After

by Gottahavemyncis

Summary

These are the stories of 'After' as the Gibbs clan forges their new lives. Fourth and last in the series that started with Serendipity. This story will be confusing if you haven't read the other three. Canon divergence.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes
Chapter 1

After

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NEW PLANS

They walked out through the main door, blinking happily in the bright sunlight, rejoining the surface world and facing the new reality with hope for their futures and those of their children and children's children.

They toured the barn and walked around the outside of the guesthouses. Aside from the sick looking trees and the general appearance of abandonment, there was nothing out of place. After about an hour, the doctors said they'd had enough sun for their first exposure, even with the precautions they'd taken. Ellie told Tim the sunshine on her skin felt glorious and he agreed. He'd never been a 'sun bunny' but going without even seeing daylight was difficult. This time they went in through the house. A few people stayed there while the rest continued to the basement and tunnel.

Later that afternoon the Tim Gibbses, Palmers, and Hubbards sat at one of the dining tables discussing the kids' schooling, as Albuquerque schools would reopen soon. During a lull in the conversation, Barbara nudged George and he cleared his throat, grinning, "Ellie, Tim, if it's all right with you and the rest of the clan, we Bishops would like to stay through Christmas. We'll be sending our kids to school with yours for a few months. Who knows, we might not be able to return home before then anyway. We took a family vote and want to be here for Tim and Brynie's birthdays, little Mac's arrival and of course Christmas. We don't have any livestock to care for, Cousin Ben is still caretaking although he's living in the basement and Roger Ortiz says they won't bring the horses back for at least another month. Tell you more about that later."

That made everyone happy, especially the Gibbses. Tim was happy for himself, for his kids and particularly for Ellie.

Jethro and Tim later pulled George aside to ask him about the Ortizes.

"It's something all the cattle and horse ranchers will have to do. Roger said they will have to test the grasses the horses graze on and bring in uncontaminated feed. Their livestock is in Arizona; their grazing areas here will have to be tested before they can come home. We'll have to do the same before we purchase new livestock, test the grazing areas for them and our horses."

He looked at Tim, "Any chance Ellie will want to keep Acorn here?"

Tim thought about it before nodding. "We'll need a new barn or shelter and she probably won't ride for several weeks after she has the baby, but that's a great idea, George!"

Jethro nodded, "We could build a little barn on the south side of the creek, put up a fence, make a paddock."

"Not too little. If Ellie has her horse here, I'd like to buy Vámonos from the Ortizes and Ty and Brynie are sure to want their own trusty steeds once they can ride alone. Ty's old enough now but Brynie has another year to go. Still…"

George was amused at the look on his brother-in-law's face, "What else are you thinking?"
Tim had mixed feelings but knew others in the clan had the same thought. "That we're going to need more dwellings. And I'm wondering if that 200-acre parcel we decided not to purchase is still available."

His father tilted his head, "I'd like to know that too as well as how you leapt from horses and barns to houses."

"We made the decision early on that we didn't need the additional acreage for a place that would only be a vacation spot for us. We bought this place and renovated it to be an occasional home. For that reason, we also decided not to acquire any animals. Especially with the Ortizes right next door. All we wanted was a place where the entire family or parts of the family could visit, relax, have fun and be comfortable. And would be easier and faster to get to than the Blue Ridge cabin. When we bought the ranch, we only had 4 kids in the family, Victoria, Teddy, Tyler and Bryn. We decided that the Bishop kids would be able to squeeze in and still be comfortable. And sure, we hoped there would be more children but we never planned this place to be a full-time residence for the entire family. Who could have foreseen a nuclear attack three years ago? We would have just brushed aside the idea as another rumor."

Tim paused, "Things have changed drastically and I think we'll need to do more to accommodate everyone. We now have four babies on the way, which will mean five families with children in the immediate family. In addition, Jim and Claire, Dave and Liz might decide to stay too. That's a firm 5 with possibly 7 families with children."

His dad nodded, "I see your point. Vacation versus real life."

"Yes. The Chalmers, DiNozzos, Perrys, Palmers, Rob, Kelly, Ellie and I have our own rooms in the ranch house, as do all the grandparents and great-grandparents. But the children don't and living in a dorm is fine for vacations and was bearable during the emergency. Long term they're going to need their own rooms or at least share with fewer kids. The nursery isn't quite the same situation although it's going to be chaotic when all four babies are on the outside. Then they'll grow up and need their own spaces too."

"So, additional houses or do we renovate the ranch house again?"

The question, which came from his father, was followed by a collective groan. Tim smiled when he noticed his mother, Jimmy, Breena, most of the siblings and Jared had joined them.

"Don't know, maybe both? We need a family meeting to discuss and plan."

Jared, who'd been listening, added: "And an architect!"

"Of course, Jared! We had one help us with the original renovations; if we all agree we can bring her in again."

Laughing, George said, "Don't forget the new barn!"

Geordie looked thoughtful, "If we're building a village and still want the pool, new barn, and corral, etc., should we look into that extra parcel?"

Shannon whistled, "We're missing a few owners and family members. Let's hold off until we're all together. Someone needs to write down what's already been said. The classroom's empty, that's the only place we all fit."

Tim called Kelly and Rob while Geordie called Ducky, Sarah, and Bob. The Hubbards and Cranes joined them, along with Tobias and most of the Bishops. Lara and Kayla looked in and then joined
them. This was a family discussion and at this point, everyone was extended family. When they were all seated, Shannon stood up.

"We called this meeting to start planning what changes are needed on the ranch to accommodate full-time residents."

Tim raised his hand and she nodded, "Go ahead, son."

"Before we start planning for us, Tyler asked if this means we won't be offering shelter to other evacuees. That's not my intent and I don't think anyone else's. We'll continue to offer the barn and guesthouses. I have an additional idea, but it can wait."

Kayla was heard to give a small cheer. Although she trusted the Gibbses, she'd been a tiny bit concerned.

When nobody had questions or comments about the evacuee shelters, Shannon continued.

"We have 12 bedrooms in the big house. In addition, there's the nursery and two dormitory-style rooms for the children so let's call that 15 bedrooms. As Tim said earlier, that was fine for vacations but not for long term. As it stands now, the Gibbs children, their spouses and the Palmers have their own rooms, as do Barb and Jerry, the Mallards, Grandpa Mac, the Colonel, Tobias, Jethro and I. Maisie's room will now go to Mel. We have a large kitchen and dining room, playroom, family room, smallish living room and plenty of bathrooms.

"However, what sounds like fun for a week or two at a time, living in one house and the kids in dorm rooms, will be a problem in the long run. We all love each other but we've just spent 14 weeks living communally and we know it's been challenging. We managed all right but we also knew it wasn't forever.

"The questions that have been asked are, do we pursue purchasing the 200 acres of land we decided not to buy when we bought the ranch and do we renovate again or build new homes or a combination of the two? I'll add another question, if we build new homes, who stays in the house?"

Geordie raised his hand and she motioned to him, "Geordie?"

"While we were gathering, I found that parcel number and looked it up on the county website. It's still listed under the same owner, Zeb Adams, and marked for sale. Just thought I should throw that in before we start planning."

"Thanks, Major! Are we serious enough about the extra land to take a vote or do we need more discussion?" Geordie grinned at his mother's affectionate use of his Marine rank; like Tim and their other siblings, he loved having a mother. Kelly thought it was funny but then admitted she loved having a father again.

Fornell raised his hand, standing when Shannon nodded to him. "I've seen that parcel. You, Jethro and I rode around over there when we first looked at this place. It's a rectangular plot, be easy enough to mark off boundaries, the Environmental Protection Act report is already done, there's no problem there although I suppose that might need to be revisited. Power will have to be brought in but the lot runs parallel to this one so it has road frontage, shouldn't be a problem or we could put solar in, excuse me, Tim could put solar in." He paused at the chuckles. "There are a lot of trees and shrubs but as I remember, we thought we could save many of the trees, plan buildings more or less around them - and the parcel has good drainage.

"What if we put the evacuees' dwellings over there and keep the family homes closer to the ranch
house? That would give the returnees a little more privacy, a sense of having their own community and keep the family more or less together."

Bob commented, "That's a good idea, Tobias. We probably wouldn't need more than 50 - 60 acres for all of us, including the pool, new barn and corral. That would leave plenty of room."

Tim stood, "Seems like there's a fair amount of overlap between the family expansion and our plans for the evacuees. I'll throw out my idea, that we start buying shipping containers, have them moved here and start converting them now rather than waiting for the government."

Geordie called out, "Grass roots, way to go, Timmo!"

"Is that contingent upon the purchase of the 200 acres?"

Tim shrugged, "Doesn't have to be, but I really like Fornell's idea of giving those folks their own space."

"A village?"

"Sure, why not? We'll have one, why shouldn't they?"

Jethro jumped up and whistled. When it was quiet, he spoke, "These are great ideas but let's focus on the acreage first. Do we want to pursue buying it? Think we need a show of hands and anyone who wants to buy in gets a vote."

Shannon stood up again, "Ok but before we get too much further, we need to decide what's going where."

Ellie stood, "I move we pursue buying the Adams' parcel, reserve a portion of it for family and extended family and the bulk of it for the evacuees."

Jethro seconded and then Shannon stopped the proceedings.

"Before we take a vote, let's see who wants in on the Adams' parcel. Show of hands, please for those who wanted to buy in for the 200 acres."

Then she smiled when Tyler and Kayla both raised their hands, waving them. "Ty, Kayla, do you have questions?"

Not wanting to discourage her young friend, Kayla nodded to Ty to go first. He stood, "Nonny, how much does it cost to help buy the land? Brynie and I have some money saved that we want to use."

Kayla nodded, standing, "That's part of my question too. My brother and I have money and might want to buy in, but is there a minimum?"

