…’

The healer looked up at his friend. He actually looked kind of scared, which was very, very unusual for him.

‘Matty the Hun’s back in town!’

Matty the Hun was a fearsome and very successful adventurer.

‘I know, Jack! She’s a legend!’

Jack just nodded.

‘She’s terrifying!’ He gulped. ‘I adventured with her once…and well…’
'What did you do, old man?'

'Um…'

For the record, Matty the Hun didn’t kill Jack.

She didn’t permanently injure him either.

Still, he did have good reason to be terrified.

Chapter End Notes

Yeah, this is weird, but it was so much fun to write! It was so, so much fun putting in all of those cameos! And yes, Mac has about five love interests of some degree in this story (depending on how you read it, I guess; I think a lot of said love interests have a fairly one-sided interest in our adorkable Necromancer) – choose your own ending/pick your own favourite? (Sorry to anyone who is a fan of Nikki…)
For Ankita. Jack tells Mac the story of how he met the woman he calls Patty. Or, at least, he tells him the part of the story that isn’t classified. (That’s the important bit, anyway.)

We’re back to serious after the silliness of Dead Man Walking and The Tale of MacGyver!

This is set in the Just Another Patriotic Guy/The Roommate Chronicles AU, about two years after the end of the former. This will make (some) sense even if you haven’t read those stories, I think; really all you need to know is that the Phoenix Foundation is actually a think-tank, it is based in D.C, and Mac, Jack, Riley and Patricia all work for the Phoenix. Prior to working there, Mac (as an EOD tech) and Jack (as a CIA agent) served together in Afghanistan. Riley is Patricia’s protégé, Bozer and Riley are a couple, Mac has a girlfriend (Dr Beth Taylor from Paperclip Charms), and in general, they are one big happy family who live relatively mundane lives.

Standing beside the rail of the rooftop deck, Jack took another swig of his beer, looking down at the red-and-orange leaves on the trees on the sidewalk. After a moment of silence, he turned to the young man he called his brother.

‘Most of it’s classified and all, so I can’t tell you that bit…’ He took another drink. ‘…But I guess the really important parts aren’t. Never were.’ He glanced over at the blonde, a look of apology in his eyes. He and Mac had long ago come to an agreement to not have secrets between the two of them if it could be helped. It might have been a largely unspoken agreement, but it was there and they both tried hard to respect it.

The younger man just smiled at him.

‘It’s not really a secret, Jack.’ He, too, looked out over the city, then pulled out a paperclip from his pocket. Jack watched as a little Gmail icon took shape, and smiled. ‘Besides, it’s nice to keep something like this to yourself, just for a little while.’

The older man smirked.
‘You of all people would know that, brother. Wooing a woman over email, all the while insisting to all your friends that you are just friends, then bringing her over to meet said friends all the while saying that she isn’t your girl yet.’

Mac just shook his head with a smile in response to Jack’s teasing.

‘You know that’s not how it happened, old man. We were just friends at first, and we were in deeper than we thought, in hindsight.’ The blonde looked down at the bent paperclip in his hands, only just realizing exactly what he’d made. His smile grew a little softer, fonder. ‘My grandfather always said that you don’t find love, it finds you. Sometimes, it sneaks up on you.’

Jack nodded. He knew that was true, for sure.

(He hadn’t looked for love, not after Sarah. But Diane had happened…and now, something was growing between him and Patty, something that Riley, and Bozer, and maybe even Mac, had seen coming before he did.)

‘Your grandfather was a wise man.’ He took another drink, turning to Mac for a moment, before staring back out at the skyline. ‘Six years before I met you, I was working in South America, under Matty the Hun…’

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**MAY 2003**

**CIA SAFE HOUSE AND BASE OF OPERATIONS**

**SOMETIME IN COLOMBIA**

Jack sat up in bed with a groan, giving up on trying to sleep. He glanced at the clock beside him. It read 2 am.

Grabbing a T-shirt, he threw it on, and padded into the dimly-lit common area. To his surprise, he heard a soft voice. He pushed down the sudden urge to seize a weapon. He was in a CIA safe house, a base of operations with state-of-the-art security, for God’s sake! Instead, he focused on the voice. A woman’s voice. A familiar woman’s voice. Singing. Excellently, and melancholically.

‘The other night, dear, as I lay sleeping, I dreamt I held you in my arms. But when I awoke, dear, I was mistaken, so I hung my head and I cried…’

He made his way towards the little terrace area they had. As he approached it, the voice stopped singing suddenly, when he was still a good ten feet away from the door.

He gave a little, somewhat wry, smile when it did. She was one of the best in the business, after all.

Jack walked out onto the terrace, where Thornton, his partner, sat on a bench, her back to the wall, shrouded in the darkness of the night.

She was a good partner, a great partner, watched his back and the rest of their team’s in the field, excellent at her job. She, unlike him, was career CIA, but she was definitely no paper-pusher. She was much, much tougher and stronger than her slender frame suggested, and a damn good shot. She was also rather strict and by-the-book; she kind of reminded him of an old-fashioned schoolmarm, and he could feel the disapproval rolling off of her whenever he called their boss Matty the Hun. Still, he’d soon come to realize that she was willing to bend the rules when it was
needed.

Though, she kept a professional, almost cool, distance from him and the rest of the team. Three months’ working together and he’d never seen her join them for a drink. Heck, he wasn’t sure if they’d ever even had a conversation that wasn’t work-related.

He sure as hell hadn’t known that she could sing.

Though, he supposed, given her almost-terrifying competence at everything he’d ever seen her do, he shouldn’t be too shocked.

He glanced over at her as he made his way towards the edge of the terrace, leaning against the railing.

‘You know, Thornton, any noise you make’s not going to bother me.’ He indicated his ears. ‘Still kinda deaf from the big boom earlier.’

There wasn’t a response, and her face remained as inscrutable as ever, so he turned away from her, looking out into the distance. Looking north. Towards where he knew she would be.

A little while later, he heard the voice again, as sad and soft as before.

‘You are my sunshine, my only sunshine, you make me happy, when skies are grey. You’ll never know, dear, how much I love you. Please don’t take my sunshine away…’

Jack gave a very wan smile, losing himself in the words, the music, and the memories.

A smile in the middle of a firefight.

Facing near-death, together, on more than one occasion, but somehow making it out alive.

‘Ladies first.’

‘You know, I’d marry you in a hot minute if you didn’t have a boyfriend.’

He sighed.

Sarah would never know, how much he loved her. (He’d never said it seriously, and never would.) And that was for the best.

She was getting married.

She was happy.

He’d probably mess it up somehow anyway.

‘The other night, dear, as I lay sleeping, I dreamt I held you…’

A week later, after yet another day during which they’d ended up a little worse for the wear, Jack walked into the kitchen, intent on a snack.

He found his partner there, drinking a cup of coffee. He made his way over to the fridge, deliberately trying not to pay too much attention to her. She reminded him, in a way, of a skittish, wary, yet deadly, wild animal- a lion, or a tiger, or a wolf, perhaps.
‘Considering that they produce so much of the world’s best coffee beans, you’d think Colombians wouldn’t drink so much instant.’

His head buried in the fridge, Jack gave a small grin.

Small-talk was definitely progress.

‘Instant’s still better than none. And the instant here is way better than anything you find in an MRE.’

The week after the Coffee Incident, as he called it in his head, Jack was in the kitchen again, preparing dinner, as it was his turn.

He was chopping jalapenos (he was making good old Texas-style chili), when Thornton came into the kitchen. She watched him for a moment, and then came over and grabbed an onion, peeling and chopping it into perfectly-sized pieces, far faster than he could have done it.

He was starting to get used to her being almost-horrifyingly competent at everything.

They worked in comfortable silence for a while, until the chili was simmering away in the pot on the stove.

After a moment of watching the chili, she leaned over and turned the stove down, bringing the chili down to a gentler simmer.

‘You need to let it simmer gently, or the liquid will evaporate off before the beef is cooked, and the meat will be dry.’

Jack shook his head, a look of disbelief on his face.

‘You’re telling me, a born-and-raised Texan, how to make Texas chili?’

She quirked an eyebrow at him, a very faint smile on her face.

‘Yes, yes I am, because you’re a terrible cook.’

‘Excuse me, I am not!’

(The beef was moister than it’d ever been any other time he’d made it. That night, he received compliments on his cooking for just about the first time ever.)

A week after that, on a quiet evening at sunset, Jack and Thornton were both out on the terrace again, sitting on opposite ends of the bench in comfortable silence. Jack lounged against the wall, while his partner maintained better posture.

He reached into his pocket, and pulled out a picture, a little battered around the edges. It was a photo of him and Sarah, in a little bar somewhere in Hanoi, drinking beer and laughing, after one of his first CIA missions.

A good memory.

Thornton, too, was lost in her own memories. After a glance over at Jack, noting that he was occupied with his photo, she pulled up the long necklace that she wore around her neck at all times, concealed beneath her shirt, and played with the ring, channel-set with diamonds, that was on it,
hanging near her heart constantly.

They both watched the sunset, not really there, and not really together, each lost in their own past.

As the sun sank below the horizon, she hesitantly shot him a look, and indicated the photo in his hands with a nod.

Jack looked at her for a moment, then back down at his photo.

‘Her name’s Sarah. Sarah Adler. My first partner in the CIA. Damn good one, too. We got in and out of a lot of scrapes together.’ He looked out at the horizon, then back down at his photo. ‘She got engaged a few months ago. I asked for a transfer.’

He looked back over at the dark-haired woman, who simply nodded. He was getting better at reading her, and he was quite certain there was understanding of a sort in her eyes.

She lifted her ring up slightly, staring at it in the dwindling light for a moment, before speaking.

‘He was career CIA too.’ Jack swore he heard the slightest quiver in her voice. ‘An op went south. He didn’t come home.’ A silence for a moment. He was dead certain about the quiver. ‘It was going to be a fall wedding, in October in D.C.’

He nodded, and they locked eyes for a moment, sharing heartbreak and sadness and understanding.

‘Leaves are beautiful that time of year.’

‘Yes, they are.’

They sat there again, in comfortable silence, until all traces of the sun were gone. Jack got up first, putting away his photo, and held out a hand to her as if to help her up.

‘Now that we’ve bonded and all, how about I shout you a beer, Patty?’

She slipped her necklace back into her shirt, ignored his proffered hand, and stood, hitting him with her deadly stare.

Jack simply grinned.

‘Oh, come on, Patty, we’re friends now, I’m not going to call you Thornton! It’ll grow on you!’

______________________________

**OCTOBER 2018**

**MAC’S RESIDENCE**

**WASHINGTON D.C**

‘…We were partners for eighteen months under Matty the Hun, and then Matty got promoted, so Patty got her job, being a highly-promising agent and all. I worked another eighteen months in South America with her as my boss.’ Jack took another swig of his beer. ‘Then I got promoted too, and pulled back stateside.’

There was something in the older man’s tone that made Mac give him a look. A hint of sadness of sorts. Jack sighed, and finished off the last of his beer, staring back out over the street.
Six months after I got back to the States, one of her team’s ops went south. Real south. He sighed again. ‘She made the best calls she could, did everything she could have, but she lost her whole team.’ Jack looked up, into Mac’s wide eyes. (His boss carried a lot more grief, a lot more darkness, than he had ever even considered.) ‘Somehow, she salvaged the op, all on her own. Got the job more-or-less done. Higher-ups ended up commending her for it.’ There was a hint of bitterness in Jack’s tone, a bitterness that Mac understood well. It didn’t sit right with them, to commend someone for a job well done, even if it was, objectively, a job well done, not when so many people didn’t come home. Never felt like a job well done when that happened. ‘Didn’t sit well with Patty, either. Maybe it was the straw that broke the camel’s back. She quit the spy game, left the CIA.’ Jack shook his head. ‘Of course, the whole op was classified, and I was out on another op, so I didn’t find out until months later.’ He looked down for a moment, then back up at Mac. ‘I didn’t find out what had happened to her until she showed up on my doorstep and told me I could either drive a desk at the CIA or come and work for the Phoenix.’

Mac did some quick mental arithmetic.

‘So for over eight years, you had no idea where your ex-partner and friend had ended up?’

Jack nodded.

‘She’s the best in the business for a reason, brother. She disappeared. She’s real good at that. I asked around a bit, but she didn’t leave much of a trail, and spies are damn squirrelly and not real keen on sharing info. All I knew is that she got out of the spy game.’ Jack gave a snort. ‘I didn’t expect to find her running a think-tank years later.’ Another snort. ‘Didn’t think she’d be my boss again either.’

Mac nodded, and bit his lip.

‘Were you and Patricia ever…?’

Jack shook his head firmly.

‘Oh, no, brother. No. We never crossed that line. Never really considered it, even.’ Jack shrugged, a bit of a smirk growing on his face. ‘Well, I flirted a bit.’ Mac shook his head with a wry smile. ‘You know, adrenaline, watching each other’s backs, a little loneliness, heartbreak, trying to let go of Sarah, and she’s a good-looking woman.’ He looked into the distance for a moment. ‘But no. I don’t think we’d have fit together then anyway. Too different and too similar in all the wrong ways, too hard and too soft in all the wrong places. Had a different set of demons then. Too much baggage and too-broken hearts.’

The younger man jogged the older with his elbow, none too gently.

‘Didn’t realize you were a poet, old man.’ Mac’s teasing expression grew softer and more serious. ‘But now…you’re different, now.’

Jack nodded, looking down at the trees with their fall leaves.

‘A bit more worn around the edges. Aged. Older, wiser. Maybe we’ll fit together now.’

The blonde nodded, eyes serious, and reached out and put an arm around Jack’s shoulders.

‘I hope you do, Jack. I really hope you do.’ A soft, gentle smile spread across his face, as he tucked the little Gmail icon paperclip into his pocket. ‘I think I’ve got my happy ending. I really, really want you to have yours too.’
Jack squeezed Mac’s shoulders in return, remembering conversations about white picket fences that seemed almost a lifetime ago, back in Afghanistan. He might have nineteen years on the younger man, nineteen years’ more baggage and lost loves and mistakes, nineteen years’ more time to become jaded, but part of Jack had always held onto that white picket fence dream, just as Mac had.

‘Hey, it’s not as if I’m short on happiness, brother, or family. I’ve got you young ‘uns.’

Mac laughed.

‘Showing your age, old man.’

Jack just shook his head at the younger man.

Even if whatever was growing between him and Patty worked out, even if they fit together now (even though he was worried about screwing it up, for some reason, he had an inkling, a sense of faith, that they’d work out how to fix it), they wouldn’t have children of their own. They were far too old now.

But then again, they weren’t exactly childless either, in a way. They had Mac and Riley, who were, Jack thought, almost like their children, though each had their own parents too. (Riley and Diane’s relationship would always be special, and neither of them wanted to intrude on that in the slightest, though Jack liked to think that he and Patty each had a special bond with the young hacker, too. And Mac and his father were back on good terms, and there was a past between them that Jack would never share with Mac, though by the same token, there was a shared history between Mac and Jack that Mac would never share with his father.) There wasn’t really a limit to love, after all.

Maybe it was better this way.

After all, they’d missed the diapers and the terrible twos and pretty much all of the angsty teenage years. (Patty had missed them all, Jack had caught the tail-end of Mac’s teens.)

Instead, they had lovely ‘future-in-laws’ and the distinct possibility of ‘grandchildren’ (who would probably disassemble the toaster, reprogram the television and make eggs bounce, all as part of a movie they were working on together) to look forward to.

Not really the conventional white picket fence happy ending, but a happy ending nonetheless.

Well, it wasn’t as if anyone else in the family’s happy ending had come about conventionally either.

Their little family wasn’t conventional by any means, and didn’t really do anything conventionally either, but they were happy.

And that was all that really mattered, in the end.

Chapter End Notes

Hope you liked it, Ankita! The headcanons that Patricia is an excellent singer and has
a deceased fiancé are borrowed from helloyesimhere. I tried something a little different with the opening scene of the story; there are lots of things unsaid and only implied, I hope it made sense…

In case anyone is interested, the version of *You Are My Sunshine* that I was listening to when writing that scene was *You Are My Sunshine (Version 1)* by Elizabeth Mitchell.
Partners

Chapter Summary

For Patty Beau Hammond. The relationship between Jack Dalton and his partner, Sarah Adler, over thirteen years. They face death frequently, their team grows, and almost everything changes, but one thing never does: they’re partners.

Chapter Notes

This is set in some sort of non-canon, James Bond-esque (sort of?) AU. (I mean, everyone roughly corresponds to Bond, Q or M-type characters, and there is badassery in formal wear and flirting in inappropriate situations?) I think it mostly explains itself as you read, anyway…

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Jack Dalton cursed as he kneed a bad guy in the groin, and then knocked out his lights with a solid punch to the jaw with his left hand, before shooting the guy behind him, who had been thrown off-balance by the prone form of his associate.

He hated fighting in a tux. (Wearing one was bad enough, and the freedom of movement in that thing was garbage.)

‘I’m putting in a request after this; next mission we do, no monkey suits! This sucks!’

He glanced over at his partner, Sarah Adler, looking stunning as always in a slinky black evening dress, who was calmly kicking a guy away from her, before shooting him cleanly.

‘You think? Try doing it in heels!’

‘You look damn good doing it!’ He smirked. ‘You know, I’d marry you in a hot minute if you didn’t have a boyfriend!’

She just shook her head at him, a grin on her face, as she took down a guy who had tried to get her into a headlock.

Jack calmly dispatched another bad guy, then another, and then, as Sarah watched his back, dispatching another three bad guys as she did so, quickly set up the zip-line to their extraction point.

He gestured to his partner.

‘Ladies first!’
TEN YEARS LATER

Jack sat by his teammate’s bedside, watching the young blonde man’s chest rise and fall, rise and fall.

Angus MacGyver, who insisted that everyone called him Mac (the kid hated being called Angus), had joined him and Sarah almost four years ago now, taking the duo to a trio.

Jack vividly remembered the two of them arguing with their boss, Thornton, about that decision. (Futilely, as it had come from even higher up than her.)

Mac had been only twenty-one then (he was almost twenty-five now), barely old enough to drink. A kid, in his eyes, and Sarah’s.

Too young to be doing what they did, living their lives. Even if he’d been an Army EOD (a very decorated one) since he was eighteen.

Mac had taken extreme exception to that idea, the notion that he was too young.

He’d set about determinedly proving himself.

And that he did.

More than did, actually.

Jack sighed again, and put his head in his hands for a moment, then looked back up at the young man, almost as if to reassure himself that he was still breathing.

Mac was brilliant, some kind of crazy genius (part of Jack thought that he should be inventing an Iron Man suit or working for NASA or teaching at MIT, not being a secret agent), but also genuinely good, with a big heart and a healthy dose of idealism. He was also stubborn as hell, excellent at compartmentalising and one of the bravest men Jack knew, if not the bravest man.

Jack gave a rather bitter snort of laughter.

The kid had only one weakness: beautiful women were his kryptonite.

They tended to turn his big brain to mush and blindside him.

(Jack was no shrink, but he was pretty sure it was to do with Mac’s childhood. The kid had serious abandonment issues and all the problems stemming from it; his father had left him when he was twelve, and teenage Mac had apparently been a skinny, awkward, shy nerd, whom practically none of the girls at school even gave the time of day. The end result? The young man was now more-or-less completely blind to his good looks, and pretty oblivious to all but the most obvious female attention, which he really got a lot of, but didn’t notice most of the time. And, when an attractive woman paid him obvious attention in that way, his brain went off on vacation.)

That was why Mac was lying in that bed, recovering from a gunshot wound to the chest.

On a mission, they’d wound up working with Nikki Carpenter, who was deep-cover CIA, supposedly, to take down a terrorist organization.

Jack and Sarah had both been more than a little wary of her, especially since a few months’ back, she had stolen a bioweapon that had very nearly killed millions of people (but hadn’t, thanks to the
three of them discovering it just in time and Mac doing his thing – though, they hadn’t known Nikki was behind it until they’d ended up working with her; none of them had ever met her before) using it as her buy-in into that mysterious organization. It seemed extreme and ludicrously risky, and since her handler, the only one who could verify her story, had just been killed…well, it looked fishy to say the least.

Mac, unfortunately, had been a little more trusting. He was younger, more idealistic and less jaded.

Nikki was also beautiful and intelligent and very interested in Mac, or so she’d seemed.

Kryptonite, to the smartest man Jack knew.

The end result: Mac lying on the hospital bed, oxygen mask affixed to his face, chest bandaged and a long road to recovery in front of him.

Jack sighed. Then he clenched his fist, and slammed it into his chair in frustration.

He hadn’t been able to protect the younger man.

(He was protective of both of his teammates- God knows, they both meant the world to him and he loved them both so, so much, in very different ways- but in many ways, more so of Mac. The kid was just that to him, sometimes: a kid. Sarah, he always saw as an adult. Never had any problems with that. Mac, that was harder. He looked so young, particularly like this, in a hospital gown and pale and unmoving.)

At that moment, footsteps sounded in the corridor. Deliberate ones, in a particular pattern that they had long ago arranged and learnt by heart. A signal, to let the other one know that they were near.

Seconds later, the door opened, and Sarah slipped inside. She’d volunteered to handle debrief with Thornton and oversight and the CIA, to help Thornton cover for him, so that he could stay with Mac.

She reached out and clasped his shoulder.

‘At least we got Nikki.’

Jack snorted.

‘Doesn’t feel like enough.’ He glanced over at Mac, then up at Sarah, who just squeezed his shoulder again. ‘We’re meant to have each other’s backs.’

The woman just nodded sadly, glancing over at Mac, then looking into Jack’s eyes.

‘We do, Jack, always will. We’re teammates, we’re partners.’ She sighed. ‘Sometimes, that’s not going to be enough. We just have to deal with that.’

She held out the fast-food bag she’d brought with her to him. Jack took it, and opened it to find a burger and fries. (He was very partial to burgers and fries.)

He looked up at his partner (and, a little, honest voice in his head told him, the love of his life) with a small smile. He didn’t have the words to express his thanks, for her volunteering to take debrief, for covering for him, for her comfort, for the food, for being his partner, so he just stood and hugged her tightly instead.

She hugged him back just as hard.
Internally, Jack sighed and scolded that honest little voice. The one that wanted to tell her the truth. They were partners. Sometimes, that wasn’t going to be enough. But he had to deal with that.

**ONE YEAR LATER**

‘And how was your dinner date with what’s-his-name, John? Jonah? James?’

Sarah rolled her eyes at Jack’s tone and words. (Even if that honest little voice in her head pointed out that Jeff pretty much was the counterfeit copy - not quite the same, not quite right - of Jack.)

‘*Jeff*. And it was lovely, thanks for asking.’

‘You don’t even like French food, especially not at some fancy place. He should have taken you out for ribs and beer.’

She rolled her eyes again, even if he was right.

‘Well, sometimes even a woman like me likes to get dressed up fancy and be treated like a lady.’ She shot him a look. ‘Maybe that’s why you can’t get a date.’

Jack opened his mouth to reply, but was cut off by Thornton.

‘Dalton, Adler, are you finished? This is a *mission briefing*.’

Jack and Sarah both briefly glanced at their boss, and at Mac, Bozer (who worked in the labs and was also Mac’s childhood best friend – that reunion, about three years ago now, had been very touching; the two had lost contact when Mac’s grandfather had died and he’d been pulled into the state care system) and Riley (a new recruit, who was both a brilliant white hat and Thornton’s protégé), who were watching with great interest, and on Riley’s part, no small amount of anger. (Jack, about eight years ago, when Sarah had gotten engaged – that engagement hadn’t worked out- had dated Riley’s mother Diane for a couple of years. He’d had genuine feelings for the woman, he really had cared about her, but he’d also walked out on them, and now with this whole Sarah mess…well, Riley was pissed at him, to say the least.)

Thornton gazed at them for a second, and then walked towards the door.

‘Mac, Bozer, Riley, come with me.’ She turned to Jack and Sarah. ‘You have fifteen minutes.’

‘He’s not right for you, Sarah. He doesn’t know you, not properly, and he doesn’t-‘

‘You have no right to tell me who I should and shouldn’t date!’

‘We’re partners! We always have each other’s backs! I’m telling you-‘

‘Oh, you’re trying to take the moral high ground here, Jack? Really? You’re being so immature about this-‘

‘I’m not the one who went and found the funhouse mirror version of-‘
‘We have been partners for years, Jack, you should have said something earlier!’

‘Oh, I did, and you know it! You got my signals, loud and clear, and you’ve been sending them right back!’

They stopped yelling at each other suddenly, all the fight, all the lies and the denial and the masks, falling away from them.

They stood there, in the briefing room, staring at one another, looking into each other’s eyes, mere inches apart.

Then, they both spoke at once. Gently, almost softly. Truthfully.

‘We’re partners, Jack. I didn’t want to mess that up. Didn’t want to risk it.’

‘It doesn’t matter anyway. We could have been happily married with a dog named Peaches and I would’ve found a way to screw it up.’

Silence for a moment.

Then, almost tentatively, Jack reached out and cupped her cheek gently with his right hand.

They smiled, wanly, at one another, eyes still locked.

‘We’ve been fools, Jack, haven’t we? Messed it all up, while trying not to.’

He nodded.

‘Yeah.’ He bit his lip. ‘Didn’t notice until now, too. Might be too late.’

Sarah moved a little closer to him, leaned up slightly, smile growing slightly wider.

‘Remember what we always say?’

His smile grew, too.

‘It’s not over until they’re dead, or you are.’

She closed the distance between them to barely none.

‘Maybe it’s not too late.’

He just closed that last little gap in response.

When the fifteen minutes were up, and the others filed back in to start the delayed mission briefing, and saw the two, Mac muttered finally under his breath, while Bozer covered his eyes and demanded his best friend make him brain bleach. Thornton simply cleared her throat loudly to get their attention, and Riley just crossed her arms and stormed over to her seat. (Her reaction did not go unnoticed by Mac and Bozer, who just exchanged a glance, making a mental note to remind the currently-distracted Jack that he really had to sit down and have a good chat with the young woman.)

TWO YEARS LATER
'Gun all good?'

'Check. Back-up?'

'Check. Back-up to the back-up?'

'Check.'

Jack and Sarah shared a grin as they finished their weapons check in preparation for their latest mission.

There was a knock on the door of the little prep room off the armoury they were in.

'Come in!'

'We’re decent, don’t you young ‘uns worry!'

Right on cue, Mac, Bozer and Riley slipped in, all smirking.

'Showing your age, old man.'

There were smiles and a few chuckles all round at Riley’s comment. Jack smiled affectionately at her. It’d taken a long chat, some almost painful honesty on both their parts, and time, but things were good between him and the young hacker now.

'Showing yours, kiddo.'

Shaking his head, Mac held out a couple of grenade-like objects to the two field agents. (After the incident with Nikki, Mac had practically shut himself in the labs, only emerging for certain missions when it was abundantly clear that his particular skill set would be required. Of late, he was getting better, more comfortable with field work as he was more trusting of his judgement again, and less inclined to run the other way whenever a woman tried to flirt with him, to everyone’s relief, Jack’s especially. However, this particular mission was pretty much right up Jack and Sarah’s alley and not so much his, so he wouldn’t be in the field with them, though he and Riley would be providing back-up.)

'They’ve got multiple settings. Knock-out gas, flash-bang, standard, EMP. Just turn the dial, then pull the pin and throw as usual.’ He handed Jack a briefcase. ‘There’s more in here.’

Bozer held out a slightly larger briefcase, which Sarah took.

‘You’ve got your standard disguise kit in there, plus a little bit of my magic. There’s a couple of quick-change face prostheses in there, should be enough to fool even the most advanced of facial-rec scanners.’

Riley held up her laptop.

‘And I’ve managed to get live sat images of the compound; there’s three exits, here, here and here, and it looks like there’s…’

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TWENTY ONE HOURS LATER
‘I’ve got a clip and a half left.’

Jack shook his head.

‘Two and a half clips.’ He held up one of Mac’s gadgets. ‘One of these things. Not much.’

He and Sarah were pinned in a room at the back of the compound. They were currently relatively safe behind cover, but both knew that they were running out of time.

‘Just like Mumbai.’

Jack raised an eyebrow at his partner.

‘Really? You and I must remember Mumbai very differently, ‘cause I was going to say Cairo.’

He glanced quickly out through the window beside them, taking into account the nearby rooftops.

‘Actually, I take that back, I think we’re going to have to pull a Sao Paulo here.’

Sarah groaned, picking off a bad guy who’d gotten too close with a well-placed shot.

‘I hated Sao Paulo.’

‘You and me both, darling.’ Jack grinned at her, taking out another bad guy with a single bullet. ‘If we get out of this, we’re going to Vegas.’

Sarah caught the grenade that Jack tossed at her.

‘Gonna go all Rain Man with Mac? Or are the three of us pulling an Ocean’s Eleven with Bozer and Riley?’

Jack shook his head as he picked off yet another bad guy.

‘Nah, I was thinking more you, me, and the King, in one of those 24-hour chapels.’

She turned the dial on the grenade.

‘Are you seriously proposing now, Jack Dalton?’

Her partner smirked.

‘Depends. Are you saying yes?’

Sarah pulled the pin on the grenade, as Jack smashed the window with the butt of his gun.

‘If we get out of this, yes!’

She tossed the grenade at the incoming bad guys, and they jumped together.

They got out of it.

They even went to one of those drive-in chapels, in Jack’s favourite car, the one that he and his father had restored together.

The young ‘uns thought the whole situation was hilarious.
(Jack and Sarah thought it was perfect.)

Chapter End Notes

This was seriously far out of my comfort zone, but I hope I did alright! Patty Beau Hammond, I hope you enjoyed it!

I know that Jack and Sarah are somewhat contrary and behave rather illogically at times, since, deep down, they both know that their feelings are requited, but I tried to a) reflect their canon situation, and b) show that they are really, really deep in denial of some sort, because they are both so scared of messing up their partnership.

The Mac and beautiful women thing is a fusion of my own theories about him in canon, and James Bond elements. (MacGyver girls, anyone?)

There’s nothing else written right now for the next chapter; do drop me a line if you have a prompt/request! *hint, hint* I’ll try most things once - I’ve written stories for this series based off everything from a very detailed description of Mac being attacked by three large dogs, to the above request for Jack/Sarah or the one before, which was Jack/Patty.
Chapter Summary

For helloyesimhere. Jack gets a new partner, twenty-one year old MacGyver. A kid, in his eyes. Their first mission: take down a money-laundering ring operating out of the Grand Lisboa Casino, Macau. Their cover: brothers on vacation. Little do they know, this is the start of a friendship that will define them both.

Chapter Notes

Yes, I stole the last line of the summary out of Star Trek. This is set in the same non-canon James Bond-esque universe as the previous story, Partners, and refers to events, backstories and relationships from that story.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

HEADQUARTERS
CLASSIFIED LOCATION
SOMEWHERE IN THE USA

Jack read through the file in his hands.

The personnel file of one Angus MacGyver, the new agent who was to be joining him and Sarah.

The photo showed a handsome, blonde, blue-eyed young man.

Decorated ex-Army EOD. Genius level-intellect.

His mother had died when he was five, his father had left when he was twelve, and then his grandfather, the last family he’d had left, had died when he was fourteen. Pulled into the state care system, forced to move, but still managed to graduate high school at sixteen, emancipate himself, and get a full ride to MIT. Finished college in two years, and enlisted immediately.

Had a Silver Star and a handful of similar honours.

And he was only twenty-one.

He looked up from the file and at his partner, who was reading her own copy. They exchanged a glance, and both shook their heads firmly.

‘No, Patty. We’re vetoing this.’
‘He’s a kid.’

They both shot a look at their boss, the looks on their faces saying it all.

MacGyver was too young to be doing what they did, leading the lives they lived.

In Jack’s mind, a twenty-one year old kid like him with a brain and looks like that should be doing a PhD at some famous school or making six or even seven figures in Silicon Valley and fighting beautiful girls off with a stick.

Not being a secret agent.

He knew Sarah felt the same way.

Thornton was quiet for a moment, still, and despite the fact that she might well be the best spy in the business, Jack and Sarah could both sense her discomfort with the situation.

‘MacGyver is very capable. He can do the job, and cope with the consequences. We wouldn’t have recruited him if he hadn’t demonstrated that, many times.’

She sounded absolutely convinced. Jack and Sarah exchanged another look. Their boss cared about them, cared about the agents under her, but she was also far more capable at seeing them as agents (though, never *assets*—and that was an important distinction) than the two of them were. That was why she was in charge. (At least partly; she was also much better at following rules and justifying breaking or bending them to oversight.)

‘Patty—’

Their boss sighed and leaned down, closer to them, resting her hands on the table.

‘His recruitment and assignment to you two came from higher up than me. I don’t like the fact of his age, but he is definitely a more-than-capable agent.’ She pinned them both with her deadly stare. ‘You must consider and treat him as such.’

Jack and Sarah exchanged another glance, a silent conversation passing between them.

There wasn’t really anything that could be done. MacGyver was joining them, no matter what they wanted.

Jack sighed, playing with the leather wristband on his wrist, before looking up at Sarah again, who was fiddling with the sling on her left arm, which was encased in a cast.

A third person, a third team member, was probably necessary, anyway.

He definitely needed a temporary partner, at the very least.

Sarah wouldn’t be fit for field work for at least a few more weeks.

He knew she agreed, even if she didn’t like it. (Sarah hated being stuck at headquarters.)

The partners, silent conversation over, looked up at Thornton, and nodded.

Their boss gave them a nod of acknowledgement, before picking up her phone and typing in a message.

‘MacGyver’s on his way up from the labs.’ She reached over and tapped the large screen mounted
on the wall. ‘We have a money-laundering ring in Macau to take down.’

Jack finished packing his gun, his back-up, and the back-up to the back-up, as well as a couple of knives and plenty of extra ammunition, plus a couple of flash-bang grenades, into his weapons case for the mission.

His new teammate, who had introduced himself as Mac, was on the other side of the armoury, packing his own case.

Which, Jack noted, contained a Swiss Army knife, duct tape, a large box of paperclips, and other odds and ends, including a pack of gum. As he watched, the blonde pocketed a second Swiss Army knife, several paperclips and two sticks of gum.

‘Where’s your weapon, kid?’

Said kid shot him a sharp look. He apparently didn’t like being called a kid. Either that, or he didn’t like the question. Maybe both.

‘I don’t like guns.’

Jack snorted.

‘Pull the other one, kid! You’re going to go into a dangerous, life-or-death situation, unarmed?’

MacGyver just nodded, closing his case.

‘Don’t need a gun.’ He patted his pocket and then pointed at his head. ‘I’ve got everything I need in here and here.’

Jack snorted again, shaking his head.

‘Life-or-death, kid. Don’t know how gum or paperclips or that Swiss Army knife will help you there.’

The implication- that MacGyver didn’t understand life-or-death situations because of his age- was quite clear.

It was only after he’d spoken that Jack realized his mistake and kicked himself mentally. MacGyver’s youth (and matching youthful appearance) was throwing him off.

His mother had died when he was five, his grandfather when he was fourteen. He’d been an Army EOD for three years.

He might look like an All-American teenager straight out of a high school movie set in a suburban utopia, but MacGyver understood death and life-or-death situations intimately.

The blonde’s eyes were hard as he glanced at Jack, before turning away.

‘I know what life-or-death situations are like. I know how to get out of them.’ He was silent for a moment. ‘I promise.’ His voice was resolute, determined.

Jack swallowed. He remembered Patty’s words; MacGyver had to be competent, more than competent, he had to be excellent, really, or he wouldn’t be here. Even if he was so young.

Even if Jack saw absolutely no way the kid could save his own neck, or Jack’s, using paperclips
and duct tape and gum.

MacGyver’s promise sounded as if he was responding to some challenge that Jack had (unintentionally, mistakenly, and unwantly) set him.

The challenge to prove himself. Show he was a capable agent, despite his youth.

Jack shook his head.

That might well prove to be a bad thing. He would have to try and nip it in the bud.

Recalling his Army and Delta Force past, the early days, the recklessness and disregard for his own health and life that that desire to prove himself had brought, Jack sighed.

Mac was a kid. Same age as Riley would be now, actually.

(Though, at seventeen, she’d insisted she was not a child by any stretch of the term. That she was grown-up and didn’t need him to watch out for her. Not altogether unlike Mac now.)

It really wasn’t surprising that Jack’s protective instincts had been awoken.

‘I’m sorry.’ Jack paused for a moment. ‘I spoke before thinking.’

The blonde just gave a half-shrug, turning back to face him again.

‘You’re not the first. Won’t be the last, either.’ He picked up his case and gave Jack a small, but genuine, smile. ‘But thanks. For apologizing. I appreciate it.’ He left the room before Jack could say anything else.

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GRAND LISBOA CASINO

MACAU

‘And what brings you to Macau, sirs?’

Jack grinned and slung an arm around Mac, leaning in a little closer to the pretty young Chinese woman who was checking them in, playing the part of the rich, somewhat obnoxious, American.

‘My kid brother’s just turned twenty-one, so I thought I’d bring him to the Vegas of the East, teach him to play poker and introduce him to manhood and all! Heard this was the place to do it!’ He winked at the young woman, who simply smiled serenely at him, and handed him a key card to their suite, and then another key card to a grinning Mac, who’d reached up and slung his arm around Jack, playing his role as required by their cover.

Jack noted that the young woman’s smile shifted, becoming far less serene customer-service, and more flirtatious, as she handed Mac his key card.

The kid appeared not to notice in the slightest.

As they walked into the elevator, side-by-side, Jack leaned a little closer to his new teammate, and jogged him with his elbow.

‘Reckon the receptionist liked what she saw, brother.’
Mac just shot him a look, an eyebrow raised.

‘She’s too young for you, Jack.’ They were using their own first names on this mission. Mac had told Jack to call him kid, as much as he hated that, because it was better than Angus. (He hated being called Angus.) Jack was going with brother instead. ‘Besides, Sarah’s not going to be happy.’

For this mission, Sarah was the name of Jack’s cover’s fiancée, who was back at home in Dallas, Texas. Patty was her disapproving mother.

Jack made a face of disbelief. The kid had a genius-level IQ and wasn’t blind. Did he not own a mirror? (He bore a distinct resemblance to some young Hollywood hunk, actually, from that X-Men reboot with the Cuban Missile Crisis, if Jack remembered correctly.)

‘No, not *me*, brother. *You.* She was definitely making eyes at *you.*’

Mac seemed to consider for a moment, and then gave a small smirk.

‘Really?’ Jack nodded. ‘You were right, I think this is going to be a fun trip. Thanks, man.’

The older man just grinned, and clapped the younger on the shoulder.

A little later, after they’d swept their suite for bugs and other monitoring devices, Mac looked over at Jack.

‘Was making up that thing about the receptionist really necessary? I mean, I know that we’re supposed to be obnoxious rich Americans, but-‘

Jack just stared at him.

‘Wait, wait, hold up there. You thought I made that all up, for our cover?’ The blonde simply nodded. Jack shook his head. Some genius he was turning out to be. ‘Nah, that was all real. She was definitely checking you out, not just checking you in.’

Mac made a face at the pun, and then looked at Jack as if he were insane.

‘Why would she do that?’

The older man sat down in an armchair, and motioned for Mac to do the same. He had a feeling this was going to take a while.

‘Now, brother, you know how when you see a pretty girl, you tend to, say, look her over in a certain way, act a certain way. Now, women are a confusing bunch, but they do the same thing. So-‘

Mac just shook his head incredulously.

‘I know that, Jack! But why would she check *me* out?’ His brow furrowed. ‘I mean, if she wanted tips or something, you’d obviously be a better choice…how much do you think receptionists get paid here? Enough to pay the bills? Maybe not, if she’s resorting to supposedly flirting with customers…’

Then and there, Jack decided that the kid might be a lost cause.

Maybe he’d ask Sarah for advice when they got back stateside. Maybe a woman’s perspective would help.
Or maybe he could just find some stuff on that *X-Men* actor on the internet; he was sure that there were girls out there who thought that he was the best thing since sliced bread.

Though, based on what he was seeing now, Jack suspected Mac would just fail to even note the eerie resemblance he bore to that actor. (Jack *really* couldn’t remember his name.)

This big brother thing was starting to feel less and less like a cover.

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Jack stood in front of a slot machine, occasionally feeding it money, but not really paying attention to it, even if it looked like he was.

Instead, he was monitoring the area around him, trying to see if anyone was behaving suspiciously.

They knew that the money-laundering ring was operating out of this casino, and that it definitely had to do with the gambling tables, rather than the shops or the hotel or the restaurants.

Unfortunately, that was just about all they knew, hence he and Mac had to stake out the place.

Jack smirked as an attractive young woman in a casino employee uniform offered him a glass of orange juice with a smile. (Casinos in Macau handed out free soft drinks and Chinese-style milk tea to gamblers.) He winked at her, and took it. This was one of the nicest stake-outs he’d been on in a long, long time.

He hadn’t seen all that much from where he was, though. There was definitely lots of dodgy stuff going on around him, and he’d noticed a few things that he was definitely going to report to Sarah and Patty, see if they could have anything done about it, but he hadn’t noticed anything pertinent to the mission.

Maybe Mac, who was checking out the blackjack tables, had had better luck.

And speak of the devil (or maybe angel, in this case), his (temporary) partner and new teammate walked up to him just then.

He smirked and indicated the glass of orange juice that Jack was holding.

‘Wanna head back up to our room and have some real drinks?’

The older man knocked back half of the orange juice, scrutinized the half-empty glass, and nodded.

‘Yeah, I could go for a couple of beers. Come on, brother.’

They made their way out of the casino, back towards the hotel area. Jack dropped off his half-empty glass along the way, not missing the way that the waitress looked at the (still completely oblivious) younger man.

Once they were back in their room and had checked the security system they’d brought with them, they let their covers fall away.

‘At least four of the blackjack dealers who were on the floor just then are in on it. I’ve got their table numbers, and a photo of all of them.’ Mac tapped the black-framed glasses he was wearing, which had a hidden camera in them.

Jack nodded, and pulled out his laptop to bring up the photos.

‘How’d you work it out, brother?’
He had a sneaking suspicion already, but he wanted it confirmed.

Mac shrugged and spoke rather casually.

‘I memorized the cards. They’re using at least seven decks, when only six are allowed, to allow the dealers to rig the game more easily.’

Jack looked up at the blonde, genuinely impressed. He grinned, and reached up and clapped him on the shoulder.

‘Good catch, Mac.’

Mac gave him a small grin in response.

‘Thanks, Dalton.’

The older man shook his head, grin still firmly in place.

‘Jack, call me Jack, brother. Only Patty calls me Dalton. And only when she’s mad.’

Mac’s grin grew a little wider.

TWO DAYS LATER

ILLEGAL GAMBLING DEN

SOMEWHERE IN MACAU

Jack punched one of the gang leader’s lackeys hard in the jaw, whacked a second over the head with the butt of his gun, and then shot a third. (Shooting a gun in close quarters, such as this private room of the gambling den they were in, was a bad idea, but he didn’t really have a huge number of options, outnumbered as they were.)

He glanced over at Mac (the kid was unarmed), intending to toss him one of his back-ups, even though he seemed to refuse to use guns (though Jack was quite certain he knew how to shoot one), and found that the younger man was more than holding his own. (He had just smashed a vase over the head of one of the bad guys, and then blocked a couple of bullets using a metal drinks’ tray.)

Jack forced his attention away from the blonde (it looked like he would be okay, and Jack couldn’t protect him if he was down himself) and focused on his own fight. He elbowed a guy in the face, and shot another, then kicked one into the statue of a lion in the corner. The man crumpled to the ground, unconscious. Spinning around to tackle a guy who’d tried to sneak up on him, he noticed that Mac had pulled out his belt and was now using that as a weapon.

Jack kneed a guy who’d tried to grab his back-up to the back-up in the groin, and then shot another one.

Did this gang leader have an infinite number of lackeys?

Unfortunately, the answer seemed to be yes. He and Mac were both pretty badass, even if he said so himself, but they were only two people, and they couldn’t do this forever. (Mac appeared to be running out of makeshift weapons. He was down to using poker chips and a bottle of champagne.)
Jack winced as he took a hard kick to the wrist, at just the right angle, causing him to drop his gun. A moment later, he was clobbered on the head with a heavy object.

The last thing he saw, as he crumpled to the ground and his eyes closed of their own volition, was his teammate, restrained by several bigger guys and struggling valiantly.

He fought to stay awake, to help Mac, to protect him, but couldn’t.

‘Jack! Jack, wake up!’

‘Five more minutes…’

‘Jack!’

He was being gently shaken.

Suddenly, all of Jack’s wits returned at once. He remembered the mission, the fight, being outnumbered and taken down, Mac restrained by those guys, struggling…He opened his eyes, and looked up to see Mac leaning over him, looking rather concerned.

He gave the younger man an once-over. He seemed alright, largely unharmed. He was conscious, and had been longer than Jack, at least. There was a gash on Mac’s forehead that didn’t look deep enough to need stitches and wasn’t bleeding any longer, and Jack could see some bruises on his upper chest, where his shirt had slipped a bit, but the younger man seemed relatively okay. He was crouching down beside Jack, and as the brunette blinked and tried to sit up, he moved away slightly, out of his way. He seemed to be moving fine, too.

Jack sighed with relief internally. (He had a feeling that Mac wouldn’t take too kindly to Jack’s protectiveness, not when he was still so intent on proving himself. Even if, in Jack’s mind, he already had. Even if he hadn’t really needed to in the first place.)

Gingerly, he sat up, taking stock of his own injuries. He flexed his right wrist, and flinched. Sprained, maybe with some ligament damage. He made a fist with his hand. Still, seemed like he would be able to shoot. He was pretty sure that he was just a walking bruise (he sure felt like it), and he might have a concussion.

All in all, he could work with that.

Wasn’t the worst he’d endured. Not by a long shot.

He glanced over at the younger man.

‘How are we getting out of here?’

(Mac had gotten them into all sorts of secure places in the last two days, using everything from paperclips to his Swiss Army knife to a modified hotel key card, so Jack figured he could probably get them out.)

Unfortunately, Jack realized, as he looked around the room, they appeared to be locked in a square box with no furniture, with a high-tech door of some sort (it didn’t have a lock and there was a tell-tale light above the door handle) keeping them in. It probably had been used as some sort of secure storeroom, and was now a makeshift cell for the two of them.

They’d also taken all of Jack’s weapons, including the little knife secreted in the heel of his left
shoe, and his belt.

He was willing to bet at least fifty bucks that they’d also taken Mac’s Swiss Army knife, paperclips and probably chewing gum too, given the little display he’d put on earlier.

Mac, seemingly reassured that Jack was relatively okay, glanced around the room for a moment. Then, he stared at the door, an expression on his face that Jack had gotten quite used to in the last couple of days. The one that meant he was deep in thought.

After a moment, he nodded.

‘I’ve got an idea.’

He got up and walked over to the door, then looked up at the ceiling.

He took a few steps back, and then with a little bit of a running start, hopped up on the door handle, and pushed up a ceiling panel. He rummaged around in the ceiling cavity for a second, then hopped back down, some wires in hand.

Jack could only watch as Mac somehow managed to unlock the door. He got up and stood next to his teammate, as they listened at the door for a moment, trying to see if there was anyone on the other side who’d noticed the door unlocking.

‘You’re crazy, brother. But brilliant. Real brilliant.’

Mac smiled at the praise, and Jack swore that his ears pinked slightly. He resisted the sudden urge to ruffle the blonde’s hair; he had a feeling that’d end with all his socks dyed lemon-yellow or something like that.

It didn’t sound like anyone was on the other side, so they slowly opened the door.

There was nothing but a mostly-empty space on the other side, dark and silent.

It seemed that they were in an empty building (though, there were signs of recent activity- it looked like the place had been vacated in a hurry, presumably after he and Mac had rumbled the gang). By the door, there was a rather careless pile of some of their things: Jack’s belt, Mac’s Swiss Army knife, his gum and paperclips, their watches and wallets. (Or rather, their covers’ wallets.)

Jack’s guns and his knife were conspicuously absent.

He guessed that they’d been removed from him earlier, when he’d been taken prisoner, but that the items before them had been removed later, as an afterthought, just before they’d been thrown into the room.

Glancing at one another, they retrieved their things, and made their way further towards what they assumed was the exit of the building.

They heard a voice, and stilled instantly, sharing a glance. They peeked around the corner, and saw a small room, an office of sorts, with the light on and the door wide open. A single silhouette was visible, talking loudly on the phone in a language that Jack didn’t know but guessed was some kind of Chinese.

Mac, however, cocked his head, listening. After a couple of minutes, he nodded, and started forwards. Jack grabbed him by the back of the shirt.
'What’s the plan, brother? Remember, I can’t read your mind.’

Mac looked a little sheepish for a moment (this wasn’t the first time this had happened in the last couple of days) and explained.

‘The plan is to take that guy down. The leader of the gang and his inner circle are escaping to Hong Kong, where they will scatter and hide, on a boat leaving from the container port in an hour and a half.’ Mac’s expression turned a little more wry. ‘Luckily we got out when we did, because a little longer, and it would not have been good for either of us.’

Jack just shook his head, pushing aside the thought that he’d nearly died, that Mac had nearly died. He’d deal with it later. Mac, he realized, was doing the same.

‘You speak Chinese, too?’

Mac shrugged.

‘Only Mandarin; we’re lucky he’s not a Cantonese speaker, most people here are, and apparently my accent is atrocious.’

Jack just shook his head again.

It seemed the kid could do just about everything.

More than capable, indeed.

A few minutes later, Jack and Mac stood in the office, the bad guy unconscious and securely restrained using his own socks and shoelaces.

Jack retrieved his weapons, wincing slightly as he tested whether he could pull the trigger. (He could, but it was definitely going to hurt.)

Mac noticed and eyed him with concern, and seemed about to say something, when Jack just shook his head at him.

‘It’s fine, brother. I can still shoot. Gonna have to see a medic when we get back, though.’

Mac picked up the bad guy’s phone (it seemed that their cover’s phones had been destroyed; at least, they weren’t anywhere in the office).

‘We should call for back-up.’

(They really should; their covers had been blown, they were injured, they didn’t actually know where they were, and they weren’t exactly armed to the teeth. Still, they both knew that there was a very good chance that back-up wouldn’t get here in time, and the gang leader and his inner circle would get away. And that was unacceptable. They’d have to do something about that.)

‘You a fan of Die Hard, brother?’

Despite the situation, Mac gave a small smirk.

‘Improbable odds, no real back-up, a larger-than-life bad guy and a hefty dose of improvising with what you’ve got? That’s my kind of movie.’

Jack grinned.
'I knew I liked you for a reason.’ He took the phone that Mac held out to him, and punched in Sarah’s number. He was going to owe his partner beers for about a month after this, but she’d understand and fill in Patty and cover for them, and in the end, their boss would understand too and cover for them with oversight.

‘Hey, Sarah, we’ve got the bad guys leaving the Macau container port in an hour and a half at…’

Making their way to a safe distance away from the bad guys’ old headquarters, they found themselves on a backstreet in an old part of Macau, far away from the glitz and the glam of the casinos, and surrounded by stained, lower-rise buildings that had seen better days. Judging by the building site just down the block, where what looked like a shiny new apartment tower seemed to be taking shape, they were far from the only ones who thought so.

There were a few locals, shopkeepers and street vendors, nearby. Some of them looked up and stared at them, two foreigners in a part of the city that foreigners rarely ventured into, before shrugging and looking away again.

Mac glanced around, and then pointed at the end of a little alleyway nearby.

‘I’ll meet you there, in ten minutes?’ Jack opened his mouth to protest. ‘I’ve got to grab some supplies, and I need to ask for directions, and I’ll draw less attention alone than if we go together.’

Jack nodded, accepting that the younger man was right. Still, he didn’t need to like it.

‘You’d better not be late, brother.’

‘I won’t, I promise.’

Mac gave him a quick two-fingered salute and jogged off.

True to his word, Mac returned ten minutes later, bearing several items in three plastic bags.

In the shadow of the alleyway, he put them down, and started rummaging in one. Jack examined the other two; the first contained firecrackers and several bundles of cash issued by the Bank of Hell, and the second a large box labelled phoenix rolls.

A couple of days ago, he would have thought that Mac was simply insane, but Jack knew better now. The kid had some sort of crazy idea in mind, some half-formed plan that he’d finish on the fly, involving these items, even if Jack had no clue what it could possibly be.

The third bag contained some sort of yellow-ish sticky rice mixture wrapped in leaves, tied together with twine, and two pairs of chopsticks, which Mac was breaking into shorter pieces.

The blonde gestured to Jack with a nod of his head.

‘Give me your right wrist.’

Jack held out his wrist obediently (when Mac was doing his thing, he’d quickly learnt, one should always just do as he said), and the younger man started affixing lengths of chopstick to Jack’s wristband, using the sticky rice as a glue of sorts, binding it with the twine, making a makeshift brace.

The older man just smiled.
‘Thanks, brother.’

Mac smiled back.

‘Can’t have you not shooting properly.’ He nodded, satisfied with the brace, and let go of Jack’s wrist. ‘I got directions, which took a while, since not that many of the locals speak Mandarin all that well.’ He smiled wryly as he spoke. ‘Either that, or maybe my accent is so terrible they can’t understand me.’

Jack nodded, and glanced at the time on his recovered watch.

‘We’ve got less than an hour, brother. We need transport.’

Mac looked down the alleyway, and Jack followed his gaze to several motorcycles, parked on the edge of the street. Jack, too, grinned.

‘Looks like we’re going to be travelling in style.’

SAFE HOUSE

SOMEWHERE IN HONG KONG

Jack grinned as he dug into a plate of delicious stir-fried rice noodles with beef (Patty’s trusted local contact, a young woman, whom he guessed was half-Chinese, half-Caucasian, and probably not far out of her teens – he really did wonder how Patty knew her - called Vivian, had dropped off several boxes of local takeaway for them, with a promise to be back with breakfast the next morning. Jack had briefly debated trying to get her number on Mac’s behalf – she was very pretty, even if she was far too young for his tastes, and not badass enough, too dark-haired and just not his partner, a little voice in his head declared- but decided against it, not wanting to risk the wrath of his boss. If he squinted, he could see some resemblance; they might be related.).

Back-up had shown up just in time to take the gang leader and his lackeys into custody (Mac’s plan had worked perfectly), and then Patty had directed them to this apartment and told them to wait for Vivian and a local doctor. (They were going to be flying back to the States tomorrow.) Dr Lau had checked over his wrist, confirmed it was sprained, told him to get some scans when he got back stateside, and wrapped it and told him to keep icing it for the next forty-eight hours. She’d also confirmed that, as he’d suspected, due to the lack of symptoms, he wasn’t concussed.

Mac had said that he was fine and didn’t need medical care and was currently in the bathroom, cleaning up a bit before he ate. Jack could hear the shower running from the dining table.

More than halfway through a second plate of food (this time, Chinese roast pork with rice), Jack paused suddenly, brow furrowing. He glanced at the clock on the wall. Mac had been in the shower for almost half an hour.

Mac did not like wasting water (apparently growing up in often-drought-stricken California coupled with serving in the military had had some sort of lasting impact on him), and did not take excessively long showers.

Certainly not half-hour ones.

Quite suddenly, Jack was reminded of seventeen-year-old Riley, who’d stubbornly resisted any and
all attempts by him to do anything that remotely resembled looking after her. He vividly recalled an incident in which she’d cut her hand quite badly on a tin of tuna while stubbornly preparing her own dinner, refusing to eat what he’d made (to be fair, he was a terrible cook), and then locked herself in the bathroom to clean and bandage her wound all alone, all the while insisting that she was fine.

She’d been very insistent that she was strong and tough and that she could look after herself. Not altogether too different from the young man, so keen to prove himself, currently in the bathroom.

(It seemed to completely fail to cross their minds, brilliant as they were, that even adults, even people as tough and strong as they were, needed help sometimes. Should have help, and people to look out for them. God knows, any sensible adult would let a doctor, or a friend, or a teammate, or a partner, help them if they were injured.)

Jack cursed internally and kicked himself for not insisting that his teammate get checked over by Dr Lau.

He got up and walked towards the bathroom, and knocked firmly on the door.

‘Hey, you okay, brother? Food’s getting cold!’

There was a silence for a moment, and Jack swore he heard a hiss of pain.

‘Yeah, I’m good, Jack. I’ll be out in a few minutes.’

Jack didn’t buy it. He was quite sure he heard another hiss of pain.

‘Brother, I know you’re not okay.’ Jack glanced around and noticed that the med kit was gone. Mac must have snuck it into the bathroom while Jack was occupied with Dr Lau and Vivian. He cursed and kicked himself again and vowed to pay much closer attention to Mac next time, and to insist that he got checked over for injury after all missions.

‘Mac, brother, I know you’re hurt. Let me in!’ There was no response. ‘Angus!’

Finally, the shower turned off (Mac seemed to be abandoning the pretence of showering) and the door opened. The blonde stood there, looking every bit a sullen teen (he certainly looked young enough to be one), naked from the waist up.

‘If you’re calling me that, it must be bad.’

Jack didn’t really respond, staring at the younger man instead.

Mac’s torso was covered in bruises. He seemed to be wincing slightly, as if the movement to the door and opening it had caused him significant pain. Combined with the bruising, Jack suspected that his ribs were probably bruised. (The kid must have an extraordinarily high pain tolerance and been hopped up on adrenaline earlier, because he hadn’t shown a single sign of it.) Mac’s forearms were covered in a large number of shallow cuts, and he seemed to have been picking little fragments of glass out of them, if the tweezers he held in his right hand were any indication. (It looked as if a vase or a glass or a champagne bottle – or, Jack suspected, all three- had been smashed over or near his forearms.) He cursed himself again, for not noticing that Mac’s sleeves, which had been rolled up when the fight in the gambling den had started, had been down ever since Jack had woken up in that locked room.
‘Brother…you need a doctor. I’m going to call Vivian and get her to bring Dr Lau back right now.-’

‘I’m fine, Jack.’ Jack just shot him a very sharp look, doing his best impersonation of their boss. ‘Okay, I’m not fine, but I don’t need a doctor. I can patch myself up.’

Jack snorted.

‘Mac, you’ve got a big brain, and you’re an engineer and a mechanic and a physicist and a chemist all in one, but you’re definitely not a doctor.’

Mac rolled his eyes.

‘Most of it’s fairly superficial. Cuts and bruises, that’s all.’

‘Your ribs-’

‘Are bruised, but definitely not broken.’ At Jack’s rather sceptical look, Mac continued. ‘If I thought they possibly could have been, I’d have let Dr Lau have a look at them. I don’t have a death wish and I don’t want to spend time in hospital with a nasty chest infection. I’m not stupid.’

It was Jack’s turn to roll his eyes.

‘No, just stubborn as hell and resistant to medical care, apparently.’ He paused for a moment. ‘Brother, from now on, if you’re hurt, you have to let me know, at the very least.’ Mac opened his mouth to protest, but Jack just cut him off. ‘Sarah and I, we’re partners. It’s my job to watch her back and look out for her. She does the same for me. You’re part of my team now, so that goes for you, too, so you need to tell me if you’re hurting, just like I have to let you and her know if I am.’ Jack paused again, and locked eyes with the younger man. ‘And no more of this having to prove yourself nonsense, Mac. These last couple of days? You’ve more than proven yourself to me. You’re a damn good agent, and a good man.’ He let that sink in for a moment, then continued. ‘And besides, I’ve read your file, man, and I know you wouldn’t have been recruited if you weren’t capable. Everyone knows that, even if we need reminding sometimes, because you do things a little differently from the rest of us, and you barely look old enough to shave. You never needed to prove yourself to me in the first place, brother.’

They stood there, silent, looking into each other’s eyes for a moment, and then Mac nodded, a ghost of a smile slowly growing on his face.

‘Thanks, Jack. I really appreciate it.’ He took a deep breath. ‘And…I promise. From now on, if I’m hurt, I’ll let you know.’ He paused again. ‘I don’t break my promises.’

Jack nodded. He’d suspected as much, from the weight that Mac had accorded the words, now, in that alleyway in old Macau, and in the armoury, just a few days ago.

‘I know, brother.’ He herded Mac back into the bathroom, and reached out and grabbed a second pair of tweezers from the med kit that was open on the vanity. ‘Now, let’s get that glass out of you so that you can have something to eat. The food’s real good here, and you could do with some more meat on your bones…’

Mac didn’t exactly let up on the proving himself front.

Jack figured that it was some sort of instinct, some kind of habit, far too ingrained in the young genius now for him to break.
But, at least, he always let Jack (and later, Sarah), know if he was hurt.

Even if he insisted that he’d be fine and to keep going with the mission.

Even if he still a terrible, terrible patient.

He let his team know. He let Jack know.

Mac never, ever, broke his promises, after all.

Especially not the ones he made to Jack.

Chapter End Notes

I hope you liked this, helloyesimhere. I hope there was enough Mac!whump and Jack!whump in it for you!

Please do not ask me exactly what Mac intended to do with the paper money, firecrackers and the box of phoenix rolls; I admit to only having a very, very vague notion as to what he intended to do with them! I also don’t think that Macau is full of gangsters laundering money (at least, I’ve never encountered any in all the times I’ve been there), but you really can buy paper money for the Bank of Hell there, and motorcycles are just about everywhere.

And yes, the Vivian who appears in this story is indeed Patty’s niece who also appears in Dead Man Walking. Dr Lau is Mac’s psychologist in Just Another Patriotic Guy. (I did warn you; I like to recycle characters, albeit in slightly different incarnations, in different universes!)

To the guest who made the request for Mac falling for Nikki’s friend and telling Jack about this – I’m working on your request and I’m struggling a bit. I’m sorry, but it’s not going to be in canon (in fact, it’s going to be really AU – the Mac/Nikki canon situation is so complicated I really wouldn’t even know where to begin), and it’s also not going to be as love-triangle-y as you wanted, I think…let’s just say, Nikki’s friend does not stay Nikki’s friend for the whole story…
Chapter Summary

For Patty Beau Hammond. What happened in Mumbai? What’s the story behind Cairo? Why do Jack and Sarah both hate Sao Paulo? Or, three missions in the lives of the partners.

Chapter Notes

So, this universe is very popular, apparently, so here’s yet another story set in the universe of Partners/Not Just a Cover. (I guess it is a pretty fun universe, and there’s a lot of opportunities for whump, which this entire fandom seems to adore…)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

MUMBAI

An Indian media tycoon had recently purchased a decommissioned Russian military satellite to add to his mobile phone network.

Unfortunately, said Russian military satellite wasn’t actually fully decommissioned, thanks to a rogue element of the Russian intelligence forces.

Hence, Jack and Sarah’s mission was to get the access code to the satellite from the tycoon so that it could be fully decommissioned.

For some people, that was the plot of a Hollywood blockbuster.

For Jack and Sarah, that was Tuesday.

Jack looked up at his partner, who was sitting on the edge of a chair in their hotel room, putting on her heels.

(This particular media tycoon had a known weakness for beautiful and badass women. Jack didn’t like the guy at all, despite the fact that he’d never met him and the businessman was, by all accounts, a law-abiding one, but he couldn’t exactly blame him for that weakness. Especially since Sarah seriously rocked that green evening dress.)

‘He won’t know what hit him.’

She smirked up at him, tucking her gun into her concealed thigh holster.

‘That’s the plan.’ She got up and made a face. ‘But next time, you’re wearing the heels.’
As usual, it ended in a fight.

It *always* ended in a fight.

‘I’m out.’

As his partner spoke, Jack fired off his last shot, which hit home. They were pinned in a room in the back of the tycoon’s mansion.

(Apparently, while the tycoon hadn’t known about the satellite not actually being decommissioned, his PA had been in on it, which had thrown a spanner in the works, to put it lightly.)

‘Me too. Looks like we’re doing this the old-fashioned way.’

Sarah groaned.

‘Nostalgia’s overrated.’

Jack punched the first bad guy’s lackey square in the jaw, as Sarah kicked another in the stomach. (The lackeys were thankfully unarmed.)

‘No arguments here!’

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**SAO PAULO**

Jack did end up having to be the honeypot eventually, but at least he didn’t have to wear heels.

The target: female arms dealer in Sao Paulo, with a known weakness for handsome, muscular guys with a touch of cowboy to them.

It didn’t go to plan.

*Nothing* ever went to plan.

As they ran across the rooftops, Jack glanced back at his partner. Her left arm had been broken in an earlier altercation with the arms dealer’s bodyguards, who were currently pursuing them, and was in a makeshift sling made from Jack’s tie.

‘Did you really have to shoot her and get all of her bodyguards on our tail?’

Despite their situation and her arm, Sarah rolled her eyes at him.

‘I didn’t like how she had her hands on you!’

They jumped to the next rooftop.

‘Hey, no need to be jealous, you’re my best girl, always will be!’

As they ran across the rooftop, Sarah just shot him a look.

‘Would you really rather I let her strangle you?’

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**CAIRO**
They’d actually had two missions in Cairo, but whenever anyone on their team mentioned Cairo, the rest of them all knew exactly which mission they meant.

They didn’t talk about the *other* mission in Cairo, not if they could avoid it.

It’d taken long enough for Mac to tell his best friend the full story, told him that it was more than a mission gone south, even though Bozer had sat by his bedside and cared for him and nursed him back to health after *that* Cairo as much as Jack had.

And it wasn’t until *months* after she’d joined their team that Riley heard all about *that* Cairo.

*That* Cairo was Jack bursting into the room, Sarah hot on his heels, just a fraction of a second too late, as Nikki pulled the trigger on Mac (whose big brain had finally unravelled her plans, confirmed Jack and Sarah’s suspicions, unfortunately too late), telling him that they’d *always have Cairo* with a smirk on her face.

(It hadn’t been a kill-shot. Jack was grateful, oh, so, so grateful, as they all were, that it hadn’t been. It could have been. Maybe Nikki, first and foremost a hacker and an analyst, wasn’t that good of a shot. Maybe Mac had moved, just a fraction, just in time. Maybe the kid’s extraordinary luck had saved his life. Maybe whatever feelings Nikki had pretended to have for Mac weren’t completely faked. Maybe it was a combination of all of the above. Whatever it was, it hadn’t been a kill-shot and that was the most important thing.)

*That* Cairo was the image of Mac, heartbreak and anger (at himself more than her) and determination to stop her written across his face all at once, blood blooming on his shirt. That image was seared into Jack’s retinas forever.

The other Cairo, the Cairo that they were talking about when they mentioned Cairo, hadn’t actually happened exactly in Cairo.

More accurately, it’d happened about a hundred clicks outside of Cairo proper, smack bang in the middle of nowhere in the desert.

Jack and Sarah were pinned behind their Jeep.

He glanced over at his partner.

‘I’ve got a clip left.’

She shook her head.

‘I’m down to four bullets. And we’re out of flash-bangs.’

He risked ducking out from behind cover to shoot one of the bad guys. He didn’t miss, as usual.

‘Well, it’s not over ‘till they’re dead.’

She fired off a shot, then another.

‘Or you are!’

He, too, popped up and shot another bad guy.

‘If we’re gonna go down, we’re going down fighting. Together.’
At that moment, they heard a helicopter approaching, and exchanged a glance. The sat-phone attached to Jack’s belt rang, and he picked up as Sarah took down two bad guys with her last two bullets.

‘Patty, this is not a good time-‘

‘I can see that. Next time, call for back-up sooner. Stand by for extraction.’

The helicopter landed behind them. The door opened, and their boss leaned out and fired at the bad guys.

Jack and Sarah hustled into the helicopter as Thornton provided them with cover.

‘I thought a corner office had made you soft, Patty!’

She simply quirked an eyebrow at him and turned to the pilot.

‘Cynthia, get us out of here.’

‘With pleasure, boss.’

Jack and Sarah exchanged a look, and then Jack shook his head.

‘Came all the way to Egypt, and didn’t even get to see the pyramids.’

Sarah nodded and smiled at him.

‘Had some great coffee, though.’

From the pilot’s seat, Cynthia addressed Thornton.

‘Are they always like this, boss?’

The dark-haired woman looked over at the partners for a moment, and then nodded and replied dryly.

‘Yes. You get used to it. Eventually.’

Chapter End Notes

Yes, the mission in Mumbai is heavily inspired by Mission Impossible: Ghost Protocol. The mission in Sao Paulo is why Sarah isn’t able to go on mission with Jack and Mac in Not Just a Cover. Patty Beau Hammond, did that hit the spot? (Nikki is very, very evil in this, but I don’t think anyone will be too upset…)

helloyesimhere, your request for a time when Mac was treated like an asset, not as an agent, is up next – it ended up being more about that general mind-set and is really rather dark. The guest who asked for Mac-falling-for-Nikki’s-friend-and-talking-to-Jack-about-it, I am 13,000 words deep (the plot is finished, but it needs editing badly) into a college!AU fic that can only be described as Mac’s life as a teen drama, complete with teenage oblivious!Mac with major self-esteem issues.
The Asset

Chapter Summary

For helloyesimhere. MacGyver is not most people. He can do things that no-one else can. He’s special and irreplaceable and a valuable asset, and that brings Patricia Thornton into conflict with her bosses.

Chapter Notes

This is not necessarily AU, this could be canon-compliant, but I think it’s a far more sinister DXS/Phoenix Foundation than we see in canon in this story. There are some pretty dark (non-explicit, not very descriptive at all) ideas in here, including potential harm of a hypothetical child and other things you can imagine a sinister and shadowy government agency would do, but no character death or permanent injury. I’m warning you, this is dark and not what you’re used to seeing from me.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

She hates the term asset.

Those who work under her, they’re never assets.

They’re agents.

(People.)

Her agents.

(Her responsibility.)

She sends them into danger. She has to. It’s her job. It’s for the greater good. And they know that, they understand that. Sometimes, she has to make the tough calls.

Sometimes, her agents don’t come home.

(She wears their blood on her hands and their lives on her shoulders. Everyone knows she’s strong, but maybe she’s even stronger than they all say, this regal Queen.)

Angus MacGyver is twenty-one years old when he becomes one of her agents.

Quickly, he proves that he’s one of the best.

He’s different, and he’s special, and he’s good (not just lucky).
Good in every way, with an innocence, an idealism, that she lost years and years ago (maybe never had).

His partner, Jack Dalton, is no different, not really. Older, wiser, but just as blind, just as ignorant, to the greyer, darker, more sinister element to the DXS. (It’s inevitable that it’s there, it’s part of this world of spies and lies that they live in, and the DXS is so far into the shadows…well, the deeper you go into the shadows, the deeper they go into you, she thinks.)

To her, Angus MacGyver is a *valued agent*. (A friend, maybe, or as much as a friend as she can have, anyway.) Just like Jack is.

To oversight, to her bosses, Angus MacGyver is a *valuable asset*.

(Jack Dalton is replaceable. The Army, the CIA, churns out dozens like him all the time, they say.)

(She disagrees.)

(Sure, they could find another gun to watch Mac’s back. They could find one that’s an even better shot, if they wanted.)

(But there’ll *never* be another Jack Dalton.)

(There’ll *never* be anyone who has quite that same special relationship he has with Mac.)

(Besides, agents, *people*, are *not* replaceable.)

He can do things that no-one else can.

( Maybe things that no-one else, ever, will be able to do.)

(She’s her mother’s daughter, a voice in her head tells her. Maybe one day, his child will be his father’s son, or her father’s daughter.)

(She swears then and there, that if Angus MacGyver ever has a child, that child will get to choose their own path, not be set on one by those who turn the cogs and pull the strings behind the scenes.)

(She swears then and there, too, because she wouldn’t put it beyond the coldest and darkest and most ruthless and least human of string-pullers out there, that if Angus MacGyver ever has a child, it’ll be out of love and not some twisted shadowy plan or project.)

Angus MacGyver can and will save millions of lives.

His job at the DXS allows him to do that.

(And he knows that. That’s why he joined up. Left the relatively uncomplicated world of soldiers and brothers-in-arms and IEDs behind.)

But, she decides, he doesn’t need to know about the darker side of his job, about the darker side of this life he’s chosen for himself.

So she shields him from it, watches his back, covers for him.

(She shields Jack too.)

(She knows, that if he knew, he’d do everything in his power to get Mac away from this life.)
(She doesn’t blame him. There are times when she wants to get them away from this life too.)

(And maybe it’s wrong, maybe it contradicts everything she stands for – or maybe it’s the best compromise she can live with, the best balance between friends and people and agents and assets and protecting those she cares for and protecting the greater good – but she also knows that she can’t let them leave the DXS, leave this life behind, so she keeps them in the dark. Or maybe the light, in this case.)

.Maybe, a little voice in her head says, you couldn’t bear to see them lose that light. Couldn’t bear to let them see the truth, the ugly, dark truth, to have to look at the world in these shades of grey that are all she sees. Couldn’t bear to see them lose the ability to save the millions of lives they can – Jack would cope, she knows, he’d move past it, find another cause, but there are times when she wonders if Mac could ever give it up. Maybe when he’s a little older, when he understands that there are more important things, selfish as it is, than saving lives, things that aren’t worth giving up for anything – she wonders, sometimes, what her life would be like if her fiancé hadn’t died, if she had something other than the greater good to consider and fight for.)

So she holds firm and fights when they suggest a way to remove his best friend (his best friend since he was in the fifth grade, the boy who grew into the man who stuck by Mac through thick and thin, ensured, without knowing, that he had a home- hot meals and jokes and laughter and holidays and celebrations and silliness and light and love- to return to) from Mac’s life, to make maintaining his cover easier.

(Bozer never gets, mysteriously and out of the blue, a job offer to join the wardrobe team for a hit Broadway musical about to go on tour, which would have led to more and more offers in the same vein, keeping him travelling, keeping him away from LA, and away from Mac. Pulling him slowly out of Mac’s life.)

(She privately thinks that it wouldn’t have worked anyway. The two young men’s friendship had survived so long and so much, survived Mac’s father leaving and his grandfather dying, and Mac’s three years in the Army, on the other side of the world – Bozer going on tour couldn’t have killed it, she believes.)

(Maybe nothing can.)

So she seethes and makes her anger quite well-known (to her bosses, in her own way, anyway) when she reads the personnel file for the new analyst assigned to Mac and Jack’s team.

Nikki Carpenter is, of course, a perfect fit for the job. MIT graduate, the right psych profile and all. (Willing to go just that little bit further, take the slightly bigger risks, do the slightly dirtier and darker work – a counterweight of sorts to the partners, avenging angels and Hollywood heroes they are.)

She is also beautiful and only three years older than Mac. They share MIT in their history. She’s brilliant, confident in her looks, in her allure, in her attractiveness. Her dating history (the DXS is very thorough) suggests that Mac is really just her type, and she’s got just the right mix of intellect and confidence and seductiveness, and she will make the first move (obviously, too) if she likes what she sees (which they know she will). She’s just the right woman to draw Mac out of his shell (because even though he carries himself with confidence most of the time, even though he’s got the looks to be a movie star, he is still a little shy and awkward, and in general, has no confidence with women whatsoever), just the right woman for him at that moment.
Nikki never knows that although this isn’t why she was recruited, this is why she gets assigned to this particular partnership.

(Mac and Jack are never any the wiser either.)

But she knows, she knows what they’re trying to do.

They’ve noticed (because of course they’ve noticed, because when the two treat each other like family and Jack calls him brother and Mac says that they’re not just partners, even a blind man could see) how close Mac is to the older man.

And they recognize, the power they hold now.

The more of Mac’s loved ones work with him, the more his lives outside and inside the DXS blend together and become one and the same, the less likely he is to ever leave.

The less likely they are to ever lose one of their most precious assets.

(And the more leverage they’ll hold over him, in case they ever need it one day. The heavier and sharper that Sword of Damocles will be.)

So something in her is set off, some alarm of sorts, some finely-honed instinct, when Nikki Carpenter, supposedly dead, resurfaces a traitor.

She warns Mac off chasing Nikki, because she’s not his responsibility, because he has to concentrate on his job, because it’s consuming him and it’s too painful even for her to watch, but also because she fears the consequences – her bosses’ plans were more successful than they could have imagined, Mac was (is) so truly, madly, deeply in love with this woman, that she fears what blackmail material (another Sword of Damocles to hang over his head) he could inadvertently generate.

And she has a bad feeling about this.

So it is with heavy heart that she pulls the strings needed to get Riley Davis early release and into the newly-reborn Phoenix Foundation.

(The young woman will fall into Mac’s little family, especially given her history with Jack, she knows. And then there’ll be one more chain binding him to the Phoenix, one more piece of leverage, that he’s taken on with open arms, albeit unknowingly. And then another innocent – because even if she’s hacked the NSA and made a lot of bad decisions, Riley’s a good person, at heart, and she’s beginning to think that there’s a lot more innocents in this world than she thought, when she looks at her bosses - is drawn into the shadows.)

So she faces an impossible choice, the day that Wilt Bozer finally discovers that Mac’s cover is just that, a cover. Discovers that his best friend does not work in a think-tank, safely in a lab or before a computer or in meetings all day long, but instead puts his life on the line at least once a week to save the world, without the world ever knowing.

(There are…ways…that they can deal with this. Ways to make him forget. Ways to make sure he can never tell anyone else. Ways to make sure that no-one will ever believe a word he says.)

(All terrible, cruel things to do, to anyone, let alone to a man who has done nothing but to love and
care for another since he was but eleven years old.)

She uses that desire that the string-pullers and cog-turners have, that desire to chain Mac to them, even as he strengthens those chains (loves and grows his team, his friends, his family, more and more and more), tighter and tighter and tighter.

(They let her offer Bozer a job in the labs, even if he appears, on paper at least, supremely unqualified. They let her bring him into this web of darkness, even more an unaware and innocent lamb for the slaughter than Mac was.)

(\text{She goes home and doesn’t sleep that night.})

So she cannot, cannot believe that she could be so blind, so stupid, so foolish, when the handcuffs click closed around her wrists.

She’s not Chrysalis.

There is no Chrysalis, just as she told them in that hotel.

That evidence, that proof – it shouldn’t exist, but it does.

Those five encrypted transmissions they intercepted– traced back to her, even if she never sent them.

Nikki’s entire op (not that the young woman knows it, not that anyone knows it, and not that anyone ever will) was a ruse.

Her bosses were sick of her, sick of her covering for her team (her friends, the only ones she’s got), sick of her shielding and protecting them.

Sick of her shielding and protecting Mac.

(\text{She knows that the others are replaceable, in their minds. The only thing that renders them worth protecting are their value to Mac, the fact that they can be used to control him – the fact that he loves them so much. The fact that that love will never waver, hence that value will never be lost, gives her only very small comfort.)}

Sick of her insistence that he was a person, an agent, not an asset.

(And that everyone else was too.)

Sick of her preventing them from using them, from using him, the way they saw them, the way they saw him – as an asset, as a tool.

A favourite Swiss Army knife, perhaps, but still a tool.

They decided to get rid of her.

(The part of her wants to say something to her team, her friends, all she’s got left to her, pass on some sort of message, hope that they start digging…)

(But she doesn’t. There’s no time, and her bosses, the string-pullers and cog-turners, are there. They’ll never believe her; they don’t know how dark their world is, after all, because she’s shielded them all this time. She’s checkmated, well and truly, and she knows that she has lost this game of twisted chess, and that she can’t protect her pawns, not anymore.)
(And maybe, just maybe, she doesn’t want to shatter their illusions. Doesn’t want them to see the shadows and the monster under the bed.)

(She knows she sold her soul to the Devil long ago.)

(She doesn’t want them to know that they might have too.)

(Ignorance, they say, is bliss.)

But maybe the fallen Queen is not as powerless as she thinks.

She’s always known that her stubborn adherence to the principle of *agents*, not *assets*, might lead to her downfall one day, even if she never saw it coming. Even if she thought it would be political machinations and a forced resignation, not handcuffs and false traitors and lies upon lies.

(There is more darkness than even she ever considered, this world of spies and lies and secrets is more twisted than even she thought.)

The web she spun closes, the suggestions she planted, slowly and carefully and with a prayer and a hope that they’d have the effects she wanted (needed) them to have, bear fruit.

Matty Webber is offered and takes the job as Director of the Phoenix Foundation.

The Queen is dethroned and imprisoned, and everyone that matters to her thinks her a traitor and a liar.

But her pawns are as safe as they can be.

(And maybe that’s all that matters, because they were all she had left to lose.)

Chapter End Notes

Again, the Patricia-has-a-deceased-fiancé headcanon is borrowed from helloyesimhere. helloyesimhere, this is definitely not exactly what you wanted, I think (I think you were hoping for more Mac!whump…), but this kind of just happened…I am actually somewhat disturbed that I even managed to come up with it. Did you like it, at least?