Bill Colter, Geordie's former tent mate and Steve Ortiz's future framer, raised his hand, waiting for Shannon's nod before he stood, "I'd like to buy in but I can't do it right away. I need to work and save for a few weeks. And I'd also like to know the minimum amount, if there is one."

Shannon saw several nods of agreement and asked for a show of hands of those who wanted to purchase a share but at a future date. Kelly and Rob quickly wrote down the names, including Ty and Kayla. Following a quick break for some necessary discussions, Shannon called the meeting to order. Geordie made a formal proposal to allow share purchases after the land was acquired and Grandpa Mac seconded the motion. A show of hands carried the motion. Next step would be to discuss a minimum amount for a buy-in but that could wait until the final purchase price of the land.
was determined.

Finally, they were ready for what had been the original proposal, those who wanted to buy-in. Shannon asked the children not to raise their hands unless they planned to use their own money, cautioning them the minimum would be at least $100, probably more.

Kayla thought about it, she and Jared had money in trust from their mother's estate. She didn't know where she'd be working once she finished college; however, she knew her brother wanted to help the returnees as much as she did so she kept her hand raised. The two of them could decide how much to spend later.

Tyler also kept his hand raised. He knew he and Brynie had some money from their first mothers and he wanted to do this. When Brynie asked him if she should raise her hand too, he nodded. Both children felt good when their parents smiled proudly at them.

This time Tobias and Mel took notes, quickly jotting down the names. All the adult Gibses, the senior Bishops, the Mallards, the Palmers, Mac, Tobias, the Colonel, Aunt Mel, Ali and Trish Bishop, Haley Chalmers, Lu, the Hubbards, Cranes, Slaters, Carters, Ned Dorneget, Barry, Freddie, Jose, the Fullers and the Vances. Kayla and Jared, Tyler and Bryn's names were written separately.

The Fullers weren't staying, Mindy wanted to live in town and they'd told Jethro they would start looking for housing as soon as their vehicle was operable. The Slaters' plans were already known. Freddie and Jose also felt they should live in town to establish a customer base. Bill would prefer the ranch but decided to go with the guys for now. He knew Steve's crew usually worked on residential buildings, which meant town. Barry also wanted to live in town; if he got a job with the Albuquerque Police Department then it would be easier to live close in.

As fond as he was of the Gibses, Ned Dorneget also wanted to live in Albuquerque. For one thing, he and Barry now had a close friendship that would be easier to develop, if it was destined to grow, if they both lived in town. Additionally, he didn't yet have a car and taxis, buses even Uber around town would be much less expensive than a 30-minute fare out to the ranch. Truthfully, he wanted to be more centralized, have some nightlife, stores, and restaurants around.

Ellie was very happy as she listened to the suggestions and saw the hands raised. She, Tim, and the kids would have their own house, the Palmers would be close by so the kids would have other kids to play with, they'd be close to the rest of the family, her horse could live here and they'd be able to offer more housing to the returnees. She raised her hand and Shannon gestured to her.

"It sounds like many of us will have our own dwellings. In that case, I propose the big house as the residence for all the grandparents, great-grandparents and visitors. That way it's a full-time residence and a vacation home. Maybe the only renovation we need to make to the house is to enlarge the dining room so we'll have one spot for family gatherings."

They liked that idea and voted to pursue it once the rest of it had been settled. In the meantime, Geordie left the room to contact the real estate agent who'd worked with them when they bought the ranch. She pulled up the information on the Adams' parcel and reminded him of the sales price, which hadn't changed. Telling her that he'd be back in touch, Geo returned to the classroom with the update.

Those who'd lived in the DC Metro area for any length of time were shocked. For that price, they would not have been able to buy much more than a closet or a slice of driveway within 50 miles of the capital. Leon nearly swallowed his tongue, having purchased a home first in trendy, expensive San Diego and later in the even more expensive DC metro area. No wonder the Gibses bought here after their stint in WITSEC!
They voted to make a full price offer, but decided everyone should see the property before they made the bid. The National Guard would be on site again tomorrow morning to remove the contaminated covers from their vehicles and test the vehicles for fallout seepage. Once that was done, provided the vehicles passed, they could get them going and have a driving tour of the new parcel.

Tim made a note to ask if the land had been inspected for fallout and radioactivity. During a discussion about prices and vehicles, he slipped out to call the county. He was smiling when he returned, telling the others, "Mr. Adams pays property taxes so yes, the parcel was tested and it has the same numbers we do. We should let the real estate agent know if we want to drive or walk around over there."

Geordie tapped him on the shoulder, "I'll send her a text, Timmo." He did that while the discussion moved on.

Jacob and Elaine hadn't joined them because they knew they weren't staying, planning to leave in a couple of days. Pete hadn't joined because he planned to move home. However, he was curious about the discussion. When he poked his head in, Shannon pointed to a chair. The more he listened the more he realized he didn't want to live in his house, the house he'd shared with Toni for more than 20 years. It wasn't home anymore, Toni wasn't there, he didn't know if she ever would be and he was still struggling with what she'd done. On top of that he was quickly reaching the annual limit of what his health insurance would pay for Toni's continued hospitalization, he had about a month of funding left and no way to pay for more. That helped him make a decision.

He raised his hand, "I need funds for Toni's continued care. Figuring I'll either sell or rent out the house to do that, I don't want to live there anyway. I won't be able to buy into the 200 acres until I start working again but would I be able to rent a room here between runs?"

He smiled as everyone nodded, even those who weren't owners. "Ok, then I'm staying, thanks. Won't need much."

Jimmy raised his hand, "Pete, would you rather sell or rent your house? I'm asking because Breena's parents and sisters will be looking for homes." In the back of the room, Ed smiled.

"Think I'd prefer to rent it for now. It'll need to be cleaned and fixed up first."

Jethro and Tobias raised their hands, "Pete, we're your crew for that. Why don't we get started on Friday after we've had our trek to the Adams' parcel?"

"That'd be good."

Bill raised his hand, "I'll help too, until Steve has work for me."

Elaine poked her head in, "Mind if we join you on your land tour? We're not leaving until early Saturday morning."

"Of course we don't mind, wondered where you were! Come with us and see how surprised you'll be when you come back for a visit."

She smiled, "We've come close to letting the house go and staying here with all of you."

Her eyes got teary when their friends called out, 'Stay, Stay!'

"No, no, thanks though. Our kids have their hearts set on us being out there closer to them. We'll be fine once we're settled. Meet new people, join the community."
Shannon took her hand, "As long as you know you and Jacob will always have a home here too. Come sit with us if you'd like, we always welcome your thoughts."

Pete smiled at her, "Where will you be in Oregon? My daughter's in Washington, maybe when I visit the three of us can get together. Halfway or shoot, I'll rent a car and come for a visit. I do move jobs out there; guess I could even drive the cab to see you."

"Oh, that would be wonderful, Pete! We'll be in Springfield, about midway between California and Washington."

"Great! We'll keep in touch then."

That generated smiles and then they resumed talking about new dwellings for those with children and those who were moving to town left the classroom. When the Cranes liked the idea of living on the ranch with their boys, the count for new homes was confirmed at 7 dwellings.

Remembering what the architect had them do for the ranch house, they split up to make their wish lists. That ended the meeting although there was much discussion over dinner and in the common area that evening. Tim noticed no one, not even the kids, was watching TV and the daily Disney movie was postponed for the first time since the shelter doors had been sealed nearly 15 weeks ago.
Chapter 2

MOVIN' ON

The National Guard crew arrived early Thursday morning and quickly completed their work. None of the engines, including the one in Pete's truck, was contaminated although his trailer was covered in radioactive fallout. Removing ladders from their rig, the Guard crew cleaned it carefully, first covering the ground around it and gathering it all for proper disposal when they were finished.

Once the Guard crew finished, Tim and Geo removed the air compressor from storage while Dad, Jerry, George, Freddie and Bill set about reconnecting vehicle battery cables and checking engines for damage from rodents. Everyone had followed Jethro's advice about changing the oil, keeping the fuel tank full, buying car covers and stuffing steel wool in the muffler or air intake. They'd also left mint-scented items around the perimeter of each car as mint reportedly repelled mice.

They only found one belt that looked a little chewed but as it was Jethro's Challenger, he could wait until he got into town to replace it. His sons thought it was funny that his was the only car affected but he just shrugged. Even if he never drove the car again it was still here, in one piece. The car his dad built for him and then waited more than a decade to give him.

There were days Jethro missed his father so much he fought tears. He didn't know why it hurt worse here than it had at home. Maybe because his entire family was together here. It did tend to hit him hardest on family days. That's when he knew Jack would have been in seventh heaven playing with his great-grandkids or teasing his grandchildren, reconnecting with Shannon, Kelly and Mac.

He was deeply thankful Mac was with them and could experience all those things and that his kids and grandkids knew their grand and great-grandfather. His father-in-law always seemed to know when he was especially missing Jack and would give him an extra pat on the shoulder, telling him one of his Jack stories. Didn't matter how often Mac told it or how many times Jethro heard it, he always felt better.

Once the tires were inflated, a few of the vehicle owners took them for test drives on the paved road, remembering to turn west instead of east, although the entrance to the Adams' parcel was three-quarters of a mile east. Tires on two of the vehicles had 'flat spots', areas where the tire was permanently damaged from being in one position too long. Jethro originally planned to remove all the tires and put the vehicles up on blocks but there hadn't been time. The Bishops had brought their own blocks and removed their tires; theirs were in perfect condition.

Pete recommended a good tire shop in town and the two owners called to order a tire apiece. They laughed when Rick's car was uncovered; they'd never changed the flat! It had been offloaded from the trailer behind Mover#3, the battery disconnected, the cover secured over it and nobody remembered or mentioned there was a blown tire. Rick just shrugged, he knew the sidewall was damaged and couldn't be repaired. Ned helped him put the 'donut' or temporary tire on and Agent Carter added a tire for his vehicle onto the Tire Shop order.

They were through with the vehicles by 10 AM and knowing everyone was excited about the land tour, they strapped the babies and younger kids into their car seats, piled into the vehicles and took off. The real estate agent had been informed and would meet them on the property in her 4-Wheel
Tobias and Jethro would later laugh about the trek, betting no group of people had ever been so excited to see plain old land. They were like castaways who'd been living on a leaky boat at sea, finally spotting land.

As Tobias remembered, the plot was mostly rectangular and flat, with a few small hills here and there. There were plenty of trees, shrubs, and wildflowers, all native to the region. It was an odd sight, the recent rains brought blooms to the shrubs and wildflowers but the same plants and many of the trees looked sickly from fallout. Bec offered to determine what might need removing but the doctors nixed that idea. If the land was purchased another botanist would be consulted, one who was not pregnant.

While the doctors, Bec and Geo's discussion went on around him, Tim stood quietly for a minute, thinking about the weather. It was 1045 on the 17th of October and he wore a short-sleeved tee shirt, jeans, and sneakers. He wished he'd worn long sleeves or thought to bring a light jacket; he was a little chilly. The kids had dressed more appropriately; they all had light sweaters or jackets on. He looked at his phone, glad to see he had cell reception and saw that the temperature was 59. That was a little cooler than the averages he'd looked up but by less than 5 degrees. He guessed nuclear winter wouldn't affect them here if it happened at all. He wondered if that was due to the limited strikes or something else. He grimaced to himself, thinking that now the information online about nuclear strikes, EMPs, sheltering, etc. could be updated with facts.

Even though the terrain was rough, the 4-Wheelers and All-Wheel Drive vehicles ventured deeper into the property. Four vehicles went first, looking for the spot Tobias remembered. Several people rode in Geo's Jeep, others in the DiNozzos' Mercedes and even more, including the kids, in Tim and Ellie's van and truck, driven by Bob.

Exploring the property, Tobias pointed to a grove of trees about a mile in from the road, "There, that's where I thought we could put some of the container houses."

The trees were widely spaced and overall it looked like a good spot. Tim and Jethro estimated they could fit 20 or 30 sets of 2 containers per lot. Two containers set flush next to each other or in a 'T' or 'L' shape; after doors or walls were cut in, the containers would be welded together. They could fit two or three bedrooms in that way, a decent size living space, kitchen and 1 full, 1 half bath or 2 full baths.

Rob suggested small patios that could be either set in the angles or to one side and they liked that idea too. Another option was to stack the containers but that meant stairs and the only ones that would really fit would be the spiral variety. Unless they stacked them and kept them separate, like apartments. Then they could put the stairs on the outside. Tim grinned and nudged his dad, "Rooftop decks!"

"Fun! We'll see; we need to look for plans online and find someone who's worked with container conversions."

Geo huffed at them, "We need to buy the land first!"

The others laughed as Jethro rolled his eyes at his second eldest. They drove back to the gate, encouraging the others to drive in and look around the parcel, showing them the first area they'd looked at before driving to the back of the property. Tim, Geordie, Tony and Bob took as many people as they could squeeze in their 4-Wheel and AWD vehicles and drove them back to the site they'd looked at. Elaine and Jacob went in one of the first vehicles and then went back to the ranch, excited for their friends and a little depressed that they wouldn't be part of it.
When Elaine later called to tell Gibbs that lunch was ready, they loaded up and drove back to the ranch. The kids and teachers went back to class after they ate while the babies played for a while before going down for their naps. The adults spent an hour sharing their observations about the property. By the time school let out for the day, they'd made several decisions.

First, the group wanted to buy the property and each owner would have a share or percentage of the total ownership according to how much they put into the buy. After some discussion, they set a minimum amount for the buy-in, stipulating that the purchaser could be an individual or a group. That made it easier for those who were starting from scratch as far as a job and income. Or like the Slaters who had their money tied up in their business.

The second decision was to form an Limited Liability Corporation, commonly known as an LLC, to legally house their ownership. Tim found a company online who would facilitate the filing and legal work. When he found decent reviews without any serious complaints or lawsuits, the group agreed. He paid the fee and delegated the forms to the others to complete. That took about forty minutes and would take less than 24 hours to have the legalities filed with the State of New Mexico. With advice from Ali and Tim's experiences with his own LLC, they decided to hold off on the purchase of the land until the LLC was finalized. They did let the real estate agent know what was going on.

That night after dinner, Pete asked for help getting his truck and Toni's things back to his house on Friday. Jethro, Bill and Tobias would see what work needed to be done while Tim and Jerry would drive the Buick and moving van. The doctors were happy he wanted to stay with them. His wound was about 85% healed but there was still a slight chance of infection. As much as he'd initially wanted to get home after Toni's attack, he realized now that he didn't want to be alone. He wasn't cleared for work so it made sense to stay here. He was comfortable in the shelter, there was plenty of company, he knew they'd all be eating in the shelter and he loved catching up on all the movies.

Still sitting at the table an hour after they'd eaten, Pete was surprised when his cell rang. It was his daughter checking up on him. A bigger surprise was the addition of his son to the call. Throughout the call, the two begged him to fly out to visit, they'd been worried sick after their mother stabbed him and needed to see him in person. After the call, he sat in thought, trying to talk himself into flying to Seattle although he hated flying and particularly hated flying by himself. When Jacob sat down asking what was troubling him, he told him.

Jacob smiled, "You of all people should be familiar with different methods of travel these days!"

"I can't drive my truck; I can't climb into it yet."

"And the Buick?"

"Is my wife's car."

Jacob chuckled, "Then how about an RV?"

"Huh?"

"Come with Lainie and me. We already planned to stop at our daughter's home in Seattle. Olympia isn't that far away, surely your daughter could meet you there. If not, we'll take you to her place. We'll drive, Pete. You know the routes, the shortcuts, the best times to drive. If you're up to it, you can help us drive, if not, you navigate. There's plenty of room in the RV, it sleeps 6."

"Wow, that's very generous of you! You sure you wouldn't mind a third wheel?"

"Not at all, we'll both feel better having you with us and you know it'll make our doctors and friends
happy."

Pete smiled at that and Jacob knew he'd made the decision to go with them.

The offer and decision pleased everyone. The doctors were happy he'd spend time with his children and would have the Rourkes to watch over him on the journey. He'd be able to drive for three or four hours at a time, not the usual 10 he was used to but it would certainly help the Rourkes. Gibbs and Vance were almost as happy as the doctors were when they heard.

For one thing, it would give Pete a different perspective, get his mind off his troubles and they knew Elaine and Jacob would watch carefully over him. Two, it would lessen the number of hours each of the Rourkes would have to drive. Three, Pete was licensed to carry and would be protection for their friends. Finally, helping to drive, navigate and being able to protect his friends would make Pete feel useful again. As a mover, he was used to taking care of everything himself and the inactivity he'd been forced to endure because of his injury and living in a concrete cave had rankled.

The decision made, the visit to his house gained importance. As he didn't know how long he'd be away, he'd need to find a property management firm to get his house rented.

Then Ginny Slater approached, asking to speak with him. Remembering Jimmy's question, he agreed.

Ginny smiled, "Would you mind if Colleen and I take a look at your house while you're there on Friday? From what we've heard, it sounds perfect for us. Either Ed and I or Colleen and Ryan or maybe Alissa and Brad hope to rent it from you. What we'd like to do is lease it for a year and we'll pay a deposit, no problem with that. Depending on what Jethro, Tobias and Bill find that needs fixing, we'd like to move in as soon as possible. That way half our family will have homes as Breena and Jimmy are owners here, and we can concentrate on our business. Also, Ed and I sold our cars before we left, getting around will be much easier in town than all the way out here."

Pete nodded, "Yes, that's fine with me! Hope you'll like it."

When the group set off Friday morning, they made a little parade. Tim, Pete, and Jerry in the Buick with Toni's suitcases, followed by Jethro, Tobias, and Bill in Jethro's truck, each with his toolbox. They were followed by the two Slater women who'd come equipped with a measuring tape and notebook.

It took some doing but Pete finally saw the logic of leaving the moving van at the ranch while he was away. It wouldn't be in the way and if it was they had the keys and Jerry knew how to drive it. It would also reduce the risk of it being stolen or vandalized. It made sense because Pete was returning to the ranch to live, not the house.

Pete made a noise when they pulled into the driveway. "Feels like years since I've been here."

"Pretty close to four months."

"Yeah, four months and a lifetime."

The other two nodded at that and looked at the house. They'd expected to see a black roof as the fallout wouldn't have been cleaned off. It was clear and the pavement was clean, someone had done a good deed for the Wares. Tim and Jerry handled the suitcases while Pete unlocked the door.

"Whew, the air is sure stale in here!"

Jerry and Tim opened a few windows for a cross breeze. "Let's let it air out while we're here."
The suitcases were carried to the master bedroom where they helped Pete locate an additional suitcase and pack it with the rest of his clothes. In the meantime, the fixers and potential renters were examining the house. It was in much better shape than Pete led them to believe. Two items were repaired immediately: a loose cupboard door and a leaky faucet in the bathroom. The fixers examined every door, every electrical outlet and light, windows, and floors. The Slaters tried to stay behind them but the men kept stopping to examine one thing or another and finally the two women headed off to the other end of the house. There were three bedrooms and two full bathrooms, one en suite in the master and one in the hallway to be shared by the other two bedrooms. Colleen and her sister Alissa each had one child, which meant whichever of them rented the house would have a guest bedroom and the one hall bath would be fine.

Except Ginny had already fallen in love with the backyard. While the house was not adobe or any kind of Spanish style, the backyard reminded Tim of the front courtyard of the house he, Dad and the kids had lived in here. Looking for his father, he nearly dragged him to the slider out to the patio. "Look!"

"That's nice, Timson, reminds me of our old house."

"That's what I thought too."