After this, we have Trigonometry, for a guest, which is Mac’s life as a teen drama and about as far from canon as you can get and the complete opposite of this chapter. Then after that, we’ve got Multiple GSWs for Dlwells51, which is the story behind Mac’s aversion to guns and canon-compliant.
For a guest. College!AU. When Mac’s lab partner introduces him to her mentor Nikki Carpenter, the teen has no idea just how complicated his love life is about to get. Luckily, he’s got his friends, including his boss and surrogate older brother Jack, who has plenty of wisdom for him.

Chapter Notes

I think that you probably wanted this to occur in canon, but I couldn’t think a way to make it work, given how complicated the whole scenario with Mac and Nikki is, so, sorry, Guest, but this is set in a very non-canon AU that is similar to the Best Days of Your Life AU.

The set-up: At the start of this story, Mac is sixteen and starting his first year at MIT (he will be there for three years, instead of two as in canon). Bozer studies at MassArt, also in Boston, and Mac works for Jack at Dalton Auto Repair just off campus. There’s no spy stuff or saving the world; just good old drama of the soap opera or teen movie variety.

In all honesty, this is about 13,000 words of Mac’s life as a teen drama, like one of those teen Disney movies (Lemonade Mouth or something like that). I kid you not; all characters, events and the plot are influenced by the fact that this is essentially a teen drama AU (people behave somewhat ridiculously, and there’s quite a lot of rather unrealistic drama, methinks). This is probably about as far from canon as you can get, yet somehow ended up being the longest story in this series to date. (Sorry, action and whump fans…) I did try to bring in as much of canon as possible (in particular, relationships and backstories and sort-of meta jokes/references), please give it a go?

For those who are keen on more canon stuff, the next chapter, Multiple GSWs, is my version of why Mac does not like guns.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

OCTOBER 2016

‘…If we disregard the whole time-as-the-fourth-dimension thing, and just think of the passage of time forwards as a spontaneous process, then it means that we can travel forwards in time fairly easily, because it’s just a matter of kinetics, but we can’t travel backwards in time easily at all, since it’s non-spontaneous.’
Mac glanced over (and down somewhat – she was rather short) at his chem lab partner, fellow sixteen-year-old MIT freshman and new friend, Beth Taylor, and nodded.

‘Makes sense to me.’ He gave a small, wry smirk. ‘I’m going to have to find another use for my Delorean, though.’

Beth gave a snort of laughter as they kept walking across campus, towards her favourite library (she wanted to get a head-start on studying for their mid-sems) and Dalton Auto Repair (he had work this afternoon).

‘Hey, it’s not impossible, it’ll just require an awful lot of energy, and it seems that if anyone could…’ She suddenly smiled and waved at a beautiful blonde young woman who was sitting under a tree, who’d just looked up from the laptop on her lap, and walked over to her. Mac just followed, and the blonde girl stood and smiled at Beth, and then at him.

The blonde girl’s smile changed quite clearly, as her attention shifted from Beth to Mac, going from fond to something that Mac could only describe as brain-frying, given the effect it seemed to have on him. (She was really, really beautiful.)

‘Hi, Beth, and…’

Beth looked a little flustered, a little awkward, for a moment.

‘Oh, sorry! Yes, Nikki, this is Mac, he’s my chem lab partner, and Mac, this is Nikki. She’s my Women in STEM mentor, and she’s a sophomore and she’s nineteen and does computer science and she’s really brilliant and is already doing freelance work on the side…’

Beth seemed to realize that she was rambling (her cheeks turned pink) and just trailed off, looking quite sheepish.

Nikki gave her another fond little smile, and then she held out a hand for Mac to shake.

‘That was a very glowing introduction, I’m not sure what I can say now, but it’s very nice to meet you, Mac.’ As they shook hands, she looked him up and down in a way that made Mac’s ears burn.

I have got to be imagining things. There’s no way that a beautiful, really, really beautiful, and really intelligent older girl would…

Even if I’m maybe not a skinny toothpick anymore, and Bozer and my engineering buddies all insist I look like that guy from X-Men…

(The gym sessions that his boss, Jack, had recently started with him were apparently paying off.)

‘It’s…it’s nice to meet you too, Nikki.’

Inwardly, he kicked himself for the fact that his voice came out at least an octave higher than usual.

He happened to glance down at his watch and see the time as he let go of Nikki’s hand.

‘Oh, I need to go, I’ve got work-‘

‘Where do you work?’

Nikki seemed to genuinely want to know, not just to be making small-talk. She graced him with yet another rather brain-frying smile.
‘Oh…umm…At Dalton Auto Repair, just off-campus.’

The brain-frying smile just got more brain-frying.

‘You’re a mechanic? I’ve always had a weakness for a man with grease under his nails.’

Mac was pretty sure that his ears were on fire. He’d have to ask Beth if there was smoke coming off them later.

*I really can’t have imagined that…and there’s really only one way to interpret that.*

*I’m not that oblivious.*

‘Umm…err…grease is really hard to remove. Especially from under the nails. Lotion helps, though!’ He kicked himself mentally again. ‘I…err…have to run. Being late for work is bad. See you tomorrow, Beth, and it was really nice to meet you, Nikki!’

He took off, waving goodbye to the two teenage girls, one blonde, one brunette, as he did, ears still burning and still cursing himself internally.

Both girls watched him go with rather different smiles on their faces, smiles generated by rather different reasons.

Four days after he’d first met Nikki (and three days after Beth had confirmed that while his ears might have felt like they were on fire, there was no actual smoke), Mac was at work repairing a particularly stubborn engine belonging to an old Ford when Nikki showed up at the garage.

‘Hey, Mac.’

The teenager in question almost jumped (he’d been really focused on the engine), looked up, and quickly wiped his grease-stained hands on his pants, before realizing that that might have just made it worse – he was already a bit of a mess, in his grease-stained jeans and MIT T-shirt that no longer hung quite as loose on his body as it had when he’d bought it.

‘Oh, hi, Nikki. Welcome to Dalton Auto Repair! What can I do for you today?’

He kicked himself again in his mind, for sounding like he was reading off a customer-service script.

His mental faculties were not helped by Nikki gracing him with yet another one of those brain-frying smiles.

She gestured at the car that was parked just outside.

‘Well, my car’s due for servicing, and I heard that the mechanics here do an excellent job, so…’

Part of Mac kind of wanted to do a happy dance (she said mechanics, not mechanic – he and Jack were the only two people who worked at Dalton Auto Repair, so she was referring to him too!), and the rest of him told him to play it cool and not be an awkward dork.

‘Oh, well, yes, we can do that. If you’d just come this way, we can sort out the paperwork…’

He led her into Jack’s office.
Nikki looked up at him as she finished filling out the forms.

‘You’re sixteen years old, you’re a freshman at MIT, you speak Mandarin and you can fix cars? Is there anything you can’t do?’ Mac’s brain seemed to have gone on vacation, because all he could really do was stare at her, since she’d just shot him yet another one of those smiles, and she was speaking with that voice. A little voice somewhere asked how she knew he could speak Mandarin, and luckily, that seemed to be what Nikki interpreted his silence as. ‘Oh, I asked Beth about you. She speaks very highly of her chem lab partner.’

Mac just nodded (his brain had definitely gone fishing and he was pretty sure his ears were bright red), and then handed her a business card.

‘We’re open 9 to 5 on weekdays and we open from 10 till 4 on Saturdays. We’re closed on Sunday, though. Call that number when we’re open, and either Jack, my boss, or I can give you an update on how your car is going. It shouldn’t take more than a couple of days, you’ve caught us at a bad time, I’m afraid, we’re pretty busy…’

She took the business card with a smile, which quickly turned into a bit of a smirk.

Mac was pretty sure that it wasn’t just the ears now. He probably looked like a tomato.

‘And if I want to call you after hours…’

‘Uh…’ Mac fumbled blindly on Jack’s desk for a piece of paper and a pen, and wrote down his phone number. ‘Here.’

She took it, that smile still on her face, and wrote down her own digits and handed them to him.

‘And here you go. Now it’s a fair exchange.’

Mac glanced down at the piece of paper in his hands, then at Nikki, and blinked twice.

Did that really just happen?

Nikki just smiled one last brain-frying smile at him, waved, and walked out of the office.

Mac stood there, stunned, for a good five minutes, until Jack got back with lunch. (Two sandwiches for Mac, since Jack thought he didn’t eat enough.)

The older man chuckled and clapped him on the back when he found him.

‘So, who is she?’

SEPTEMBER 2017

‘…Yeah, it’s great that she’s finally finished that project; we haven’t been able to meet up for nearly a month, she’s been so busy, which sucks!’ Beth jogged him lightly with her elbow, an eyebrow quirked. ‘But seriously, she’s your girlfriend! If I’m happy that Nikki’s emerging from cyberspace at last, you must be tap-dancing on cloud nine!’

Mac chuckled, and nodded.

‘Well, I can’t tap-dance, but yeah. Definitely!’
Beth, too, laughed.

‘We finally found something that Angus MacGyver can’t do!’

She waved goodbye to him, as they’d reached the lecture hall where her biology lecture was held.

‘See you later, Mac! Have fun on your date!’

‘See you, Beth!’

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**OCTOBER 2017**

‘Morning, bro!’ As Mac walked out of his bedroom, hair mussed and blinking rather sleepily (he’d had a late night the night before, working on a project with his engineering buddies), his best friend and roommate (he and Bozer had moved out of their dorms and into an apartment together after their first years at MIT and MassArt respectively) grinned at him from the kitchen, and then picked up two plates of freshly-made waffles and walked into the dining area. ‘I made waffles!’

Mac grinned at him. (Bozer’s waffles were incredible.)

‘Thanks, Bozer.’

‘Anytime, bro, anytime.’ The nineteen-year-old took a seat opposite Mac. ‘So what’s your plan for this fine Saturday?’

Mac swallowed his mouthful of waffle before replying.

‘I’ve got work this afternoon, and then I’m going out with Nikki tonight; she’s finally finished that project, so she’s emerging from her room at last.’ Mac was very happy about that, his girlfriend of nearly a year had been consumed with her work for the past week, yet again, and he had barely seen her apart from dropping by her place once or twice with a delivery of coffee and pastries. Beth hadn’t even seen Nikki at all for three weeks, with her being so busy, though Nikki had managed to make time to chat with her over email. She was an excellent mentor, after all.

Bozer swallowed, grinned, and reached out and bumped fists with his best friend, then winked. ‘I’ll crash at Penny’s tonight, then.’

Mac’s ears reddened instantly.

‘You don’t have to…’

The older teen looked incredulously at him, an eyebrow raised.

‘Nope, I definitely have to. I love you, man, and I’m so happy for you, you’ve come such a long way since Darlene Martin and all, but there are some things I don’t want to see. Or hear.’

Mac, ears still rather pink, reached out and clasped Bozer’s shoulder.

‘Sorry…but thanks, man. I appreciate it.’

As Bozer rushed out the door (he was late for filming for his latest project), he called out to Mac.

‘Have fun with Nikki, bro! Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do!’
Mac’s ears turned red again.

‘Bozer!’

NOVEMBER 2017

‘Jack, I’m heading off now! The Toyota’s all fixed up, it looks like someone tried that shove-a-potato-or-something-like-that-in-the-exhaust trick, but I repaired the engine, so it should be good to go.’

Jack stuck his head out of his office (modernizing his accounts and the way he ran his business was a pain, computers were so not his thing, and it seemed that Mac wasn’t all that great with them either, unfortunately – Jack had considered hiring Nikki to help out, but he apparently couldn’t afford her freelance rate), and grinned at his friend and employee.

‘I’m proud of you for finally cutting class, brother!’ It was his and Nikki’s first anniversary, so Mac was skipping his afternoon class to make her dinner. Mac wasn’t the most devoted or studious of students (he preferred his projects and recreational, albeit science-related, reading and YouTube video watching to studying for tests and exams or doing homework), but he also didn’t skip classes. Except, it turned out, for love. ‘Knock her socks off and don’t do anything I wouldn’t do!’

Mac smiled to himself as he walked up the stairs to Nikki’s apartment, a bag of groceries in hand.

Like him and Bozer, his girlfriend lived off-campus (she’d moved out of her dorm at the end of last year), as she made excellent money from her freelance work.

Nikki had said that she wouldn’t be back home until seven that evening; she had a meeting with one of her freelance clients from three, and those always ran late. Really, really late. Her clients, while they paid well, were apparently very demanding. It was currently four, so he had plenty of time to make the surprise just perfect for her.

He let himself in with the key she’d given him.

Oddly enough, the lights were on.

She must have forgotten to turn them off before she left.

That’s strange…

There were voices in the apartment.

Coming from the bedroom, specifically.

Maybe she also left her laptop on…

Trying to ignore the sinking feeling in his stomach, Mac tip-toed over to the slight-ajar door of Nikki’s bedroom.

‘…We’re not going to be interrupted by your skinny dork of a boyfriend, are we?’

‘No, he’s in class now, and he never skips…’

‘Happy three months, baby.’
Not wanting to believe his ears, wanting this all to be a terrible misunderstanding, Mac peeked through the crack in the door.

What he saw shattered his heart.

He dropped the bag of groceries, which went spilling everywhere.

The sound alerted the occupants of the room (his now presumably *ex*-girlfriend and an older guy that he recognized as having played intramural basketball as a senior last year for Nikki’s dorm’s team) to his presence.

Nikki’s eyes widened as she took in the sight of him, shoulders slumped, the spilled groceries at his feet.

Mac looked down, then at the guy, then at her.

‘Was it all a lie?’

Then he turned tail and ran out of the apartment, not wanting her to see the tears in his eyes.

‘Mac!’

Bozer looked up from the dining table, where he was working on a prosthesis (a full-face prosthesis for General Wang, who would be played by Mac, since Mac was the only guy he knew who spoke Mandarin) for his latest movie.

The front door was opening, which was weird, since Mac was at Nikki’s, making her dinner… Maybe his roommate had forgotten something.

Bozer glanced into the kitchen. Mac’s pancake-making toaster was still there, maybe he’d come to pick that up. (Even though Bozer thought that his best friend probably wasn’t going to use that; particularly since it still sometimes shot batter onto the ceiling…)

He had a bad feeling about this.

That bad feeling was confirmed when Mac stepped inside, shoulders slumped and tears in his eyes.

His heart sunk all the way into his feet. What had that girl done to his best friend?

‘Mac, bro…did something happen with Nikki?’

The blonde stumbled further into their apartment, the tears that Bozer knew he’d been fighting to hold in until he got home starting to roll down his cheeks.

‘She cheated on me.’ He let out a sob that made Bozer’s heart wrench. ‘And lied to me. For *three months.*’

Bozer got up and walked over to his best friend, and pulled him into a tight hug.

‘I am so, so sorry, bro.’

Mac’s response was muffled by the fact that his head was buried in Bozer’s shoulder, but the older teen heard it regardless.

‘I love her. And she knew that. I love her and…’
Bozer’s heart broke a little more for him. He didn’t know what to say in response, so he just rubbed Mac’s back and let him cry.

All he could do was be there for him.

At about 6:30 that evening, Mac’s phone beeped. A text message.

For a moment, he had the irrational urge to throw the phone across the room, before he remembered that he had deleted Nikki’s number already, and blocked it, not wanting to hear her excuses.

He picked it up from the coffee table, putting down the paperclip he was playing with (it had just taken the shape of a heart, cut in two with jagged edges), and glanced at the ID.

Beth.

He opened up the text message.

**Hey, Mac! How’s the dinner prep going? Do you need me to stall her? She’s going to be so happy, I just know it! J**

He sighed.

He’d asked Beth to help him out by texting or calling Nikki with some kind of emergency if he was running short on time, and of course, his friend had agreed readily. (She was very fond of Nikki, looked up to and idolized the older girl; she was friends with both of them, so of course she’d wanted his surprise to go off without a hitch.)

Of course, she couldn’t possibly know what had just happened.

He sat there for a moment, debating whether to tell her or not. (Part of him just wanted to hide it forever, in some sort of vain hope that not acknowledging it would make it go away.)

He sighed again, put down his phone, and picked up another paperclip, shaping it into an ECG line without thinking.

Then he picked up his phone again, and replied to Beth.

**She cheated on me, Beth. And lied to me. For three months.**

A reply came through three minutes later.

**Oh my God, Mac, I’m so, so, so, sorry. That is a TERRIBLE thing for her to do to you! HOW COULD SHE?**

**God, I’m so sorry, Mac. Would you like me to come over with ice-cream and my Mythbusters DVDs? We could eat ice-cream straight out of the tub and watch things blow up with Bozer? Or we can just chat over the phone about anything at all? Or I could just go away if you want? Whatever will make you feel even just a little bit better...**

He didn’t really have to consider, just typed out a reply.

**Come over, please.**
He got a response almost immediately.

I’ll be there in twenty minutes.

Putting his phone back in his pocket, he stood and made his way into the kitchen, where Bozer was making tomato soup and grilled cheese sandwiches, Mac’s favourite comfort food from his childhood, that his mom and his grandfather had made for him whenever he was feeling down, or sometimes, just because. (Bozer actually used the exact family recipe for the soup that his mom and grandfather had used; when Mac was twelve and Bozer was fourteen, and Mac’s father had just left, Bozer had actually gone to Mac’s grandfather to beg for the family recipe – it was a secret – so that he could make it for Mac, because he wanted to do something, anything, for his best friend. Mac’s grandfather had gone one step further and personally taught him the recipe.)

‘There’s going to be three of us for dinner; Beth’s coming over.’ Mac paused for a moment, drumming his fingers lightly on the kitchen countertop as he watched Bozer work. ‘She’s bringing ice-cream and Mythbusters.’

Bozer looked up, and gave Mac a wan smile.

‘She’s a good friend.’

Mac nodded slowly, an answering wan little smile on his face.

‘Yeah.’ He reached out and clasped Bozer’s shoulder. ‘At least I’ve got great friends.’

He pulled out his phone again.

* Might as well tell Penny, and Charlie and Tom and Aaron and Matt.  
* Like ripping off a band-aid, right?
* Besides, they’re my engineering buddies, well, not Penny, but they’re all my friends. Great friends.  
* They’re here for me too.

Later that night, as they sat on the couch, each with a tub of ice-cream in their laps (Beth had brought five different tubs in five different flavours with her, since Mac always seemed to pick a different flavour of ice-cream whenever their friend group went out for ice-cream), Bozer and Beth exchanged a concerned look, which Mac didn’t notice.

Bozer sighed and texted Penny, who was very worried, back as discreetly as he could.

Mac had only nibbled at his grilled cheese sandwiches (Bozer, like Jack, thought he didn’t eat enough and had put three on his plate), finished only half a bowl of tomato soup, and was now staring at his melting ice-cream rather than eating it.

He’d also barely reacted when the Mythbusters successfully slowed Buster’s descent using a parachute made of shower curtains enough so that he hit the ground at only 4Gs (this was the sort of thing that Mac loved and generally thought was pretty awesome and typically tried to replicate and improve), and he hadn’t even seemed to notice when they abandoned all pretence of realism and blew the foam shark to smithereens (Mac was fascinated by explosions, and he loved watching things blow up, provided no-one was in danger, of course).

Bozer and Beth shared a brief moment of anger at Nikki, for doing this to their beloved friend (for
doing this to the young man who was quite possibly the best person they knew), before it faded away back into concern.

What could they do, but be here for him and hope that was enough?

The next morning, Bozer and Beth exchanged a very, very worried look when they realized that Mac was not in his room as they’d presumed he was. (Beth had crashed on their couch overnight.)

‘I’m so, so sorry, Bozer, I didn’t hear him leave or…’

Bozer just shook his head, and patted the teenage girl’s shoulder reassuringly.

‘Nah, it’s not your fault at all. My bro can be really sneaky when he wants to be, trust me.’ He paused for a moment. ‘We just have to find him before he gets himself into some kind of trouble.’

He pulled out his phone.

‘I’ll text Jack. Maybe he’s at the garage.’

Beth nodded, bringing up her own contacts list.

‘I’ll ask his engineering buddies; maybe he’s gone to their workshop.’

(Mac and his engineering buddies rented a workshop space in a converted warehouse nearby from Cynthia and Scott, a married couple who gave MIT students a good deal on workshop space.)

Jack’s garage didn’t open until 10 on Saturdays, but sometimes, he’d come in early to work on one of the jobs, particularly if they were busy, or sometimes, to work on a personal project of his own. (He enjoyed restoring old cars.)

A while back, he’d given Mac a key, so the kid could come and go whenever he wished.

Usually, being a teenager with a girlfriend, friends, his projects and hobbies, and a full load of classes, Mac didn’t come in early on Saturdays.

But today, when Jack arrived at the garage, the lights were on and there were distinct clanking sounds.

He pushed down that little thrill of fear that that gave him (he’d been out of the Army for six years, and sometimes, he still felt like he was in Afghanistan). He knew it had to be Mac.

He stepped into the work area, and caught sight of the blonde.

The kid looked like he hadn’t slept a wink. He was pale and dishevelled, and was glaring at the auto parts in front of him as if they’d personally insulted him, his mother and all of his friends.

Jack’s heart sunk all the way into his feet, heavy as stone. Yesterday, Mac had been so full of life, so excited and happy for his and Nikki’s anniversary. And today…

‘You know, brother, they’re not going to grow legs and walk themselves into place if you keep looking at them like that.’

The kid threw the wrench he was holding down in frustration. He looked around the garage, then down at his knees.
‘She cheated on me, Jack.’ His voice was flat and toneless. Heartbroken. ‘And lied to me.’ He looked up at Jack, and the older man saw the tears pooling in Mac’s eyes. ‘For three months.’

Jack felt anger course through his veins.

*How dare she!* Mac was a good kid, a great kid. Growing up into a great man. Yet, he maintained a sense of idealism, of innocence, of optimism. An innate goodness that made him so easy to love and so hard to be mad at. How dare that girl hurt him!

Jack tamped down that anger, channelling the protectiveness he felt for the younger man into comfort instead. Mac needed that more at the moment. He’d be mad and go a few rounds with a punching bag later. He walked over and helped the despondent teen up.

‘Come here, brother.’ Jack pulled him into a tight hug, rubbing his back. ‘Let’s go get some breakfast at that diner down the block you like. My treat.’

Mac let out a long sigh.

‘Thanks, Jack.’

Jack watched as Mac played with one of the paperclips he always carried in his pockets, not touching his breakfast.

The mechanic pulled out his phone under the table. He texted two numbers, one that he didn’t contact all that often, and one that he didn’t even have until this morning.

**To: Wilt Bozer (Mac’s Best Friend), Beth Taylor (Mac’s Little Genius Friend)**

**He’s safe, I found him, but he’s not okay.**

Beth stared at her coffee cup as she waited for Nikki to show up to the diner near Jack’s garage where they had their fortnightly ‘big-sister-little-sister’ meetings/catch-ups.

Nikki was brilliant. She already had a foot in the door of the industry she wanted to work in, with her freelance work.

She was also beautiful and so confident and not at all awkward or weird or dorky. She was feminine and yet still so strong.

Beth had idolized her.

Wanted to be just like her, even if she knew she’d never be as pretty as Nikki was or as smooth and cool as she was. She didn’t think she would ever be as strong, either.

But she didn’t anymore.

Not after what she’d done to Mac, who’d loved her so much.

No-one deserved to be cheated on and lied to, no-one.

But Mac least of all.

He was quite possibly the best person that Beth knew.
He was kind, he always wanted to help others, he cared for his friends as if they were family (and they were, she supposed, since he had no family left, as sad as that was – he hadn’t spoken to his father since he was twelve, after all), he never broke his promises, he had a strong moral compass and he was just good.

And he was her friend.

A dear, dear friend.

Nikki had been too.

But not anymore.

Nikki froze as she slipped into the booth opposite the brown-haired girl who was her ‘little sister’, as Beth looked up at her, brown eyes narrowed and hardened.

Internally, she sighed and her heart sank.

Beth was friends with Mac. Good friends. She knew. Had to know.

Before Nikki could say anything, try and explain (even though, a little voice in her head said, there were no excuses, not for what she’d done), the younger girl spoke up.

‘I used to look up to you.’ There was an anger in her voice, a sadness, a heartbreak. Nikki wasn’t sure if it was for herself, or for Mac. Probably both. ‘You’re so confident and brilliant and…’ She paused for a moment and shook her head. ‘But I don’t anymore. Not after what you did to Mac. Not after what you did to my friend. No-one deserves that. Especially not him.’ The brunette stood and left a couple of bills on the table to pay for her coffee. ‘I don’t want you to be my mentor anymore. I don’t want to be just like you anymore. I don’t think I want to be like you at all.’

She left before Nikki could say anything.

The blonde just stared at the half-empty coffee cup.

The younger girl was a sweet, adorable little thing, who idolized her.

This fierceness, this protectiveness that she’d heard in her voice, seen in her actions, that was not something she’d seen before.

Not something she could have seen the younger girl having inside her.

Maybe Nikki hadn’t known her ‘little sister’ as well as she’d thought.

Maybe their perceptions of each other had been blinded by Beth’s idolatry of her.

It probably didn’t matter anyway.

A single choice changed so much.

Well, she’d made her bed, she had to lie in it.

Unbeknownst to either young woman (he was sitting in the booth behind theirs, in the seat closest to Beth’s, with his back to Nikki, who apparently did not recognize him from behind), Jack had heard everything.
He gave a somewhat sad smile.

He might have a horrible ex-girlfriend (even if Jack, like all of Mac’s friends, had liked her a lot), but at the very least, Mac had wonderful friends.

He left money to pay his check, and followed the brown-haired girl outside.

He found her sitting on a low wall outside the public library a couple of doors down from the diner, seemingly deeply lost in thought.

‘You did good, kiddo, just then.’

She looked up at him in surprise and shock and for a moment, he was a little worried that she was going to topple off the wall, and stared at him with wide eyes. She bit her lip and looked very sheepish.

‘You…you heard that?’

Jack just nodded.

‘Uh huh. Agreed with every word you said, too. You did the right thing, kiddo.’

‘I feel bad, actually. I mean, they met because of me…’

Jack shook his head, locking eyes with the teenager.

‘Hey, it’s not your fault, Beth. Not nearly! Everything that happened; it’s all on Nikki. Not you, not Mac, not anyone else. All her.’

She looked up at him for a moment, and then gave a little smile.

‘Thanks, Mr Dalton.’

Jack shook his head, quite tempted, all of a sudden, to reach out and ruffle her hair. (He suspected she’d absolutely hate that; Mac did, and Riley had even more so – he figured it was a girl thing, their hair usually being easier to mess up and all and harder to fix.)

‘Call me Jack, Beth. Mr Dalton was my dad.’

Her smile widened.

‘Okay, Mr Dalton…sorry, Jack.’

She hopped off the wall, and Jack reached out and clasped her shoulder briefly.

‘Mac’s…Mac’s like family to me. Makes me glad, to know he’s got friends like Bozer and Penny and you and Charlie and the rest of his engineering buddies.’

Her smile widened as she looked up at him.

‘It makes me glad that he’s got you.’ She looked up at him for a moment, then quirked an eyebrow. ‘You really are a big soft goofball, aren’t you? I didn’t believe Mac at first when he said that his ex-Army mechanic boss was…’ She trailed off and looked a bit sheepish, seemingly just realizing what she’d said. ‘Please don’t tell him I told you that, I wasn’t supposed to tell you that…’
Jack just laughed.

Mac really did have great friends.

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DECEMBER 2017

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Mac grinned as he closed the group chat that he and his engineering buddies had, which at the moment, was full of various permutations of Merry Christmas.

He got up from the couch and walked into the kitchen.

‘Hey, Bozer, man, do you need help?’

His best friend and roommate (who had forsaken returning to Mission City to be with his family for Christmas, apologizing to them deeply, but insisting that he just had to stay with Mac in Boston – in all honesty, Mac had nowhere else to go, he certainly wasn’t going back to Mission City, even if Bozer’s family had said he was welcome to celebrate the holidays with them – Mac didn’t know how he was ever going to thank Bozer for this) looked up from where he was seasoning the side of beef brisket (he’d forgotten to order a turkey and this was all the butcher had left) that he was preparing.

‘Nah, I’m good, bro. Pastrami’s ready to go into the grill; next year, you’re doing your thing to it so it doesn’t take half the day, okay?’

Mac gave a small chuckle, shaking his head with a smile.

‘Will do, Bozer.’ He paused for a moment. ‘Wait, are we going to have pastrami every year from now on?’

Bozer nodded.

‘Yeah, I’m thinking we make a tradition out of it; when life gives you lemons and all.’

Mac just shook his head again (his best friend was a little nuts sometimes, though he supposed he couldn’t really talk), grinning.

‘Well, your pastrami’s delicious, so I’m not going to complain.’

Bozer grinned and picked up the pastrami, heading out of their apartment, towards the little rooftop deck area that belonged to them. Mac followed.

‘When’s Jack coming around, bro?’

‘He said about six.’

As Bozer put the beef carefully into the grill, Mac’s phone beeped.

He pulled it out of his pocket and grinned when he saw the message.

Merry Christmas, Mac! J Thanks again for the pot + pot plant!

There was a photo attached, of a grinning Beth wearing reindeer antlers and an Oh Chemistree, Oh Chemistree ugly Christmas sweater.
He’d made her a pot out of some scrap metal for Christmas, and put an aloe vera plant in it, and given it to her before she’d gone home for the holidays.

He laughed (it was a terrible pun, but still, he appreciated science humour) and showed Bozer the picture. Bozer just shook his head with a fond grin, both at the picture and Mac’s reaction.

‘You adorkable science nerds…’

Mac just jogged him with his elbow (Bozer had a healthy collection of Christmas-themed clothing himself) and typed out a reply.

**Merry Christmas to you too! And thanks (again) for your gift; I’ve already got plans for it! J**

(For Christmas, he’d received a large box of assorted scrap metal pieces from her – which a lot of people would have thought wasn’t a very thoughtful Christmas present, but it was to him, particularly since every piece in there wasn’t rusted – she’d evidently picked through bits and pieces at a junkyard or something. His mind was already buzzing with ideas on what he could make with them, particularly when he combined them with the gift vouchers to a local appliances shop and an auto parts store, and the several pounds of paperclips and duct tape he’d gotten from his engineering buddies.)

He got a reply almost immediately.

**I thought you were terrible with plans. ;) Looking forward to seeing what you make!**

He laughed, shaking his head, and then turned his attention to helping Bozer.

The grill had caught fire.

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**JANUARY 2018**

‘Man, that is awesome!’

‘It’s so weird…but it really is kind of cool.’

‘Are *all* you engineering types insane?’

‘You know you love it, baby.’

‘…That is true.’

Mac smiled as he showed his latest project (which was primarily made of the old gumball machine that Bozer had bought him for Christmas – it didn’t exactly do anything all that *useful*, at least, it was highly inefficient, but it did look awesome and was rather entertaining, even if he said so himself) to Charlie, his girlfriend Marissa, Tom, and Tom’s girlfriend Claire.

(Semester started again tomorrow, but they were all back in Boston now, so he and Bozer were having some friends over for a get-together.)

The doorbell rang, and Bozer opened the door.

Standing on the other side were Beth, Penny and Aaron, who’d evidently run into each other on their way up the stairs, judging from the conversation they were having.
Penny immediately reached out and hugged Bozer with her usual enthusiasm, which Bozer returned. Aaron stepped inside, moving around them (he wasn’t the touchy-feely type), and walked up to the little group around the former-gumball machine.

‘Hey, guys. Mac, is that what I think it is?’

Beth smiled as Bozer pulled her into a side-hug, and then held up the box she had in her hands as she walked over to the group around the gumball machine.

‘I made science gingerbread!’

Mac raised an eyebrow.

‘Science gingerbread?’

Beth nodded, opening the box so that he could take a look inside. She narrowed her eyes at him, a teasing look on her face.

‘No mocking, or no gingerbread for you!’

Mac took a look inside the box.

_Huh, what do you know? Conical flasks, round bottoms, beakers…it really is science gingerbread._

He raised his hands in supplication, smiling.

‘No mocking! Just a little surprised, that’s all. I have never seen or imagined science gingerbread.’

Beth quirked an eyebrow at him, glancing over at his gumball machine contraption.

‘You made _that_ and you have never considered the possibility of science gingerbread?’ She glanced at the gumball machine gadget yet again. ‘Actually, is that what I think it is? A spaghetti machine?’

He nodded with a bit of a smirk.

‘Of _both_ kinds.’

Her eyes lit up. Passing the gingerbread box absent-mindedly off to Charlie, who immediately took a piece, Beth walked over to the machine to examine it more closely, glancing between it and Mac, grinning broadly.

‘So it makes pasta, extremely inefficiently?’

He just nodded, returning her grin, and starting up the contraption. Both young geniuses watched as the first gumball started rolling down the ramp.

They didn’t notice the looks that Claire and Marissa exchanged, nor the look that passed between Bozer and Penny, slightly slower and simultaneously more concerned and hopeful (it hadn’t been that long, not since Nikki, probably not long enough, but…)

To be fair, Charlie and Aaron and Tom didn’t notice either, occupied as they were eating the gingerbread. Teenage male engineering students, as a general group, weren’t usually very good cooks and had a diet primarily consisting of ramen and pizza and energy drinks.
Mac picked up the spanner, and made a couple of changes to the engine of the solar car in front of him.

Today was Valentine’s Day.

It’d been three months (and he was not still in love with Nikki), but quite understandably, today wasn’t the happiest of days for him.

His friends had been really great, they really had.

Yesterday, Penny had brought him a cake for Galentine’s Day.

*I guess it might be a little upsetting for some, if your ex-girlfriend brought you a cake for Galentine’s Day, and you know, I’m not a girl, so I don’t know if Galentine’s Day even applies to me…but it’s always the thought that counts.*

*Besides, it was a delicious cake.*

*Hey, I’m a teenage boy. Maybe I get caught up in stuff and forget to eat sometimes, but I seriously appreciate food of just about any kind.*

*Anyway, not many ex-girlfriends you can still call a friend, after all.*

This morning, Bozer had gotten up very early and made him (heart-shaped) waffles for breakfast and then dragged him to an arcade to play Whack-a-Mole and DDR and Guitar Hero on a friend date before his morning classes.

After his morning classes, Jack had taken him to the gym next door to his garage to punch some bags, and then taken him out for lunch.

Now, it was evening, and Mac was in the workshop that he and his engineering buddies used to work on their projects – the current project was their solar car for the Annual MIT Solar Car Competition, they’d won last year, so had a title to defend.

None of his engineering buddies were present, as they all had plans. (They’d all offered to adjust their Valentine’s Day plans, so that at least one of them could keep him company at all times, but Mac had insisted that they didn’t. It wasn’t fair, not to them, or to Claire or Marissa or the girl that Matt had just started seeing or Aaron’s mystery someone that he refused to tell them anything about. He was okay, anyway.)

Mac sighed, exerting a little more force than needed on a particularly stubborn bolt.

*As you can probably guess, I’ve never exactly been popular with girls.*

*You know, I was pretty skinny all through high school, and maybe I’m not a toothpick anymore, but I’m not exactly Jack or a member of the football or basketball team now either.*

*And, well, I get excited by weird things.*

*And do things like make a pancake-making toaster.*

*I can’t help it, really.*
That’s what I’m like. And it’s so much fun, and it’s interesting and I just can’t resist!

Penny’s always saying that it’s important to stay true to yourself and be who you are, because those who matter, don’t mind, and those who mind, don’t matter.

My grandfather used to say stuff like that too.

And…well, Nikki was the first girl who was really, definitely, interested in me in that way.

Darlene Martin shot me down cold.

Penny…well, I know she loves me, and I love her too, but we probably never did in that way.

And Nikki’s beautiful and brilliant and confident and successful, and well, she could have anyone she wanted, and she picked me.

At least at first.

Mac sighed and shook his head, trying to change his train of thought.

You know what lies down that path. You’ve walked it before.

Think about something else, MacGyver, anything else.

Luckily, at just that moment, his phone chimed.

He wiped some of the grease off his hands and pulled it out of his pocket. He smiled a little as he saw who the text was from.

Beth was good company, a good friend. Maybe she’d provide him with a pleasant distraction.

Hey Mac, you know how you said you’d be working on your solar car tonight? If I’m not going to be in the way or distracting you or anything, could I come crash at the workshop for a bit? I’m kicked out until midnight; my roommate’s got *plans*.

He shook his head wryly at the mention of plans and being kicked out by one’s roommate.

Bozer also had plans, but his plans involved trying to get Mac’s new friend and fellow employee at Dalton Auto Repair, Riley - who was a freshman doing computer science at MIT – to give him her phone number. So far, he had the first three digits.

(Beth and Riley had met at the start of the semester at a Women in STEM event, and had apparently bonded quite quickly over a mutual hatred of rom-coms and a love of superhero movies. They, like Bozer and his engineering buddies and just about everyone, insisted that he looked just like the guy who played Havok in the *X-Men* reboots, which he really couldn’t see. Of course, that had led to him and Riley becoming friends, and one day, Mac had brought her to work with him, intent on getting Jack to give her a job, thinking that her computer skills would be very helpful to the mechanic, who was still struggling with the whole modernizing thing. Unfortunately, he didn’t know that Riley was the daughter of Jack’s ex-girlfriend Diane, whom he’d walked out on. That had caused more than a bit of tension, but was thankfully resolved now. Jack and Riley were back on good terms.)

Hey Beth, of course, come on down. You’re always welcome here! J

He got a reply a minute later.
Thanks, Mac. I'll bring pizza, I bet you haven’t eaten dinner, WHICH IS BAD.

His stomach chose that moment to rumble loudly. He laughed.

Thank you, Beth. Pepperoni, please?

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MARCH 2018

‘Two from two!’

‘Oh, yeah!’

‘Go us!’

‘Who’s awesome?’

‘We are!’

Mac and Charlie, who were currently in the middle of a congratulatory hug that involved back-slapping, both shook their heads fondly at the antics of Tom, Matt and Aaron.

Well, we did just win the Solar Car Competition for the second time.

That does call for celebration.

He and Charlie let go of each other, and Charlie was immediately drawn into the embrace of his girlfriend Marissa, who was keen to congratulate him properly.

Mac turned his attention to Bozer, Riley and Beth, who’d all come along to support him and his team (Penny had a class theatre performance, and Jack had to work).

They were wearing T-shirts decorated with a bowl of mac n’ cheese (Mac n’ Cheese was the name of their team for any and all competitions – it was a long story that involved a very late night and too many energy drinks), with varying levels of enthusiasm ranging from Bozer (extreme) to Riley (tolerance).

Bozer reached out and pulled Mac into a side-hug.

‘Congrats, bro!’

‘Thanks, Bozer.’ He paused for a moment (Bozer had made the T-shirts, and while they were a really great gesture of support, they also weren’t going to catch on as the latest fashion craze either.). ‘Great work with the T-shirts, I really appreciate it.’

Bozer beamed anyway, and Riley shook her head (she’d told him that the T-shirts were a bit much), but she smiled and reached out and bumped fists with Mac anyway.

‘Congratulations, Mac.’

‘Thanks, Riley. So, you in for the robot we’ve got planned for the Undergraduate Engineering Showcase? We desperately need a programmer, and you’re the best one I know.’

(He’d asked her earlier, a couple of weeks back, and she’d said she’d consider it, and give him an answer after the Solar Car Competition, when she’d gotten to know his engineering buddies a bit
better.)

Riley nodded.

‘Yeah, I’m in.’

Mac grinned.

‘Great!’

Beth smiled at Riley, giving the other girl a thumbs-up, and then turned to Mac.

‘Congratulations, Mac. There were so many fine pieces of engineering out there today, but you guys seriously took the cake!’

He reached out and pulled her into a side-hug, smiling down at her.

‘Thanks, Beth.’ He looked up, at Bozer and Riley, who were whispering about something or the other, he didn’t know what. ‘You guys want to come along for burgers with us?’

‘Tesla. If I was going to name my child after any scientific figure, I’d pick Tesla.’

He had no idea how they’d gotten on to this topic, but here he was, eating fries and talking to Charlie about what he’d name his hypothetical future offspring if he had to name said child after a scientific figure.

(To be fair, there were lots of odd conversations going on; on his left, Beth was telling Bozer and Riley all about how Professor Sevchenko hated Professor Levkin and Professor Orlov, and was trying to restart the Cold War.)

‘Your name is Angus and you would saddle a kid with Nikola?’ Charlie sounded very sceptical, and was quirking an eyebrow at him. Marissa elbowed her boyfriend and shot him a look, and Charlie continued before Mac could say anything. ‘Hey, Beth, what do you think about naming a kid after Tesla?’

The brown-haired girl, who’d just finished telling Bozer and Riley the story about the Russian professors, turned to face Mac and Charlie and Marissa.

‘Well, Nikola’s a pretty unusual name, I don’t know if I’d want to saddle a kid with that.’ She thought for a moment. ‘Though, you could go with Nicholas or even Nick, or they could do as Mac does…and Tesla was really, really awesome, I mean, if you were going to name a kid after a scientific figure, he’s up there.’

Unfortunately, at that moment, as she spoke, there was one of those mysterious lulls in conversation that Mac could never quite determine the root cause of.

Everyone, and he meant everyone, shot them looks. Bozer smirked, and Charlie even went so far as to waggle his eyebrows at him.

Beth turned rather pink and shifted uncomfortably in her seat, and Mac, his ears burning under his hair, made a mental note to tease Bozer and Riley later (Bozer had finally gotten her entire phone number, and Riley had admitted the other day that of course Jack’s scariest regular client, whom he called Matty the Hun, or the Hun for short, liked Bozer- who’d happened to be hanging out at the garage the other day when she’d come by – because everyone liked Bozer.), and threaten to turn all
of his engineering buddies’ clothes hot pink, so that they wouldn’t do it again, because they were making her uncomfortable and embarrassing her, never mind him.

*Is it the nicest thing to do?*

*No, probably not.*

*But I’m not actually going to turn their clothes pink, and I was going to tease Bozer and Riley anyway, to be honest…and eh, turnabout’s fair play.*

*What’s a little teasing between friends?*

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**APRIL 2018**

Mac and Riley, walking towards Dalton Auto Repair on Saturday morning, suddenly stopped as their phones both buzzed at the same time.

They opened identical texts from Jack.

**Mac, Riley, I’m sick as a dog, so I’m closing the garage for the day, since we haven’t got any appointments and the backlog’s so big we probably don’t want to be taking walk-ins anyway. Health’s more important than money and all. Go home and do whatever it is you kids do on weekends.**

The two teens exchanged a glance. Jack was sounding more and more old man as every day passed.

They were so teasing him for this later.

Another text came through a moment later.

**Riley, remind Bozer that you’re supposed to be off limits. Have fun on your date.**

Mac just raised an eyebrow at Riley, who stared at her phone, mouth slightly open, before looking up and shaking her head, muttering under her breath.

‘Thanks, Patricia. I told you that in confidence, and then you went and told Jack…seriously, there’s got to be something going on between those two.’

(Patricia Thornton was a District Attorney who worked out at the gym next to Jack’s garage. She had taken Riley under her wing when she’d joined up while still working through her anger at Jack.)

She looked up at Mac, who simply looked at her, his eyebrow still raised. Eventually, Riley sighed.

‘Bozer found out that I’ve never played mini golf, and he finds that to be unacceptable, so we’re going to play mini golf this afternoon.’

Well, that explained why his roommate had been so happy this morning.

Mac nodded, a small smirk starting to grow on his face.
‘Like on a date?’

Riley nodded slowly, a rare softness in her eyes as she stared into the distance.

‘Yeah, like on a date.’

*Bozer’s a great guy, the best, and Riley’s awesome too, I’m glad they found each other.*

*At least they actually have love lives.*

It was a shame that Jack was sick, of course, but at least he had some extra time to work on Beth’s birthday present now. (Eighteen was a big milestone, and after she’d bought him a subscription service that sent him a new box of recycled odds and ends every month for a year, like a box of doorknobs and old phones, which had been this month’s – he’d had no idea that such services existed, but he supposed there was a market for everything – for his eighteenth, he really did have to make her something really awesome for her birthday, didn’t he?)

Mac ducked his head into the office, drying his hands, which he’d just scrubbed clean of grease.

‘Hey, Jack, Riley, I’m heading off now.’ It was four o’ clock in the afternoon, which was the official ending time of Mac’s shift.

Jack looked up from the new laptop that Riley had insisted he buy, instead of the clunky old desktop that he’d had in the past, where the teen girl was showing him how to use a new billing program she’d custom-written for him.

‘Done with that Chrysler, brother?’

Mac shook his head, looking a little sheepish.

‘No, but I’ll be in early tomorrow to finish it, I promise.’

That was unusual, Mac often stayed late if he was in the middle of something. Jack turned away for a moment, seemingly to grab Mac’s favourite leather jacket for him, in order to conceal his smirk. (And the young ‘uns said he couldn’t be subtle!)

‘Got something to do, brother?’

He had a feeling that he knew what it was; both Mac and Riley had asked for this evening off, because it was Beth’s birthday and they were having a little party for her.

Jack was very fond of her, as he was of all of Mac’s friends, really. (The kid was like some sort of magnet or something, drew a lot of good people to him – birds of a feather, Jack supposed).

He was pretty sure that Mac was much fonder of her than the blonde realized.

Mac nodded as Jack handed him his jacket.

‘Yeah, I’ve got to pick up a pie. Actually, a few pies.’

Jack’s brow furrowed.

‘Not a birthday cake?’

Mac shook his head, a fond, soft little smile on his face that neither Jack nor Riley missed.
'No, she likes pie more. A lot more.' He walked out the door, waving. 'See you later!' 

Jack just shot a look at his other employee, who simply nodded. 

'She does *really, really* like pie.' Riley quirked an eyebrow at him. 'And you’re seriously late to the party, old man. It really took you this long?'

Jack shook his head, and then snorted. 

'Just because I haven’t said anything, doesn’t mean I haven’t noticed, kiddo.' 

Riley scoffed, and then her phone beeped, and she opened up a message. Jack caught a flash of what he’d learned was a cat meme, as Riley gave a soft little smile and laughed. He shook his head. 

He was surrounded by crazy kids in crazy love. 

Bozer romanced Riley with mini golf and bizarre and funny pictures of cats. 

Riley actually thought a guy who wore tartan waistcoats and weird cardigans was pretty cute. 

And now Mac seemed to be falling for his friend who made cookies shaped like chemistry equipment. 

Who was seriously impressed by things like Mac’s gumball machine gadget and his tricked-out grill that sometimes caught fire and thought they were really cool. (Though, he supposed, that wasn’t exactly an uncommon opinion among Mac’s friends.) 

Well, at least he had another funny story to tell Patty. (He was positive that the woman had a sense of humour, and he was going to find it.)

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**JULY 2018**

Sitting on an old blanket on the rooftop deck of his and Bozer’s place (though, it was kind of his place for most of July, since Bozer had gone back to Mission City for a little while – after being reassured that Mac would not be alone, since Jack was still here, of course, and Beth was staying and taking summer courses and doing an internship too), Mac glanced over at the teenage girl sitting next to him. 

After a day of classes and interning and studying, he and Beth had met up for a dinner of sandwiches and fruit on the roof. 

She finished chewing and swallowed. 

'How’s the hot-tub project going?'

He swallowed his mouthful of sandwich and smiled. 

'It’s going well, I think it’ll be done by the time Bozer gets back.’ Mac’s expression turned more wry, and his smile became more of a smirk. ‘He’ll probably try and talk Riley into using it, and she’ll probably say that she’d rather get electrocuted the normal way, but end up going along with it anyway.’ 

Beth gave a snort of laughter, then seemed to realize something, and narrowed her eyes at him.
‘Did you electrocute yourself working on it?’

He looked a little sheepish.

‘Umm…not badly?’

She shook her head in exasperated fondness.

‘I know you’re good, but you’re also lucky, and your ridiculous luck had better hold out. I do not want to have you as a patient one day.’ She wanted to be a doctor, and was thinking that ER might be the field for her. ‘You are bad enough when you have a cold and refuse to look after yourself. You have got to be a terrible patient.’

*Based on the times I’ve had bad cases of the flu, and the time I fell out of a tree back in the third grade, and the time I got food poisoning when I was fourteen?*

*Yeah, she’s probably right.*

He smiled at her.

‘Well, if I wind up being your patient, at least I know that I’ll have an excellent doctor.’

She took another bite of her sandwich, chewed and swallowed, before responding.

‘I haven’t even gotten into medical school yet! I might be an awful doctor, for all you know.’ Her smile turned a little more teasing. ‘Or can you see the future now too?’

He laughed, and shook his head.

‘No, haven’t developed the gift of foresight, I’m afraid. It’d sure be useful for exams.’ She gave a snort of laughter, and his expression turned more serious. ‘But I know you’ll be an excellent doctor.’

She smiled and ducked her head at the compliment, cheeks turning a little pink. The motion had caused a lock of her hair to slip out of place, over her eyes, and he had the sudden urge to reach out and tuck it back behind her ear.

‘You know, the only constellation I can identify is the Big Dipper.’

Mac turned his head to face the girl lying on the blanket next to him. The sun had set, they’d long finished their dinner, and they were trying to stargaze now, as best as they could, anyway, given the light pollution.

‘Really?’

She nodded.

‘Yeah, it’s just not something I ever picked up.’

‘Well, Ursa Major’s body and tail are made up by the Big Dipper, it’s quite hard to see unless it’s really, really dark, but we can try…’

He reached out and pointed, and after a moment of watching where he was pointing, she reached up and mimicked him.
‘There? I don’t think I see it…’

‘A little more to the left, I think.’

He was quite suddenly tempted to just take her hand and guide her that way.

A little while later, Beth looked over at him, smiling and looking very impressed.

Mac’s ears suddenly felt a little warm, which was odd, really, because they’d been friends for almost two years, and it wasn’t the first time she’d looked at him that way, but he didn’t think that reaction had ever happened before…

It wasn’t all that dissimilar to what had happened when she’d practically tackled him into a hug when he’d given her her eighteenth birthday present, actually.

‘How do you know all of this?’ She paused for a moment. ‘Wait …did your grandfather teach you?’

Her voice softened when she mentioned his grandfather, like all of his friends’ who knew about his grandfather and how he’d lost him just before he’d finished high school did.

(Sometimes, the loss still felt a little raw, even though he did like to talk about the man who’d practically raised him, about the advice and the stories that he’d shared with him.)

He nodded, a soft, fond smile on his face as he slipped into his memories for a moment.

‘Yeah, he did.’ He was silent for a moment, and then he glanced back up at the sky, then at her. ‘He taught me to navigate by them too.’ He gave a snort of laughter. ‘That came in handy once or twice. Bozer and I went exploring near our lab once, and we got lost. Really lost. We ended up staying in the one place, waited till nightfall, and I found our way back home.’ He snorted. ‘We got in such big trouble, him more than me, actually. He was grounded for about two weeks. I think my grandfather was secretly very proud, so I got off lightly.’

Beth shook her head, grinning.

‘You can navigate by the stars. You always carry a Swiss Army knife. You have never met a problem that you couldn’t solve using some paperclips, duct tape and a stick of gum. I know you’re not always the most rule-abiding, but how in the hell did you get yourself kicked out of the Boy Scouts?’

He chuckled, shaking his head.

‘It’s quite the story.’

‘We’ve got time.’

He nodded with a smile, and looked back up at the sky.

‘Well, it started the day that I decided I wanted to go for this particular Merit Badge…’

‘…that is how you got kicked out of the Boy Scouts. Really?’

Mac, arms crossed under his head, lying down, nodded, as Beth, who’d sat up halfway through his story, looked down at him, face incredulous.
‘Yes, really. I am officially banned from attending any and all Boy Scout activities in any capacity.’

She stared at him for a moment, and then covered her mouth with her hands, laughing uncontrollably. He, too, chuckled, more in response to her reaction than anything else, shaking his head.

When she finally stopped laughing, she leaned over him and poked him in the chest, still smiling broadly, still flushed from laughter, eyes affectionate.

‘You, Angus MacGyver, are ridiculous! I cannot wait for the day that Bozer makes a tell-all memoir-movie about the two of you…’

Lying there, looking up at her, as she smiled at him and teased him with that softness in her eyes, he was suddenly very tempted to sit up and kiss her.

And then, it hit me.

Oh, no.

Jack, working on a Jeep with a currently non-functional engine, looked over at the blonde teenager who’d become like a brother to him, or maybe even a son. Mac was supposed to be working on restoring a motorbike that had once been little more than a pile of parts (Matty the Hun had brought it in and practically challenged the teen to fix it – exactly why, Jack didn’t know, he was pretty sure the woman was crazy – and Mac being Mac, he hadn’t been able to turn down the challenge.).

However, he didn’t seem to be paying it any attention at all, because he was currently using a spanner that was at least two sizes too large for what he was trying to do.

Jack pondered for a moment, wondering what could be distracting the young genius so much.

He very quickly came to a conclusion.

(It wasn’t all that hard, Mac was only ever really distracted to this extent by matters of the heart, given his big brain. And with almost all of his friends – save one – gone for the summer right now, it wasn’t all that hard to narrow it down. Particularly with what Jack had been seeing these last few months, especially since the summer had started – two teenagers walking over from campus after classes, eating pie at the diner a few doors down on Saturdays, meeting up for dinner when Mac finished work, laughing and joking and teasing and talking about things that went way over Jack’s head. A cynic might say that it was because all their friends weren’t there, because they had no one else, but Jack was no cynic. In fact, one could say that maybe he had a distinct romantic streak.)

He remembered, quite vividly, quite suddenly, a teenage girl, a little younger and shyer and more awkward than she was now, confronting her ‘big sister’ over the wrong she’d done to a beloved friend, and sitting on a wall lost in thought and almost falling off and calling him Mr Dalton.

He gave a small, wry little smile.

She was a good match for Mac.

He left the Jeep with the non-functional engine, towelling his hands off on a rag absent-mindedly, and sat down on a stool near the blonde (he was getting too old for sitting on the floor now, his knees would not be happy if he did).
A few minutes later (Mac could be very stubborn when he wanted to be), the teenager sighed and put down the incorrectly-sized spanner.

He absent-mindedly rubbed his hands on his already grease-stained jeans, and then sat cross-legged on the ground next to the motorcycle.

‘I think I like Beth.’

Jack snorted, deliberately affecting a more casual air. That would probably help get Mac to open up and all.

‘That’s not news, brother.’

Mac looked sharply at him, and rolled his eyes.

‘Like like, Jack.’ Mac made a face at the rather juvenile wording. ‘I think I have a crush on her.’

Jack just shook his head again.

‘Not news, brother.’

Mac looked up at him again, slightly less sharply and more genuinely curious. Jack couldn’t help but give a little smile at that.

Sometimes, Mac was very stupid for a genius.

‘Really?’

Jack just nodded.

‘Hasn’t been rocket science, working it out, brother.’

Mac snorted.

‘Rocket science isn’t actually that hard.’

It was Jack’s turn to snort, and he rolled his eyes, before resting his elbows on his knees and leaning forwards, towards Mac.

‘Now, the real question, brother, is what are you going to do about it?’

What am I going to do about it?

Well, probably nothing.

We’re friends.

Dear friends.

Really, really good friends.

How could I possibly give that up?

He looked up at Jack, and then away again, not quite able to meet his eyes.
'Nothing.'

Internally, Jack sighed, as a suspicion that he and Bozer and Riley and a good deal of the rest of Mac’s friends had carried since the Nikki Incident, even before, really, grew stronger.

‘You really, really like a girl, and you’re not going to do anything about it?’

Mac glanced at him again, and then looked away, pulling a paperclip out of his pocket and starting to play with it.

‘Yeah.’

In his mind, Jack cursed Nikki yet again. For good measure, he cursed Mac’s father and Darlene Martin, and Donnie Sandoz and the rest of Mac’s childhood bullies, all those people who’d made him feel like he wasn’t worth much, when, in Jack’s mind at least, he was worth his weight in gold, at the very least.

As a result, Mac had no confidence with women, was oblivious to (and in fact, might well twist and misinterpret to deny, subconsciously) all but the most obvious of female attention, and, Jack suspected, had buried the feelings he held for Beth so deeply that he didn’t even know they were there until now, all, Jack thought, because his default setting was there is no way she could be interested in me.

‘Brother, you only have a bad idea once in a blue moon, so I’m telling you now, that is the worst idea you’ve ever had.’

Mac looked sharply up at the older man.

It is not.

The Football Field Incident is probably the worst idea I’ve ever had, small nuclear meltdown and all.

In all seriousness, this is really a very good idea.

If I don’t do anything about it, we can still be friends.

We can still talk about time-travel and group theory and new treatments like that star-shaped peptide polymer for a post-antibiotic resistance world, or make weird jokes and eat sandwiches on a blanket on the roof.

She’ll still make me science gingerbread for Christmas and send me pictures of her ridiculous science-joke T-shirts whenever she gets given a new one and grin whenever I use my pancake-making toaster and order me to rest whenever I get sick.

I can still show her all my projects and watch her light up and get all curious and excited, and give her little paperclip things that never fail to make her smile, even when she’s worried about exams.

But if I do something, say something…then things are never going to be the same.

It’ll make things awkward. Uncomfortable.

I don’t want to do that.
And I wouldn’t blame her, not in the slightest, if she just decided to not talk to me ever again.

Darlene Martin ignored me for the rest of Junior Year, and Senior Year, actually, after I asked her to Prom.

That made being chem lab partners really hard.

‘No, it’s not, Jack. If…if I don’t say anything, we can still be friends.’ He pause for a moment, and his voice was softer when he spoke. ‘I don’t want to lose her.’

Jack looked very, very sad.

Mac had only ever seen this level of sadness in the older man’s eyes twice.

When Jack had, one night, when they’d been working late in the garage, told Mac all about Sarah, the woman that Jack called the right one.

When Riley had slapped the older man, twice, and yelled at him, because he’d been the closest thing she’d ever had to a father, and then he’d left, and stormed off.

They sat there in silence for a moment, and then Jack spoke, his voice hoarse with emotion.

‘You really, really think you’ll lose her, brother, if you tell her?’

It sounded half a question, half a statement.

Of course, because why would she be interested in me?

Well, clearly Jack thinks differently, but he’s biased, of course.

He’s family, after all.

Mac just looked up at Jack, almost incredulously.

‘Look, Jack, I appreciate the fact that you think so highly of me, I really do, but at risk of pointing out the obvious, you’re not a woman, and you’re not Beth.’ Mac paused for a moment, and pulled out another paperclip. The first one had taken the shape of an almost-empty container. ‘She’s brilliant, Jack, and sweet and kind and fierce all at once.’ He sighed. ‘And she’s beautiful.’ The paperclip in his hands took the shape of a pie. ‘Why would she be interested in me?’

Jack was quiet for a moment, seemingly weighing up his words before he spoke.

‘You’ve been friends for almost two years. She’s been a damn good friend to you, too, just like you’ve been to her. Didn’t you once stain her favourite shirt blue?’

It was a lab accident.

Lab coats and safety glasses don’t protect everything.

If you got that particular synthesis just slightly wrong…the whole mixture blows up and you get what is essentially blue dye everywhere.

It was a really bad choice for a first year practical, in all honesty. Someone was bound to screw it up.

That particular day, it just happened to be me. I wanted to try this tip I’d read about online, and,
well, I picked a bad practical to try it in…

But if not for the mess and everything, it was actually kind of cool. The dye’s not dangerous or toxic or anything, just…persistent.

Despite himself, Mac gave a wry little smile.

‘And some of her hair.’

She agreed on the cool bit, and forgave me. After some ranting and poking. And an apology pie.

Even if she had partially-blue hair for a while.

Jack just looked at him as if to say see?

‘You turned a girl’s hair blue, and she’s still one of your best friends. It’s going to take an awful lot to make her leave.’ Jack’s expression grew more serious. ‘She ever tell you what she said to Nikki, after you two broke up?’

Mac just looked up at the older man, brow furrowed.

I know they’re not friends anymore, and I know that Nikki doesn’t mentor her anymore.

I asked if I was putting her in an uncomfortable position, being friends with me while Nikki was still her ‘big sister’.

She just said that Nikki wasn’t her mentor anymore, or her friend. I’ve never seen her eyes as hard as they were then.

‘No? I don’t think so.’

Jack nodded. He’d thought as much.

‘Remember how much she used to look up to Nikki?’ Mac just nodded. ‘She used to want to be just like her. That all changed when Nikki cheated on you, and she made that very, very clear to her, too.’ Jack smiled wryly. ‘She was plenty dramatic, and didn’t pull her punches. I heard the whole thing.’ He paused for a moment, let that sink in. ‘My point is, brother, is that I reckon whatever you feel for her? I think she feels the same about you.’

Mac blinked a couple of times, looked down at his feet for a moment, then back up at Jack.

‘But…but she’s never said anything. Never given me a sign.’

I know I matter to her, I know that.

We’re friends, good friends, that’s never been a doubt in my mind at all.

But surely, surely if she was interested in me in that way, she’d have said something? Given me some sort of sign?

Jack sighed.

‘Mac, brother, firstly, you’re not very good at noticing signs. Remember Katarina, that German exchange student with the real nasty ex-boyfriend? The one who came here to thank you after you made her a Taser, so she could defend herself?’ Mac nodded. ‘Well, I didn’t say a thing then, because you were with Nikki and all, but she was keen on you.’ Mac looked like someone had just
shown him irrefutable proof that the moon was made of cheese. ‘See my point, brother? You kinda
need obvious signs, you know, in bold with neon lights. And that brings me to my second point.
Remember how you see her? She’s brilliant, she’s beautiful, she’s kind, why would she want you?
Well, I reckon she sees you the same way, and I reckon she sees herself the way you see yourself.’

Mac made a face of disbelief.

‘That’s preposterous—’

Jack reached out a little, clasped Mac’s shoulder and looked him in the eye.

‘Brother, think about it. Put that genius brain of yours to good use. Think. What’s she like now?
What was high school like for her?’

When she was twelve and in the eighth grade, some of the girls at school started spreading
rumours about her. Really, really nasty rumours.

When she was thirteen years old, a set of lockers in a locker bay nearly fell on her. They were
pretty heavy, and it seemed almost impossible that they’d fall on their own, but she never found out
if anyone pushed them.

When she was fourteen, nearly fifteen, she stayed home on Prom night and watched Mythbusters
with her parents, because no-one asked her.

When she was fifteen, she dated a guy, who, she says in hindsight, was all wrong for her, and she
might not have even liked in that way in the first place. She says that it was probably because he
was the first guy to show any interest in her in that way.

Maybe…maybe Jack’s right.

Maybe I am being a very stupid genius.

Jack continued.

‘And because of that, I think she doesn’t dare give you more obvious signs, because she doesn’t
think you could be interested in her, and she doesn’t want to lose you.’ Jack, again, paused to let
that sink in, noting with satisfaction that Mac seemed to be deeply considering his words. ‘And
thirdly, half the time you’ve known each other, you were with Nikki, and then you were getting
over her. Nikki, whom Beth thought of as beautiful and confident and smooth and everything she
wasn’t, I reckon. And you were happily in love with her, and then you were heartbroken. She’s
your friend, Mac, and she cares about you. What does a true, good friend do or say in that situation,
even if they’ve got more-than-friendly feelings for you? What would you do?’

Mac looked up, nodding slowly.

‘Nothing. I’d say nothing. If they’re happy and in love…why would I ruin that? And if they’re
heartbroken, that’s not the time. I’d be there for my friend, as just a friend…’

Jack nodded.

‘Exactly, brother. Now, I don’t know how long she’s had more-than-friendly feelings for you, I
don’t know if she developed them before or after Nikki or somewhere in the middle, but I reckon
that doesn’t really matter, does it?’ Mac simply gave a small smile. A hopeful one. Jack took a
deep breath, not really wanting to say the next words, be feeling he had to, for Mac’s sake. ‘And I
have to tell you, brother, I’m sorry, but I don’t know for sure, completely, that she feels the same
way about you as you do about her. Can’t read her mind and all, and love’s a tricky beast, always is, but if I were a betting man? I’d say she’s as much in love with you as you are with her. She’s never dated anyone these two years, has she? And I don’t think it’s just because everyone thinks she’s your girl.’

Well, he’s right on both counts, actually.

She hasn’t dated anyone all this time I’ve known her.

And I know I’m rather oblivious when it comes to anything involving me, but I’m not nearly as bad when it comes to other people.

There’s a guy in electrical engineering with me, his team came second in the Solar Car Competition and he’s an all-round good guy, who I’m pretty sure is interested in her…he never did anything about it, as far as I know.

I always figured that it was because she never seemed interested in him…but having said that, just about every time she runs into him, I’m there too…

I guess it might look like she’s my girl from the outside…

And in love might be too strong a word, in fact, it really is probably too strong a word…but Jack likes to exaggerate.

Besides, it sounds more poetic that way.

Mac nodded, slowly, and then a slowly-broadening smile grew on his face.

‘Thanks, Jack. Thanks. I really, really, really appreciate it.’ He paused for a moment, looking up at the older man and into his eyes. ‘And…you’re wrong, Jack. Love’s not always a tricky beast. It’s never been hard for us.’

Jack just got off his stool, reached down and hauled Mac to his feet, and hugged him in response. His voice was a little choked with emotion when he responded, and Mac was mildly concerned that he might have a bruised rib or two, so tight was his embrace.

‘You’re right, brother, you’re so, so right.’

After a quiet moment, they let go of one another.

Mac looked down at the paperclips he’d left on the floor, and bent down and picked up the pie with a fond, soft smile, that shifted to somewhat sad and regretful as he spoke.

‘I knew her first. I wish…’

It’s not that Nikki is evil or anything like that.

Yes, she did something seriously horrible to me, and I don’t know if she’s a good person, at least not good like all my friends are.

Not good like I always try to be.

But I don’t believe that she always intended to do that to me, not from that very first moment under the tree.

I loved her, and I think she loved me too, at least for a while.
It’s just…well, it’d have saved me a lot of heartache, and probably, hopefully, if Jack is right, her a lot of heartache too, if I’d fallen for a different girl the first time.

Jack reached out and clasped Mac’s shoulder.

‘We’ve all got our regrets, brother. I’ve made a lot of mistakes, and more than my share of mistakes in love, over the years.’ He’d never told Sarah, not truly, not seriously, how he felt. He’d left Diane, left her and Riley, just walked out. ‘It’s what we do to after that matters.’ Riley had forgiven him. She’d mentioned that Diane was coming down to Boston with her, in about a month before semester started. Maybe she’d forgive him too. Maybe it wasn’t too late.

The blonde nodded, and smiled at Jack, reaching out to clasp his shoulder too.

‘Thanks, Jack, again. For the wisdom and the advice.’

Jack gave a small smirk and a shrug.

‘Hey, not much good growing old if I can’t share some wisdom of the ages with you young ‘uns, right?’

Mac leaned against a tree as he waited for Beth to leave the biology lab in which she was doing an internship over the summer. Professor Orlov had let him go from his internship early today. (He suspected that part of it was because the Professor wanted to go home and watch The Price is Right, but he wasn’t exactly going to give voice to that thought.)

She started a little, surprised, when she saw him as she walked out, but grinned and waved just the same, walking up to him.

He’d had twenty minutes, standing there, to build up his nerve, and he wasn’t about to let that go to waste, so he just smiled back at her, even though he was sure his ears, at the very least, were on fire.

‘Beth, would you like to go get pie at the diner with me?’

She looked up at him, looking hopeful and surprised and a little hesitant, cheeks pink, and at that moment, he knew for sure that Jack had been right.

‘Mac…are…are you asking me out on a date?’

He smiled and nodded, not really caring now that he probably looked a bit like a tomato.

‘Yes, yes I am.’

Her smile widened, turning into a grin.

‘I…well…yes, of course, I’d love to.’

He grinned too, and they stood there in comfortable silence for a moment, and then he gave a small smirk.

‘You do really love pie.’

‘Pie is amazing. It’s also irrational.’

Yes, that was a terrible joke.
Almost as bad as Jack’s puns.

But I kind of laughed anyway.

NOVEMBER 2018

Jack grinned as he watched the two young couples walk away from his garage, on their way to a double-date. (Apparently, Whack-a-Mole was going to be involved – he’d been right about the whole crazy-kids-in-crazy-love thing.) Bozer ran a little way ahead of the group, and bowed down in a dramatic gesture at Riley, who shook her head at him, but reached out and took his proffered hand anyway. Mac and Beth watched their friends, and after a moment, Mac reached out and put an arm around his girlfriend’s shoulders, pulling her close for a moment and kissing the top of her head.

Jack’s grin grew softer as they left his field of view.

Love wasn’t a magic bullet.

He knew that.

Mac had issues (so did Riley, in all honesty, and Beth, and Bozer – all people did, though some more than others).

Self-esteem issues, stemming from his dad leaving when he was twelve, and then everything and everyone from Donnie Sandoz to Darlene Martin to Nikki. (At least that was his theory, he was no shrink.)

That wasn’t all going to be fixed since he and Beth had gotten together now.

Still, his friends (Bozer, and Penny, most of all, maybe, though he liked to think that he and Riley and Beth, of course, and Charlie and the rest of Mac’s engineering buddies had made a decent contribution) sticking around with him for all these years seemed to have helped.

(Mac was not insecure about them leaving him or not wanting him around or not loving him, that was for sure.)

So if Beth stuck around (and maybe it was Jack’s romantic streak talking, but he really did think she would), it’d help.

Besides, Mac was as strong as anyone Jack had ever met, and he’d met some pretty strong people (Delta Force commandoes, Patty, Diane, Riley – hell, maybe everyone’s got strength, in different ways, really), and he could do things no-one else could, and he was definitely not most people, and it wasn’t as if he was going to lose this support network, this family he had now, so Jack was as certain as he could be that the young man he called his brother was going to be just fine.

Chapter End Notes

I hoped you liked it, guest who asked for this! I think you wanted more Mac-dealing-
with-having-feelings-for-Nikki’s-friend-and-the-complications-that-brings, and I think you got more Mac was abandoned by his father and bullied at school, so must have really bad self-esteem issues, what are the consequences of that instead…sorry!

This turned out to be weirdly like the music video for You Belong With Me, by Taylor Swift. I am going to blame my subconscious for that – I was listening to the song a little over a month ago, then happened to actually watch part of the music video, and then I was like, wait a moment, that’s Mac!

I’m not actually sure how much I like this personally, but I’m also not going to throw out 13,000 words of writing, so here it is…This is kind of what I envisioned Mac and Beth to have been like in college, for those of you who have read Paperclip Charms, by the way. (A little shy and awkward and lacking the confidence and self-esteem to think that the other one could have been interested in them, and hence never doing anything about it.)
Multiple GSWs

Chapter Summary

For Dlwells51. Mac doesn’t like guns. Why? Of course, there’s a story (or, maybe stories) behind that.

Chapter Notes

Thank you for the lovely (and reassuring response!) to the last chapter! You’re all awesome!

And the pendulum swings the other way again…we’re back to introspective and (a little) dark. This series has been very helpful for extending my range as a writer! This is, as far as we currently know (up to 1.14, Fish Scaler), canon-compliant.

He doesn’t like guns.

(Well, he appreciates them as fine works of engineering, of human ingenuity and all, but he doesn’t like them, and sometimes, he wishes they’d never been invented, kind of like the nuclear bomb, even if that’s anathema to someone like him, always buzzing with ideas and curiosity and the thirst for knowledge and desire for constant innovation.)

The why isn’t a story that he tells, not really.

It’s not really one story, anyway.

Not really a story to be told, honestly.

It’s not, as some people think, the tragic tale of a childhood accident, maybe the loss of a beloved childhood friend, that’s given him this aversion.

(Maybe it was, in another life, but not this one.)

It’s not one incident, one story, but many.

Maybe too many to tell.

It’s the ache in his grandfather’s knee whenever the weather turns cold, ever since he was shot there in Korea.

It’s hearing about school shootings and dead children, watching news broadcasts on TV, reading
about them in the newspapers, because even though everyone tries to shield him from it, because he’s a child too, he’s far too smart to be ignorant.

Far too smart to not think if not for this, then maybe…

His brain might be too big for his own good.

(And his heart might be too, because even if he doesn’t know these people, doesn’t know the first thing about them, even if they’re miles and miles away, it still hurts.)

It’s his dad leaving one day, with his rifle on his shoulder, saying he’s going on a hunting trip (they both know that’s a lie, he’s got far too much packed, far too many bags, for a hunting trip, and besides, it’s been a long time coming, honestly – the inevitable has been inching closer and this is just the day it all snaps – somehow, he’s still shocked and hurt anyway).

(This one’s not logical, not in the slightest.)

(He finds he doesn’t care.)

It’s when Bozer’s fifteen and he’s thirteen, and Bozer’s saying to him, you know that convenience store robbery yesterday, the one where that guy nearly shot a random innocent bystander? Well, that innocent bystander was my mom.

It’s the fear and the sadness in his shaken best friend’s eyes (and the little bit of guilt, too, that he’s expressing these feelings to him, when he lost his mom years ago and his dad’s gone and he might as well be an orphan).

It’s that horrible feeling that he has, because his best friend nearly lost someone dear, nearly became a half-orphan, and he knows what that’s like and it’s terrible and he wouldn’t wish it on anyone, let alone Bozer.

It’s Afghanistan and a little girl caught in cross-fire and shot in the heart.

A teenage boy killed by a sniper’s headshot on his way to school, in what must have been a terrible, tragic, cruel case of mistaken identity.

(And too many other similar stories to tell.)

(Maybe too many to bear.)

It’s not quite rational.

(Maybe not rational at all.)

He knows that.

He’s a genius, after all.

A gun’s a tool, really, not good, not evil, not on its own.

Depends on the wielder, really. Depends on what they do with it. Where they point it. How they use it.
(Like any other tool.)

He thinks (even if he doesn’t want to), that if he had to, he could kill with just about anything.

He really doesn’t like it (he doesn’t want to ever have to, not if he can help it), but he could.

How does a gun differ, from a knife, from a stick, from fists, from a car, or, for that matter, a Swiss Army knife or a couple of paperclips?

There are deadlier things out there – cars have killed more people. He doesn’t dislike them at all.

Some argue about intent and purpose – knives have other uses, and maybe it’s true – what use is there for a gun, save to hurt and kill?

(Actually, he can think of many other uses – bullet casings can be lock-picks, after all- but then he’s not most people, is he?)

But guns are different, maybe for reasons that he can’t quite pin down (he’s got lots of theories, but none seem completely, wholly perfect).

(The widow of the inventor of the Winchester rifle went mad, apparently, built a house full of staircases to nowhere, because she thought she’d be haunted by the ghosts of those killed by her husband’s invention.)

(She’d probably understand.)

So maybe he doesn’t know exactly why he doesn’t like guns, even if there’s lots of maybe-whys in his past (in all honesty, maybe it’s death by a thousand cuts or straws that broke the camel’s back), but he knows he doesn’t like them, and maybe that’s enough.

He knows what it looks like.

He’s a secret agent who goes around seemingly unarmed.

(He’s not – he’s got his brain and his Swiss Army knife and his partner and his team.)

Jack carries a gun.

Uses it too.

He doesn’t have a problem with that.

Doesn’t that make him a hypocrite?

Maybe it does.

Or maybe it’s the best compromise he can live with.

(Maybe that still makes him a hypocrite. Well, he’s human after all.)

Jack and his gun have saved his life many times over. He knows that, and he’s grateful.

(Maybe it’s wrong, letting Jack carry the blood on his hands and the stains on his conscience for him, even if it’s all for good and saving lives and all, but he takes comfort in the fact that Jack seems to bear it just fine. They’re not the same, and Jack doesn’t share his aversion, anyway. And
he knows, he really does, that Jack would do that, for him, because they’re not just partners, they’re family.

(Besides, his partner doesn’t shoot to kill, not if he can help it. He does, sometimes, because that’s the nature of their work, sometimes it’s necessary, but he avoids it when he can, and he’s more grateful for that than he can ever articulate to the older man.)

A gun is a tool.

A deadly tool.

A dangerous tool.

One that he hates, and will not use (he can, but he won’t – he can only think of a handful of situations in which he would, and they’re all so dire and so horrifying and nightmare-ish that he refuses to think about them, because he’ll do anything to make sure they don’t come to pass).

But a tool only does what its wielder makes it.

And if there is any one person in this world that he would put a gun in the hands of, it’s Jack.

He knows how to use it properly.

He’ll always, always use it for good.

(And he doesn’t shoot to kill, not if he can help it.)

(Doesn’t use it lightly, even if it looks effortless and comfortable when he does.)

He knows his partner’s heart, better than he knows anyone else’s (better than he knows his own, quite possibly), and he knows it’s good above all.

In Jack’s hands, a gun is a tool for good.

(Can help people, save lives.)

Still, he doesn’t like them.

(There’s a story there.)

(Lots of stories, maybe.)

(Too many to be a story, perhaps.)

Chapter End Notes

Dlwells51, I hope you liked this! It’s a bit weird and I’m not sure if it actually gets anywhere or actually answers why Mac doesn’t like guns…but I hope you liked it regardless! According to Wikipedia, in the original series, Mac’s aversion stems from an accident involving a childhood friend, but I decided to do something a bit different.
I think that Mac being Mac (and having been a soldier), he must know how to use a gun, and might well have actually used them in the past. (I can’t imagine them letting him go to Afghanistan without having at least proved that he can fire a bullet into a target.) I also suspect that Mac, with his big brain, has come up with scenarios in which he might have to use a gun (because I think we can all think of the possible scenarios).

I’m not sure where some of the darker bits came from – in particular, the bit where Mac admits that he could probably kill someone using just about anything…apart from the fact that he would never do it, and probably wouldn’t be able to cope with the consequences for his conscience, he would probably make a very good assassin, in all honesty. (Yeah, don’t know where these dark thoughts are coming from…)

Up next, Someone(s) to Face the Day With, or, several conversations revolving around Mac’s self-esteem issues, set in the canon universe, for helloyesinhere.
Someone(s) To Face the Day With

Chapter Summary

For helloyesimhere. He and Bozer became best friends when the older boy punched Donnie Sandoz for him. His dad left when he was twelve. Darlene Martin shot him down cold. Of course, Mac’s got self-esteem issues, but luckily, he’s also got amazing friends.

Chapter Notes

This is canon-compliant up to 1.14, Fish Scaler (some spoilers, so don’t read if you haven’t seen it yet), I think. (It doesn’t contradict any events in canon, and I think it’s in-character.) The title is from I’ll Be There For You by The Rembrandts. (The Friends theme!)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Alfred Pena watched as his latest trainee, eighteen-year-old Angus MacGyver, departed the training area, heading back to the barracks after a long day.

He didn’t miss the younger man’s mood, didn’t miss the slight slump (MacGyver, he’d soon realized, was excellent at compartmentalizing, a skill that would serve him well when they went to Afghanistan) of his shoulders.

He turned his attention to packing up. He’d give the teen some time, and then go speak to him.

Sure, he’d messed up today, missed the bigger picture.

What he didn’t know was that each and every one of Pena’s trainees had the first time they’d been confronted with this exercise, too.

That was the point of it – to teach them a lesson. An important lesson. A life-saving lesson.

Each and every one emerged a little shaky, a little startled, from this lesson.

He always made a point to sit down and talk to each and every one afterwards, as a result.

(He might be Army, he might be tough, his trainees had to be tough, but the whole real men don’t have feelings and crises and doubts idea was just stupid. Learning to cope with them, learning how to lean on your brothers-in-arms and how to help them too, that was vital to surviving the line of work they were in.)

He’d never trained a genius before.

Never trained a kid who’d turned down NASA and Tesla and SpaceX and at least ten other
companies, plus five rather aggressive PhD offers, to join the Army instead.

He had no plans to tell him, but MacGyver was the best of all the trainees he’d ever had.

He’d be a damn good EOD.

He was a damn good man, too.

He knew that some of the others on base had doubts about the kid.

He was so young, kind and caring and big-hearted by nature, did he have the strength, the toughness, to cope with this life?

Pena knew they were wrong.

MacGyver was strong. He would be ready.

Still, even the strongest of men needed a little support at times.

‘MacGyver.’

The blonde teenager, sitting on his bed in the empty bunkroom, lost in thought, started to jump to attention, but Pena waved his hand and shook his head.

‘At ease, Mac.’ He took a seat on the bunk opposite Mac’s. ‘I just wanted to check in on you.’

‘I’m fi…’ The teen trailed off, and pulled a paperclip out of his pocket instead and started fiddling with it. Pena had made him promise, like he did with all of his trainees, that he would not lie to him or keep things from him, that he would tell him if he didn’t understand something, didn’t know how to do something, had any doubts whatsoever, or was feeling out of sorts in any way. All things that could get him or others killed in Afghanistan. ‘Sorry. I’m…I’m not fine.’ Mac sighed, staring at the brain-shaped paperclip that he’d made. ‘I…I messed up today. Didn’t think. Didn’t use my brain.’ The blonde snorted. ‘Not going to be of any use to anyone if that becomes a habit.’

The brain-shaped paperclip made a lot more sense now.

Internally, Pena sighed. Of course the kid tied most of his worth to his brain, if not all. He was eighteen and had finished college, at MIT no less, in two years. He was also fairly odd, got excited by weird things, so surely hadn’t had the best time throughout school, Pena thought, as he glanced around the bunkroom. A broken light had been repaired, using what looked like a couple of paperclips and some chewing gum. A framed photo, clearly precious to one of Mac’s bunkmates, had somehow been mounted on the wall. He’d heard plenty of scuttlebutt about how his trainee’s big brain, endless resourcefulness and creativity, and kind heart, had led to little changes, little favours or gifts, that made life just that little bit better for those around him on base.

Mac’s big brain was worth an awful lot, sure, but it wasn’t all the kid had going for him. Not nearly.

‘Firstly, Mac, it’s not going to become a habit, because I’m not going to let it become a habit, never mind you.’ Mac looked up and gave him a very small, very wan smile. ‘Secondly, you’d not be of much use to anyone if you were just a brain on legs. You could have the biggest brain in the world, and you’d be a damn awful EOD if you didn’t have courage to spare and didn’t watch your brothers’ backs in every way you could.’ He paused for a moment, let those words sink in. ‘And you’re going to be a good EOD, Mac, a damn good one. Not because you’re a crazy genius; I’ve
known an awful lot of great EODs, none of them are near as smart as you are. I’d like to think I’m a pretty decent EOD—‘Mac nodded with a little smile. ‘-and I’m probably not as half as clever as you.’ He paused again for a moment. ‘Nah, Mac, you’re going to be a damn good EOD because you’ve got heart, a damn good heart.’

They sat there in silence for a moment. Pena watched the blonde teen as the brain paperclip was reshaped into a heart, and smiled. Eventually, Mac looked up and nodded at him, a little smile on his face.

‘Thanks, Pena. I appreciate it.’

The older man stood with a nod of acknowledgement.

‘Get some rest, MacGyver. We’ve got a long day tomorrow, and I’ve got plenty of challenges for you.’

Mac’s smile widened somewhat.

‘Yes, sir. Looking forward to it.’

About a week after that fateful day at the airport, on a Saturday, Jack showed up to his partner’s place with coffee and poppyseed bagels for two (Bozer had left already, he had an early shift) for breakfast.

He found Mac out on the deck, staring at the ashes in the unlit fire-pit. Jack sighed. Well, he did just find out that his supposedly-dead girlfriend, whom he’d mourned for three months, wasn’t actually dead and had instead betrayed him, her team and her country, and gotten him shot to boot. A stronger man than Mac (and Jack wasn’t sure if such a man even existed) would be shaken up too. They’d already had a couple of conversations, more than a couple of conversations, over beer and pizza at Jack’s or here, when Bozer was out, or in the car on the way to or from work. Seemed they needed another one.

‘I brought bagels, brother. Poppyseed, too!’

Jack sat down next to the younger man, and handed him a cup of coffee, and a bagel. Mac took them, muttering his thanks, but made no move to drink any of the coffee or eat the bagel.

Jack, meanwhile, took another sip of his coffee, and a large bite of his bagel, taking his time as he chewed and swallowed, before speaking.

‘What’s eating you, brother?’

Mac sighed and was silent for a moment before he responded.

‘It’s stupid. Trivial.’

Jack snorted, reaching out and hitting Mac lightly on the arm with the hand that held his bagel.

‘Feelings of any kind, brother, ain’t stupid.’

Mac sighed again, and stared at the ashes for a minute. Then, he took a small sip of coffee, and three bites of his bagel, chewing and swallowing slowly.

‘I’ve been shot down, figuratively. She…she got me shot, literally.’ Mac gave a very bitter snort of laughter. ‘I know I’m not much of a catch, but am I really that bad?’
Part of Jack filed away the knowledge that his partner had been shot down by a woman at some point in his life (Mac had generally been fairly tight-lipped about his relationship with Nikki – the woman hadn’t been, in contrast – and never talked about high school and none of his occasional college stories had ever mentioned a girl; Jack had – clearly wrongly – assumed that, Penny- whose relationship with Mac had really been more friends than anything else- aside, Nikki was the first woman in his partner’s life and possibly the first to draw his interest away from thermodynamics and quantum physics and engines); he’d raise it later, much, much later, when the wounds that Nikki had inflicted on him had closed over more.

Right now, he’d deal with this not much of a catch problem.

‘Brother, you’re not wrong often, but you are this time. Firstly, you’re seriously basing this whole I’m not a catch thing off your crazy evil ex-girlfriend? Emphasis on the crazy evil bit?’ Mac looked like he was going to retort for a moment, before he seemed to think better of it. Jack was really quite sure now that there had been more girls in his partner’s life, more girls that had pulled his attention away from the twenty-seven thousand uses for a paperclip or how to build a helicopter from a blender, but clearly, Mac didn’t want to talk about them. He’d dig into that later. ‘Secondly, have you looked in a mirror lately? ‘Cause you look an awful lot like that guy from X-Men, and he’s got quite a few fans.’

Mac snorted in response.

‘I do not look like him at all, I really don’t know where you and Bozer keep getting that from. And how in the world do you know all about his fans?’

Jack just shook his head.

‘I’m going to get Riley to run some sort of facial recognition thing on the two of you, and show you proof, brother. Cold hard evidence.’ He took another bite of bagel, while Mac shook his head. ‘And I was at the waiting room at the dentist and I was bored and all they had were these magazines.’

Mac gave a snort of laughter at the thought of Jack reading Hollywood gossip magazines targeted at the female half of the population.

Jack decided to press his advantage for the moment, and he reached out and put his arm around the younger man.

‘And thirdly, and most importantly and all, you’re kind and all noble and heroic and good, Mac. The right girl? She’ll see that, and love you for it.’ Jack paused for a moment. ‘And the right girl will love that crazy genius brain of yours, and all the weird things it spits out and gets excited by too.’

Nikki had (at least seemingly; Jack didn’t know how far her lies stretched, whether he even knew her in the slightest) admired Mac’s intellect and his brilliant mind, and shared in it, at least to an extent, (she was brilliant too, after all, even if she wasn’t quite like Mac – nobody was, really), and had definitely not minded his creativity, not in the slightest.

Jack glanced over at his partner, who was lost in thought. There was a bit of sadness, of regret, in Mac’s eyes (he really did have to find out about those other girls one day), but he seemed to be taking in Jack’s words. The older man decided to press his advantage yet again, and squeezed his arm around Mac’s shoulders a little tighter.

‘It might take a while, brother, finding the right one always does. Lot of fish in the sea and all.’
Jack looked out and into the distance for a moment. ‘Just got to make sure you don’t let her go without a fight when you do.’

He knew that from experience.

Eventually, Mac nodded, and took a sip of his now-cold coffee, making a face and putting it aside, and taking a large bite of his bagel. He reached up and put his arm around the older man, returning the side-hug.

‘Thanks, Jack. For…for everything. I appreciate it.’

Jack gave him a wan smile.

‘My pleasure, brother, my pleasure.’ He paused for a moment. ‘But this little chat doesn’t mean Riley’s not off-limits, even if you’re a great catch and all, okay?’

Mac gave a snort of laughter and shook his head, a smile growing on his face.

‘It’s not me you have to be worried about.’

Early in the morning, as the sun was still rising, Riley came out onto the deck area, two cups of coffee in hand.

‘Morning, Mac.’

The blonde looked up from where he was staring at the piece of paper, half-covered in words, resting on a book about Ancient Greco-Roman engineering in his lap.

‘Morning, Riley. Bozer still asleep?’ Riley had crashed at their place the night before, after having stayed far too late for a movie marathon to go home. (He really did need to look at getting better lumbar support into their couch.) The young woman just nodded, and handed him a cup of coffee, which he took with a smile. ‘Thanks, I needed that.’

Riley gave a small, answering smile, and sat down on the other chair beside him, sipping at her coffee and watching the sunrise. Eventually, she glanced over at him and the letter that he was working on.

‘Still trying to write that letter to your dad?’

Mac glanced over at her, then back down at the letter and nodded. (He’d gone through an awful lot of iterations of the letter, many, many drafts. He’d been stop-starting, too, pushing it aside for weeks at a time as, well…everything that had happened, happened.)

‘Yeah.’ He was silent for a moment. ‘I don’t know what to say.’ He gave a small snort of laughter. A somewhat bitter one. ‘Well, I know what I can’t say, since it’s top-secret and all…kind of wish I could tell him, though. About what I do.’ He sighed and glanced over at her. ‘I…I don’t know if it’s because I want to, I don’t know, show off or something, show him that I didn’t need him and how well I did without him, or…’ He swallowed. ‘Or…because I want him to be proud of me and who I’ve become.’ He looked away, down into his coffee cup, and took a sip. ‘Maybe both.’

Riley just shrugged.

‘Makes sense to me.’ She was very quiet, very still, for a moment, staring at the letter in Mac’s lap, and simultaneously off into the past, into her memories. Then, she looked up at him, eyes meeting
his. ‘But you could tell him all about those science fairs you won in high school, about MIT, about the Army. Tell him about going back to Mission City and seeing Mr Ericson again and meeting Valerie. Tell him about your projects; the grill or the hot-tub or that motorcycle you just finished.’ She paused again and her voice was a little softer when she spoke. ‘You could tell him about us.’ She shrugged again. ‘Tell him about Jack’s terrible puns and even worse singing, or Bozer’s incredible waffles and how he manages to look cute even in those cardigans.’ Mac hid a smile behind his coffee cup at that last statement. Riley seemed to realize what she’d said, because she cut herself off and shook her head, indicating his letter with her coffee cup. ‘Point is, you’ve got a lot you can say.’

He nodded with a small smile. Riley took another sip of her coffee, looked out on the horizon again, and then continued, her voice firmer again.

‘And if he’s not proud of you without knowing about the whole saving-the-world-every-other-week thing, then you’re better off without him.’ She took another sip of coffee. ‘I’m better off without my dad. Way better off.’

They locked eyes for a moment, and then Mac reached out to bump fists with her.

‘Thanks, Riley.’ He tucked the piece of paper back into the book. He’d work on the letter again later. ‘Since you made coffee and Bozer cooked dinner last night, how about I make you two pancakes for breakfast?’

Riley quirked an eyebrow at him.

‘Using a pancake-making toaster, or…?’

Mac shook his head with a sigh and a smile. Bozer had recently told Jack and Riley all about his pancake-making toaster from his college days (which Bozer had never seen, but had heard second-hand stories about from all of Mac’s engineering buddies).

‘Since we only have the one toaster right now, and Bozer’s never happy if I turn the last toaster into something, it’ll have to be the normal way.’

Riley nodded, and then shot him a look.

‘You normally have multiple toasters?’

Mac shrugged.

‘They’re quite useful to have around.’

She just shook her head with a snort of laughter.

There are two things that I know for certain.

Well, more than two things, but two things that aren’t the Second Law of Thermodynamics or the square root of 256 or the Irving-Williams Series and the like.

Firstly, I’m not lucky. Not just lucky, anyway. I’m good at what I do.

Secondly, my friends, my family, love me, just like I love them, and we’ll stand by each other through just about anything.

I don’t doubt that.
I really don’t.

But the subconscious is weird.

Psychology was never my thing, but I do know that.

It takes our worst fears and tiniest and most miniscule of doubts, or even doubts that we had, once upon a time, but don’t anymore, and twists them.

The result?

A nightmare.

‘Jack Dalton, one of my best agents, is dead, MacGyver, because you’re not good, you’re just lucky.’ Eyes looked at him sharply. I told you so was implicit. ‘You failed to prove me wrong, in the worst way. Starting from today, the word improvise is no longer part of your vocabulary.’

A sharp slap was delivered to his face. ‘How could you, Mac? How could you? You gambled, you always do, improvising instead of doing the same thing and carrying a gun like him! And you were bound to lose eventually, and when you lost, you lost his life!’ Another slap. ‘Thanks to you, I’ve lost the closest thing I’ve ever had to a father!’ She stormed off, out of the room (and out of his life), her eyes filling with tears.

Part of Mac wanted to call out, tell her that he’d lost the man who’d been, almost, in a way, like a father to him too, but he didn’t.

Instead, he turned to his best friend, hoping for some sort of support, someone to tell him that it wasn’t his fault (even if it was and they were just empty words), but found the other man shaking his head.

‘She’s not wrong, you know.’ The boy who’d grown into the man who’d stood by him since the fifth grade looked sadly at him, then nodded resolutely. ‘In fact, she’s right.’

He walked out of the room (out of his life) after the young woman, and one of Mac’s deepest, darkest, most secret fears – the thought that one day, Bozer might leave him, might choose a girl over Mac (the part of Mac who thought this couldn’t blame him in the slightest) - came to fruition.

He woke, gasping and damp and sticky with sweat.

Just a nightmare.

Just a nightmare.

Brought on by that conversation you had with Matty two days ago.

Just a nightmare.

Not real.

Not real.

You know it’s not going to happen.
Mac sighed, and glanced over at the clock. 4 am. He got up and headed into the living room.

It was past time he did something with that old gumball machine Bozer had bought. And they’d just bought three new toasters yesterday.

Keeping his hands busy always helped.

Three and a half hours later, on Saturday morning proper, Bozer awoke and walked into the living room to find his best friend sitting, slumped over and asleep, at the coffee table, the gumball machine beside him, half-disassembled, gumballs in a bowl beside him, and a toaster with its innards on display next to his head, a screwdriver in hand.

He sighed.

If Mac hadn’t been tinkering or watching TV or YouTube videos or reading in the living room when Bozer had gone to sleep, but was tinkering or reading or watching something or asleep over one of his projects or on the couch the next morning, then there was only one explanation.

He’d had a nightmare.

His best friend usually refused to talk about them; though, sometimes Jack could get him to open up when he didn’t want to.

Still, Bozer did his best to be there for him, as he always did.

He walked into the kitchen, and pulled out the waffle iron, and started making up the batter for his world-class waffles as quietly as he could.

He’d wake Mac up to eat when the waffles were done.

Good food, especially good breakfast food, solved a lot of problems, in his opinion.

While the last batch of waffles were in the waffle iron, and two plates of waffles, drizzled in syrup with stewed mixed berries, sat on the table, Bozer walked over to the coffee table, and gently addressed his best friend.

‘Mac? Wake up, bro, I’ve made breakfast. It’s waffles!’

Bozer waved the waffle that he’d brought over from the kitchen for this express purpose under the blonde’s nose.

(He figured that there was no way any bad guy had ever attempted waffle-related torture, so it shouldn’t trigger a repeat of the General Wang incident.)

Blinking blearily, Mac slowly sat up, his hair rather mussed and with a spring caught in it.

‘Why do I smell…oh, morning, Bozer.’

The other man just grinned at him, waving the waffle.

‘Morning, bro! I made waffles! Come on, let’s eat while they’re hot!’ Bozer remembered the waffles still in the waffle iron, and rushed back into the kitchen to save them before they got burnt.
‘I was thinking that we have a BFF day today, not that Riley and Jack aren’t great and all, but we haven’t really had time for just the two of us in ages. I’m thinking after breakfast we play *Mario Kart*, and then maybe watch *Pacific Rim* and order pizza in for lunch, and then get Jack and Riley over for dinner, fire up the grill…’

Making his way over to the table (the waffles smelled amazing), picking out the spring from his hair on the way, Mac gave a small grin.

*Well, my morning just got infinitely better.*

‘Seriously, bro, I demand a rematch! You know Rainbow Road’s my weak point!’

Mac smirked.

‘Best of ten, then?’

Bozer smirked back with a nod.

‘You’re on, bro.’

As Bozer picked the next course, Mac reached out and put an arm around his best friend, pulling him into a side-hug.

‘Thanks, Bozer.’

He didn’t really need to articulate what the thanks was for. The *for everything* was quite implicit.

His best friend grinned at him, with affection and love in his eyes.

‘Hey, remember that promise we made, when you left for college?’

Mac, too, grinned, that same softness in his eyes.

‘Best friends forever, no matter what.’

Bozer nodded, grin widening.

‘And my best friend never breaks his promises, and I follow his lead.’

Mac squeezed Bozer’s shoulders a little tighter, and they sat there in comfortable silence for a moment, before Bozer smirked.

‘Still, I’m going to kick your ass, bro! I know your kryptonite! Toad’s Factory, here we come!’

That night, sitting by the fire pit, a beer in hand, Mac shook his head with a smile, as Bozer regaled Jack and Riley with the story behind his eighth science fair victory.

*There are two things that I know for sure.*

*There are.*

_Maybe, sometimes, in the darkest of nights, the darkest corners of my mind, I doubt that._

*The world’s a place of endless possibilities, and with my brain and imagination, I guess it’s inevitable that I think about pretty much everything._
But I do know those two things for sure.

I’m not just lucky, I’m good.

And my friends, my family, they love me as much as I love them, and we’ll stand by each other through just about anything.

Chapter End Notes

I have no idea if Lucas Till has ever featured in Hollywood gossip magazines. For the sake of this story, he has in the MacGyver universe. (Also, for the sake of this story, please just accept that Mac’s startling resemblance to a somewhat-well-known actor does not ever cause any problems for his job. Please?)

Adding the bit with Pena in it was a bit left-field, I think, but I firmly believe that he must have been very important to Mac, given that Mac reacted so strongly to his death, that he couldn’t even face Pena’s family for five years and has a bit of an obsession with The Ghost. (If you’ve read One Flap of a Butterfly’s Wings, you’ll know that in my headcanon, Pena’s death changed Mac and hence his entire life forever.)

Also, I know that until (at minimum) post-Screwdriver is a very long time for Mac to have been working on his letter to his father (9 episodes and all), but given that it is not mentioned again…I figured that he hadn’t sent it yet. Besides, with how much drama is happening in his life, he probably hasn’t had much time, either.

I hope you enjoyed this, helloyesimhere. Team-as-Family friendship stuff is universally loved, right?
In His Shoes

Chapter Summary

For Axxonly. When a trip to Walmart goes awry, Jack, Bozer and Riley are forced to put their heads together and do their best to channel Mac, in order to prevent their patchwork family from being torn apart.

Chapter Notes

Set in the AU off 1.12, Screwdriver that I created in THREE in Permutations, about five years after its events, but not in the same universe as Responsibility.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

‘Drop it, or she dies!’

The terrorist in front of him in the fresh food section of the Walmart was holding a gun to the head of a terrified-looking woman in her late twenties, who looked to be about eight months’ pregnant.

Without hesitation, Mac dropped the makeshift Taser he’d made from a beard trimmer (yet again) and already taken out two of the bad guys with, before he’d seen this third terrorist threatening the woman, forcing her towards the manager’s office. He’d known that he wouldn’t be able to take down this third man, but he’d rushed into the fresh food section anyway.

He couldn’t let them take her into the manager’s office.

Not when he was really quite certain what fate awaited her there.

Of course, I’d rather not suffer that fate either, and I’ll do my best to escape it, and I know Jack and Bozer and Riley will do everything they can to rescue me from it, but better me than her and her unborn child.

Better me than one innocent life, let alone two.

‘Good.’ The terrorist nodded to another who’d walked up behind Mac as he’d threatened him. ‘Cuff him.’ He levelled his eyes at Mac. ‘Any funny business, and she dies.’

Mac didn’t resist as the second terrorist zip-tied his wrists and led him into the manager’s office, where their boss was doubtlessly waiting.

According to Murphy’s Law, anything that can go wrong, will.

According to my grandfather, sometimes, life likes to fight dirty. Lures you into a false sense of security, then sucker-punches you in the gut.
This instance illustrates both of these principles.

It all started when Bozer, Riley, Jack and I, given the rest of Friday off after returning from a mission early this morning, decided to make a little trip to Walmart. Bozer and I wanted to pick up some supplies for our respective projects...

10 MINUTES EARLIER

Sitting in the appliances and electronics section of his local Walmart, where he’d been looking at toasters, Mac cursed internally.

It was really just his luck, wasn’t it?

They’d gone to Walmart, just to pick up a few things. Only minutes after he’d separated from his friends, whom he assumed were in the baking and cooking supplies area, since Bozer wanted to make a croquembouche, to head to the appliances and electronics section (the others were really uninterested in appliances and tended to get sick of waiting for him while he was standing there comparing toasters, trying to decide which would work best for his latest project, or if maybe a blender would be better instead), this particular Walmart was being robbed.

A group of ten masked and armed men had burst into the store (he’d had good view of the entrance from where he was), fired a few warning shots, and, using the cashier’s PA system, demanded that everyone sit and stay where they were, and to try nothing, or they’d be shot.

Mac had obeyed, not wanting to draw any attention to himself. If this was a simple robbery, and no-one was going to get hurt if they obeyed, he shouldn’t do anything, as much as that hurt him to do. His cover aside, he knew he couldn’t take down ten armed guys, particularly since if he did anything, there was a good chance that one of the innocent shoppers or his friends could be hurt. He figured that his friends would also have enough sense to do the same. (They were always going on about how he had the least sense and was the most inclined towards crazy and dangerous heroics, after all.)

About five minutes ago, who he assumed was the leader of the bad guys had stalked towards the manager’s office. He figured that only the manager could open the tills.

Still, how long did it take to get the manager to cooperate? Why hadn’t the leader emerged from the office yet?

And why would you rob a Walmart, of all places? He supposed that Walmart would have pretty good takings, and cash wasn’t very traceable or distinctive in the slightest, unlike any stolen goods, and security here was looser than, say, at a jewellery store, but still…

An unpleasant feeling settled in his gut.

That unpleasant feeling got much, much worse as two of the robbers walked past, seemingly heading to the manager’s office.

‘…Killing a hostage every hour; that’ll get those 1% capitalist pigs to give in to our demands…’

‘…Change their business model and raise the minimum wage to $18 an hour…’

Apparently, this wasn’t a robbery after all. It was an act of terrorism, and he, his friends, and the shoppers in this Walmart were now hostages. And their lives were now all at risk.
At the very least, the number of people held hostage shouldn’t be too high, it being the middle of a workday and all. He couldn’t see anyone except those two terrorists and two cashiers at the checkout, actually, from where he was.

Regardless of the number of people at risk, however, he knew he absolutely had to do something.

Glancing around to make sure that the two terrorists were definitely gone, for now, and that no-one else could see him, he reached into his pocket and checked his phone.

As he suspected, no service.

They’d clearly been prepared and jammed everyone’s phones.

With no way to contact his friends, both here in the store with him or at the Phoenix, he was on his own.

*On the bright side, at least I’m in the appliances and electronics section.*

*Lots to work with here…*

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**PRESENT**

‘Attention all Walmart customers and Walmart Head Office, this is the AWL, the Anti-Walmart League. We have a message for you.’

Jack, Bozer and Riley, alone in the cooking and baking supplies area, glanced at one another. Apparently, this *wasn’t* a simple robbery, and apparently, the AWL, whom none of them had ever heard a thing about, were broadcasting this message to Walmart’s HQ.

They had to do *something*, instead of sitting here and trying not to draw attention to themselves. (They were secret agents, after all, as much as they *wanted* to do something, they did have to try and maintain their covers through a simple robbery.)

That desire to do something only sharpened as they heard the presumed leader of this AWL continue.

‘Now, this *nice* young man, Angus MacGyver, according to his driver’s license, is going to read our list of demands. Every hour from the end of this call that we don’t get what we want, someone dies, starting with him. Let that be a warning to you, anyone in this store who is thinking of playing hero; if you tase two of my men, you’ll be the first to die. And don’t even think about calling for help; we’ve jammed all of your phones.’

All three friends exchanged worried and horrified glances as Mac’s voice sounded out, reading the list of demands. Discreetly, Riley checked her phone for a signal and found there wasn’t one; the AWL leader wasn’t bluffing.

They were definitely, definitely going to have to do something now.

They couldn’t let the terrorists kill a hostage every hour.

They couldn’t let them kill *Mac*.

Jack started muttering under his breath.
‘God damn it, brother, why do you always get yourself into trouble?’

Bozer, too, was talking quietly to himself.

‘…I’m never letting you go anywhere alone again, bro…’

‘Guys, focus. We can chew Mac out later, but we’ve got one hour, and we need a plan.’

Both men nodded at Riley.

At that moment, they heard footsteps and fell silent, just looking at the floor, playing the part of meek and frightened shoppers. A moment later, one of the terrorists walked past them, looked over and seemed to decide that they weren’t a threat, then moved on.

Silently, they all stared at their watches, and waited for the next set of footsteps.

It took five minutes before the next patrol, again just a single man, went past them.

They all looked up, exchanging a glance.

It was Jack who spoke, whispering.

‘There’s not many of them, not enough to cover the store properly, and they’re clearly not very well-trained either, or they’d have rounded us all up by now. Also, neither of them were holding those guns like they know how to use them properly either.’

Riley and Bozer nodded, and Riley glanced up at the ceiling, looking at the security cameras without making it obvious what she was looking at.

‘We’re in a blind spot; they’re probably watching from the manager’s office, which is where I presume they’ve got Mac, but they can’t see us now.’

Jack pursed his lips.

‘Not going to do us much good; we need to move…’

Bozer just indicated the contents of their shopping cart, which was right beside them. Inside was a rolling pin, several laser pointers of various colours (Mac had wanted them for something) and the batteries required by the laser pointers.

‘I think I know how we can take out the cameras. Mac was going on about lasers in the lab last week…’

He quickly got up and grabbed the laser pointers, opening up the packaging and putting the batteries in. Riley quickly started helping her fiancé.

Jack gave a small smile.

‘Now, we’re in business. Any ideas for a distraction? We need to cause some chaos.’

Riley bit her lip.

‘Remember how Mac set off the smoke alarms my first mission?’ She indicated the ceiling with a nod of her head. ‘We could do the same here, set off the sprinklers. There’s baking soda and vinegar here…’
Bozer nodded.

‘If I need it for a movie, Mac makes a smokescreen for me out of bicarb and vinegar. I’m pretty sure I know how to do it.’

Jack, too, nodded, eyeing the rolling pin in the shopping cart.

‘Smokescreen, eh? That should allow me to get the jump on one of those guys.’

They heard the footsteps again, five minutes after the last terrorist had gone past, just as they’d predicted, and fell silent, hiding the laser pointers and the packaging.

As the man walked away from them, they all looked up and exchanged a glance. Riley grabbed the laser pointers, while Jack seized the rolling pin and Bozer reached out to grab vinegar and baking soda.

‘Jack, man, could you start putting flour in the cart, making it heavier? We can make ourselves some kind of battering ram, force equals mass times acceleration and all…’

Jack just shot him a rather incredulous look, while Riley just smiled and shook her head. Bozer rolled his eyes at the older man.

‘You live with my bro for years, you pick up stuff like that.’

Jack smiled a little and nodded, starting to reach for the flour.

‘We got five minutes. Let’s make it count.’

Meanwhile, in the manager’s office, tied up next to the unconscious manager, doing his best to see if he could locate his friends on the security camera feeds on the screen in front of him (he was very sure that they were going to do something, now that they knew this wasn’t a robbery, and while he was glad they were – he didn’t want to die – he was also very worried) that the AWL leader was focused on, without said man noticing, Mac noticed several coloured dots appearing on one of the feeds in the far left corner.

He’d told Bozer all about how one could use lasers, preferably several of different colours, to damage security cameras just the week before.

He gave a small smile internally, and started talking. He had to prevent the terrorist leader from noticing his friends and what they were doing for as long as possible, and hence prevent him from radioing his men and coordinating them to take them down, using that walkie-talkie he had on the desk.

With all of the AWL members spread out like they were, his friends had a chance to take them down. If they were coordinated by someone who had eyes more or less all over the store, then they didn’t stand a chance.

‘You’re an activist, standing up for the oppressed masses against the elites and the ruling class, aren’t you?’

Mac deliberately spoke in a curious, open tone.

The AWL leader turned to him, and just nodded, brow furrowed, evaluative. He must have bought Mac’s curiosity, because he walked a little closer to him, continuing to speak, putting his back to
and ignoring the security camera feeds.

‘Of course. We have greater inequality now than we have ever seen before in human history. We…’

*Nobody ever develops Stockholm Syndrome this quickly. And Walmart has its faults and inequality of all kinds is a major issue of this century, as it has been through all human history, but these guys push it to the extreme, and terrorism is never the answer.*

*But, as surprising as it is, I’m actually a decent actor. When I’m doing work-related things, anyway. And when Jack or Riley actually tells me the plan so I don’t have to follow along on-the-fly and pretend to be Riley’s fiancé or a Hollywood talent scout without any warning. Though, the intended targets did buy my act both of those times anyway…*

Yeah, I know, that’s really hypocritical, given my tendency towards on-the-fly stuff.

*I’m human!*

He just kept listening, seemingly intrigued, one eye on the security camera feeds behind the AWL leader’s back, as the other man ranted and raved, even muting the walkie-talkie absent-mindedly so he wouldn’t be disturbed.

‘What the-’

The terrorist never saw what hit him when he approached the aisle full of smoke, and Jack clunked him on the head with the rolling pin.

A moment later, the sprinklers went off. (It seemed that the terrorists had disabled the alarms, but not the sprinklers, so there was no accompanying noise.) They heard shouts of confusion.

Jack grabbed the man’s gun, handing the rolling pin off to Riley, and Bozer picked up the man’s walkie-talkie.

The three exchanged a look, and Bozer gave a small smirk, which was returned, despite their situation.

‘It’s show-time.’

He started giving orders through the walkie-talkie, in an excellent imitation of the voice of the man whom they presumed was in charge, who’d spoken over the PA system earlier.

‘Yes, I’ve read Piketty’s *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, though, I admit I’ve never considered it that way. Talking to you is very enlightening…’

As more and more security camera feeds died behind the still-distracted AWL leader’s back, Mac smirked internally.

*That’s family, right?*

*Family’s always got your back.*

Riley, Jack and Bozer waved awkwardly at the brunette, heavily-pregnant woman they’d encountered in the fresh food area, having just knocked out one of the terrorists (their seventh,
which meant three left if the cashiers they’d met earlier had counted correctly – it was somewhat of a miracle that they’d managed to take out so many without seemingly being noticed – even if they were taking out the cameras, someone should still notice that the feeds were going black, or that Bozer was impersonating the leader, which meant that Mac had caught on to what they were doing and was presumably distracting the person who was watching the security feeds, who also had to be the leader, which meant he was almost certainly in the manager’s office) right in front of her using fruit and their trusty rolling pin. (Jack had picked up all the guns and either taken them himself or removed all the ammunition and kicked them under the shelves, but he didn’t want to fire one unless absolutely necessary, not wanting to draw any more attention than they already had.)

She just pointed towards the back of the store, seeming to know who they were looking for (it was a very logical conclusion, given that they were going around taking out terrorists, that they were trying to stop them and rescue the hostages, and everyone in the building knew that Mac was in the greatest danger right now), towards where the cashiers had told them the manager’s office was. Where they knew Mac almost certainly had to be.

‘Three of them took him that way, two didn’t come back, but one did.’ She rubbed her bump and looked at them imploringly, sadly, with tears in her eyes. ‘I…I think he saved us.’ She rubbed her belly again in a circular pattern, as if trying to soothe her baby. ‘They…they were going to take me, and I think they were going to…’ She swallowed and looked down. All three Phoenix Foundation employees’ eyes hardened, and Jack muttered bastards under his breath. Killing hostages, innocent people, was a horrible thing to do as it was, let alone choosing a pregnant woman as the first one to die, because it would certainly make quite a statement. ‘He interrupted, and they took him instead.’ She looked back up at them. ‘You have to save him.’

Jack, Riley and Bozer exchanged a look full of meaning.

Of course, Mac would have pulled his usual heroics.

Of course, Mac would give his life to save an innocent woman and her unborn child.

And of course, they had to save him.

He was their friend. He was family.

It was Jack who spoke, trying his best to keep the emotion out of his voice. He had to compartmentalize, they all did, for now.

Until Mac was safe.

‘Will do, ma’am.’

They made their way towards the manager’s office.

They still had ten minutes left.

As yet another screen (this one showing the fresh food section) went black, Mac started counting in his head. He knew that Jack, Riley and Bozer were heading his way, and that while they should be able to take out the two guys guarding the door without any problems, it would be better for everyone involved, terrorists included (he was quite sure that if Jack thought he was in danger – which, given the gun on the table next to the AWL leader, he would be if the man finally realized what was going on - he wouldn’t hesitate to shoot, and he wouldn’t hesitate to shoot to kill, either, if he thought it was necessary), if the AWL leader didn’t realize what was going on for as long as
possible, and didn’t notice when the two guards were taken out.

So, when he was as sure as he could be that his friends were just about to reach the manager’s office, Mac smirked and interrupted the AWL leader.

‘You know, Martin Luther King Jr, generally respected as one of the greatest social justice activists of all time, whom I agree with very much, said that we must not allow our creative protest to degenerate into physical violence.’

That seemed to finally knock some sense into the AWL leader’s head, because Mac watched as realization dawned on his face, and then blood quite literally roared in his ears and he swore loudly at him, before he turned to the screen, finally noticing the blacked-out security feeds, swore again, insulted Mac several times, very loudly (just as the agent had hoped – he was pretty sure that he could just make out two thuds at that moment, like two unconscious bodies hitting the floor, since he was listening out for them), and backhanding him rather hard in the face.

Despite the pain, Mac smirked anyway, as the man stormed over to the door, without his gun, and flung it open, yelling some sort of command to his men…only to instantly crumple to the floor, having been hit on the head with the rolling pin that Riley was wielding.

*Emotions cloud our judgement.*

*I, unfortunately, learnt that lesson the very hard way.*

*Still, it was a valuable lesson, and of all emotions, rage is probably second only to love in its ability to turn one’s brain to mush.*

The hacker put down the rolling pin, and started freeing Mac from his bonds, then the still-unconscious manager. The blonde smiled at her as she did so.

‘That was a good hit.’

Riley smiled back at him, relief clear in her eyes, shaking her head as she rolled the manager into the recovery position.

‘It’s a surprisingly good weapon, maybe I should start carrying one around.’

Jack and Bozer, having finished properly restraining the unconscious terrorists, poked their heads in through the door, eerily similar expressions on their faces somewhere between smirks and grins. That same relief that had been in Riley’s eyes was also clear in theirs.

‘Guess what, brother? We got to be you!’

‘Did we make the grade, bro?’

Riley snorted and rolled her eyes affectionately, while Mac just shook his head, smile widening.

‘High Distinction.’ His expression turned more serious. ‘Thanks, guys, I really, really appreciate it.’

His friends, too, looked more serious for a moment, that relief that would have made their earlier worry and fears painfully obvious, if he hadn’t already known it’d be there, just because he knew they loved him like he loved them, clearly written on their faces. Riley reached out and squeezed his shoulder, before the two of them got up and made their way over to Jack and Bozer, who each put an arm around him. After a moment, Riley joined in, putting an arm around Jack and her other
‘You know what you’re always saying, brother?’

‘We’re not just a team, we’re family.’

‘And we do anything for family, bro.’

They all shared a smile across the circle, sharing a moment of silence, of relief and affection.

Then, Jack broke the silence.

‘And because we’re family and we love you and all, brother, you’re getting checked out by a medic.’

Mac groaned.

‘I’m fine, guys.’ They all looked very sceptically at him. He figured that the AWL leader’s slap had probably left a mark, even if it didn’t hurt anymore. ‘Look, apart from getting slapped once, I really am unharmed.’ They still looked very sceptical, and he rolled his eyes. ‘Fine. I’ll have a medic look me over and tell you that I’m fine, I promise.’

The other three nodded, satisfied.

Of course I heard the story of The Boy Who Cried Wolf when I was growing up.

So, I guess I should have realized that this was bound to happen someday, given that I can be a bit resistant towards medical attention.

It was inevitable, I suppose, that one day, I won’t actually be hurt, and they won’t believe me.

Mac sat on the edge of the back of an ambulance as a paramedic checked him over. Jack, Riley and Bozer were on the phone to Thornton and talking to the local police, trying to sort out this mess and explain what had happened without blowing their covers.

Eventually, the paramedic (whom he was sure Jack had told to be extra-thorough, since it took so long for him to be examined) nodded, satisfied, and told him that, as he’d insisted, he really was fine. She then left his side to go inform Jack, Bozer and Riley of the fact. (He had promised that he’d get the medic to tell them that he was fine, after all.)

He looked over at the pregnant woman who’d had a gun held to her head, who was sitting on a gurney, talking with her husband, a man who looked to be in his early thirties with a JPL lanyard around his neck, who’d just arrived at the scene and immediately rushed over to her.

‘…The paramedics agree with my assessment, I’m going to the hospital for observation in case of early labour brought on by shock…’

Her husband just nodded, and leaned over, putting an arm around her shoulders, and another on her belly, kissing the side of her forehead, and then whispering into her ear, and Mac looked away, wanting to give them as much privacy as could be had in a Walmart parking lot full of rescued hostages and relieved families and police and paramedics.

A minute later, the couple, the woman still on the gurney, came up to him.

Both husband and wife just stared at him for a moment, not sure of what to say. It was the man
who broke the silence, voice hoarse and heartfelt.

‘I…I don’t know what we can say, or do, not after what you did for us, but…thank you.’

His wife nodded, continuing, with a hand resting on her belly, locking eyes with him for a moment.

‘Thank you so, so much.’

Mac shrugged a little awkwardly and gave them a small smile.

‘I just did what had to be done.’

The couple both shook their heads, matching little smiles on their faces, glanced at one another, then interlaced their fingers together, and looked back at him, as the husband addressed him again.

‘You know, we’re having a boy. We haven’t a picked a name for him yet…’

‘And who better to name him for than the man who saved his life and his mother’s, and made a Taser from an electric beard trimmer?’

Ears burning under his hair, Mac shook his head, feeling a little more awkward, with a small, wry smile.

‘Trust me, you don’t want to give your son my name.’ Quite suddenly, he recalled a conversation in Afghanistan, with Pena and a couple of other soldiers, just a few nights before his mentor’s death. He remembered Pena telling them that his daughter was to be called Annabelle, and he remembered telling his fellow soldiers for what (or rather, for whom) he’d name his hypothetical future offspring, when he was still eighteen and naïve and pretty fresh out of MIT. Harry for his grandfather was too personal…but, well, this child’s father worked for JPL, and it appeared that his mother was pretty appreciative of fine engineering herself. His smile widened. ‘But…if you’d like a suggestion, Tesla was a seriously awesome guy. Nikola’s really not a great name to saddle your child with, but what about Nicholas?’

The husband grinned (he did work at JPL, and Mac was pretty sure he was an engineer of some sort – he’d done engineering at MIT and he was pretty familiar with that grin in response to Tesla-mentions himself), and his wife rubbed her belly absent-mindedly with a smile, before replying.

‘Well, he does like to use my bladder as a workbench, and as far as scientific figures to name your child after go, Tesla’s up there.’

The three of them all shared a smile for a moment, and then Mac stood up, making to leave.

‘I’m glad I could help.’

The couple nodded at him, grateful smiles still on their faces.

‘Thank you, again.’

‘And thank your friends for us, please?’

(She’d seen them walk out together, and he supposed that it would have been pretty obvious what they all meant to each other.)

‘I promise.’

He smiled back at them and walked away.
That, just then, made me a little bit sad for some reason.

I don’t know if it’s because I’m nearly thirty and my biological clock is ticking – I read something about that online, but it was talking about women, and I’m not sure how accurate it was anyway – or because Riley and Bozer are getting married, or because Jack and Diane are going for third time lucky and giving it a go for the third time, and of course I’m happy for all of them, but I’ve been feeling a little bit down of late.

I still want that white-picket-fence happy ending; you know, wife, kids, maybe a dog.

I’m getting more and more doubtful as to whether I’ll actually ever find it.

My romantic history is pretty awful, to say the least.

Still, I guess that happy ending’s always been about having a family.

And I’ve got that.

I’ve had a family for years now.

Jack and Bozer and Riley, and even Patricia and Diane, now.

Besides, I think I’m going to be Uncle Mac within the next five years.

And it’ll be fun teasing Jack about being a grandpa.

Mac walked up to his friends with a smile, as the paramedic and the police talking to them left, and Thornton hung up. He pointed at the woman and her husband, who were getting into an ambulance to be taken to hospital.

‘They wanted me to pass on their thanks to you.’

Riley, Jack and Bozer looked over at the little family, and waved. The couple waved back until the ambulance doors closed.

All four agents exchanged a look, full of mixed emotions. Relief, horror that along with so many others, this woman and her baby had nearly died today, horror in response to what Mac had done to at least try and save them, a hint of pride and admiration in what he’d done, in what they’d all done today, and a little worry, even now.

Eventually, Jack took it upon himself to try and lighten the mood.

‘Is there going to be a little Angus or Angussina coming into the world in hopefully about a month?’

Riley snorted, while Bozer grinned and Mac shook his head with a smile.

‘No, Jack. I saved their son from that terrible fate.’ He paused for a moment, and when he spoke again, there was a note of some kind of wistful sadness in his voice. ‘I suggested Nicholas, for Tesla.’

Jack, Riley and Bozer exchanged a glance. They hadn’t missed the tone in their friend’s voice.

They’d all been worried about him since everything that had happened with Nikki, and while they
were glad that Mac was finally over all of that (or, at least, as over all of that as he’d ever get, in all likelihood), they still worried.

He hadn’t found what Bozer and Riley had found, and what Jack suspected, hoped, he had managed to find again.

And that worried them, and saddened them.

Mac had a big heart. He was an amazing friend, an amazing brother (and maybe sometimes a son) and he’d be an amazing husband and father.

They firmly believed that he, of all people, wasn’t meant to spend his life alone. (Well, not alone, but not with just his friends for company, even if they were family.)

Unfortunately, none of their attempts at helping Mac meet anyone had worked yet. (Though, they were pretty good at being very, very discreet now.)

Mac, too, didn’t miss the look that they exchanged, and gave a small smile. They cared so much (hence the whole trying-to-set-him-up business), and he had them, for which he was infinitely grateful. He knew they’d poke into this later, but for now, he didn’t want to deal with it, so he pushed it aside and into a little box in his mind, and smirked instead, indicating the departing ambulances and paramedics.

‘I told you I was fine!’

Jack, Bozer and Riley shook their heads fondly, accepting the change of topic, at least for now.

‘Yeah, brother, you being sensible and honest about being hurt once ain’t going to convince me. Leopards don’t change their spots and all.’

‘The old man’s right, Mac.’

Riley left off the for once that had been so typical for her in the past. Mac was beginning to think that she was warming to the idea of Jack actually being her real stepfather, despite her insistence when he and her mom had gotten together again (moving past the fact that the relationship they’d tried to rekindle after their run-in with The Collective had failed when Jack got Sarah’s wedding invitation in the mail) that while he was the closest thing to a father she’d ever had, she really didn’t want him to be her stepdad.

Bozer just grinned when Mac quirked an eyebrow at him.

‘Hey, like I’m going to disagree with my computer goddess, especially when she’s right.’ Jack cleared his throat. ‘Oh, and Jack, of course, since he’s pretty great and all too. And right, too.’

Jack snorted and muttered something that sounded a little like no respect for his elders under his breath.

(He’d been sounding more and more like an old man lately. The young ‘uns, as he called them from time to time now, thought it was because he was getting old and teased him appropriately.)

Mac just shook his head, a small, teasing grin on his face, and jogged Bozer with his elbow.

‘I thought we were best friends, Bozer! Aren’t you supposed to back me up?’

His friends, his family, just shook their heads at him as they chuckled.
As they expected, their boss was waiting for them in Mac’s living room (Bozer had moved in with Riley almost a year back), and pinned them all with her probably-patented deadly stare.

‘Oversight is furious. We’ve been working frantically to ensure that your covers remain intact. If this happens again, you are to keep your heads down and act only if you are directly threatened.’ They all swallowed and looked appropriately chastised, but didn’t miss the little loophole she’d given them. After all, they lived improbable lives, maybe impossible lives, but what were the chances of being caught up in a Walmart being held hostage by terrorists again? Then, the deadly stare and I-am-disappointed-in-you face disappeared, to be replaced by softer eyes and a small smile. ‘Off the record, excellent work. Jack, Riley, Bozer, I was particularly impressed by how well you channelled Mac.’

All four of her agents smiled at Patricia.

‘Reckon we can do without him next time he winds up laid up hurt, Patty?’

Jack was grinning teasingly.

Patricia just raised an eyebrow.

‘I think you still have a long way to go, Jack.’

(They all knew that – there was nobody quite like Mac, after all, but it was still fun to joke about it.)

The five of them stood there for a moment, with expressions ranging from small, heartfelt smiles to broad grins, and then Patricia broke the silence.

‘The beer’s in the fridge, and I ordered Chinese, it should be here in about half an hour.’

Mac, Jack, Bozer and Riley all grinned, and Bozer walked over to where Mac kept his DVDs and pulled out a very familiar and often-used one, while Mac and Jack headed to the kitchen. The latter grabbed the beer and then texted Diane, while the former got out his automatic popcorn-delivering popcorn maker. Riley reached for the TV remote and turned it on, as Patricia grabbed a couple of bean bags (they’d upgraded from stools) and positioned them next to the couch.

They all knew the drill.

It was time for a family movie night.

Forty minutes later, with a container of beef lo mein in his lap and a beer in hand, sitting in the armchair he’d recently acquired, Mac grinned as the title sequence for *Die Hard* started, looking over Bozer and Riley, lounging on bean bags and stealing from each other’s containers of takeaway, and Jack and Diane and Patricia, sitting on the couch, the curly-haired woman shooting Jack a look (he’d just stolen a shrimp from her noodles).

*I’m almost thirty.*

*I don’t have a wife and kids yet. I’m not going to in the foreseeable future.*

*I don’t even have a girlfriend.*

*But I do have a family.*

*Maybe it’s not the typical white-picket-fence happy ending, but I think it is one anyway.*
Besides, Jack’s just passed fifty, and I think he’s headed well towards the wife and kids ending, albeit unconventionally, given that none of us young ‘uns are biologically related to him.

I’m only almost thirty.

My story’s not over yet.

Not nearly.

A month later, Patricia handed him a print-out from a hospital newsletter.

A birth announcement for one of the hospital’s ER doctors, who’d just welcomed a son, Nicholas Taylor-Lee, born healthy at seven pounds, eight ounces and twenty inches long.

He smiled, and tucked the announcement into his pocket.

Chapter End Notes

The AWL (Anti-Walmart League) is an entirely fictional terrorist organization. It is deliberately absurd for two reasons, one, in order to be a small and unknown organization (and inferable from that, not particularly well-trained, easy to take down, but also desperate and ruthless and willing to do incredibly terrible things for attention) in the MacGyver universe and two, in order to not be similar to a real organization. All views expressed by the AWL are exaggerated real-life criticisms of Walmart/the world. These real-life criticisms may well be valid, but of course, violence and terrorism is NOT the answer. Also, yes, the bad guys in this fic are very stupid and easily defeated– please just roll with it?

I am not completely sure where the angst about Mac’s lack of a girlfriend/wife/children comes from, but it just happened. In the universe that I created in THREE, I don’t know if I see a ‘happy ending’ for Mac in terms of that white-picket-fence, wife and kids and a dog happy ending. (I’m not completely sure why, I just don’t – he has serious issues after all that mess with Nikki in this universe, but I have written him and do see him getting over similar issues in my other universes…)

However, the trade-off in this universe is that firstly, Patty’s not a traitor, and secondly, they’re all pulled (even) closer by Nikki’s betrayal, so, as he concludes himself, in this universe, Mac does get his family anyway. And, as he himself concludes, as a result, he does get a happy ending.

Axxonly – I think this was moderately close to what you asked for! Regardless, I hope you liked it!
Chapter Summary

For DogsDalton. Dark vigilante AU. When Mac is six, a car crash in Mission City kills Wilt Bozer, his parents, and Arthur Ericson. Twenty years later, the vigilantes Artemis and The Boy Scout Killer terrorise LA’s criminal underworld and Mac and Riley are a twisted power couple.

Chapter Notes

DogsDalton, I know you requested a multi-chap Mac/Riley story, and I really can’t produce that, I’m really, really sorry – I don’t ship Mac/Riley at all, I write and think of them as very sibling-y in the canon universe and in my other universes (because of their respective relationships with Jack, and I don’t know, I just get that vibe from them, which is a very personal opinion– they very, very slightly remind me of myself and my male best friend), but here’s my best attempt. It’s set in a very, very AU universe, and it’s rather similar in style to One Flap of a Butterfly’s Wings (this idea has been percolating through my head ever since I wrote that, honestly – your request focused it and crystalized it enough for me to be able to write it, which I’m grateful for!). I really don’t feel like I’ve done your request justice at all – it isn’t hugely about Mac/Riley, but I really wanted to at least try for you! I’m very sorry that I pretty much failed…

WARNINGS: There’s a lot of darkness in this (in a lot of ways, more than in The Asset), including major character death as revealed by the summary, plus character deaths as in canon, and some implications of/references to consensual underage sexuality between two (barely) underage people, as well as consensual sexual activity between adults/of-age individuals, and an implied potential sexual assault (which does not occur, thanks to Mac), all of which are entirely non-explicit. There’s also an unplanned pregnancy and references to consideration of abortion (but no actual abortion occurs), as well as what would legally be called murder (albeit justified) and other things that occur with vigilantism. Also, warnings for OOC Mac and Riley, at least in relation to canon. (I think that they’re reasonably in-character in the sense that if all of the things in this fic had happened, they could be like this.)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

According to Le Chatelier’s Principle, if a change is made to a system at equilibrium, the system will react in such a way as to oppose that change and return to equilibrium.

Some say that the universe is such a system.

That there is a set way that events should play out or people should be; a set Fate for us all.

And that if something, the forces of Chaos or Chance, changes that, that things play out in a certain
way in order to oppose that change and go back to what things were supposed to be, somehow.

Angus MacGyver was always supposed to grow up to be a hero.

That was always meant to be his Fate.

However, it is often forgotten that even though Le Chatelier’s Principle is oh, so true, once a change is made, the system, even though it returns to equilibrium eventually, can never be exactly the same.

In this life, Angus MacGyver grows up to be a hero.

At least in the eyes of some.

In this universe, there is a terrible car crash in Mission City when little Angus MacGyver is six years old, just a year after his mother’s death.

A multi-car pile-up.

Eight-year-old Wilt Bozer and his parents, as well as beloved local science teacher Arthur Ericson are killed.

Angus MacGyver, like the rest of the community, mourns and is saddened, even if he never knew any of the dead, and they all count their blessings that the death toll wasn’t higher.

He may be a genius, but he has no idea what he’s just lost, or how much things have just changed.

His father still leaves when he’s twelve and his grandfather is left all alone to raise him, which is honestly what he’s been doing already (and does a great job).

Some things are universal constants.

Donnie Sandoz still beats him up; he’s still got his bullies and no friends.

That is also a universal constant.

But this time, there’s no-one to stand up for him. No-one to become his friend in the fifth grade, or later, either.

(The new girl who shows up when he’s in the seventh grade, Penny Parker, feels sorry for him, but she’s new and a little on the outer herself— she’s into theatre, after all, so she’s not exactly Miss Popular - and he’s so smart and she doesn’t even know how to be friends with him, doesn’t know if he’d even want any friends who aren’t geniuses and just normal, really, so she never reaches out to him.)

Instead, Angus MacGyver (because he is a genius) teaches himself how to evade and hide from his bullies terrifyingly well, and takes up martial arts to boot (with the fierce dedication and determination and never-give-up attitude he usually reserves for his projects), because he has to defend himself, because he’s got no shield at all and no-one to stand with him.

(He’s harder and sadder and just that little bit rougher, too, because no-one save his grandfather ever shows him kindness, and in order to survive, he’s had to grow harder and rougher than he did in another life, and he’s nothing if not a survivor.)
He gets into more trouble (just a bit more, because he’s still good and kind in his heart, even if it’s buried under walls and spines – he only ever fights to defend himself, and he hides and evades and blends into the shadows whenever he can to avoid fights, too), and his grandfather worries more, a lot more, than he did in another life.

Angus MacGyver’s grandfather dies when he has just turned fourteen, two years earlier than he did in another life (two years earlier than he was supposed to), from a heart attack that the doctors can’t say wasn’t brought on by his constant worry over his grandson, brilliant and a genuinely good boy, at heart, but also different and friendless and alone and hard.

The teenager is pulled into state care, and forced to move away from the only home he’s ever known (even if it doesn’t feel like home anymore, not in the slightest), halfway across the country, all the way to Indiana.

But Angus MacGyver is a genius, and the universe starts to correct itself, to push back and push him back onto the right path.

He’s darker and harder and sadder and colder and more alone than he’s ever been before (ever was in another life), but he still manages to finish high school at sixteen.

He gets into MIT (still, somehow, because he’s Angus MacGyver and there’s a way the universe is meant to be), but without that glowing letter from his beloved 8th grade science teacher, without his support and assistance and all those extra science fair victories (because in this life, no-one ever entered him into the District Science Fair – the other teachers didn’t want to or couldn’t be bothered to encourage him that much), without anyone to care for him and help him and support him and encourage him (no best friend, no ex-girlfriend but still friend, no grandfather, no beloved teacher), he doesn’t get the full ride he got in another universe, and even though he’s been left money by his grandfather and his mother, he can’t afford it.

Angus MacGyver goes to Purdue instead, because he really only has a choice between Purdue and Indiana State, and Purdue’s got a better engineering program.

That gives the universe another chance to try and fix things.

At Purdue, despite being sixteen and hard-shelled and still a little awkward and shy (but not skinny, not in this universe – he’s got three black belts in three different martial arts and he’s still leanly built, but you couldn’t possibly see him as skinny or weak, you couldn’t say he looks like a nerd, albeit one with Hollywood good looks, not in this universe), he finds his engineering buddies anyway.

(He lets his walls down a little, just a little, since he’s among birds of a feather and he’s emancipated and the future’s starting to look good – he’s still an optimist, even after everything this life’s thrown at him – and he’s still, somehow, miraculously really, good and kind and big-hearted behind those walls. He opens only a little gap in the walls around his heart, but it’s enough for some to wriggle their way into it anyway – his heart’s still bigger and more open than it really should be, in this life.)

He also falls in love.

She’s his age but in college too, in his year, and almost as brilliant. She’s kind and sweet and a little bit fierce (he knows she’ll grow up to be fierce, anyway, once she’s a little less shy and a good
deal more confident and in general, older) and for some reason (he’s not completely sure why, but a voice that sounds like his grandfather tells him that it’s because of his big, crazy brain and what it spits out, and how he loves fiercely and deeply the small number of people- his engineering buddies and her – that he’s made his family, and how he abhors bullies and wrong-doers and so stood up for that schoolboy outside a coffee shop and rescued a young woman, drugged and confused, from a couple of men with terrible intentions, and Angus MacGyver almost believes him), she returns his feelings.

He thinks, sometimes, that he really should stay away from her. She’s his age, but young in a way that he isn’t, innocent in a way that he isn’t, not in this life (he’s not innocent, he thinks, not even in the way most would expect, since he’s just sixteen and some still call him a Boy Scout, despite the fact that he’s really, really not - not since he’d met a girl about his age with even more darkness than him, a friend of a girl in his last foster home, a girl who’d shown him, in her own half-broken way, affection that he hadn’t had for quite some time and never had enough of in this life). His girl’s the good girl to his bad boy, and part of him doesn’t want to corrupt her (he’s still selfless and good, at his core, even in this life) but she loves him, really, really does, for who he really is, and even if she can’t truly understand his darkness, because she’s got both her parents and a loving home here in West Lafayette (she got into MIT too, but her parents wanted to keep her close by, since she’s so young) she tries so, so, hard to empathize, and that’s more than enough, and he knows it’s selfish and fears that it’s wrong, but he loves her so much too, and he can’t let her go.

Somehow, he wins over her parents, too (it probably helps that her mother’s a chemistry professor and her dad’s a biomedical engineer, so they appreciate his mind, and they’re good and compassionate people, the kind of family he sees in movies – besides, he’s still got that goodness that somehow shines through, that innate goodness that makes him so hard to hate and so easy to love), despite everything.

Angus MacGyver graduates with First Class Honours at eighteen, after only two years (and so does his girl), and joins the Army.

He trains as an EOD under Alfred Pena. He writes emails to his girl and his engineering buddies (his family) and even sends letters with paperclip charms enclosed to his girl. He saves lives in Afghanistan, defusing bombs, and earns the respect of his fellow soldiers despite his youth, and it looks like against all odds, the universe has managed to restore an equilibrium that’s more-or-less the way it was supposed to be.

But The Ghost happens (another universal constant) and Pena dies, just weeks before his daughter’s birth.

In another life, this almost broke him, this strong (so, so strong) young man who’d endured so much in that life (but not as much as in this one).

In another life, it changed him, forever, made him harder and darker and sadder and gave him yet another set of demons.

In this life, it does break him.

In this life, it changes him, forever, makes him even harder and darker and sadder and gives him yet another set of demons to add to his huge collection and maybe that’s just one too many sets to bear.

The Army sends Angus MacGyver home.

He’s good, so, so good at what he does, but he can’t do it anymore, they say, despite his protests.
He gets an Honourable Discharge on mental health grounds.

That fragile equilibrium is blown to shreds.

Angus MacGyver has always (will always, no matter the universe) believe that home is where the heart is.

He makes his way to Evanston, Illinois, finds a job working for a sixty-something mechanic hoping to retire and rents a tiny little studio apartment above the shop from the man to boot, because his girl’s at Northwestern, and she still holds his heart, even after everything.

He’s still only nineteen, and he’s far too broken for his age.

Yet his girl loves him, still, anyway, even though she’s still so pure and innocent and good and angelic (he’s corrupted her, true, but he doesn’t think he could ever make her fall from grace, and he’s still got a good heart underneath everything, anyway) and she refuses to let him just destroy himself or cut himself off from her, like he’s done to all his engineering buddies (she reads so, so much about PTSD and helping veterans and the like and combines it with her medical school training and her love for him and that fierceness he saw in her and fights to stitch him back together).

But in the end, his decision is made, six months after he returns to her.

In the violence of his nightmares, he displaces her from his bed (never hers, he never goes to her place, the share house she lives in with a couple of her fellow medical students, he refuses to and she’s more than clever enough to pick her battles and know that he has to take baby steps), with an awful lot of force.

His girl (he truly believes she’s an angel, or at least as close to an angel as a human can be) forgives him and soothes him instantly when he wakes, but he sees the line of bruises along her left side the next morning, when she’s not quite quick enough to slip out of his shirt and into her own clothes while he’s in the bathroom.

He muses and thinks (he’s got a genius brain, but this is such a hard decision) all morning long, as he fixes some old Chrysler for his boss. He loves her and he wants so much to be selfish, but at the end of the day, Angus MacGyver, despite everything, is good and selfless and will do anything to protect his loved ones (even from himself).

He meets her that afternoon, after her classes, on the edge of campus, as is their habit.

And he tells her goodbye and leaves.

She follows him, chases him, but he’s so, so good at evading and hiding, he’s had to be since he was in middle school, and while she might be almost as brilliant as he is, she’s never trained her brain the way he has to do this, since she’s never had to. (She had her bullies in school, but she had a friend or two to help protect her, unlike him, and she’s never served.)

She finally loses him, and eventually (because she’s stubborn, his girl), she gives up (at least for now; he knows she’s not letting him go that easily– he’s already gotten a new phone with a new number, and set up a new email address, and he’s packed his things and given his boss/landlord his notice–he’s leaving her properly and going cold-turkey, he promises himself, so he won’t be tempted to return).

He watches her, without her knowing (he’s good at this, had to become good at this), until she
stumbles her way into a McDonald’s and is eventually found by one of her classmates (she has a study group tonight; he knew her friends would search for her if she didn’t show up and didn’t text or call – they’re good people). He knows this boy (and it’s ironic, really, that he calls him that, since the other man is really almost three years older than he is – but he’s a boy, really, compared to him, hasn’t seen anything like what he has) has a huge crush on his girl (he has to stop thinking of her as that; she isn’t his girl anymore), and part of him tells the rest of him that he hopes his girl (who’s not his girl anymore) finds happiness with him, hopes that this doctor-to-be heals her broken heart that he’s left her with.

He knows she’s in safe hands (in better hands than his own), so he leaves, with his conscience clear and his heart heavy and in shards.

Angus MacGyver makes his way to LA, finds another job working for another mechanic and another little studio apartment above the shop, in a so-called bad part of town.

He has no intentions of being anything save a simple mechanic, living an honest but boring existence, trying to forget about his girl (who’s not his girl anymore, he keeps telling himself) and about Pena and The Ghost and Afghanistan and his grandfather and everything.

(He grows even darker and sadder and harder, all alone without anyone to love or to love him.)

But Angus MacGyver has always been meant to be a hero, and the universe tries to compensate again.

It starts small.

(Throwing around an abusive husband defying a restraining order to protect the man’s wife and children, stopping bullies from beating up an unfortunate victim or two.)

(Sometimes, he doesn’t always succeed. The husband comes back, after he’s gone, with a gun in hand, and the next day, there’s news of murder.)

But Angus MacGyver has always, always, always wanted to save lives and protect people and do good (that’s why he joined the Army), and in the end, that isn’t enough, not for him.

He, he realizes, has a very unique skill-set.

He’s good at improvising; he can make almost anything from what’s around him, as long as he’s got his trusty Swiss Army knife. (And even without, really, if he must.)

He can also fight hand-to-hand exceptionally well, and he’s damn good at blending into the shadows, or a crowd.

(Skills that he had to learn, in this life, to survive, skills that he’s developed further since they no longer became strictly about survival – his girl’s sent a PI, it seems, to try and find him, as she’s stubborn and fierce and loved him so much, he supposes, but he’s evaded him without too much trouble. Skills that he didn’t have, not like this, anyway, skills that he didn’t learn, not like this, anyway, in another life.)

And he’s smart enough to become pretty good at anything from law to hacking fairly quickly, if he puts his mind to it. (He learnt Mandarin in just one summer, back when he was seventeen on a dare/challenge from one of his engineering buddies, after all.)

He would make an excellent vigilante.
And become one he does.

(The law is there for a reason, he knows that, and he does respect it in a way – he’ll never go after anyone who hasn’t broken the law and done wrong, after all – but he also sees its failings in stark and cruel clarity.)

When Angus MacGyver is twenty-two, drug lords or mafia bosses and other unsavoury figures, ones that everyone knew were guilty, but law enforcement were never able to pin anything on, nothing that stuck, anyway, start to show up dead, with pages and pages of proof of their crimes next to them on data sticks or on real paper or a mixture of soft and hard copy. (Whatever was the most convenient and hardest to trace in that case, the detectives conclude.)

(In another life, Angus MacGyver never kills, not if he can avoid it. But he’s darker and harder and sadder and colder in this life, and in these two years, since he left his girl and moved to LA, he’s seen too many deaths of relative innocents that could have been prevented, if someone had just pulled the trigger earlier, and in many cases, where that person who should have pulled the trigger was him. That murdered family, the woman and her two children, killed by their own husband and father when both the law and he failed to protect them, was just the first.)

The police never manage to find a scrap of evidence to identify the man whom everyone starts calling The Boy Scout Killer, since he always (only) kills very bad people, leaves all the evidence that would have been needed for, at the very least, a long, long jail sentence (evidence they were never able to get the legal way), and kills in ways that would earn him some very twisted Merit Badges.

(In fact, it takes them ages – far longer than it should have, really – to discern that the killings are the work of one person, since the MO varies each and every time. He does seem to like to improvise, they say.)

Equilibrium is restored.

Sort-of.

A twisted equilibrium.

(Things can never be exactly the same, after all…not after such a change.)

(Still, Angus MacGyver never uses a gun. Some things are universal constants.)

When Angus MacGyver is almost twenty-three, he goes after a black hat hacker organization, The Collective.

His plans collide head-on with those of another almost-twenty-three-year old, Riley Davis.

(The universe is correcting again, as best as it can.)

The Collective take Riley’s beloved mother, the only one she loves in the world (since Jack left, anyway), because they think that Mac’s work is her work, and that she’s moving against them, since she refused to hack the NSA for them.

(That tiny change at just that moment – her mother not only being under threat, but needing rescue and actually almost dying - hardens her just that little bit more. Makes her that little bit colder.)

Riley, who has been tracking The Boy Scout Killer, apparently, trying to work out who he is (just
to see if she can), solves the mystery under pressure and reaches out to him.

Of course, he helps her save Diane (he’s still Angus MacGyver, good at heart and always willing to save a damsel in distress), and then, together, they take down The Collective.

Riley gets a purpose and a way to make up for her past sins, the only way she sees available to her. The only second chance she can possibly have, and seizes it.

Afterwards, unbeknownst to everyone, even Diane, Artemis and The Boy Scout Killer join forces.

The criminal underworld of LA learns to fear them.

Artemis and The Boy Scout Killer are allies, colleagues.

Riley and Mac, against all odds, because they’re both broken and hard and cold and defensive, become dear, dear friends.

(It actually shouldn’t be surprising; despite everything they’ve been through, all they’ve done, all they do and will do, somehow, miraculously, buried in them, at their hearts, is still goodness.)

(Besides, they share a secret, and Riley’s only got her mother and Mac has no-one at all.)

Slowly, slowly, they let each other through the walls they’ve put up, start sharing more secrets.

(His mother, his father, his grandfather, state care, Pena, the girl he left behind – he doesn’t think of her as his girl anymore, even if she’ll always have a special place in his heart. Her abusive father, the tough times she and her mom had growing up, Jack, how she fell into black hat work.)

And slowly, slowly, oh, so, slowly, but surely, Mac starts to fall in love again.

(Again, the universe is trying to repair itself and go back to what it is meant to be, even if it can’t.)

Riley’s strong, and intelligent, and beautiful, and she shares his darkness and his sins and his secrets, and she’s the only one he trusts in this world, really, the only one who really knows him. (The girl he left behind wouldn’t, not anymore, not since he’s grown even harder and darker and sadder and colder and sinned so, so much since he left her.) Besides, he thinks, with their shared brilliance and terrible fathers and that burning curiosity and desire to prove themselves that they both have, plus that drive to do anything they can to protect their loved ones, even if they didn’t share these sins and secrets, in some other life, perhaps, he thinks they’d have fit together well anyway. And he’s got a big heart meant to love, so it’s natural he grows to love her.

But he doesn’t tell her.

He keeps it a secret, one of the few he keeps from her. (There are others, like the name of the girl he left behind or some memories of times he shared with his grandfather; things he just doesn’t feel ready to share with her, not just yet.)

He has no idea if she returns his feelings; Riley holds her cards close to her chest, after all, hides behind layers of sarcasm and sass (she doesn’t have those moments of vulnerability and honesty she has – learns to have - in another life in which she’s surrounded by friends and loved ones), and he doesn’t want to make things awkward or lose the only friend he has in the world.

Besides, they’re a good team, a great team, and they’re doing good (even if what they do is very illegal), and he doesn’t want to mess that up.
But of course, one day, when they’re both twenty-five, it all comes to a head.

The day before, Mac had finally, finally shared with Riley the name of the girl he left behind.

He knew when he did that she’d go and look her up, find out where life has taken her.

(Mac has never been able to bring himself to keep tabs on her; he’d promised himself to let her go completely and to go cold-turkey, after all.)

(He notes that there’s an interesting symmetry to it, the woman he loves now learning all about the girl he loved then, almost on his behalf.)

He expects to hear, in a matter of hours, really, all about how the girl he left behind has just finished her residency (ER had been her goal, even then, and that residency takes three years) and is in a happy relationship with another doctor or doctor-to-be or maybe a medical researcher, with an Ivy League or MIT or CalTech or Berkeley PhD, someone brilliant and kind and unmarred and noble and truly worthy of her. He expects to hear that she’s doing very well and achieving the great heights he knew she was capable of, that her parents, everyone, knew she was capable of.

He doesn’t expect Riley to storm into his studio (he gave her a key and told her she didn’t have to knock over a year ago), and slap him twice, hard, across the face.

He doesn’t expect her to yell at him how could you leave them and open her laptop and show him the file that she’s compiled on the girl he left behind.

(As he reads, suddenly the fact that a PI had been sent after him, four and a half months after he’d left her makes even more sense than he’d thought. She hadn’t sent him just out of stubbornness and love.)

He doesn’t expect to learn that nine months after he’d left, she’d had a baby.

His son.

(No form of contraception is completely effective, he knows that and the failure rates of all commonly used kinds from reading some article ages and ages ago, and, a little voice in his head notes, she did always say that you have a tendency to make the implausible happen. He supposes that she never even considered it in that way.)

Nicholas Harry Taylor (she named him for his grandfather, and for Tesla, just like he’d said he’d name his hypothetical future offspring, one evening in a burger joint having weird conversations with his engineering buddies and her when he was sixteen – for a moment, he almost wants to cry, because she remembered and she still loved him, at least then, when she named their son) is a little over five years old, and absolutely brilliant and already in the first grade, and will in all likelihood skip at least one more, if not two.

He also looks so much like him. (Her parents must have known, all this time, who the father of their daughter’s baby was, they’d met him and known him and weren’t stupid in the slightest, after all, but if they hadn’t, the resemblance would have made it oh, so obvious.)

He reads that she never finished medical school, that she dropped out and returned home to her parents in West Lafayette when she learned that she was pregnant, had her son (their son), and when she was barely twenty-two, gone back to school and gotten a Master’s in education. She teaches high school biology and chemistry in West Lafayette now, a single mom living in a little townhouse with her son.
He wonders, briefly, why she kept their child, but then in the next thought (or maybe the same one, really), answers his own question. (She loved him, he loved her, and she loved him despite everything, loved him fiercely, too. He knows, somehow, in his soul, that she’d love their unborn child, conceived in love, even when it was little more than a collection of cells, a zygote, too much to make any other choice.)

Of course Riley is furious with him (he is too).

Jack walked out on her and her mom, and as amazing a mom as hers is (and as amazing a mom as he knows in his soul the girl he left behind is, and can see she is, in what Riley has found, the pages and pages she’s got on them), he knows that she has never forgiven the man for leaving, because he was the closest thing to a father she’d ever had.

She yells at him that he should have stayed, shouldn’t have left the way that he did, and he yells back that they’re better off without him and that he’s a taint and a shadow and she half-yells, half-whispers that he’s the best man she knows and then storms out.

He knows that she won’t come back, and it hurts so, so much.

(His heart’s all broken pieces that have been put back together with duct tape anyway, but he’s pretty sure it cracks again.)

He spends a full day locked in his head, and emerges with a clear sense of what he must do (Which is definitely not to return to West Lafayette and the girl he left behind and their son – her son, he tells himself – because they really, really are better off without him, always have been. Besides, he can’t leave Riley either, even if she doesn’t want to see him ever again, and he has no idea if that makes him a better or worse man.), but not much awareness of what he is actually doing.

On this odd autopilot, he makes his way to Riley’s, knocks at her door until she opens it, still with anger in her eyes (and tears – he notes that she’s been crying too), and blurts out the words that he’s been wanting to say to her for ages.

I love you, he says.

She lets him in, and it’s probably a sign of how messed up both of them are (because there’s still so much they have to talk about and resolve), or maybe it’s a sign of how deeply they’re buried under each other’s skins now, that she then pushes him against the door (she’s stronger than she looks) and kisses him fiercely.

She doesn’t say it back, at least, not then (she does, later, in the dead of night, lying in her bed, after they’ve talked- he’s pretty sure that the oxytocin and dopamine and the endorphins made it easier to talk, in a way – there’s got a be a reason for pillow talk to exist, after all) but he knows then that she loves him too.

They find happiness together, against all odds. They find a family in one another.

(In many ways, they already had, but love in the open just seals the deal.)

They fight their demons, in their heads and in the world, together, Mac and Riley, both as themselves and their alter-egos.

(Either everything in this universe is completely, utterly messed up, or this is the closest to what’s meant to be that can be had, after everything that’s changed.)
They do good and bring justice, even if they break the law, and in the eyes of quite a lot of people, they’re heroes.

(Just like they were always meant to be.)

And they love each other, and that makes them better and happier and gives them strength.

(Just like they always were meant to, just like it always would have, even if it’s a different kind of love.)

(Love’s still love, after all.)

When Angus MacGyver and Riley Davis are twenty-eight years old, Jack Dalton, Nikki Carpenter and Charlie Robinson are called in by their boss Patricia Thornton, interrupting their dinner and drinks night at a local bar.

Two online presences, each used to keep an eye on two women of very different ages in two very different places, have been linked to a third, which has in turn been linked to the infamous vigilantes, The Boy Scout Killer and Artemis.

It was done using statistical analysis of some kind that Jack doesn’t understand, but Nikki does. Looking at how likely specific code signatures and the like would be used by two different hackers just by chance.

The presences are all far too well masked to be able to determine who is behind them (to find Artemis and The Boy Scout Killer using them), and the match is shaky at best, since whoever this Artemis is (and they’re quite sure that Artemis is the hacker, while The Boy Scout Killer does the actual killing), she has considered this possibility and tried to hide her tracks (they presume it’s a woman), but the two women being monitored give them a strong, solid lead, or, at least, the best lead anyone’s ever gotten on these two.

One of the women is a twenty-eight year old single mother with an almost-nine year old. Evidence on social media points to her having had a boyfriend, one Angus MacGyver, in her late teens. Photos show that the little boy greatly resembles him.

(Angus MacGyver fits the profile of The Boy Scout Killer; he’s got the tragic backstory and the right skill-set, with his genius-level IQ, engineering degree and time in the Army and apparent knack for improvisation, if the video from the Purdue Solar Car Competition is to be believed.)

The other (and Patricia Thornton prefaces this with an apology to Jack, and an order to sit down) is one Diane Davis.

Her daughter Riley, they believe, is Artemis.

Riley, whom Jack thought of as almost a daughter.

Nikki and Charlie and Patricia all give their friend, ashen-faced and shocked and beating himself up inside, concerned looks, and then their all-business boss finishes the briefing.

Her last words are delivered to Jack, with an element of gentleness to them, a softness.

‘Bring them in alive.’
In all honesty, this horrifies me (and I wrote it – though that might be part of the reason why…) even more than The Asset. Still, I do think it is fairly well-written (at least right now, I don’t know how I’ll feel about it later), and since it was a request (and I do try and write and post every single request I get, even if it’s not my cup of tea and I’m not incredibly satisfied with the end product), I decided to post this. I’d appreciate some feedback on this, even if it’s just screaming about how much you hate it?

I’d also like to say that this is not an attempt to bash the Mac/Riley ship – it was not my intention to try and show that they only ‘work’ as a couple in such a dark and twisted universe, I promise (Mac-promise!). Firstly, I don’t believe that’s true at all – I think that there are many good reasons why they’d make a good couple in canon/near-canon (which are raised by Mac in this fic), I just don’t personally ship them. Secondly, and more importantly, I firmly believe that Fanfiction Land is a free country, and everyone has the right to ship or not ship whomever they want, for whatever reasons. I do try very hard to be fair to ships that I don’t ship myself (like Jack/Sarah, in all honesty), or characters that I don’t like myself. I know that I haven’t always done that – I really still don’t like Nikki, so I have a very hard time writing her sympathetically, and the happiest Mac/Nikki ending I’ve managed to date (and probably will ever manage, in all honesty) is in TWO in Permutations. I’m sorry, I really am, for that; my sole defence is the fact that I’m a flawed human being, like all human beings.

The intention/message of this fic, in all honesty, if there is one at all (it’s probably just a product of some disturbingly-dark and twisted section of my mind), is that Bozer and Mr Ericson were very important in shaping Mac and his life.
Wait, What?

Chapter Summary

Inspired by helloyesimhere. Mac got kicked out of the Boy Scouts. Given that he’s Mac, why? How? Many of his loved ones ask that over the years. Or, five times Mac told the story, and the reactions of five people (or groups of people) to the tale.

Chapter Notes

Again, this wasn’t a straight-up request, but it was heavily inspired by a little chat I was having with helloyesimhere over on AO3, in which she pointed out that nobody to date has written a story as to how Mac got kicked out of the Boy Scouts. Technically, I haven’t either, but this was so much fun, I couldn’t resist…

This is canon-compliant up to 1.16, Hook. It utilizes my headcanons for Mac’s college years, as well as his relationship with his grandfather, and ties in somewhat to The Right Ones, as well as Someone(s) to Face the Day With (both of which are also canon-compliant up until Hook), and it also ties in a tiny bit to One Flap of a Butterfly’s Wings, The Darkness Inside and Paperclip Charms (none of which are canon-compliant), the former two if you squint and think about it.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

His Grandfather

Eleven-year-old Mac sat on the edge of the couch in the living room, looking down at the floor, not quite able to meet his grandfather’s eyes.

His grandfather had just collected him from what was now his final Boy Scouts activity. (His father was busy at work, as usual.)

They sat there in silence for a moment, Mac on the couch and his grandfather opposite him in an armchair. Eventually, his grandfather broke the silence.

‘Now, boy, I’ve already heard what the Scout Leaders had to say about your hijinks. But there’s always two sides to every story, so now I’ve got to hear yours.’

Mac squirmed in his seat, and wordlessly, his grandfather pulled open one of the drawers in the coffee table, and pulled out a couple of paperclips and handed them to his grandson. Mac took them, looked up at his grandfather, shot him a grateful smile, and started talking, his hands fiddling with the paperclips almost of their own accord as he did so.

‘I really wanted this particular Merit Badge, and I got this idea…’
There was a twinkle in his grandfather’s eyes and a small smile on his face when Mac finished telling his side of the story.

‘I would have paid good money to see that, boy.’ Mac gave a little grin, and then his grandfather quirked an eyebrow at him, the small smile disappearing (but not the twinkle in his eyes). ‘Oh, don’t get me wrong, boy, you’re still in trouble.’ Mac nodded sheepishly, and then the small smile reappeared, looking a little more wry. ‘Don’t let that story get lost in all those thoughts in that big brain of yours; ladies love a man who can make them laugh, and that story’s gold. And it’s going to be a good one to tell your grandkids one day.’

Mac resisted the urge to roll his eyes (the last time he’d done that in response to his grandfather’s advice about ladies and grandkids, it had led to a somewhat uncomfortable situation in which his grandfather had gone on about how, one day, he wouldn’t be satisfied with only him and Bozer and Archimedes and explosions that save lives, which he supposed was almost certainly true objectively, but girls were weird), and instead smiled at his grandfather.

‘Thanks, Granddad.’

His grandfather just shook his head at him.

‘Don’t thank me yet; you’re still in trouble, remember?’

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**His Engineering Buddies**

‘Trust me, you don’t want to do that.’

Tom, Aaron and Matt all stopped discussing their idea, and looked at seventeen-year-old Mac with expressions of interest and cocked eyebrows. Internally, he sighed and looked up from their latest project for the Undergraduate Engineering Showcase, glancing around their workshop.

‘Sounded like you were speaking from experience there, Mac.’

‘You’ve tried this before, haven’t you?’

‘Got something you wanna share with us?’

He sighed again, out loud this time (his engineering buddies were awesome, but they did love to tease him endlessly), and looked back at his friends.

‘When I was eleven, I tried that. It ended with me getting kicked out of the Boy Scouts.’

Aaron’s eyes widened. Matt gaped at him like a fish. Tom’s eyebrows disappeared into his hairline.

‘You got kicked out of the Boy Scouts?’

‘You?’

‘Mr-Always-Carries-a-Swiss-Army-Knife?’

‘Who won’t even let us use our master plan to get him together with the girl of his dreams and the love of his life, because it’s not gentlemanly?’

Mac’s ears reddened instantly.
'She’s not...I mean…that plan involves locking us into a tiny storage cupboard together…and it’s really not gentlemanly! My grandfather always said—'

‘-That you don’t kiss a lady on the lips until at least the second date, we know.’

‘You’ve told us that one before.’

‘Many times.’

‘But Sebastian says differently!’

Tom pulled out his phone and started playing a song on it that he’d downloaded for this express purpose.

‘There you see her, sitting there across the way…’

Mac just rolled his eyes, ignoring the fact that his ears were steadily getting hotter.

‘Guys, really. There’s no way she could possibly be interested in me.’

They all shot him very sceptical looks. Tom fast-forwarded the song to a very specific point.