There was a large garden at the back and more potted plants around the perimeter of the patio. A beautifully tiled fountain graced the center of the back of the patio, with an outdoor kitchen and patio furniture towards the front and a pergola over the table and chairs. They could see the rain had done a partial job of ridding the plants of fallout but there was more to be removed. When Pete saw the dead plants he made a noise, but Ginny tapped his hand.

"It's all right, Pete. Remember folks in town have been outside for longer than we have. We'll hire someone to come in and clean that out. The house is in pristine condition. Needs a little dusting and vacuuming, that's all. No need to hire a cleaning service, I haven't done any housekeeping in four months and it will do me good!"

In no time, Ginny arranged to rent the house and buy the Buick from Pete. The others watched the exchange in fascination, Tim and Jethro recognizing where Breena came by her attitude of friendly efficiency. When there was a pause, Tim looked at Pete, who seemed to be in a daze. "Hey Pete, maybe Ginny would like to drive the Buick back to the ranch, a test drive for her."

Pete smiled, nodded and then grinned, "Ginny, did you know we bought the Buick from Tim?"

"No, I didn't. How did that happen?"

Tim gave her another variation of the 'undercover' story, trusting Pete wouldn't give them away.

Ginny smiled in surprise, "My goodness, what a small world - or did you stay in touch?"

Pete answered that. "After their move to Alexandria, we didn't speak again until this past June. Tim called to tell me about the threat, advising me to stay home for a few months and ended up hiring me for the move."

"Wonderful and now we'll add another story for the Buick. Timothy, a test drive will be fun but I had this make and model at home. Although mine was purple."

With a laugh, the 8 of them closed the doors and windows, made sure everything was locked up tight, Pete setting the alarm as he left, writing the passcode down for Ginny.

By mid-afternoon, they had the rent and deposit figured out, and a year's lease signed. They also
came to an agreement on the Buick and Jethro offered to run Pete to the bank to deposit the Slaters’ check. Pete was glad it was Jethro, so much had happened over the last two days that his mind was close to overload; he needed a few minutes of quiet!

They stopped on the way back to buy several gallons of ice cream, the first they'd had since moving into the shelter. Jethro wanted farewell treats for their friends and to complete the last dinner they'd have together as shelter mates.
Chapter 3

TOWN AND NOT SO LITTLE 'WHITE LIES'

Jacob and Elaine were quite proud of their last shelter feast. With Jerry’s approval, they used the last packages of steak in the freezer and served it cooked to perfection over an open flame. Elaine made rolls from scratch, potatoes were baked in the oven and the vegetables gently sautéed, always a shelter favorite. When Jethro and Pete walked in with the gallons of ice cream, Elaine beamed at them. "Now, how wonderful is that? I made berry pies and that will top it off perfectly!"

She smiled again when she saw the smaller container for Jimmy and Eileen, "Good. I made a special dish for them, berry pie without the crust, using that natural sweetener they both like."

The dinner was a huge success with most of the group so full they had to wait to eat their pie. They walked on the cork path and the treadmills or rode the stationary bikes. Jethro, who was on the cork path with Tim, Geo, and Tony, laughed, "We're going to have to share the fitness room with the Returnees or we'll get as fat as one of Nick's pigs!" At home in Tahlequah, Nick Bishop raised pigs as a member of the global 4H Youth Organization.

Geo thought about that, "We could move the fitness center up to the basement."

"Maybe but your wife and brother have me working on planter boxes for down there, planning on a larger indoor garden."

Tony frowned, "Why indoors? I thought we were clean, I mean the land."

Tim nodded, "Numbers are very low, yes, but we won't know where the produce and fruit we buy at the store is grown or the plants at the nursery. Bec says seeds and plants have to come from certified clean growers and it will take time for growers to be certified by the state Agricultural Department. It'll be easier to keep growing our own for now. We'll use the seeds from what we've already harvested and Mom brought seed packets from Virginia. Next year we might plant outside, but this year Bec wants to control it."

Geo told them about renting a beehive to get things pollinated. Tony shook his head, "That is too weird. How do you rent a beehive? Call Rent-A-Center?"

They chuckled at that and Geo explained how and why beehive rentals had started.

Their father snorted, "Somewhere my grandfather Gibbs is turning over in his grave. He was a beekeeper and proud of it. And he was never stung, not once."

They came to an abrupt halt as a giggling naked Lia ran smack into her Uncle Tony. Tim shook his head, "She's ahead of her sister; Brynie was nearly 30 months before she went streaking."

Picking her up, he grabbed a towel, wrapped it around her and caught up to the others. As he and Lia reached them, he heard Dad telling the story of Brynie's naked run down their block here in Albuquerque.

Geo stared at Tim, "Aren't you afraid she's going to wet on you?"

"Nope, she'll let me know if she has to go."
"She's only a year old!"

"Almost 13 months now and I don't know whether she wants to keep up with her siblings or if she's just a very together child, but she started her own potty training."

"Isn't she heavy?"

"Not that heavy! Haven't you ever walked with weights?"

"Not a baby!"

Tim, Tony and Dad snorted and Tim huffed at his older brother, "You will, Geo, promise! Here, take Lia for a minute. Ellie says she's about the same weight that our unborn child feels like."

Geo took Lia, giving her a big kiss and enjoying her squeal. "Yikes, she's not all that heavy but she is squirmy."

"And so are babies inside Mommy's womb."

"Wow. Don't tell Bec, ok? Don't want to scare her."

They finished their walk and Tim took Lia to the toilet where her little potty seat was waiting. Successful, she grinned at her daddy, who returned the grin and cleaned her up, washing their hands with NoAgua before returning to the nursery. Ellie was there and sighed when they walked in. "There you are, you little rascal!"

"She decided to have a naked walk with us."

Together they went through her nightly routine and tiptoed out as she was the last nursery resident to go down for the night.

Then they joined the rest of the gang for their pie and ice cream. Jimmy and Eileen were so happy with their desserts they hugged both Elaine and Jacob. "Thank you so much for everything!"

"You're welcome. Now, we left copies of the recipes we've made for you so anyone can make them for you. Or you can make them yourselves."

She, Jacob and Pete said goodbye to everyone that evening as the trio planned to leave by 5 AM. Their suitcases and belongings were already in the RV, they each had overnight bags. Remembering that one of the shelter couches was a sofa bed, they'd taken their mattress up to the RV that afternoon, took the mattress out of the sofa bed that evening and put it on the platform bed Steve Ortiz, a man they'd still not met, made for them.

They hoped to leave before anyone was awake but later realized they should have known better. At least half their shelter mates were up and escorted the three to the RV, hugging and kissing each one of them. Luckily, it was chilly out so nobody lingered. Jethro, Shannon and Tobias were the last holdouts, waving them off the property.

The two old friends stood watching at the gate as their taillights disappeared down Quail Hill Road.

"Routes are all safe. No hot spots."

"Long drive. A lot of switching between interstates."

"Pete knows the way. KOAs they'll be staying in have good reviews, Tim checked."
"Glad Pete's with them."

"They promised to call every night."

Sighing, they returned to the warmth of the shelter and their last ever pot of coffee made by their friend Elaine.

The rest of that day felt like it was going to be mindlessly busy with one thing or another and Jethro thought that might be a good thing. The company helping with their LLC called to tell them their filing would be finalized on Monday. They were advised not to purchase anything until they received and reviewed a kit with all the necessary information. It was on its way via FedEx.

Ginny Slater borrowed the ranch vacuum cleaner and cleaning supplies to start cleaning her new home, daughters Alissa, Breena and Colleen went with her. They'd found a gardener trained to safely remove fallout and he was meeting them at the house. Tim and Jimmy also planned to be there, which Ed thought was funny.

"Trust me; Ginny doesn't take crap from anyone and she sees right through anyone trying to cheat her. And worse, she'll put you to work!"

"Ok, ok, we get the message."

Instead, the two decided to take the kids out for some fun. They made lunches and loading up the children, including most of the teenagers and drafting Uncles Jim, Rob, John, George, Jim, Tony, Bob and Geo, drove into town to the BioPark.

It was cold today so they started inside the Aquarium where they spent two hours visiting every living thing. As the Botanic Garden was closed with a note saying they were cleaning up the damage from fallout, they headed for the Rio Line, one of the park's two train lines, and traveled to the zoo. Ty and Brynie were fascinated by the train and asked if they could ride again after the zoo. The other train line, the Thunderbird Express ran a loop through the zoo every 30 minutes so the answer was yes.

They had a wonderful time at the zoo, watching the animals being fed, playing and sometimes putting on a little show for their visitors. There was a printed notice at one habitat that said the bears who lived there had been evacuated from the National Zoo.

Jimmy had to keep tight hold of Teddy who tried several times to get closer to 'his' animals. Lia and Ricky rode in a double stroller next to Zoey and Zach's double stroller but the little ones saw plenty of the animals as their fathers, uncles or in the twins' case, brother and uncles, held them up at each habitat.

When they were at last satisfied that they'd visited all the animals, birds and reptiles, they walked to the Africa Station and hopped on the Thunderbird Express for their 30-minute ride through the zoo. They had to leave the strollers behind but the littles were just as happy sitting on laps where they could see more. The kids watched avidly, calling out their favorite animals and habitats as the train chugged by them. By the time they were done, they were hungry and reclaiming the strollers, made their way back to the Aquarium where they'd parked. They'd eat in the large cafeteria. After settling the kids, two of the adults ran back to the cars to get the lunches. Back inside, they found Uncle Jim treating everyone to hot chocolates and they warmed up.

While Arin, Lia and Ricky were fine, Zach and Zoey were a little fussy by now, the longest they'd been away from their foster parents since they first joined the Vances. Big brother Jared was perfectly acceptable until they wanted their Mama. With Lia and Ricky asleep in the stroller, it was
time to go home.

Back home, the moms made the most of the absence of kids and husbands, mostly just relaxing. Ellie sat in her favorite chair, in their room in the house and read a book. By herself, for a whole hour. Then she took a nap and slept uninterrupted for another hour. When she woke, she walked down to the shelter and helped herself to a piece of pie, warmed up in the microwave and topped with yummy ice cream. Shannon joined her, "Better have your favorite antacid handy."

Ellie nodded as she looked around before licking the plate. "I know but it was worth it. Every single morsel."

"I'm making you something for after the baby, want to come see?"

"Sure!"

She followed her mother-in-law to the library and then gasped as several people yelled, "Surprise!" She rolled her eyes at Breena, sitting next to Ginny, Alyssa and Colleen, all smiling smugly at her. Cleaning indeed!

Her mom grinned at her, "Happy Baby Shower!"

"Wow! I had…this is so cool!"

"We'll have another one when the boys and kids are all here but this one is for you, Eleanor Rose."

"Okay?"

She understood when she started opening gifts that were very personal: post-baby lingerie and clothes, products for her skin and hair. Comfortable but stylish clothing. A gift certificate for a day at a local spa. A promise to take the kids for the weekend. Another gift certificate, this one for a popular hair salon in town.

"Oh, this is wonderful, thank you all so much!"

Jazzy handed her a package, saying, "Don't open this until the baby's two or three months old and Tim's going out of his mind."

Ellie giggled, "All right."

Barbara handed her another package, "And this is from Elaine, it's just for you. She hoped to be here but that didn't work out."

It was a pan of butterscotch brownies, Ellie's favorite. She took a bite of one and moaned - it was that good. She eyed the other women and quickly wrapped the pan back up as they laughed at her. "Elaine gave us a plate so we wouldn't steal yours. And those are not for Tim or the kids, they're yours, all yours."

"Yummy - I need to hide them!"

Shannon grinned, "Find a big box of tampons or sanitary pads, empty it out and slide the pan in. Double wrap it in foil first and put a vanilla candle near the box to dilute the smell. Trust me, they'll be perfectly safe."

Lara chuckled, "Oh yes, no danger there!"

The younger women giggled, "This is very useful information!"
"No telling!"

"We promise!"

They had chips, salsa and 7-layer bean dip and everyone dug in. Ellie quickly broke out the antacids and reported they'd done the trick - as she reached for another chip.

Jethro and Tobias worked on the raised planting beds and baby furniture all morning and were mystified when they went into the shelter for lunch and found it empty. No kids in the playroom, which was very strange. Frowning, Jethro pulled his phone out, smiled and showed Tobias the photos he’d received from his sons who had apparently taken all the kids to BioPark. Great idea and he bet the mamas were enjoying their leisure.

With a grin, Jethro motioned to Tobias and they took their sandwiches and chips up into the house. Tobias sat while Jethro disappeared, returning with two cold bottles of beer.

"Oh my God, I forgot alcohol still existed! Where'd you stash these?"

Jethro shook his head, "Not telling you!"

"Fine, be like that. Thanks for the brew."

They drank slowly and when the bottles were empty Tobias said, "Can't believe it but I'm buzzed. On one beer!"

Jethro just nodded, he felt the same way. Deciding they were done with furniture making for a few hours, they went for a walk, bundling up, as it was a blustery day. That quickly chased away their buzzes and they had a brisk walk that lasted about 10 minutes when, without exchanging a word they turned and quick walked back to the house.

NCIS NCIS NCIS NCIS

When Shannon asked about churches in town, her husband conferred with Tim and Ellie and the four of them, Mac and the three children piled into the van to attend services at the church Jethro and Tim went to three years ago. They'd asked the others but everyone had plans. Tim drove; halfway there he pulled off the road.

"Dad, we're the Hulls here, Mark, Brian, Thomas and Brinley. Both of us are widowers."

"Forgot about that."

Shannon made a noise, "Use your undercover story and introduce me as Patricia Hull, your wife. If they're nosy, we'll tell them we got married when you left here, we renewed our vows then, close enough."

Tim sighed, "That works except for one thing."

"What's that?"

Mac chuckled, "Me, daughter. If I'm your father and you and Mark have only been married for three years, why do Brian and the kids look just like me?"

"Oops!"

"I can be McKenzie Hull, how's that? I'll be Mark's dad instead of yours."
"That works, Grandpa, thanks!"

Tim turned to look at the kids. "Ty, are you all right with being Thomas for an hour or so?"

"Sure, Daddy."

He looked at Brynie who smiled, showing the gap where her baby teeth were falling out. "I don't remember my pretend name, Daddy."

"Brinley."

"That's easy! What about Lia and Mommy?"

Ellie chuckled, "We get to keep our names, Bryn. Lia wasn't born yet and your daddy and I got married after you lived here."

"Oh! I remember our wedding, I wore my cowgirl boots!"

"Yes, you did."

Tyler leaned forward to touch his dad's head, "Ok Daddy, we're all set."

"Thanks, son." Tim eased the van back into traffic and they continued to the church. Once there, he parked and helped Ellie out while Dad, Mom, and Mac got out with the kids, holding Lia.

They made it into the church without seeing anyone who looked familiar. Walking up the aisle, Tim caught a couple of puzzled glances, as if people were trying to figure out why they looked familiar. Dad entered a pew about halfway up and they put the kids in between Mac and Ellie. Tim looked at his watch nervously, three minutes before the service would start.

He'd started to relax a little when the boy in front of Mac turned around and grinned in surprise at Ty. "Thomas! Hi!" The kid yanked at his mother's arm, "Mom, it's Thomas and Brin; they used to be in day-care with me!"

The mother turned around and Tim recognized her as yep, one of the day-care mommies. She stared at him and then Ellie. He smiled at her and shifted Lia who was playing with his ear. She turned the other way and stared at Dad who smiled and went back to looking through the hymnal.

The woman started to turn around again, looking at Mac and then at Tim and the kids. Tim ignored her as Lia was now trying to climb over his shoulder. He whispered to her, asking her to be good, she made a face and then patted his cheek, nodding. After that, she contented herself with looking over his shoulder at people, flirting outrageously. Tim and Ellie, very much aware of their daughter's shenanigans, had a hard time keeping their laughter to themselves. Finally, Tim lowered her to his chest where she played with his jacket buttons.

In the meantime, the service started and Lia had to see who was talking. When they sang, she clapped her hands and did a decent job of singing along although she didn't know the words. When she squirmed to get down, Tim sent a mental SOS to his parents and Mom leaned forward motioning to him. Lia was passed along, stopping with a kiss for each person, until she came to Nonny. From there she went to Poppy who thankfully was at the end of the row. He finally took her out of the nave, Lia pouting the entire way.

When the service was over, they joined Dad and Lia in the vestibule. She beamed at them, ready to be an angel again. Ellie took her but at 7 months pregnant, holding onto a squirmy 1-year old was difficult at best. Tim quickly scooped her up and finding a quiet space near the stairs to the choir loft,
let her down. She squealed and took off but he'd anticipated that and had her back in his arms before she got more than a foot away from him. Calling to his father, he used his head to gesture to the van but it was too late, the minister had spotted them. "Mark, Brian, it's wonderful to see you again! I can't believe how much Thomas and Brinley have grown. How old are you now?"

Ty smiled, "I'm 7."

Bryn grinned, "I'm almost 6!"

"My goodness, you're all grown up! And who are these lovely people with you?"

Dad spoke up, "Reverend Miller, I'd like you to meet my wife, Patricia and my dad, McKenzie. And Brian's wife, Ellie, their daughter Lia and the new little one is little Mac."

"After great-granddad, that's wonderful! Congratulations to you and welcome to our congregation. Mark and Brian are fine men as I'm sure you know. Have you moved back here?"

Ty frowned, "We're evacuees. Our house got bombed."

"Oh my heavens, I'm so sorry, that must have been an awful ordeal getting out. Thank the Lord you're safe and unharmed. Did you shelter here?"

"Yes, we stayed in a family shelter outside of town."

"Oh, the Ortizes, yes I heard about their huge shelter. I'm thankful you stayed in touch with them."

Ellie put her hand on Brynie's shoulder so she wouldn't correct the man. Tim smiled, "Reverend, if you'll excuse us, Ellie's not supposed to stand for long."

"Oh certainly, by all means, get her someplace comfortable. Next time you come, we have a nursery where Miss Lia can stay during services if you'd like."

"Great, thanks, we didn't realize!"

Smiling at people who were still standing around talking, Tim got his family out of there fast.

When they were all in the van, Tim said, "We can't go back there unless we tell him our real names. We can go with the undercover bit. Ty and Brynie are going to start school in town; how is that kid going to react when he finds out Thomas is really Ty?"

Dad nodded, "All right, we'll tell him."

Tim shook his head, "Know what I kept remembering? Us counting all the people we'd invite for the farewell barbecue we never had and Tony asking us if we really knew that many people. Idiots!"

"Timothy, how on earth could you have foreseen this situation?"

"We bought the ranch, Grandpa. Never gave a thought to anyone recognizing us."

"Because it was for vacations, son. You haven't done anything wrong. Stick with the classified case."

"You're right."

Hungry, they decided to have lunch out, finding a restaurant neither Dad nor Tim remembered. As they sat down, Tim smiled, "I bet Nancy will have the new diner in Taos open soon!"
Dad's face lit up, "I forgot, thanks for reminding me we're not out of great diner options."

Mom was happy too, "Jethro, remember we agreed on a longer trip to Taos before all this craziness started." She looked at the others, "We sneaked away for a couple of days while we were working on the house."

"Sneaked away from who? Tobias?"

"Yes. He said he understood but here it was our house and he was helping."

Dad shook his head, "His house too, Shan, he owns part of it."

She nodded, "Right. When are we going?"

Ellie shrugged, "Have to check with Nancy."

Tim thought about it, "It would be fun to be there for her Grand Opening and I bet she has that on a Saturday. That's less than three hours' drive." He turned to his wife, "Sweetie, you think you could handle that all right?"