‘...there’s one way to ask her…’

Mac sighed again. His engineering buddies, smart as they were, could be very stupid sometimes. He put down the spanner he was holding.

‘Do you want to hear the story of how I got kicked out of the Boy Scouts or not?’

They’re going to give it to me so much for it, but it’s better than the alternative...

Let’s just say that they’re going to have more, much more, to tease me for than my non-existent love life and huge unrequited crush after this.

Tom, Aaron and Matt all exchanged a look, and then Tom turned off the song and they all put down their tools, and turned to him with smirks.

‘We’re listening.’

All three of them stared at him with wide eyes for a moment, then started chuckling and grinning. Matt, who was closest to him, reached out and clapped him on the back.

‘Man, you were one crazy kid!’

Tom just smirked and elbowed Matt none-too-gently.

‘He still is!’

Aaron just smiled a little sheepishly, a little slyly.

‘I still kind of want to try it.’

Tom and Matt just nodded in agreement after a moment, and after another beat or two, Mac gave a small smirk.

‘Well, I’m pretty sure I know how it went wrong last time…and I’m pretty sure MIT engineering
will be a lot more understanding than the Boy Scouts if it goes wrong again…’

**His College Crush**

‘You made a helicopter out of an old blender. You know *eleven* non-illegal uses for body bags and bleach. You can navigate using the stars, always carry a Swiss Army knife and have never met a problem you couldn’t solve using it and some paperclips and a stick or two of gum. Sure, you don’t always follow the rules, but *how on Earth* did you get yourself kicked out of the Boy Scouts?’

Swallowing his mouthful of pizza, seventeen-and-a-half year old Mac grinned at the brunette girl, also-seventeen-year-old Beth, who was sitting next to him, her own slice of pizza in hand.

It was winter break, and all of their friends had gone home, while they stayed, taking winter subjects so that they could graduate at the end of next semester, two whole years early, and since she didn’t really have anyone else to hang out with (and did appreciate fine engineering, even if she was no engineer herself), Beth was hanging out with him in the workshop as he got to work on the solar car he and his engineering buddies were building for this year’s competition. (They had a title to defend, after all, so a head start had been agreed upon as an excellent idea.)

‘It’s quite a long story.’

She quirked an eyebrow at him, taking a bite of pizza, and then chewing and swallowing.

‘It’s half-past six. Neither of us have class until ten tomorrow. We’ve got time.’

He nodded, and gave a little smirk, trying not to think about his grandfather’s advice to eleven-year-old him.

*She’s brilliant, MacGyver, and beautiful and sweet and fierce, too. She couldn’t possibly be interested in you, even if she’ll surely think that this story is hilarious.*

‘Well, it all started the day I decided that I really wanted to go for this particular Merit Badge…’

‘…*that* is how you got kicked out of the Boy Scouts. *Really?’*

Beth stared at him, expression incredulous, her piece of pizza on a napkin in her lap and completely forgotten.

He just nodded with a smile, having finished eating his own share of pizza quite a while ago. (He was a teenage boy, after all.)

‘Yes, really. In fact, I kind of got more than kicked out of the Boy Scouts; I’m actually banned from attending any and all Boy Scout events in any capacity. For life.’

She just stared at him for a moment, and then covered her mouth with her hands and burst into uncontrollable laughter. He, too, chuckled in response to her reaction.

When she finally stopped laughing, Beth leaned closer to him, and poked him in the sternum, still grinning broadly, cheeks still flushed from laughter.

‘You are *ridiculous*, Angus MacGyver! I can’t wait until the day you release your tell-all memoirs!’ Her eyes widened with a realization, and that grin grew even wider. ‘Oh, you have to let
Bozer make a movie of your life!’

Mac just shook his head, smiling.

‘He’ll embellish it ludicrously; I’ll wind up saving the world with a paperclip and a turkey baster or something!’

She smiled wryly and poked him again.

‘Exactly; that’s why you have to let him! I’d pay good money to watch that!’

He found himself staring at her for a moment, grinning with her cheeks pink, teasing him and poking him with softness and warmth in her brown eyes, and he was very, very tempted to just lean over and kiss her.

He scolded himself as soon as that thought appeared, and shook himself out of it.

*Get it together, MacGyver. She’s not interested, couldn’t possibly be, remember?*

*Besides, two-date rule. I’ve never even been on one with her, and won’t ever, because of the aforementioned reason.*

*My grandfather would be turning in his grave.*

Instead, he just grinned at her again.

‘Have I ever told you the story about the time Bozer and I made a robot chicken for one of his movies?’

---

**His First (Serious) Girlfriend**

‘How did you get kicked out of the Boy Scouts, Mac?’

The twenty-three year old looked down slightly at his girlfriend, who’d curled herself into his side on her couch, as they watched some movie on Netflix that neither of them were all that interested in. (They’d had a tough mission today and just wanted to decompress.) Nikki just smirked a little back up at him.

‘Oh, come on, I know you’re not telling Jack just to annoy him, but I’m curious too!’ Her fingers danced lightly across his chest. ‘Mac, tell me, please?’

Her smirk and her voice took on a slightly more devious tone, with a hint of some kind of promise. He shook his head slightly with a smile. Nikki was very, very good at getting him to do what she wanted him to, not that he really minded.

His smile turned a little bit more wry, and then he smirked.

‘Well, when you put it that way…’ She just smiled up at him, her fingers continuing to play their distracting rhythm along his collarbone. ‘When I was eleven, I decided I really wanted this particular Merit Badge, and I had an idea…’

Nikki laughed, burying her head for a moment in the crook of his neck, and then looking back up at him, an eyebrow arched as if to say *really?* He just nodded, a half-sheepish, half-sly smile on his
face.

She shook her head, and then the slow smirk that he’d become very fond of in the last almost-year grew on her face.

‘What you did today, back then…you’ve always been a little bit of a bad boy, haven’t you?’ She wriggled into his lap. ‘I’ve always had a weakness for bad boys.’

Her fingers kept doing that distracting little dance.

Like it always did (when he wasn’t focused on a mission) when she did that and talked to him like that, his brain decided to go fishing, so Mac just bent his head slightly and kissed his girlfriend.

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**His Family (and his New Boss)**

Almost-twenty-five year old Mac shook his head with a fond, exasperated and amused little smile as Jack finished downing yet another bottle of hot sauce and immediately started gulping down a large glass of milk.

He, Riley, Bozer and Matty exchanged a look that very clearly said *when will the idiot ever learn?*

Jack, having finished the large glass of milk and no longer looking quite as red, wiped some of the sweat from his brow and turned to the blonde.

‘Truth or dare, brother?’

Mac raised an eyebrow with a little smirk.

‘After seeing that, *again,* it’s got to be truth.’

Riley and Bozer made chicken noises, and Mac shook his head, that fond little smile returning, while Jack thought for a moment, and then smirked.

Matty, too, smirked slowly, as if she knew that this was going to be good.

‘Brother, I’ve been dying to know this for years: how did you get kicked out of the Boy Scouts?’

Matty’s smirk widened slightly, as if proud her suspicions had been confirmed, and Riley leaned forwards a little with interest, while Bozer just rubbed his hands together with a grin.

‘Strap yourselves in, this is going to be good! This is one of my bro’s best stories!’

Jack snorted, and punched Mac lightly in the arm.

‘Then how come he’s been holding out on us? Come on, brother, we’ve known each other for years, I can’t believe you haven’t told me this story yet!’

Mac just shook his head yet again.

‘I’m telling you now!’ He finished off the rest of his slice of buttermilk pie, chewing and swallowing slowly. (A good story always needed a little bit of suspense, after all.) ‘When I was eleven years old, I decided I really wanted this particular Merit Badge, and I had a very particular idea as to how to get it…’
Jack gaped at him, his mouth opening and closing repeatedly. Riley looked at him incredulously for a moment, before giving a snort of laughter, then another, and another, while Bozer chuckled and clapped his hands together, despite the fact that he’d actually been witness to the whole incident. Matty just shook her head, an eyebrow quirked.

‘Well, it is lovely to have more assurance that your blatant disregard for my orders isn’t personal.’

Riley turned to Bozer, and socked him lightly in the arm.

‘I can’t believe you didn’t tell me this story earlier!’

‘I’m sorry, snookums-‘ Riley punched him again, slightly less gently, and Bozer raised his hands in supplication. ‘Woah, sorry, sorry, still method acting.’

Riley just rolled her eyes at him, but Mac swore he saw a hint of fondness in them. He turned to Jack, who was still doing an excellent impression of a goldfish, and jogged him with his elbow. That seemed to shake Jack out of it, because he started chuckling, and then shook his head fondly at the blonde.

‘Now I know how you knew how to do that thing you did in Cairo.’

Mac gave a snort in response, and Bozer and Riley exchanged a significant look.

‘You know, next time either of you picks truth, we’re going to ask what happened in Cairo.’

‘What my honeybear-‘ He got another punch from Riley and a look from Matty. ‘-sorry, Riley, said, guys.’

Mac and Jack just shared a glance, and then turned to their friends, with matching little smirks.

‘Sorry, guys.’

‘No can do.’

‘It’s classified.’

‘Top-secret.’

‘Need-to-know basis.’

Bozer and Riley just turned to Matty instead.

Their boss sighed and shook her head.

‘Sorry, but they’re telling the truth. I don’t know either, and unless it becomes mission-pertinent, I won’t find out. Unfortunately.’

Mac and Jack’s smirks grew a little wider, and they clinked their beers together.

‘What happens in Cairo…”

‘…Stays in Cairo.’
Yes, this fic achieves absolutely nothing, but it is fluffy and funny? (I hope…) There is, of course, a healthy dose of irony in some of these, in particular, the Mac/Beth interaction…oh, if only they knew…
A Woman Scorned

Chapter Summary

Inspired by helloyesimhere. Very AU, villain! Nikki origins story. When Angus MacGyver is only ten years old, he meets the girl who will grow into the woman he’s going to marry. Twelve years later, he meets Nikki Carpenter.

Chapter Notes

My brain is weird. That is the only warning, aside from the usual handful of innuendos that come from writing Nikki, on this chapter. I don’t know how happy I am with this, but I thought I’d write it and put it out there – I’ve been stressed and tired and I kind of need a pick-me-up/to do something that isn’t Chemistry or German!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned.

People do the most incredible, amazing things for love.

Good things.

Kind things.

Inspirational things.

But they also do terrible things.

Incredible things.

But terrible things.

Hell has nothing on Nikki Carpenter.

(Not in this life anyway.)

In another life, Angus MacGyver waits eleven years before his second best friend (because Bozer’s always, always his first best friend, always has been since the older boy saved a skinny blonde nine-year-old fifth grader from Donnie Sandoz by punching the bully in the nose) enters his life.

In this life, he waits scarcely a year.

When their precious (and precocious, oh, so precocious – though that’s no surprise, really, given her parents) little girl is almost ten years old, Dr Caitlyn O’Reilly, PhD, receives a job offer she can’t refuse from Stanford, and her husband Michael Taylor gets a business opportunity in Silicon Valley, so they pack up and move to Mission City, California.
Little Beth Taylor, only ten years old, starts the sixth grade at Mission City Junior High that year. (Her parents are a little worried, because while she’ll do perfectly fine academically, of course – she is a genius, after all – she’s so young and awkward and shy, but they’re assured that their daughter’s not even the only ten year old in her year, as improbable as that is. Maybe she’ll make friends with this other child genius, the teachers say.)

Of course, ten-year-old Angus MacGyver is not privy to any of this.

But he does notice that when he starts Maths class this year, he’s not the only student put in a corner with a textbook borrowed from Mission City High, and left alone as the teacher rushes off to help their classmates, who need it much, much more than they do.

(He’s been given a Geometry textbook; she’s got Algebra 1. Geometry is easy, and doesn’t really hold his focus, so he finds himself reading her work upside-down. She works more methodically, maybe a little slower than he does, but efficiently and quickly, too. She looks up at him and gives him a shy little smile, once or twice, and he knows that she’s coming to the same conclusion that he is.)

(He hands her a couple of questions from his Geometry textbook, neatly copied onto pieces of paper he tears out of his notebook; he did Algebra 1 the second semester of the fifth grade and it’s really not all that interesting a textbook – it’s full of repetitive problems, which were frankly boring. Some Geometry will at least offer some variety.)

(He gets a wider, grateful smile in return.)

The next day, Angus MacGyver winds up in yet another fight with Donnie Sandoz, but this time, he’s not the bully’s original target.

(Of course, Bozer jumps in to help his best friend, because he’ll follow Mac anywhere and everywhere, and besides, bullying’s wrong and someone has to stand up to Donnie – it’s not really their fault that the bigger boy pretty much only speaks with his fists, hasn’t quite learned the lessons he’ll learn eventually yet.)

The duo becomes a trio.

(The two boys are building a lab, in the woods nearby. It was just going to be for the two of them, but Mac shyly and almost-guiltily asks Bozer if it can be Beth’s lab too, because she really needs somewhere aside from her home to feel safe, to feel like she belongs.)

(Mac and Bozer are best friends, became best friends quickly, too, and Mac and Beth’s friendship grows just as fast, even though they’re at that age where boys and girls start to really feel like they’re different.)

(Mac feels a little guilty about that, worries that he’s making Bozer feel bad or inferior in some way, making him feel that he’s not his best friend anymore – he knows it doesn’t make sense, not really, to have two best friends, but that’s really the only way he can describe it.)

(But Bozer understands, because Bozer always understands. Beth’s the first person Mac’s met who’s like him, and he knows what they say about birds of a feather. And, he knows, Mac’s heart’s so big, he’s got plenty of love to go around, and besides, Beth likes him and he likes her too, and they all get along like a house on fire, as Mac’s grandfather says. More friends is always a good thing, anyway.)

They pin a photo up on the wall of their lab, of the three of them, taken by Mac’s grandfather; a
blonde boy, a dark-skinned one and a brunette girl, all grinning up at the camera.

Mac’s father leaves when he’s twelve.

(Of course he does; it’s a universal constant.)

His grandfather does everything he can; hugs his grandson, makes him his special tomato soup and plenty of grilled cheese sandwiches, talks to him and listens to him and gives him advice.

Mac’s best friends beg for the secret family recipe for his special tomato soup, because they want to comfort Mac in any and every way they can.

(They’ve already brought over macaroni and cheese – Bozer’s family’s special recipe – and a large peach pie, and there’s been hugs aplenty and even the gift of the DVD of the first season of Mac’s new favourite TV show, a new program called *Mythbusters.*)

Harry Jackson teaches both of them the recipe, because as far as he’s concerned, Bozer and Beth are family.

(Bozer’s maybe the brother that Mac never had – and maybe the second grandson that Harry never got, may his daughter rest in peace – and he knows he’s not the only one who has an inkling that Beth’s going to be his granddaughter-in-law one day – even if they’re only twelve and this kind of childhood sweethearts relationship sounds like it belongs in a Hollywood movie, not real life.)

Mac does not lose a bet and have to ask Darlene Martin to Prom when he’s fourteen, almost fifteen.

(Shé’s still his lab partner, and Darlene’s still nice to him so that he helps her with her homework, but she’s not the girl he’s got a crush on or the one that he wants to take to Prom.)

In this life, Bozer doesn’t have to make him lose a bet to get him to ask the girl he’s got a huge crush on to Prom, but he *does* have to enlist Mac’s grandfather and their dear friend Penny Parker (Bozer’s Prom date) to persuade the blonde to follow through with it.

(Mac’s still, somehow, ridiculously, got it into his head that his crush can’t be requited because he’s a skinny, nerdy dork who gets excited by weird things, despite his genius IQ, the fact that it’s obvious to everyone that his crush is very much requited and that it’s really rather clear that there’s no way Beth would like him half as much if he wasn’t the sort of guy who makes a spaghetti machine of both kinds.)

(For a guy who improvises almost everything, there’s a lot of universal constants in his life.)

So of course she says yes (with pink-tinged cheeks) when Mac asks (with his ears on fire), and the two of them and Bozer and Penny have a great Prom night.

(The best part, they all agree, is heading back to Mac’s afterwards and watching the recording he’d made of the live shuttle launch that had occurred earlier that evening together, while digging into apple pie – baked by Bozer - and vanilla ice-cream.)

Mac and Beth both get into MIT when they’re fifteen, getting close to sixteen.

(He kisses her – properly, not a sweet little kiss on the cheek like they’ve been sharing for months
now – for the first time that day.)

(Penny thinks it’s so sweet and romantic and adorable, how they’re pretty much the dictionary-definition of childhood sweethearts. Bozer thinks it’s ludicrous that his two best friends have brains that work at light-speed but move at the pace of glaciers, particularly since he’s just collected fifty bucks from Harry Jackson, since he won the bet on when those two would finally become official, the one that they made almost two years ago.)

They’re going to move across the country at sixteen, go off to college far away from their families, but they’re going to go together and so they’re far from being alone.

(Besides, Bozer and Penny will keep in touch, of course, and so will her parents, and Mac’s grandfather promises to as well – though Mac fears that his grandfather might not even make it to his high school graduation – the doctors say that he’ll be implausibly lucky if he does.)

Mac’s grandfather is implausibly lucky, because he does make it to his grandson’s graduation.

But only just.

A week after graduating (second in his class, because Beth did far better than a C in Biology and is really much more studious than he is), Mac’s burying the last (blood) family member he’s got left.

(Harry Jackson has been dispensing more and more words of wisdom to his grandson in those last days since graduation, seeming to know that his time is up. He tells Mac that he can do anything if he just uses his brain and what’s around him, he tells Mac that while some people might call him a family-less orphan, that’s definitely not true, because he’s got Bozer and Beth and Penny and all the other friends he’ll make in the future. He tells Mac to absolutely not let his future-granddaughter-in-law go without a fight and not to eat too much of Bozer’s cooking, as good as it is, after thirty or it’ll start to show, so to eat as much of it as he can while he’s still young and his metabolism’s still running along so quickly. And, most of all, he tells Mac to absolutely, never, ever, ever close his heart off to new people, to love, for fear of abandonment, for fear of the hurt that abandonment causes.)

(Mac promises his grandfather that he will do all of those things, and Harry just smiles at him, because he knows that his grandson never, ever breaks his promises.)

He kneels and cries at his grandfather’s grave after the service, not caring about the mud ruining his smart black suit (it’s raining today, even though they live in sunny California and it’s practically summer – implausibility follows him around, it seems).

Beth kneels too, her black dress’s skirt growing covered in muck, holding his hand and drawing a continuous figure-eight (infinity) on it with her thumb. Bozer crouches down beside him on his other side, a hand squeezing his forearm, steady and constant, and Penny stands there with her hand on his shoulder, holding an umbrella, trying to keep them all as dry as possible.

None of them go home that night; instead, they all go back to Mac’s house (it’s his house legally, now, too; he’s emancipated and everything).

Penny camps on his couch, even though the lumbar support is terrible. Bozer digs out that old air mattress they used for some experiment ages ago and positions it on the floor of Mac’s bedroom. Beth and Archimedes squeeze onto his bed with him, and surrounded by living, breathing loved ones (and Bozer’s snoring and Archimedes’ whiffling and the scent of the hand lotion Beth’s fond of), Mac sleeps fairly well that night.
Archimedes is buried just days before they leave for college.

The vet says that the dog lived an awful lot longer than he should have, almost as if he were holding on for Mac’s sake.

(He knows that it’s completely irrational to think so – you can’t stave off death by strength of will alone, he knows that both in theory and empirically; if you could, his grandfather would still be hale and hearty, he knows – but part of Mac agrees.)

There’s becoming friends with Aaron and Matt and Tom at MIT, his engineering buddies, and victories at the Solar Car Competition and breaks spent in Boston with Beth, taking summer and winter courses so as to graduate early.

There’s teasing and friendship and love, just like there was in that other life.

He also still accidentally dyes part of Beth’s hair blue in a lab accident in their first year and has to buy her an apology pie (and of course she forgives him in this life, too), and Aaron and Matt still come up with that ridiculous name for their engineering team, and they all still lose their minds laughing when he tells them the story of how he got kicked out of the Boy Scouts, and he still creates that much-beloved pancake-making toaster.

(But in this life, there’s no plan to get him together with his dream girl, no playing of Disney songs or plots involving very small closets. It’s completely unnecessary, after all.)

(He even goes home to Mission City a few times over the two years in this universe; spending Christmas and Thanksgiving with his girlfriend and her family and Bozer and Penny.)

Mac and Beth still graduate after only two years, and she still heads off to Northwestern for medical school, and he still joins the Army.

(And she still worries, even though she’s so, so proud of him, and he still promises to write.)

The Ghost still strikes and Pena still dies and Mac still descends into grief and anger.

(He doesn’t respond to Beth’s emails – or Bozer’s or Penny’s or his engineering buddies’ – for a few days, but eventually, he manages to bring himself to write to Bozer and to Beth. The others will have to hear about him and what’s just happened through them; he just doesn’t feel like writing to them right now, and he knows in his soul that they’ll all understand.)

(Bozer’s been his best friend since they were nine, and he thinks – even if it sounds like a romance novel, which he knows is not what life is like at all – that he’s been in love with Beth since before he even understood what it meant to love a woman, as his grandfather had told him when he was almost-sixteen.)

When he comes home from that first deployment, his loved ones, his family, are ready and waiting to help him; to heal him and fix him and soothe him as best as they can.

(Beth stitches him up, his engineering buddies do some fixing, Bozer stuffs his stomach with food and the darkness with humour and Penny even changes her minor to Psychology for his sake.)

(It helps so much and he’s more grateful than he can even begin to articulate, despite his genius-
Angus MacGyver is only nineteen years old. His girlfriend is seven weeks younger than he is.

But they’ve known each other for nearly half their lives, and they’ve been together since they were fifteen, and they’ve loved each other in some way or another since they were nearly-eleven, and he’s in the Army and disarms bombs for a living, and they’ve made it through the fall-out from Pena’s death and his first deployment with their relationship stronger than ever, and they’ve promised each other (and he doesn’t break his promises and she’s sworn to herself to never break an oath, any oath, not just the Hippocratic Oath) that they’re in this for the long haul and for the good and the bad (and they understand what that means – they’ve had bad, truly bad, after all), and honestly, they’ve spent their entire lives being supposedly too young for what they’re doing...

He wasn’t planning this at all, but he’s never been one for plans.

Mac buys a ring, just a week before he deploys again.

Beth says yes.

When he is nineteen, Angus MacGyver goes back to Afghanistan with a fiancée waiting at home for him.

When he is twenty, Angus MacGyver goes back to Afghanistan again with a wife waiting at home for him.

Jack Dalton, the CIA agent he meets and befriends, despite their large age gap, when they’re assigned to work a taskforce together, at first quips constantly, after noticing one of Mac’s favourite photos of her (grinning with her hair in two braids in a T-shirt emblazoned with *Don’t Trust Atoms, They Make Up Everything* and pink flannel pyjama pants during a movie night when he’d been back home last – it’s a favourite because it’s pretty much her and light and happiness all captured in pixels), about jailbait (Mac somehow manages to dye Jack’s hair orange in revenge – it’s not serious revenge, not at all, just an attempt to create some lightness out here - *he knows* Jack, and is used to him, comfortable with him and his sense of humour, even if they’ve not known each other long, somehow), and then moves on to teasing Mac about being tied down to one filly so young.

(He realizes, one night in the desert as he and Jack talk, truly, really talk, that Jack’s probably a little jealous, a little wistful and wishful, and it truly saddens Mac, that one of the best men he’s ever known has such heartbreak in his past.)

When he is twenty-one, the DXS approaches Angus MacGyver.

Offers him something he shouldn’t be able to turn down: a chance to protect people, save lives (maybe save the world), while still coming home and leaving behind war and its senseless death.

Offers him the chance to keep working with Jack (who apparently isn’t really CIA, even if he used to be), who is rapidly becoming his second (or maybe third – Beth’s his wife, but she *is* also his second best friend, and they *do* say marry your best friend, after all, so he supposes she can be both) best friend, and maybe even a surrogate older brother and occasionally a father.

He turns them down anyway.
He’d have to lie to everyone who matters to him, everyone he loves, save Jack. He’d have to lie to Beth, he’d have to lie to Bozer, keep a whole part of his life completely secret from them. To keep them safe, of course, but he’d still have to lie.

He thinks that she’s definitely a spy of some sort who can mask and hide anything she wishes, but Patricia Thornton, the woman who comes to recruit him, seems to agree with his decision.

But the DXS is persistent, and they know what Mac can do, and they really, really want him to join up, so they come back with a compromise.

Bozer can’t know.

But Beth finishes medical school in a year.

She’ll commence an emergency medicine residency when she does.

The DXS, it turns out, has its own small hospital in LA, staffed by its people.

They treat normal people, of course, to keep up their cover, but also their agents and the agents of other covert organizations as needed.

They’ll offer her a residency there, bring her into the fold.

He’ll have to lie to her, but only for a year.

He can save lives, help people, even save the world, they say.

You have a gift, they say, you should, you must (you have a duty), they say, to use it to save as many as you can.

He says yes.

(He hopes he hasn’t made the wrong decision.)

He only manages to keep the fact that he doesn’t actually work for a think-tank from Beth for about three months, until she comes to visit him at his and Bozer’s place in LA for Thanksgiving break.

He supposes that was inevitable – trying to explain away injuries from being thrown into a wall and then beaten with a large blunt object during a fight as being the consequences of being hit by a car while grocery shopping is not likely to work when you’re married to a doctor-in-training (and a genius one at that), after all.

(It’s an awful lot easier to get Bozer to buy these excuses, since his roommate and best friend has no medical training or genius IQ and doesn’t see him in a state of undress either.)

He tells her the truth, the whole truth, and promises her to secrecy.

(He swears to that willingly, but she’s also really, really mad and hurt, too.)

(He understands, really does. She has a right to be. Lies and dishonesty and deception is still that, even if it’s for the greater good, even if it was necessary.)

(That night, he wonders if this is the end for them. Wonders if they’ve made it through high school
and Donnie Sandoz, his grandfather’s death, Pena and The Ghost and the fall-out, and him being deployed and her being in medical school and all the strain that causes, only to lose each other now because of this decision he made.

(He’ll regret it forever if that’s the case.)

He confides in Jack.

(He gets advice. Advice that comes from lessons hard-learned by the older man.)

They make it through.

(He’ll regret it forever if that’s the case.)

Mac suspects that Thornton knows that Beth knows, nine months too soon, but his boss never raises it and puts him into that uncomfortable position, and he’s very grateful for that.

(Patricia Thornton will always cover for her team, no matter what life they live.)

When Mac is nearly twenty-two, a new person joins his and Jack’s partnership, making them a team of three.

Nikki Carpenter is three years older than him and Beth, a hacker and an analyst who graduated from MIT the year that they started there.

She’s the best on the keyboard, and, he notices, a beautiful young woman.

(Of course he notices; he’s the sort of person who’d note a few letters scribbled on a newspaper or a reflection in a window in a photograph.)

Nikki Carpenter, Jack almost-immediately notices (as obvious as it is to him, Mac’s still rather blind to these things – possibly even blinder than he ever was in another life, since he’s really only had eyes for the girl who grew into the woman he’d marry since he was about thirteen), is very, very interested in Mac (she admits to herself that it was mostly physical at first – Angus MacGyver, even if he doesn’t really know it, is a very good-looking man - but it turns into something more almost faster than it should have – he’s one of those people who are so easy to love, after all – because he’s brilliant and kind and oh, so good and noble).

But, as Jack knows (but Nikki doesn’t – Mac wears his ring on a chain around his neck, hidden under his shirt, while at work, and leaves the necklace in his locker, along with his ID, whenever they go out on mission, and he’s one of those people who really likes to keep his private life just that, private), Mac is very, very in love and very, very happily married.

So Jack tells Mac what’s noticed (and he’s sorry that it has to be this way, on some level – he does like Nikki, she’s a good analyst and a great teammate and he suspects that, if this blows over and everyone can be an adult about it, that he and her and Mac – and by extension Beth and Bozer and maybe even Patty, who’s taken Nikki under her wing – will all be very good friends, maybe even family), and just before Nikki intends to make her move (an obvious move, too), Mac awkwardly but firmly and as gently as he can has a word with her, shows her his ring and all.

Nikki nods in understanding and does her best to move on. To move past this.
They all do, Jack and Mac and Nikki (and Beth, too, because of course Mac tells her about all of this, and she finds his obliviousness quite amusing and says to him that maybe in another life, if they hadn’t known each other since they were ten, if there hadn’t been Bozer and Penny and his grandfather to nudge them, with the two of them being so stubborn and that little bit too shy and awkward and oblivious when they were younger, maybe they’d have taken years to get their act together, and, with a little smirk, he makes some kind of quip about being very glad that things worked out the way they did and kisses her in response).

Nikki comes to Mac and Beth and Bozer’s (it is a little awkward, sometimes, Bozer sharing a house with his married best friends, but at the end of the day, he couldn’t really afford the rent in many other places at all—Mac and Beth mostly charge him rent as a token, really—and they’ve known each other for twelve years, after all) for barbecues on occasion, and it looks like everything’s going to be fine, since they’re all adults and all.

She and Beth get along well, even, and that makes Mac very, very happy (he wants everyone who matters to him to get along well, after all—Nikki’s his teammate and his friend, and of course she matters).

But (and she holds this close to her heart, because she knows it’s the only thing she can do, the only right thing to do in this situation) Nikki never quite lets go of Angus MacGyver.

(She’ll never meet anyone else like him, and there’s just something about this man…)

She pushes it down and buries it.

He’s married, he’s in love, he’s very happy.

He’s her friend.

(They’ll only ever be friends—and that hurts so much—but it has to be enough.)

(Shes better at masking her feelings—lying, deceiving, a darker part of her mind says—than Mac is, better at it than Jack is, too.)

(Shes might even be good enough at it to fool Thornton.)

(Shes not just the best on a keyboard.)

When Nikki has just turned twenty-seven, she gets captured on a mission after being separated from Mac and Jack.

She knows that she’s going to be okay, because Mac and Jack will come for her (they’re a team, and they’d never, ever, ever leave one of their own behind—probably would never leave anyone behind, actually, as long as they were still breathing).

But she’s wrong.

She doesn’t leave okay.

Not really.

(This particular bad guy finds that tiny little chink in her armour. She doesn’t know how or why—maybe it’s because this particular bad guy is the misogynistic kind who thinks that women are silly, emotional creatures, incapable of everything that’s needed to live the kind of life she lives—
but he does. Finds out, somehow, that she’s buried deep in some one-sided love, and plays with her, cuts her and wounds her, using that, and even manages to connect the dots and work out that it’s Mac, and…)

(This particular bad guy gets away, but not before he leaves some kind of mark on her.)

Mac and Jack save her, of course (they’re full of guilt and apologies that it took two days – two days too many), and take her to the DXS’ hospital, and it just so happens that Beth’s the doctor who sees to her, and the younger woman’s as kind and caring and competent as she always is, but Nikki feels some swell of jealousy when Mac just glances at her with a look that means _everything_ (one that, even if she knows he loves her – but not in the right way – he’ll never give her).

(She feels terrible for it afterwards, but that doesn’t make those feelings go away.)

(Part of her doesn’t understand, part of her asks _how could he love her and not me?_)

(She’s beautiful, she knows that, she’s the best on a keyboard in at least two ways, she’s intelligent and brilliant and she knows exactly what it’s like to be in the field, she could have just about any man she wanted – except for the one she does – why doesn’t he want _her_, love _her_?)

(She knows it doesn’t work that way, and it horrifies her a little – and only a little – but she thinks that just the same.)

_They let her stew for a little while, as they pull some strings and start concocting a plan, based off this new little piece of information they have._

(Nothing’s off-limits, not in this world of lies and spies and terrorists and betrayal.)

Then, they reach out.

(A woman scorned, they say. Hell hath no fury…)  

Some careful twisting, slow seduction, gentle nudges….and they have her.

Mac holds out the bio-weapon, as Nikki stands there, a gun to her head and (crocodile) tears in her eyes (for a moment, she almost regrets it – it’s so easy to imagine that he’s handing it over because he _loves_ her the way he _should_, not because they’re friends and teammates and he’d do this for just about anyone, because Mac’s only acceptable casualty rate is zero, and he’s probably already got some kind of inkling- even if he doesn’t know it yet - on how he can get the bioweapon back or stop its use – but she doesn’t, because if this works, if everything goes as planned, he’ll be _hers_, _they_ promised.)

Then there’s a gunshot sounding out by her head, and she drops (just as planned), but then there’s another gunshot (that wasn’t the plan, not at all…)…

They’d promised they wouldn’t hurt him, they’d promised…

She starts to wonder if they’re lying, if they’ve always lied, and then pushes that thought away immediately.

She can’t think that, that’d mean she’d…that’d mean she’d…

She refuses to think about that.
Everything unravels sooner than it should.

Sooner than was planned.

(Sooner than it did, in another life, another world, where she had more weapons in her arsenal to distract Mac with and switch off that genius brain, where she was more focused and less driven by a broken heart and twisted, played, bent feelings.)

He clicks the cuffs closed around her wrists (she’s imagined him doing that, more than once or twice, but never in this context), and just looks at her with sadness in his eyes.

She just smirks at him (hiding everything – shattered heart and broken dreams and regret – behind it), and tells him that they could have ruled the world together.

He just shakes his head (a heartbreak in his eyes that she lets herself pretend is because he loved her the way she loved him, even if she knows it’s definitely, definitely not), and hands her off to Homeland.

She doesn’t look as he makes his way back over to his friends, his family (who used to be hers, too).

She doesn’t look at Jack and Bozer, eyes sad and angry and hard all at once, she doesn’t look at that new young woman, the new analyst, Riley, who just looks angry and hard (she supposes that Riley had never known her). She doesn’t look at Thornton, the woman who was her mentor and a closer friend than even Jack, in a way, the woman who gives so little away, yet is clearly hurt; Nikki can read it, as easy as her own lines of code, in her dark eyes.

She doesn’t look at them as they all stand there with that look in their eyes that tells Nikki that if she ever goes after these people whom they have all taken as their family (just like Nikki had, before) that she’ll have a fight on her hands, a fight that she will lose.

She especially doesn’t look at Mac and Beth, as the blonde reaches out and takes his wife into his arms (the fierce little doctor’s shaken and scared, but she’s holding together admirably well – there’d been a hit out on her, and it had almost succeeded, after all).

(At least, she tells herself she doesn’t look.)

(It’s a lie.)

Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned, they say.

Maybe Nikki Carpenter is no scorned woman, not really.

But love’s a powerful thing.

A salve.

A balm.

A light in the darkness.

A comfort.

A joy.
But also pain.

Suffering, sometimes.

And a weapon, a powerful weapon, in the hands of those who know how to use it.

In the hands of those who are \textit{willing} to use it.

Nikki has no idea who or what she is anymore.

A villain?

A fool?

A victim?

All and none at once, like Schrödinger’s cat?

Nikki Carpenter, however, was definitely not one thing.

She \textit{wasn’t} amoral and emotionless and \textit{heartless}, despite what some high-ups were saying.

No, she had a heart.

And she had a litany of flaws and faults and it was her terrible decisions that led to what she’d done, of course (and she knew that, deep down)…

But she had a heart.

And that might have just started it all.

\textit{Anything for love.}

\textbf{Chapter End Notes}

This came from a brief conversation I had with helloyesimhere about Nikki being obsessed with Mac, and being possessive of him and rather creepy. My brain, being my brain, decided to spit this half-fluff, half-serious-tragedy fic out. (I suspect it comes from the same place in my head as The Asset, One Flap of a Butterfly’s Wings and The Darkness Inside.)

I am not sure what to make of Nikki in this; I mean, on one hand, she’s darker and creepier than in canon, methinks, but on the other hand, I also think she’s more sympathetic. I’m not exactly a huge fan of the whole doing-this-all-because-I’m-creepily-one-sidedly-in-love-with-you thing, but on the other hand, I do like how this works (and at least it’s a better reason for her fall from grace than money, in my honest opinion).

The idea that the DXS/Phoenix has a hospital of its own as mentioned in this fic is not mine, but I actually can’t remember who came up with it (I’m sorry, whoever you are – I think it was helloyesimhere or Deliwiel…).
**Chapter Summary**

For Objessions. AU re-imagining of Compass. Mac doesn’t talk much about college. It’s not because he hated it, far from it. He had family there, he loved and was loved. But after a certain day in Afghanistan, he vanished from his MIT family’s lives…until a sudden tragedy brings him full circle.

**Chapter Notes**

I know I write a lot of fix-its, but please don’t take this as a fix-it! I, on balance, really did enjoy Compass, and I do really like Frankie (her full name – Rosalind Franklin Mallory – makes me really happy because Rosalind Franklin was one of the discoverers of DNA’s structure- she was the person who took the X-Ray Crystallograph that ultimately enabled determination of its double helix structure!), but a combination of me thinking about my headcanons about Mac’s MIT years and what we found out in the episode, my desire to escape from thinking constantly about radical reactions, plus a nudge from Objessions, produced this. So, long story short, this is no fix-it, but a very AU re-imagining of Compass. Please think of it as what Compass could have been, in a very different universe where a couple of things in Mac’s life (like his grandfather’s death) happened differently or at different times.

Canon-compliant up to 1.17, Ruler, then diverges slightly from 1.18, Flashlight (on Mac’s age and how old he was when his dad left), then completely AU from there on.

Thoughts on 1.20, Hole Puncher, at the end of this very long story, complete with spoilers

See the end of the chapter for more notes

*My grandfather was always pretty fond of the concept of going full circle.*

*He said that whether we like it or not, we tend to find ourselves back in the same place.*

*I think he was right, though, to be honest, he almost always was.*

*I didn’t always think so; in fact, I definitely didn’t for years, but the older I get, the more I realise that he was a very, very wise man.*

*For years, I didn’t talk about The Ghost, or Pena. Tried not to think about it too.*

*Yet I found myself re-living that day in Afghanistan anyway.*

*I spent years avoiding Mission City. Didn’t go back after I left for college.*

*Until last year.*
‘...Maybe you need a partner who can speak your language.’

Mac opened his mouth to respond to his boss (he couldn’t possibly get a new partner, he couldn’t possibly be split up from Jack, he’d made a mistake, definitely, but this was the first time it’d happened in all these years…), but was interrupted by his phone vibrating in his pocket.

He pulled it out, and glancing at the caller ID (there was no name, but the number seemed very familiar), answered.

The voice on the other side of the line was definitely familiar.

‘Aaron?’

Mac got up and left the room, with a quick nod of apology to Matty.

He and Aaron had lost touch years ago. He’d lost touch with all of his friends from MIT years ago, because…Mac pushed that thought away.

He wondered briefly, as Aaron waffled on about how he’d managed to get his contact details (he’d changed his phone number and email address when he’d started working with the DXS; Aaron, who’d briefly dated Penny after Penny and Bozer’s trip to MIT during Spring Break of his first year there, had apparently managed to dig out her number, and hence get Mac’s), exactly what could have happened to get his old friend to reach out to him, after all this time, and after he’d cut them all off.

He only wondered briefly, because, quickly, Aaron got to the point of the call, having seemingly found the words he needed.

Riley, seated in one of the chairs, turned to Bozer.

‘Aaron?’

Bozer’s brow furrowed.

‘Friend of Mac’s from MIT. A close friend. One of his engineering buddies.’

Bozer, Riley and Matty, with a quick glance at one another and a silent conversation, stepped quietly over to the door.

‘What…what, uh, happened?’ Mac closed his eyes for a moment, fighting back tears. ‘Uh, no, of course I’ll be there. Send me the…thanks.’ He hung up.

Bozer spoke from behind him.

‘What’s going on, Mac? Is Aaron okay?’

Slowly, Mac turned and nodded at his best friend, with a grief in his eyes that Bozer had seen far too often for his liking.
‘Aaron’s fine… but…’ He swallowed, and when he spoke again, his voice was a little shakier, a little hoarser. ‘There… there was an accident. Beth’s… Beth’s dead.’

That same grief appeared in Bozer’s eyes, and he walked over and pulled Mac into a hug.

‘Oh, Mac… I’m so sorry, man.’

Mac clapped his best friend twice on the back, and sighed and took a deep breath, then let go of Bozer. He glanced over at his boss.

‘There’s a memorial in her hometown, West Lafayette. I was wondering if I could go.’

Matty took in the look in the young man’s eyes, the sadness in his posture.

Mac knew grief far too well.

She nodded.

‘Go. We’ll deal with all this later.’

Mac smiled wanly at her, and Bozer and Riley, then turned to leave to go pack a bag, book a flight, and get to the Mid-West.

As he departed, both women turned to Bozer, who just sighed.

‘Beth’s another close friend of Mac’s from MIT. A really, really, really close friend.’

Dressed in a smart black suit with a dark shirt and tie, Mac stared out the plane window as it made its way across the country.

She hated flying.

It terrified her.

I kept telling her that that made no sense.

Flying is, statistically, the safest common mode of transport.

Travelling by car is far more dangerous. She never had a problem with that.

Her response was always something along the lines of ‘that, Angus MacGyver, is true, but that is also why it’s a phobia, an irrational fear!’

That tended to descend into conversations about phobias. Or the irrational nature of humans. Or the whole concept of rationality. Or why rational science is superior… well, I’ve made my point.

People in general, for example, are irrationally scared of sharks. You are more likely to be killed by a car, a cow, a coconut, bees or even a vending machine.

People are also irrationally scared of death, given that, technically, since all humans will eventually die of old age if we don’t die of something else, and we are ageing every moment of every day, we are also, technically, constantly dying.

He sighed.

I guess most of us aren’t scared of death.
We’re scared of dying early.

We’re scared of our loved ones dying early.

He pulled out his phone and glanced at the date, not that he really needed reminding.

She’d have been twenty-five next month.

The US’s female life expectancy is 81.6 years.

680.2 months too soon.

He sighed again, and pulled out a paperclip from his pocket, shaping it into an ECG line absent-mindedly as he lost himself in his memories.

SEPTEMBER 2008

MIT UNDERGRADUATE CHEMISTRY LAB

‘Okay, the final burette reading is 21.72 mL, which gives us a titre volume of 13.23 mL…’

Titration is boring.

It’s an important fundamental skill, but it’s boring.

I guess even MIT has to start from the basics.

Mac turned to his chem lab partner, a rather short, brown-haired girl who looked about his age, sixteen. Her name was Beth Taylor, and she had rather shyly and sheepishly come up to him when their group had started splitting itself up into pairs at the start of the session, their first chemistry practical. He suspected, if she was the age she looked, that he knew why she’d come up to him.

Birds of a feather flock together.

Beth looked up at him as she finished recording the value (he was reading the burette because she was too short to be at eye-level with the meniscus, so she was in charge of recording the data), a furrow in her brow and her head tilted slightly to the left.

‘You must have atypically long and thick vocal cords.’

Her eyes widened almost-comically as she spoke (it seemed that she hadn’t intended to say that at all and had had a bit of a brain-to-mouth-filter failure), and Mac gave a snort of laughter (he could relate, sometimes he thought out loud too), and Beth responded with a sheepish little smile.

Well, titration is boring, but at least my lab partner’s interesting.

NOVEMBER 2008

OUTSIDE BETH’S DORM BUILDING

‘…Mac, the Tombs are off-limits. They’re locked, we’re not meant to go in there…’
He gave a little smirk.

‘Trust me, locks haven’t kept generations of MIT students out, and they aren’t going to keep me out. Never have.’ Beth just shook her head with disapproval, though there was a fond little smile on her face as she did so. ‘It’ll be fun!’

The teenage girl sighed.

‘I know it’ll be fun! A lightning gun sounds awesome, maybe even cooler than your pancake-making toaster, but…’ She held up the folder of notes she had in her arms. ‘If we get caught, we’ll all be in so much trouble, and it’s against the rules, and I should study for exams…’

Mac nodded, and tucked his hands into his pockets, leaning against the wall.

‘You know, I’m pretty sure MIT’s quite aware of what goes on in the Tombs. I think that some of the professors secretly condone us playing mad scientist.’ Beth grinned and gave a little chuckle, thinking of her Biology professor, Professor V, who always insisted that impossible was not a scientific term and probably would be the type to secretly condone breaking into the Tombs to do experiments. ‘And you’re going to do really well in the exams anyway; you don’t need to do extra study!’ Beth looked rather sceptical, and Mac just shook his head. ‘E2 reactions. Are they stereospecific or not, and why?’

‘They’re stereospecific, because the reacting hydrogen and leaving group must anti-periplanar to one another in order for the reaction to proceed.’

He cocked an eyebrow at her as if to say see? and then smirked again.

‘Besides, college is when you’re supposed to go a little wild and experiment.’

Beth snorted.

‘I’m pretty sure that most people who say that don’t mean do scientific experiments.’

Mac just shrugged.

‘I’m not most people.’

Beth snorted again, and nodded with a smile.

‘Oh, that’s not news.’ She thought for a moment, then nodded. ‘I’ll come along.’ She shot him a wry smile. ‘You’re a bad influence, Angus MacGyver.’

With a grin, he gestured at his leather jacket (it had been his grandfather’s, and he wore it almost daily, despite the fact that it was really getting too small for him) and his hair, which he liked to wear a little longer than most of the other male students at MIT.

‘I do have three hallmarks of your stereotypical bad boy.’

Beth shook her head with an amused expression, then her brow furrowed.

‘What’s the third?’

A very curious expression appeared on his face, half sheepish smile, half proud smirk.

‘I got kicked out of the Boy Scouts.’
She stared at him as if he’d just argued that the moon was made of cheese.

‘What do you mean you got kicked out of the Boy Scouts? You always carry a Swiss Army Knife, you know six non-illegal uses for body bags and bleach, you seem to be able to solve any problem with just a couple of paperclips and a stick of gum…how did you get kicked out of the Boy Scouts?’

MAY 2010

THE TOMBS

Looking up from the blender-helicopter that he was making (it’d been a challenge/dare from Matt; he and his engineering buddies, joined by Beth and Tom’s girlfriend and biochemistry student Claire, were messing around in their usual area in the Tombs, since they’d all finished their last exams for the year earlier that day), Mac addressed his friends, fidgeting with the spanner in his hands.

‘I’m…I’m not coming back next year.’

Five pairs of wide eyes turned to him.

He wasn’t dropping out, not exactly. He hadn’t left Boston for the last two years, he’d stayed over the summer and both winters doing classes and internships for credit (his grandfather had passed away just a week after his high school graduation, and there hadn’t really been a pressing reason for him to go back to Mission City) and he’d graduate with his undergraduate degree in just a couple of weeks. But he’d already been promised a PhD position with Professor O’Hair, his favourite engineering professor, and he was due to start that in June, albeit unofficially until the school year started up again, and he knew it’d be a shock to just about everyone that he wasn’t going to continue with his schooling.

Mac continued.

‘I…I was walking across campus last week, thinking about my grandfather.’ He didn’t need to explain why he was, his friends all knew that the anniversary of Harry Jackson’s death was coming up. Mac looked down for a moment. ‘Two years ago, to that day, one of his old war buddies passed away.’ He paused for a moment. ‘Not long before he did.’ He took a deep breath. ‘Anyway, this guy saved his life. And…that made me think, and I realized that while I was sitting here trying to solve these theoretical problems, soldiers were out there facing real ones. Ones that I could solve.’ He glanced up again. ‘I went and enlisted in the Army. I mean, I love it here, I really do. Being around…being around people like us. It’s amazing.’ They all shared a soft little smile, a moment of understanding, before Mac continued. ‘But everything we do is so abstract, and I need something more hands-on.’

There was a moment of silence.

It hadn’t been an easy decision.

Mac was smart enough to know (plenty smart enough to know) that war was not a nice place.

Not at all.

He was also a pacifist who absolutely hated guns.

And he loved MIT. He really did. Loved what they did here, loved the environment and the people
most of all.
He really had been very keen to do that project with Professor O’Hair. He’d have done a good job, and he’d have loved it, he knew.

Staying at MIT would have meant staying with his engineering buddies, too. Tom, Matt and Aaron all had at least one year to go, and were fairly likely to pursue further study, so they’d probably be around for a couple more years.

(But not Beth, who was graduating at eighteen after only two years like he was, and was heading off to medical school and was hoping to get admitted to Northwestern.)

Yet he also knew, somehow, that he’d made the right decision.

He knew, somehow, that this was what he had to do, and that if he didn’t do it, he’d regret it forever, and never quite feel satisfied.

In the end, it was Tom who broke the silence, notes of shock and pride and worry in his voice.

‘We’re going to miss you, man.’

The others all nodded, and it was Beth who spoke next, some note in her voice that Mac couldn’t quite place along with that same shock and pride and worry that he’d heard in Tom’s.

‘And we’re going to worry about you.’

He ignored the voices in his head that started chiming at that. (The one that sounded like his grandfather pointed out that maybe, just maybe, his bigger-than-Darlene-Martin crush wasn’t completely unrequited. The one that sounded like Bozer pointed out that ladies love a man in uniform.)

Instead, he just smiled at his friends, and reached out and put an arm around Matt, and his other around Aaron, who were standing closest to him.

‘I’m going to miss you guys too.’

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THE DAY AFTER MAC’S GRADUATION

ROOF OF MAC’S DORM BUILDING

Sitting on an old blanket on the roof (they weren’t supposed to be here, but he’d picked the lock with a borrowed bobby pin), Mac glanced over at the teenage girl sitting beside him. Beth just smiled at him around her mouthful of pie.

Tom, Aaron and Matt had very unsubtly decided that they were going to play laser tag, and deliberately not invited him, hinting (or rather explicitly practically-ordering him) to go spend the last evening before he left for boot camp (he’d be packing and leaving in the morning) with Beth instead.

He knew exactly what they were trying to get him to do (they’d given up on subtle and all downloaded Kiss the Girl onto their phones a year ago), but he was not going to do it.

He was not going to put her into that awkward position, where she’d have to decide if she could
stay friends with a guy who was half in love with her.

He was *not* going to risk losing her friendship if she decided she couldn’t.

He reached over and cut himself a second slice of pie. (He was a teenage boy, after all, and while he didn’t love pie nearly as much as she did, he *did* think it was delicious.)

They sat there, chewing their pie in comfortable silence for a while, before Mac spoke.

‘Do…do you think I’m crazy?’

For reasons that he was trying and failing to not think too much about, her opinion about his decision seemed to matter just that little bit more to him, like Bozer’s did or his grandfather’s would have.

Beth cleaned the last of her pie off her spork, sucking on it for a moment while lost in thought, before giving him a wry smile.

‘I’ve always thought you were crazy, Mac. In the best way possible.’ He smiled softly at her, and then her face turned more serious. ‘But no, I don’t.’

He really should not have felt that rush of relief that he did at that moment, but he did. He glanced up at the sky.

‘Professor O’Hair thinks I’m nuts. He *told me* I’m nuts.’

The moment he looked down again, he noticed Beth’s eyes were narrowed, and she had crossed her arms indignantly.

‘He shouldn’t say that! You’re going to serve our country, and protect people, and—’

Mac’s smile widened.

*And though she be but little, she is fierce.*

*I’m not the biggest fan of Shakespeare, but I do like that particular line.*

‘He said it very nicely, and he *did* wish me good luck. There’s no hard feelings, definitely.’ Beth looked mostly placated, and Mac continued. ‘And…and they’re never going to say it, but I’m pretty sure Tom and Matt and Aaron and all of our other friends think I’ve lost it too.’

Beth stared at him, fairly intently, for a moment, then turned away, seemingly a little embarrassed by what she perceived as her own awkwardness. She spoke softly, staring at the far corner of the roof.

‘I worry about you going into a warzone. I admit, I…I don’t like the idea.’ She paused for a moment. ‘But I…I think I understand.’ She paused again. ‘It sounds arrogant to say this…but I’m smart, Mac. *Really, really* smart. I’m not you, but brains-wise, I’d like to think that I’m in your league.’ He made a noise of assent. (He had the higher IQ, probably was slightly smarter in that way, but Beth was more studious and probably had more focus. He suspected that in the end, that’d balance them out.) ‘Doctors are intelligent people. But they don’t have to be geniuses. In fact, not many doctors are. You don’t need to be a genius to be a good doctor, and geniuses don’t necessarily make good doctors. But I think…I think I can be a good doctor, and I think I can save lives by being one.’
‘You can, and I know you’re going to be a great doctor.’

He just knew it, somehow.

She turned back to face him, and smiled, cheeks pinking and ducking her head a little at the compliment.

‘Professor V thinks I’m crazy, too. So do quite a lot of my mom and dad’s friends. They think, with a brain like mine, I should be doing R&D in Silicon Valley or spending the rest of my life researching at a university. They say that if I want to save lives, this is a more efficient, more optimal way of doing it, given my particular skill-set. And I guess that might be true. I mean, if I work hard and a little luck goes my way, maybe I can help develop a cure for HIV or cancer or malaria, and save more people than I ever could as an ER doctor.’ She shrugged. ‘But…I agree with what you said. About needing to be hands-on.’ She shrugged again. ‘I guess…I guess I want to see immediate, direct results.’ She gave him a wry little smile and looked a bit sheepish. ‘I’m rambling, and I did not mean to turn this into being all about me!’ She took a deep breath. ‘What I’m trying to say, Mac, is that I really think I get it.’

He nodded with a smile.

‘You do.’

They sat there on the roof until very, very late that night (or very early the next morning), laughing and talking about anything and everything.

When they finally decided to call it a night, Beth hugged him very tightly.

‘Keep in touch?’

He smiled into the crook of her neck, and then rested his chin on her shoulder so he could speak more clearly.

‘I’ll write, well, email you. I promise.’

Beth beamed.

She knew he never broke his promises.

AUGUST 2011

AFGHANISTAN

That same horrible mixture of emotions (of grief and guilt and sadness and anger and numbness) that he’d felt near-constantly for the last two months swirling through his mind, Mac stared at the huge number of unread emails in his inbox.

Some were from Penny, some from Aaron and Matt and Tom and his other MIT friends.

The most recent ones, however, were all from two people, who’d emailed him daily for the last six weeks, once it’d become obvious that his lack of response wasn’t because he was busy on a mission that they couldn’t know about.

Bozer had been his best friend since he was nine, and Beth was stubborn as a mule.
And, a little voice in his head told him, *they love you. Maybe more than anyone else alive does.*

He ignored that little voice, which was the same little voice that had been nagging him for the last almost-three years, telling him to ask his first year chem lab partner out for pie at the diner, or to tell her how he felt that last night on the roof, that same voice that had been starting, before Pena’s death, to concoct crazy plans about showing up at Northwestern when his first deployment ended, because he finally, finally believed that she just might return his feelings.

(Later, Mac would laugh, bitterly, about the ridiculous irony of his situation, but right now, he was in no fit state to even consciously realize it.)

He just couldn’t do it.

Couldn’t write back, not to anyone.

These two months, he hadn’t, beyond sending Bozer a short message telling his best friend that he was alive, but Pena wasn’t.

There was too much going on in his head, too many emotions and thoughts and what-ifs and scenarios, and he just couldn’t, and he knew what was wrong with him (he was too smart not to), and part of him just didn’t want his friends (his family) to have to deal with the darkness he had in him right now.

Mac sighed again, and took a deep breath.

He clicked on Bozer’s latest email, and started trying to write something, *anything.*

Bozer had been his best friend since he was nine years old.

Bozer had been there when his father left, and when his grandfather died.

He would set himself the goal to write to Bozer.

He’d get through that, and worry about everyone else later.

*There’s a famous Chinese proverb, by a guy called Laozi.*

*A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step.*

*I need to take the first step.*

*And then the next one, and then the next one.*

*Put one foot in front of the other, do it again, do it again, and just keep doing it, as my grandfather said.*

*One step.*

Two days later, Beth’s daily emails stopped appearing.

A week later, he hadn’t received any more from her.

She’d finally, finally given up.

Two months and a week of radio silence (two months and a week of a broken promise) and she’d
finally given up.

It hurt a lot more than it should, considering that he was the one who stopped replying and broke a promise to her.

Part of Mac told him that he should write back to her, but he was still struggling to write to Bozer, and he just couldn’t.

I regretted that.

I let her go, I really did, and I moved on.

I expect she did the same.

I know, really, somehow, that she would have.

But I still regretted that.

My regrets came and went. Ebbed and flowed like the tide, as my grandfather would say.

Sometimes, I didn’t regret it at all.

Sometimes…like after that bioweapon and my unplanned flight…I really regretted it.

I know, I know, it’s not healthy. And it wasn’t as if I was pining, or still half in love with Beth.

I lied to Jack, that day in Portugal. I’m not proud of it, but I did. At least verbally; I kinda told him the truth through…well, everything else. It felt easier that way.

I was still in love with Nikki then.

I’m not really sure how I feel about her now. It’s complicated. Really, really complicated.

But, look, I’ve got an IQ over 160. I think too much. I consider a lot of what-ifs.

And this was a pretty big what-if.

APRIL 2017

INDIANAPOLIS INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT

As he walked out of the airport, Mac just shook his head with a small smile as he saw Jack, left arm in a sling, clad in a very smart chauffeur’s uniform, standing in front of a very fancy car, with a sign emblazoned with MacGyver.

‘Suit’s a nice touch.’

Jack smiled as they began their usual comforting, familiar banter.

‘You sure? You know, I was worried it was a little over the top, but I look good.’

Mac just shook his head again.

‘No, no. Over the top would have been using the Phoenix jet to get to Indianapolis before me,
renting this car, and then meeting me at the airport. The hat and the gloves are just the cherry on top of a banana split of weird decisions.’

Jack nodded, and clapped Mac on the back.

‘Bozer called and told me what happened. And, sure, I’m missing mandatory rehab for my arm, but I wanted to be here for you, man.’

Mac clasped Jack’s uninjured arm for a moment with a small smile.

He had the best friends, the best family, that he could have ever dreamed of.

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**JACK’S FANCY RENTAL CAR**

**ON-ROUTE TO WEST LAFAYETTE**

Mac glanced over at the driver’s seat, gesturing with his head towards Jack’s sling-engaged arm.

‘Shouldn’t I be driving?’

Jack scoffed.

‘Are you kidding me?’ His expression softened slightly. ‘My arm may be all busted up, but whatever’s going on in that head of yours has no business behind the wheel.’ There was another pause, and when Jack spoke again, his voice was much softer, much gentler. ‘And I’m really sorry about the loss of your friend. What was her name? Beth?’

Mac nodded.

‘Yeah.’

Jack glanced very briefly over at him.

‘What happened, exactly?’

Mac was quiet for a moment, and when he spoke, there was a note in his voice that Jack very much did not like hearing there, and, irrationally, wanted to do absolutely anything to make go away.

‘She had a car accident. She was doing her residency at a hospital in Detroit. Driving home after a late shift, she…lost control of her car, rolled off the road, car burst into flames. She’d been grocery shopping that morning, before work, had a few things in the car that acted as accelerants…’ He trailed off, and swallowed. ‘Just…just bad luck. One of those things, I guess.’

Jack glanced over at him again.

‘You loved her, didn’t you?’

‘It…it wasn’t like that.’ He paused for a moment. Jack wasn’t just his partner, Jack was family. He deserved to hear the truth, even if, as happened fairly often, he couldn’t quite answer directly. ‘I…I didn’t think she could ever possibly feel the same way.’ He gave a bitter snort of almost-laughter. ‘We…we kept in touch after I enlisted. It wasn’t until I’d been in Afghanistan nearly a year that I realized that she probably did, and then…’ Mac swallowed, and glanced over at the older man. ‘Then Pena died, and…I just stopped replying to her emails.’ He paused for a moment, then when he spoke again, his tone was a little brighter, more teasing, a tiny bit snarky. ‘Is that what you
wanted to hear?’ He glanced over at his partner. There was a sadness in Jack’s eyes, sympathy, and Mac gave his partner a little nod, a little smile. Then, he let out a little chuckle. ‘To this day, I still can’t believe that she loved me back. She was way out of my league.’

Jack looked incredulously at him. (He suspected that this was another one of Mac’s moments when he failed to comprehend his Hollywood good looks.)

‘Out of your league? She was that gorgeous?’

‘No.’ He shook his head. ‘Well, yeah. Yeah, she was, but it wasn’t her looks.’

Jack glanced over at the blonde.

‘Then why was she…wait, was she smarter than you or something?’

‘Uh…no. Yes. Maybe.’ Jack just shot him a look, and Mac shrugged. ‘Intelligence isn’t easy to measure. Particularly when you’re trying to differentiate between very intelligent people. I have a higher IQ, she had better grades, my mental arithmetic’s better, but she…’ He trailed off. ‘It depends on how you’re looking at it.’ Jack looked rather balefully at him. He much preferred it when Mac gave him simple, definite answers. The blonde sighed. ‘Probably not. On balance, we were probably about the same.’

‘If it wasn’t her looks or her brains, then why was she way out of your league?’

Mac stared out the window for a beat, then turned back to Jack.

‘It wasn’t just one thing. It doesn’t exactly make sense, but the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.’

Jack shot him a look.

‘Those your grandfather’s words again, brother?’

Mac sighed.

‘Yeah.’ He paused again. ‘She was very smart, and very beautiful. She was also kind and sweet and fierce, all at once. She was crazy in the best way, and very, very stubborn.’ He looked out the window again. ‘When…when I stopped writing to her, she sent me an email every day without reply for six weeks.’

Jack sighed and glanced over at Mac for as long as he could risk while also driving.

‘She sounds pretty special. I’ve never heard you talk about anyone like this before.’

The not even Nikki hung implicitly in the air between them. (For two years, Mac had believed that Nikki was the right one. He was no longer convinced, at least, not like he had been, that she was, but he had, for a time.)

The blonde shrugged a little uncomfortably. He himself didn’t really know why, but he had a hypothesis or two.

‘Young love.’ He paused for a moment. ‘First love.’ He smiled slightly, a soft, fond smile tinged with sadness and regret. ‘And Beth was one of a kind.’ He looked out the window again, staring into the distance. Into the past, into his memories. ‘I accidentally dyed her hair blue once. Well, some of it.’
Jack shot him an incredulous look.

Mac had once dyed his hair orange *on purpose*.

The blonde in question’s smile grew a little bit wider as he reminisced.

‘It was a lab accident. Chemical synthesis during our first year. A rather fiddly chemical synthesis. If you got it just slightly wrong, it’d blow up and send blue dye flying everywhere. The dye, luckily, wasn’t dangerous, it was just…persistent.’ Mac’s smile turned a little more wry. ‘It was a very bad choice for a first year practical. *Someone* was bound to mess it up.’

Jack cocked an eyebrow at him.

‘And that person happened to be *you*, brother?’

Mac looked a little sheepish.

‘I wanted to try this tip I read about online. Unfortunately, I picked the wrong practical to try it out in.’

Jack just shook his head.

‘You dyed the hair of the girl you had a serious thing for blue because you were playing mad scientist.’

Mac looked even more sheepish.

‘And her favourite shirt.’

Jack’s mouth gaped open for a moment, then he snapped it firmly shut and shook his head.

‘You, brother, are *hopeless* with women.’

Mac chuckled, and then his expression softened.

‘She…she agreed with me that it was a very cool explosion. She also forgave me, after I apologized, bought her a pie, and she ranted at me and poked me for a bit.’

Jack snorted, and shook his head with a smile.

‘One of a kind indeed, man.’

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**FUNERAL HOME NEAR PURDUE UNIVERSITY CAMPUS**

**WEST LAFAYETTE**

As they listened to the eulogy, Mac fiddled with a paperclip in his hands. When the eulogy was over, Jack leaned closer to the younger man, and gestured to the now-pie shaped paperclip.

‘What’s with the pie?’

Mac looked down at the re-shaped paperclip, then back up at Jack with a sad little smile.

‘I think I should have brought flowers…but Beth really loved pie. I think she might appreciate this
The man sitting on Mac’s other side, who looked to be in his late twenties and also very, very exhausted (there were deep dark circles behind his glasses), heard the blonde’s comment and turned to him with a very small smile.

‘I’ve never met anyone else who loved that particular foodstuff more.’

They shared a look, two strangers brought together by a common grief.

It’s a strange phenomenon.

Disasters bring people together.

Grief unites us.

Every cloud has a silver lining, perhaps.

‘How did you know her?’

The exhausted-looking man sighed.

‘I’m her ex-boyfriend. Dated the back half of medical school, and most of the first year of our residencies.’ He sighed again, and Jack shot Mac a look, which the younger man studiously ignored. ‘Maintaining a relationship becomes practically impossible when one half of a couple’s doing an ER residency, and the other a neurosurgery one at hospitals in different cities.’ He rubbed his temple, and shook his head. ‘You?’

‘College friend from MIT.’ Mac stepped out of the aisle of seats. ‘Excuse me, I should go…’ He motioned towards the table where flowers and cards and condolences were being deposited.

Beth’s trainee-neurosurgeon ex-boyfriend just nodded.

‘Of course.’

Jack and Mac made their way over to the table, and Mac left his paperclip pie, noting the card and flowers from Tom and Claire, with apologies that they couldn’t make it, since they were in Germany.

He glanced up again, and noticed Beth’s parents. He pointed out the couple, in their late fifties, to Jack.

‘I…I should go give my condolences to her parents.’

Jack nodded, and clasped his shoulder briefly with his good hand, and then gestured to a quiet corner.

‘I’ll be waiting right there, brother.’

Mac gave him a wan little smile, and walked over to the grieving couple.

‘Professor O’Reilly, Mr Taylor, I’m so sorry for your loss…’

Despite the fact that they’d only met in person once, at his and Beth’s graduation, the petite chemistry professor (her daughter had inherited her mother’s build) reached up and hugged him.
Mac hugged her back, patting her back gently, and then let go and shook hands with her father. He swallowed, a sudden lump in his throat, as he looked into the older man’s eyes, the exact same shade of brown as his daughter’s.

After he left her parents, he almost immediately ran into Matt and Aaron, who each pulled him into a hug. Mac addressed Aaron as he let go of his old friend.

‘Thanks…thanks for letting me know.’

‘I…I had to, Mac.’

The three of them stared at each other for a long moment, and reached a silent consensus. (They’d been very in-sync back in their college days, and it seemed that in a way, things were still almost as if Mac had never abruptly cut off all contact from them.) Aaron and Matt nodded, and each reached out to clap Mac on the back. He gave them a wan smile in return.

It was Matt who broke the silence.

‘I just wish she was here to…I guess, forgive you too, Mac. She was the most cut up about…about losing touch with you.’

Mac just nodded, swallowing that persistent lump in his throat again, and Matt spoke again.

‘How are her folks holding up?’

Mac shook his head.

‘Pretty torn up.’

Both of his engineering buddies nodded.

‘Hell, we all are.’

Aaron ran a hand through his hair.

‘First that terrorist attack, then this…’

Mac’s brow furrowed.

‘Terrorist attack?’

Aaron paused, and then nodded.

‘I guess you couldn’t possibly have known…I live in Detroit, Beth and I catch…caught up from time to time.’ He bit his lip. ‘Remember that car bomb that went off in Detroit, two weeks ago? Killed five people, nearly killed a Senator?’ Mac nodded. He’d seen it on the news. ‘She had a rare day off, so went grocery shopping. Wound up witnessing the whole thing. She was close enough it singed her clothes.’ Mac closed his eyes for a very brief moment. Witnessing a bomb going off, and its aftermath, was something that he wished on nobody, least of all his civilian friends. One of them being so close…well, that was something he didn’t even want to think about, let alone that person being her. ‘And, well, you know her.’ Mac nodded again, a tiny little smile on his face. ‘She was the first responder on the scene. And…she never mentioned it, but the news reported that a local doctor saved the Senator’s life; he’s still in hospital, but he should make a full recovery, and his people did send a very large bunch of flowers…’ Aaron motioned at the extremely ornate
‘Excuse me, fellas.’

Jack walked up and tapped Mac on the shoulder, indicating a man, smartly dressed but not ostentatious in any way, shape or form (the kind of man who, normally, no one would give a second glance, unless you were a trained spy – this sort of blending into the background set off alarm bells in Jack’s head), who was taking photos discreetly (but not discreetly enough) on a phone.

‘Who takes candid photos at a funeral?’

Mac’s brow furrowed, and he quickly bade farewell to Aaron and Matt, as he and Jack walked towards the man, splitting up without having to consult as they neared him.

‘Hey, can I talk to you?’

The man ignored Mac, and started walking faster.

Jack came out from behind him and grabbed the man, pinning him to a table.

‘Hey there, Sneaky Pete.’

The man pushed his knee hard against Jack’s injured arm. The brunette gave a scream of pain, and sunk down to his knees. Mac immediately rushed over to his side.

‘Are you alright?’

Jack nodded, panting.

‘He dropped his phone, so yeah, I’m fine.’ He indicated the doorway, through which the man had just fled, with a nod of his head. ‘Go get him, Mac!’

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HORTICULTURE GARDEN
PURDUE UNIVERSITY
WEST LAFAYETTE

Twenty minutes later, Jack and Mac met up again at a distinctive wooden pavilion, set in the middle of some very nice gardens.

‘I lost him. I’ve never been here before, and I think he knows this city better than I do. He disappeared into thin air.’ Mac sighed, frustrated. ‘You get into his phone?’

Jack nodded.

‘Yeah, man, it’s definitely a burner.’ He held it out to Mac. ‘This guy had shots of just about everyone at the service. Question is, why?’

Mac shook his head.

‘I don’t know. Why would anyone crash the funeral of an ER resident who died in a car crash?’
There was a note of something in his voice, a tone that meant he had an idea. One that Jack was very, very familiar with.

‘You think it wasn’t an accident.’

Mac nodded slowly.

‘Two weeks ago, she saved the life of a Senator after a car bomb went off.’

Jack’s brow furrowed.

‘That terrorist attack in Detroit? Media everywhere are reporting that Senator Kelly was the target, brother.’ Jack considered for a moment. ‘But that doesn’t explain how they knew it was her; I don’t think any of the media outlets reported her identity, they usually don’t in cases like this. Also doesn’t really explain why they want her dead. Revenge on a single doctor who inadvertently foiled their plans isn’t really standard terrorist MO; they’ve usually got some higher-calling thing they’re obsessed with.’

Mac huffed out a breath.

‘Let me guess. You think I’m jumping at shadows because I can’t accept she’s gone.’

Jack had only just opened his mouth to reply when they heard footsteps. Both Mac and Jack were instantly on alert, and a moment later, four FBI agents, wearing bulletproof vests emblazoned with the name of their agency, each carrying a gun pointed at the partners, were surrounding them.

‘FBI!’

‘Hands up!’

‘You’re under arrest!’

Mac and Jack exchanged a glance (one of the men was very clearly the man who’d been taking photos at Beth’s funeral) as they put their hands up.

My grandfather said that if it looks like a duck, walks like a duck and sounds like a duck, it’s probably a duck.

There is definitely something more going on.

Beth’s death was not an accident.

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FBI OFFICE

INDIANAPOLIS

‘You, Mac, go to West Lafayette to attend a funeral, and you, Jack, sneak off from Phoenix-mandated PT and take an unsanctioned trip to the Mid-West to accompany him, and the two of you get yourselves arrested by the FBI.’

Matty did not look happy.

Mac sighed.
‘I know this isn’t official Phoenix business, but I also know that Beth’s death was not an accident.’

Matty just shot him a look.

‘Given that the FBI’s involved, don’t need to be a genius to figure that out, Mac.’

From his seat next to Riley in one of the chairs, Bozer spoke up, brow furrowed.

‘But, Mac, Beth was doing her residency, wasn’t she? Why would anyone want to murder her?’

Riley, who had been focused on her laptop, looked up and held her computer out to Bozer.

‘Found this CCTV footage from the ambulance bay of a Detroit hospital, the one that they took the Senator to after the bombing. Quality’s not the best, but I’m sure it’s Beth in civilian clothes and walking by the gurney.’ Riley typed quickly for a moment, and then looked up again. ‘The immediate area around the blast was a dead zone, but I’ve got her accompanying the Senator into an ambulance and talking to paramedics. Media reports were that an off-duty doctor saved the Senator’s life, and that he was the target…’ The young woman shrugged. ‘Might have made her a target.’

Mac and Jack nodded.

‘Yeah, that’s what Mac was thinking.’

Riley shook her head, focusing back on her laptop.

‘I can see if I can get an ID on the terrorists, check FBI and NSA and Homeland chatter…’ Matty raised an eyebrow at her. ‘Oh…uh… I’ll ask nicely?’

Matty just nodded, eyebrow still quirked.

Riley looked down at her laptop, then up again, locking eyes with Mac.

‘It’s going to take time.’

Matty, too, made eye contact with the two agents on the screen; first Jack, then Mac.

‘Well, time isn’t on your side, Mac. I need you back here in 48 hours for another assignment.’

Mac looked very hopeful.

‘48 hours? So we can stay?’

Matty nodded.

‘Yes. You and the one-armed man have two days to help the FBI solve a murder. I know the guy who runs FBI operations in the Mid-West, I’ll get you read in.’

Mac and Jack both smiled at their boss.

‘Thanks, boss.’

They hung up, and Jack turned to his partner.

‘That was unexpectedly nice of her.’

Mac nodded absent-mindedly, thinking back to what Matty had said about Jack that very morning.
She cares.

For all her bark, she really does.

She’s only considering splitting us up because she’s worried that one day, the…language barrier…between me and Jack is going to get one or both of us killed.

I really, really don’t want that to happen.

I don’t want Jack’s blood on my hands. Really, really don’t want his blood on my hands.

But at the same time, I don’t want a different partner. Even a new partner who speaks my language.

He shook his head, pulling away from that train of thought, boxing it up for later.

He didn’t have the time or brainpower or emotional capacity to deal with it right now.

Instead, Mac glanced around the little conference room that he and Jack had been deposited in, once it’d been established that they and the FBI were on the same side.

The older man was currently leaning against the table, and, as Mac watched, winced a little.

(The FBI agents, despite Mac and Jack’s protests, had cuffed Jack, none too gently, insisting that they’d seen too many suspects fake injuries or use them to their advantage, to get gentler treatment and facilitate their escape. They both knew that that couldn’t be any good for the axial fracture in Jack’s left radius.)

The blonde just gestured with his head towards his partner’s arm, an eyebrow quirked.

Jack just shook his head.

‘I’m fine, brother. I’ve had worse, and we’ve got a job to do.’

They stared at each other for a moment, and then Mac nodded.

‘Thanks, Jack.’

He didn’t need to specify exactly what the thanks were for. In fact, he wasn’t quite sure if it was possible to specify exactly what he was thanking Jack for, beyond everything.

Jack just smiled at Mac, and a moment later, the door opened, and the FBI agent whom they’d accosted at the funeral (who still didn’t look very happy at them) addressed the two Phoenix agents.

‘Your boss called mine, and now you’re on the case.’ He motioned for them to follow him out of the conference room. ‘Come on, we’re going for a drive.’

Mac and Jack just exchanged a glance.

This was getting weirder by the minute.

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ON-ROUTE TO FBI SAFEHOUSE

SOMEBEWHERE IN INDIANAPOLIS
‘…The Detroit office has been on high alert; the bomb that nearly killed Senator Kelly wasn’t the only car bomb that’s been found in the last two weeks.’ The FBI agent, Agent Connors, glanced over at Jack, who was sitting in the passenger seat beside him. ‘Best intelligence suggests that we’ve got a small, isolated cell, no concrete links to any other organizations.’

Jack nodded, glancing back at Mac, who was sitting in the back, playing with a paperclip, which was taking the shape of a magnifying glass.

On one hand, a small, isolated cell was a good thing, from their perspective. Likely had fewer resources, geographic range of attacks would be smaller, their plans wouldn’t dovetail with or be coordinated with another organization or organizations.

On the other hand, the members of such a cell would also be very, very hard to identify, track down and arrest, due to the lack of profile and connections.

Connors turned into a small, quiet suburban street.

‘Where we going?’

‘You’ll see.’

Mac and Jack both rolled their eyes.

Connors was being deliberately squirrely, because he still wasn’t happy with them for what had happened at Beth’s funeral.

Jack turned to the FBI agent.

‘Come on, man!’ He held up his sling-encased left arm. ‘That knee you stuck into my fractured arm? And that not-gentle-at-all cuffing? I’ve forgotten completely about that! Water under the bridge!’

Mac sighed, and shot Jack a look, then addressed Connors.

‘Look, we’re sorry. But it was all a misunderstanding, and we’re all on the same side. We’ve all got the same goal…we want to get justice for Beth. And stop a terror cell from hurting any more innocent people.’

The grief in his voice was very clear.

Connors glanced back at him for just a moment, as did Jack. Mac’s partner gave him a very small, wan smile, while Connors seemed to have a more assessing, lost-in-thought look in his eyes. Then, the FBI agent spoke.

‘You’ve made your point, I’ll let it go.’

‘So you gonna tell us where we’re going?’

As Jack spoke, they pulled into the driveway of a small, nondescript house.

Connors shrugged.

‘We’re here anyway.’

Mac and Jack exchanged another look full of questions, and followed Connors inside.
Mac froze in the doorway of the small, Spartan living room, just inside and to the right of the front door.

He barely heard the door click closed behind him, or Jack gasp and swear softly, or Connors’ voice as the FBI agent spoke.

He hadn’t seen her in person since they were eighteen, and he hadn’t seen a photo of her in which she was older than nineteen, at least not until this morning. Her hair and eyebrows had been dyed at least four shades darker than her natural light brown, and he’d never seen her hair shoulder-length before; she’d always worn it longer. She was wearing fake glasses like the ones that he wore on missions sometimes, and clothes that he didn’t think she’d ever pick for herself, and she looked paler and more scared than he’d ever, ever seen her (paler and more scared than he ever wanted to see her), but the young woman standing in the living room was unmistakably Beth, and she was unmistakably alive.

Jack did a double-take, and glanced rapidly between Connors, the other FBI agent sitting on the couch, the young woman staring at Mac with very wide eyes and his partner himself, who looked like he’d seen a ghost (which, Jack supposed, he kind of had).

‘…Dr Taylor, this is Jack Dalton, and Angus MacGyver, though I guess you two don’t need to be introduced. They work for the government, which, for all of our sakes, they should have told us immediately…’

Jack just shot Connors a look, and the other man trailed off and mouthed sorry.

The sudden silence seemed to cause his partner and the young woman, who were still staring at each other in shock, to find their voices again.

‘Angus MacGyver...well, you did join the Army…’

Mac raised a hand and waved awkwardly.

‘Hi, Beth. I…I wasn’t expecting to see you…I wasn’t expecting to see you again.’

As soon as the words had left his mouth, Mac winced at his rather poor choice of words, and Jack saw fit to try and rescue the younger man before he dug himself into a hole he couldn’t work out how to climb out of.

Jack turned to the two FBI agents.

‘You know, some warning about this big plot twist would have been nice, fellas.’

His words caused Mac and Beth to finally, finally stop staring at each other. The young woman shook her head a couple of times, as if to clear it, while Mac shot the FBI agents a very sharp look that clearly said that he very much agreed with Jack.

Connors, at least, had the good grace to look a little bit sheepish.
After a moment, Beth glanced over at Jack, who waved at her, less awkwardly than Mac had. He winced in the next breath, as the movement caused his left arm to twinge painfully.

The young doctor noticed, and most of the shock that she was still shaking off left her eyes, which she instead narrowed at the two FBI agents. She gestured at Jack’s arm.

‘Did you do that?’

Both FBI agents shook their heads; the one who wasn’t Connors actually put his arms up in supplication.

‘No.’

‘Wasn’t us. He was like that when we found him.’

Beth turned her attention to Jack and Mac, shooting them a very firm look.

‘It’s kinda a long story, Dr Taylor.’

She quirked an eyebrow at Mac, who just shrugged and nodded. A soft little smile crossed her face for a moment, and then disappeared again as she returned her attention to Jack.

‘Call me Beth, please, and I’m having a look at that arm.’ She glanced over at the FBI agent who wasn’t Connors. ‘You’ve got to have a med-kit somewhere in this safe house; get it for me, please.’

The man nodded, exchanged a look with Connors, and then the two FBI agents left the room, one to grab the med-kit, and Connors to check the perimeter. Beth stared herding Jack and Mac towards the kitchen.

‘Really, I’m fine, it’s just a little fracture…I’ve endured a hell of a lot worse…’

Beth just shook her head and kept herding.

‘A little fracture? And honestly, saying that you’ve endured worse is a terrible, terrible argument… what was the precise injury?’

‘Axial fracture to the left radius.’

As the little doctor (who was seriously as stubborn and fierce as Mac had described her, despite her appearance, Jack thought) moved him to the kitchen by sheer force of personality and will, Jack glanced back at his partner.