She smiled, "Yes, as long as we go in the next few weeks. The sibs might want to go too."

"Yours or mine?"

She chuckled, "I was thinking of yours but we can ask mine if they'd like to go too."

Tim laughed at the look his father tried to hide. "Hey, she's our friend too, I knew her first! If you two want some time to yourselves, go during the week. Ellie's not going to be mobile for too much longer."

Mom nudged Dad with her elbow, "He forgets he's retired now, we can go anytime."

"Not while you're still teaching."

"Mm, we'll see about that."

Brynie looked up, "Us kids too, Daddy?"

"Of course, Sweet Pea!"

Ty nudged his sister, "Maybe we can go to that toy store again!"

Her eyes lit up, "Where we got to play with everything? I remember that! Mommy, Daddy, can we stay in the cabin again?"

"You two remember that?"

Ty answered, "Sure, that was my first ever flashlight!"

Tim thought his first flashlight was later at Ruidoso but didn't say anything.

Brynie added, "I think I remember and Ty told me about it."

"We'll talk about the cabins and where we'll stay later, kids, all right? First, we need to find out when Nancy is opening her new place."

"Ok."
Their meals were fine although not up to Elaine, Jacob or Nancy standards. Afterward they went home.

NCIS NCIS NCIS NCIS

Tim called Nancy, who was excited to hear from her friend and to be told they wanted to be at her Grand Opening, which was scheduled for the following weekend. After the call, he and Ellie spent a few minutes looking online for kid-friendly places to stay in Taos and decided that once again the best value for the money and the easiest place with young children was the Taos Creek Cabins.

When Ellie called to make the reservation, she mentioned they were a repeat customer from three years ago. That earned them a discount and when the reservations clerk looked up the previous record, she noted an address in Virginia.

"Ma'am, I see the previous address listed was Alexandria VA. Are you by chance evacuees?"

"Yes, we are. Our family and friends left on our own the day after the government evacuation started and we sheltered in Albuquerque."

"Oh my goodness, all of you together? You weren't part of that huge caravan with the moving trucks and cars, were you? Thank heavens you made it out safely. And I am so sorry for your losses; it's hard enough to deal with for those of us not directly involved."

"Thank you; we're doing all right, our family is mostly all together and that's what matters, that and making sure everyone else is also recovering. And yes, that caravan was ours. We brought a lot of our personal belongings and furniture, knew we'd need our cars for after - now. Everyone we know got out safely although there are a couple of family members we haven't seen yet, one ended up in Belize and the other in San Francisco. Our friends, neighbors, and co-workers are all scattered. But we're alive and they caught the bastards - that's the important thing."

"It's wonderful to hear your positive attitude. Now, you may not be aware of this but we're offering one night free for all evacuees with a voucher for one of our local restaurants. In fact, the voucher we have is for a diner that's opening next weekend, perfect timing, and the owner is also an evacuee! She and her family are the ones spearheading the Evacuee Welcome Special."

Ellie debated whether to mention their connection with Nancy, deciding to wait until they checked in. "That's wonderful, thank you so much. Uh, in that case, let me talk with my husband about coming up Friday evening and spending two nights with you."

"Certainly, I'll reserve the cabin for two nights. Please let me know by Thursday if that changes."

"I will; we look forward to our stay!"

When she got off the phone, Tim was right there. "Two nights?"

"One night is free because we're evacuees. And there's a meal voucher for the diner!"

"Cool! That works out great. How early can you leave Friday?"

"We need to work all day, but maybe if we don't take lunch breaks?"

"That's fine for me but little Mac will need a break."

"Then I'll get started a little early."
Tim nodded and grinned at her, "Most of the sibs are going too. Don't know about two nights but they're on for Saturday and an overnight."

"Yours or mine?"

"Some of both. Rob, Ali, Kelly, Sarah, Bob, and Haley are going. Mateo and Geo are working and Bec says they'll visit some other time. The DiNozzos have plans and the Palmers are doing something with the Slaters. However, John and Jazzy are going which also means our kids will have their cousins to play with. George and Eileen said they might go up another weekend, think they want to get away by themselves." He looked at Ellie, "I thought of that too, that you and I could get away for a night or two."

"Why don't we wait until after the baby's born, maybe a couple months old? I'm afraid with everything that's happened the kids will be frightened if we leave. And when we do go, I'd like to be able to enjoy myself. Right now I feel like a mama elephant who's been pregnant for two years and I know the next six weeks are going to get worse." When she saw the look on Tim's face she added, "I'm uncomfortable wherever I am, Tim; I might as well be doing something fun. And I really want to see other scenery."

"All right. I'm glad we'll have another ultrasound tomorrow, our much delayed 20-week checkup!"

She huffed, "You mean our 34-week checkup! I can't wait to see what Little Mac looks like now."
BABY MAC AND A ROAD TRIP

When they got to the doctor's office the next day, Ellie handed over the completed new patient paperwork they'd faxed to her and copies of her medical records, also sent by Dr. Mallard. They drew blood for tests and then she had an exam followed immediately by the ultrasound.

The doctor slowly moved the wand over Ellie's baby bump. They could see little Mac's profile in clear detail, he was curled up. Dr. Hunter smiled, "I'd like to get his measurements. Is there any way you can get him to move around, stretch out?"

Ellie thought, "He's usually active for a few minutes after I lay down."

"All right, let's do that." He adjusted the exam table so she was nearly prone. The baby started moving around and soon he stretched out. Tim laughed as he could see Ellie's tummy bulge with what looked like the heel of one of Little Mac's feet. The doctor took stills of the baby, measuring his length and current weight.

"He's already 19½ inches and you have six weeks to go, he's probably going to be close to 21 inches at birth. His weight is about 7 pounds now; he'll get up to 8 before he joins us."

"Your due date was December 1st; however I wouldn't be surprised if this little guy shows up a week or so early. I want to see you once a week starting mid-November. When are you starting your maternity leave?"

"We are federal agents, evacuees from DC. The head of our agency sheltered with us, including my direct supervisor. We're currently working from our home out on Quail Hill Rd until the new office is ready, after Veteran's Day. I'm already on desk duty - I'm normally a field agent. With permission from you, I can work from home as long as I want."

"I see. And if you do that, will you have regular hours?"

"Yes."

"I'll approve that as long as you adhere to some restrictions. Eight hours of sleep every night and no more than four hours of work a day. No lifting anything over 5 pounds. Lots of walking, you'll need to continue your exercise routine but no more than a quarter mile without a rest. Do you have stairs you have to climb?"

"Yes, our bedroom is on the second floor of our house. And our kids' rooms too."

"No more than three trips up and down a day." He looked at her information. "Is your younger daughter walking yet?"

"Yes, although she's still wobbly on stairs and uneven surfaces."

"Then she goes up and down with Dad or someone else. At 13 months, she's too heavy for you right now."

Ellie was crestfallen and the doctor shook his head. "Do you cuddle with her, read her stories?"
"Yes, we sit in the rocking chair to cuddle and read stories."

"That's fine, just no picking her up."

Tim threw in, "We have plenty of help, Doctor and one of our friends is opening a day-care center next to the new office. Our plan was for Lia to go there once our office opens."

"That's fine. Then he frowned, "You both work for the same agency?"

"Yes, although I'm in the office, not a field agent."

"Good. Now, you'll need to have your hospital tour and see about a Lamaze class. Our front desk has information on both."

"Doctor, we planned to drive to Taos this weekend. A friend from home is opening a restaurant and we were going to get away for a couple of days."

"Taking the children?"

Tim answered because he wanted to add something. "Yes, and my brother and sister, both pediatricians, will be going too."

"That certainly changes things. Two nights?"

Ellie nodded, "Yes, I thought it would be better as I can get more rest. We're going after work on Friday."

"Are your doctor siblings also going for two nights?"

Tim shook his head, "We hadn't planned on it but I'll ask if one of them can do that."

"All right, you're in good health although I know you're uncomfortable. And having been cooped up for so long, the getaway seems important mentally and emotionally. IF you have a doctor with you all weekend and I mean in the room next door, then I'll approve. However, I don't want you working all day and then sitting in a car for nearly three hours. Work in the morning, rest in the afternoon and take a walk before you go. And as far as sightseeing in Taos, I'm going to restrict you to four hours per day with breaks every hour."

"Doctor, the cabins we're staying in have a pool with climate control so it's still available now. Is that all right?"

"Absolutely yes, swim as much as you like, that's very good for you, takes the weight off your back. What's the name of the place?"

Tim told him and the doctor jotted it down. "Have to check it out. Hotels and motels are so noisy."

Tim laughed, "The cabins are separate but when I stayed there before there were other kids too."

"But they wouldn't be noisy all night! What's the name of the new restaurant?"

"Diner the Great. Formerly of Silver Spring, Maryland."

"My wife's been itching to go on a road trip, maybe we'll go up too."

"The owner's name is Nancy Fendlay; she's a friend of ours."
"Wonderful! I won't mention you, though."

"Oops, privacy laws, sorry!"

"Yes, I do have to adhere to them!"

While Ellie was getting dressed, Tim made the appointments for future checkups. The staff gave him two brochures, one for the medical center birthing center tour and the other one for Lamaze classes. He was happy to see there were interactive online Lamaze classes, the most practical way for them to attend at this point.

As they reached the truck, Ellie said, "Do you feel like going straight home?"

He shook his head, "No way! You hungry?"

They laughed, as Ellie was usually hungry, pregnant or not. She wanted Chinese food and the doctor said she didn't need to restrict anything but to eat in moderation so Tim drove to the Chinese restaurant he and Dad frequented back in the day. After they ordered, Tim took his wife's hand. "Our baby's almost here! I love the shots of him."

"Me too! Let's go shopping on the way home."

"Ok but no more than an hour."

"That'll work. Wonder if there are any baby stores in town?"