There was a fond, gentle little smile on Mac’s face, the kind that Jack was quite sure the younger man wasn’t fully conscious of.

He was pretty sure a similar little smile grew on his face in response.

‘…I don’t think that you’ve got a break, but as best as I can tell, you’ve probably worsened the fracture.’ Beth looked up from Jack’s arm, at the older man. ‘Have you been having PT for it?’

Jack actually looked a little sheepish, something that Mac was going to tease him for later.

‘I…err…might have skipped my first session to come with Mac to….err…’
There wasn’t really a nice way to say *to come to your funeral*, after all.

A quick flash of *something* flickered across the young woman’s face for a moment, before it disappeared, and she glanced over at Mac, then looked back at Jack.

‘You’re a great friend, and a *terrible* patient.’ She looked over at the blonde again, and they stared at each other for a moment. ‘Birds of a feather flock together, I guess.’ Mac gave another one of those small, soft smiles, a slightly wry one this time, which Beth returned. Another beat passed, and Jack started to feel as if he was very much a third wheel, and then Beth looked back down at Jack’s arm. ‘Ideally, I’d like to splint this, but there’s no split in the med-kit…’ She looked up and glanced around the kitchen, pursing her lips in thought. ‘If I had a couple of rulers, or even sturdy plastic chopsticks, not those cheap flimsy take-out ones…’

Mac, too, glanced at Jack’s arm, and then started looking around the room, that very familiar look, his *I’ve got an idea* look appearing on his face as he did so.

‘I think I might have a solution.’

He got up and walked over to the wall, where several framed photos (almost certainly the stock photos that came with the frame, as they were all very generic, aesthetically pleasing landscapes) hung. He grabbed one of the frames, and removed it from the wall, brought it back over to the dining table, and started prising it apart with his Swiss Army knife. He looked up at the other two with a little smirk on his face.

‘Don’t think the FBI will miss it, and I figure they kinda owe us one or two anyway.’

Jack watched as the realization of what Mac was doing flickered across the young woman’s face (a moment or two before that same realization hit him), followed by the widest smile he’d seen all day.

The photo frame disassembled, Mac handed the two longest pieces of the frame to Beth, who immediately started attaching the makeshift splint to Jack’s arm.

‘You always did get the best of ideas from the strangest of inspirations.’ She sounded mostly as if she was talking to herself, then looked up as she finished splinting Jack’s arm and smiled at the blonde agent. ‘Thanks, Mac.’

The young man smiled back at her, toying with his Swiss Army knife and a nail he’d prised out of the photo frame, and there was another of those moments during which Jack felt very, very surplus to requirements.

‘…I dreamed I was building a car engine. I don’t really know *why*, it doesn’t make much sense. I think it might be because we had a guy come in, a college student who’d had a bit of an accident with a project, and it reminded me…’ Beth, who was telling Mac and Jack the story of how she’d wound up in her situation, as Connors and the other FBI agent, Dempsey, looked on, glanced at Mac for a moment, then smiled sheepishly. ‘Sorry, getting back to the point…there was this part, and I just couldn’t remember its name when I woke up, and it was driving me *crazy*…’ A little smile that he wasn’t quite able to stop appeared on Mac’s face. ‘…so I went out to my car, and looked under the hood, hoping that would jog my memory.’ She paused for a moment, and looked down at her hands, then back up at the two Phoenix agents again, with a rather wry, sardonic smile. ‘I…don’t know much about engines, but I know enough to recognize that the bomb was not meant to be there.’ Jack snorted. Apparently, ER doctors shared the rather dark sense of humour that secret agents and soldiers had. Mac, his partner noted, did not snort, and just kept playing with
the paperclip he held in his hands, his eyes still focused on Beth. ‘I called the police, and then next thing I knew, the FBI was all over me, and we faked my death, and…’

Her voice trailed off, and she looked down at the table top.

*Now, I’d like to think that I know quite a bit about compartmentalizing.*

*It’s part of the job.*

*But it’s not just EODs and soldiers and secret agents and spies who need to compartmentalize.*

*I’m no doctor, but I’ve known a few.*

And one thing I’ve picked up is that quite a lot of them have some kind of doctor headspace. A place where they think of themselves, above all, as a medical professional, kind of detach from themselves, I guess.

*They need to be able to do that, to maintain enough objectivity to do their jobs, and to hold themselves together, with all they see and experience.*

*Beth’s using it to do that right now.*

*And she’s doing a very good job of it, but…well, I’ve been compartmentalizing more or less my whole life, a lot longer than she has, and even I’ll admit I crack sometimes.*

Mac was very tempted to reach out, put a hand over hers, but didn’t. Instead, he reached into his pocket and pulled out a few more paperclips, and started shaping them with more of a purpose. As his fingers worked, he locked eyes with the young woman sitting on the other side of the table.

‘Do…do your parents know that you’re alive?’

*They’re either excellent actors, or…*

As he suspected, Beth shook her head. There was an unmistakeable sadness, pain, in her eyes.

‘No.’ She closed her eyes slowly for a moment, then opened them. ‘They can’t know, because… because it’s a matter of national security, so no-one can…’

Both Mac and Jack shot very sharp looks at the two FBI agents, who both shrugged apologetically.

*I know what protocol is.*

*Despite my tendency to disregard the rules, I understand why they exist.*

*I do understand why they’re important, sometimes, at least.*

*But that doesn’t mean I have to like it.*

*In fact, I really don’t like this whole faking-her-death thing.*

*Beth’s lost her entire life.*

*As far as the entire world knows, Beth Taylor’s dead.*

*She’s…she’s a ghost, now.*

*And…I’m so glad that Jack can’t read my mind…but I want far, far better than that for her. She*
deserves far, far better than that.

Look, I do understand why it had to be done.

It’s better than leaving her out there as bait, and complacent terrorists who think they’ve succeeded are easier to catch.

But I really, really don’t like it.

Mac finished with his paperclips, and handed Beth the result. Jack stared at the very complicated shape as it changed hands, and made a face at the two FBI agents as if to say any of you know what this thing is? Beth gave a little snort of laughter as she took the piece of paperclip art.

‘Really, Mac? You made an entire peptide hormone from paperclips? Now you’re just showing off!’

The blonde just shrugged with a little smirk.

‘Oxytocin’s a wonderful thing.’

The young woman nodded, expression softening.

‘That it is.’

‘…We’ve been working off the theory that the cell wants her dead because she saved Senator Kelly’s life.’

Jack and Mac nodded, as Connors briefed the two of them on everything the FBI knew.

‘So he was the target?’

Connors nodded.

‘As far as our best intel suggests, yeah. We’ve got FBI working with his security team at the hospital.’

Mac, who was fiddling with yet another paperclip (he’d brought many with him, intending to use them to try and calm his emotional state), spoke up.

‘And her parents? They might be a target, especially if the cell suspects that she might not actually be dead…’

Connors nodded again.

‘Got a protection detail on them, not that they know it, of course.’

Mac nodded again. Jack glanced over at the paperclip shape that his partner had made; he’d learned over the years that they were a good insight into his big and often overly-busy brain. The object looked like a caduceus.

‘I need a copy of everything you’ve got on the bombs. Please.’

Jack got up, and clapped Mac on the shoulder, then nodded at Connors in acknowledgement.

‘I’m gonna call Riley, see if she’s got us a lead with her computer magic.’
He walked out of the room, and Mac called out after him.

‘It’s not magic, there’s no such thing as magic!’

Mac, sitting in the eating area in the kitchen, stared at the bomb schematics on the dining table, reading through the FBI’s crime lab’s analysis.

They’d concluded that the bombs themselves were a dead end.

Unfortunately, he agreed with them.

They’d all been improvised with readily-available materials, and there were no traces of fingerprints or DNA. No bomb-maker’s signature, as far as he and the FBI could tell, either.

He sighed, and took a deep breath.

‘Look for a new angle.’

Beth, who was cooking dinner while Jack talked to Riley and the FBI agents to their bosses and he studied the schematics (she’d argued that they all needed to eat, and since she didn’t have the skill-set to help with the investigation, it made sense that she cooked), glanced over at him, her brow furrowed.

‘Did you just make a Big Hero 6 reference?’

Eh, what do you know?

I did, albeit unintentionally.

Bozer really loves that film.

Honestly, I do too. You know, science nerds save the world. I can relate.

He shrugged, with a wry little smile.

‘Well, I didn’t mean to, but yeah.’

An answering smile appeared on her face, as she put spaghetti into the pot of boiling water on the stove.

‘Is it bad that now I really want to ask you to make me a Baymax?’

He chuckled.

‘A personal healthcare companion could really help you with your job.’

There was a moment of silence as reality caught up with them again. Beth’s eyes met his for a beat, then she looked away, swallowed, and started stirring the pasta.

Her life’s gone.

She can’t be a doctor, not anymore.

When this all dies down a bit, and the threat to her life isn’t so high, she’ll go into Witness Protection.
Be given a new identity, a new life, far away and far removed from what she had.

Unless we catch these terrorists.

Mac re-focused on the papers before him with renewed vigour.

‘You still looking at those schematics?’ Jack sounded surprised, and glanced at his watch. ‘I’d have thought you’d be done…I dunno, like ten minutes ago?’

Mac sighed and didn’t look up from the papers.

‘Came up blank the first time, I’m trying to find a new angle. Riley got any leads?’

‘She’s still doing her thing, said she’ll call back moment she gets anything.’ Jack sat down next to his partner. ‘What if it’s not about revenge?’

Mac just looked at Jack incredulously.

Maybe he thought I was jumping at shadows earlier.

But the FBI agrees with me.

Beth faked her death, because there was a very real threat to her life.

‘Jack, the FBI—’

‘And how many times have we proven them wrong, brother?’ Mac huffed out a breath, conceding the point. ‘Look, that brain of yours can be overly cerebral. Technical. Let’s look at the human element. Motive. What if the FBI’s wrong? What if it isn’t terrorists trying to get revenge? You know, since they tend to be all about higher callings and whatnot, and since this cell is so good at staying under the radar and all, it’s pretty stupid of them to risk blowing all that just for revenge.’

Mac sighed again, rifling through a couple of papers absent-mindedly.

‘Okay, I’ll bite. Who else do you think might want to kill Beth?’

He looked up at the young woman, who had now drained the pasta and was starting on a sauce. Jack, too, looked over at her.

‘Jealous ex?’

Beth looked very unconvinced.

‘There’s nobody for an ex to be jealous of, firstly, and secondly, I only have two exes, one of whom I dated for three months when I was fifteen and haven’t really interacted with since, and I really don’t think Sam wants to kill me.’

Jack couldn’t help himself and shot Mac a look, which was studiously ignored.

‘Sam the neurosurgeon?’

Beth nodded, brow furrowing and tilting her head slightly.

Mac answered her question before she could ask it.

‘He came to your funeral.’
Beth made a slightly surprised face as she stirred the pasta sauce.

‘That was nice of him.’

Jack shot him another *look*, which Mac pretended to ignore, again.

‘Okay, so not an ex then. How about a date gone wrong, sweetheart?’

Beth just shook her head as she took the pasta sauce off the stove.

‘I also don’t think that my best friend from work’s lawyer older brother, or a junior oncologist from my hospital would want to kill me either, particularly since it wasn’t as if either date was a disaster or anything; we just didn’t click…’

Mac had to try very, very hard to not start tearing his hair out when his partner shot him yet another one of those *looks*.

Fortunately, Beth, focused on plating up dinner, didn’t notice.

Jack smirked a little.

He was enjoying this.

‘How about some guy you rejected not taking it well?’

Beth looked up from the bowls of pasta with a very disbelieving look. Under his breath, Mac muttered something about Jack having watched far too many crime dramas.

‘I really do not think that one of my hospital’s med-evac helicopter pilots is inclined towards murder either.’

Jack shot his partner *yet another look*.

*That’s it.*

*I’m recreating that lab accident that turned Beth’s hair blue, and I’m going to use it to dye Jack’s hair blue on purpose.*

*Turnabout’s fair play.*

Beth deposited three bowls of the pasta on an empty patch of the table, then picked up the other two bowls from the kitchen counter and headed towards the bedroom that Connors and Dempsey were talking to the FBI in.

‘I’m going to give Connors and Dempsey their dinner. I’ll be back in a moment…’ She shot them both a wry look. ‘Don’t damage each other while I’m gone, I’d much rather eat dinner than patch you both up.’

*She noticed.*

*I’m so dyeing Jack’s hair blue.*

As Beth walked down the corridor, Mac turned to the older man, and opened his mouth, but before he could say anything, Jack just raised his right hand in supplication.

‘Come on, brother! Just trying to help you out!’
Mac looked very exasperated.

‘I appreciate the sentiment, Jack, but firstly, I don’t need your help, secondly, now is really not the time, thirdly, it’s none of your business, fourthly, my love life is far too complicated without throwing someone else into the mix, fifthly-’

‘I’m pretty sure that’s not a word, brother.’

Mac just glared at him.

Then, the expression on his face slowly but surely morphed into his I’ve got an idea expression.

Maybe Jack’s on to something.

Maybe it’s not revenge.

This terror cell’s top priority seems to be remaining undetected.

What if…what if they’re going after Beth because she can identify them, somehow?

I mean, she was so close, maybe she saw something…

Jack’s expression grew serious as he noticed.

‘What is it, Mac?’

At that moment, Beth walked back into the kitchen, and took one look at Mac’s face, then gave a small smile and addressed Jack.

‘That’s a good look. A very good look.’

Jack just smiled at the young woman with a nod of his head.

‘Oh, yeah.’

Mac blinked twice, then started speaking.

‘Jack, I think you’re right. It’s not about revenge.’ He looked away from his partner and at the young woman instead. ‘Beth, I think they’re after you because you can identify at least one of them.’ Her eyes widened instantly. ‘Did you see someone acting strangely? Maybe being too interested in whether the Senator was alive?’

Beth had clapped a hand over her mouth, which she lowered as she nodded.

‘There was a man. He got to the Senator just a moment after I did, said he was going to help…I…I told him I was a doctor and bossed him around…he didn’t look very happy, I just assumed that he didn’t like being bossed around by…well…me.’ She looked down for a moment, then back up at Mac, biting her lip. ‘He…he was trying to finish…finish the job, wasn’t he? And I stopped him, because you can’t exactly kill someone subtly in front of a doctor…’ Wordlessly, Jack got up and pulled out a chair, and Mac guided her over to it. Beth sat, shaking slightly, and was silent for a moment, before she locked eyes with Mac, who was crouching down next to her chair. ‘I…I showed him my hospital ID quickly, because he didn’t believe that I was an almost-fully-qualified doctor…God, I can’t believe that I…that’s how they found me, that’s why…how could I have been so stupid?’

Mac reached out and grabbed her hand, looking up into her eyes.
‘It’s not your fault.’ He squeezed her hand gently. ‘You did the right thing. You did a very brave thing, and you saved the Senator’s life.’

She gave him a sad little smile, and shook her head.

‘Thanks, Mac, but really, I did my job.’

He nodded in response.

‘Yes, you did your job. Did what you were trained to do. You’re not trained to spot terrorists, or to suspect people like that.’

*And I hope, I really do, that she never will, even after all this.*

After a moment lost in thought, Beth nodded slowly.

‘You’re right.’ Her smile turned a little more wry. ‘As you often are.’ Her expression turned more serious again. ‘Thanks, Mac.’ She took a deep breath, and that earlier calm that she’d had returned to her eyes.

Mac let go of her hand and stood up, glancing over at Jack.

‘Now, it’s up to us to do our job.’

Jack nodded, and then pulled Mac aside and into the corridor, out of Beth’s earshot.

‘Brother, are you absolutely sure you’re not trying to make something out of nothing, because then we might have a chance to get her her life back?’

After a moment, Mac nodded resolutely, and satisfied, Jack nodded and clapped the blonde on the back.

‘Okay. I trust your gut.’

Later that evening, after Mac, Jack and Beth had explained the new theory to Connors and Dempsey, and it had been decided that a sketch artist from the FBI should come first thing in the morning to get an image of the suspected terrorist from Beth’s description, Mac and Beth stood in the kitchen, cleaning the dishes.

Jack had gone to check the perimeter, while Dempsey and Connors checked in with their bosses to update them.

Mac washed and Beth dried in fairly comfortable silence for a while, before they both spoke simultaneously.

‘You know, of all the things I imagined you becoming one day, I really didn’t consider the love child of James Bond and Q.’

‘I’m sorry I stopped writing.’

They both stopped what they were doing, and stared at one another for a moment, before Beth broke the silence, looking down momentarily at the bowl in her hands, and then back up at him.

‘I was really mad at you at first. You promised you’d keep in touch, and I always believed that you never broke your promises. And I thought…’ She cut herself off and took a deep breath. ‘But I
knew what you were doing over there, and I knew you’d seen some terrible things, and I figured it must have been something really, really terrible happening that made you stop writing.’

He nodded and swallowed the lump in his throat.

‘Yeah. It was my C.O, the guy who trained me, dying.’ He closed his eyes for a brief moment. ‘His name was Alfred Pena, and he has a widow and a daughter whom he missed meeting by about a week.’

A little hesitantly, Beth put down the bowl and reached out and squeezed his shoulder gently.

‘I’m sorry, Mac.’

He gave a half-shrug.

‘It was a long time ago.’

She squeezed his shoulder again.

‘Doesn’t mean it doesn’t still hurt.’ Beth paused for a moment, then shook her head and looked up at him, her eyes wide. ‘I’m sorry, that wasn’t a double-meaning, I didn’t mean to…’

I know I hurt her.

I hurt Aaron and Matt and Tom, and Penny and Bozer, too.

But maybe...maybe I hurt her most of all.

My grandfather said something, once, about how we tend to hurt others when we’re hurt ourselves, like how injured animals tend to lash out at people who try and help them.

I guess knowing that didn’t stop me from doing it.

He just nodded.

‘I know.’ He paused for a moment, looked into her eyes for a breath. ‘But I’m still sorry.’

Beth gave him a small smile, and looked away into the distance.

‘The past is history. Going back in time to change it is a non-spontaneous process.’ She turned back to him. ‘I think I forgave you a long time ago, Mac.’

He returned that little smile, and then his expression morphed into a slightly-teasing smirk.

‘You know, I really don’t think you can disregard the whole time-is-the-fourth-dimension-thing.’

Beth narrowed her eyes at him, a teasing little smile on her face.

‘I know that! I was only almost-twelve when I came up with that way of thinking, cut me some slack!’

Mac chuckled, and with a slightly broader smile, Beth picked up the bowl and finished drying it, and they worked in comfortable silence for a couple of minutes.

As Beth put the last bowl away, she turned to him again, and spoke, her voice soft.

‘Do you really think you can stop these people and get me my life back?’ Her voice grew a little
‘And don’t you dare sugar-coat it for me, Angus MacGyver.’

He took a half-step closer to her.

‘I think we can, because we have to. We have to, because if you go into Witness Protection, it’ll… it’ll kind of be like you’re dead.’ Beth just nodded, and his voice softened and got a little more hesitant, a little shy and awkward like he’d been all those years ago. ‘And… and I’ve already lost you twice, and you’ve died once, and…’ He cut himself off with a shake of his head. ‘It’s not about me. This isn’t fair to you, it’s not fair to your parents and your friends, and all the lives you can save in the future.’

Beth nodded sadly, looking down at their feet for a moment.

‘Things don’t just happen because we want them to, Mac.’

He shook his head, and there was a note in his voice that made her look back up at him again when he spoke.

‘No, but we can make those things happen if we try hard enough. Necessity is the mother of all invention, and impossible is not a scientific term.’

Beth gave a little smile at that.

‘Well, I do have an excellent inventor on my side, and you always were very good at making the implausible reality…’

He reached out and put a hand on her arm for a moment.

‘I’m going to do everything I can to get you your life back. I…I’m not sure how much this means to you now, but I promise.’

Her smile grew a tiny bit wider.

‘I still believe in promises.’

Jack’s phone rang as he finished the perimeter check.

‘Yeah, what’s shaking, Threepio?’

‘I thought we both agreed Mac was Threepio? Clearly, I’m Boba Fett.’

Jack snorted.

‘Boba Fett was a badass, man. He was, like, the best bounty hunter in the galaxy. And just for saying that, you’re more like that fat, worthless one, Jabba.’

‘This is what I get for calling you.’

Jack’s brow furrowed.

‘And about that, you always call Mac when you need something. What are you calling me for? What do you want?’

Bozer sighed.
‘Okay, okay, you got me, Jack. I’m calling about Riley.’

Instantly, Jack grew concerned.

‘Why? Is she okay?’

Bozer sighed again.

‘She’s fine, I’m not.’ He took a deep breath. ‘Ever since Hawaii, Captain Aloha’s been blowing up her phone non-stop. And she’s all giggles and smiles and I need your help, man. I mean, I’m stuck in the friend-zone and I don’t-‘

Jack cut him off immediately.

‘You’re stuck in the friend-zone? Okay, couple things. First of all, stuck implies that you deserve to be in some other type of zone, and that ain’t up to you, man. That’s always up to the girl, and you know that. Second-‘

‘Okay, but what I’m-‘

‘Hey, don’t interrupt. I’m not done. Second, anybody who can call Riley Davis a close personal friend is lucky. She’s a good person, man. And third, if you don’t start taking no for an answer, I’m gonna go all Wookie on you and rip your arms off.’

There was silence on the other end of the line for a moment.

‘Message received, loud and clear, man.’ There was another pause. ‘I’m sorry, I’ll stop and-‘

‘It’s not me you should be apologizing to.’

Bozer sighed.

‘I know. I’ll go talk to her ASAP.’ There was another pause. ‘Jack? Can…can I say something?’ Bozer’s voice sounded very small, very young. Jack tended to forget, sometimes, how young Bozer was, maybe because he was two years older than Mac and Riley.

‘Go ahead.’

‘I know this sounds bad and all, given, you know, what we’ve just talked about…but I really, really do like Riley. Really, really like.’ There was yet another pause. ‘And…and it’s not just because she’s really hot. It was, at first.’ Bozer sounded as ashamed as Jack had ever heard him, and given that Bozer was pretty shameless, that was saying something. ‘But…she’s brilliant and she went to prison for her mom, and experienced things that are so terrible they’d give me nightmares for months and came out even stronger for it, and…and she taught me some seriously awesome CGI tricks, and we like the same video games and she appreciates fine burgers, and fashion and style, which, seriously, no-one else on this team does, and she’s got enough sass to…’ Bozer trailed off.

Jack sighed.

How he’d wound up being surrogate father to three twenty-somethings, he didn’t know. He was probably doing a terrible job, but they did say no-one was ever really ready for parenthood.

He was pretty sure that while Riley was not as keen on Bozer as Bozer was on her (it was probably not possible for her to be, in all honesty), Riley did like Bozer, though he wasn’t quite sure in what way. He only really knew that she didn’t think of Bozer in quite the same way she thought of Mac
(Jack had actually been more worried about Mac pursuing the young hacker at first, thinking that Mac seemed to like smart and rather sassy women, and given the fact that they both had really big brains, he thought they might be interested in one another, but they’d fallen into a very firm just-friends relationship. Sometimes, Jack almost thought of them as being like siblings, though that was probably just him projecting.).

Part of Jack suspected that Riley was still working it out.

Bozer’s very mixed and confusing behaviour probably was not helping.

Jack was pretty sure that Riley very much liked Bozer when he was the Bozer they all knew and loved, telling jokes and lecturing them about movies and cooking and stuffing them with food and in general, bringing light into their lives. He was also pretty sure that Riley didn’t mind Bozer’s questionable jokes and occasional creeper tendencies either, at least, most of the time, because she definitely knew his heart was in the right place.

But at the same time, he also knew that Riley very much did not like the Bozer who hit endlessly on her and wouldn’t take no for an answer. The Bozer whom, Jack thought, was trying to use his ‘game’ to get Riley’s interest.

The thing was, despite what Jack said to Mac routinely about having no game or leaving his game at home, there really wasn’t a game.

When you started thinking of pursuing a woman like a game, that’s when you got into trouble.

He’d done it when he was younger, before Sarah, and sometimes he toed the line, but he knew that.

Jack was really quite sure that that Bozer was definitely not the real Bozer.

If Bozer learnt his lesson and started just being himself, and Riley happened to be interested in him, he’d give the two his blessing.

(Of course, he’d threaten Bozer thoroughly, but he’d give them his blessing.)

Jack snorted internally.

What had he been thinking, considering Mac and Bozer as his sons? Neither of them had any skill with women whatsoever. They were both hopeless.

No sons of his would be that hopeless.

He spoke into the phone again.

‘Look, Bozer. You’ve got real feelings for her? Great. That makes me feel better about all this. But that doesn’t mean you get a free ticket to keep driving her crazy and trying to get out of the so-called friend-zone, okay?’

‘I know.’

‘Good.’ Jack paused for a moment, mentally debating with himself before coming to a decision. ‘Go and apologize to her, Bozer. Be her friend. Only her friend. No agenda, no stepping-stone-to-being-something-else. Keep your more-than-friendly feelings to yourself. If something happens, that’s great. If nothing does, that’s also great, because she is your friend, and she is an amazing friend. Clear?’
‘As crystal.’ There was another pause. ‘Thanks, man.’

There was nothing but sincerity in Bozer’s voice. Jack smiled.

‘Always happy to share the wisdom, brother.’

______________________________________________________________

‘I’m kinda surprised she managed to get to sleep.’

Mac glanced up at Jack, who was sitting in an armchair in the living room, seemingly at rest, but he’d also moved the chair so that he had a good view of all the entry points to the room, plus half the entry points to the house, so Mac knew better. Mac himself was currently making a second security system to back up the FBI’s using the television. He figured that the FBI would forgive him, and if not, he did have the money to compensate them for a television.

*Small price to pay for a little more peace of mind.*

It was 3 am, and Beth was asleep, as were Connors and Dempsey. The agents were taking watch in shifts, and Mac and Jack had the second one; they’d just woken up. (Or at least Jack had, Mac had lain awake, unable to calm his mind enough to sleep.)

He exerted a little extra force on a particularly stubborn screw.

‘She’s an ER doctor; she’d have developed major issues by now if she hadn’t adapted to sleep just about anywhere at just about any time.’ Mac paused for a moment; he didn’t talk much about his past, but Jack was Jack and given their situation…’Besides, she fell asleep a couple of times in the Tombs back at MIT.’

‘The Tombs? Yeah, that’s not ominous at all.’

‘Yeah, the Tombs is what MIT kids called a cluster of old buildings that no one uses anymore. We used to sneak into them all the time.’

Jack’s brow furrowed.

‘To do what?’

‘Work on experiments.’

‘Oh.’

That was not what Jack had expected at all.

Mac gave a little smirk.

‘The kind the faculty didn’t approve of. They had a strict policy on explosions.’

Jack snorted.

‘Man, I can’t tell if you did college completely wrong or completely right.’

Mac shook his head, rolling his eyes.

‘Anyway, while the place has a certain charm when you’re seventeen years old and playing mad scientist with your friends, it’s not exactly a place I’d pick to take a nap in.’
Jack nodded, brows raised.

‘Yeah, that doesn’t surprise me one bit.’

Mac had opened his mouth to respond when his phone rang. He pulled it out and answered, putting his phone on speaker.

‘Riley?’

*I have the best friends in the whole world.*

*It sounds cheesy as hell, but I really do.*

*How many people would pull an all-nighter to help you protect an old friend?*

Riley had been chasing up leads and keeping an eye on their surroundings.

‘Mac, there’s been a breach in the FBI’s network, I’m still tracing it, but you’ve got to get out of there. You’ve got incoming, two cars, both registered to a seriously dodgy private security firm.’

Mac and Jack exchanged a glance, and Jack immediately got up to wake Beth, Connors and Dempsey.

‘ETA?’

‘Fifteen minutes, I can probably stretch it to seventeen or eighteen by hacking into traffic lights… doing that now.’

Connors and Dempsey ran into the room, followed a moment later by Jack and Beth.

‘Riley, how soon can back-up get here?’

He could practically see the hacker shaking her head when she replied.

‘Not soon enough. I’ve sent word to the FBI via Phoenix’s network, they just got back to me, ETA twenty minutes.’

‘Okay, thanks, Riley. We’ll call you back when we get to a new location.’

He hung up.

The four agents exchanged a glance. Mac and Jack then both glanced over at Beth, who, as expected, looked very scared. As they watched, she took a deep breath, and pulled herself back into that calm doctor headspace.

It was Connors who broke the silence.

‘We split up.’ He gestured to Mac and Jack. ‘You get her out of here, we’ll stay and wait for back-up, take down those guys, and see if we can trace them back to the terror cell.’

The two Phoenix agents nodded, and Dempsey tossed Jack a set of keys.

‘For the car in the garage.’

Mac immediately started grabbing random parts of the disassembled television.

Connors, who’d run out of the room as soon as he’d finished speaking, returned a moment later,
two guns and ammunition in hand.

He held one out to Jack.

‘You can shoot one-handed?’

Jack nodded.

‘Makes reloading a pain, but yeah.’

Connors offered the other gun to Mac, who had just grabbed a couch cushion. The blonde just shook his head.

‘No, thanks.’

Connors just looked at Jack with an eyebrow cocked.

Jack just shrugged.

‘He’s not real keen on guns. Doesn’t need them either.’

Connors didn’t look convinced, but tucked the spare gun into his waistband just the same.

Now staring at the knick-knacks on a bookcase (they included a snow globe and an I Heart New York decorative platter; Jack suspected that they were unwanted souvenirs given to or accumulated by FBI agents over the years, that had been donated to make this safe house feel a little less like a safe house, or more able to pass for an actual house), Mac turned for a moment to Beth.

‘Grab as many acids, bases, combustibles and aerosols as you can in four minutes, please.’

The young woman nodded, and immediately rushed off towards the bathroom.

Dempsey was now staring at Mac, who had just seized the snow globe. Connors turned and half-whispered to Jack.

‘What does he plan to do with these things?’

Jack shrugged on his good side.

‘Absolutely no idea. Doubt he knows right now. He’ll come up with something.’

Connors and Dempsey just exchanged a look.

Jack supposed that Mac could take some getting used to.

The blonde was currently playing with some electrical cords, stripping the insulation away from them.

He handed the cords to the two FBI agents.

‘Plug those in, and you’ve got an electric whip.’

Jack clapped his good hand on his leg.

‘Aww, come on, man! I don’t get to use one of those? You know, back in Texas, I was–’

‘Junior Whip-Cracking Champion.’
Mac started out the door of the living room, his haul contained in a makeshift bag he’d made out of a blanket that had previously been on the couch.

Dempsey and Connors were still staring, somewhat bemused but also rather gratefully (it was an odd expression) at the new weapons Mac had provided them with.

‘Yeah, well they don’t! Who says I was talking to you anyway?’

Mac just rolled his eyes as they met up with Beth in the kitchen.

The young woman had a bag slung over her shoulder, one of those reusable shopping bags. Jack noticed a bottle of bleach and some drain cleaner, and she shoved a bottle of vinegar, a can of spray cooking oil, and a bag of sugar into a second bag as he and Mac entered.

‘I’ve got a good selection of bases, a couple of aerosols, and a good number of combustibles, bit low on acids, though.’

Mac nodded.

‘It won’t be a problem, come on.’

He started towards the garage. Jack made to grab one of the bags off Beth, but she just shot him a look and gestured to his arm, pulling both out of his reach, and the two of them followed the blonde out the door.

‘Riley, we need you to tell us how to get us out of here without being spotted by the bad guys.’

Mac, sitting in the back seat with Beth, his various supplies between them, addressed the hacker over speaker phone, as Jack drove.

‘Jack, take a left next street, then a right. Mac, where are you guys headed?’

‘West Lafayette.’ He glanced over at Beth. ‘We’ve got a home ground advantage there.’

‘Alright, I’ll work out the best route. Jack, next left, then sharp right.’

Mac held out his phone a little closer to Jack so that the older man could hear Riley’s directions more clearly, and leaned closer to Beth.

‘Do you have somewhere we can go?’

Beth thought for just a moment, then nodded.

‘Yeah.’ She gave a very, very small, very, very wry smile. ‘I assume that given your current occupation, your lock-picking skills haven’t gotten rusty?’

Mac returned that smile.
‘I’ve learned another trick or two.’

‘Jack, you want the next right, then you’ve got about a quarter of a mile before a left.’

Beth gestured at Jack with her head.

‘Should he really be driving, with his arm?’

Mac snorted.

‘Oh, try getting him to give up the wheel.’

‘Hey, even one-armed, I’m still a better driver than you, brother! Case in point: Atlanta!’

‘That does not count!’

‘Cairo!’

‘That doesn’t count either! And I thought we don’t talk about Cairo!’

‘What happened in Cairo?’

Mac and Jack both glanced at Beth (Jack far more briefly, since he did have to focus on driving), with matching little smirks.

‘Sorry, sweetheart.’

‘It’s classified.’

Beth sighed, shaking her head with a wry little smile.

‘For what it’s worth, Mac, you have many talents, but I really don’t think that driving is one of them.’

Jack grinned as Mac let out a rather put-upon sigh.

‘Anything else the human Swiss Army knife can’t do, Beth?’

‘Presuming he hasn’t picked up the skills over the last six years? Tap-dance. Sing. Walk on water. Balance three pineapples on his head.’

Looking into the rear-view mirror, Jack made a face at the two of them.

‘What in the world did you do in college?’

Mac just smirked.

‘What happens in Cairo, stays in Cairo. And what happens at MIT, stays at MIT.’

Jack shook his head.

‘I’m getting those stories out of you. Even if it takes a whole bottle of tequila.’

Mac shook his head and started playing with another paperclip, which quickly took the shape of a pineapple.

‘Besides, I worked out how to do the pineapple thing.’
Beth shot him a very impressed and genuinely quite curious look. Jack wished he had a camera to capture the moment.

‘Really? How?’

‘Well, I…bent the rules slightly. You know how I had trouble getting the pineapples to balance on top of each other?’ Beth nodded. ‘I broke off some of the leaves, used them to stick the pineapples together, and…’

Jack, turning onto the freeway, shook his head again.

It was a shame he couldn’t get video of this.

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**JACK’S BORROWED CAR**

**ON-ROUTE TO WEST LAFAYETTE**

‘Guys, I’ve worked out how they breached the FBI network. And seriously, I didn’t think I could hate these guys any more, but I do. They got in through Beth’s parents’ phones; the FBI are monitoring them so they can track and protect them without them knowing, the terrorists used that as a back door to get into the FBI’s network.’

Mac shot Beth a look of sympathy. The young doctor closed her eyes for a moment, swallowed and took a deep breath. Her eyes were calm again when she opened them.

‘Can you trace it back to them, Riley?’

‘If I had, like, three times the processing power, two of me and five days, yeah, but with our constraints? No. But I’ve worked out when they got in: at the funeral, and since they needed to use Bluetooth to get in…’

‘..They must have been there.’

Jack pursed his lips.

‘How’d they do that without being noticed? FBI had surveillance on the funeral.’

Mac ran a hand through his hair in frustration.

‘Which we interrupted, and pulled them away from, because they thought we were the threat.’ He sighed. ‘Okay. Can’t change the past. Beth, we’ll get you to give a description to our Phoenix sketch artist and pick through any footage of the funeral we can get a hold of.’

Bozer’s voice piped up through Mac’s phone.

‘Actually, if Beth gives me that description, I think I can do you one better.’ His tone changed; they could practically all see the grin growing on Bozer’s face. ‘Hey Beth, long time, no speak!’

Mac held out his phone to her, and she took it.

‘Hi, Bozer. He had curly brown hair, fairly sharp cheekbones…’

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**DISUSED LECTURE THEATRE**
The last tumbler in the lock clicked, and Mac opened the door. Beth and Jack followed him inside.

‘This is where I used to go after school, sometimes, to get away from…well, some of my classmates.’

Mac glanced back at her with a little smirk.

‘And I’ve thought all these years that you were a goody-two-shoes.’

Beth just shook her head at him.

‘Firstly, compared to you, breaking into an old lecture theatre to hide and read and maybe use the blackboards is nothing. Secondly, it was never locked when I was in high school; that lock was installed while I was at Northwestern, I didn’t realize until I came home to visit before I started my residency and couldn’t get in.’

At that moment, Mac’s phone rang.

‘I’m still working on the hair, but if I got it right, this is the face of the guy who tried to kill the Senator.’

Beth looked at the clay face that Bozer was showing them and nodded.

‘That’s him.’

‘Riley, can you run facial recognition on him using all the footage from the funeral?’

‘Yeah, doing it now.’ There was a pause. ‘Damn. No matches.’

They all exchanged a glance. Their hopes had all risen, and then…

Riley’s expression changed.

‘Wait a moment. They had to be nearby, to get the Bluetooth signal. But that doesn’t mean they actually had to be at the funeral…’ The hacker typed furiously. ‘Searching all security cameras and traffic cams within 100 feet of the funeral home…Got him!’

Mac, Jack and Beth all exchanged a glance, hopes rising again.

‘You got an ID, Riley?’

‘Yup. Just pulled his driver’s licence. I’m going to start digging now, I’m probably going to have to go into the Dark Web, but the Phoenix techs and FBI techs and I should be able to pin the whole cell.’

Mac smiled down at Beth, who was blinking as if she couldn’t quite believe it.

‘You’re going to get your life back.’

She looked up at him, then at Jack, then Bozer and Riley on Mac’s phone, eyes brightening and smile widening.
‘Thank you. Thank you so much.’

Mac’s smile widened.

‘It’s kind of our job description.’

—

ENGINEERING FOUNTAIN

PURDUE UNIVERSITY

WEST LAFAYETTE

‘…The whole cell’s been taken into custody. The FBI has agreed to forgive you for disrupting their operation, and, I quote, plundering their safe house.’

Mac looked a little sheepish.

Bozer held up the clay face he’d made.

‘So, they going to need this for evidence, or whatever? Cause I worked really hard on it.’

‘We’ll let you know, Boze. And thanks, everyone, for helping us out.’

‘And you did it with nearly fifteen hours to spare. But I still want your butts on a plane and home ASAP. Both of you.’ Matty focused her attention on Jack. ‘Jack, you think you can con your way into the French embassy with that sling on your arm?’

Beth shook her head instantly, eyes growing firm.

‘His arm needs to be looked at again; he should get another X-ray, and keep it splinted and still. There is absolutely no way he should be on a mission again in fifteen hours.’

Matty stared down the young woman. Jack, Bozer and Riley all exchanged wide-eyed looks, then Bozer seemed to have a realization and relaxed. Mac just looked thoughtful, a hint of a smirk appearing on his face.

‘Are you telling me what to do with one of my agents?’

Beth swallowed and bit her lip, but straightened her shoulders a little and held Matty’s stare.

‘Because I’m a doctor, and he’s injured and unfit for duty, in my professional opinion, yes, because it’s my duty.’

Matty stared at her for a moment, and Beth looked as if she’d like to melt into the floor, but didn’t look away. Then, Matty smiled.

‘I like you.’

Beth blinked twice, as if she couldn’t believe what had just happened (to be fair, Riley and Jack didn’t look much better), Bozer grinned and Mac just gave a smirk that became a smile.

‘Uh…Thank you. I…I…err…like you too.’

Matty, Bozer and Riley bade farewell and hung up.
Jack held out his good arm.

‘Little love.’

With a smile, Beth reached up and hugged him gently, being careful to avoid his arm.

‘Thank you, Jack.’ She let go and narrowed her eyes at him, and poked at his chest. ‘Now, make sure you keep that arm as still as you can, rest, and do your PT. No more skipping sessions!’

Jack chuckled.

‘I won’t, unless another one of Mac’s old friends suddenly dies.’

His last word was punctuated with air quotes.

Beth shook her head, a fond, exasperated smile on her face.

‘Terrible patients really do flock together.’

With a smile back at her, Jack slipped away, to give the two old friends a moment.

‘Well, you’ve got your life back. What’s next on your To-Do list?’

She always had some kind of list, usually, multiple lists, in college.

I’m a pretty on-the-fly kind of guy, so I never really got it, and it was always fun to tease her about them…

Beth slapped him lightly on the arm.

‘Do not mock To-Do lists! To-Do lists are very useful.’ Her expression grew more serious. ‘I’m going to go and tell my parents I’m alive, and apologize.’ She looked down, then back up at him. ‘Then, I’m going to take some time to do my best to get back to normal, probably go see a psychologist, probably several times, and then I’m going to go back to Detroit, finish my residency and find a job.’

The last clause was spoken with very firm finality.

And she will do that.

She’s going to be okay, she’s going to stitch herself and her life back together, and then she’s going to go and stitch other people back together.

Just like she always intended to.

I can’t see the future.

I can calculate odds, sure.

But I can’t see the future.

But somehow, I know she’s going to do exactly what she says.

Mac smiled at her, and then reached into his pocket and pulled out a phone. Her phone, which he’d managed to retrieve from the FBI. He held it out to her, and she took it with an answering smile, and unlocked it.
It opened to her contacts list, which had a new number listed.

‘I’m not going to lose touch with you again. I promise.’

Beth’s smile grew wider.

‘Thank you, Mac.’

She reached up and hugged him tightly. Mac hugged her back just as tightly, chin tucked over her shoulder, and his smile widened.

_I’ve come full circle._

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**PHOENIX FOUNDATION HEADQUARTERS**

**SOMEBWHERE IN LA**

‘You are a very bad influence on one another. Combined, the two of you get into even more trouble than Jack did alone.’ Mac and Jack exchanged a glance as their boss lectured them. ‘You’re wildly different, and clearly, that leads to lost-in-translation moments.’ She gestured at Jack’s arm, which had been re-splinted using proper splints. X-rays had confirmed that Beth was right about the lack of a break, though his axial fracture had not improved in the slightest, and was actually slightly worsened. ‘But, you also balance each other out. Keep each other in check. Complement each other.’ She paused for a moment, as Mac and Jack exchanged a relieved look, followed by a smile. ‘And I don’t think anyone else will ever have your backs as much as you have each other’s.’

Jack reached out and clapped Mac on the back with his good arm, and Mac grinned back at his partner.

They weren’t going to be split up.

Jack then turned to Matty with a smirk.

‘You’re getting soft, Matty.’

The woman just quirked an eyebrow at him.

‘Oh, you know me better than that, Jack.’ She held out a folder, a very thick folder, to him. Jack took it with his right arm. ‘That’s your punishment for skipping Phoenix-mandated PT.’

Jack opened the folder.

‘Transverse, longitudinal, normal, perpendicular, stress, strain, acid, base, combustible, aerosol, surface area to volume ratio...’

‘Think of it as homework. Learning to speak Mac. You’ll be having a vocabulary quiz in two days, so get to work.’

Bozer poked his head into the war room, where Riley was wrapping up the last of the case with the FBI.

‘Hey, Riley.’ He took a seat in the chair opposite her. ‘I’m, uh, sorry.’
‘For what?’

‘For, you know, not taking any of the one billion hints you’ve been dropping. And for making things weird with Captain Aloha.’ Bozer shook his head. ‘I mean Kalei.’ He paused for a moment. ‘I let my hopes about what we could be blind me to what we are. And what we are is pretty great.’

Riley locked eyes with him for a moment.

To be fair to Bozer, while she had been dropping hints that he was coming on way too strongly, she’d also occasionally dropped hints that she might like him as more than a friend. She was still working that out; honestly, at the moment, all she really had was that she’d sooner kiss Bozer than Mac, but firstly, she was never telling him that, and secondly, she wasn’t sure what that meant; whether it said more about how she thought of Mac or how she thought of Bozer.

Kalei was nice, he understood and spoke her language, he was funny, he was cute, he made her laugh and he made her smile. Bozer was nice too, he was also funny, also cute, and he also brightened her life, and he understood, or at least, was coming to understand, the life of a Phoenix agent, and even if he didn’t get most of what his friends had endured, not completely, he tried very, very hard to and even harder to help. She really didn’t know.

But she did know, for sure, that she really wanted to be friends with Bozer, because he really was a good person. And he was funny and nice and loyal, and had great taste in video games and movies and better style than anyone else on the team besides her (not that Mac and Jack were much competition).

‘Are you saying you’re finally ready to be my friend?’ Bozer nodded, and Riley grinned. ‘Then can we finally grab a burger and talk about Resident Evil 7?’

Bozer grinned right back.

‘Absolutely.’

Riley picked up her bag and stood.

‘On one condition.’ She quirked an eyebrow at him. ‘Can you give me some advice? Cause, uh, I’ve been thinking about my game, and it could probably use some tweaks.’

She nodded, eyebrow still raised.

‘Yeah.’

‘Little tweaks.’

‘Yeah.’

‘Little tweaks here and there.’

‘All right.’

‘So when it comes to women…’

ONE MONTH LATER

MACGYVER’S RESIDENCE
With a smile, Mac finished typing and sent the text message.

**Happy Birthday, Beth! :)**

He turned back to the grill as Jack handed him a beer. (Bozer and Riley were so engrossed in *Resident Evil 7* that Mac had taken it upon himself to make the burgers, or they’d never get to eat.) He opened it with his Swiss Army knife, and took a swig, then reached out and tapped the bottle to Jack’s with a grin, which the older man returned.

He checked on the burgers, which probably needed another three minutes or so.

About a minute later, his phone beeped with a reply.

**Thanks, Mac, and thanks for the present! I love it! :)**

There was a picture attached, of Beth grinning ridiculously in the T-shirt he’d sent her, emblazoned with *The name’s Bond, Ionic Bond, taken, not shared.*

Jack had an eyebrow quirked at him, one of those *looks* on his face, when he looked up from his phone.

Mac sighed, rolled his eyes, and reminded himself to work on recreating that lab accident as soon as possible.

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*I’ve known a lot of tragedy in my life.*

*I’ve lost a lot of family.*

*In a lot of ways, I’ve lost my entire family. Biological family anyway.*

*But I’ve also known a lot of happiness.*

*I’ve gained a lot of family too.*

*I’ve lost family.*

*Some permanently.*

*Some temporarily.*

*Some, I’ve managed to find again.*

*You can’t change the past.*

*You can’t change history.*

*But somehow, you can find yourself come full circle. Back at the beginning.*

*Maybe it’s not what you did in the past that matters.*

*Maybe it’s what you’re going to do in the future.*
Thoughts on 1.20, Hole Puncher – I absolutely, absolutely adored the episode! It was so, so good; I really, really liked the different facets of everyone we got to see, in particular, Matty’s threat to Murdoc (I think it fits with her; she’s willing to go further than Mac or Jack would, I think, which is why she’s the boss, because it’s necessary in their line of work, but at the same time, she won’t harm Murdoc’s son any more than his father has, really, with his job), and also Mac’s struggle with trying to be Murdoc (I think some people might think that he went a little too far, but I think that the copious angst he had with it and how clearly it didn’t sit well with him, coupled with the very pressing need he had to pull it off actually fits with a guy who, despite the fact that he’s a Boy Scout with a very strong moral code, works a fundamentally shady job that requires very hard choices).

Meanwhile, I am holding out for the ending that many of us want - Nikki in handcuffs and Thornton proved innocent. At the very least, we’re obviously going to get some kind of ending involving The Organization, so there is definitely hope!
He’s been shot down cold and spent college pining. His first serious girlfriend cheated on him, and the second died a hero before they could meet in person. Jack, Bozer and Riley attempt to help Mac get back into the dating pool. Of course, it does not go as planned.

Yup! This story is back!

This is a not-secret-agents!AU. Mac is a JPL engineer, Bozer is his roommate who makes movies and flips burgers, Jack is a mechanic and Riley is an FBI white-hat. Mac and Jack were in the Army together in the past, which is how they met. They are, of course, still friends who have become family!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

JACK’S RESIDENCE

SOUTH PASADENA

‘…Yeah, he mentioned two weeks ago that his shrink is encouraging him to date again…’

‘…We gotta do something, you know Mac, if we leave him to his own devices...’

‘It’ll be ages before he manages to even get himself a date.’

‘And we can’t have that.’

Jack, Bozer and Riley all nodded firmly over beers around Jack’s kitchen counter.

They had met tonight for one reason.

Because they loved their crazy-genius-mad-scientist-puppy (Bozer’s words) very, very deeply and wanted him to be happy very, very much.

Mac’s romantic history was sad, tragic and painful.

He’d been shot down cold by Darlene Martin when he’d asked her to Prom.

(She’d only been nice to him so he’d do all the work in chemistry class, plus her homework.)

Then he’d spent college pining after a woman who called him boy genius, emphasis on the boy.
(Frankie was five years older, and Mac had been sixteen and skinny and had still looked a fair bit like a boy at the time, and she’d had a boyfriend, so it was perfectly understandable, even expected, but it still had to have hurt.)

Then his first proper girlfriend (as much as he still loved Penny, their twenty-six day relationship didn’t really count) had cheated on him while he’d been deployed, lied to him for months and left him for the other guy the day he got home to boot.

(Jack, Riley and Bozer all firmly hated Nikki for doing that to their friend. Mac was one of the best people they’d ever known, and nobody deserved that, least of all him.)

Then, tragically, he’d met Zoe, a brilliant, beautiful glaciologist and grad student whom he’d just connected with, online, but before they could even meet in person, she’d died in a school shooting at her university. She’d died a hero, saving the lives of thirty-one of her students, but that had been cold comfort for Mac, and cold comfort for them.

Fast forward nine months and after grieving Zoe and what they could have been…Mac was now ready, in the eyes of his psychologist and all his friends, to give dating a go again.

Jack, Bozer and Riley were determined that after all that sadness and tragedy and pain, Mac’s romantic future would be bright.

They’d ensure it.

Mac, they all knew, had always wanted that white-picket-fence happy ending. Wife, a couple of kids, maybe a dog called Archimedes the Second.

They were going to do everything they could to help him find it.

The obvious starting point was to help him find the future Mrs MacGyver, so that was what they were going to do.

Jack took a swig of his beer, before speaking.

‘I say we go for divide and conquer. Come up with a plan each.’ He shrugged and drank some more beer. ‘More plans, bigger chance of success.’

Bozer and Riley nodded in agreement, and Riley sipped her beer, then spoke.

‘Who gets to go first?’

Jack just smirked and held up the hand that wasn’t clutching his beer.

‘Only one way to determine that, Riles.’

Several intense rounds of rock, paper, scissors later, they’d determined that Bozer would go first, then Riley, then Jack, and all three friends’ minds were now buzzing as they started to work on their brilliant plans.

MACGYVER'S RESIDENCE

PASADENA
Bozer smirked to himself as he pulled up the number for a physiotherapist who acted on the side whom he’d worked with on one of his films two months ago on his phone.

Cindy, upon seeing a photo of Mac, had commented that he had a cute butt, so Bozer figured that was as good a place to start as any.

Besides, his roommate had a type.

He liked his women intelligent, beautiful and with plenty of spirit or sass or mettle or moxie, as Mac’s grandfather would probably have described it.

Cindy was so that type, he thought.

Bozer’s smirk widened as he sent the carefully-planned text.

If you asked him, he thought they wouldn’t even need Riley and Jack’s plans.

Mac groaned internally and rolled his eyes as he stepped into his house after the blind date that Bozer had insisted he go on, under the threat of not getting any of his world-class waffles for the next six months.

*Trust me, that’s a big threat. Bozer’s world-class waffles aren’t called world-class for nothing; it’s not hyperbole.*

His roommate, Jack and Riley were all sitting on the couch, attempting to be nonchalant, but not doing a very good job. They were clearly all waiting for him to come home from his date so they could interrogate him as to how it went.

He decided to head them off at the pass.

‘I still don’t get why a movie in a cemetery makes a good date, it’s really not romantic, but…’ He smiled. ‘It was a good night.’ Jack, Bozer and Riley all shot him looks that were eerily similar, clearly not satisfied with just that, and Mac sighed, rolled his eyes and continued. ‘She’s smart, she’s beautiful, she’s funny…and we’re going out again next week.’ He threw his hands up in the air. ‘Happy now?’

The smiles of the trio on the couch were softer than one might have initially expected, full of happiness and hope for him, and Mac, despite his annoyance, couldn’t help but smile that same smile back at them.

*Yes, they are way too interested in my personal life.*

*But that’s family.*

The following week, Mac grinned as he drove back home after his second date with Cindy, an expression that had more than a hint of a smirk in it.

They’d failed to escape Professor Intrigue’s escape room because they’d gotten *distracted*, which had cost Cindy her perfect escape room record, but it’d been a very pleasant distraction, and she’d elected to continue being *distracted* instead of actually escaping, so…

*That, I admit, was a really nice ego boost.*

*And I think I’m starting to see the appeal of an escape room as a date activity.*
I mean, being locked in a room with a beautiful and intelligent woman...once you stop trying to escape and realize you were crazy for trying, that's got substantial romantic potential.

That does kind of defeat the purpose, though...

‘Boze...what’s all this?’

The week after the escape room date, Mac walked into his home, a little melancholy, to find that there were candles and red rose petals everywhere and that his best friend was standing in the kitchen, cooking something that smelled like duck and citrus.

‘Well, I thought you might bring Cindy here, third date and all, so I thought I’d help you set the mood, up your romance game.’ Bozer’s face grew concerned. ‘But you’re home early and flying solo, bro...didn’t go well?’

Mac shrugged and walked into the kitchen, plonking himself down on one of the bar stools.

‘We decided that we don’t really fit together.’ He shrugged again. ‘Better to work it out now than down the track.’

Bozer studied his best friend closely. The blonde seemed disappointed and saddened, but reasonably so. He also seemed wholly earnest; Bozer was quite sure that he and Cindy not fitting together wasn’t the product of Mac not being ready to start dating again after Zoe.

So, Bozer just started plating up his duck l’orange, going for a simpler arrangement than his original plan.

‘Sorry, bro. That sucks.’ He held out a plate with a fork and knife to Mac. ‘Duck l’orange midnight snack?’

That made Mac smile at him as he took the plate, then took a bite, smile widening as he chewed.

RILEY’S RESIDENCE

HIGHLAND PARK

Riley poured her best friend, Samantha Cage, FBI profiler and interrogation expert, a glass of wine, then poured another for herself.

(They were having a girls’ night in in her apartment.)

She considered for a moment, wondering where to start, or how to start, but Sam somehow beat her to it (she was a behavioural expert and uncannily good at her job, after all).

‘I’m not going on a date with Mac, Riley.’

The hacker stared at her for a moment, then shook her head with a little, fond smile, before looking over at Sam, expression far more serious, raising an eyebrow.

‘Why not, Sam? There’s mutual attraction there...’ Sometimes, the two blondes had some serious chemistry, sometimes, for reasons that Riley didn’t know, it seemed to fade out, but she thought there was plenty to justify a date, just to see if it could be something. ‘...even if Mac, being Mac, is completely oblivious to it.’
That got a fond, knowing little smile from the other woman. Then, Sam looked down into her wine glass for a moment, then took a healthy gulp, before looking Riley in the eyes.

‘I have my reasons, Riley.’

There was something in her voice that suggested she didn’t want to talk about it, and Riley, understanding that feeling very, very much, dropped it.

She’d just have to tell Bozer and Jack that her plan was a no-go.

Sure, she wanted Mac to find his right one, as Jack put it.

(She’d also really wanted to be the one to succeed, beat out Jack and Bozer, especially Jack.)

But she was never, ever going to force or trick her friend into a date she didn’t want.

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BAR

PASADENA

‘…Cheers.’

Mac and Jack clinked their glasses of cold beer together. It was a Friday night, and Jack had invited the younger man out for beers and wings, just the two of them.

After a few sips of beer, and after the wings had been delivered to their table by a waitress with a winning smile, Jack pointed at Mac.

‘You know, brother, this is the perfect opportunity for you to get your game on.’ He held up his hands as Mac shot him a look. ‘I like having the dessert table to myself, man, but life’s too short to skip dessert.’

The blonde sighed and drank some beer, picking up one of the wings.

‘I know what you three are up to.’ His expression grew very wry. ‘You’re not exactly subtle.’

Jack made a huffing noise, picking up a wing himself as Mac took a bite of his, then pointing at the younger man with it.

‘I can so be subtle, man!’

Mac looked very sceptical as he chewed and swallowed. After swallowing, he spoke.

‘I appreciate the sentiment, but…’ He gestured to the surroundings. ‘…I’m not so good at blind dates…’ Sure, the first two dates with Cindy had gone quite well, but they’d at least chatted via text a little first, and he was pretty sure he’d been awkward at the start, though it seemed she’d been forewarned by Bozer. ‘…and Boze and Riley want to sign me up for online dating, which should be a bit easier, but…’ Mac seemed to realize that he was getting a little off track, and shook his head a little and waved a hand, getting back to the point. ‘I’m not going to pick up random women in bars, Jack.’ Mac took a bite of his wing, chewed, swallowed and drank some beer, before speaking, voice almost confessional and rather young, with a healthy dose of wryness. ‘I wouldn’t even know how.’

Jack, despite the fact that he’d suspected that would be the case, sighed.
He might be Mac’s surrogate father-figure, but there was no way the younger man could be mistaken for his son, in his mind.

No son of his would be this hopeless with women.

He gave a knowing little smirk.

‘Well, that depends on whether you’re looking for company for the night, or something more long-term, brother. If it’s the former, I’ve got a whole bank of lines, I’ll let you borrow a few. Just don’t sprinkle nerd juice on the conversation and you should be fine.’ Mac was incredibly good-looking, even if he didn’t seem to be quite able to see it, after all. Jack gestured to the other side of the room. ‘Try that red-head over there, she’s been ogling you.’

Mac looked very sceptical at that, especially after glancing over, discreetly, at said red-head, clearly thinking that she was way out of his league. He turned back to Jack and shook his head firmly.

‘I’m not interested in one-night stands, Jack.’

The older man simply nodded.

He’d expected as much (Mac’s fashion sense wasn’t the only thing old-fashioned about him, and he was definitely a romantic and a Boy Scout at heart – and even Jack, for all his flirting with just about any attractive woman he encountered, preferred something more long-term), but he’d also considered that Mac might be at the point where one-night stands seemed like a very attractive proposition. He was young and healthy, after all, and even though he really didn’t want to think about it, Jack knew that it’d been a long time for him…

He pushed that thought away (he really didn’t want to think about it), and continued after sipping his beer.

‘Then you start up a conversation, start with small-talk, steer it towards getting-to-know-you, feel out for common interests, that sort of thing.’ Jack reached out and socked the blonde lightly in the arm. ‘You’ve done that before, man! Like what you did with Zoe, just in real life!’

Mac’s expression grew very wry, with a hint of sadness in there.

‘A conversation debating the age of an Arctic ice core is highly unlikely to work ever again, Jack.’

Jack’s brow furrowed.

‘How did that segue into…?’

Mac shrugged, that wry, slightly-sad smile still firmly on his face.

‘It just did, but it probably started when I told her the story of how I broke into a lab at MIT to sneak a peek at an ice core from Greenland that they claimed was 500,000 years old because I wasn’t convinced that it was.’

Jack blinked twice, then nodded with a snort.

‘Yeah, don’t think the tale of how you snuck into a lab to ogle an icicle’s gonna work again, brother. Sorry.’ He smiled, soft and sad, mirroring Mac’s own expression. ‘She was real special, man.’
Mac simply nodded.

There was still something sad in that fond little smile, but it wasn’t the same sadness that he’d carried nine months ago, Jack knew.

Mac was healing. Had healed substantially.

In that moment, Jack was completely certain that Mac’s shrink had gotten it right.

He was definitely ready to jump into the dating pool again.

Now he just had to encourage Mac to strike up a conversation with a woman, which was not going to be easy, Jack knew.

Mac could be very, very stubborn.

But he was going to succeed.

(Jack Dalton never gave up.)

(Especially when it came to his loved ones.)

(Since Mac wanted it, he’d help him find someone to make mini-Macs with. Even if it required nudging and coaching and shoving the younger man.)

(He’d never have little Jacks, but he did have a family, and he wanted nothing more than to keep them safe and happy.)

‘Leave me alone, Eric! I said we were over! Leave me alone!’

As Mac left the bathroom, he noticed a young woman with blonde curls trying to pull away from an older man in a sharp suit, who was clearly not taking no for an answer, in a dim corner of the hallway.

The man, Eric, had backed her into the wall and was looming aggressively over her, even as she kept protesting.

‘You are mine, Katarina. I am not letting you go!’

Mac changed course, heading towards the pair in the corner, instead of back towards his and Jack’s table.

‘She said she doesn’t want you. Leave her alone.’

Eric spun around to face him, a sneer on his face.

‘And who are you?’ He turned to Katarina, expression growing stormier. ‘Is this pretty boy your new boyfriend?’

Katarina, looking very frightened, as was only natural, shook her head insistently. Mac held up his hands, determined to not accidentally make the situation worse while trying to make it better.

‘I’m just a concerned gentleman looking out for a lady, even if I’ve never seen her before.’

Eric shot him a very, very dirty look, then glanced once more at Katarina, who seemed to have
gathered her courage and simply tilted her chin, glaring right back at him as if he was the scum of the Earth.

The man sneered at Mac, then stormed off. Mac turned to Katarina once he was gone, voice and expression concerned.

‘Are you alright?’ She nodded, a little shakily, but also resolutely. ‘Is he going to try and hurt you later?’

Katarina found it in her to snort derisively.

‘Eric is a coward.’ Her expression changed, a wry little smile appearing as she held up her handbag. ‘And I have a Taser.’ That made Mac smile, and Katarina continued, her smile widening as the wryness disappeared. ‘Thank you…’

‘Uh, MacGyver. Angus MacGyver. Call me MacGyver.’

Mac rubbed the back of his neck rather awkwardly, as Katarina’s smile widened and softened further.

‘Thank you, MacGyver.’

Later that night, after another round of beer, another order of wings, and a game of pool (which Mac thumped Jack in) and a round of darts (which Jack won narrowly, having better aim than the younger man), as well as much teasing and nagging of the blonde by the brunette by the brunette (Jack had insisted that Katarina was interested in him, which Mac thought was really overreaching on Jack’s part – she had clearly been grateful, even if he’d just been doing the right thing and hadn’t done much anyway, but she’d also gone home straight after, understandably – he’d walked her to her car and checked her Taser was functioning properly, just in case, and gotten a grateful hug in thanks – and besides, she clearly had relationship-related issues to sort out and Damsel Syndrome was definitely a thing), Mac and Jack walked down the street towards Jack’s car.

They were almost there when a familiar but unwelcome figure stepped out of the shadows.

Eric, his suit rumpled, tie loosened and now reeking of alcohol, stalked towards them, getting into Mac’s face.

‘I know what you’re doing, trying to steal my girl.’ He snarled. ‘She’s mine, and I don’t like it when people touch my things, so you’re going to pay.’

Mac and Jack exchanged a glance, both very disgusted, and held up their hands to placate the man, even as they primed themselves for a fight if need be.

Eric kept stalking forwards, backing them into an alley full of dumpsters.

There was a noise. Then another.

Mac and Jack exchanged another glance, then darted apart. The two thugs who’d been about to set on them missed, and a fight started in earnest.

*Clearly, Katarina was right about Eric being a coward.*

*I mean, he recruited six huge thugs to attack us in a dark alleyway.*

*And now he’s watching from a safe distance.*
Mac picked up a full bag of trash that reeked of rotting fish and swung it at one of the thugs, as Jack landed a solid punch to the jaw of another.

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**HUNTINGTON HOSPITAL**

**PASADENA**

*Look, not to brag, but Jack and I can more than hold ourselves in a fight.*

*We’ve seen real combat, and we do keep ourselves in shape.*

*But six huge thugs with plenty of pounds and inches on me, and pounds and inches on Jack too?*

*Well, we were never going to get out of there completely unscathed…*

‘Mac, brother, what are you doing?’

Mac ignored Jack and finished removing his IV line and got out of bed, reaching under the little nightstand by his hospital bed for his clothes.

(He couldn’t escape in a hospital gown, after all. And he hated hospital gowns.)

Jack, meanwhile, sighed and rolled his eyes.

(Mac was a terrible, terrible patient. He’d put a medic or two into conniptions back in their Army days.)

‘Mr MacGyver! Get back into bed!’

Dr Taylor, the petite young brunette woman who’d been assigned to Mac and Jack, walked into the room (she’d been summoned by Jack pressing the call button the moment Mac had stated playing with his IV), and narrowed her eyes at Mac, crossing her arms.

The blonde shot Jack a look of betrayal, which Jack responded to with an unapologetic look of his own.

Sensing that there was no escape this time, Mac got back into bed, as Dr Taylor busied herself re-inserting his IV.

‘You have bruised ribs, minor bruising to one of your kidneys, and too many contusions to count, including what is becoming a rather impressive shiner.’

Over Dr Taylor’s shoulder, Jack winked at Mac, then spoke.

‘You know, Doc, if you think we’re beat up, you should see the guys who tried to jump us.’ He gestured to Mac and smirked. ‘He might be a little skinny, but he’s plenty strong.’

Mac fought the urge to face-palm and instead shot Jack another look.

*We are in the hospital.*

*Jack is attempting to ‘help’ me to impress the doctor who is treating us.*
Admittedly, she is very pretty, even in scrubs, which are generally unflattering, and she’s obviously very smart…

Still, very attractive doctors notwithstanding, timing is important.

Right now, Jack’s timing is way off.

And his ‘help’…well, let’s not get started on that.

Thankfully, Dr Taylor mostly ignored Jack.

‘I’m sure he is.’ She double-checked that Mac’s IV was secure and shot him another narrow-eyed look. ‘Given your earlier nausea and kidney injury, you have to stay on an IV.’ Her expression softened. ‘I know you don’t like it, Mr MacGyver, but you have to stay overnight for observation and treatment.’ She narrowed her eyes at him yet again. ‘If you attempt to escape again, I will have no choice but to have you restrained to your bed.’

She picked up his chart and started updating it as Mac sighed. Between Jack and Dr Taylor, he knew he wasn’t going to be able to escape from the hospital.

‘Mr MacGyver is my dad.’

Dr Taylor finished updating his chart and looked up and gave him a small smile.

‘Would you prefer Angus?’

He made a face.

‘Just MacGyver, thanks.’

She nodded and made another note on his chart.

‘Of course, MacGyver.’

He watched as she wrote, then spoke when she was finished, a small smile on his face.

‘I promise I won’t try and escape again, Dr Taylor…’ Mac’s expression became a wry smirk. ‘…But I once escaped a set of handcuffs and a locked room with nothing but a single serve of orange Jell-O, so I think I could get out of those restraints.’

She made another note on his chart, then looked up at him.

‘How?’

She sounded genuinely impressed. She also sounded genuinely curious.

That made Mac smile, then smirk again.

‘I’m a JPL engineer, we improvise a lot. And I’ve got a knack for this sort of thing; it’s won me twelve science fairs.’

Dr Taylor made yet another note on Mac’s chart, and Jack wondered if the hospital, being so close to JPL, had some sort of secret code for potentially troublesome engineers.

Then, she replaced his chart, looked up and smiled at Mac again.
‘Impressive. I only ever managed nine.’

Then, she walked over to Jack’s bed to inspect him. The older man smirked at the younger over Dr Taylor’s shoulder.

Mac really wasn’t all that good with women. He really wasn’t smooth or suave or confident. He was usually a little awkward at least part of the time.

But Mac was confident and smooth when he was in his element, in his wheelhouse. Namely, when there was science involved.

That could mostly negate Mac’s general awkwardness in relation to women he found attractive.

(Jack figured that they just had to find another woman who was at least half as much into science as Mac was – for all her faults, Nikki had shared, admired and understood Mac’s brilliant intellect and Frankie and Zoe were scientists themselves. Besides, a fellow nerd – not that Nikki could be described as one, though Frankie and Zoe were definitely nerds - probably wouldn’t mind Mac’s occasional awkwardness.)

(Dr Taylor seemed to fit the bill. Fit the bill very well, Jack thought.)

Mac shot him a look and threw his head back into his pillow, but otherwise ignored Jack.

The older man’s smirk widened.

Earlier, when he and Mac had called Riley and Bozer to let them know what had happened, he’d had to tell the duo that his plan had failed.

Now, he was starting to think that it hadn’t failed, not really.

Sure, it hadn’t gone to plan, but he might well have achieved his objective, which was really all that mattered in the end, right?

Dr Taylor finished her check of Jack, and after making a quick note on his chart, she walked over to the door of their room.

Before she left, she pointed at Mac and narrowed her eyes at him again.

‘No escaping, MacGyver, or you’ll face my terrifying wrath.’

Mac gave a little smile.

‘I always keep my promises, Dr Taylor.’

She regarded him for a moment, tilting her head a little to the left, then nodded, seemingly satisfied, and left the room.

Mac watched her go, that little smile firmly in place.

Jack smirked.

Yeah, his plan hadn’t gone to plan.

But he didn’t think it’d been a failure.

Dr Taylor, ER doctor at Huntington.
He, Bozer and Riley could work with that.

Chapter End Notes

Yeah, this is silly. This is pointless. But this was fun! If you liked this, you’ll probably like *Just My Luck* and *There’s Something About MacGyver* *hint, hint*.

I’m now working on the next one-shot for this story; it’s a re-imagining of 2.10, War Room + Ship, in the same way that *Full Circle* was a re-imagining of 1.19, Compass. I’m hoping to get it done and up in the next couple of days.

Let me know if you’ve got any requests!
Deus Ex Machina

Chapter Summary

For DIWells51.

The MSF ship Dignity I is stranded in the Red Sea, 50 miles offshore. Due to politics, help is hours away. Mac has to keep the 362 people on-board alive until it can arrive, using a young doctor as his hands. AU re-imagining of 2.10, War Room + Ship.

Chapter Notes

This is a re-imagining of 2.10, War Room + Ship, so is canon-compliant until that point. Please, please, please don’t take this as my attempt to ‘fix’ that ep or replace Zoe – I really liked her and her chemistry/connection with Mac. Some of you have probably realized that I’m quite fond of Multiverse Theory, so please, please just take this as what could have been in another universe – Mac has to help a different ship trapped in a different place for different reasons, with a different person acting as his hands on-board. In this universe, the R.V. Bancroft never has a terrible accident and Zoe Kiruma and her students have a very productive research trip, and Zoe gets to come home and eat a lot of rocky road ice-cream, and then gets a job at NASA (a glaciologist is useful if you’re building probes to try and find water – in the form of ice – on other planets!) and meets a different cute, geeky engineer, okay?

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

PHOENIX FOUNDATION HEADQUARTERS

SOMEWHERE IN LA

‘...Two hours ago, there was an accident on-board the MSF ship Dignity I, which stranded it in the Red Sea 50 miles offshore.’

Mac’s expression grew deeply concerned as Cage briefed him as they walked towards the war room.

‘What happened?’

Cage’s expression mirrored his.

‘Explosion in the engine room. Blast killed the captain, four crew members, including the ship’s engineer, and severely damaged the ship. MSF mission was to evacuate civilians needing high-level medical care from Houthi-held regions. There’s 362 people on-board.’

Mac’s expression grew even more concerned.
The Yemeni civil war was, to put it lightly, a mess. It was also a humanitarian crisis.

There’s going to be politics involved in this, I just know it.

When that politics is played while 362 lives are at stake...well, it decreases the odds of a good outcome here.

I’ll just have to do everything I can to better those odds another way.

They reached the war room and entered through the open door. Riley was perched on the arm of one of the armchairs, typing away on her laptop, while Matty was speaking to two people on the big screen in scrubs and doctor’s coats, a grey-haired, well-built, gentle-looking man in his fifties and a pretty, brunette, petite woman who looked to be in her early twenties but surely had to be older.

The corridor they were in was dark; clearly, some of the damage had to be the loss of power to the ship.

‘...Okay, I’ve tasked a satellite to keep us connected, we shouldn’t lose your signal.’ Matty turned to Mac. ‘Cage has you up to speed?’

He nodded.

‘More or less.’

His boss nodded too and gestured to the doctors on the screen.

‘Dr Chris Garcia, Dr Beth Taylor, meet Angus MacGyver.’ Matty indicated him with a wave of her hand. ‘MacGyver is an engineer here at the think-tank and our best chance at keeping you alive until help can get to you.’

Mac turned to his boss.

‘How far away is this help?’

He suspected he already knew the answer, which was one he knew he wouldn’t like.

Matty’s expression was very set when she responded.

‘There’s a US Navy ship six hours away, but several parties are having a pissing contest.’

Mac nodded grimly.

‘So a long time.’ His fingers itched for a paperclip, but Matty had banned that activity and removed the bowl of paperclips, so he had to content himself with clasping his hands in front of him. ‘What about aircraft?’

It was Cage who responded this time.

‘No-fly zone.’

‘And they won’t make an exception for an MSF ship?’

Some anger and frustration bled into his voice, and Cage and Matty just looked at each other and shook their heads.
This was a politically extremely messy situation. To Mac, the solution was clear. Send aircraft, send that US Navy ship, to hell with all the politics. 362 innocent lives, medical personnel and sick and/or wounded civilians, were at stake here.

Unfortunately, he’d been in the business more than long enough and was more than intelligent enough to know that the world did not work that way and there were some problems, like this politics, that could not be solved by the judicious use of a Swiss Army knife, some duct tape, paperclips and other odds and ends.

Matty headed for the door, a set, determined expression on her face, and Mac knew that his boss was going to do her best to get help to the Dignity I as soon as possible.

Even if she had to go yell at some world leaders to do it.

He turned his attention back to the two doctors on-screen. It was Dr Garcia who spoke first, business-like and calm, clearly drawing on his medical experience to keep himself so.

‘I’m the leader of the MSF team on-board, and Beth’s going to be your hands. With the loss of our ship’s engineer, she’s the closest thing to an engineer we have on-board.’

The young doctor spoke up, a little hesitantly, but with that same doctor’s calm as the older man.

‘My dad’s an engineer, my mom’s a chemistry professor; I grew up around both engineering and chemistry. I have steady hands and I’m a quick learner.’

Mac managed a little smile at that.

‘We should manage just fine, Beth.’

Dr Garcia spoke again, haggard concern clearly written across his face.

‘Our first priority has to be restoring power; we have batteries on all essential life-support equipment, but some of them will go dry in an hour.’

Riley brought up a plan of the ship on her laptop and showed it to Mac.

‘The propulsion room housed the two main generators. Both were taken out doing the explosion.’

On the screen, Beth spoke.

‘And for some reason, we can’t get the back-up generator to start.’

Mac nodded grimly, brain already whirring, thinking of reasons why that might be the case, and potential solutions using what an MSF ship might have on-board.

‘Okay, Beth, first thing I’m going to need you to do is use the camera on your laptop to show me the back-up generator.’

The doctor nodded, and started walking down the corridor, talking to Dr Garcia as she went.

‘You need to get back to our patients, Chris.’ She gave a reassuring smile, or, at least, a very good attempt at one. ‘I have MacGyver and…’

She gestured to Cage and Riley, clearly asking for their names.

‘Cage.’
‘Riley.’

That attempt at a reassuring smile grew a little wider.

‘…Cage and Riley for company and help. Go!’

Chris glanced between the young doctor and the Phoenix agents, then nodded and hurried off.

(Cage’s analysis was that the older doctor was a mentor for the younger. They might have only met a few months’ ago when their MSF deployment had begun, but had quickly grown close. In fact, Chris was a father-figure for Beth, but more in the way that Jack was a father-figure to Mac, rather than how he was a father-figure for Riley.)

Beth reached the generator and positioned her laptop so that Mac could see it, speaking as she did so.

‘I’ve got about six hours of battery life left on my laptop, but I’m assuming that help is further away than that, and using video-chat might drain the battery faster…’

Mac gave a little smile, meant to be reassuring for the doctor, but also because he couldn’t quite help it either.

*She thinks a bit like an engineer.*

*The odds might have just improved.*

‘I’ll whip something up after we diagnose the genny’s problem.’ His thinking-face grew more prominent and he walked up to the screen and pointed at something. ‘And it looks like it’s right there.’ The laptop swung around and Beth appeared on the screen again. ‘Now, Beth, what I need you to do is to make me a list of everything on-board that you can get your hands on, so that’s gonna be supplies, equipment, provisions, toiletries, everything. Include any essential medical equipment, we might be able to use non-essential parts. And be precise.’ He tried to make his point with a bit of levity. Keeping her morale up and her generally calm was going to be essential, Mac knew. He had enough experience being roughly in her position to know that. ‘Six packets of ketchup is not seven. Does that make sense?’

She nodded, a tiny little smile appearing on her face.

‘We’re going to Apollo 13 and* The Martian *it?’

Mac smiled.

‘Yeah, we’re going to science the shit out of this.’

Her tiny smile grew less tiny.

‘Sending our medical equipment and supplies manifest to you now, then I’ll get onto the rest.’

There were a couple of clicking sounds. ‘MacGyver, this manifest was updated four hours ago, so the quantities of disposable medical supplies have decreased, but we don’t have time to get a more accurate count…’

His expression grew wry.

‘I can work with that, Beth. 531 rolls of gauze is close enough to 530.’
‘Life jacket.’

‘Check.’

‘Thermometer.’

‘Check.’

‘Coffee mug.’

‘Check.’

The war room was a hive of activity, as Riley went over the manifest that Beth had sent over, copying it onto a whiteboard, Cage moved furniture to make space, and Jill and a couple of other Phoenix techs ferried in duplicates of items found on the Dignity I.

Mac examined the ceramic mug that Jill had just handed him, and held it back out to her.

‘Uh, Beth says that they’ve got tin and plastic coffee mugs on the ship, and this one is ceramic...’

Jill nodded in understanding.

‘...And everything we have here needs to be identical to what she’s got on-board. Got it. I’ll keep looking.’

Jill, Cage, Riley and several techs were making a Herculean effort to locate, buy, beg or borrow (but not steal) duplicates of everything that Beth had at her disposal and bring them to the war room.

Mac nodded in thanks and turned back to the doctor on the screen.

‘Okay, Beth, it looks like your generator problem is actually a fuel pump problem...’ A look flickered across her face that was very much a why didn’t I think of that? look. ‘...so what we’re going to do is make you a peristaltic pump to manually feed fuel into the generator, since you don’t have any spare ones.’ Peristaltic pumps had common medical applications, such as in dialysis machines and open-heart bypass machines. Unfortunately, all the peristaltic pumps on-board were currently in use keeping people alive, so Beth was just going to have to make another one. He picked up the suitcase that was lying on the floor, turning away from the screen. ‘First thing you’re gonna want to do is detach the two wheels from the carry-on you have there-’

Cage tapped him on the shoulder.

‘Mac.’

‘Uh, yep?’

She gestured to the doctor, who had picked up the carry-on too, but was also looking so overwhelmed that she’d frozen a bit.

Mac shook his head and mentally kicked himself.

‘Beth, I’m so sorry, I’m going way too fast, aren’t I?’

She shook her head with great, fierce determination.

‘No, I can keep up.’ She took a breath, slightly shaky, and closed her eyes for a moment. ‘I know
how a peristaltic pump works, I spend a lot of time around them, I can keep up.’ She bit her lip. ‘I have to. We’ve got twenty-seven minutes before…’

She trailed off, clearly unable to finish her sentence, but they all knew what she was referring to. Before her patients started dying as the essential equipment they needed to live ran out of power.

Mac looked over at Riley and Cage.

‘Guys, can I have a second?’ Both women nodded and walked to the door, Cage pulling the door closed behind her. ‘Thank you.’ He turned back to the woman on the screen. ‘How we doing, Beth?’

She sighed, shaking her head, her voice soft and vulnerable and scared.

‘Not so good.’ Her voice became a little bit calmer, a bit more like a doctor diagnosing a patient, but he could still hear that fear and vulnerability in there. ‘I’m having trouble focusing. I’m overwhelmed, exhausted and terrified.’ She held up her hands. ‘My hands are shaking. They shouldn’t be; I’m a doctor, I’m supposed to have steady hands!’

They were indeed shaking.

Mac nodded, flashing back to Ecuador for a moment, and the last shaky-handed doctor he’d seen.

‘You know, if I was in your position, I’d be all that too, and my hands would be shaky, trust me.’ He paused for a moment. ‘And I’m an engineer, and before I worked here, I was an Army EOD.’ He gestured to the ship. ‘What you’ve got to do, that’s my wheelhouse.’ He looked her dead in the eye. ‘So, that’s…that’s probably like me having to perform brain surgery, and I don’t even know what state I’d be in if I had to do that.’

She gave a little nod, then another, stronger one, then a very tiny smile appeared on her face.

‘I’m an ER doctor, MacGyver. I really don’t think I could manage brain surgery either.’

He gave a wry smile.

‘Better you than me; I got a C in Biology.’ Deliberately forcing himself to relax, Mac sat down on a chair. ‘Let’s take a break, Beth.’

‘What? Do we have the time?’

He shook his head firmly.

‘Beth, don’t worry about the time. If you’re going to be my hands on-board, we’re both going to need your hands to be steady. And you’ll build faster if you can focus and have steady hands.’ He made himself smile, hopefully in a decently relaxed fashion. ‘So, how about we just talk for a second? You said your dad’s an engineer; what kind? Where does your mom teach?’

She gave a little nod, and took another breath. It was deeper and less shaky this time, a good sign.

‘He’s a biomedical engineer; he runs a company that builds everything from cochlear implants to prosthetic legs. And my mom teaches at Purdue.’

His smile became more natural as he responded.

‘So you’re sort-of a Boilermaker?’
That got him a particularly strong exhale which was probably meant to be a laugh.

‘Well, I did my undergrad there, so I actually am a Boilermaker.’

‘I’m a Beaver.’

That made her smile widen, and she also looked a little impressed.

‘You went to MIT? I got in, but my parents wanted me to stay closer to home, so…’ She gave a little shrug. ‘I was sixteen.’

His own smile widened and no longer felt forced in any way, shape or form, as he looked up at her on the screen, making eye contact.

‘Me too.’ He leaned back a little in his chair, a wry little smirk appearing on his face. ‘And maybe they had other reasons, Beth; we got up to a lot of mischief at MIT. My friends and I once broke into some off-limits buildings to build a lightning gun, and then there was the time we had a contest to see who could balance the most pineapples on their head, and the time we came up with eleven legal uses for body bags and bleach…’

‘Was one of them laundering lab coats?

He half-laughed, and nodded.

‘Yeah, yeah it was,’

Her smile widened a little more, and then she took a deep breath and raised her hands, which were no longer shaking. A calm look settled on her face as she settled back into her doctor headspace.

‘MacGyver, I’m ready to build this pump.’

He nodded, still with a little smile on his face.

‘Call me Mac.’ He got up off the chair and picked up the carry-on, as she did the same. ‘I see on the manifest that you do have a tool kit, so you’ll need a Phillips-head screwdriver to remove the two wheels from the carry-on…’

He tapped the whiteboard, then glanced back over at the screen.

Beth was holding up a navy-blue Swiss Army knife with a sheepish little smile.

‘I’ve got one of these right here.’ She shrugged, smile softening a little as she started unscrewing the first screw. ‘My dad gave it to me when I left for my deployment; he said it’d be useful. He was very right.’ Her expression grew very wry. ‘I never considered I’d be using it for this, though.’

Mac’s face broke into a grin, despite the situation, and he held up his own red one.

‘I think me and your dad would get along; I never go anywhere without mine.’ He chuckled and shook his head as she kept unscrewing the wheels. ‘And Beth, you have no idea how many crazy things I’ve used this for.’

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**NINETEEN MINUTES LATER**

‘…Now, bend the generator’s fuel line into a U-shape around the wheel and axle assembly.’
Mac watched as Beth repeated his actions, carefully and methodically. Then, she nodded.

‘Done. How’s this look?’

He smiled.

‘Perfect. You just built yourself a peristaltic pump!’ He picked up a power drill (handily part of their tool kit on-board) and placed it in the centre of the wheel and axle assembly, then turned it on. ‘Now, running the drill should push diesel along the fuel line and into the generator just like the fuel pump should have.’ The diesel that they’d scrounged up flowed between the two buckets, just like it was meant to. ‘Just like that.’

Beth nodded and set to work replicating Mac’s actions.

‘Here’s hoping mine does that too.’ She turned on the drill, and Mac, Cage and Riley all watched as the fuel moved through the fuel line on the screen. She smiled and relaxed noticeably, clearly very relieved, as the generator started up again and the lights turned back on. ‘It worked!’ She glanced between Mac and the generator. ‘We did it!’

He smiled too, as Beth picked up the walkie-talkie she’d been using to keep in touch with Chris, the MSF team leader’s voice ringing out from it.

‘Good work, Beth. And thank you, MacGyver.’

Beth sipped water from the water bottle she’d had in a little satchel that she’d been carrying (she seemed the type to like to be prepared for things), and picked up her discarded doctor’s coat (she’d taken it off a while ago due to the heat), packing it into her bag.

Mac simply watched, telling himself that he was just keeping an eye on her, given the high-stress situation she was currently experiencing.

(He was so convincing that he didn’t even realize that he was just telling himself that; as far as Mac’s consciousness was aware, he really was just keeping an eye on her.)

‘Now that you’ve got the power on, I can see you a little better…’

She looked up, finished with her packing, and smiled at him, looking even younger and quite shy.

‘Mac-’

She was cut off by the blaring of an alarm.

Instantly, both of their smiles disappeared, and Beth picked up her walkie-talkie.

‘That’s the fire alarm.’ She spoke into the walkie-talkie. ‘Chris, can someone go to the control room and see where the fire is?’

It was a different man’s voice, with a slight French accent, which replied.

‘I’m in the control room, the computer’s showing fires in the bow thruster room, the galley and the testing lab.’

Beth bit her lip and looked back up at the trio in the war room.

‘It might just be an error…’ She didn’t sound convinced. ‘I’ll go check the thruster room.’
Chris’s voice then sounded out over the walkie-talkie, as Beth slung her satchel back on, pinned her walkie-talkie in place by her ear using her shoulder and her head and picked up the laptop.

‘Don’t worry about the patients, Beth, we’ve got it.’ His voice faded out, as if he was talking to other people near him instead of into the walkie-talkie. ‘Get everyone high risk on oxygen…’

Riley looked up from her laptop and looked at Mac and Cage, gesturing to her laptop screen, expression grim.

‘Those rooms are right above the propulsion room where the explosion happened. The heat from the blast could have melted the insulation on the wiring behind the walls.’

Cage’s expression was equally grim.

‘Turning the power back on shorted them out and lit the fires.’

On the big screen, Beth turned back to them, her expression also extremely grim, fear and worry underlying it.

‘It’s not a false alarm. We’ve got real fires.’ She gestured to the ceiling. ‘Our fire suppression system didn’t come on.’

Mac swore under his breath and ran a hand through his hair.

‘Okay, so the ship must have sustained more damage than we thought. If we don’t put out those fires now, the whole ship’s going to burn.’

The four of them, three in the war room, one thousands of miles away, all exchanged a worried, grim look.

Beth tugged the makeshift mask she’d made for herself, by cutting off a section of her doctor’s coat using her Swiss Army knife and soaking it with water from her water bottle, down and addressed the trio in the war room from near the bow thruster room.

‘We have enough extinguishers for the smaller fires, but the one here in the bow thruster room…’ She coughed, sending concern through them all, especially Mac. He was very, very aware of the deadliness of smoke inhalation; the stats were running through his head at that very moment. He knew Beth was equally aware, hence the mask and the fact that she’d been walking through the ship in an awkward crouch of sorts to avoid as much of the smoke as possible. ‘…it’s getting out of control.’

Mac pointed to the door of the bow thruster room.

‘Okay, that door right there, it’s watertight…’

Beth nodded in understanding.

‘…So it’s also airtight. If I close it, the fire will run out of oxygen and burn itself out.’

Mac really, really wished he had a paperclip in his hands right then. There were some on the ship, so Cage had brought them in earlier, but they weren’t in reach at that moment…

He really missed the paperclip bowl.

‘Be careful, Beth. Door’s metal, it’s going to be really, really hot…’
He was aware that he might sound condescending (that was something everyone knew, really, and Beth was very, very intelligent, and an engineer and chemist’s daughter would obviously know that metal conducted heat very well), but it was always the obvious things that people tended to forget, and he really, really didn’t want her to hurt herself.

However, he needn’t really have worried.

She’d already put down her satchel and tugged her makeshift mask back up, and was now pulling off her scrub top, leaving her in a damp, sweat-stained tank top. Beth wrapped her hands in her scrub top, and carefully closed the door, then stood up on her toes to look through the porthole in the door.

After a few seconds’ of inspection, she turned back to face them, stepping away from the fire, and nodded, then pulled down her mask again, her expression still serious, slightly relieved, but not substantially.

*She and the rest of the medical personnel know very much that they’re not out of the woods, not yet.*

*Most fire deaths aren’t from burns, they’re from smoke inhalation. So, without fresh air, everyone on-board is still in danger.*

*We’ve got one problem fixed, but now we’ve got a bigger one.*

*Come on, MacGyver, think of something…*

*Beth and 361 others are counting on you.*

‘That seems to have worked.’ She picked up her walkie-talkie and spoke into it. ‘Chris, the bow thruster fire is currently burning itself out…’

She coughed again and pulled up her mask as Chris replied, her eyes still very concerned. Then, when Chris was done, she pulled her mask down again and addressed Mac, Cage and Riley after another couple of coughs, crouching low to the floor as she spoke.

‘We’ve got our most vulnerable patients on oxygen and masks of some sort on everyone else…’ She indicated her own mask. ‘…and we’ve opened all the doors and turned on all our fans to try and increase airflow, but…’

She trailed off and gave a helpless little shrug.

Mac ran the schematics of the ship through his mind, thoughts whizzing through at very high speed.

*It isn’t going to be enough.*

*And she knows it too.*

‘Beth, how many people can you get outside onto the deck?’

She shook her head; she and the other medical staff had clearly considered that as a possibility already.

‘About 30% of our patients can’t be put on the deck for long, and we could probably only fit about 25% on it.’
Cage leaned over and spoke quietly to Mac.

‘Soldiers from at least two rebel factions and three groups of pirates have been spotted in the area in the last six hours, Mac. It’s not safe to move them onto the deck. They’re already a sitting duck.’

Cage spoke matter-of-factly, calmly, though he recognized that she didn’t speak without care either (in fact, quite the opposite), now that he knew her quite well. He looked at the other blonde for a moment, and ran a hand through his hair, turning back to the doctor on the screen.

‘Alright, scrap that, Beth.’ He stared at the manifest list for a moment, and then, it hit him. ‘I’ve got an idea.’ He turned to Riley. ‘Riley, pull up schematics of the ship.’ He stared at them for a moment, muttering to himself under his breath, then nodded. He pointed to two items on the manifest list. ‘Beth, get all of your HEPA filters and all the filter refills.’

‘Mac, the HEPA filters are currently in use…’ They used the HEPA filters to prevent the spread of airborne pathogens to prevent airborne disease transmission. She trailed off, however, as realization dawned on her. ‘We’re triaging. Death from smoke inhalation is more imminent than from infection.’

He simply nodded, wishing he could think of something else, but he really couldn’t, not with the time and materials he had at his disposal.

Beth nodded and pulled up her mask again and started hurrying down the corridor in that awkward crouch, as Mac continued to explain his plan, closely examining the ship schematics as he did so.

‘We’re going to rig up some more HEPA filters using the refills, and then we’re going to optimize the positioning of the filters and fans…’

‘…Well, we are no longer at risk of smoke inhalation, thanks to you, we didn’t lose anyone, a US Navy ship is coming to evacuate us in three hours…’ Mac was quite sure that Matty was at least partially responsible for that fact, though he also knew he’d never find out how she’d pulled it off. ‘…and I have been ordered to take a break.’

Beth plonked herself down on a chair in what looked like a small staff breakroom, looking very exhausted, but also relieved and relatively happy.

Mac smiled, sitting down on a chair himself. He was alone in the war room, Riley had ducked out a while ago, while they’d been building the makeshift HEPA filters, probably for a reason to do with her dad and Jack’s putting him into ‘protective custody’. Cage had left after the smoke had been cleared, probably to update Matty and possibly help her out with the politics by hacking powerful people’s brains.

‘Would you like some company?’

She smiled back.

‘If you’ve got time, I’d appreciate your company.’

His smile widened and he leaned over and helped himself to a paperclip from the box that Cage had brought in, then started re-shaping it into a ship.

‘I have time.’

For some reason, his brain wanted to say for you, but he stopped himself. That would be a very
weird thing to say.

Beth tilted her head a little to the left as she watched his hands bend the paperclip.

‘Is that a paperclip ship?’

His smile widened and grew a little sheepish.

‘Yeah. It’s an old habit, one my boss banned, but you had paperclips on the ship, so…’ He chuckled and shrugged, looking down at the paperclip ship. ‘Just something to keep my hands busy.’

When he looked up again, Beth had crossed her arms and narrowed her eyes. There was something fierce in the tilt of her chin.

‘Your boss banned you from re-shaping paperclips to keep your hands busy? How could she? That’s…that’s…she shouldn’t have done that!’ There was some kind of protective anger on her face and in her eyes now. ‘I mean, you don’t just use them to keep your hands busy, do you? They also help you clear your head, right? What does banning you from using them achieve, apart from being cruel and bad for your mental wellbeing?’

Mac just shrugged, looking away from the screen and at a corner of the floor.

‘I don’t know. Matty does everything for a reason, she just doesn’t always share those reasons.’

That came out more bitter than he’d intended.

There was absolutely no way that Beth could understand where that bitterness came from, not at all, but her expression grew more sympathetic, though there was still that protective anger there too.

He suspected that if Matty, probably still playing politics and kicking asses (figuratively, Mac was quite sure), came back into the war room, his boss might find himself being scolded by the doctor.

The mental image of Beth, small but fierce, scolding Matty, who was even smaller and probably still fiercer, was quite amusing, actually.

She seemed to sense that he didn’t want to talk about it further, and changed the topic, seemingly pulling the first random thought she had out of her head.

‘You know, I’d really, really love a slice of pumpkin pie right now.’ She looked very sheepish. ‘Sorry, that was really weird…’

He chuckled and smiled up at her.

‘Pumpkin pie’s great, though I’m more of an apple guy myself; why is that weird?’ His expression grew more wry. ‘Anyway, you’re talking to a guy who spent his last day off building a spaghetti-machine-spaghetti-machine.’

That made her giggle, even as her eyes lit up with curiosity.

(Both made him feel much warmer on the inside.)

‘I’d really like to see that.’ Her smile grew softer. ‘You know, when the Navy said they were patching us through to an engineer, I didn’t expect a real-life Mark Watney…’ Beth gave a slightly sheepish, slightly awkward half-shrug with a matching smile. ‘…and I really didn’t expect he’d be
about my age.’

Mac’s expression grew wry.

‘You get a lot of Doogie Howser jokes, don’t you?’

Beth just sighed and nodded.

‘Yes, and most of them are terrible.’

Mac chuckled.

‘A friend of mine, Jack, he works here at the Phoenix too, makes the worst puns.’

Beth made a face, then tilted her head to the left and examined the war room around him.

‘What do you guys do at the Phoenix Foundation?’

Mac gestured to the rather cluttered war room, then at her.

‘Well, we are a think-tank, and we specialise in unconventional solutions to unconventional problems.’ He paused for a moment, and looked back at her, into her eyes. ‘And after what I’ve seen today, you’d fit right in here.’

She laughed, and shook her head, her cheeks colouring a little at the compliment.

‘Mac, don’t tease! Medical school is really expensive, I’m buried under student loan debt, and I could really use a job when my deployment ends, but what in the world would a think-tank want with an ER doctor?’

He chuckled and looked down for a moment.

He wasn’t allowed to tell her, of course, but the Phoenix Foundation definitely had a need for medical doctors, ER and trauma surgery trained ones especially.

Then, he looked back up at her, as she waved at Chris, who’d just come into the breakroom and sat down opposite her.

‘Drop by when you’re back in the States.’ His smile widened and softened. ‘I’ll show you around. We could grab some pie, and I’ll show you my spaghetti-machine-spaghetti-machine.’

She smiled right back at him, bright and soft.

‘I’d like that, Mac.’

As soon as she’d finished speaking, there was a loud sound, like a muffled explosion.

Beth, her eyes wide, Chris and Mac all jumped up at that, exchanging a concerned look. A very concerned look.

Cage, followed closely by Riley, swept into the war room a second later.

‘Satellites just picked up a four-man dinghy approaching the Dignity I…’

Riley swallowed, then continued.

‘…and they fired a shoulder-launched rocket at the ship.’
‘…We have a hole in the hull, there’s water coming in. Fast.’ Beth tried to close the door, but it wouldn’t seal. ‘And there’s something wrong with the door.’

She shifted her laptop so Mac could see it and he swore under his breath.

‘The compression gasket’s torn, so even if you close it, it’s not going to be watertight. We’ve got to find a way to seal it now.’

Beth turned her laptop back around so that the camera faced her. She seemed to be back in her doctor headspace, using her training to help her keep calm like she had earlier, but she was definitely pale and very worried.

‘How?’

Mac looked up at her on the screen, trying as hard as he could to be reassuring.

‘I don’t know yet, but it’s going to be alright.’

_I have to think of something._

‘…Okay, I’ve mixed the resin. The consistency’s like Play-Doh.’

Mac looked up from his own finished batch of resin, which Cage had been helping him with.

‘That’s perfect.’ He pointed at the broken door. ‘Now, spread it around the door’s inner edge; it’s safe to use your fingers, just make sure you get it all the way around the door jamb.’

Beth nodded and got to work doing as Mac described.

‘I’m guessing this will expand when I add heat, so will be thick enough to completely seal the door?’

Despite the situation, Mac smiled and nodded.

‘Yup.’ He started gathering supplies for the next part. ‘The last step I’m going to show you is how to make a detonator so you can trigger the reaction remotely…’

‘…I really hope this works.’

Beth held up the detonator as Mac held up the corresponding one in the war room and counted down.

‘Three, two, one.’

There was a _foof_ as Mac’s bucket of resin expanded.

On-board the Dignity I, nothing happened.

Beth looked up at him, expression very grim.

‘Mine’s not working.’

Mac swore vividly internally, but fought to stay calm externally.
‘Okay, check the connections on the remote and the detonator itself.’

She’d already started doing that as soon as she’d finished speaking, and after about twenty seconds, Beth looked up at him and shook her head, expression even grimmer.

‘Everything’s connected properly…’

She walked back towards the flooding room as Mac replied.

‘Beth, stay calm. I’m going to walk you through the build again-‘

She cut him off as she reached the room with the hull breach, and there was a distinct note of panic in her voice, and she was clearly using every ounce of willpower to keep herself in her calm doctor headspace as much as possible.

‘Mac, the hole’s getting bigger. The room’s about a quarter full of water.’ She swallowed. ‘There’s no way to stop it!’

Mac reached out and touched the screen, muting the transmission from their end.

He swore, swallowed and closed his eyes for a moment, before opening them and looking up at Cage and Riley, expression extremely grim.

‘She’s right.’ He swore again and started rummaging through the stuff in the war room frantically. ‘There’s got to be something I can use to trigger this reaction remotely.’ Riley un-muted the transmission from her laptop as Mac rummaged and talked to himself. ‘What if we…this is…damn it! We’ve used everything!’

Mac’s breaths came quickly as he stood in the middle of the war room, his back to the screen.

On the screen, Beth spoke up, something fierce and brave in the tilt of her chin, even as her voice shook.

‘Wait, Mac, we haven’t used everything…’

He whirled back around to face her.

‘What do you mean? What haven’t we used?’

The moment he saw her face, realization dawned in him even as he fought to deny it, willed it to not be so.

(He’d of course considered the possibility, somewhere in his brain, but had boxed it up immediately, because it was just an unacceptable solution to the problem.)

Beth swallowed and her eyes flickered closed for a moment, a flash of incredible fear going through them just before she did, but when she opened them, it was her doctor’s calm rationality, the coolness and detachment that enabled her to triage (but was far from meaning she didn’t care) that predominated.

‘Me. We haven’t used me.’ She gestured to the door. Her hands were steady now, even though her voice was very, very shaky. ‘I can seal the door from the inside.’

From the side of the room that wasn’t occupied by the whiteboard, Cage took one glimpse at Mac’s face, then gestured discretely to Riley, and the two women left the room.
Mac hardly noticed.

‘…Beth, help is less than two hours away. We can put you guys into the lifeboats—’

Standing in front of the door to the compromised room, her back to the water, she cut him off, voice fiercely determined over the fear.

‘Mac, 30% of our patients either can’t be loaded into the lifeboats or won’t survive more than about half an hour in them. A further 20% probably won’t survive an hour and a half or will have their potential for recovery severely compromised.’

He ran a hand through his hair, his sheer desperation bleeding into his voice.

_I can’t let her do this. I can’t. I have to think of a way. I have to think of a way!_

‘I can whip something up to—’

Beth cut him off again, tilting her chin up.

‘Mac, even with whatever you whip up, going out on the lifeboats would risk the lives of my patients. I can’t do that, not when this—’ She gestured to the resin-rimmed door and herself. ‘…Not when there’s something I can do to prevent it.’

His own voice was rough when he spoke.

‘There has to be another way.’ He started frantically scanning the room, hoping against all logic that there was something he’d missed. ‘There’s always another way…’

‘Mac—’

‘…something I overlooked!’

‘Mac!’ He looked up at her, feeling wetness in his eyes. She took a shaky deep breath, her doctor’s calm fading away, leaving great fear kept in check only by fierce determination. ‘Mac, if I don’t seal this door right now, the whole ship will sink before the Navy gets here.’ He opened his mouth, as if to protest, eyes darting over to the whiteboard to triple-check his math. ‘You did the math yourself.’ She swallowed and her eyes flickered closed for a moment. Her voice was softer and more frightened, but somehow, also stronger and fiercer when she spoke again. ‘And we don’t need math anymore, Mac. 361 is much greater than one.’

He refused to let his own eyes flicker closed for a moment, not wanting to lose sight of her, and just looked up at her on the screen through the slight cloudiness of the tears he refused to let fall.

‘No, I can’t let you do this, Beth.’

There was a voice to her left, outside the laptop camera’s, and thus Mac’s, field of vision. Judging from Beth’s slight startled movement, she hadn’t noticed the speaker’s approach either.

‘She’s not going to.’ It was Chris’s voice. He must have heard Beth and Mac’s conversations over Beth’s walkie-talkie (she’d commandeered another one from a passing nurse to build the detonator). The image on the screen shook and changed, as if the laptop was being removed from Beth’s hands, and then, Mac was looking at the face of the much older doctor. In the background, a tall, broad-shouldered man also clad in a doctor’s coat whose expression was sad-eyed but accepting, was holding very tightly onto Beth, as if to prevent her from jumping into the flooding
room with the matches she was holding. The young woman was shaking her head, teary-eyed, as Chris swallowed and continued. ‘I’ll do it.’

Beth found her voice again at that, and her tears began to fall.

‘No, no, no! Chris, you can’t…I can…I’ll…no!’

The older doctor looked at her, his own eyes wet, and reached out and prised the box of matches out of her clutches, then took her hand in his own.

‘Beth, I am thirty-two years older than you. I’ve lived thirty-two years more. You have at least thirty-two years more of saving lives left than me.’ He managed the ghost of a wry little smile. ‘Don’t need to be anywhere near as smart as you to do that math.’

Beth looked up at her mentor, still sobbing and shaking her head, and then, the man holding onto her started tugging her away, and Chris held up the box of matches.

‘You said it needs heat to react, right, MacGyver?’ Mac simply nodded, his eyes not quite able to leave the image of Beth in the background, still being tugged away by the other doctor. ‘So if I light the resin directly, it’ll burn, right?’

He pulled his eyes away from Beth, still sobbing in anguish, and focused his attention on Chris and nodded.

A small part of Mac’s mind was simply relieved that it wasn’t her.

The rest of his mind was full of sadness and grief and anguish and guilt and admiration for the very brave and very good man in front of him.

‘Can we do this together?’

Chris stood, waist-deep, in the water, holding up the box of matches. Mac nodded, swallowing the lump in his throat, holding up his own box of matches.

‘Of course.’

He struck a match at the same time as Chris, and the doctor lit the resin, which expanded quickly.

‘I hope this works.’

Mac swallowed again.

‘It will.’

By his own calculations and Riley’s modelling, it would.

The ship wouldn’t sink, at least, not until long after help arrived and 361 people were evacuated.

The doctor swallowed too, and looked at him, right into his eyes.

‘You know how I know that was the right thing to do, MacGyver?’ Mac shook his head. It was all he could manage. ‘If you were here, you’d try and do this yourself.’ It was more of a statement than a question, but Mac just gave a little nod. ‘I’d do it for you, too. That’s how I know it’s right. I’d do it for anyone if the math was right, not just her.’
At that, Mac had to fight really, really, really hard to not break down into sobs.

*I don’t believe that any person deserves death.*

*Not even Murdoc.*

*A good man, a great man, a hero like Chris Garcia...he deserves to get a long, happy life. To go home to his loved ones, to spend many years with them.*

*Not to die like this, alone.*

He took a deep breath.

*Well, I guess he isn’t completely alone.*

*I can’t save him.*

*But I can make sure he doesn’t die alone.*

*Be strong, MacGyver. You have to be.*

*For him.*

*For the hero who’s just saved 361 lives, plus countless more over his career.*

Chris was looking around now, as the water rose. It was now lapping at his chest.

‘The water’s rising really fast now...’ He locked eyes with Mac. ‘MacGyver, can...can you record some messages for me? Goodbyes?’

Mac swallowed and nodded firmly.

‘I will personally ensure they get to whoever you want, Chris, I promise.’ He gestured vaguely in the direction of the war room door as the older man nodded. ‘Do you want me to-‘

‘No.’ That was said firmly, vehemently, and Mac simply nodded. Then, Chris closed his eyes for a moment, losing himself in memories. ‘Ellie, I love you so, so much. I’m so sorry I can’t go on that big anniversary vacation with you; you’ll just have to have enough fun and R&R for the both of us, okay? Tommy, Mike, I love you, kiddos.’ There was a smile on his face at that, sad and fond and a little reminiscently happy all at once. ‘I know you hate being called that, but indulge your old man one last time, okay? Look after your mom, look after each other, and know that I’m so, so proud of the men you grew up to be.’ He paused for a moment, voice cracking. ‘I love you three so damn much. I’m so sorry I couldn’t come home to you, but I had to do what I had to do.’ The water was well up his neck now as he tread water. ‘Beth, you remember what I always told you, okay? Look forward to the future, to all the lives you can save and all the good you can do in the future...and make sure you take MacGyver up on his offer.’

The image disappeared, replaced by static.

Mac finally let his tears fall, sinking down onto a chair and burying his face in his hands.

Beth was sitting on the floor in a storage room full of medical supplies, still crying, with an opened box of tissues beside her.

Mac silently thanked her colleague or colleagues who’d found her some privacy, the tissue box and
another laptop.

When she appeared on the war room screen, she just looked at him, and all he could do was nod, his own eyes still teary.

She gave another sob.

‘He…he has…had…a wife and two sons.’

Mac swallowed, flashing back several minutes, and nodded again.

‘I know.’ His own voice was almost as rough with emotion as hers. He swallowed again. ‘He…he left messages…I promised to get them to the intended recipients.’ She looked up from her tissues, sniffing. ‘Beth, he wanted you to know, I quote: Beth, you remember what I always told you, okay? Look forward to the future, to all the lives you can save and all the good you can do in the future.’

He left off the bit about him. He’d promised, but at the same time, it didn’t seem right, not at all. The timing was off. He’d make sure that Beth got the recording, so she could watch it or just listen to it when she felt ready, if she ever did.

Beth sniffled again and blew her nose into one of her tissues, then picked up another one and wiped her eyes, even though the tears still flowed.

‘That’s…that’s Chris.’ She sniffled and wiped her eyes again. ‘Always…always looking out for me.’ She inhaled a long, shuddering breath, her tears slowing, and made a monumental effort for some levity, some light in the darkness. ‘Mac…you know what I want more than pumpkin pie right now? A hug.’

There had been many, many times in his relatively short life that Mac had wished he could teleport. At that moment, he wished he could as strongly as he ever had, just so he could move halfway across the world in an instant, to give a heartbroken, brave and exhausted (physically and emotionally) doctor a hug.

Instead, he did the best he could and offered her a very sad little smile and gestured around the war room.

‘I’m all out of stuff to make a teleporter with, or I’d say just give me about fifteen minutes…’ He shrugged, trying for levity like he so often did in the field, had in his Army days, and, he suspected, like she and the other doctors did too, to get through the day. ‘But maybe that’s for the best; I don’t want to wind up like Admiral Archer’s beagle…’

That earned him a tiny, wan smile, which he counted as a win.

‘I don’t want you to go the same way as poor Porthos; I like the fact that you’re on this planet and in this universe.’

His little smile widened a bit.

‘Glad I’m here too, Beth.’

She wiped away the last of the tears from her face, and then looked back up at him.

‘I never said thank you, Mac. For saving 361 lives.’
Her voice trembled a little on the number.

He shook his head gently.

‘You and Chris did it. I just talked to you.’

Beth looked sceptical, but she also didn’t argue, probably, Mac thought, due to how she viewed Chris’s role (clearly brave and heroic; it’d be cold comfort, but Mac vowed to himself to make sure that he received the recognition and posthumous honours he deserved, and also vowed to make a sizeable donation to MSF in his honour) rather than hers.

Eyes closed, she took a deep breath, then another, then another, the breaths growing stronger and less shuddery with each one. Then, she opened her eyes and looked at him, her doctor’s calm back on her face and in her eyes.

‘I have to go help prep for the evacuation now.’

Mac simply nodded, no small amount of admiration for the young doctor in his eyes.

_It takes a lot to get up and keep going after the loss of your mentor._

Especially…especially when it could have been, or should have been, you.

_I would know._

‘If you want company later, after you and your patients and colleagues are safe…I’m here, Beth.’

She gave a little smile and nodded.

‘I’m…I’m going to take you up on that, Mac.’

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**THREE HOURS LATER**

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Mac sat in the Phoenix’s empty breakroom in front of a laptop with a screen full of static, playing with the paperclips he’d stashed in his pocket.

(The breakroom was pretty much never empty, not even at 6 pm like it was now, but somehow, by some miracle probably called Cage, it was.)

There was an array of muesli bars and vending machine snacks and a bottle of water in front of him, as well as a bottle of lemonade.

Cage had brought those to him, along with a message from Matty that the US Navy had successfully rescued 361 souls from the Dignity I and that the prognosis of all patients, according to the MSF staff, was very good, all things considered. Matty’s message had also stated that the Phoenix was now working on identifying just who had fired that rocket into the Dignity I and that she had extracted vows from very important people that justice would be served.

The master interrogator had lingered for just a moment, but he knew she could easily tell that he did not want to talk about it.

So, she had simply said that if he did want to talk about it, she was there if he wanted, whether he wanted a trained, objective listener or a friend.
He’d given her the best grateful smile he could, and nodded, and then she’d slipped out of the room, assumedly to help Matty and work on that investigation, and left him to his thoughts.

He took another sip of the water.

Mac knew he was supposed to eat the muesli bars and chips and pretzels and whatnot (he hadn’t eaten since breakfast, just before he’d shown up at Jack’s, and while that wasn’t altogether unusual for him, he knew very well that it wasn’t good for him), but he just couldn’t.

THREE MINUTES LATER

The static was replaced by Beth, sitting in what looked to be the XO’s stateroom on a Navy vessel.

She also had a plate of mashed potatoes and sausages with a salad and a container of strawberry Jell-O, as well as a bottle of water, in front of her. The water bottle was opened and she’d drunk about a quarter of it.

The food was completely untouched.

‘Hi, Mac. Do you have time to keep me company for a while?’

He gave a small smile.

‘I’ve got all night if you need it, Beth.’

Whatever doubtlessly complicated scenario that was going on with Riley’s dad (he could only guess why Jack needed to forge a signature on a baseball to prevent her dad from dying, and any possibility he could come up with was complicated), Jack and Riley had each other.

Mac knew that Bozer would have gone through some very difficult experiences while at spy school, but he also wasn’t due home until the next day.

And Matty and Cage, while he knew they weren’t unfeeling and would have been affected by the events of the day, were the ones best able to cope alone, he knew, and besides, they were busy ensuring justice. For Chris.

So he did have all night.

He gestured to the food in front of her.

‘You should eat. You burned a lot of calories today.’ She made no move to touch the food and just sighed. He glanced at the assorted snack foods he had in front of him, and an idea hit him. Mac picked up one of the muesli bars and held it up. ‘You know, I haven’t eaten all day either, and I haven’t got much of an appetite.’ He jiggled the muesli bar around in mid-air. ‘I’ll eat if you do?’

He was counting on the fact that she wouldn’t let him go without food, so would eat if it made him eat.

She managed to shoot him a look, an exasperated one (but also, he thought, even if he wasn’t Cage, somehow fond), clearly seeing through the ruse, which made him give a little smile, but nodded.

He found he suddenly had an appetite, and opened the muesli bar and took a large bite. An inadvisably huge bite, which made his cheeks bulge out like a chipmunk’s.
That got him a very weak snort and another exasperated look.

(This time, you didn’t have to be Cage to see the fondness there.)

That also got Beth to swallow a spoonful of mashed potato, then another.

After swallowing, he took another bite of muesli bar.

Beth had another bite of mashed potato.

Eventually, they got to the point where Mac had eaten three muesli bars and a packet of pretzels, while Beth had eaten all the mashed potatoes and half a sausage.

At that point, she picked up her spoon and the container of strawberry Jell-O, and started skimming her spoon across the top of the dessert, peeling back little layers of Jell-O that slowly built up on the spoon.

After six such passes over the Jell-O, she looked up at him.

‘I…I can’t stop thinking about what could have happened if I’d just built and connected that detonator properly, or if I’d just done it faster so there was time to go through the build again...’

Mac put down the packet of chips that he’d just picked up.

‘You did a really, really good job, Beth. Seriously. You were my hands almost as well as these...’ He held up his own hands, then realized that that was extremely weird-sounding (that was what happened when he half-thought out loud, especially when he was really tired), but ploughed on. ‘Maybe I forgot something or made some other error while teaching you to make the detonator.’ He looked down, swallowed, then looked back up at her. ‘I should have thought of a better solution. There had to be another way. There always is.’

That fierce protectiveness appeared in her eyes again.

It seemed that Beth was the sort of person who’d always try to protect her friends (he supposed they could be called friends now, even if they’d never met in person and had only ‘met’ hours ago, given what had happened in that time), even from themselves.

He got that.

His entire improvised family was full of people who were like that, himself included.

‘Don’t you dare blame yourself, Angus MacGyver!’ She gave a little shake of her head. ‘You played a key role in saving 361 lives today, even if you say that all you did was talk!’

He just looked at her for a moment, a realization hitting him, then gave a little smile.

‘You did too, Beth.’ The smile grew more wry. ‘And please tell me you recognize how ironic what you just said is...’

A matching wry little smile appeared on her face.

‘As soon as I said it, yes.’ She played with her Jell-O for a moment longer, then continued. ‘How
about we make another pact, Mac? I’ll try not to blame myself if you don’t?’

He nodded, the wryness in his little smile disappearing.

‘Deal.’

They fell silent again for a couple of minutes, returning to their respective meals, then Beth broke the silence again.

‘Is this what you do at the Phoenix Foundation? Save lives every day?’

He swallowed his mouthful of masticated potato chip, and gave a sad smile.

‘We try. As hard as we can.’

Beth gave a little nod.

‘Chris…Chris always said that we can’t save everyone, but the important thing to do is try…try as hard as you can.’

_The thing is, the only thing you can ever do is try._

_Try as hard as you can._

_I know you can’t save everyone._

_I know I can’t blame myself for that, not if I tried with everything I had._

_Part of me always says that I could have tried harder._

_The rest of me knows that, objectively, I did everything I could._

_I will never, ever, be able to forget the lives I wasn’t able to save._

_But at the end of the day, even if it is still hard to accept completely, I did everything I could. I always do._

_I just need to convince a part of me of that._

Beth put down her half-empty cup of Jell-O and sought out his eyes.

‘We…we tried as hard as we could, right, Mac?’

She sounded a little uncertain, needing confirmation.

With a deep breath, he nodded firmly, resolutely, certainly.

‘Yeah, we did.’

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_TWO WEEKS LATER_

_NICE BUT NOT FANCY HOTEL_

_CHICAGO_
At 2 pm, Mac straightened his black tie in the mirror one last time, then left his hotel room, after checking that his Swiss Army knife, paperclips, phone, wallet and hotel key card were in his pockets.

Right outside his hotel room, in the corridor, he encountered Beth, who had clearly just left her own room.

They were, apparently, staying in the same hotel, in rooms next to one another.

Mac was quite sure that that wasn’t a coincidence.

Riley and Bozer had handled the hotel booking for him, as he, Jack and Cage had been on a mission until last evening; he’d only flown into Chicago that morning.

(He was glad that Bozer and Riley had worked on it together, and had seemed to have done it just like old times. There’d been something a bit off about their relationship ever since Bozer had come home from spy school. Mac figured it was because Bozer had clearly gone through some difficult, life-changing experiences while there, and Riley had had that whole drama with her dad while he’d been gone, so it was probably only natural that, since they’d all been a little changed while they were apart, things would be a bit off while their new, slightly-changed dynamic worked itself out, since it’d kind of just been given a sudden shock.)

(After a chat about what had happened on that crazy day to each of them, Jack had offered to come with him, but he’d declined. This felt like something that he should fly solo for, for some reason.)

(Jack had also apologized for not being there for Mac in the war room that day, since he’d been so caught up with Riley and her dad. Mac had told him that there wasn’t really a need to apologize; at that moment, Riley had needed him to do what he’d done, and Mac could never begrudge that.)

(Jack Dalton was an incredible person, but there was only one of him. He could only be in one place at a time, after all.)

Beth was wearing a short-sleeved black dress, a lacy one which fell to her knees. She’d braided her hair. She also looked very, very sad and like she hadn’t slept well the night before.

(Shewas still beautiful, a voice in his head pointed out. She’d been pretty in scrubs and a sweat-stained tank top, her hair in a harsh ponytail that had grown messy, working tirelessly in a near-death situation. It wasn’t surprising that she’d be beautiful in a nice dress. Even if it was for a funeral.)

(Mac told that voice to shut up immediately.)

The two of them stared at each other for a long, long moment.

Then, Mac found his voice.

‘Do…do you still want that hug, Beth?’

She just gave a shaky little nod and stepped closer to him. He held her close, tucked his chin over her shoulder, and rubbed her back soothingly, which made her arms tighten around him.

FUNERAL HOME

CHICAGO
Beth and a couple of Chris’s MSF colleagues (including a Frenchman called Pierre who was also the tall, broad-shouldered man who’d pulled Beth away that terrible day) gave a eulogy at the funeral.

So did Chris’s wife and two children.

The moment he’d laid eyes on Tommy and Mike Garcia, Mac had known exactly why, beyond what he’d said, Chris could never, ever have allowed Beth to seal that door. Why he’d said that he’d never have let Mac do it either.

Tommy was twenty-six. Mike was twenty-four.

At twenty-five, Beth was exactly halfway between them in age.

It was raining when they left the funeral home.

Mac knew that the idea that the weather somehow reflected one’s mood was complete and utter nonsense.

But even he had to admit that there was something poetic about it.

They walked back to the hotel together, sharing her umbrella.

(Beth liked to be prepared and had brought one. Mac, being someone who essentially improvised for a living and had lived in either sunny California or the deserts of Afghanistan and Iraq for all save two years of his life, had neglected to bring one.)

He held it (he was eight inches taller than her, it was the only logical arrangement; besides, his grandfather’s memory would berate him endlessly if he didn’t), and they walked very closely together, sides occasionally brushing, as necessitated by the fact that they were sharing an umbrella.

(It was so much better than sharing an umbrella with Jack in Mawsynram.)

**NICE BUT NOT FANCY HOTEL**

**CHICAGO**

They wound up back in his room, eating slices of the pumpkin and apple pies he’d baked (the apple according to his reconstruction of his mom’s secret recipe, the pumpkin according to Bozer’s recipe) and brought with him, which he’d heated up with a device that he’d built mostly out of the hotel hairdryer in his room (the construction of it and accompanying detailed explanation, more scientific than one he’d use in the field, had earned him an impressed look, a genuinely happy smile and a couple of really good questions), with the vanilla ice-cream that he’d picked up from a convenience store after he’d gotten out of the taxi he’d taken from the airport and shoved into the tiny freezer in the mini-fridge.

Eventually, after they’d gotten through about half of each of the pies, after discussing the construction of his makeshift pie warmer, how her pumpkin pie recipe compared to Bozer’s and how he’d managed to replicate his mom’s recipe using a lot of trial-and-error (complete with amusing anecdotes, of course), Beth put down her spork and sipped some water, then looked up at
him across the rickety little hotel table.

‘The Garcias invited me to have dinner with them tomorrow.’ She swallowed again, staring at her makeshift plate (it was the lid of one of the boxes he’d packed the pies in for their trip from LA), then looked back up at him. ‘I’m not sure if I should go…’

He, too, put down his spork, swallowed, and spoke, his voice soft.

‘When I was nineteen…the guy who’d been my EOD training officer and was my C.O. and I were on patrol in Afghanistan. We were just about to clear the last house for the day.’ Mac’s eyes flickered closed for a moment. ‘There was something wrong with our bomb disposal robot, so he told me to stay with the Humvee and fix it.’ Mac swallowed. ‘He went in alone, stepped on a pressure plate…’

Beth’s eyes flickered closed too.

‘I’m…I’m so sorry, Mac.’

He nodded in thanks, before continuing.

‘He was about to go on leave so he could see his daughter’s birth.’ A look of great sorrow, mirroring his own, appeared on her face. ‘Beth, for six years, I couldn’t face his widow and his daughter. I didn’t meet Annabelle until she was six years old.’ He looked down at the half-pies and makeshift plates. ‘I couldn’t bear the guilt. I thought that maybe they might blame me. I…I couldn’t bear to see them when I knew Al would never see them again.’ He looked up at her, met her eyes. ‘But they didn’t blame me, not at all. Not even for staying away for so long. And they were happy to see me. And I can tell Annabelle stories about her dad, help her get to know him. That really helps with that guilt, Beth.’ Without really thinking about it, he reached out with a hand, so that it brushed against hers on the tabletop. ‘I don’t know how long it’s going to take you; maybe you can go tomorrow, maybe in a year, or two, or six or ten.’ He squeezed her hand again. ‘But they won’t blame you.’

She nodded slowly, processing, then looked down at their joined hands and the half-pies and gave a soft little smile.

‘Thanks, Mac.’

A matching smile grew on his face too.

They ate breakfast together the next morning, and then, after he’d finished re-packing (he had to head back to LA; bad guys didn’t seem to take vacations), they both stood in the corridor, looking at each other again.

She held up her arms for a hug, and of course, he obliged and smiled over her shoulder.

‘If you’re ever close to LA, just drop me a line.’ They’d exchanged phone numbers the night before, along with a promise to keep in touch and strict instructions from him to just text or call if she wanted or needed to talk (thanks to a custom program by Riley, any calls from civilians now diverted to voicemail when he was on missions, so there’d be no repeats of Cairo). His smile widened. ‘I’ll show you my spaghetti-machine-spaghetti-machine and show you around the Phoenix.’

Mac was now determined to have a chat with Matty.
Beth had been sent home by MSF from her deployment early, quite understandably, given what had happened on the Dignity I.

Thus, she was in need of a job.

She was also brilliant, could compartmentalize very well, was an excellent doctor, and was brave, strong and good.

She’d be a very, very good fit for the Phoenix.

He just had to make sure he was really on his boss’s good side when he did have that chat.

Beth, too, smiled.

‘If you’re ever near…well, wherever I end up, the equivalent goes for you, Mac.’

THREE WEEKS LATER

ANOTHER NICE BUT NOT FANCY HOTEL

LA

Beth opened the door to her hotel room.

She was in LA for a couple of job interviews. Unfortunately, although she and Mac had arranged to meet up at his place, so that she could see his spaghetti-machine-spaghetti-machine, and also meet his friends-who-were-family (who sounded like awesome people), he’d had to call her the night before, extremely apologetically, to tell her that he was being called away on urgent think-tank business.

(Given how they’d ‘met’, Beth understood completely. Mac’s skill-set had been crucial, the key, really, to saving 361 people that day. Of course, he’d be needed to make such miracles happen regularly, and that was never going to be something that happened on banker’s hours and with decent notice.)

He’d said he’d contact her if he’d be back in LA before she left, but also warned her that there was a good chance it wouldn’t happen.

(That made her very disappointed – she really wanted to see him, and his spaghetti-machine-spaghetti-machine, and meet his friends-who-were-family – but she got it.)

She started as soon as she stepped inside her room.

There was a woman, a very diminutive woman, standing there.

Thankfully for Beth and her heart rate and blood pressure, she also recognized the woman immediately.

Matty Webber, the Phoenix Foundation’s Director.

Mac’s boss.

Matty smiled up at her in a way that was almost a smirk.
‘Welcome to LA, Doc. I heard you were looking for a job?’

Beth blinked several times as she processed.

The Phoenix Foundation wasn’t actually a think-tank.

Mac *did* try to save lives on a daily basis by finding unconventional solutions to unconventional problems.

However, the way he’d gone about it with the Dignity I was apparently the exception, rather than the rule.

Mac and his friends-who-were-family were covert agents of the US government.

Really, really covert agents.

And now…now his boss wanted her to become one of them.

(Well, not exactly. There’d be no world-saving or any form of secret-agent-ing for Beth; she was being offered a job in their infirmary – highly covert government agents apparently needed a lot of medical care and it mostly had to be done in-house for national security reasons and the safety of said agents, which explained why Mac had seemed to think that an apparent think-tank had use for an ER doctor. Apparently, one of their doctors was retiring, so there was a vacancy.)

After she’d finished processing, she put down her laptop (a file – heavily encrypted and with many fail-safes, apparently - had been loaded onto it from a thumb drive that had gone straight back into Matty’s pocket) and looked at the woman who might become her boss.

Matty spoke, her voice a bit softer and kinder than Beth had expected it to be.

‘Any questions?’

Beth nodded.

‘Did…did Mac ask you to do this?’

She wanted a job on her own merits, thank you very much. Not because a friend had asked on her behalf.

Matty looked her right in the eye.

(Beth realized that if Matty wanted to lie to her, she could, easily, and she’d never know, but somehow, she had a feeling that the other woman would tell the truth, at least as much as she could, national security and mind full of secrets and all, right now.)

‘No, he didn’t ask.’ That was true; Mac hadn’t managed to find what he thought was the right time to have that chat with Matty (which may or may not have been intentional on her part; she’d never tell). ‘I’m making you this offer because you deserve it. Because he was right when he said you’d fit right in.’

Beth nodded, then shifted uncomfortably. When she spoke, her voice was hesitant, a little scared, even, but clear nonetheless, and she looked Matty in the eye when she spoke.

‘I…I told myself that I’d try and learn about the culture of any hospital I got an interview at, before I accepted any offers. So…I want to do the same with the Phoenix, and…well, you are the boss, so
you’re very influential in terms of the culture…Mac says you’re part of his family, but…’ Beth shook her head a little, aware that she was rambling. ‘You banned Mac from using paperclips to clear his head.’ She tilted her chin up a little, her voice and expression making it very, very clear that she disapproved of that. Strongly. ‘Do you do that sort of thing often?’

Matty studied the young woman for a long, long moment, her expression coolly evaluative as she stared her down.

To her credit, although Beth looked like she wanted the Earth to open up and swallow her whole, she maintained eye contact, chin still a little up-tilted.

For the last five weeks, Mac had been doing his paperclip thing again, using paperclips stashed in his pockets.

She’d shot him a few looks, but he’d kept it up defiantly anyway.

Jack had shot her looks whenever Mac’s hands started altering the little pieces of metal, as if threatening her if she scolded his partner and enforced the ban.

(There was a bit of guilt in his eyes too, as if he’d regretted not standing up for Mac’s right-to-ruin-paperclips earlier, when she’d put the ban in place in the first place.)

Matty hadn’t done it to be punitive or mean.

Sure, Mac could be a pain in the ass. The expense reports alone from his missions were horrific.

(They were mostly not that bad, financially – a dam and the floor of a hissar in Turkey being notable exceptions – they were just annoying, as they were bizarre and really hard to explain and there were so many things. Clownie Cakes. A packet of Cheetos. Five bottles of chocolate sauce. A garden gnome. Two bottles of bleach. Three bottles of dish soap. A carrot cake. Four casserole dishes. Eight fishing rods. One pound of lemons.)

But she’d done it for what she’d thought was his own good.

Mac had a really, really bright career, a really, really bright future ahead of him.

But weird, seemingly-childish little habits like his paperclip thing would only hinder that.

If she could train him out of it, it’d be good for his career, standing and reputation.

Matty had done it for his own good.

She always acted for what she thought was best for her agents, even if they couldn’t see it at the time.

(Even if they never saw it. She didn’t give many explanations, after all.)

But after the last five weeks, she realized now that she was wrong.

(Rare, but it did happen.)

Banning Mac from doing his paperclip thing was doing far more harm than good to him.

Angus MacGyver might well be the only man in the world who would give up being the most decorated and respected US covert operative in decades for paperclips.
After a long, long moment, Matty smiled at the young doctor before her. A genuine smile.

(Matty liked people who stood up to her for what they truly believed was right. It took guts to question her, she knew. It took a lot to speak truth to power; it was something that she couldn’t teach.)

‘I like you.’ Beth blinked several times in surprise. Matty’s expression grew more serious. ‘I made a mistake when I banned Mac from doing his thing to paperclips. I don’t like making mistakes, and I always seek to rectify them.’

That seemed to satisfy the young woman, and she nodded and smiled, before speaking again.

‘One last thing…if I say no, what are you going to do? Keep me quiet using NDAs and the threat of prison? Or…I don’t know…wipe my memory using some kind of machine or drug you’ve developed in secret?’

(Beth thought that was highly unlikely; to the best of her knowledge and understanding, *Men-in-Black*-style memory wipes really weren’t possible with anything resembling current technology and understanding of the brain, but…well, it was the Phoenix Foundation. She was learning to expect extremely unlikely and seemingly miraculous things from anything or anyone associated with that name.)

Matty just smirked at Beth as she walked backwards towards the door.

‘Oh, you’re not going to say no.’

Then, she turned and strode out of the room.

Matty’s own finely-honed instincts told her that Beth would take the job.

Cage thought so too.

Individually, they were rarely wrong.

But both of them at once?

That was so improbable that not even Mac could make it happen.

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**EIGHT HOURS LATER**

**PHOENIX FOUNDATION HEADQUARTERS**

**LA**

As she waited for Mac, Jack, Cage, Riley and Bozer to return from their mission to Sacramento (it’d been *far* easier and simpler than expected; they’d just landed in LA and were on their way back to the Phoenix), Matty’s tablet beeped her email notification noise, and she opened up the email.

**Director Webber,**

**After careful consideration, I would like to eagerly accept your offer to work at the Phoenix Foundation.**
I am available to start as soon as I can move my things to LA.

Bethany Taylor, M.D.

Matty smiled knowingly.

‘…A, of course I’m glad that I can catch up with Beth before she leaves LA, B, it is not a date, and C, it does not look like the lovechild of R2-D2 and an Ewok trap! It’s a spaghetti-machine-spaghetti-machine! You know, it makes pasta, extremely inefficiently?’

Mac and Jack, bickering as usual, walked into the war room, followed by Riley and Cage, who were exchanging an exasperated-yet-fond look. They were followed by Bozer, who was texting someone on his phone.

Mac’s retort to Jack’s response died on his lips when he noticed the large bowl of paperclips on the table.

He looked up at Matty, as if he couldn’t quite believe it, and she just nodded and smiled at him, some level of apology in both.

Mac grinned remarkably like a kid on Christmas morning, and happily took a couple of paperclips from the bowl.

Jack, Riley, Bozer and Cage all exchanged a look, a he’s-absolutely-nuts-but-we-love-him-just-as-he-is look.

Matty just smiled, in a way that was almost a smirk.

‘I’ve got even more good news for you, Baby Einstein.’

Chapter End Notes

WOAH that was so much longer than I expected it to be! (These episode re-imaginings get away from me, methinks – though, after writing Every End is a Beginning, I realize you need about 9000 words to write something that resembles an ep of the show, I think.)

Yes, I know, the title of this one-shot gives which way the plot goes away, but I couldn’t resist! I did consider killing Beth off, but in the end, decided against it, because I felt that that was unoriginal and didn’t give me any new territory to cover that wasn’t covered either by the writers in the ep, or by me in Tea and Rocky Road. I also felt it was ‘disrespectful’ to Zoe – Beth survives because of something that could never have happened with Zoe, because somebody else chose to make the ultimate sacrifice, much like Zoe did, for much the same reasons as she did.

The Dignity I is a real MSF ship, though it works in the Mediterranean, and the Yemeni situation in here is a somewhat fictionalized version of the real, current crisis. Mawsynram is a real place, it is a city in India and is the rainiest place in the world, apparently.

I also almost cried when I wrote that scene with Chris and Mac (I am, however, much
more attached to Chris than any of you, I guess – he’s always Beth’s mentor in my works and I have some backstory in my head involving their relationship), and God, I was like so much angst…maybe too much angst…while I was writing!

Did you guys enjoy that? Was it a good re-imagining? Was I original enough or did I go too far off the plot of 2.10, War Room + Ship? (It’s kind of a balance, methinks…) How’d I handle the paperclip ban? (It became a bigger part of this story than I intended…but I personally really liked how it turned out.)

As always, if you’ve got a request – let me know!
Chapter Summary

For LaughingLadybug.

His children are nestled all snug in their beds, while visions of paperclips and duct tape
dance in their heads…so it’s time for Mac to retrieve presents from their hiding places,
finish off his DIY gifts and wrap the lot. Luckily, he’s used to working under
pressure…and Santa’s got a little helper.

Chapter Notes

Exactly what universe this story is set in isn’t really clear/established in the story – to
the best of my memory, it works in my Paperclip Charms, Just Another Patriotic
Guy/The Roommate Chronicles, There’s Something About MacGyver, Every End is a
Beginning/Somewhere in the Middle/It’s Beginning to Look a Lot Like Christmas, and
Just My Luck AUs (as well as a couple of the AUs featured in this story, like Deus Ex
Machina)...but I wrote this thinking about my Just My Luck AU.

Honestly, it doesn’t really matter – this is just fluffy, Christmas-time feels with
dad!Mac and a healthy dollop of Mac/Beth, all sprinkled with some Team-as-Family!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

MACGYVER FAMILY RESIDENCE

CHRISTMAS EVE

11:57 PM

Mac carefully listened through the door of his kids’ bedroom (at six and three respectively, Nick
and Maria still shared a bedroom), his ear pressed to a glass, which was in turn pressed to the door.
When he heard nothing but deep, steady breathing, he carefully eased the door open just a crack
and glanced inside.

He smiled, soft and loving, at what he saw.

Both of his little bundles of energy (who insisted that they weren’t really little anymore, especially
Nick) were fast asleep.

At last.

(It being Christmas Eve, bed-time had been much later than usual, and there’d been several more
bed-time stories than usual too, naturally all Christmas-themed.)
He carefully closed the door as silently as possible, then made his way back into the kitchen, the glass in hand.

His wife was there, already in her pyjamas (purple chequered pants and a faded, well-worn Oh Chemistree, Oh Chemistree T-shirt that’d been a Christmas gift from him years ago) and a navy robe with white polka dots, getting a head-start on preparations for the family Christmas party the next day.

That made Mac’s smile widen further as he put the glass back into the cupboard where it belonged.

_Apart from the very obvious not-being-a-boy part, Beth would have made a much better Boy Scout than me._

_She’s always adhered to their ‘Be Prepared’ motto far, far better than I have._

Closing the door to the cupboard, he reached out and wrapped an arm around her waist, then pressed a kiss to the side of her forehead.

‘The children are nestled all snug in their beds, while visions of sugarplums dance in their heads…’ Beth gave a snort of laughter, all the while shooting him a look. He simply kept smiling, the expression growing simultaneously a little sheepish and a little smug. ‘Just couldn’t resist, Beth.’

She shook her head fondly, then leaned her head against his shoulder, a wry smile on her face.

‘In this household, I think it's more likely to be paperclips and duct tape than sugarplums, Mac.’

That made him chuckle, even as he nodded in agreement. Then, he gestured towards the Christmas tree in the living room, which didn’t have any presents under it yet.

‘Will you be alright wrapping? I’ve still got a few things to finish up with some of the presents…’

Mac was, of course, _making_ presents for everyone, or, at the very least, modifying something or the other to make it better and/or cooler.

Beth nodded, that wry smile still on her face, a touch of ruefulness to it now.

‘Every year, we say we’re going to get this done before Christmas Eve…’ She glanced at the clock on the kitchen wall and her expression grew even more wry. ‘Or, technically, before very early on Christmas morning…’

_We haven’t managed to get all the presents wrapped before Christmas Eve, or even before very early on Christmas morning, since before the kids came along._

_Parenting is hard._

_We’ve found it requires a curious mixture of being prepared and highly organized, and improvising._

_Luckily, we’ve got complementary skill-sets in that regard._

_Besides, nothing worth having ever comes easy, as my grandfather liked to say, and Beth and I think that it’s very much been worth it._

Mac shrugged, a similar wry smile on his face.

‘Maybe we’ll pull that off when Nick and Maria are older.’
Then, after kissing his wife (he didn’t need mistletoe to do that, not at all, and he couldn’t not take advantage of the fact that there were no little eyes around whose owners said eww loudly whenever they happened to witness such an icky activity), Mac headed off to finish off his DIY Christmas presents.

Still smiling, soft and fond and happy, Beth started pulling Christmas presents from their hiding spots.

She and Mac had to be very creative with hiding the Christmas presents, especially the ones for the children, in particular the ones from Santa Claus.

(Given that his existence was plausible, Beth really did wish that the jolly old man would help them out; delivery of presents very late on Christmas Eve/very early on Christmas Day by whom she thought was most likely an alien or a group of aliens via Einstein-Rosen bridge would be so much easier than carefully selecting presents for the kids at least a month in advance, going Christmas shopping in late November/early December and then having to hide the gifts for nearly a month.)

(Nick, Maria and Hedy, Bozer and Riley’s daughter, liked to spend the lead-up to Christmas searching the MacGyver family home for hidden gifts. Mini-Mac, as Bozer called their son, was the ring-leader in all of these searches, and they were always aided and abetted by their Grandpa Jack. The little group was very, very good at finding hiding spots, so they just had to be very, very creative.)

(Luckily, Mac was excellent at that.)

Beth removed a carefully-selected couple of books from one of the bookshelves in her and Mac’s bedroom, then pressed down firmly on a very well camouflaged, nearly-seamless panel that had been hidden behind the books, which then popped open, allowing her to reach into a cavity in the wall.

CHRISTMAS DAY

1:32 AM

Mac walked back into the living room, carrying a festive red sack containing his now-finished-but-as-yet-unwrapped present-projects. He’d swapped his chinos and navy-blue button-down worn over a long-sleeved black T-shirt for a Santa costume, complete with a hat that hid his hair reasonably well, a fake, bushy, white beard that was rather itchy and a modified pillow stuffed under his coat that didn’t make him look pregnant.

There was now a large pile of presents under the Christmas tree, some wrapped with brown butcher paper with red or green twine serving as ribbons, some wrapped with bright red, green or gold wrapping paper with holly-patterned ribbons.

On the coffee table, there were spools of ribbon and twine, three rolls of wrapping paper, a large roll of butcher paper, and a tape dispenser. There were fifteen pieces of already-cut sticky tape stuck to the edge of the coffee table, ready for use, and there was still a stack of unwrapped presents by the couch.

Mac’s very sleepy wife was wrapping a Lego set for Nick in green reindeer-patterned wrapping paper, a navy-blue Swiss Army knife in her right hand.
She looked up at him and smiled, quirking an eyebrow at him. Mac chuckled in response to her unspoken but clear question, gesturing to his costume with one hand, then towards the kids’ bedroom.

‘Just in case they decide to sneak out of bed to see if they can spot Santa…’ He put down the sack of presents, crouched down and started pulling the gifts out, starting with the DIY kids’ chemistry set he’d made for Maria (it’d allow her to mix up slime or Play-Doh of any colour she wished, and all the ‘chemicals’ were 100% edible and all the ‘glassware’ plastic, so it was very safe for a three-year-old), a very determined, yet somehow soft expression on his face. ‘They’re kids; they should believe in Santa, not not be able to rule out his existence.’

Beth nodded in agreement, her own expression mirroring his, reaching out to put her hand on his for a moment.

‘I knew they’d grow up fast, but…’

He turned his hand over so that he could weave his fingers through hers, nodding.

‘…We never thought it could be this fast.’

It’s a common parenting cliché and axiom that your kids grow up faster than you could possibly expect.

So, of course, we expected them to grow up fast.

Still, clearly, ‘they grow up so fast’ holds, even if you’re expecting it.

That is, no matter how fast you think they’ll grow up, your little ones get less little even faster than you thought possible.

Nick, precociously brilliant at six, quite possibly more so than either of them ever had been, had started asking questions about the existence of Santa Claus, probing ones that were shifting into territory that required answers involving math and Einstein-Rosen bridges that could really only show that the existence of Santa was plausible and could not be ruled out.

For now, his child’s desire to believe dominated, but they knew it wouldn’t be all that long before the scales tipped.

They also knew that the whole process would probably start even earlier with Maria, who seemed to be more or less as brilliant as her brother, given that she had Nick as an influence.

Children should believe, not have to content themselves with plausibility and an inability to rule it out.

They should just believe.

I love them, we love them, so, so much. Every bit of them, those emerging brilliant and ever-curious intellects included.

Even when they lead to awkward, uncomfortable questions, like when Jack tried to convince Nick that most babies are delivered by stork, but MacGyver babies are delivered by drone when Beth was pregnant with Maria.

Nick wasn’t terribly convinced, and then asked why Mommy was getting fat if he was telling the truth.
I assure you, my revenge on Jack was suitably diabolical.

Anyway, the point is, we want our kids to have a childhood. To not have to worry about anything more than the monsters under the bed or making sure they’re on Santa’s nice list.

Like all parents do.

And part of that is ensuring that they can believe. Just believe, for at least a couple more years.

Six is too young to stop believing. Three is far too young.

We know it’s going to happen one day, but this year shouldn’t be that year.

And when they stop just believing…well, then it’s time to break out the math.

It did confuse Jack even more all those years ago, but I’ve improved it over the years – with help from Beth, and a little input from Riley, and some inspiration from Jack, believe it or not – so I’m reasonably confident that by then, I’ll be able to explain it in a way that they can follow, more or less.

Beth’s smile widened a little as she squeezed his hand and looked over at him. Then, she giggled, and let go of his hand to reach into her robe pockets for a tube of her hand lotion and one of his handkerchiefs.

‘You’ve got a bit of grease on your cheek, Mac…’ She squeezed some of the hand lotion onto the handkerchief, tugged his fake beard out of the way and cleaned his cheek gently but efficiently. Mac smiled as she finished her task and folded the handkerchief neatly, putting it back into her pocket, then straightened his fake beard and sat back on her heels. She gestured to his costume, smile widening and growing more wry. ‘We should get me a costume for next year; with this family, I-saw-Mommy-kissing-Santa-Claus would be bound to get out of control…’

Mac groaned, even as he nodded in agreement.

‘Jack would have a field day…’

Beth simply nodded wryly, then handed him the roll of butcher paper.

‘If we want to get more than two hours’ sleep, we should probably get on with it.’ Mac smiled and nodded as he took the roll from her. ‘The ones in wrapping paper with the ribbons are gifts from ‘Santa’, the butcher-paper-and-twine ones are from us.’ Beth passed him the roll of red twine. ‘I’ve done the top flap over the bottom for Santa’s gifts, with squared-off edges and about an inch overlap, ours have the top flap over the bottom as well, but have triangular edges and about a half-inch overlap…’

Mac’s smile widened as he pulled out his own Swiss Army knife to start wrapping the modified video camera he’d made for Hedy.

As you can see, I’m not the only one who’s gone a little overboard in trying to ensure that the kids believe, just believe, for another year.

They’re worth that little bit of extra effort.

Family always is.
Standing in the living room, before the Christmas tree, Mac and Beth both yawned, even as they smiled, proud and happy, at the tableau before them.

The coffee table had been cleaned up, all trace of the frantic present-wrapping gone. Mac was back in his chinos and T-shirt, his Santa costume carefully hidden away for next year.

And there was a very large pile of beautifully-wrapped presents under the tree.

Mac wrapped his arms around his wife’s waist, pressing a kiss to the top of her head.

‘What time did we get the kids to promise to not wake us until again?’

There was a very wry smile in her voice when she replied.

‘They promised they wouldn’t get out of bed until 6:30, and that they wouldn’t wake us or open any presents until 7…’

Mac smiled wryly.

‘So about three hours of sleep for us, then…’ His smile grew even more wry. ‘Well, we’ve had worse.’

I always try my best to keep my promises.

Beth and I are raising Nick and Maria to do the same.

But kids on Christmas morning…well, when I was a kid, I was never quite able to keep my promise to stay in bed until exactly 6:30, and even though I didn’t actually open any presents, nor did I go jump on my parents’ bed or anything like that before 7…my attempts to deduce what I’d been given or exactly how Santa had entered and exited our home usually wound up generating a lot more noise than I thought…

It really was the most wonderful time of the year.

Mac’s smile widened as he held Beth a little tighter, ducking a little to tuck his head over her shoulder so that they were cheek to cheek, the two of them taking another moment more to admire their handiwork, soft, warm, content smiles on their faces.

Now that I’m on the other side…even if I’m going to be running on three hours of sleep tomorrow…it still is the most wonderful time of the year.
As always – let me know if you have a request!
For Hermione Bosch. There are some things you don’t learn about a person when you meet in a warzone. Jack discovers that his new partner loves Bulgarian folk music, enjoys spectating golf and is addicted to HGTV. Or, in which Mac trolls Jack.

Chapter Notes

This is canon-compliant up until 2.11, Bullet + Pen, and is set pre-canon. It’s also a little cracky, but probably not more so than what the show would do…

See the end of the chapter for more notes

MACGYVER’S RESIDENCE

LA

Jack unlocked his new partner’s front door (Mac had given him a key and told him he didn’t need to knock), and stepped inside. Mac’s roommate, Bozer, was in the kitchen, wearing an apron that proclaimed *Kiss the Cook*, humming to himself and stirring what smelled like the most delicious tomato soup that Jack would ever have the privilege of tasting. There was a whole array of different kinds of cheese on the kitchen counter, variously sliced or grated with what seemed to be military-style precision.

(Bozer, Jack had realized, took his food very, very seriously.)

(Since he got to eat the fruits of that labour, Jack had no complaints there whatsoever.)

The younger man looked up and grinned at him, then pointed to the door that led out to the garage.

‘He’s doing his thing. Not exactly sure *what* that is, exactly, but…’

That was accompanied by a fond little shrug with matching grin, and Jack smiled fondly, shaking his head.

He headed into the garage, and his ears were immediately assailed by the voice of a woman, singing in some language that he was pretty sure was one of the Balkan ones. The music, which was emanating from something that looked vaguely like a set of speakers and very much like one of Mac’s DIY projects, sounded classical and folksy (there was definitely a classical choir in the background), but there was also something very exotic and strange about it, something that he couldn’t quite put a finger on.

His blonde partner was standing in front of a thing that looked like a cross between a bicycle, a fairy-floss machine and a windmill, adjusting something. He looked up as Jack entered and smiled
and waved in greeting, as Jack made a face as the singer hit a particularly shrill, high-pitched note.

‘Brother, what is this racket?’

(Sure, Mac was a little weird – okay, more than a little weird – but while Jack had concluded that Mac probably didn’t listen to the modern stuff that most of his generation seemed to like, he’d pegged him as a classic rock kind of guy.)

(Not this…whatever it was.)

Mac looked up from whatever it was he was building and at Jack, looking rather affronted.

‘Bulgarian folk music.’ He pointed a grease-stained finger at Jack. ‘And it is infinitely better than your singing.’

Jack gaped at him for a moment, both affronted and utterly bemused.

‘Bulgarian folk music…Mac, brother, you like Bulgarian folk music?’ He made a spluttering noise of disbelief. ‘But…Mac, man, what about the classics? AC/DC? Metallica? Guns N’ Roses?’

The blonde, who’d gone back to tinkering with the bicycle-fairy-floss-machine-windmill hybrid, looked up at Jack again, shrugging.

‘They’re alright, when you’re not butchering their songs, but…’ He gestured to the DIY speakers. ‘AC/DC doesn’t do asymmetric meters, Jack. Their music just doesn’t have the richness and complexity and subtlety and intrigue offered by, say, nine or eleven or fifteen beats per measure.’ He shrugged again. ‘That’s something you can really only find in Balkan folk music.’

Jack just nodded slowly, glancing between Mac, who’d returned to working on his thingamajig again immediately after he’d finished speaking, and the speakers.

‘Well…I’ll leave you to do your thing to your weird folksy tunes, brother. I’ll…uh…go see if Bozer needs any help with dinner.’

The week after he discovered his partner’s love of Bulgarian folk music, Jack stepped onto Mac’s front porch, and was nearly bowled over by Bozer, who burst out of the door and ran by, dressed in his work uniform.

‘Oh, God, I’m late, Mr Lind’s gonna be pissed…oh, hi, Jack!’

‘Hi, Bozer!’

The greeting was ineffectual and pointless, given Bozer’s rush (he was already diving into his car), but Jack had been raised by his mama to have proper manners.

(Well, she’d tried her best, anyway.)

He stepped through the open door, closed it behind him, and found Mac sitting on the couch, feet up on the coffee table, a beer in hand, watching TV.

However, the big screen didn’t show a football game or a basketball game or even a baseball game.

No, Mac was, apparently, keenly watching golf.

As Jack watched, dumbstruck, the blonde grinned and slapped his free hand on his thigh, turning to
the older man and pointing at the screen, where some golfer had just apparently hit a hole-in-one.

‘Did you see that, Jack? The perfect amount of force, applied at the perfect angle…’

Jack picked his jaw up off the floor, and blinked twice, then found his voice.

‘Golf, brother? Golf?’

Mac rolled his eyes.

‘Golf is a highly underrated spectator sport, Jack.’ Mac held up a notebook covered in what looked like gibberish to Jack (he recognized the numbers and letters, mostly – he wasn’t so good with Greek symbols - but they were arranged in such a way that looked like nonsense to him), but clearly made plenty of sense to the blonde. ‘There’s so many variables; everything from wind speed to the stature of each individual golfer.’ He smiled like a little kid. ‘The physics is fascinating.’

Jack backed away slowly, hoping that a love for golf wasn’t contagious.

‘I’m…I’m gonna go grab some beer, brother.’

Mac raised his own drink as he turned back to the TV.

‘Golf is even better with beer. Hurry back; the coverage is turning to Adam Scott’s round next, and you don’t want to miss that!’

Five days later, Jack walked in to find Mac on the couch again, watching TV again, transfixed again, but with a large bowl of popcorn on his lap this time.

There was one of those HGTV house flipping shows (they were all the same to Jack) on the screen. Jack glanced between the TV and his partner, jaw dropping and making noises of disbelief, and Mac threw his hands up in an exasperated manner.

‘I love DIY, Jack! What did you expect?’

With that, he turned back to the TV, where the house-flipping couple were arguing over the backsplash, and popped several pieces of popcorn in his mouth.

Jack continued to do his best impression of a fish.

The next morning, when Mac got out of the shower after his run, dressed for the day and running a hand through his damp hair, his roommate, still clad in pyjamas and a little bleary-eyed, was making his world-class waffles, using Mac’s modified triple-decker waffle iron (it could make three waffles at once, so was much more efficient – three times more so, to be precise – than a standard waffle iron). Mac smiled as he approached the kitchen counter.

‘Morning, Boze.’

‘Morning, bro!’ Bozer pulled the waffles out of the iron, and put them on a plate, pouring more batter into the waffle iron, then drizzling syrup and stewed berries over the three just-cooked waffles. He held the plate out to Mac. ‘Eat up!’

Mac reached into the cutlery drawer for a knife and fork, his smile widening.
‘Thanks, Boze.’

He did as instructed, cutting himself a healthy bite of waffle and popping it into his mouth. After quickly inspecting the three waffles-to-be in the iron, Bozer pointed at his BFF with his spatula.

‘Bro, how long are you planning on messing with Jack for?’ Bozer held up his hands with a grin. ‘Not that I don’t love seeing you troll him, man, just wondering.’

Mac smirked.

‘I don’t know yet, Bozer.’ His smirk widened. ‘I’ve still got a couple of ideas up my sleeve.’

_Honestly, I’ll probably stop when I can’t stand to watch yet another argument over a kitchen backsplash or yet another flipper or flippers buying a house without doing even a basic structural inspection_.

_Though, it might be a while…the physics of golf actually is fascinating, even if it’s not the most exciting of spectator sports, and Bulgarian folk music and its asymmetric meters are really growing on me…_

Chapter End Notes

Err…this was probably not what you were thinking about but…*points dramatically* look, there’s the plot bunny! Blame him!

The Bulgarian folk music bit is inspired by Phineas from _Phineas and Ferb_ he has an odd love of Bulgarian folk dancing). The golf bit is inspired by a couple of real people – I once met a guy who loved to watch golf and had actually gotten in to playing the sport by watching it, and I also have a close friend who loves to watch cricket and has managed to get me sort-of into it (it appears extremely dull and repetitive, but there’s actually lots of strategy and many, many factors and variables to consider when constructing those strategies). HGTV is mostly so that Mac can say ‘I love DIY; what did you expect?’ and because I also have a bizarre soft spot for house-flipping shows…

As always – let me know if you’ve got a request!

It’s now NYE here in Australia, so Happy New Year, everyone! I hope that 2018 is a great year for you!

In terms of fics for the New Year – there’s only one in the works right now, and it’s definitely weird. The working title is _The Stone-Hearted Queen_, and it is a fairytale!AU heavily based on _Beauty and the Beast_. It involves teenage!Mac, Bozer and Riley, a curse and matchmaking…but no talking furniture! The following is my working summary: ‘There’s a storm outside, they’ve got nowhere to go, and they’re just kids, Patty, you gotta let them stay!’ Orphaned, hunted and desperate, Mac, Bozer and Riley seek refuge in the home of a cursed Queen, said to have a heart of stone. After befriending the castle’s also-cursed inhabitants, they resolve to break the curse…by helping the Queen and her faithful Captain of the Guard fall in love.

I’ve planned it out fully, I have most of the key scenes in my head, and I’m now
working on writing it properly; I’m hoping to have it done and start posting it in mid-Jan.
His Own Time

Chapter Summary

For Happy Anon.

‘Tell me you’re kidding, Matty…Mac, brother, hurry up! I’m sick of this casino town, and you’re taking your sweet time!’

Mac’s wife goes into labour while he’s on a mission. Of course, he’s kept in the dark to prevent him from getting distracted…so it’s up to Jack to make sure his partner gets home in time.

Chapter Notes

Title comes from the saying about babies coming on their own time and nobody else’s. This is a sequel to Deus Ex Machina from earlier in this fic. (It was the only AU I could think of, off the top of my head, that I’ve created in which Mac is a secret agent, he and Beth are in a relationship and it is Matty who would tell Jack, as requested by Happy Anon.) It takes place a few years after the end of that story.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

HOTEL ROOM

GRAND SIERRA RESORT AND CASINO

RENO

NEVADA

‘…Man, this is perfect! Once we’ve caught the bad guy, we can hit the tables, you know, make sure you get a last little bit of fun before you’re saddled with a ball and chain for the next eighteen-plus years!’

Mac rolled his eyes as he set up their equipment. He and Jack had been sent to Reno to capture a mercenary, Ryan Lim, former Taiwanese Special Forces, who’d been a thorn in the side of just about every US intelligence agency for the last five years. He’d been spotted at the Grand Sierra, and had a known weakness for high-stakes poker.

In other words, this is just another Wednesday for us.

(Ever since Beth had reached the 36th week of her pregnancy, all of his and Jack’s missions had been within four hours’ flight of LA, something that he had definitely noticed and was very, very grateful to Matty for.)
He kept assembling the security system, speaking as he worked.

‘Jack, A, the expression ball and chain is typically used as a pejorative term for a significant other who weighs down their partner with restrictions and demands.’ Mac looked up at his partner, raising an eyebrow wryly. ‘Are you really insulting my wife and/or my unborn son?’

Jack held up his hands.

‘Woah, ‘course not, brother! Poor choice of words.’

Mac nodded, and continued, looking back down at what he was assembling.

‘And B, you already said exactly that during my bachelor party. It loses something the second time, Jack.’

_Actually, pretty much straight after he said that, my bachelor party got cut short.

_Jack and I had to go prevent the Panamanian ambassador from being blown up.

_We succeeded, but we also went for a dip in some sewage, and poor Beth had to see to a very smelly me and Jack.

_Sometimes, I really don’t know why she puts up with me.

Jack huffed out a sigh as he checked his weapons.

‘Okay, so no last hurrah, but how about you hit the blackjack tables and win some big moolah?’ Jack gestured to Mac with a cartridge of bullets. ‘Since kids are expensive and all.’

Mac just rolled his eyes again and ignored his partner.

_Research tells me that everyone copes with impending parenthood a little differently.

_Still, Jack has a really odd way of dealing with his impending grandfatherhood.

_____________________________

MACGYVER'S RESIDENCE

LA

_____________________________

Bozer hummed to himself as he prepared tomato soup and grilled cheese sandwiches, making sure to put anchovies and barbecue sauce on two of the sandwiches.

(Pregnancy cravings were weird.)

Since she was 39 weeks pregnant, Beth was, of course, on maternity leave. Bozer was at her and Mac’s house (he’d moved out and in with Riley a couple of years ago), since it’d been agreed upon by all of them (Matty included – she’d actually ordered him there the instant Mac had been summoned to the Phoenix for a mission) that she couldn’t be left alone for any length of time now, with the baby’s arrival imminent.

Besides, Mac’s already very strong protective instincts had gone a bit crazy ever since he’d learned he was going to be a father. In fact, Mac had just gone a little cuckoo, full stop. Or, at least, more cuckoo than he already was.
The house’s security system had been fully upgraded three times, and the whole place had been baby-proofed thoroughly in a way that only Mac could baby-proof. Gadgets like a solar-powered bottle warmer, a sat-phone baby monitor and a self-rocking, lullaby-playing cradle that was also fire-proof, earthquake-proof and bullet-proof had started appearing. The house had acquired handles and poles placed at strategic locations, to help Beth get up, once her belly had gotten so big it’d become difficult for her to stand up under her own power after sitting down.)

His BFF was going to be a great dad, Bozer knew.

But since the great daddy-to-be was currently capturing a bad guy in Reno and couldn’t be here to dote on his very pregnant wife, Bozer was being a good bro and doing it in his stead.

Bozer looked up as the bathroom door opened and Beth stepped back into the living room, instantly watching her for any signs that she needed assistance of any kind. She smiled at him and shook her head fondly as she waddled towards the kitchen, then she suddenly grabbed onto the back of the couch with a hand, hissing in pain.

Bozer dropped the wooden spoon he was stirring the soup with into the pot, barely remembering to turn off the stove, and rushed over to her side.

‘Beth, are you-’

She took a deep breath and pointed at the puddle on the floor beneath her feet.

‘Bozer, I’m in labour.’

Bozer immediately panicked, waving his hands around.

‘Oh my God, we gotta get you to the hospital, where’s your bag? Or is the baby almost here? Am I gonna have to deliver him? Mac made me read a book on it-‘

‘Bozer!’ Beth yelled in her listen-to-me-or-else doctor’s voice, then, when he stilled, switched to her calm-but-caring doctor’s voice. ‘Calm down. Breathe.’

Bozer did as instructed, and then reached for his pocket, to pull out his phone.

‘I’ve got to let Mac know-‘

Beth grabbed his arm, stilling it, and shook her head.

‘Don’t tell him, Bozer.’ He looked at her as if she’d lost her mind entirely, and Beth swallowed and shook her head, even though he could easily tell, from her eyes, from her face, that she wanted nothing more than Mac at her side at that moment and for what was to come. She took another deep breath, her doctor’s calm appearing in her eyes, setting aside that wish, rubbing her belly. ‘We can’t risk him being distracted, not even a little.’

That could cost the lives of innocents, or Jack’s or Mac’s.

Bozer nodded, a little sadly.

Working for the Phoenix required a lot of sacrifices.

Beth had always understood that, understood the importance of the job, the fact that, sometimes, it had to come first, that, sometimes, she’d have to share Mac with the world, and that that was no slight on her.
Of course she did, given her own profession and how they’d met.

She took another deep breath, one hand still on her belly, almost as if she was reassuring her son.