Tim grinned at her and while they ate, he found a store that sounded perfect. He wouldn't tell her where they were going, why ruin her fun?

She smiled as they walked into the store. "Oh boy, I'm gonna love this!"

"Yep. Forty-five minutes to shop."

"I can do that."

"I'm gonna do some shopping of my own; see you in a bit."

She was already on her way to the first rack of baby wear. He watched her and then looked around, finally asking a sales clerk for the item he wanted. She took him to the rack and he found just what he wanted and then threw in something for himself. He quickly paid for everything; the items were wrapped in tissue paper and put in a big shopping bag. Then he browsed a little, taking photos of a few things. When he spotted Ellie moving to the cashier, he followed her. His mouth dropped open as she piled a mound of clothes, toys, and other baby items on the counter.

"Sweetie, that's more than 5 pounds!"

"Oops, I forgot!"

The sales clerk chuckled. "May I make a suggestion?"

"Please!"

"Do you know if you're having a baby shower?"

"Yes, I am. Don't know when."
"Why don't you pick out a few things to buy now and then we'll put the rest on a register. You can let people know you have items you like here and we'll give them a copy of the register. It works just like a wedding register."

"Thanks, that's a great idea."

Behind her, Tim smiled in relief. Not that they couldn't afford everything but they knew their family and friends were planning something.

Ellie picked out a few items for now and paid for them, the two leaving the store with Tim carrying two shopping bags.

When they got to the ranch, he took the bags upstairs to their room where they were stashed in the closet, after Tim wrote Ellie's name on her bag.

Ty and Brynie were still in school and Lia was napping in the shelter so they went looking for their parents.

Jethro was in his temporary workshop, part of the outbuilding that still had most of the furniture stored in it. He and Tobias worked all morning on baby furniture and then Tobias took off, having lunch out with Mel.

Jerry returned to the workshop with Gibbs after lunch and was helping his co-grandfather with the lathe.

Tim thought of calling his father but decided a walk in the fresh air would be good for him. He grinned when he spotted his father-in-law with his dad and waited until they were through their task before interrupting them.

Jethro looked up first, "Hey son, everything all right?"

"Yes. We just got back from our doctor's appointment. Have new shots of the baby for you."

"Great, we'll take a break, clean up and come see them."

They were just leaving the shed when they spotted Ellie walking over with Shannon, Barbara, and Mac.

Tim swallowed a sigh; Ellie had done more than enough walking for one day. She should be resting by now.

Ellie wanted to make a face at her husband; she could see the worry in his eyes. She guessed that was what husbands did. They couldn't carry the baby or give birth so they made sure their mates were safe and well cared for. No matter how annoying it was sometimes.

The couple showed their parents the stills of Little Mac, pointing to his current weight and length. Barbara smiled, "Oh, he's almost ready."

Tim nodded, "Yes, Ellie has some new restrictions and the doctor thinks he might come a week or so before his due date. We have weekly checkups starting after Veteran's Day."

"New restrictions, are you still going to Taos this weekend?"

"Maybe. If one of our doctors can go with us on Friday then we can go but if Rob or Kelly can't go until Saturday, then the doctor doesn't want us to go. And he wants me to have time to rest and get
some exercise before the car rides to and from."

"Have you asked the docs yet?"

Tim replied to that, "No, we had lunch out and did a little shopping, haven't had a chance yet. And sweetie, haven't you had your walk for this afternoon?"

She nodded, "I do want to lay down. But I'll walk back."

Tim grinned, "Nah, I'll get the ATV. We'll stick to the path so it won't be bumpy."

The Gibbs' kids had chipped in, buying Jethro and Shannon a two-seater All-Terrain Vehicle as a combined Father-Mother's Day gift last spring. When Steve Ortiz and his crew rehabbed the guesthouses and barn, they'd also added a paved path between the ranch house, guesthouses, and barn. Steve thought the family might take in paying guests at some point and ATVs and golf carts were a great way to get guests and their luggage to their rooms.

Tim brought the ATV out from the storage shed and Ellie climbed on. He took off, driving slowly so she and the baby would have the smoothest ride possible.

Ellie was later glad for her two-hour rest as the kids bounced around, excited about the baby's pictures and their trip this weekend. Kelly, now working at the UNM Medical Center, was off Friday through Sunday and would go with them. The others would drive up on Saturday.

Tim was afraid the rest of the week would drag but then the LLC information arrived. The packet was first carefully reviewed by Ali, then by an attorney she recommended in Albuquerque and finally by the membership. On Thursday, a cash offer to purchase the Adams' parcel of 200 acres was made and accepted. Within a few days, the deed to the land would legally be in the hands of the LLC.

Tim and Ellie were amused at how excited they were about their trip to Taos. When they stopped to think, they realized they'd been preoccupied for more than 6 months with the threat, then preparing and getting everyone out of danger, followed by the attack and weeks of sheltering.

Even with Ellie's restrictions, it felt wonderful to leave the ranch and get out of town for a couple of days. When they said something to Kelly, she laughed as she was feeling the same way. She just wished Mateo would come with them but he was adamant about working to save money. Ellie told Tim she thought that relationship had encountered a rough spot.

The kids were excited about the trip although they hadn't felt quite as much of the strain as their parents and grandparents had. As their parents told them would happen, they left home to move to the ranch, then to the shelter where they'd been busy with school, playing with Neo in the pet shelter tunnel, playing and hanging out with their parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, and friends. Although having the Bishop relatives there was new and there were a lot more people living around them, their routine was quickly established.

Ty and Brynie were old enough now to know when something was wrong. They'd sensed it while their family and friends were moving all their belongings to the warehouse and the morning they drove to the airfield with more of their things. Ty knew when they kissed Poppy and Nonny goodbye that morning that it wasn't 'normal'. But then they were reunited at the ranch and everything happened the way their parents said it would. They were sad about all the houses on E. Laurel being blown up and they knew that other things were gone but they were still too young to imagine the
devastation. With all that and with a few major exceptions, the day the missiles struck, the mourning, celebration days, and the night Mrs. Ware hurt Mr. Ware, they felt safe.

With everyone so excited about the weekend, the drive to Taos went quickly and they drove onto the Taos Creek Cabins property shortly after sunset. Kelly and Ellie got the kids inside while Tim unloaded their luggage. He’d made a double recipe of macaroni and cheese with grilled chicken and veggies last night and when he brought in Lia's booster seat, he turned the oven on to heat their dinner. By the time everyone was settled, dinner was in the oven and the kids were exploring the cabin. Tyler put his flashlight on the nightstand and then grinned at his Aunty Kelly who had her own flashlight. She smiled at him, "This is a new place; I might get lost on my way to the bathroom tonight."

"I couldn't remember where we were our first time but I found Daddy and kissed him. Then he tucked me back in and kissed me. After that, I got my flashlight, oh, that was at our lake!"

In the other room, Tim nodded to himself, amazed that his 7-year-old remembered anything that happened when he was 4. But then he had vague memories of being in a new place, which he believed was Okinawa, and how different it was and he'd been about 3 when they moved there. He also remembered taking care of baby Sarah with Patrick and climbing up on kitchen counters to reach the cabinets, food and the microwave, although he was 6 then.

He was relieved when his wife and sister liked the cabin, declaring it charming and perfect for families. While he got dinner ready, Dr. Kelly checked Ellie's vitals, reporting she and the baby were fine.

Lia ate about half her dinner before she fell asleep. Tim cleaned her up with NoAgua lotion, got her changed and into her portable crib in the kids' room. Then he went back to his own dinner. Brynie and Ty made it through dinner and about 15 minutes of a movie before they conked out and Kelly helped him get them cleaned up, changed and into bed. Ty woke up enough to make sure his flashlight was where it was supposed to be, yes, he was his father's son, before pulling the covers up over him. Brynie never stirred.

Ellie was next as she kissed her husband and sister-in-law goodnight. Kelly and Tim looked at each other, laughing softly as it was early for both of them. They'd each brought a deck of cards and found a third one on the cabin's game shelf so the two of them settled in for a cutthroat game of Spite and Malice. Mac taught both of them although he claimed he'd learned it from Jack. There was strategy involved and it took the siblings nearly forty minutes to finish one game, which Kelly won.

Tim demanded a rematch and they spent another 30 minutes locked in mortal combat, er, the strategies of the game. This time Tim won and both yawning decided to turn in.

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As he'd done with Ty and Brynie last time they were here, Tim set up Lia's baby monitor, linking it to his watch. When she woke Saturday morning, the little girl amused herself for nearly an hour before leaning into the monitor and calling for her daddy, just as Brynie did when she was younger.

Tim was up, showered and dressed, now he got Lia up and the two of them enjoyed their morning beverages in their sippy cups (or travel mug as Tim called his), the little girl sitting on Daddy's lap while he read the news on his tablet. Sometimes he'd stop and read something to her and she'd nod solemnly or giggle.

Eventually, the others got up. As Nancy's 'Grand Opening' was an all-day affair, once everyone was dressed, they piled into the van and drove into town for breakfast. They were early and glad of it
when they got there as several cars followed them into the parking lot. They had no problems getting a table but didn't sit until after Nancy kissed and hugged each one of them, announcing to the other customers that these were friends from home, fellow evacuees. Kelly, Tim, and Ellie smiled at each other when they saw the familiar booths and tables, it was just like home! They had a hearty breakfast and when a photographer from the local paper entered the diner, Nancy asked if they'd appear in a photo with her. That was problematic for the two NCIS agents but they solved it by having the kids and Kelly in one photo with Nancy and the two of them in another one with Nancy, their faces obscured. Tim later sent a text to Bob, warning him to watch out for cameras.