‘Besides, the normal duration of labour for a first time mother is between ten and twenty hours; given that he’s only in Reno and it’s as standard a mission as Phoenix missions get, there’s a good chance he’ll be back in time.’ Her expression turned more wry, searching for that silver lining like their whole makeshift family always did. ‘And I’m probably going to spend a good deal of the next ten to twenty hours saying extremely unflattering, insulting or threatening things about him anyway, so it might be for the best that he’s not here…’

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PHOENIX FOUNDATION HEADQUARTERS

SOMEWHERE IN LA

Riley’s phone beeped in her pocket as Mac and Jack signed off, ready to execute their plan for capturing Lim. She sent the detailed map of the casino to the partners, then pulled out her phone.

Her eyes widened a little as she read the text, and she immediately looked up at Matty, Cage and Jill, who were in the war room with her. Jill was typing, while Cage and Matty spoke in hushed tones.

‘Guys, Beth’s in labour.’

Jill’s eyes widened.

‘We need to get Mac back on-’

Cage shook her head and cut off the blonde tech.

‘No, Beth would have vetoed telling him.’

Riley just nodded in confirmation, holding up her phone, Beth’s text on the screen, when Jill looked over at her.

Matty, meanwhile, simply looked over at Riley.

‘Go.’ Riley nodded, not having to be told twice, already getting up, as their boss pointed at Jill. ‘Jill, take over for her.’ Matty strode towards the war room door, which Riley opened for her. ‘I’ll be back in a minute.’

She walked out, followed by Riley, who immediately headed towards the garage to head to the hospital.

Matty stepped into the nearest women’s bathroom, walked into a cubicle, closed and locked the door behind her, reached into a secret pocket sewn into the lining of her jacket, and pulled out a phone.

One she kept for emergencies.

She texted a number that she’d long ago memorized a code phrase known only to her and the recipient, chosen months ago.
Jack, who was loitering in one of the casino’s service corridors, hidden from security as Jill had looped the security cameras, waiting to ambush Lim once Mac had lured him to this site chosen by him, Mac and Cage, pulled out his phone as it beeped.

There was a message from a number he didn’t recognize, but the message itself was familiar.

**Longhorn – drone on its way.**

Jack muted his earpiece and cursed.

That was the coded message that he and his boss had set up months ago, in case Beth did go into labour while Mac was out on a mission.

(When they’d been picking the phrase, he’d wanted to go with something involving a stork, before he’d realized that MacGyver babies would be delivered by drone, not by stork. Matty had rolled her eyes and scoffed at him, but indulged him anyway.)

‘Tell me you’re kidding, Matty…’

Of course, he knew she wasn’t. Matty the Hun was not a kidder.

Jack sighed, a little sad, knowing that he was absolutely not to tell Mac under any circumstances before ex-fil.

He got how the job had to come first when they were on the job, and he got that the news would distract Mac, just a little bit (he was really good at compartmentalizing, after all), but that that little bit could be deadly for someone, including his partner. He also knew that Beth would never resent Mac even if he missed the whole thing, but Jack also knew that Mac really, really wanted to be there…

So, Jack just had to make sure that they wrapped the mission in time for Mac to welcome his baby boy to the world.

He rubbed his hands together.

He knew exactly how he was going to do it.

Jack un-muted his comm.

‘Mac, brother, what’s taking you so long? You losing your touch?’

Sitting at a high-stakes poker table, playing poker, Mac allowed himself a slight annoyed reaction in response to his partner’s words, as he rolled his eyes internally.

The fake tell would only help, after all.

His job in this plan was to anger Lim, who was extremely competitive and had anger issues, by kicking his ass in poker without breaking a sweat, so that Lim would follow him to the ambush
point, intending to rough him up, so Jack, with Mac’s help, could kick his ass in the knuckle-sandwich fashion.

Mac was extremely, extremely good at poker. He’d learned at MIT, playing with Frankie, Smitty and the rest of their friends, all of whom were capable of counting cards.

With Cage, who could not be bluffed (they’d all tried over the years, and failed miserably), helping him out by way of his black-framed camera-glasses and earpiece, he was repeatedly scooping the pot.

Still, as Cage had emphasized, it would take time to piss Lim off enough.

Mac got that Jack wanted to get a chance to hit the tables himself, have some fun, but it was highly unlikely (read: essentially impossible) that Matty would allow it anyway, even if they finished the mission in ‘record time’.

_There’s no true record for this, of course._

_Every Phoenix mission is different._

_But that doesn’t mean you can apply a classification system to them, and the average amount of time Jack and I need to complete a mission of this type, to ex-fil, is 9.27 hours._

_We’re at 4.58 right now._

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**ABANDONED CASINO**

**(VERY CREEPY ABANDONED CASINO)**

**(IT MIGHT BE HAUNTED)**

**(ACCORDING TO TRIPADVISOR)**

**RENO**

**NEVADA**

Jack paced along the stained, formerly-plush red carpet, grousing and antsy.

‘Mac, brother, hurry up! I’m sick of this casino town, I don’t wanna find out if those people on TripAdvisor are right about the ghosts, and you’re taking your sweet time!’

Of course, the mission had gone wrong.

They _always_ went wrong, but Jack had really been hoping that there was some justice in the universe and that it would go right _just this once_.

It turned out that Lim hadn’t come to Reno alone.

No, he’d brought two of his merc buddies and sometimes-teammates with him.

Thus, although they now had Lim prisoner, they’d also gotten themselves into a spot of bother. His two merc buddies weren’t happy that their buddy had been captured (there was, apparently, some honour among mercs, and besides, they weren’t willing to take the risk that he might flip on them
and sell them out), so Mac and Jack, their prisoner in tow, were being pursued.

Hence, they were now in this boarded-up, derelict casino, and Mac was building one of his somethings to take down the two other bad guys.

The blonde didn’t even look up from what he was doing, though Jack knew he was rolling his eyes.

‘Rome wasn’t built in a day!’ He pointed at an old slot machine. ‘Grab me that lever.’

Jack rolled his eyes in return and grabbed the lever and handed it to his partner.

‘That’s ‘cause you weren’t the one building it, man!’

Mac scoffed as he did his thing with the lever, carving marks into one end with his Swiss Army knife. At that moment, Lim decided to return to consciousness, and started struggling ineffectually against his bonds, making *humph* sounds around the makeshift gag he wore (it was Mac’s tie). Jack just punched him in the jaw and knocked his lights out again, as Mac dragged part of his makeshift trap (at least, that’s what Jack thought it was; it looked a bit like something out of *Scooby Doo*) into place.

‘Jack!’

Mac’s partner waved a hand.

‘He was annoying me! Besides, it’s *his* fault that we’re not already on the jet on our way back home!’

Mac snorted and returned to his work, pointing at the old poker table next to Jack.

‘Toss me those poker chips.’

Jack was being annoying. He also seemed quite irritable.

However, Mac didn’t waste any brainpower thinking about the *why*.

(Jack did seem a little more annoying than usual, but it wasn’t as if being annoying was unusual for Jack.)

(Of course Mac loved him, annoyingness and all, but Jack was quite often in an annoying mood, and he estimated that 85% of the time, it was for no good reason, like wardrobe giving him a blue tie instead of a red one, or the hotel breakfast buffet not having Honey-Nut Cheerios.)

(Jack being a bit irritable and taking it out on the bad guys wasn’t all that unusual either, particularly when missions went south.)

Mac had far more important things on his mind.

Like making sure that this makeshift trap would actually work. He’d gotten the idea out of this old episode of *Scooby Doo* that he and Bozer had watched years ago.

Cartoon physics was tricky to translate to its real world equivalent.

Fifteen minutes later, all three mercs were restrained and handed over to the local FBI, and Mac and Jack were unhurt and walking away, towards their rental car.
As far as conclusions to missions go, whether they went south or not at any point, that was pretty much perfect.

And we’re done in record time too; 6.24 hours.

And now I might get to see Jack try and beg Matty to delay our ex-fil, so he can -

Wait a minute, Jack was complaining about how we weren’t already heading home earlier -

And then, it hit me.

Mac’s brain, now that it had far much more processing power at its disposal, and was no longer focused on the mission, very quickly came to a conclusion.

He stopped in his tracks and turned to his partner.

‘Beth’s in labour, isn’t she?’

He didn’t even give Jack time to respond, apparently getting the answer he needed from the older man’s face, and before Jack could do much (he only got out ‘Mac, son…’), the blonde had picked Jack’s pocket for the rental car keys and started running towards the vehicle.

‘Jack, we need to get home ASAP; hurry up!’

Jack threw his hands in the air, long-suffering and exasperated.

‘That’s what I’ve been trying to get you to do, brother!’

He shook his head, fondness permeating the exasperated gesture, and ran after Mac.

HOSPITAL

LA

After a short plane ride that had felt much longer and had required Jack to spend the whole hour and 40 minutes trying to calm his partner down, and a drive that had probably gotten him a speeding ticket or two (Jack had absolutely refused to allow Mac to drive, but he’d still had to put up with Mac’s backseat driving), Mac burst into Beth’s hospital room, followed closely by Jack and Cage, who’d been sent downstairs to meet them.

(Matty was dealing with debrief and the FBI and Oversight so Mac and Jack didn’t have to.)

A very flushed, panting Beth was on the bed, face pained as a contraction passed. Bozer and Riley were holding her hands, and wordlessly, Bozer released the hand he was holding, and got up from his seat, Riley doing the same a moment later.

Mac sat down in Bozer’s vacated seat and took his wife’s hand immediately.

‘I’m so, so sorry, Beth…’

She turned her head to face him, a very wry look on her face, underscored by understanding.

‘I really should have foreseen this happening, given our lives, Mac.’ She paused, voice even more wry and teasing when she continued. ‘You can make it up to me by putting up with me threatening
you with a vasectomy repeatedly for however long this is going to take.’

Mac chuckled, a sound that was quickly cut off as another contraction ripped through her, and she squeezed his hand very, very hard and cried out.

Cage tapped Jack on the shoulder, and shot Bozer and Riley a glance, and the four of them slipped out of the room to give the couple some privacy.

Two hours later, Jack, Riley, Bozer, Cage and Matty filed into the room, all smiling.

A very exhausted but extremely proud and happy Beth was sitting in a reclined position on the bed, cradling a very precious bundle with a rather impressive shock of blonde hair. Mac sat in a chair beside the bed, staring at the blonde bundle in his wife’s arms, completely and utterly fascinated and besotted by the newest addition to his family.

Both new parents smiled up at them as they entered, and Beth passed their son off to her husband.

‘Go make introductions, Mac.’

His smile widened, and he stood, cradling the baby carefully and expertly in his arms (Mac had watched many a YouTube video in preparation for this, and even improvised a fake baby to practice with, using a baby doll that had been weighted based on data for average weight distribution in babies and the estimated birth weight he and Beth had determined for their son), and walked closer to his friends-who-were-family, pausing in front of each of them in turn.

‘Nicholas Harry MacGyver, meet your Grandpa Jack, your Auntie Riley, your Uncle Bozer, your Auntie Cage, and your…Matty.’

Chapter End Notes

As usual, Mac and Beth’s son is named Nicholas Harry MacGyver (known as Nick to most, Mini-Mac to Bozer), after Tesla and Mac’s grandfather. And yes, Matty is just Matty, because I can’t imagine her being Grandma Matty or Auntie Matty or anything like that, so…she’s just Matty! :) Did you guys like Mac’s baby-related MacGyverisms? Were there enough Team-as-Family feels and Jack-and-Mac-bromance feels? (Sometimes, methinks there are never enough, so…)

Happy Anon, I hope this hit the spot! (I really enjoyed writing this one! It was a great prompt!)

As always, let me know if you’ve got a request!
Target Practice

Chapter Summary

For LaughingLadybug. Missing scene set between the seasons. During a stopover in LA between Kiev and Patagonia, Jack finds the time to give Riley a tip on the shooting range.

Chapter Notes

This is set sometime in the approximately two weeks between Seasons 1 and 2. It is canon-compliant up to everything that we know about those two weeks as of 2.12, Mac + Jack.

Thoughts on 2.12, Mac + Jack, at the end of this chapter, with spoilers.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

PHOENIX FOUNDATION HEADQUARTERS
SOMEWHERE IN LA

Riley picked up the standard-issue 9mm Glock, inspecting the weapon and checking the safety was on, as she’d been taught to do.

By Jack.

And Thornton.

(She pushed away that stab of pain that thought caused; the attack on the Phoenix had brought those feelings of pain and hurt that Thornton’s betrayal had caused to the fore.)

(Shes also pushed away the memories that holding the Glock in her hand brought up; that horrifying moment of triumph, when she’d realized that she’d stopped Horn, that she was alive…but that he wasn’t. She resisted the urge to bring her hands up to just below her collarbone, where his blood had gotten smeared on her…)

Riley swallowed, and picked up a magazine of bullets, then headed to the firing range.

Riley took a deep breath, then another, centring herself, focused on the motion, the action, and her target, and fired.

Again and again and again.

She emptied the entire magazine of bullets into the paper target, then lowered her weapon, put the safety back on, and removed her earmuffs, breathing hard and closing her eyes.
The light that signalled that the range was ‘hot’ turned off, and the door of the observation room clicked open.

Riley didn’t notice.

That, her visitor thought, was not a good sign.

‘You’re still pulling a little to the left, Ri.’

She whirled around, startled, to face Jack, who was leaning against the observation room wall with fake nonchalance, before crossing her arms and trying for the same.

She didn’t want to talk about it, not now.

‘Aren’t you supposed to be traipsing around Europe with Mac, hunting for his dad?’

That came out bitterer than she’d intended.

She knew that Jack couldn’t let Mac go hunt for his dad alone, not in the slightest.

If not for the fact that Bozer was still in hospital, and Matty needed her to help clean up the mess that the attack on the Phoenix had caused and hunt for Murdoc (both things that she was more useful for than Mac and Jack – combing through chatter and financials and the dark web were right up her alley, not either of the partners), that is, if not for the fact that she was needed here in LA, she’d have offered Mac her help too.

Offered anything she could do to help him on his quest, because Mac was family, and that was what one did for family.

Riley shook her head, rubbing her forehead.

Too many nights spent sleeping in the chair by Bozer’s bedside, wrapped in Jack’s football snuggie, had taken their toll.

(Bozer had finally persuaded her, two nights ago, to stop sleeping in the chair – it had terrible lumbar support, even worse than his and Mac’s couch – and start sleeping in her own bed again.)

(But not without the snuggie, not that she was ever telling anyone that. It was an atrocious shade of orange, but it was really comfy.)

No wonder Matty had told her to take a break from monitoring chatter, trying to find Murdoc and checking that there were no attempts by The Organization to retrieve the bioweapon that Mac had disposed of. (Though how anyone would get it back from the random crevasse in Siberia he’d dropped it into, she had no idea.)

She was clearly at least a little sleep-deprived (which was saying a lot, for a hacker), or she wouldn’t have said that.

‘Forget I said that.’ She shifted her weight to her left leg, gestured to the target she’d been firing with using her head. ‘I just need more practice.’

She made as if to head to the armoury for another clip, but Jack shook his head and stepped forward to block her way.

‘No, no you don’t. Not without correcting it first, Riles. Practice makes permanent, not perfect; you don’t want that to become muscle memory.’ Something clearly guilty, a little remorseful (only a
little; he knew he should be with Mac, but that he should also be here in LA, for Riley, and Bozer, and even Matty, too, but there was only one of him, and he'd had to make a choice, and he'd thought that Mac needed him a little more right then, as his mission would otherwise be a solo one, while the others at least had each other…) appeared in Jack’s eyes. ‘And me and Mac are on a stopover on our way to Chile, we’ve got a few hours before our flight; he’s gone to see Boze, and I thought I’d pop by and visit my other favourite whiz-kid…’ Riley gave a little smile, and reached out and pulled Jack into a side-hug, a gesture he immediately returned, smile mirroring hers, before continuing, tone lightening in a way that Riley could tell was deliberate but was very grateful for. ‘Come on, Ri, let’s go grab you another clip, and then I can show you how it’s done!’ He squeezed her shoulders. ‘Whaddya say?’

She nodded, and let Jack steer her out of the shooting range.

Chapter End Notes

I seriously doubt this is what you were thinking about when you gave me that prompt, LaughingLadybug, but I hope you liked it anyway? Everyone else – what did you think? Does this slot well into canon? Was it in-character? Did you like the feels? :P

Disclaimer: I have never fired a gun in my life or otherwise handled one. I do not want to Google proper procedures on the topic for obvious reasons, so everything about Riley’s handling of a firearm comes from watching TV…

Guest – your request, which is done and titled This Perfect Weather, is up next!

Thoughts on 2.12, Mac + Jack: Favourite episode of the season, hands down! I have no words, really! Just everything about it…down to the details like how Mac has such a nice house in LA at his age! In terms of plot speculation – anyone thinking that maybe, The Ghost and Murdoc have joined up? I mean, Murdoc conveniently shoots Cage in the stomach (he could have shot her in the head, or the heart, and killed her instantly/too fast to be saved…) so that Mac and Co. are out of his house, during which The Ghost then rigs Mac’s house to blow…we know Murdoc’s accumulating some kind of team from 2.04, Penny + X-Ray…and then, just hours before, Mac’s dad stopped by and dropped him off a present to help Mac find him? Are all of these events tied together?

Anyway – that got my creative juices flowing, so I’m writing an AU one-shot (set in the A Woman Scorned AU from this story) based on that ep…stay tuned!
This Perfect Weather

Chapter Summary

For a Guest. Four years after she left her wounded war hero boyfriend for another man the day he was discharged from hospital, Nikki runs into Mac…and his girlfriend. ‘For what it’s worth, Mac, I’m sorry.’

Chapter Notes

This is set in the Just Another Patriotic Guy/The Roommate Chronicles AU, approximately 3 years after Just Another Patriotic Guy ends. Guest, this is probably not what you were thinking of (I’m guessing that you were probably thinking of one of my mostly-canon AUs/canon-divergence AUs), but this scene has actually been in my head for about a year. I thought about including it as an epilogue to Just Another Patriotic Guy, actually, but never wound up doing so. The title comes from the song Sweeter than Fiction by Taylor Swift (incidentally a favourite of mine).

WALMART

WASHINGTON D.C.

Nikki Carpenter strode along the aisles of the Walmart (not her usual one, but her last meeting of the day had been nearby, and she’d decided to stop by and do a quick grocery run – she and her husband were almost out of several staples), a basket in hand.

She reached the aisle she’d been looking for, the one with pasta and sauces, and started walking down it, only to stop in her tracks.

Standing at the other end of the aisle, examining all the varieties of dried pasta on offer, a hand on a shopping trolley, was a very familiar man.

A very, very familiar man.

Mac selected two packs of pasta, and turned to put them in his trolley, and froze, staring at her.

He looked much better, she thought, than when she’d seen him last. He looked strong and healthy again, a massive contrast to that day four years ago. She couldn’t help but let her eyes flick down, noting the clear lack of a pinned-up trouser leg, the most obvious change from that day, aside from the lack of crutches.

As she looked up at his face again, Mac’s own gaze flicked up from where it’d been caught on the pair of rings, one a relatively simple band, the other more ostentatious with a trio of sparkly diamonds, on her left ring finger.
They stared at each other for a moment, before the extremely uncomfortable, heavy silence was interrupted by a cheerful female voice, whose owner, a small, pretty brunette, her arms full of a large bag of dog treats, two boxes of paperclips, three bags of red pens and a gallon of cheap, high-fructose chocolate sauce, rounded the corner into the aisle (which was thankfully empty except for Mac and Nikki).

‘Paperclips are on special, Mac, and since it’s Halloween in five weeks, I thought it’d be a good idea to stock up on red pens and the bad kind of chocolate sauce, they’re half-price…’

She trailed off, eyes widening, as she took in the scene in the aisle before her, and froze for a moment, before dumping the contents of her arms into the shopping trolley in front of Mac.

Mac’s girlfriend (she could be no-one else, surely – at least given the lack of a ring) then turned and looked Nikki dead in the eye.

The blonde woman was surprised to note that there wasn’t a possessive, *stay-away-from-my-man* look in her eyes.

No, there was a fierce, protective anger there, matched with a slight up-tilt of her chin.

Something that told Nikki, *don’t you dare do anything to hurt him again.*

After a moment, the brunette took a step back, glancing over at Mac, look shifting to concern, before speaking, in a slightly babbling, very awkward manner.

‘I’ll just go grab some more paperclips, since you can never have enough, and they are 30% off, and maybe we can get Hippocrates some more dog treats…’

She trailed off as Mac reached out and grabbed her hand, looking into her eyes for a moment, and she simply gave a little nod in response to what she saw there, squeezed his hand, and looked back at Nikki, that fiercely protective look back in her eyes.

Nikki swallowed, finally finding her voice.

‘For what it’s worth, I’m sorry, Mac.’

She didn’t regret what she’d done, not at all. She didn’t regret breaking up with Mac for her now-husband.

She did, sometimes, regret how she’d done it, even if she’d lost, honestly, less sleep than she probably should have over it.

Maybe she should have broken up with him over email or over the phone or on Skype, while he’d still been deployed.

Maybe she should have done it when he’d first woken up in that hospital bed at Bethesda.

Maybe she should have done it a week or two after that, while he was still in the hospital or the rehab centre, once his recovery had progressed a little more.

But at the same time, it didn’t feel like something that should have been done over the phone or over a screen, and how could she have broken up with a wounded war hero while he lay in hospital?

And if she’d done it earlier, how might that have affected Mac? Would he have been in more
danger over in Afghanistan, either due to distraction or recklessness? Would it have compromised those early days of recovery?

The answer to both was probably yes, she thought.

And that had mattered to her, it really had.

Just because she didn’t love him anymore didn’t mean she didn’t care about him at all.

Her ex-boyfriend blew out a breath, eyes flickering closed for a moment, before swallowing and opening them again.

‘I…I hope you’re happy, Nikki.’

That was completely, totally genuine. Of course it was, of course he really did want her to be happy, because he was Mac.

A soft little smile appeared on her face.

‘I am.’ She really, really was. Never had been happier. ‘I hope you’re happy, too.’

She meant that, she really did.

He smiled too, squeezed his girlfriend’s hand, then replied, looking at her, not Nikki.

‘I am. Very.’

They stood there, a little awkwardly, but far less uncomfortable than previously, for a moment more, before they each gave a little nod, then Mac spoke, addressing his girlfriend, as Nikki turned to the selection of pasta sauces available.

‘They’ve got 30% off paperclips, Beth? All paperclips?’

Out of the corner of her eye, Nikki saw the brunette woman nod with a fond smile on her face, then poke Mac in the chest.

‘Yes, Mac, their whole range of paperclips. But no buying more than another four boxes; there’s not enough storage space at home for more than that!’

He chuckled, and still out of the corner of her eye, she watched them walk off, Mac pushing the trolley one-handed and sliding an arm around Beth’s waist.

‘Well, actually, I think I have an idea…if I promise to use some of my stockpile to increase our storage space tonight, can I buy more?’

‘You never break your promises, almost all of your ideas are excellent, you are exceptionally skilled at paperclip-based construction, and similarly talented at maximising storage…so I think I can definitely be persuaded, Mac.’

Chapter End Notes

Guest, I know this is probably not what you were thinking about, but did you like it anyway? Everyone else – what did you think? This is honestly one of my most
sympathetic portrayals of Nikki, methinks…and yes, Mac is going to go home and build a paperclip storage system so that Beth will let him buy more paperclips, as he has filled the allotted storage space (aided and abetted by her purchasing more whenever they’re on sale and there’s room in the allocated storage space) in what is, at this stage, technically their and Bozer’s apartment…

Up next: Constants and Variables. Some things are constant, no matter the universe. Mac and Jack’s bromance is one. Their contentious first meeting is another. Jack being scolded by Mac’s wife for beating up her husband? That isn’t. Or, an AU take on the start of Mac and Jack’s relationship.

The next one is set in the universe of A Woman Scorned, so maybe read that before the next post (in two days) if you haven’t already?

As always – let me know if you’ve got a request!
Chapter Summary

Some things are constant, no matter the universe. Mac and Jack’s bromance is one. Their contentious first meeting is another. Jack being scolded by Mac’s wife for beating up her husband? That isn’t. Or, an AU take on the start of Mac and Jack’s relationship.

Chapter Notes

This is set in the AU of A Woman Scorned. I strongly recommend reading it first, but if you haven’t, most of it still makes sense, I think, provided you have some familiarity with Beth.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

TASKFORCE SNAKEBITE BUNKROOM

THE SANDBOX

(SPECIFICALLY – GHANZI PROVINCE, AFGHANISTAN)

Now, if my lovely wife were here, she’d be reminding me of the - off the top of my head- 23 times over the last decade that my tendency to fix problems without really thinking about much apart from the potential solution, and thus forgetting about important things such as asking for permission to fix or improve other people’s things, has gotten me into trouble.

The rest of the taskforce that Mac was newly assigned to clapped and cheered as the CIA agent who ran the taskforce, Jack Dalton, lifted him clean off his feet. Mac countered by pushing off the conveniently-located nearby bunk to get the momentum to bring the older man to the ground.

Well, actually, if Beth was really here, she’d probably be scolding my new squadmates, including the guy who is essentially my new boss and is trying to beat me up, but you get the point...

‘Attention! On your feet!’

Oh, this is definitely a Murphy’s Law day.

Jack Dalton swore internally repeatedly as Martinez entered the tent and he jumped to attention. The man was technically his commanding officer, even if this taskforce was Jack’s and he wasn’t Army, not anymore.

Jack normally loved undercover work, but this was not his cup of tea.

Not at all.
Damn that stupid terrorist with his stupid codename (who called themselves The Source?).

Damn him and his elusiveness and the fact that he was running, essentially, two organizations, one US-based (creatively called The Scion) and one whose tentacles extended all around Afghanistan (also creatively called The Stock).

Because of that, Jack was stuck here in the Sandbox, pretending to be a CIA agent running a taskforce to take down The Stock.

The DXS had also given him the mission to gather as much intel on The Scion’s activities as possible (which was a pain, since he wasn’t even allowed to tell anybody about the domestic side of The Source’s operation) and take out The Source.

The only saving grace in Jack’s eyes was the fact that there was a deadline on this, and Patty had made him a deal of sorts.

If he couldn’t take out The Source by that deadline, they’d re-group. Find another approach. Another way.

And Jack could go on a well-deserved, two-week vacation back in home sweet Texas.

No matter what, in 64 days, he’d be out of here.

Except 64 days was still a pretty long time, and he’d had a terrible day.

An informant had gotten taken out by an IED before Jack had gotten the intel on The Source he needed off him.

And then he’d come back to base to find that the new EOD he’d requested be added to his taskforce, to partner him, had arrived.

Jack had asked for the best.

He’d gotten a scrawny blonde kid who looked like he should be starring in some high school movie.

And said kid was playing with his bolt carrier.

He’d lost it.

‘Yes, sir.’

Martinez shot them both a look, then strode out of the bunkroom again.

Jack turned to the new EOD.

‘Angus MacGyver?’ He scoffed. ‘What kind of name is that? Sounds like a new burger at Carl’s Jr, don’t it, boys?’ His men laughed. ‘Pretty embarrassing.’

The kid crossed his arms and stepped forward, rolling his eyes.

‘A guy named after a hamburger just pinned your ass in front of your buddies.’

Jack glared right back at him.
‘No, man, you didn’t pin anybody! I was about to break your skinny little arm, MacGyver.’ Jack paused for a moment, crossing his own arms and getting into the kid’s face. ‘I’ve heard people talk about you.’ Of course he kept an ear out for any scuttlebutt going around base. ‘You’re supposed to be some bomb wonder kid, huh?’

There was an implicit challenge in his words, in his tone, which MacGyver responded to by holding his gaze, eyes hard.

‘I think you mean wunderkind, but no, I wouldn’t say that.’

Jack snorted.

‘Considering your training officer died on your watch, I don’t think I’d say that either.’

The blonde inhaled a sharp breath, something pained flickering across his eyes, and Jack felt some savage satisfaction at the fact that he’d struck a good blow.

(A little part of his brain regretted striking below the belt, but that was completely steamrollered by Jack’s temper and foul mood.)

Mac had had a terrible day.

He’d been reassigned from a squad that had respected his skills, despite his junior rank and young age, and treated him well enough, mostly leaving him alone and gossiping about how weird and young he was amongst themselves and with others from time to time.

(He really, really missed Al. The older man had always treated him with respect, and later, as they’d gotten to know each other, as a friend, maybe even some kind of surrogate younger brother or son on occasion.)

His new squadmates had spent the ten minutes he’d been in their company before his fight with Dalton mocking him for his name and his age and corresponding youthful appearance.

(He’d had a lot of bullies; most of them said and did more-or-less the same thing. They weren’t very creative.)

(To be fair, since he’d enlisted, he’d decided to give the bullies as little ammo as possible. His paperclips and Swiss Army knife stayed hidden until needed. He made sure that he had privacy for his phone calls, especially the ones with Beth, and kept his photos of her hidden away from all eyes. He was not giving them any more ammunition, and he was never, ever going to let them insult or mock or denigrate her in any way, shape or form.)

Then, his attempt to fix his new C.O.’s rifle and help him out, fix a problem for him, had backfired spectacularly.

(The man had walked in, seen him trying to solve the lack of forward assist on his bolt carrier and had set on him without giving Mac a chance to explain.)

And then Dalton had gone and poked at a wound that was still sore (would probably, Mac thought, be a little sore for the rest of his life).

His eyes hardened further.

He didn’t know much about Jack Dalton.
There wasn’t much scuttlebutt about him (he was CIA, after all, and he hadn’t been around long either).

But he had something up his sleeve.

‘You know, I’ve heard about you too, Dalton.’

‘Oh, yeah?’

‘Yeah. Mostly that you’re an opinionated, loudmouth knuckle-dragger who’s only stuck with me ‘cause I’m the most junior EOD tech and nobody’s gonna work with you.’

Jack’s temper flared again at that, and he stepped closer to MacGyver.

He wasn’t brilliant; Jack knew that. He acted silly, often. That was his personality, and besides, it was how he reacted to high-stress situations; he worked to lighten the mood. It worked wonders, both for him and those around him, he’d found.

But he wasn’t stupid, and he didn’t like being called that.

Especially by this kid, even if scuttlebutt was that his IQ was higher than Einstein’s and most people probably were stupid compared to him.

Stuck-up know-it-all.

‘Yeah, well, thanks to this opinionated, loudmouth knuckle-dragger, every bomb nerd I’ve ever protected has made it home to his loved ones, so I must be doing something right, Angus.’ He stepped closer, spoke quietly. ‘Look, I’ve got 64 days until I ship back home and this Source and Stock becomes someone else’s problem. 64. And nothing, I mean nothing, especially some scrawny, blonde-haired know-it-all is gonna keep me from seeing Texas again. You hear me, slick?’

Mac stared right back at him, just as much attitude in his voice.

‘Believe me, slick, I can’t wait to put you on that plane myself.’

‘Good. I think we’re on the same page.’

‘I think so.’

Jack pointed a finger at the kid.

‘And since we’re gonna be working together, I think it’s only fair that I lay some ground rules. Rule number one: we don’t ever, ever touch Jack Dalton’s stuff again. You understand me?’

The kid just responded back in the same tone of voice, the same hardness and attitude in his eyes.

‘Rule number two: we don’t ever, ever refer to ourselves in the third person.’ He scoffed. ‘Who does that?’

Jack huffed out a breath.

‘Whatever, man.’

They stared each other down for another moment, before MacGyver spoke, extending an olive
branch of sorts.

‘Look, like you said, 64 days. Let’s just get through that, then we don’t ever have to see each other again.’

‘Fine with me.’

‘Good.’

‘Good.’

‘Hey, wunderkind, just admit you can’t disarm it!’

They’d been here for ages.

Jack hated working with EODs.

Sure, he appreciated what they could do, but he hated having to work with them.

Everything took forever.

MacGyver was supposed to be one of the best, but he still moved at snail’s pace, in Jack’s eyes.

From underneath the Humvee, MacGyver retorted, voice somewhat muffled.

‘I absolutely can disarm it! I just need you to stop talking and give me a minute!’

Jack snorted.

‘I’ll give you a minute. That don’t mean I got to stop talking…’

A couple of minutes later, Jack stared incredulously at the twenty-year-old blonde, standing there by the Humvee that should have been blown to bits, taking the two of them with it, chewing gum.

‘Did you just disarm the bomb with a stick of gum?’

MacGyver nodded.

‘Yeah.’

Jack snorted, shaking his head.

‘Well, I hate to admit it, but you are good.’

Maybe his request for the best EOD on base hadn’t gotten mixed up with the casting call for Hollywood’s latest teen flick after all.

‘Well, technically, it wasn’t the gum. It was the foil wrapper…’

The kid seemed to react a little uncomfortably and awkwardly to the praise, however grudging, and that gave Jack an unexpected little rush of sympathy for him.

(He wasn’t the only one who was hard on him, he knew…)

Jack shook his head and made a face.
(Still, he totally got why. The kid was weird and crazy and had issues with doing things the normal way and keeping his hands off other people’s stuff, even if it seemed that his intentions were always good, that he was always trying to help, and he just forgot about little things like asking for permission ‘cause he was so caught up in the fixing-the-problem bit.)

‘Huh? Is there something wrong with you?’ There probably was. ‘I mean, I’m not sure if I can spend another 47 days around you...’

‘...I just need one more hour.’

Jack shot his EOD a look.

They’d been here all day, clearing this area that was, according to satellite imagery, full of suspicious activity that could well be related to The Source and his organization’s activity.

They’d found zip. Nada. Diddly squat.

Not a single IED.

Jack was ready to bounce, head back to base and re-group. In fact, he was radioing the rest of the taskforce to do just that.

He turned away from MacGyver and spoke into his sat-phone.

‘The AO appears to be clear. All units return to base. Over.’ Then, he turned back to MacGyver. ‘Let’s go.’

There was a very stubborn expression on the blonde’s face.

‘Last time I didn’t follow my gut, someone died.’ He gestured around them. ‘There’s a bomb here, I can feel it. And if we don’t find it, someone else will, like another American soldier, an innocent or a child!’

He turned from Jack and started walking away, intent on continuing the search.

‘Man, we’ve covered every inch of this armpit and we haven’t found diddly! Let’s bounce!’ Jack rolled his eyes. ‘Why’d I get stuck with an annoying EOD tech who’d rather follow a hunch than follow orders?’ MacGyver ignored him and kept walking. ‘Son of a bitch!’

Jack scampered after him, his rifle in hand.

That kid was a pain in the ass. If he got shot or captured, it’d be his own fault.

But he was also Jack’s responsibility.

And he was a kid, and Jack was determined to get him home to his parents and loved ones.

There was no reason for him to feel so protective about this scrawny blonde kid, especially since he was such a pain.

Jack told himself that it was just due to his odd resemblance to a Golden Retriever puppy.

He’d always had a soft spot for dogs.
Mac glanced between the four dead terrorists and the sniper in the window.

‘…Did you just take out four guys with two bullets?’

‘Yeah, I’m trying to conserve ammo…’

That required not only good aim, but also intelligence, both to make the shot, and to make that decision.

A different kind of intelligence than his, but still intelligence.

He’d been wrong in calling Jack a knuckle-dragger, even if he was still right about the opinionated loudmouth bit.

‘…Now, we need to get on the same page, kid, and I mean right now. That is, if you want to keep breathing.’ His voice was very, very firm, brooked no arguments, was confident and sure, but wasn’t condescending. It reminded Mac of the tone Pena had taken with him, whenever Mac had gotten ahead of himself, early in his training. ‘Next time, you wait for me to take my position before scampering off like that, you hear me?’

Mac swallowed, chastised and a little sheepish, and spoke honestly, looking down.

‘I…I…uh…didn’t think you were coming with me.’ He looked up again at Jack. ‘Thanks.’

There was something a little regretful, a little sorry, and also sad in the older man’s eyes, which surprised Mac greatly.

He hadn’t thought that the older man cared much about him at all.

(Mac didn’t really have many people who did, after all. Hadn’t formed bonds with many of his fellow soldiers, except some of his fellow EOD techs, like Charlie Robinson.)

‘You’re welcome.’ That was said seriously, before Jack’s tone became flippant again. ‘To be honest with you, I don’t think I’d have the patience to break in another EOD nerd…’

‘No, no, no! Do not come up here, you hear me? Stand down!’ Jack looked down at the bomb underneath him, with two minutes on the clock. ‘This is the moment of truth. I’m a dead man. Just get out of here, go on!’ He swallowed. ‘Save yourself.’

He was not letting the kid die on his watch.

Jack could never live with himself if he did.

He cared way too much about the pain in his ass, he really did. Maybe he should have checked in with the medics; maybe Mac’s craziness was contagious…

The blonde crouched down beside Jack.

‘Hey, Mr Careful.’

Jack rolled his eyes.

‘Carl’s Jr. Can’t you follow one simple order? How is the world’s slowest bomb tech gonna defuse this thing in a minute and a half?’ He gestured to the device. ‘You see that?’
To his credit, the kid sounded calm, cool and collected when he replied.

‘I know.’ He shot Jack a little smile, reassuring the older man. ‘Guess I’m just gonna have to figure it out, aren’t I?’

Jack stared incredulously at him.

‘What’s the matter with you? The only reason I’m not running for my life is ‘cause I’m sitting directly on top of it!’ He looked the kid dead in the eye. ‘You’re not. Get out of here!’ Jack shook his head, reached out and grabbed Mac’s wrist. ‘Don’t you know a lost cause when you see one?’

Mac shook his head, looking at the hand on his wrist.

It suddenly hit Jack (and at what an inopportune time…) that the kid didn’t get much friendly physical contact.

In fact, the only person Jack had ever seen give Mac any physical affection was one of the EOD techs, Charlie Robinson, and they didn’t get to see each other often at all.

Jack resolved right then and there to give the kid a pat on the back (or two, or three) if they got out of this alive.

‘No, I don’t.’ A very wry little smile appeared on Mac’s face. ‘One of my many character flaws.’ He looked up at Jack, genuine care in his eyes. The care that brothers-in-arms in Hollywood showed each other, the care you found in the best units, best teams, best partners, in reality. ‘This is how it works. You watch my back, I watch yours.’ He paused, tone becoming lighter again, deliberately. ‘I’m gonna need that arm to do it, though.’

Jack released Mac’s wrist, resolving to do his best to stop calling him ‘kid’ in his head and out loud, as the younger man started working.

Kids didn’t do stuff like this. Didn’t disobey an order to save themselves to save a comrade they didn’t know so well and who had been a bit of a jackass to them, knowing full well they could die.

No, this was very much the decision of a man.

A very good man. A brave man, and a noble one.

‘How are you gonna defuse this thing in less than a minute?’

Mac wasn’t actually the world’s slowest bomb tech, Jack knew. He was, actually, a very good bomb tech. A very, very good one.

(He and Charlie Robinson held some kind of record, apparently.)

‘I don’t know. You’re just gonna have to trust me.’

He did.

‘Patty, I’m telling you, I’m so close, I can taste it.’ Jack spread his arms as wide as he could as he conferenced with his boss over a highly-secured video chat in the tiny excuse for an office he’d been assigned on base. ‘I just need more time. Maybe…I don’t know, three months, tops?’

Thornton regarded him for a moment, her seemingly essentially-expressionless eyes very knowing to Jack.
'Three months?'

That was how long Mac had left in his deployment. Jack knew that Thornton knew that; he’d waxed lyrical about the young EOD since that day two weeks ago, when Mac had saved him from certain death, knowing that Mac would be a great DXS agent.

Jack nodded. With three months, he knew he could take down The Source, especially with Mac at his side. And if that meant he could keep an eye on the young EOD for as much of the rest of his tour as he could…well, two birds, one stone.

‘Yeah, Patty.’

She regarded him for another long moment, then gave a little nod.

(Thornton might be by-the-book, might seem cold-hearted, but Jack knew that under all that, cool as she was, she was a master at bending the rules and really did care.)

‘I’ll get you three months, Jack. But Oversight will need more than The Source and The Stock. Do you stand by what you said two weeks ago?’

Mac had that much potential and was so special, had such a unique skill, that Jack was convinced (and he thought his boss was too, as hard to read as she was) that Oversight would be over the moon at the possibility of recruiting him.

But there was something in her voice, in her eyes, that Jack couldn’t place.

He nodded anyway, pushing it aside. He trusted her, even if he knew she kept many, many secrets from him.

‘More and more every day, Patty.’

‘Jack?’ Mac’s brow furrowed as he stared at the older man as he walked into the otherwise-empty bunkroom. Jack was supposed to go home that morning. His flight was meant to leave at 0730. It was now 0830. ‘I thought you went home?’

Jack shook his head.

‘Nah, I asked my boss to keep me on the case. I’m doing a pretty fine job, of course, and all the handover stuff’s always a pain, and you always lose something in the switcheroo…’ Jack shrugged in a way that Mac was sure was falsely nonchalant. ‘Besides, it hit me last night that this poor little bomb nerd with the silly hamburger name ain’t gonna make it two days in the Sandbox without me watching his back.’ He pointed at Mac. ‘Before you go getting big-headed, I didn’t do it for you, I did it for my country.’ The look on his face, in his eyes, said otherwise, then shifted a little to something knowing that Mac didn’t understand. ‘I got a sneaky suspicion you’re too valuable to Uncle Sam to lose just yet.’

He smiled at Jack, feeling suddenly warm inside that had nothing to do with being in the desert and everything to do with Jack’s words.

‘Well, thanks, Jack.’

‘...Yeah, I’d really have missed him.’ Mac shook his head with a chuckle, pacing along the bunkroom’s length, enjoying his phone call with Beth. Jack had gone off to speak with Martinez,
leaving Mac alone in the bunkroom, and since he wasn’t on-duty and had privacy, and it wasn’t some crazy hour back in Illinois, he’d of course taken the chance to call her. ‘You know, if you’d told me that we’d become friends the day he tried to beat me up for-’

‘He tried to beat you up?’

**Oops…**

*I did not mean to tell her that, not now and not like this.*

*I was going to mention it, of course, but as a joke, maybe even play it down a little, when I introduced her to Jack in person, not…*

‘Beth-‘

‘*Mac.*’

Her voice was very firm. He could practically see her narrowing her eyes at him, hands on her hips, or jabbing at the air in front of his chest, or poking him in the sternum.

He sighed.

‘The first day we were assigned to work together, before I’d actually met him, Jack’s bolt carrier fell off his bunk, and I noticed that it didn’t have forward assist. Thus, after some examination, I started to fabricate a spring to fix that. Unfortunately, he walked in just as I was doing that, and… well, he’d had a bad day, he didn’t let me explain, and just took a swing at me, and I’d had a bad day too, and…well…we wound up getting some unintentional, unplanned hand-to-hand combat practice?’

‘*Unintentional unplanned hand-to-hand combat practice*…’ Beth sighed, a very long-suffering, fondly-exasperated sound. He knew she had to be rubbing her temple with her free hand at that moment. ‘*Mac*, in the ten years I’ve known you, there’s been at least 23 incidents where your attempts to fix or improve things for people have gotten you into trouble; I love your crazy brain and your crazy ideas and the associated focus and enthusiasm, and the fact that you always want to help, but…’

He nodded sheepishly.

‘I have a really bad habit of forgetting to ask first.’

He could see her wry nod and smile in return in his mind’s eye.

‘Well, nobody’s perfect, *Mac.*’ She paused for a moment, and he could practically see her eyes narrowing again. ‘But he should never have taken a swing at you before you could explain either! That’s a *completely* unreasonable reaction, even if he’d had a bad day! Let me have a word with him, *Mac.*’

‘Beth, I’m not sure that’s-‘

At that moment, Jack walked into the bunkroom, and raised an eyebrow at him in question as Beth cut him off.

‘*Angus MacGyver*…’

He knew that tone.
That was the tone that had made him stay in bed when he’d had a really bad case of the flu when they’d been at MIT.

That was the tone that had stopped him from cutting off the cast on his arm a week early when he was thirteen because he was sick of it, it shouldn’t compromise his healing, and he could rig up something else that gave him more breathability, comfort and mobility while maintaining sufficient stability and support using duct tape and chopsticks…

That was the tone in her voice when she’d been very outraged on his behalf when some of the academics and their fellow students at MIT had called him crazy for ‘throwing away his future’ by joining the Army after graduation.

_They do say ‘happy wife, happy life.’_

_Sorry, Jack…_

Mac held out the phone to the older man.

‘It’s for you.’

Jack, bemused, took the phone.

‘Hello, Agent Dalton.’

‘Uh…hi, whoever you are.’

He looked even more bemused, shooting the EOD a glance, wondering if Mac was pulling some kind of prank on him.

‘Beth.’ There was barely a pause before she continued. ‘Look, Agent Dalton, I understand that you had a terrible day, I know that you see horrible things over there, and I agree that Mac shouldn’t have tried to improve your bolt carrier without asking for permission, but _trying to beat him up_ was a _completely_ unacceptable response!’ Jack agreed, in hindsight (his temper had definitely gotten the better of him that day), but shot Mac a _what-the-hell-is-going-on_ look. The blonde just shrugged sheepishly and helplessly, even apologetically. Beth continued, her voice softening, gentling. ‘I know that you two have made up and are now good friends, but, although this is probably _completely_ unnecessary…’ Her voice took on a very firm tone, and Jack had a feeling, somehow, that the woman on the other end of the line would be narrowing her eyes at him if she could. ‘Agent Dalton, _don’t you dare_ ever hurt my husband again.’

Jack swallowed.

‘Message received, ma’am, loud and clear. And I won’t, promise.’

Mind still reeling from the very bizarre event, Jack handed the phone back to Mac, stepping towards the doorway again to give him some privacy to finish his call, before his brain finally parsed the rest of that threat. The supposed-CIA agent stopped in his tracks and whirled around to look at the blonde again, his jaw dropping.

‘You’re _married_?’

Mac, the phone back at his ear, raised a hand and mouthed _not now_ at Jack, and, understanding (it was really, really bad form to interrupt the phone calls of fellow servicemen and women to their loved ones – those calls were priceless precious), he nodded and paced away to give Mac and _his wife_ at least the illusion of privacy.
Jack turned and stared at the canvas of the bunkroom tent, still mostly in shock.

Mac was twenty years old.

He looked younger.

And he was, apparently, a married man.

(Married and in the Army, disarming bombs for a living. Mac really had grown up fast.)

Well, there went his plans to take the younger man out for drinks at a ‘gentleman’s club’ for his twenty-first birthday, introduce him to the world of men properly and all.

(That little something he’d seen in Thornton’s eyes, heard in her voice, made sense now. And now there was a niggling little thought at the back of his mind, the thought that if he’d known that Mac was married, had a wife, he’d never have put him up as a potential DXS recruit; he’d seen first-hand what this life did to relationships. Jack cursed himself for acting first, asking questions later, as he had an unfortunate tendency to do…but he pushed the thought away, reassuring himself with the knowledge that the DXS didn’t conscript people. It wasn’t as if Mac could be forced to work for them, after all.)

‘…You going to sleep soon?...Beth, you don’t need to study more for that test; you’re going to do amazingly…’ Mac shook his head, a soft, loving smile on his face. ‘Who was the one who was valedictorian of our high school and maintained a 4.0 at MIT?’ A teasing smirk appeared on the blonde’s face. ‘And aren’t you the one who’s always going on about healthy habits, like getting enough sleep?’ He chuckled. ‘True, you’ve never claimed you aren’t a hypocrite…stop studying and get some sleep, Beth. Or I’ll have no choice but to piss off my C.O. and build a teleportation device to make sure that you do in person…actually, that wouldn’t be very conducive to sleeping.’ Jack made a face (sure, Mac was married, that had implications, but Jack did not want to think about any of those implications…), as Mac glanced over at him, sheepish, ears reddening. ‘Good luck for your test, Beth, not that you need it…’ His expression was fond and loving again. ‘…love you too.’

Mac hung up, and Jack raised an eyebrow at him.

‘So, you’re married. To a girl called Beth who’s still in school and is a spitfire.’

Mac nodded, a very odd expression on his face that was part sheepish smile, part besotted grin and part smug smirk.

‘Yup.’ He paused for a moment. ‘Well, she’s in medical school; she already has a degree, and the spitfire bit is kind-of part-time…’

Jack smiled fondly at the look on his EOD’s face.

He remembered being in love very, very well.

(Sometimes too well for his peace of mind.)

‘What medical school is she at, brother?’

Mac’s smile turned very proud.

‘Northwestern.’
Jack let out a low whistle.

‘Whoa, clever girl. And hardworking.’

Mac chuckled, shaking his head fondly.

‘Oh, you have no idea, Jack.’

The older man stepped closer to the younger again, gesturing with his head towards Mac’s belongings, still largely tucked away.

Certainly, anything truly personal was hidden away.

‘Got any photos?’

Mac hesitated for just a moment (Jack suspected that his first instinct was still to keep her hidden away, and given how some of the other men treated Mac, he couldn’t blame the younger man in the slightest, for wanting to protect himself and – Jack was sure this was the more important thing, in Mac’s mind - protect his wife from any insults or slights of any kind), but crouched down and carefully retrieved a stack of clearly very precious photographs.

He handed the top one to Jack, who looked down at it to see a very pretty, sweet-looking, brunette girl (and she was a girl to him; she could probably have passed for sixteen) with her hair in two braids, grinning, wearing a T-shirt emblazoned with *Don’t Trust Atoms, They Make Up Everything* and pink plaid pyjama pants.

Jack looked up at Mac and socked him in the arm teasingly.

‘Man, you’re young, but seriously, you robbing the cradle, Mac?’ He gestured to the photo. ‘She even old enough to be married? ‘Cause she looks like jailbait!’

Mac sighed and rolled his eyes.

‘Beth is twenty years old in that photo, as she is now; she’s seven weeks younger than me, Jack.’

As Mac finished speaking, they heard the voices of several of their squadmates, approaching the tent, and quick as a flash, Mac squirrelled away the stack of photos again as the four men entered.

That tugged on Jack’s heartstrings and brought a little wave of remorse through him.

Once Jack had started sitting with Mac in the mess and shooting dirty looks at anyone who dared to even look at him funny, most of the men had left Mac alone, and were civil to him when they had to interact. The few hold-outs had quickly adopted their peers’ behaviour after Jack had had words with them. (Complete with threats for non-compliance, of course.)

But that didn’t mean they were friendly towards Mac.

Jack now saw an opportunity to fix that.

Back in his Delta days, he’d bonded with guys he didn’t seem to have a lick in common with, over their loved ones, the people waiting back at home for them.

By sharing stories and reminiscing and sharing the wishes they had for when they got home, the places they’d go with their loved ones, the food they’d eat with them, the movies they wanted to
watch together, and so on and so forth.

He leaned over and whispered in the younger man’s ear.

‘Trust me?’

Mac gave a little nod, immediately, and Jack surreptitiously passed the photo of Beth back to him, then stepped forward, shaking his head and gesturing at the men.

‘You’re real lucky, fellas. If you were here five minutes earlier, you’d have gotten your ears blistered by Mrs MacGyver too…’

Jack shook his head again, affecting relief and terror in a rather exaggerated manner.

One of the men snorted, and raised his eyebrows at Mac.

‘You went and tattled to your-‘ One of his friends jabbed him in the stomach with his elbow, and the man looked contrite. ‘Sorry.’ He took a breath, muttering something about breaking a bad habit, then continued. ‘Your mom yelled at a CIA agent?’

Mac glanced at Jack for just a moment, and the older man just nodded reassuringly, and then, he gave a half-smirk, half-smile.

‘My wife yelled at a CIA agent.’ He turned to Jack as four jaws hit the floor. ‘And she’s not actually Mrs MacGyver, Jack; she kept her name.’

There was a moment of silence, and then, the man who’d jabbed the other in the stomach smiled at Mac.

‘Your missus’ a spitfire like my ‘Manda?’

Mac smiled back at him, nodding.

‘Yeah.’ After another moment’s hesitation, he held up the photo in his hand. ‘Her name’s Beth. I met her in sixth grade Maths.’

Chapter End Notes

I have no idea where that came from… me wanting to dig into Mac and Jack’s brains during the first few weeks of their acquaintance as shown in the ep (I mean, why’d they wind up in fisticuffs? – we know Jack has a temper, but Mac’s reasonably level-headed…though I guess he did wind up in at least one fight with Donnie Sandoz as a boy…) combined with me wanting to write a fic set in this AU in which Jack and/or Mac’s fellow soldiers find out that he’s married and do fish-impersonations seems to have yielded this…hopefully no complaints?

Next up: No, Not the Puppy Dog Eyes! For Sarai. ‘What? You think this is the first time Mac’s asked me to blow the power in the neighbourhood?’ Bozer’s BFF is basically an overgrown Golden Retriever puppy. That means Bozer winds up doing some pretty crazy things…like blowing the whole neighbourhood’s power.
No, Not the Puppy Dog Eyes!

Chapter Summary

For Sarai. ‘What? You think this is the first time Mac’s asked me to blow the power in the neighbourhood?’ Bozer’s BFF is basically an overgrown Golden Retriever puppy. That means Bozer winds up doing some pretty crazy things…like blowing the whole neighbourhood’s power.

Chapter Notes

This is set pre-canon and is canon-compliant, as far as we know as of 2.12, Mac + Jack. It’s set very soon after Mac has returned home from Afghanistan.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

MACGYVER’S RESIDENCE

LA

‘Bro…’

Bozer stared at his roommate and BFF, who was holding a wet towel in his left hand and a broomstick in his right.

It was 9 am. Way too early for this, considering it was a Saturday and Bozer had been up until 3 am filming night scenes for his latest movie the night before.

Mac’s hair was also sticking up every which way, and there seemed to be a spring tangled in it. There was a smudge of grease on his chin, and another longer streak on his cheek, he was wearing his pyjamas (an MIT T-shirt and navy-blue plaid flannel pants) and he looked wan and exhausted.

It was obvious that Mac had been up all night, and hadn’t listened to Bozer when he’d come home the night before and told Mac to go to sleep. His BFF had said he would when he finished the component he was working on for the thingamajig he was building, but clearly hadn’t.

Even more concerning was the fact that there were two empty cans of Red Bull on the coffee table, where Mac had been working and on which the remains of a DVD player, a toaster and a pogo stick, as well as several prisms from Mac’s collection, rested.

Now, Bozer knew that, knowing his BFF, the Red Bull could just as easily have been used for some kind of genius mad science rather than been drunk, but he had a feeling that Mac had consumed it.

He sighed internally, bracing himself.

Excess caffeine and sugar, combined with sleep deprivation, could do funny things to a person,
making them do funny things.

*Mac* on excess caffeine and sugar and sleep-deprived…well, that was something that Bozer had hoped he’d never have to experience again, no matter how much he loved his roomie and his crazy brain.

‘Please, Bozer…*please.*’

Mac’s tone, voice and posture were pleading, begging. Bozer looked into his BFF’s eyes, and found himself utterly unable to say no.

Mac’s puppy-dog eyes (which Bozer was still convinced were unintentional and unconscious) were impossible to say no to.

He pointed at his roomie.

‘This is the absolute second-last thing? Once I do this, you just need to do one more tiny little step, and then you’re done?’

Mac nodded.

‘Yup.’

‘And then you will go eat some food, take a shower, lie down in your bed and go to sleep, in that order?’

The blonde nodded again.

‘I promise, Boze.’

Well, Mac took promises very seriously, but…

Bozer held out a pinkie.

‘Pinkie-promise?’

Mac shifted the towel onto his arm so that he could hook his pinkie around Bozer’s.

‘Pinkie-promise.’

Bozer nodded again and reached out and took the broomstick and the wet towel.

‘This is the last time, bro, last time. Never again, Mac, *never again.*’

Mac simply rushed off to do something to his thingamajig, without really replying, his attention clearly shifting now that he’d gotten Bozer on-board.

Bozer sighed again, in a very long-suffering, exasperated manner, as he opened the front door and glanced furtively around, before grabbing the ladder from the garage.

He knew that it wasn’t unusual for newly-returned servicemen and women to not be able to sleep, or even to refuse to sleep, due to nightmares from what they’d seen while serving their country, protecting people like Bozer, and Mac had only been home for two weeks.

He knew that it was important for their loved ones to be supportive and care for them during any difficult times they experienced.
Bozer was determined to do that to the best of his ability for his BFF.

Still, Bozer thought, as he climbed the ladder, he doubted that anyone else had to deal with their vet loved one pleading with them to knock out the neighbourhood’s power.

He raised the broomstick with the wet towel mounted on the end.

This better not get them in as much trouble as the last time he’d done this, when he and Mac were teens in Mission City…

Chapter End Notes

When he’s sleep-deprived and had too much sugar and caffeine, Mac doesn’t always use his great powers (completely) responsibly…as poor Bozer knows very, very well. Sarai, did you like that? Everyone else?

Guest – your request is up next. It’s probably far longer (4500+ words) and more action-y (and less fluffy) than you were asking for…but I think you’ll like it, since you miss Patty! It’s another canon-divergence AU, picking up right where 1.12, Screwdriver, finishes, like Permutations.

The summary is as follows: A Mother’s Love, for a Guest. It’s not money or ideology or disillusionment that turns Patricia Thornton into Chrysalis. No, it’s a web of lies, betrayal and secrets…and a 10-year-old boy named Pete. ‘Patty’ll do anything for her boy. Anything.’

As always – let me know if you’ve got a request!
Chapter Summary

For a Guest. It’s not money or ideology or disillusionment that turns Patricia Thornton into Chrysalis. No, it’s a web of lies, betrayal and secrets…and a 10-year-old boy named Pete. ‘Patty’ll do anything for her boy. Anything.’

Chapter Notes

This is an alternate ending to 1.12, Screwdriver – it picks up between Mac and Nikki’s chat at the Phoenix and Sarah’s wedding and goes WAY AU.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

JACK’S CAR

ON-ROUTE TO MACGYVER’S RESIDENCE

(AT LEAST, THAT’S WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE…)

LA

Jack turned on to Mac’s street, then spoke, his voice terse and commanding, no room for argument or questions.

‘Go dark. Now.’ Riley, Bozer and Mac, who’d all been lost in thought, still reeling from the revelations of the day, all exchanged a glance, then got to work doing as Jack had instructed, disassembling their cell phones, Bozer doing Riley’s as she cut her laptop off the Phoenix’s network. Jack nodded in approval as he drove past Mac’s house, making a turn down the next street. ‘I got burners in the glove compartment.’

Mac, sitting in the front seat, reached into the glove compartment and passed two burners back to Riley and Bozer, took one for himself, then turned to his partner.

‘Jack, what’s going on?’

Jack swallowed, looking very, very grim. Very worried.

Bozer and Riley exchanged a glance, Mac joining in via the rear-view mirror.

‘You know earlier, when I said it was probably money and ideology and disillusionment?’ They all nodded wordlessly. ‘Well, I lied. It ain’t. I know it ain’t.’ He made another turn. ‘There’s only one reason Patty’d ever betray us, and his name’s Pete.’ Jack glanced at Mac, then at Bozer and Riley through the rear-view mirror. ‘He’s ten, he’s a great kid, and they’ve got him. They’ve got to.’ Jack made another turn, shaking his head a little, a maelstrom of emotions in his eyes. Anger, worry,
fear, admiration, empathy and understanding…‘Patty’ll do anything for her boy. Anything. Even if she don’t share any blood with him.’

‘Thornton has an adopted kid?’ Bozer was doing an excellent impression of a fish. ‘Pinch me.’

Riley socked Bozer none-too-gently in the arm instead, muttering something about men and reading the room, as a hurricane of thoughts swirled through Mac’s brain.

The Organization had taken Thornton’s son to force her to go along with their nefarious plans.

But Riley and Bozer had found that Chrysalis had been feeding intel to The Organization for at least three years.

There was no way that Thornton’s son had been held hostage by The Organization for three years, or that they’d been using him as a threat against her for that long either.

Thornton was the best covert operative in the business.

She’d have found a way to get herself and her son free in that period of time.

That meant that it was far more short-term…which had a lot of implications that Mac really, really didn’t like.

The financials were faked.

Or the mole was someone else, the link to Thornton faked.

Either way…they’d been played. Really, really played.

What were the lies? Had they really been betrayed?

Had he really been betrayed? How long had he been lied to, if he had been at all?

(Who were the flies, who were the spiders? How many innocents had been caught in this web of deceit and betrayals?)

‘I still love you.’

Had that always been a lie?

(Was she a fly? Or was she a spider?)

Mac shook his head, pushing that aside.

Jack said that a kid was in danger. And not just any kid either. The son of a friend, someone whom they (almost) considered family.

Right now, Mac didn’t think there were many people he could trust. Not for sure.

But he trusted Jack. For sure. Of course he did.

Honestly, he trusted Jack more than he trusted himself right now.

\[\text{DINER}\]

\[\text{LA}\]
Jack led them into the slightly-grimy, greasy-spoon diner, walking to a booth occupied by a man and a woman. The man was built like Jack, and appeared to be in his mid-fifties, with greying brunette hair. The woman was very petite, Asian and could have passed for being forty.

Jack slid into the booth, and Mac, Bozer and Riley followed, making introductions as they sat.

‘Nick, Rowena, this is MacGyver, Bozer and Riley. Mac, Bozer, Riley, this is Nick Edwards, ex-Navy SEAL, and Rowena Ho, ex-Special Forces.’

‘We live four doors down from Patricia.’

‘We watch Pete for her when she can’t.’

Nick swallowed as he finished speaking, and Rowena reached out and put her hand over his in comfort, before addressing the four Phoenix agents.

‘He was taken 22 hours ago, straight after school. We’ve been searching for 21 hours, but this is all we have.’ Rowena reached into her pocket and pulled out a small plastic sandwich bag with a very small amount of dirt inside it, and at the same time, Nick pulled out his phone and brought up an image of some skid marks. ‘We found those two blocks from his school.’

Riley immediately pulled out her laptop (which she’d ensured wasn’t traceable) and connected to the diner’s free Wi-Fi, so that she could do a search for the make and model of the vehicle based on the skid marks, while Mac picked up the baggie of dirt and started examining it through the magnifying glass attachment of his Swiss Army knife.

Nick turned to Jack, speaking uncharacteristically quietly.

‘You got any leads on who might have taken him? Her place is crawling with suits, there’s something real bad going on…’

Jack gave a very bitter snort of laughter, glancing over at Mac, who was very focused on the dirt, muttering under his breath.

‘Oh, you got no idea, man, no idea.’ He nodded. ‘And yeah, we got a lead.’

Mac pointed to a small chunk of what seemed to be a round, red berry, and a small seed in the bag of soil.

‘These are from Nevin’s barberry; it’s an endangered plant endemic to Southern California, there’s supposed to be fewer than 500 individual trees left…’

Riley typed frantically, writing strings of code on the fly.

‘Cross-referencing known Nevin’s barberry locations with traffic-cam footage of late-model SUVs…’

‘Okay, we’ve got it down to 50 addresses…screening the homeowners now…’

‘Riley, look.’ Bozer reached out and pointed at one of the names on the screen. It was a vaguely familiar name. ‘That’s the owner of one of those shell companies that the money passed through on its way to Chrysalis’ bank account…’
Jack, Mac, Nick and Rowena all exchanged a glance, then Jack spoke, already getting up.

‘What’s the address, Ri?’

PERFECTLY ORDINARY HOUSE IN SUBURBIA

(NOT)

(IT’S REALLY AN ORGANIZATION SAFEHOUSE)

LA

The safehouse was empty.

There was no sign of Pete.

‘Damn it!’

Jack punched one of the walls, hard enough to break the drywall.

Nick reached out and put a steadying hand on his shoulder as he breathed hard in anger, while Mac, Bozer and Riley exchanged a glance.

We’ve got questions.

Lots and lots of questions.

But they’re going to have to wait.

Right now, we’ve got an innocent child in danger. A friend’s son to boot. One of our own.

Pete is our priority.

‘Toss this place.’

Mac stepped inside one of the bedrooms of the safehouse, and two feet from the bed, stopped in his tracks.

Then, he grabbed one of the pillows and held it up to his nose.

Coincidences are statistically inevitable.

It’s just all about chance.

But some coincidences are too improbable to result from simple chance, and aren’t actually coincidences.

23 hours ago, Pete Thornton was taken.

23 hours ago, Thornton was tied up dealing with us going dark, disobeying orders and harbouring a fugitive, Nikki.

And someone wearing Nikki’s perfume slept in this bed, in this safehouse, where Pete’s kidnappers were very recently, also very recently.
This can’t be a coincidence.

Jack stuck his head through the doorway, making a face as he saw what Mac was doing, trying to bring a little levity into their lives as he always did.

‘Brother, I know you’re weird, but sniffing pillows, that’s crossing a line—’

‘Nikki was here. Recently.’ Mac’s face was very set. Grim, as he kicked himself and berated himself repeatedly internally. ‘You were right about her all along.’

Jack swallowed, his expression growing concerned.

‘Mac, brother…’

He stepped forward, putting a hand on Mac’s shoulder, but the blonde brushed it off and started searching the rest of the bedroom for clues.

He felt sick to his stomach. He wanted to wash his mouth out with soap and scrub himself all over until he was red and raw, to try and get her off him, out from under his skin…but he had to focus.

Little Pete Thornton was in danger.

Great danger.

Danger that only they could save him from now.

There was only one option for Mac.

He pushed those feelings of disgust and anger with himself, those horrible feelings of pain and hurt and guilt away, into a securely-locked safe in his mind, and made himself focus.

Save Pete (and his mom) first, deal with the nuclear-level fall-out later.

‘…They forced her to put years of intel onto a USB, dead-drop it at the Phoenix, to be picked up by…’ Bozer glanced at Mac. ‘…She-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named.’

Riley swallowed, looking up from her laptop, a look in her eyes that reminded Mac, Jack and Bozer of what had been there when The Collective had taken her mom and forced her to go rogue.

‘And if she talks, hints or otherwise tries to clear her name in any way…’ She swallowed again. ‘Pete dies.’

Riley had managed to get into The Organization’s network, by exploiting some of the info that Mac had (thankfully) memorized from Nikki’s phone.

They’d managed to discover The Organization’s extremely nefarious, extremely complex and also extremely brilliant plan.

Force Thornton to hand over intel to Nikki so that they could pull off the rest of the set-up, making it look like she’d been turning over intel for years, taking her off the board.

Get Nikki into the CIA, have her supposedly working to take down The Organization, so that she could help them from the inside.

Keep Mac (apparently, The Organization considered him the biggest threat of them all, after
Thornton) distracted and emotionally blinded, incapable of working out what was really happening.

And keep Pete indefinitely as insurance, so that their web of lies and manipulation was never exposed.

Jack swallowed, hand tightening on the mug he was holding.

‘Then she’ll never talk. Never. She won’t risk him.’

Nick and Rowena just nodded in agreement.

Mac, meanwhile, looked up from his corner of the dining room table that they were all sitting at, tossing the butterfly-shaped paperclip he’d been working on onto the table-top.

‘Nikki is Chrysalis. But how?’ Jack shot him a look, and Mac shook his head. This wasn’t about being convinced that she wasn’t lying to him. This wasn’t a product of the hold she had over him. The pieces of the puzzle didn’t quite all add up. ‘How could she know about Pete? Or Thornton’s alias? No-one at the Phoenix knew it; you got it from the NSA...’

Okay, okay, I know, I know.

Nikki’s lied.

A lot.

Maybe she’s lied about everything.

Just because she never mentioned Pete to me, never hinted at his existence, not even unintentionally, doesn’t mean she didn’t know, but...

Maybe there’s something really, really wrong with me, but I don’t believe that absolutely everything was a lie.

I don’t believe that she was always, always playing me.

I think that some of it was real.

At this stage, I’m not sure if that makes it better or worse.

Riley just turned her laptop around, bringing up pages and pages of classified, highly-compartamentalized intel.


Bozer spoke, looking very, very grim.

‘That account in the Caymans? There were heaps and heaps of pretty small withdrawals from it, from all over the place, hundreds of aliases.’ He paused and swallowed. ‘We thought it was just one person taking the money, just using that as a trick to keep it from being traced back to them.’ He shook his head. ‘We thought wrong.’

Riley gestured to her laptop.

‘Chrysalis isn’t one person, Chrysalis is many people.’
Mac and Jack exchanged an extremely, extremely grim look.

The US’s intelligence and covert operations agencies were infested with moles.

*Who can we trust now?*

---

Mac rooted through the safehouse’s trash cans, sorting it out into piles, as Riley and Bozer kept combing through The Organization’s network, coming up with a list of possible locations where they might be holding Pete, while Nick patrolled the perimeter and Jack and Rowena kept searching through the safehouse’s upstairs, looking for anything that could be of any use whatsoever.

Halfway through the third bag of trash, Mac held up half of a receipt using the tweezers from his Swiss Army knife, examining it closely for a second, then put it down in one of the piles, before digging further through the trash bag, pulling out a couple of Shake Shack bags, a banana peel and two apple cores.

He examined the banana peel and apple cores carefully for a moment, muttering about decay rates in a mostly-anaerobic environment. Then, he opened the bags, made a small noise of triumph when he found a solitary, leftover fry and studied it for a moment, face screwing up in concentration as he held it up to eye level with the tweezers. When he’d finished examining the fry, he pulled out the burger boxes and fry containers that were inside the bags, rubbing his fingers over the cardboard inside the boxes and containers, then started muttering to himself about grease saturation and water condensation rates. He then jumped up and walked over to the safehouse’s oven, pulled it open and stuck his head inside.

After a couple of seconds, he pulled his head out, nodded, and stole the pen and notebook that Bozer had been taking notes for Riley with. His BFF made a noise of protest.

‘Sorry."

He started scribbling frantically on an empty page of the notebook, muttering about surface area, ambient air temperature and the estimated heat transfer coefficient of an average ShackBurger.

Riley leaned closer to Bozer, an eyebrow raised.

‘Do I wanna know why Mac has an estimate for the heat transfer coefficient of an average ShackBurger?’

Bozer shrugged, looking a bit sheepish.

‘Well, it involves me making our Shake Shack shakes a little more fun…and being a little too heavy-handed with the tequila?’

Riley stared incredulously at the two roommates for a moment, then shook her head and muttered half to herself.

‘Yeah, I don’t want to know.’

Mac stopped muttering and scribbling, having covered three pages of the notebook with maths.

‘Riley, pull up a map of all the Shake Shack locations in LA, Pete’s school, this safehouse and all your candidate safehouses.’
Riley did as instructed, and Mac moved closer so he could see her laptop screen, bending over and putting a hand on the back of each of Bozer and Riley’s chairs.

He stared at the map for a moment, before nodding to himself and pointing at the screen.

‘They destroyed the half of the receipt that had the Shake Shack location and the time of purchase on it, but we can still work out what Shake Shack they bought the food at.’ Mac gestured towards the discarded fast-food containers on the floor. ‘Those burgers and fries were made roughly 28 hours ago, and they had been in those boxes for at least 40 minutes and were cold by the time they got back here.’ He pointed out one of the six Shake Shacks on the map. ‘Taking into account LA traffic at that time, this has got to be where they got them.’ He gestured between that Shake Shack, Pete’s school and the safehouse they were in. The safehouse was between the two locations. ‘It’s forty miles from his school in the wrong direction.’

Bozer and Riley both nodded, thinking.

‘They wouldn’t stop there if they were coming back from scouting out kidnapping spots, but if they were coming back from scouting somewhere else…’

‘If I was gonna kidnap someone, I’d double-check where I was taking them. You know, make sure I got all my supplies, make sure it’s secure, so on and so forth…’ Bozer held up his hands, as Riley shot him a look. ‘Purely hypothetical! Just going off, like, every serial killer documentary and movie ever made! I’m trying to get into the heads of the bad guys!’

Riley pointed out one of the Organization safehouses that she and Bozer had identified as a candidate for where they were holding Pete, not far from Mac’s nominated Shake Shack.

‘This is the only Organization safehouse we’ve found in the area.’

Mac nodded, his hands shaping a paperclip into a burger.

‘It’s our best bet.’

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**ANOTHER ORGANIZATION SAFEHOUSE**

**LA**

Nick and Rowena, dressed in business casual (‘borrowed’ from a couple of cars parked at a shopping strip which presumably belonged to people who’d just picked up their dry-cleaning), walked up to the door of the safehouse and rang the doorbell.

(They assumed that The Organization obviously knew what Mac, Jack, Riley and Bozer looked like, but were far less likely to know Nick and Rowena instantly on-sight.)

‘Hello? Hello, anybody home? I’m Marcus Colby, real-estate broker, and this is my partner, Anna Lim. We’ve got several clients who are very interested in properties in this area…’

In a car that they’d also ‘borrowed’, parked about 50 feet down the street, Riley, typed frantically on her laptop, while Bozer held up some odd thing that Mac had made, which resembled a cross between a TV antenna and a loud-speaker that somehow communicated with the phone-sized thingamajig in Nick’s pocket.
‘Done. All their security systems are out. Mac, Jack, you’re good to go. Nick, Rowena, in ten, nine, eight, seven...’

Standing by the fence that divided the Organization safehouse’s backyard from the backyard of their rear neighbours (who were handily on vacation), Mac and Jack each grabbed one of the objects from the plastic bags in their hands, which looked like water balloons, but were better described by the nickname Jack had given them, boom-balloons.

They each lobbed the ‘boom-balloons’ in their right hand at the safehouse. On contact, the balloons exploded, causing a loud noise remarkably like gunfire to ring out. With a quick glance at each other, Mac and Jack then leapt the fence, plastic bags still in hand, Mac pulling out his Swiss Army knife with his free hand, Jack his gun.

As planned, Jack took cover behind a large tree about ten feet from the back door, continuing to lob boom-balloons at the house, while Mac ran all the way to it, getting to work on the lock. When he was about ten seconds away from being done, he shot Jack a hand signal, and his partner ran quickly through the yard to him.

Mac stepped to the side, and flung the door open, following Jack inside. They were immediately met by a couple of The Organization’s men (and could also immediately hear what Nick and Rowena were up to just inside the front door – there were gunshots and masculine grunts of pain and curses, as well as a voice that sounded just like Nick’s – ‘This is just like Sanaa!’ – followed by a reply from Rowena – ‘Obviously, we remember Sanaa very differently!’), and Jack shot one through the shoulder, while Mac pushed the heavy wooden door into another, then flung a boom-balloon at a third.

‘Drop it, or the kid dies!’

On the upstairs landing, Jack stood mere feet away from Pete Thornton and the man holding a gun to his head, an arm around the boy, holding him to his body as a human shield.

The ten-year-old’s hazel eyes were full of tears, and there were old tear tracks down his cheeks, but he wasn’t crying, not while bound, gagged and with a gun to his head.

He really was his mother’s son.

Jack dropped the gun.

‘Good, now move back, nice and slow and-‘

The man didn’t get to finish what he was saying, because there was the sound of glass smashing, and then, he fell to the ground like a sack of potatoes, having been struck in the head by a rock the size of a golf ball, expertly thrown.

Jack rushed over to the boy, quickly undoing the gag, then gathering him up into his arms.

‘Hey, hey, it’s okay, buddy, it’s okay, I’m Jack, friend of your mom’s, you remember me, right? It’s okay, buddy, you’re safe now, I got you...’

Over the now-sobbing boy’s shoulder, Jack nodded at Mac, a very relieved, thankful smile on his face. The blonde was now climbing through the window after breaking the rest of the glass, ignoring the broken glass, having climbed up using the drainpipe and the window ledges and casings as hand- and foot-holds.
After ruffling his mop of unruly, sandy-blonde curls, Jack pulled away a little from Pete.

‘Come on, kiddo, let’s get you out of those...’ He gestured to Mac, who gave the boy a somewhat-awkward, but nonetheless friendly, wave and smile. ‘This is Mac, he works with me and your mom, he’s gonna help us out...’

Pete gave a little nod, as Mac worked on the restraints, while Jack rubbed his back reassuringly.

‘Mom says you’re really smart, like really, really smart and that you can do anything with a paperclip...’

Mac glanced over at Jack for just a moment (Thornton had told her son all about him...he probably shouldn’t have been completely surprised by that – she came over for Christmas, after all – but he was a little ashamed to admit that he was), and found that the older man, too, looked a bit surprised, though nowhere near as much as Mac felt.

‘Well, I wouldn’t say anything, but paperclips are really, really handy things to have around...’

‘Who’re we gonna call to clean this whole mess up?’ Bozer lowered his voice, leaning closer to Mac, Jack and Riley, with a quick glance over at Pete, who was being comforted by Rowena while Nick kept an eye on their new prisoners. ‘And, you know, get the boss out of jail? Since we got a mole infestation and all?’

Riley continued.

‘We need somebody high up in covert ops that we can trust.’

She sounded like she had no suggestions, as she and Bozer just looked at Mac and Jack. The blonde shrugged helplessly, but Jack pulled out his burner with a smirk.

‘Don’t worry, guys, I got this. I know somebody.’ He paled. ‘If she doesn’t kill me first...’

Mac, Bozer and Riley all exchanged a look as Jack dialled a number, stepping away from them somewhat.

‘Hey, Matty, Longhorn here, long time, no speak...’

MACGYVER’S RESIDENCE

LA

Jack cornered Mac as he left the bathroom, hair damp, after a long, long shower (he’d scrubbed himself red and raw, trying to get her off him, and there was still a slight, lingering taste of bile in his mouth).

Mac ran a hand through his hair.

‘I’m sorry, Jack. I should have listened to you.’ He gave a very bitter snort of laughter. ‘You were right. She’s my kryptonite.’

Jack reached out and clasped Mac’s shoulder tightly, gesturing with his head over to the living room, where Riley was playing Mario Kart with Pete, both of them sitting cross-legged on the floor, Pete leaning against Thornton’s legs, while she sat on the couch and ran her hands through...
his curls, looking far more maternal than Mac’s imagination, wild and powerful though it was, had been able to envision her being. As they watched, Bozer walked over from the kitchen, three mugs of his special, top-secret-recipe hot chocolate, complete with marshmallows, in hand.

‘People we love will always be our weakness, brother. For all of us.’ Jack squeezed his shoulder.
‘And there ain’t nothing wrong with that.’

Mac nodded, looking back over at Jack, reaching up and putting his arm around the older man’s shoulders, pulling him into a side-hug.

‘The people we love give us strength, too.’

Jack smiled, hugging Mac back.

‘Yeah, man. Yeah.’ Then, he let go of Mac and started walking towards the kitchen. ‘Come on, let’s get some of Boze’s hot chocolate before it’s all gone!’

In the kitchen, Pete watched, wide-eyed, as Mac stabbed the plastic straw clean through the potato, as Bozer and Riley clapped and cheered appropriately.

Back in the living room, Thornton swallowed as she watched, something very soft, very fond in her eyes, a look that Jack had only ever seen there a handful of times, and always in relation to Pete.
(Though, he’d thought he’d seen ghosts of it, hints of it, when she looked over at Mac and Riley and even Bozer, too, of late…)

There was, however, also something unbearably guilty in her eyes, and that was reflected in her voice when she spoke, very quietly.

‘Should I have given it away, when I took in Pete?’

Jack looked over at her, and she was very relieved, comforted, to see that there wasn’t blame or disapproval in there.

‘You ain’t the first one in our line of work to put people in danger by making ‘em your family, Patty. And you won’t be the last.’ He glanced at Riley as he spoke, then looked back at her. ‘And you kept him safe for years, and you’ll always try your best to do that.’ He looked back over at the four younger people in the kitchen, eyes lingering on Mac. ‘I reckon that’s the best anyone can ask of you.’ Then, after glancing back at her for a long, silent moment, Jack grinned. ‘But hey, if you decide to give it away, I’d like to humbly submit myself as a candidate for Director of Operations. You know, for stability’s sake, promote from within?’

She arched an eyebrow at him, but a small, amused (at least to him) smile appeared on her face anyway, so Jack counted that as a win.

An hour later, Pete lay in Mac’s bed, sound asleep. The bedroom door was ajar, and all five adults sat in the living room, Thornton with a clear line of sight to her son.

They sat in silence, a little heavy, a tiny bit tense, until Bozer broke it.

‘Okay, since no-one else is gonna say it, I’m gonna say it. Boss, you have a secret son and you never told us?’
Riley socked Bozer none-too-gently in the arm.

‘Read the room!’

Bozer just put his hands up.

‘Hey, I just said what we were all thinking!’

Thornton put down the mug of hot chocolate that she’d been sipping at, even though it could no longer be described as ‘hot’, and was probably better described as ‘cold’.

‘I’m sorry. I should have told you about him.’ She’d always thought that keeping Pete a secret from as many people as possible would keep him safe. Clearly, she had thought wrong. After all, he was only safe (and she was only free) because she’d told Jack (something which she’d never intended to do, but Jack Dalton was persistent and smarter than he looked and had somehow gotten through her defences and under her skin), something that was seemingly so out-of-character that The Organization had never suspected that she would have done it. She was never going to announce to the world that she had a son (that would be foolish), nothing near it, but she should have told Mac, Riley and Bozer about him earlier. They could be trusted, and they would protect her son as if he were one of their own, because in their minds, she thought (maybe hoped, more accurately), he was, because he was hers and she was one of theirs, one of them. Part of this little improvised pseudo-family. She looked around, making eye contact with each of them in turn, something that could only be described as openness in her eyes. ‘I will always have to keep secrets from you. That’s part of my job. But, from now on, no more unnecessary secrecy.’

Jack smiled, reached out and clasped her shoulder, and then, to her great surprise, Riley got up and hugged her. Unused to being hugged by anyone but her son, Thornton was stiff for a moment before she hugged the young hacker back. When she let go, a smiling Mac (his smile, she noted, was more wan than those of the others, more sadness and hurt in his eyes, unsurprisingly – she knew that the wounds that Nikki had inflicted upon him were deep, and could only hope that now that she was behind bars, her lies and betrayal laid bare, his unhealthy obsession would end, as would that powerful hold the woman held over him) handed her a pair of paperclip shapes; a mama bear and a smaller, baby bear. She smiled a little smile back at him, which made his widen a little. Bozer grinned.

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

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

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

_There’s a lot of work ahead of us._

_Chrysalis needs to be caught. All of them._

_The Organization has to be stopped._

_And we need to determine just how badly compromised the Phoenix is._

_We’ve got a lot of healing to do, too._

_Especially me._
But I chose the name ‘Phoenix Foundation’ for a reason.

Together, we’ve made it through a lot. I know we’ll continue to do that.

We can rise from the ashes.

Together.

Chapter End Notes

How was that? Guest, I know this is not exactly what you wanted – I think you wanted more fluff and less angst and secret-agent-ing? Also, I know that Jack never actually says that Patricia is a good mom anywhere in this fic, but…it’s really heavily implied? And I guess he doesn’t exactly go around introducing little Pete to everyone either, but…this is what my brain threw out? I hope you liked it anyway!

And yes, Mac + tequila + Shake Shack = mad hamburger science, mostly because I couldn’t resist! Pete’s name comes from Pete Thornton from the original show. Nevin’s barberry is a real plant endemic to SoCal that is endangered, and there are apparently really six Shake Shacks in LA (at least, as best as I can tell from their website…which is also where I got the ShackBurger from, apologies if no-one actually calls it that; I’ve never eaten Shake Shack and only know what it is from TV shows…)

Nick and Rowena are OCs of mine from my Every End is a Beginning AU; in this reality, they and Thornton met at some point during their careers and became friends. Nick and Rowena then eventually decided to settle down properly and took up more civilian jobs, raising two foster sons (Alex ‘Flyboy’ Lucas – an Air Force fighter pilot - and Carter Justin – an FBI white-hat engaged to one of his co-workers, May Torres - also OCs from that AU). When Thornton adopted Pete, she reached out to them again, and just so happened to buy a new home close to theirs…

I think I’ve now written a grand total of five different fix-its for 1.12, Screwdriver (all three chapters of Permutations, plus Every End is a Beginning, plus this…), which might be mildly concerning…

Oh – and an issue of continuity that I realized while writing this: exactly when did Jack start working for the DXS? In 1.11, Scissors, he says that he was a ‘bathroom tile salesman’ and working for a covert agency (confirmed, probably, to be the DXS by implication in that ep, plus the fact that it’s stated in 2.13, CO2 Sensor + Tree Branch, that bathroom tile salesman is his Phoenix cover) when he dated Diane. But if we take him at face-value in 2.12, Mac + Jack, he was in the Army when he met Mac in Afghanistan. So what was Jack’s career pathway? I originally assumed, before 2.12, that it was Army/Delta Force to CIA to DXS (and that he met Mac while undercover in Afghanistan, like I wrote in Constants and Variables/A Woman Scorned). But if we take what we learned in both 1.11 and 2.12, he went (possibly Army)-CIA-DXS-Army-back to the DXS? Or maybe it was the original trajectory I thought of, and Jack simply had to lie to Mac (and everyone else) about who he really worked for in 2.12? Or maybe it’s just a continuity issue, like Mac’s age or when his dad left…

As always – let me know if you’ve got a request!
Statistically Inevitable

Chapter Summary

For TorchwoodCardiff. After a mission gone wrong, Jack’s in hospital. Which is plunged into lockdown when one of the bad guys he and Mac were meant to take down storms into the ER. But Mac and Cage have a bigger problem on their hands… luckily, Mac’s read the WikiHow on delivering a baby.

Chapter Notes

This is set in some nebulous near-future in which Cage, fully recovered, has returned from visiting her sister in Australia and the team is back to ‘normal’. (Which I’m not sure will actually happen in canon – I suspect something is up with Cage; either her being shot and going to Australia was always part of the plot and is a lead-in to something major, plot-wise – like a revelation as to what her real name is and why she’s hiding it, as hinted by Murdoc – or Isabel Lucas either has another commitment and can’t appear in a couple of eps so they had to come up with some reason for Cage to not appear for a while, or is leaving the show and they’re writing her out, but don’t want to do it by killing her in case she wants to come back.)

Title comes from Mac’s statement/belief that coincidences are statistically inevitable.

Warning – there’s an extremely-vague kind-of spoiler for The Last Jedi? (It’s a ‘spoiler’ in terms of a potential interpretation of an element of the film; it doesn’t seem to have much to do with the plot – though admittedly, I haven’t actually seen the film myself, so…)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

HOSPITAL

(THE ONE THAT MAC SHOULD HAVE A LOYALTY CARD FOR)

(SERIOUSLY – GET ON IT, PEOPLE)

LA

‘…Seriously, man, I’m telling you, it was like I used the Force!’ Jack, sitting in a hospital bed in a reclined position, wearing a hospital gown and hooked up to an IV, gestured dramatically. ‘I was just running and running and they just kept missing…well, except for, you know…’ He gestured to his left calf, where, until quite recently, a solitary bullet had resided. ‘You reckon they can test my midichlorian levels here?’

Variously sitting and standing around Jack’s hospital bed, Mac, Bozer, Riley and Cage exchanged fondly exasperated and slightly amused glances, though Cage’s sharp eyes caught underlying
worry and concern in everyone else’s eyes, as well as a hint of guilt in Mac’s.

They all knew that Mac and Jack had been very, very lucky that day.

The partners had been sent to take out a group of arms dealers before they could sell their merchandise (a whole crate of stolen rifles that were in development by DARPA and highly-classified) in a deal that was due to go down in 24 hours’ time.

Of course, the plan hadn’t quite gone to plan, leading to Jack drawing fire and acting as a distraction while Mac whipped up one of his on-the-fly creations.

And of course, the contraption and improvised plan had worked, and they’d captured the four arms dealers, stopping the deal and preventing the stolen experimental weapons from being sold. The arms dealers were now in custody and the weaponry returned to DARPA.

In other words, the mission was a success.

Except for the fact that Jack had been shot in the calf.

As Mac ranted at the older man about midichlorians not being real and how they’d sort-of retconned midichlorian levels being vital to the ability to use the Force in the latest Star Wars film anyway, Cage exchanged another glance with Bozer and Riley, this time with more obvious concern.

They all knew that Mac was blaming himself for Jack’s situation, because he was Mac.

He knew, intellectually and logically, that it wasn’t his fault and that Jack would never blame him, but that did not stop him from blaming himself.

Cage crossed her arms and spoke.

‘Mac, when was the last time you ate?’

The partners stopped their bickering about The Last Jedi, as Mac’s face screwed up a little in thought, sounding a little sheepish when he replied.

‘Uh….twelve hours ago?’

‘Bro!’

‘Let’s go to the canteen and get some snacks.’

Cage gestured to the door of Jack’s room with her head. Bozer, Riley and Jack all nodded in eager (far too eager) agreement at that plan.

‘Me and Riley will keep Jack company.’

‘Yeah, if we let you stay here with him, he’ll never get the rest he’s supposed to be getting, ‘cause you two will just keep arguing about the true nature of the Force.’ Riley crossed her arms and turned to Jack. ‘And seriously? You call Mac a nerd, when you’re the one who has to bring Star Wars into every third conversation?’

As Mac walked towards the hospital’s canteen with Cage, he shook his head with a fondly exasperated little smile as he toyed with a paperclip.

They’re covert operatives for the US government.
The dark-haired, dark-skinned man aged in his mid-thirties, dressed in a dress shirt, dress pants and a suit jacket, limped into the ER, the right knee region of his pants bloodied and torn.

Once inside, he took a seat, then, suddenly, pulled out a gun and grabbed the woman sitting next to him (a middle-aged lady with a packet of frozen peas pressed to her forearm) by the neck, holding the gun to her head.

As screams and cries of panic spread through the room, people began running out of the ER, and a nurse at the station in the corner pressed the emergency lockdown button, the man coolly turned to the nearest member of hospital security, who’d pulled his own gun on him.

‘I want a doctor and a helicopter. Now.’

In the canteen, as the lockdown alarms went off, Mac and Cage, holding an assortment of snacks, exchanged a very, very concerned look, and both pulled out their phones.

PHOENIX FOUNDATION HEADQUARTERS

SOMEBWHERE IN LA

‘…Our intel was wrong. Mac, Jack, tomorrow wasn’t the time of the first meeting between the dealers and the potential buyers, and you didn’t get the whole ring.’ Matty glanced at Jill, who was perched on the arm of an armchair in the war room, along with several other frantically-typing Phoenix analysts, and a photo of a dark-skinned, dark-haired man in his mid-thirties appeared next to Bozer, Riley and Jack (who were conferencing in from Riley’s laptop; Mac and Cage were on the phone, voice-call only) on the war room screen. ‘This is Martin Gupta. The last member of the arms dealing ring, who happened to be meeting the potential buyers alone when Mac and Jack took down his buddies. Obviously, the meet went south…’ That was unsurprising, given that his merchandise had been confiscated and his operation blown in the middle of the meet. ‘…and now he’s at the hospital using a hostage to order around hospital security and demand medical treatment and a helicopter.’ Matty’s expression and voice grew stern, but a little apologetic nonetheless. ‘You have to keep your covers.’ Jack-the-bathroom-tile-salesman had supposedly been shot in a home invasion gone wrong. ‘But you can’t let Gupta escape.’

That sounded like an impossible mission. But Matty had faith in her agents.

Especially these agents.

There was a knock on the war room door, and Andi stuck her head in, holding a phone out to Matty, who nodded, then turned back to the screen for a moment.

‘I’m going to talk to the FBI, we’ll keep you updated. Good luck.’

In the canteen, Mac and Cage exchanged a glance, then Cage spoke into the phone that Mac was holding.
‘Mac and I can’t leave the canteen, it’d be too suspicious…’

They were far from being the only people having a hushed, serious conversation on the phone in a corner, but they both knew that walking out of here would only draw a lot of attention that they couldn’t draw, both for their covers and for stopping Gupta.

Mac continued, sounding frustrated.

‘And we’re two floors up and on the opposite side of the ER.’

In Jack’s room, Riley and Bozer exchanged a glance, Riley gesturing to the hospital schematic she’d pulled up on her laptop, as Bozer held up his phone, on which they were talking to Mac and Cage.

They were far closer to the ER, and they all knew it.

‘There’s a storage room two doors down from us.’

Bozer nodded and gave a little grin as he picked up where Riley’s thoughts were going.

‘We can borrow some scrubs.’ There were still hospital staff walking around, checking on patients and making sure that all were as safe and well as could be, given the situation, though they couldn’t move far or freely through the hospital either, due to the lockdown. ‘Walk around like we belong, and no-one will question us!’

Mac made a noise of assent, as Cage’s voice rang out over the phone.

‘Authority bias is extremely powerful, as established by the Milgram experiment and its variations.’

Bozer and Riley glanced at Jack, who just nodded.

‘I’ll be fine.’ He pulled a very small ceramic knife out from under his bed and handed it to Riley. ‘But I’ll feel better if you got that with you.’

Bozer stared incredulously, as Riley swallowed and gave a serious little nod, taking the knife.

‘How’d you sneak that into the hospital, man?’

Jack just pointed at his boots, which were sitting in the corner.

‘Secret compartment; Mac helped me out.’

Mac and Cage stared as the heavily pregnant woman, supported by her husband, cried out. As she did, her husband looked around the canteen, clearly panicked.

‘That…that was two and a half minutes since the last one!’ The note of panic in his voice grew more distinct as it clearly sunk in, given that everyone else in the room had frozen to some degree and no-one had stepped forward, that there were no medical professionals in the canteen when the lockdown had commenced. And with the lockdown, summoning one would be near-impossible. ‘The doctors said we had time, said we should go to the canteen and try and relax, but…’

The two Phoenix agents exchanged a glance, and then, Cage spoke into her phone very quietly.
'Bozer, Riley, Mac has to deliver a baby. We’re going to be busy for a while.'

She pocketed her phone, but didn’t hang up, as Bozer and Riley made noises of shock and disbelief.

Meanwhile, Mac gestured to the canteen worker who was standing beside the kitchen door.

‘Get food service gloves, clean towels and hot water.’ He sounded extremely authoritative, to Cage’s approval. She was thankful that Mac always sounded like he knew what he was doing, even if he was making it up as he went along. Then, he walked over to the labouring woman and her husband. ‘Sir, ma’am, my name is Angus MacGyver.’ He gestured to Cage. ‘This is Samantha. He gave a wry and apologetic little smile. ‘Unfortunately, neither of us are medical professionals, but I do know how to deliver a baby.’

The woman gave another cry of pain as she was wracked by another contraction, and Cage reached out to help her husband support her, taking one of the woman’s hands reassuringly. Her husband, meanwhile, looked incredulously at Mac.

‘How?’

‘I read about it online.’ He shrugged as the man gaped at him like a fish. ‘I was bored and thought it might be useful to know.’

Cage sighed and face-palmed internally, even though her demeanour, as she spoke with the mother-to-be, comforting and reassuring her, remained calm as ever.

(Mac could be very inspiring, seemingly knowing exactly what to say, from time to time. However, she knew that Mac being Mac – impossibly earnest, considering his profession, slightly awkward and not the best with social stuff – that had to be attributed to great effort, a strong and genuine determination to help, and luck, more than anything else.)

(Luck was not on his side this time.)

Naturally, the man did not look very reassured at all, and made a spluttering noise, as the canteen worker hurried over, arms full of towels with a box of food service gloves balanced on top. Mac started spreading towels on the floor. As Cage and the woman’s husband helped her to lie down on them, Cage made eye contact with the father-to-be, choosing her words carefully.

‘I know this isn’t ideal, but if you can’t have a medical professional deliver your son or daughter, Mac’s the next best thing. He’s smarter than Einstein, went to MIT and used to disarm bombs for the Army; he’s very good with his hands and very calm under pressure.’ A touch of wryness appeared in her voice. ‘He also has a long history of being very good at things that he’s never done before.’

The man did look somewhat reassured at that, as Mac handed Cage the box of gloves.

‘Put those on; you’re going to check if the baby’s crowning yet.’ He turned back to the labouring woman. ‘Sorry, Mrs…’

‘Marks. Eliza Marks.’ She gestured to her husband. ‘And Luke.’

Mac gave a slightly awkward little wave and smile, holding his non-gloved hand out to Luke Marks to shake.

‘Hi. Uh…Nice to meet you.’ He gave a little shake of his head, shaking off that awkwardness,
looking serious again and turning to Eliza. ‘Have you had any complications during your pregnancy?’

Cage knew that Eliza would be far more comfortable with her doing the physical examination than Mac.

She was also extremely hard to fluster and not squeamish at all.

Still, she did not sign up for this.

She gave Eliza Marks an apologetic smile as she finished pulling on the gloves. The woman’s only response was to cry out in pain again as yet another contraction wracked her body.

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The petite, brunette, young woman in a doctor’s coat and scrubs approached Gupta and his hostage in the otherwise-empty ER, her hands up, holding a small medical bag in her left hand. As she approached, Gupta kept his arm around his hostage, holding his gun to her head.

‘I’m Dr Bethany Taylor. I’m trained in emergency medicine, and I’m here to treat your knee.’ Her voice was calm and professional. ‘In order for me to do that, you’re going to have to sit down and let…’

She trailed off, glancing at the sobbing, terrified woman.

‘Mrs Marsh. Lily.’

Dr Taylor gave a nod, as if they were simply making introductions.

‘You’re going to have to let Mrs Marsh get out of the way.’

She looked back over at Gupta, making eye contact with him.

What he saw pleased him. This doctor, Gupta thought, was small and young and looked sweet and fragile, even if she seemed brave and calm now. She was no threat.

He gave a little nod, and pushed Mrs Marsh into one of the seats, then sat down one seat away from her, his gun still trained on the woman, then shouted out.

‘If you or anyone else tries anything, you both die!’

Dr Taylor just nodded in acceptance, again as if this was a perfectly normal conversation.

‘I’m going to come closer, crouch down and put down my bag.’ When she’d finished speaking, she did just that, looking up at Gupta. ‘I’m going to reach into my bag, and take out some gloves.’ She grabbed a box of gloves and pulled a pair on. ‘And now I’m going to take out scissors to cut your trouser leg.’ He nodded, somewhat dismissively, almost bored, and Dr Taylor started carefully and gently cutting through his pants. Then, she put down the scissors and started examining the gunshot wound. There was an entry wound, but no exit. She looked back up at Gupta. ‘I’m going to remove the bullet and any fragments or debris. I’ll give you a local anaesthetic and a sedative-’

Gupta cut her off.

‘No! No drugs!’

‘Sir, it will be extremely painful-‘
‘No!’ He waved his gun around a little. ‘No drugging me!’

Dr Taylor held up her hands, a placating gesture.

‘Okay, no anaesthetic or sedative.’ She gestured to her medical bag again with a little movement of her head. ‘I’m going to grab a scalpel…’

‘The head’s out!’

‘You’re doing so well, Eliza, so well…’

‘You’re almost there.’

Bozer and Riley, hiding in a storage closet right next to the ER (they hadn’t been able to get any closer), listened to the audio from the police and FBI outside the hospital (Jill had gotten in to both their internal communications and the line they were using to communicate with Gupta, to try and talk him down), while watching the security footage from the hospital’s security cameras (which Riley had hacked).

Bozer was also eavesdropping through the door of the storage closet, using a stethoscope.

‘Bozer, you have to see this.’

Riley turned her laptop around, her expression very serious, and Bozer put down the stethoscope, moving closer to the hacker.

Gupta had seized the young doctor who’d been treating him as soon as his knee was bandaged, and was now holding a gun to her head, ordering his previous hostage to go.

Bozer and Riley exchanged a glance.

It made sense.

Keeping a patient as a hostage allowed him to exploit the sense of duty that the hospital staff felt towards patients.

Keeping the doctor as a hostage allowed him to exploit the personal connections the staff had with her.

Both, in that sense, made good hostages.

But keeping both was just infeasible for him (it was too hard to control both of them, or keep both under adequate levels of threat for his demands to be taken seriously), and the doctor was five inches shorter and at least 40 pounds lighter than the older woman, so Gupta must have thought she’d be easier to control and move around.

Matty’s voice rang out again from Riley’s laptop, their boss appearing on screen as she spoke.

‘They’re not budging on the chopper; the US government doesn’t negotiate with terrorists.’

Matty rolled her eyes, as Jack, patched in via his phone in his hospital room, spoke up.

‘Matty, we gotta get him out of that ER and on the move. Boze and Riles can’t get any closer, and if we give in to his demands, he’ll drop his guard, plus he’s more vulnerable on the move.’
'What do you think I’ve been telling the FBI, Jack?' Matty crossed her arms. ‘They want a solid plan before they authorise anything. A really solid plan. *Not* the sort that Blondie comes up with.’

Bozer, Riley and Jack fell silent for a moment, before Bozer spoke up, looking a little bit hesitant and a little bit sheepish.

‘Well, I got a plan…but it’s kinda a Mac-plan, boss.’ He pointed at Jack on Riley’s laptop. ‘You’re gonna like this one; it involves a kinda reverse-Alan Rickman from *Die Hard*…’

Mac, smiling, handed the squalling, bloody baby girl, wrapped in a towel, to Eliza, who was exhausted and sweaty, but also extremely, extremely happy. Her husband Luke, too, was grinning proudly by his wife’s side, and the other patients and family and friends of patients in the canteen started clapping.

Cage smiled at her fellow Phoenix agent, before everyone gave a little jump as her phone, still in her pocket, emitted a loud screaming noise. A familiar loud screaming noise; the same one that Mac had set his ringtone to for Halloween the previous year.

(Clearly, Matty and/or Riley was resorting to fairly desperate measures to reach them. Since they knew what was happening and why Mac and Cage were occupied, it had to be major. Like having a plan to take down Gupta that required them.)

Mac smiled apologetically and sheepishly to Eliza and Luke.

‘Uh…sorry, excuse us. I…uh…that’s our boss and I don’t think she’s happy with us…’

He pulled off his bloodied gloves, as Cage did the same, and the two of them stepped into a corner to answer the phone.

‘Oh, *shit*.’

The hospital’s Head of Security and the two security guards who were in the security HQ of the hospital with him exchanged a look, as they watched the brunette man in a hospital gown and a robe, a bandage wrapped around his left calf, stagger around the hospital, getting dangerously close to the ER.

‘…Why is there a purple elephant in my room? It just ate Boba Fett!’ He head-butted a security guard who approached him, trying to take him back to his room. ‘Take that, you evil lizard! You stole my burger!’ He kept staggering closer to the ER. ‘Why is there no Guns N’ Roses playing here? You call this a hospital? I wanna file a complaint!’

Clearly, he was hopped up on painkillers.

He might also be mentally disturbed.

The Head of Security and the two guards scrambled out of the room, as the patient head-butted another guard.

‘Okay, Jill and I have got the communications between the FBI, hospital security and Gupta diverted…’

Riley handed Bozer her phone, which had already been set up to impersonate another phone. He
gave a little smirk.

‘It’s show-time.’

Bozer dialled the number that had been typed into the phone already, then started speaking, in a voice that was very much not his own.

In fact, it was the voice of the FBI negotiator who’d been talking to Gupta.

‘…Sir, I’ve spoken to my superiors. The hospital is insisting on providing you with the transportation that you have demanded; one of their med-evac choppers is on the helipad on the roof…’

As Gupta, forcing Dr Taylor to walk in front of him at gunpoint, his left hand holding her shoulder, his right the gun, walked past the hospital canteen, following the route to the helipad he was being dictated by who he thought was the FBI negotiator, Cage, holding a bloodied towel in her hands, looking very shaken and scared and with a pleading look on her face, burst out of the canteen.

‘Please, we need a doctor…she’s just given birth and there was so much blood and…’ She made a strangled sound much like a sob. ‘Please.’ She looked beseechingly up at Gupta, falling to her knees. ‘We need a doctor, please. Her for me. I’ll…I’ll go with you, just…’ She gestured to Dr Taylor. ‘Just let her help Eliza, please!’

Gupta scoffed at Cage’s pleas, but he did stop, right outside the hospital canteen. (Just as Cage had intended.)

Mac, standing in the hospital canteen, not far behind the kneeling Cage, threw the sharpening stone (taken from the kitchen) he was holding at Gupta. The stone struck him very hard in the right wrist, forcing him to drop his gun, and Dr Taylor had the wits to pull free from his slackened grip and run down the corridor. Cage, moving very quickly, dove for the gun, seized it, and pointed it at Gupta, who put his hands up, recognizing that he was bested.

Mac hurried over to the arms dealer, pulling out his belt and using it to bind the man’s wrists.

When he looked up again, Eliza, Luke, the doctor down the corridor and everyone else in the canteen was staring at both him and Cage, incredulous.

Mac blinked, then spoke, after glancing at Cage.

‘We were in the Army. Well, she was Australian Army, I was US Army, but…more-or-less the same thing.’

‘Hey, Matty.’

Jack, now restrained to his hospital bed, turned his head and grinned at his boss in greeting. Matty gave a little smile in return.

‘Hi, Jack.’

He gestured to the restraints around his wrists with his head.

‘Any chance you could help me out?’
Matty crossed her arms and snorted.

‘I’ve already had to talk the doctors out of sending you in for a psychiatric assessment.’

‘So that’s a no?’ Matty shot him a sarcastic what do you think? look. Jack sighed. ‘Then at least can you tell that purple elephant to go away?’ Matty raised an eyebrow at him, and Jack just burst into chuckles. ‘Kidding, kidding, Matty.’ She rolled her eyes, as Jack smirked. ‘Hey, you reckon I’d have a chance with the Academy for that performance? And didn’t it remind you of Lima?’

Matty gave another snort at that, shaking her head in an exasperated manner, a note of fondness in her eyes nonetheless.

‘You and I clearly remember Lima very differently.’

Bozer, Riley and Dr Taylor stood in the doorway of the hospital canteen, watching as Mac and Cage talked to the new parents, all with soft little smiles on their faces as Eliza carefully placed her baby girl in Mac’s arms.

Bozer turned to Dr Taylor.

‘You were really brave. I mean, surely you had to know that he might take you hostage, but…’

Dr Taylor gave a little half-shrug.

‘Thanks, but it…it was just one of those moments when the job requires you to step up. And… well, better me than a patient.’

There was something in her eyes that suggested that she was definitely very shaken by the events of the day (who wouldn’t be?) but was holding it back admirably for now; it hadn’t quite hit her yet.

(Bozer was 100% convinced that she’d be okay nonetheless. She looked fragile, but he was certain she wasn’t.)

Bozer and Riley shared a glance, something both wry and understanding in their eyes, then the hacker spoke.

‘We get that.’

Eliza and Luke Marks both smiled as Eliza gently and carefully deposited their daughter in Mac’s arms. Both mother and daughter had been declared as doing fine by the doctors.

‘Meet Lauren Samantha Marks.’

That was said very pointedly to Cage, who looked, for once, surprised and thrown off-balance. Mac’s smile widened, taken on a hint of an amused, teasing tone.

(He already knew exactly what the talk around the fire-pit tonight was going to be about.)

Cage found her voice and smiled at the couple, then looked down at baby Lauren in Mac’s arms.

‘I’m…I’m honoured.’

Chapter End Notes
TorchwoodCardiff, how was that? Did it hit the spot? Everyone else, what did you think?

And yes, Mac learned how to deliver a baby off the internet. Because he was bored and thought it might be somewhat-useful information to have. (He’s Mac? That’s the best I’ve got?)

And I know, I know – Mac and Cage might have broken cover a little at the end when they stopped Gupta, as did Bozer and Riley when they were talking to Beth, but I’m going off the show’s logic regarding their covers, okay? (As long as you have some plausible deniability and tried, it’s okay, even if no-one actually really believes you!)

This episode is heavily inspired by several things: the episode of Scorpion in which Happy and Toby have to deliver a baby in a locked-down hospital (due to some kind of superbug outbreak), the most recent season of NCIS’s mid-season finale (Delilah goes into labour while McGee is held hostage in the hospital’s ER by some bad guy who demands medical treatment and a helicopter), Spencer Reid delivering a baby on Criminal Minds (having learned how from books, I think, in case JJ went into labour while they’re on a case?) and one of the episodes (2.20, Pool Cue) that I wrote for Every End is a Beginning (which was essentially written so that Mac had to deliver a baby).

As always – let me know if you’ve got a request!
The Care and Feeding of MacGyver

Chapter Summary

For Anon. The US ambassador to Liberia might be involved in a smuggling operation, so the team is sent to investigate. Cage hacks some brains, Riley hacks some computers, Mac and Jack run for their lives and Jack has to make sure his partner’s skinny butt doesn’t get any skinnier.

Chapter Notes

This is set in the same nebulous near-future canon as the last in this series, Statistically Inevitable, after the events of that story. I’d suggest reading that before you read this, if you haven’t already, as there are a few references.

The prompt that Anon gave me for this was heavily based off the old MacGyver episode, The Endangered (which I have not seen – I just used the elements and description that Anon gave me – it aired before I was born, I’m quite sure, and the show doesn’t really air here, nor do we have it on our Netflix), so if you recognize something, that is probably where it comes from!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

I like to assume the best of people.

Especially those who serve our country, in all the varied ways that one can do that.

But I’ve learned from experience that, unfortunately, not everyone has good intentions.

Sometimes, people who are supposed to do good do very bad things instead.

Honestly, I wish that I was out of a job.

I wish that there was no need for me to do what I do.

But we don’t live in a perfect world.

Still, I especially dislike those missions when we go after a mole or expose corruption.

Like today.

FANCY PARTY

(REALLY, REALLY FANCY PARTY)

US EMBASSY
As Cage sauntered past wearing high heels and the bright-red, sequinned, Kevlar-embedded dress that Bozer had sewn for her, Mac and Jack, both wearing very smart suits (Jack's was black, Mac's grey), pretended to give her an appreciative once-over. She smiled flirtatiously at them, then continued striding through the room, turning many heads, and, as planned, catching the attention of the US ambassador and a few of his senior aides.

They were in Monrovia because the US ambassador to Liberia, or someone very close to him, was strongly suspected of being involved in an international smuggling ring, though they had no idea what was being smuggled.

Thus, as this was a highly politically sensitive situation, to say the least, the Phoenix had been called upon to investigate to determine what was being smuggled and exactly who was involved, and collect evidence on the matter for the State Department.

As Cage struck up a conversation with a senior aide (who couldn’t quite keep his eyes on her face) on the edge of the group around the ambassador, Mac and Jack split up, keeping their eyes peeled and ears perked.

Bozer finally finished unpacking the huge wardrobes that this mission had necessitated (which had handily made smuggling all of their equipment into the country and into the hotel really easy), hanging up the last of the slinky dresses that Cage and Riley might need, then brushing some lint off the second of Mac's suits.

Riley, meanwhile, was watching the camera feed from Mac’s camera-glasses and the feed from Jack’s boutonniere-camera, running a cross-referencing program between the feed and any and all known smugglers of any sort in any database, as well as hacking into several phones, using the device in Cage’s clutch (which looked like lipstick, but was a Mac creation) that allowed her to get into any devices nearby with Bluetooth.

He sat down in front of his own laptop (which had the split-screen of the camera feeds from the two partners on it, with the cross-referencing program), and wordlessly, Riley focused on hacking, while Bozer kept watching the feeds.
Jack, with a nod at the waiter, took two of the mini-quiches from the tray that the man was holding, cramming one into his mouth immediately, as he walked casually around the room, seemingly admiring the collection of what he assumed to be local art, eavesdropping on conversations as he did so.

Out of the corner of his eye, he could see Mac doing a similar thing, though his partner’s hands were free of food.

(In fact, Jack had been keeping an eye on Mac all evening, and he was pretty sure he’d only had one or two canapes, almost-certainly just to not look suspicious for not eating.)

(He got that the fufu stuff that they’d eaten for a really late lunch a few hours ago, along with a really lovely spicy stew, was really filling, but all this undercover work was making him hungry, it should be doing the same to Mac.)

(But, of course, Jack knew that his partner wasn’t hungry. He made a mental note to make sure that Mac at least ate something for breakfast, or even had a midnight snack once they finished at this fancy shindig.)

Jack stuffed the second mini-quiche into his mouth, as he wandered over to examine a colourful, abstract painting of three women in traditional clothing, which just so happened to be near two gentlemen having a hushed conversation that looked really fishy.

‘…No, I know a guy. He can get you top-quality chimpanzee, the best you’ve ever tasted!’

Jack couldn’t help but make a face as he walked away from that conversation, thankfully masking it as a reaction to the spring roll he’d picked up from another waiter on the way. He chewed and swallowed.

‘Riles, you hear that? Eating Bubbles? Or am I going mad?’

Through his earpiece, he heard Riley’s reply.

‘No, you’re not going mad. Bushmeat, meat from non-domesticated animals like chimpanzees, elephants, hippos and monkeys, is a delicacy here. It’s a major threat to biodiversity and also contributes to the spread of diseases.’

‘So I shouldn’t try chimp jerky?’

‘No, Jack.’

‘You reckon it tastes like chicken?’

Riley didn’t even deign to reply.

Mac bent down to examine a monkey skull that, according to the label below it, was from a Diana monkey which had died of natural causes and whose body had been used for science. The skull had then been gifted to the ambassador to raise awareness for conservation efforts.

His brow furrowed a little as he examined it.

That didn’t look right.

Mac straightened up and, with a smile, took a glass of champagne from a passing waiter, drank
down about a third of it so the glass was no longer full, then bent down and tilted the glass forward towards the display case, using it as a makeshift magnifying glass.

(It would have been a little too conspicuous, he thought, to pull out his Swiss Army knife’s magnifying glass.)

He nodded again as he straightened up, moving on to examine a stunning example of one of Liberia’s renowned detailed, decorative, ornate masks.

That Diana monkey had not died from natural causes.

A gunshot wound was definitely not a natural cause.

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**FANCY HOTEL**

**MONROVIA**

**LIBERIA**

Mac tossed the monkey-shaped paperclip onto the desk, next to Riley’s laptop.

‘I think we’re dealing with bushmeat smuggling.’ He gestured to the re-shaped paperclip. ‘There was a skull on display from a Diana monkey that’d been shot.’

Jack, sitting on the bed, nodded, tucking his left ankle over his right knee.

‘Yeah, and there were those guys talking about where to get good chimp.’

Bozer turned his laptop screen around, which had an image of the two men who’d been discussing chimp meat on it.

‘And one of them is a junior local employee of the ambassador.’

Cage perched on the end of the bed and nodded in agreement.

‘The ambassador is making regular, low-profile trips to the Lofa-Mano National Park, supposedly due to a personal fondness for wildlife conservation.’

Riley started typing quickly on her laptop.

‘I’m pulling those travel records, even if they’re on the sly, he’s the ambassador, he can’t just up and go without leaving any trail…’

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**MIDDLE OF NOWHERE**

**LOFA-MANO NATIONAL PARK**

**LIBERIA**

Jack really, really missed yesterday.

Yesterday, he’d gotten to eat heaps of really great free food, and the mission had gone
swimmingly, even if he’d had to wear a (not-literal) monkey suit.

Today, he and Mac had (after flying on the Phoenix jet to the Lofa-Mano National Park in the middle of the night) started hiking at 4 am, towards the site that had been pin-pointed as the most likely base of the bushmeat hunting and smuggling operation based on satellite imagery. Their job was to gather evidence of the operation, while Cage, Riley and Bozer, back in Monrovia, got the evidence that linked the operation back to the ambassador (or whoever else was really behind it; they weren’t ruling out other suspects).

They’d hiked for four hours through the muggy, humid, hot jungle, and hadn’t eaten a proper breakfast, instead eating the protein bars that they had in their packs.

(Jack had eaten three. Mac had gotten down one.)

The only good thing that’d happened all day was that they’d gotten plenty of incriminating photos of the bushmeat operation.

Safe to say, they had more than enough to shut down this ring and put those poachers away for a good long time.

Unfortunately, their attempt at a clean getaway hadn’t gone very cleanly.

Mac was currently crouched down by his partner’s left leg, freeing Jack from the metal trap that’d closed around his ankle as fast as he could.

Jack had managed to suppress most of his cry of pain when the trap had closed around his leg, and was doing an admirable and excellent job of suppressing more noises of pain as Mac freed him, so that wasn’t the problem.

The problem was that this was no low-tech, low-budget operation. No, these traps, basic though they were in construction and design, had one high-tech aspect about them: they sent out an alert when they closed on prey.

Mac had quickly recognized that (and pointed it out to Jack) when they’d been taking photos and recording audio of the poachers’ base camp and activities.

The blonde finished freeing Jack, who gave a hiss of pain, his eyes screwing shut, and then helped him limp about twenty feet further into the jungle, the two of them taking cover behind a particularly large tree.

Mac then reached into his pack and pulled out their first aid kit, grabbing a roll of gauze and using it to bandage Jack’s ankle tightly.

Jack panted as Mac pulled the bandage tight, hand tightening on the tree trunk beside them, pointing at his partner with his free hand.

‘This, brother, is why I don’t like the jungle.’

Mac raised a very sceptical eyebrow, shaking his head.

‘You don’t like the jungle because of the relatively low chance of getting caught in a poacher’s trap? Not because of the stifling humidity, or the abundance of mosquitos that both make you itchy and could give you an extremely nasty disease? Or-‘

Mac cut himself off as the two of them heard footsteps and shouts.
The partners exchanged a glance, and then, Mac helped the older man up, and the two of them ran, Mac deliberately slowing himself to keep pace with Jack.

Gunshots began to ring out.

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**FANCY HOTEL**

**MONROVIA**

**LIBERIA**

As Cage got ready for her ‘date’ in the bathroom (the night before, she’d subtly manipulated one of the senior aides of the ambassador’s into asking her out for lunch, to give her an ‘in’), Riley and Bozer used the data from Riley’s hacking the night before and the video footage that they had to match phones (and the intel garnered from them) to people.

They were about halfway through the process when Mac and Jack called via sat-phone. Bozer and Riley exchanged a worried glance, and Bozer got up to knock on the bathroom door to get Cage to come out and see, because they knew that this was probably bad news.

Jack, who was talking into the sat-phone, sounded out of breath.

‘We got good news and we got bad.’

Mac, too, sounded out of breath, though less out of breath than his partner.

‘Bad news is that we got rumbled.’

‘Good news, you guys probably won’t have that problem, since all the bad guys are occupied chasing us!’

There were shouts in the distance, as Mac continued.

‘And they didn’t see our faces, there’s no reason for them to think that we’ve caught on to the embassy link, and we’ve got all the evidence we need.’ He fell silent for a moment, breathing hard, before he and Jack seemed to come to a stop, to take a brief rest before they continued, and work out a plan of action. ‘Riley, we’re on foot, they’ve got Jeeps…’

The hacker caught on quickly and nodded, beginning to type, bringing up satellite imagery on her laptop.

‘I’ll plot you guys a route back to the jet that can’t be followed by Jeep.’ She examined the map for a second. ‘Alright, you want to head roughly north-east, on a bearing of 55 degrees…”

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**MIDDLE OF NOWHERE**

**(A DIFFERENT MIDDLE OF NOWHERE FROM LAST TIME)**

**LOFA-MANO NATIONAL PARK**

**LIBERIA**
Ideas flew through Mac’s brain rapidly as he and Jack ran through the jungle, the blonde occasionally glancing over at the brunette with concern (Jack’s gait didn’t seem too badly affected, but Mac could see the flickers of pain that crossed the older man’s face very clearly, even if someone who didn’t know Jack might be hard-pressed to do so).

Their pursuers would have to be on foot now too, which meant that they were no longer at a severe disadvantage, but surely there had to be something else he could do to tip the odds more into their favour…

Many, many ideas (or half-formed kernels of ideas, more accurately) crossed his mind, some being instantly discarded, some retained for further thought, until Mac finally found The Idea.

He spotted a good site about twenty feet ahead of them, and slowed down, holding a hand out to Jack.

‘Give me your tranq-gun and darts.’

Mac had honestly been surprised that Jack had even packed a tranquilizer gun and darts in his weaponry for the mission.

(He and Jack had an understanding. Mac was a big fan of less-than-lethal weaponry and not a fan of the lethal kind; Jack thought there was a place for guns – Mac would be perfectly happy if such weaponry was always in the hands of someone like Jack, but it simply often wasn’t.)

Apparently, however, Jack had thought that there was a good-enough chance that they’d wind up having to deal with the local wildlife, and since they were able to take so much equipment with them on this mission (thanks to their covers all having huge wardrobes, plus an interest in going on safari), he’d brought along a tranq-gun.

(Because, he’d said, it was okay in his book to shoot some bad guy who was trying to kill or hurt you or other people, but some poor leopard who thought you were lunch because it was a wild animal and you were in its home, not so much.)

(Mac wasn’t convinced that they’d have a huge amount of choice if they did get cornered by a leopard – tranq guns didn’t work instantly – but the underlying sentiment was something he could support.)

The brunette handed them over, as Mac started pulling vines from nearby trees, and testing the rigidity of several nearby tree branches.

‘Brother, what’re you making this time?’

Mac didn’t pause in his work, pulling out his Swiss Army knife and taking out the large blade attachment, but gave a slightly-sheepish, slightly-wry shrug with a matching smile.

‘I don’t have a name for it, but think of it as a combination of a catapult, a sling-shot and an Ewok trap with a tripwire?’ Jack grinned; he liked the sound of that. Mac pointed to a large rock a few feet away. ‘Grab me that rock…’

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FANCY HOTEL

MONROVIA

LIBERIA
Mere minutes after Cage had left for her ‘lunch date’, Bozer and Riley exchanged a glance.

‘Ambassador Healy’s got two phones.’

‘One of them is squeaky-clean…’

‘And the other’s got all of these mini-love-letters on it.’

The ambassador’s second phone was full of flirty and sometimes (quite disturbingly) downright inappropriate text messages, all between the ambassador and a single number.

Bozer made a face as he read a particularly flirtatious message (the ambassador was older than Jack…eww…).

‘Is this guy having an affair, or are these some kind of code?’

Riley gestured to her laptop screen.

‘Well, whoever he’s talking to, they’re in Lofa-Mano National Park.’

‘So Ambassador Healy’s having an affair with a hermit or a park ranger, or this is a code and he’s really talking to some poacher-smuggler-guy?’

Bozer sounded like he thought that the third option was the most plausible, which Riley honestly agreed with. She nodded.

‘Jill and I will get on cryptanalysis of the texts.’

As Riley emailed Jill back at the Phoenix, Bozer nodded, picking up his phone to update Cage.

Maybe she could offer some insight.

She’d somehow worked out that he was terrified of octopi (which Bozer maintained was the correct plural form no matter what Mac said – octopuses just sounded wrong).

Maybe she could tell whether someone was really-flirting or code-flirting.

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MIDDLE OF NOWHERE

(A DIFFERENT MIDDLE OF NOWHERE, AGAIN)

LOFA-MANO NATIONAL PARK

LIBERIA

Mac and Jack hadn’t stuck around to see if the tranquilizer-dart-catapult-sling-shot-Ewok-trap-with-a-tripwire had worked, but judging from the fact that about forty minutes after they’d set it, there’d been a very loud outburst of very frustrated and angry swearing from only a couple of voices, they assumed that it had. Besides, it seemed, based on the admittedly-small amount of noise following them (these poachers were pretty decent at keeping quiet, unsurprisingly), there were fewer people pursuing them now.

As they reached a river, which they didn’t have to cross, thankfully (they had to follow it east for
three miles, and then they were only two miles south of the Phoenix jet), another idea hit Mac.

He pulled the sweat-stained bandanna from around his neck, and handed it to Jack, who made a face.

‘I ain’t doing your laundry and I don’t want your smelly-‘

Mac rolled his eyes and cut Jack off, nonetheless quite grateful for Jack’s usual attempt to bring levity and light into their tense and unpleasant situation.

‘Throw it across the river, Jack.’ He pointed to the opposite bank. ‘We’re going to try and trick them into thinking we’ve crossed it.’

Mac crouched down as he spoke, bundling leaves together and attaching them to a stick to make something that vaguely resembled a broom, which Jack was quite sure that Mac was going to use to erase their tracks as best as he could as they walked.

Jack tossed the bandanna across the river with a nod of approval.

He’d hate to have to track Mac using his AMOS skills.

Then, he gave a very mischievous smirk.

Maybe he could convince Matty to loan Mac out to the CIA or something for AMOS final exams. Make the people taking the course try and track the blonde’s skinny butt through the wilderness.

It’d be a challenge, to say the least.

FANCY RESTAURANT POPULAR WITH EMBASSY STAFF

MONROVIA

LIBERIA

In the bathroom, supposedly ‘freshening up’, Cage, locked in a cubicle, talked with Bozer and Riley over the phone.

‘…I don’t think the ambassador’s involved, but Kennedy is.’

The ambassador’s senior aide had looked distinctly uncomfortable, as if he was hiding something, to her expert eyes, when she’d steered conversation over lunch onto the topic of the Lofa-Mano National Park (which she’d pretended to really want to see and had asked his opinion on, since he’d mentioned the ambassador’s trips there the night before, in passing). She didn’t think that it had anything to do with his boss’s potential affair (she really didn’t seem the type of guy who’d be fazed by one being had or being hidden, not at all – his hand had slipped far too low on her back the night before, and not one, but two, of the female aides of the ambassador had been shooting her very jealous looks as she flirted with him, both of them completely unaware of the other’s looks and completely ignorant of his two-timing, and he’d leered at the waitress who’d served them lunch). Besides, her read and profile on the ambassador, while it’d been obvious that he was hiding something he felt guilty about and as if he was betraying someone, was far more suggestive of an affair than substantial law-breaking, whereas Kennedy read as being a sociopath. Largely amoral.
‘...Yeah, that matches what we’ve found, Cage.’

Bozer was sitting in front of his laptop, which displayed a photo taken from the Instagram account of one of the Lofa-Mano National Park’s rangers. A program written by Riley and Jill had found a man who resembled the ambassador embracing a woman in a park ranger’s uniform reflected in the lake in the background of the selfie.

In contrast, their cryptanalysis software had returned absolutely nothing.

It seemed that it was real-flirting, not code-flirting.

Riley, meanwhile, was already digging deeper into Kennedy.

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**OUTSIDE THE FANCY HOTEL**

**MONROVIA**

**LIBERIA**

Cage had returned from the bathroom, ‘freshened up’ and continued her lunch with Kennedy, who was not suspicious in the slightest.

(On one hand, it was very flattering to her skills, but on the other hand, she had no patience for men who underestimated her because she was female, young and very attractive.)

He’d received a phone call towards the end of their lunch, and then, with a supposedly-charming smile (which Cage acknowledged, objectively, would be considered charming by most – but she could read between the lines far better than almost anyone) had apologized and said that an urgent issue at the embassy had come up.

He’d then offered to escort her back to her hotel, offering to meet her there in the bar late that night for a nightcap (evidently, she thought, despite his ‘urgent’ business – which she was quite certain was Mac and Jack’s fault – he was hoping to see ‘Marta Cornes’ very soon).

(He was already deep in her bad books, but he lost more points for that.)

(Seriously, he was obviously a terrible bad guy, with his priorities. No wonder US intelligence had quickly picked up on his illegal activities.)

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**FANCY HOTEL**

**MONROVIA**

**LIBERIA**
In the elevator (she’d convinced Kennedy to take just two more minutes to escort her up to her room, so he’d know exactly which one to come to that night, when his business was done and he needed help relaxing – it’d been laughably easy, and she knew he suspected nothing and wasn’t trying to bluff her – she really did think that Bozer needed more credit for that red dress she’d worn the night before, and the more casual dress she was wearing now), Cage’s phone vibrated in a set signal in the pocket of her dress.

A set signal that meant that it was takedown time.

Obviously, Mac and Jack had gotten back to the jet and sent in the evidence they had, and Riley and Bozer had gotten what they needed to tie it back to Kennedy.

She barely managed to suppress the finally, thank God, and instead, quick as a flash, before he could even really react, shoved her foot into Kennedy’s knee then punched him hard in the jaw, knocking him out.

When she reached their floor, Bozer was already ready and waiting with a pair of handcuffs. He helped her haul the unconscious former ambassadorial aide out of the elevator, cuffed him, and then they dragged him into their room, secure in the fact that Riley had already knocked the security cameras out.

Once inside their room, Kennedy started to stir, and his first reaction was, stupidly, to gape at Cage.

‘But…how…what…’

The blonde rolled her eyes and headed into the bathroom, intent on getting back into more comfortable clothes (Mac had very kindly put together a little something on the jet on the way to Liberia that let her get in and out of dresses with zips at the back, even tight ones, completely on her own, when he’d found out that she would be wearing that same red dress he’d had to help her out with when her interrogation of the Chinese ambassador had been interrupted).

Meanwhile, Bozer smirked and pointed at Cage, mouthing you go, girl, and Riley gave a snort, crossing her arms and shooting Kennedy a very unimpressed look.

‘You’re not the only one who’s fallen for that, and you won’t be the last.’

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**PHOENIX JET**

**SOMEWHERE OVER LIBERIA**

**ON-ROUTE TO MONROVIA**

‘…I’ll be fine, brother, we got the best docs at the Phoenix, they’ll have me right as rain in no time.’ Jack waved a hand as Mac finished cleaning and dressing his ankle, and reached down and grabbed a yoghurt-topped strawberry muesli bar (Mac’s favourite kind) from the open medical kit on the plane’s floor. He held it out to Mac. ‘Now, you sit down and eat this.’ He shot the blonde a look. ‘You only had a couple of nibbles at the party last night, you only ate a banana when we got back to the hotel, and you’ve eaten a grand total of one protein bar today, son. You gotta be starving.’

Mac sighed and rolled his eyes at Jack’s mother-henning, but it was in a fondly exasperated way, and there was a little smile on his face as he ripped open the wrapper and took a large bite of
Wordlessly, Jack grabbed a chocolate bar from the med-kit’s ration stash and held that out to the blonde, before grabbing another muesli bar for himself.

Mac frequently didn’t eat properly during missions.

But Jack had learned that forcing Mac to eat during a mission was generally futile.

With enough effort, he might get a muesli bar or a protein bar or two, at best, into his partner, but that was it, tops.

And it annoyed Mac (and not in a fond exasperation way) and he claimed that it disrupted his rhythm when Jack got too insistent about it, and since Jack had long learned the wisdom of picking your battles, he’d settled on letting Mac be and letting him eat when he wanted to eat during missions, unless he thought his partner was going to collapse on him mid-mission (which had never happened, either because Mac was so stubborn and strong-willed he could keep himself going by sheer force of will, or because he simply ate just enough to keep himself going, or some combination of the above).

However, Jack also made sure that he got as much of the food in the med-kit into his partner as he could when they were on their ex-fil transport, and then made sure that Mac got a couple of good meals into him (which wasn’t hard at all, since he lived with Bozer) once they were home.

(In general, unless he’d been badly emotionally affected by a mission, Mac didn’t need any nudging to eat once they’d gotten home, but he usually needed at least a nudge, sometimes more, while they were legging it out of wherever they were, back to LA.)

Mac finished off the chocolate bar (he’d eaten very quickly; Jack had timed it perfectly, the blonde had probably been just on the verge of crashing, which was unsurprising, given that he’d just finished the very last task he ‘had’ to do, namely, seeing to Jack’s injury), and Jack just tossed him a bottle of water, then another muesli bar.

Mac shook his head at him again, raising an eyebrow, but Jack crossed his arms, and the blonde opened the water bottle, drank some of its contents, and then ripped open the packaging on the second muesli bar.

PHOENIX FOUNDATION HEADQUARTERS
SOMEWHERE IN LA

A few days after Liberia, Jack left Mac, Bozer and Riley in the lab, working on less-lethal tech for the next Korman Challenge (even after this year’s fiasco, Matty was still very determined to win the next one and secure that funding, which had been very strongly impressed on the three younger agents – and besides, a little healthy competition was a very good thing), and headed down to the infirmary.

He smiled when he got there and found that Dr Taylor was on-duty.

(The week after the birth of Lauren Samantha Marks, Dr Farnham, one of the Phoenix’s doctors, had announced his retirement. Dr Taylor had gotten herself onto the Phoenix’s radar because of her courage and calm during the Hospital Incident, and Matty had wound up recruiting her.)
She would be an excellent ally in Jack’s quest.

(Dr Taylor was the medic that Mac listened to the most. Part of it, Jack knew, was just his partner’s known weakness for beautiful and intelligent women – Dr Taylor was both very pretty and extremely, extremely clever – but the rest of it was down to the fact that he responded particularly well to her methods of difficult-patient-wrangling, for some reason.)

(He didn’t quite get it, but Jack was not going to look a gift horse in the mouth.)

‘Hey, Doc.’

She looked up from where she was filling out supply orders in her little office.

‘Hello, Jack.’

Her eyes fell to his ankle, examining it, then, she looked up at his face, still examining him, and Jack waved a hand.

‘Oh, no, I’m fine, Doc, I swear.’ She seemed placated (Jack – unlike someone – was not a terrible patient). ‘I just wanted to talk to you about putting extra food into the med-kits for the missions Mac and I get sent on. It’s not that he isn’t eating, not really…it’s just that he tends to forget when we’re working. He loses his appetite.’ Dr Taylor clearly shared Jack’s disapproval of that, though she also seemed resigned to it, like he was. Part of her terrible-patient-wrangling technique, after all, involved picking her battles. ‘So I gotta feed him up after, we don’t want his skinny butt getting any skinnier, after all.’

She nodded in agreement, bringing up Mac’s medical file on her computer and making a note.

‘Thanks for letting me know, Jack. I’ve made a note of that, and I’ll bring up adding additional rations to the standard-issue med-kit at the next Medical meeting; MacGyver can’t possibly be the only agent who has that issue.’ Her lips pursed in thought. ‘What’s his favourite kind of muesli bar? What is the most popular kind amongst Phoenix agents? And if we were to add some new rations to the med-kit, what do you think most agents would like?’

Jack grinned.

Yeah, she was going to be a great ally in the care and feeding of Angus MacGyver.

(All the medical personnel in the Phoenix infirmary were great. And Dr Taylor was just as professional as the rest of them, really, but she was also probably the cuddliest doctor on staff, for lack of a better term. Scuttlebutt was that she was responsible for the fact that camomile tea was now standard-issue for med-kits for missions to cold places – something that the agents heartily approved of.)

On his way back upstairs, Jack encountered Matty and Cage in the elevator, coming up from the interrogation room level.

The two women exchanged a glance and smiled knowingly.

TWO WEEKS LATER

PHOENIX JET
Mac’s brow furrowed as Jack tossed him a strawberry-flavoured, yoghurt-coated muesli bar, a snack-size packet of M&Ms and a bag of trail mix.

Since when had M&Ms and trail mix become part of the med-kit?

He opened the trail mix and popped a few pieces into his mouth, shrugging.

Well, they were delicious, so absolutely no complaints there.

Just like he’d had absolutely no complaints about the addition of camomile tea for missions to cold locations.

Which gave him a sneaking suspicion that he knew who might’ve had a hand in the new med-kit rations.

(He knew Jack’s meddling when he saw it, but he couldn’t have done it alone, definitely not.)

Matty, in his opinion, had made an excellent call when she’d hired Dr Taylor.

Jack just smirked as Mac ate, closing his eyes and pretending to doze, letting his thoughts drift.

Maybe he should write a guide to looking after Mac.

The Care and Feeding of Angus MacGyver.

Obviously, it wouldn’t become a best-seller (Mac was definitely unique), but they’d at least all get a good laugh out of it.

You must ensure that your Angus MacGyver is constantly supplied with paperclips and a Swiss Army knife. A plentiful supply of duct tape and chewing gum is also required. Toasters, DVD players, other household appliances and any other random doo-dads, scrap and apparent junk are also highly recommended.

He also requires frequent (and mostly intellectual) stimulation, or boredom will ensure, which, if severe, leads to VERY BAD THINGS, which can and do vary widely and may include your hair being turned orange in a prank war, the loss of power to your neighbourhood and small fires and/or explosions.

Your Angus MacGyver is normally capable of self-care. He does not require assistance maintaining personal hygiene standards or dressing, however, his fashion sense leaves much to be desired. Attempting a makeover, however, is futile. Though normally capable of feeding himself and a good cook (except when regarding steak - see Chapter 3), when on missions or particularly emotionally distressed or particularly entranced by a project, he will neglect to consume adequate amounts of food. Although attempts to feed him during these periods are usually failures, one must ensure that they nudge, insist and/or nag, as required, him to eat afterwards. The preferred comfort food of Angus MacGyver is tomato soup (prepared according to the Jackson family recipe – ask Wilt Bozer) and grilled cheese sandwiches.

Despite his tendency to keep the most personal of matters to himself, Angus MacGyver is a social
creature, capable of great love and needing to have loved ones who love him in return. He considers his closest friends to be family and frequently acknowledges such. He has underlying self-esteem and abandonment issues stemming from his childhood (bullying, a sense of being extremely different and not fitting in, loneliness – he had, at most, three true friends as a child, including his 8th grade science teacher – and abandonment by his father at the age of ten), which influences his behaviour and decisions. When these issues are brought to the surface, he requires support, reassurance and affirmation.

Angus MacGyver has a very specific type when it comes to female companionship, that type being intelligent, beautiful and feisty/spirited/sassy/spitfire women. He may have a slight preference for blondes…

Chapter End Notes

Anon – how was that? Did you like it? Was there enough running-for-our-lives-through-the-jungle and Jack feeding Mac/hunger-related hurt/comfort for you? (Yes, there wound up being some Cage, Bozer and Riley involved too, but I honestly struggle to write a mission!fic without the ‘supporting cast’…)

My personal favourite bit of this chapter is probably ‘The Care and Feeding of Angus MacGyver’ being written in Jack’s head! And yes, this story is heavily inspired by that NCIS episode in which they deal with bushmeat smuggling (I think it’s from the most recent season; it’s got Reeves in it…).

As always – let me know if you’ve got a request!
Chapter Summary

For Mr Brown. Mac has a bout of insomnia. Jack and Bozer look after sleep-deprived Mac…who is even weirder than normal. Muffin-juggling, a potential case of gumball-poisoning and arguably-inappropriate use of Phoenix resources ensue.

Chapter Notes

This is a sequel to the previous two one-shots, Statistically Inevitable and The Care and Feeding of MacGyver, occurring a few months after The Care and Feeding of MacGyver.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

On occasion, your Angus MacGyver may suffer from temporary bouts of insomnia. These are typically associated with emotionally distressing events, though sometimes occur for no discernible reason.

MACGYVER'S RESIDENCE

LA

With a sign, Mac sat up on the edge of his bed, placing his feet on the floor and running a hand through his hair. He glanced at the clock on his bedside table, which showed that it was 5:24 AM.

He sighed again, and stood up.

There was no point tossing and turning any longer. He’d been doing that for hours already, just as he had the night before.

He walked over to his closet and grabbed his running shoes.

A good, long run might help him sleep the next night.

At the very least, the fresh air and endorphins would help with the sleep deprivation symptoms.

When sleep-deprived, Angus MacGyver behaves extremely weirdly, even more so than usual.

A couple of hours later, Mac returned to his home, very sweaty, physically very tired, but feeling less exhausted than he had at 5:24 in the morning.

(That had something to do with the run. That also had something to do with the two cups of coffee
he’d had at a diner on his way back.)

Bozer was standing in the kitchen, still in his pyjamas and definitely bleary-eyed, grating carrots for the carrot-cake-banana-bread hybrid he was making for brunch for himself, Mac and Jack.

(Riley and Cage had declared that they were drowning in testosterone and were thus having a girls’ day. They’d invited Jill, Beth and Matty along, and were getting brunch, with plans for shopping afterwards.)

(Bozer was really, really curious as to the details – he knew that she had to buy clothes, but he could not imagine Matty being all giggly and girly like women in movies were when they shopped in groups, in fact, he couldn’t quite imagine Cage doing that either, unless she was undercover - and had almost been tempted to use his super-spy surveillance skills to eavesdrop on girls’ day, but he liked being employed and alive, so had decided against it.)

Mac stared at Bozer’s carrots for a moment (a long and slightly weird and awkward moment), then shrugged.

‘You should try it with high anthocyanin carrots. Purple carrot cake would be pretty cool.’

Then, without another word, Mac headed off for the shower.

Bozer paused in his carrot grating and sighed.

His BFF was always weird and always had been and always would be, and Bozer wouldn’t have him any other way, but he’d known Mac for well over half his life, and he knew the signs.

Jack and Bozer exchanged a glance as Mac, sitting at the dining table with them, juggled three carrot-cake-banana-bread muffins, a rather-maniacally childish grin on his face.

Then, Bozer sighed and manoeuvred the coffee pot out of his roomie’s reach, while Jack reached out and seized one of the muffins out of thin air, stuffing half into his mouth.

Mac, his juggling disturbed, shot his partner a dirty look. Jack just snorted and swallowed his mouthful of delicious carrot-cake-banana-bread, before crossing his arms and leaning back in his chair.

‘Food’s for eating, brother, not for doing circus tricks with!’ He pointed at Mac. ‘Eat, or I’ll tell Beth you aren’t.’

Bozer smirked.

Mac really wanted to stay on the Phoenix’s not-so-new-anymore doctor’s good side.

And not just because her wrath really was terrifying (despite appearances, she could be scary…and sporting Dora the Explorer Band-Aids was really undignified for covert operatives of the US government).

(Bozer totally shipped it.)

(And he was totally going to win the betting pool on just how long it’d take for them to actually get together.)

(Sure, Cage was Cage, and Matty was Matty, and Riley had algorithms, and Jack was, despite appearances, quite wise and he and Mac had a legendary bromance, of course…but Bozer had
known Mac since the blonde was nine, and that definitely had to count for something.)

Mac stubbornly stared at Jack for a moment, as if double-checking to see if he was bluffing, before taking a bite of one of the muffins, muttering under his breath about how he was sure Beth would appreciate his juggling algorithms, then, as he moved on to the second half of the muffin, muttering that she would certainly still tell him to eat the muffins, and juggle something else instead.

(Bozer would describe the look on his BFF’s face as pretty besotted.)

He looked up and noticed Jack and Bozer’s smirks and waggling eyebrows, and his ears reddened and he shoved a particularly large bite of muffin into his mouth, shutting up completely.

Bozer passed Jack another muffin, the two of them exchanging a very significant look.

Mac would, of course, absolutely refuse to acknowledge that that incident had ever occurred. It probably never would have if he wasn’t sleep-deprived.

But it had happened, and Jack and Bozer were never, ever going to forget it.

(They weren’t going to let Mac forget it either.)

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*Running tends to help with Angus MacGyver’s insomnia, however, he does not need encouragement to go for a run and will do so himself. The long run will reduce his tiredness temporarily.*

*One should then encourage and assist him to take a nap once he begins showing signs of sleepiness, such as yawning.*

*This, however, should be done relatively subtly. While he will almost-certainly see through any ruses, he will appreciate the gesture.*

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‘Brother, what is *that*?’ Jack, who’d been out on the deck, enjoying the sunshine and watching a Cowboys highlights reel on YouTube on his phone, walked inside and gaped at the *thing* that Mac was building on the coffee table. The former CIA agent then raised his voice and literally hollered. ‘Boze, come see what our boy’s done now!’

Bozer, who’d been lifting weights in the garage, hurried into the living room and stared at the pile of gumballs and the bowl of what looked to be royal icing sitting on the coffee table, and at the model of what looked to be a building that was slowly taking shape in front of Mac.

The blonde, meanwhile, rolled his eyes.

‘It’s a scale model of St Basil’s Cathedral.’ He looked pointedly at his partner. ‘You know, the place in Moscow where we—’

Jack held up a hand and cut him off.

‘Woah, woah, we swore we’d never talk about that again, man!’

Bozer threw his hands up in the air.

‘Oh, *come on!* First Cairo, and now St Basil’s Cathedral? You guys never tell me the good stories!’
Jack glanced at his partner, who didn’t look up from where he was carefully attaching a piece of gumball to his model.

‘Trust me, Boze, that ain’t a good story.’ Mac nodded sagely in agreement as he finished affixing the piece of gumball and began to cut up another one. Jack snorted. ‘And seriously, man, gumballs?’

Mac shrugged.

‘They’re colourful, reasonably suitably-shaped, and it’s fun.’ He popped one of the gumballs into his mouth. ‘Besides, I can do that.’

Jack shook his head, muttering about never, ever thinking that Carl’s Jr would be this weird, while a slow look of horrified realization dawned on Bozer’s face.

‘Bro, are those the gumballs from that gumball machine I bought last year?’ Mac nodded. Bozer looked even more horrified. ‘I’m pretty sure they’re older than me!’

Jack, too, looked horrified, as Mac kept chewing, seemingly unperturbed.

‘Mac, how many have you had? You gonna die of gumball-poisoning? That’s a real dumb way to die, brother!’

The blonde rolled his eyes, continuing to chew and work on his gumball model.

‘Including this one, I’ve had four. And I’m not going to get gumball-poisoning; given the amount of preservatives in these, they’re perfectly safe to eat.’ He shrugged. ‘Actually, they’re quite good. Just a little stale.’

He reached out and grabbed two, offering them to Jack and Bozer, who shook their heads vehemently.

‘Nah, I’m all good, bro.’

Jack pulled out a packet of gum from his pocket.

‘I BYO’d, man.’

As he finished the scale model of St Basil’s Cathedral, Mac yawned and stretched, shifting a little in his seat, and Jack (who was watching more Cowboys highlights on the couch) and Bozer (who was puttering about in the kitchen, marinating and brining meat for tonight – Riley, Cage, Matty, Jill and Beth were coming over for dinner, and for that many people, grilling was Bozer’s go-to), exchanged another significant look.

Bozer washed his hands and grabbed some teabags from a special box in the pantry, and set about making three cups of tea. When he was done, he walked over to the couch and offered Jack a cup, then Mac.

‘Building a scale model of St Basil’s Cathedral is thirsty work, so…’

Mac shook his head with a fond, exasperated little smile, then yawned again as he accepted the mug of camomile tea.

‘Thanks, Boze.’
Bozer just grinned at his BFF and sat down in the armchair, sipping at his own mug of tea.

After half a mug of camomile tea (and carefully noting that Mac had finished his), Jack stretched and yawned in an exaggerated manner.

‘Man, I’m tired…I think I’ll try and grab some shut-eye. Can I borrow your couch?’


‘Go ahead! Naps are great!’

Mac shook his head with a snort, a little smile on his face nonetheless, before letting out a cracking yawn.

‘You’re covert operatives for the US government. You’re supposed to be subtle.’ He let out another huge yawn and put down his empty mug. ‘But a nap sounds good…’

He yawned yet again, and got up and headed for his bedroom.

Jack and Bozer exchanged a satisfied smile, Jack reaching out to bump his fist to Bozer’s.

Then, the older man yawned again and stretched out on the couch.

‘I’m gonna follow Mac’s lead…wake me up in a couple, Boze?’

Bozer looked incredulously at the older man for a moment, then shook his head with a smile, then nodded, pointing at Jack.

(He figured that since Jack was getting old, he probably wasn’t as energetic as the young ‘uns – as he’d called them the other day, which they were never going to let him forget – were.)

‘Sleep tight, don’t let the bed-bugs bite, old man!’

‘I’m not old!’

Angus MacGyver’s periods of insomnia tend to resolve themselves over time, reasonably quickly, however, it is highly advisable to assist in this process. This can be achieved by ensuring that he spends time relaxing and having fun in the company of his loved ones, especially in the evenings.

Mac, Bozer, Jack, Riley, Cage, Jill, Beth and Matty all sat around the fire-pit, roasting marshmallows for s’mores as they listened to Jack and Matty tell the story of a most-interesting mission in Lima.

(Well, the non-top-secret, highly-compartmentalized bits, anyway.)

‘…And that is why I can’t show my face in that ceviche restaurant ever again.’

As Jack finished speaking, Mac chuckled and shook his head as he rotated his marshmallow to ensure that it browned evenly and perfectly, while Bozer and Riley stared at Jack and Matty for a long moment, then exchanged a glance and burst into somewhat-hysterical laughter. Cage gave an amused little smile as she assembled her s’more and took a bite, something rather knowing in her eyes, as if she was putting together the pieces of the story and some rumours she’d heard in her CIA days and using her skills to fill in the gaps that Matty and Jack had left, while Jill and Beth
blinking several times, the doctor wide-eyed, before bursting into slightly-sheepish giggles.

Jack, meanwhile, smirked and put his marshmallow into the flames, setting it on fire, before blowing it out.

Mac sighed exasperatedly as he took his own marshmallow off the heat.

‘Jack, I know it looks cool, but that is not the optimal way to toast a marshmallow. You’re taking it far past the caramelization point, so you just get unpleasant-tasting black stuff.’

Jack snorted.

‘That the scientific term?’

Beth laughed and smiled wryly, sucking a little bit of marshmallow off her thumb.

‘It kind-of is; I think you’d be surprised how often terms like black gunk or sludge or stuff are used in a chem lab.’

Mac, too, chuckled, taking his marshmallow off his stick and popping it onto a graham cracker.

(Beth’s mother was a chemistry professor, so she’d definitely know, probably better than him, actually – he hadn’t done more than the compulsory amount of chemistry at MIT, focusing on engineering instead.)

(Well, he hadn’t officially done more than the compulsory chemistry…what he’d gotten up to in the labs after-hours or in the Tombs wasn’t exactly something he could get course credit for.)

‘Well, it’s a mixture of many different partially-oxidised carbon compounds that is almost-certainly non-homogenous and varies from marshmallow to marshmallow, so black stuff works really well as a general catch-all.’

A half-second later, Mac’s thinking-face appeared, and he turned to Beth.

‘You thinking what I’m thinking?’

She tilted her head to the left a little, her own thinking-face appearing.

‘If you’re thinking of characterizing the various mixtures of partially-oxidised carbon compounds that result from combustion of different brands and/or flavours of marshmallow under various conditions, then yes?’

Mac’s expression became something halfway between the grin of a child on Christmas morning and the smirk of a very-much-grown man impressing an attractive woman. He turned to Jill.

‘Can we borrow the mass spec?’

Beth put a hand on Mac’s arm, biting her lip.

‘Mac, I don’t think that we should-‘

Matty passed her marshmallow stick off to Jack, who took it obediently, then put her hands on her hips.

‘Excuse me, do I hear you planning to use Phoenix resources to conduct a personal experiment, Blondie?’
Beth shook her head vehemently, while Mac paused for a moment, his *I-have-an-idea* face appeared, and then shook his head, a hint of a smirk on his face.

‘Of course not, Matty. We’re…just discussing the development of a data set to enable more conclusions to be drawn from samples of burned material. Marshmallows are…just a convenient starting point.’

*I’m not lying to or deceiving Matty.*

*I’m really not.*

**Okay, I admit the idea’s only just starting to form properly in my head, but if we could come up with a protocol and a database of sorts that can link the composition of mixtures of partially-oxidised carbon compounds with the conditions under which they are formed, that really would be useful.**

*You could use the conclusions regarding the necessary conditions to narrow down important things like where the relevant fire was, or how large it must have been, or how long it burned for.*

*What do you know?*

*This could be a great new project, both in terms of aiding the Phoenix’s work, and helping us keep our cover.*

*It is a very think-tank-y thing to do, after all.*

Cage rescued Matty’s marshmallow before Jack set it on fire, handing it back to their boss, while he, Riley and Bozer snickered about Matty’s attempt to outsmart the smartest person in the (metaphorical) room.

Matty pulled her marshmallow off the stick and put it in her mouth, chewed and swallowed, shaking her head.

‘Obviously, you missed your calling, Goldilocks.’

Cage gave a little smirk-smile, offering Matty another marshmallow from the bag that Jill passed her.

‘As employees of the US government, we should be happy that Mac didn’t pursue criminal defence law.’

Jack shook his head, pointing at Cage, then reaching out to clap Mac on the shoulder.

‘Nah, we should be rejoicing that our boy didn’t pursue super-villainy.’

Cage’s smirk-smile widened a little and she gave a half-shrug.

‘They’re not mutually exclusive.’

The next morning, Mac woke after a night of restful sleep, two minutes before his alarm went off.

He smiled, stretched and got up to grab his running shoes from the closet.
With my deepest apologies to lawyers…

Mr Brown, did that hit the spot? Everyone else? I think fluffy Team-as-Family with Jack-and-Bozer-looking-after-Mac is a pretty popular concept, so…

As always – let me know if you’ve got a request!
BFFs

Chapter Summary

For Harceus Mjalga. “Fun like the water-balloon cannon, fun like the time you made lightning in the Gym or fun like last week when we spent two hours chasing Archimedes ‘round the neighbourhood?” 14-year-old Bozer’s BFF has a surprise for him. Or, Mac expresses his love through DIY.

Chapter Notes

This is, to the best of my knowledge, canon-compliant based on what we know to 2.14, Mardi Gras Beads + Chair, and is set very much pre-canon.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

BOZER FAMILY RESIDENCE

MISSION CITY

CALIFORNIA

Fourteen-year-old Wilt Bozer groaned as the modified walkie-talkie on his bedside table rang, and he picked it up and answered.

‘Bro, it’s 7:30 in the morning on a Saturday…’ Bozer raised an eyebrow as his BFF replied. ‘Fun like the water-balloon cannon, fun like the time you made lightning in the Gym or fun like last week when we spent two hours chasing Archimedes ‘round the neighbourhood?’

That is, fun with no negative consequences, fun that had negative consequences (Coach Wilson had had it in for Mac ever since, despite the fact that there wasn’t really any damage to the Gym – he now used any and every excuse to make Mac run extra laps, which Bozer would make a bigger fuss about if not for the fact that Mac really didn’t seem to mind), or supposed fun that was not actually fun (well, Mac hadn’t seemed to mind nearly as much as Bozer had – the blonde had a ridiculous but adorable soft-spot for the dog, and seemed to find all the running after him almost enjoyable, therapeutic).

Bozer sat up properly on the edge of his bed, tossing the covers off.

‘…Radio-tracker collar? So next time he runs off, we just play You’re Getting Warmer, You’re Getting Colder?’ Bozer grinned, impressed. Mac was only twelve, but Bozer was pretty sure he was smarter than all the teachers at both Mission City Junior High and Mission City High. He’d already won five Science Fairs, and Bozer was sure that Mac would reach something like a dozen first places before he graduated from high school in four years. As Mac excitedly described the brand-new collar he’d made for Archimedes in great detail, some of the science going over Bozer’s head (when he got excited, Mac tended to forget to translate his thoughts into normal-people-speak;
Bozer had picked up a little of the science – you couldn’t be Mac’s BFF and not – but not nearly enough to keep up with Mac; he simply didn’t have the brains, which he really didn’t feel bad about, since Mac was apparently smarter than Einstein and never, ever made Bozer feel inadequate), a realization suddenly hit the older boy. ‘Mac, bro…is this a lead-up to you telling me that Archimedes has escaped again?’

Bozer got up, off his bed, and started rummaging around his closet for some clothes.

‘…Oh, thank God. You totally should have called him Houdini, though.’ Bozer snorted. ‘What kind of name is Houdini? You’re asking that? You named him Archimedes!’ He shook his head as he tugged on a pair of pants, his walkie-talkie pinned in place between his shoulder and ear. ‘Yeah, yeah, accurately approximated Pi, anticipated modern calculus, invented the Archimedes screw and all that…but come on, bro! The escape artist!’ Bozer chuckled as he started putting on his shirt. ‘Fine, we’ll agree to disagree.’ He did up the buttons and nodded as best as he could, given the awkward position of his head. ‘…Yeah, I’ll meet you at the lab after breakfast.’ Despite the fact that his BFF couldn’t see him, Bozer affected a very serious look and stared at the imaginary-Mac in his mind’s eye. ‘But that’ll be a while, you know breakfast’s the most important meal of the day, and Saturday’s Waffle Day, and you can’t rush my world-class waffles!’ Bozer was slowly but surely perfecting the art of waffle-making, using the experimental method, which he really did have to credit Mac for (his BFF was a way more fun and way better science teacher, in Bozer’s mind, than any real science teachers he’d ever had, except for Mr Ericson). Bozer stopped in his tracks as he put a hand on his bedroom door handle, intending to head downstairs to start on breakfast for his family. ‘…Wait a moment, you haven’t eaten yet, bro, have you?’ Bozer sighed internally. When Mac got seized by an idea, he got a little manic and a little crazier than normal, and forgot about things like asking for permission to use people’s stuff, social-behavioural norms and eating. Luckily, he had Bozer and his excellent (even if he said so himself) cooking to keep him from wasting away. Bozer opened his bedroom door and headed towards the kitchen. He could definitely envisage Mac in his mind’s eye, sitting in their lab, working on one of his thingamajigs, possibly with a grease smudge on his cheek and definitely with grease under his nails, making puppy-dog eyes at the older boy without realizing that he was. Bozer sighed out-loud. ‘…Yeah, of course I’ll bring you some waffles.’ He grinned, shaking his head fondly. ‘No sweat, bro. What are BFFs for, after all?’ He entered the kitchen. ‘See you.’

Bozer hung up, put down the walkie-talkie, pulled on his apron and grinned and cracked his knuckles, then, just for fun, did his best Iron Chef pose before getting to work.

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MAC AND BOZER’S LAB

LOCATION: TOP-SECRET

(NO, NOT KIDDING)

(HEY, IF DONNIE SANDOZ KNEW WHERE THIS WAS…)

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Bozer, holding a paper bag containing now-slightly-soggy waffles in his mouth, climbed up the rope to the lab, and was greeted by the sight of his grinning best friend sitting next to a very shiny metal disc of sorts with a small griddle pan mounted in the middle. The disc faced the window of their treehouse. The older boy handed over the waffles.

‘Eat, bro.’

‘Thanks, Boze.’
Mac, however, didn’t eat the waffles.

(Bozer was expecting Mac to develop a gargantuan appetite any day now; he remembered being twelve, how he’d started almost eating his poor parents out of house and home when his growth spurt had started.)

(Mac hadn’t started his growth spurt yet, and was still short and skinny. Bozer had a sneaking suspicion, however, that his BFF was going to be all legs soon, and then taller than him not long after.)

(Genetics were on Mac’s side.)

Instead, he took them out of the bag and laid them onto the griddle pan.

‘Uh…Mac, bro, what are you doing?’

Mac’s grin widened and became almost a smirk.

‘Heating them up on your brand-new solar grill.’ He shrugged. ‘Remember how I was telling you about Archimedes’ supposed solar-death-ray last week?’ He shrugged again, hands fiddling with a paperclip that was rapidly taking the shape of the sun. ‘I got inspired.’ Bozer reached out and put a hand over the grill, a couple of inches from the surface. It really was hot. ‘On sunny days, it should get to 550 degrees Fahrenheit, so you’ll be able to grill on it. It’s also fully portable; I’ll show you how to pack it up and set it up again later, so you can grill anywhere, anytime there’s sufficient sunlight.’

With that, Mac reached out and took one of the now-warm waffles, taking a large bite, chewing and swallowing, before shooting Bozer a thumbs-up.

Bozer reached out and bumped his fist to Mac’s.

‘That, bro, is awesome.’ He pointed at his BFF. ‘You are awesome.’

Mac’s grin widened, becoming childlike, in a way that made Bozer a tiny bit sad.

There were a grand total of three people in the world who could be said to find Mac’s crazy DIY stuff and Mac himself awesome on a regular basis.

Bozer.

Mac’s grandfather.

And Mr Ericson.

Bozer really hoped that one day, people would come to appreciate Mac far, far better, just as his BFF deserved.

Maybe after Mac saved their lives or even saved the world.

(Bozer had an idea for that – at some point, he should totally write a movie starring Angus MacGyver, teenage super-spy…which he would neither confirm nor deny was inspired by the Alex Rider series.)

‘Thanks, Boze.’

Bozer finally fully parsed everything that Mac had said.
'Wait…you said this was my brand-new solar grill?’ He glanced between the blonde and the grill. ‘You made this for me, bro?’

Mac, his mouth full of waffle, just nodded as it was obvious, before swallowing and speaking.

‘Of course, Boze. You like to grill, and I thought of a fully-portable, environmentally-friendly, more fire-safe way for you to do it, so I had to make this.’ He let out an oof as Bozer flung his arms around the shorter, younger boy, mumbling about how he had the awesomest-mad-scientist-puppy-BFF ever and wrapped his arms around him in return. After a moment, they let go of each other and Mac ate another bite of waffle, then gave a slightly-sheepish little smirk. ‘Well, I might have had a slight ulterior motive…’

Bozer chuckled and grinned, rubbing his hands together.

‘Hot dogs for lunch?’

Mac just reached out and bumped his fist to Bozer’s.

‘Just what I was thinking, Boze.’

Chapter End Notes

Harceus Mjalga, did you like that? Hopefully Bozer and Mac friendship is your cup of tea! Everyone else – did you like that little glimpse into Mac and Bozer’s childhood adventures?

And yes, I could not resist that little Angus MacGyver, teenage super-spy meta joke! (I’m fully aware that my fondness for meta jokes might be getting a little out of control, don’t worry!) I don’t think they’ve established anywhere in canon that Mac expresses love via DIY, but I feel that that is a very natural ‘love language’ for him, so it tends to appear in my stories.

End Notes

Of course, extreme creative liberties taken with Mac’s drunkenness symptoms. And yes, sickeningly-sweet Team-as-Family fluff. I’m not sure if this was exactly what you had in mind, Dinah, but I hope that it hits the spot! It might have turned out a lot fluffier and sillier than you wanted…

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