After breakfast, they took the kids to the toy store that had been so much fun 3 years ago and let the two older ones loose while Ellie found a comfortable chair and footstool. Aunty Kelly took Lia around to the toys and play stations meant for her age group and the two of them had fun together. As he had before, Tim watched to see what all three of his children were most interested in and then with a word to Ellie, disappeared to the gift shop, having everything shipped to the ranch. The shipment also included several items for Little Mac to help him develop as he grew from newborn to infant to baby.

NCIS NCIS NCIS NCIS

Eventually, they pried the kids from the toys, crafts, and imagination stations and returned to their cabin for Lia's morning nap. Not surprisingly, her mother also had a nap, pleasing Tim and Dr. Kelly.

While Ellie and Lia were snoozing, Kelly went back to town to look around for a few hours and Tim took Ty and Brynie on a nature walk, ending up at the creek where they fed the ducks. Ellie found it endearing when she heard that the owners of the property made sure to shelter the ducks with them, creating an underground pond and grassy habitat for them. Now they had the ducks they'd taken with them and several ducklings who for once had been safe from predators.

Tim smiled to himself as he watched the kids, remembering the photo he'd taken of the kids feeding the deer the last time they were here. He and Ellie eventually had the photo painted and would hang it in the new house. Maybe they'd come back after little Mac was walking and take a new photo of all four of the children.

When mother and baby daughter woke, the family went for a swim in the climate-controlled pool, spending most of the afternoon swimming and playing. The rest of the gang arrived over a period of a couple of hours.

The Hubbards were first. They checked into their cabin, Hannah and Callum joined their cousins in the pool while Jim, Claire, and Ainsley said hello and goodbye as they left to explore Taos. Nearly an hour later the kids, Tim and Ellie were out of the pool taking a break when Tyler called out, "Poppy, Nonny and Grandpa are here!"

They were greeted as if the family had been apart for weeks but then they'd lived in each other's pockets, so to speak, for so long that it was odd to be away from them. As he hugged his mom, Tim thought about how long it had taken the two of them to be comfortable with each other. Just as he thought they were really connecting, he and Ellie had gone on their delayed honey moon and he'd thought of nothing but his bride for two glorious weeks on Kaua'i. Home again, he felt like he and Shannon had to start over again, although not with the bad feelings. Now he couldn't imagine his life without her.

Shannon and Jethro checked in and took their bags to the cabin. They'd already done some sightseeing and wanted a swim before dinner. Tim, Ellie, and the kids stayed for a few minutes but the kids needed to dry off and change for dinner so Tim herded them back to the cabin along with
Hannah and Cal. They discovered Kelly had returned and was waking from a nap. Between them, they got the kids dry and Lia dressed. Rob and Ali arrived last as Rob, also employed at UNM Medical Center, worked the night shift and needed to sleep for a few hours. Ali drove and said he slept most of the way so he should be mostly caught up. She'd been to Taos several times and she and Rob had already been to see her favorite spots.

They had a wonderful time surprising Nancy with their crowd. Dinner was delicious and most of the group had more photos taken with Nancy. Back at the cabins, they'd thought to have a campfire but it was too chilly and Ellie and the kids were tired. Poppy offered to cook breakfast in the morning, the group deciding to meet at Tim and Ellie's as they had the biggest cabin.

After breakfast and a walk down to the creek on Sunday, Sarah and Bob offered to watch the kids if Tim and Ellie wanted to spend some time in town. They did, taking the Chalmers' car. They spent three glorious hours by themselves, with plenty of rest stops for Ellie, did some more Christmas shopping and then drove back to the cabins.

After Dr. Rob checked Ellie, she and Lia had naps while the others had one last swim. When the nappers woke, the Tim Gibbses and Kelly packed up and headed for home. The senior Gibbses liked the cabins and Taos so much they wanted to stay another night so Mac also went home in the van.

Everyone enjoyed the outing and it seemed to breathe purpose into them as if the trip to Taos spelled the end of the 'sheltering' days and the true beginnings of their new lives.

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Back at the ranch, the LLC membership quickly made a decision to split into teams, just as they had while preparing to evacuate. The various teams included Preparation, Container Sources, Purchase and Delivery, Design, Furnishings, Exterior, Landscape, Bidding for Contractors and Finding Residents. This last entry started out as "How to find Evacuees to live here."

During the first few weeks after the land was purchased, members of the Preparation team reviewed the soil analysis, consulted qualified engineers and learned about water, utilities and sewage needs. The Container Sources team searched for reputable sources of used shipping containers. There was a lot of preparatory work and research that needed to be done before the containers could be converted.

In the meantime, life on the surface continued to be busy and more of the former shelter residents went back to work and school.

Geo heard from his Commanding Officer that he'd been assigned to Kirtland Air Force Base near Albuquerque, doing liaison work. He was vague about his duties reassuring his wife and family he wouldn't be traveling anywhere near the strike zone or out of the country. The assignment should be interesting and he was relieved he wouldn't have to leave his pregnant wife or family.

Maggie had a call two days later. She'd completed her first trimester and had dutifully reported her pregnancy to the Corps earlier that morning. She was in the shelter library working while Arin had his afternoon nap. When her laptop chimed with a Skype call, she blinked at the contact id. Straightening her posture, she accepted the call saying, "This is Captain Barnes."

"Captain, this is Colonel Flagg, MCASY, I'm your new CO."

Colonel Flagg informed her she had been recalled to active duty at the Marine Air Station in Yuma, Arizona. For now, she would perform those duties from Albuquerque. "Once you are medically cleared to return to work, we'll revisit your duties. Captain, the work you'll be doing is vital to the
Corps and the nation; you'll be leading the team to process returning Marine dependents from their evacuation locations. And that will require phone and computer work; you will have four staff here in Yuma. I've spoken with Director Vance who agrees this is a priority."

"Yes sir, of course. I look forward to the assignment, how soon may I start?"

The colonel chuckled, "I've sent you our mission goals and the procedures we've worked out. If you have any suggestions or changes, let me know. Director Vance tells me your family is actively working to house evacuees, more evacuees."

"Yes sir. We formed a group to work towards that, purchased a parcel of land and are in the process of adding 100 temporary homes for evacuees and Returnees."

"Wonderful!"

When Maggie disconnected, she smiled. She loved a challenge; she'd been afraid she'd be stuck with paperwork, which she knew was necessary and helpful to the Corps. This she was proud and excited to take on.

Of the camp alumni, Barry was hired by the Albuquerque Police Department and reported for orientation and his first duty shift within 24 hours of accepting the position. Having already passed the licensing exam, Jose and Freddie took on their first New Mexico plumbing jobs. Bill worked with the paving contractor and the landscape contractor on the Evacuees Project before beginning full-time work for Ortiz Construction. Changing his plans, he continued in residence at the ranch, sleeping in his room in the shelter. He was going to save money, buy in to the LLC. Long-term, he hoped to buy his own bit of land and build a home.

Ed and Ginny Slater moved into their rental home and had their equipment moved from storage into their new mortuary building. And just in time as the Palmer-Slater mortuary had their first client before their official opening. They were ready but went ahead with their 'Grand Opening' a week later.

Kayla, Jared, Jeff Crane and Emily Fornell had been taking online college courses for several weeks, now they prepared to return to campus. Kayla, Jeff, and Emily were enrolled at UNM while Jared would be leaving for the University of California, San Diego in time to start class November 12th. Because of the disruption of normal life in most of the country, most colleges and universities were running staggered class sessions so those students released from shelters could resume their formal education as soon as possible.

Enrolled in the private prep school and able to attend via Skype and online courses, Jeff had quickly fulfilled his high school credits and earned his diploma faster than even his shelter instructors predicted. He, Emily and Kayla would move into the campus dormitories the same week Jared’s classes started.

Mateo also returned to school, finishing his undergrad work at the University of New Mexico. Although he had a 'free ride' that is a full scholarship, he'd quickly found part-time employment and found a share rental near campus.
Chapter 5

HELPING OUT

The Preparation team announced they were done and the Container Sources team narrowed their search to three vendors, two in Texas and one in Kansas. It was time for an update and both teams requested a meeting of the full LLC.

When everyone gathered in the shelter classroom the day of the meeting, some joining via video chat, Shannon, the spokesperson for the group, stood to speak.

"Good news! We've done all the administrative and prep work for the Evacuee homes. And the Container team has three vendors they want to work with. We have costs, now it's time to decide how many containers we want to purchase and get contracts signed. Which also means we need to vote on the design and get the sites prepared. Design team, you are up first!"

Liz, Rick, Lara, Maisie, Emily, Jethro and Geo stood while Jared, who was offsite, joined them via Skype. Liz kicked off the presentation, "We've found several conversion plans we like. Our team decided which ones we thought were the most economical and practical for the Evacuees. In a minute, we'll show you the ones we've selected."

Before they presented their choices, Jared spoke. Smiling at his friends and family he said, "We recommend three plans, each one simple to execute. The first two plans use two containers per home. The first plan has three bedrooms and the second one has four bedrooms. Both plans 1 and 2 feature 2 bathrooms. The third plan uses one container and has one bedroom, 1 bath with an extra room that can be a small bedroom, an office or a craft room. We recommend using Plan 3 for a quarter of the homes.

"Now, as I said, all of the double container homes will feature two full baths, the singles will have one. All of the homes will have full kitchens, outdoor spaces and possibly hook-ups for a stackable washer and dryer. We'll come back to alternate plans for laundry after our presentation."

He watched as the team ran their slide presentation, showing each plan in detail so that it was easy to understand. The shareholders liked the plans and voted for all three as recommended. The next decision was how many homes to start with.

After some discussion, the decision was made to start with 20 homes, broken into 15 doubles and 5 singles. Their end goal was 100 homes but they wanted to do it in smaller groups so people could start moving in as soon as each group of homes was completed.

Twenty homes called for the purchase of 35 containers and the vote to purchase was unanimous. Each of the containers would be scrubbed before delivery straight to the site.

Before they went any further, Aunt Cissy raised her hand with a question. "I'm glad we'll consider hook-ups for a washer and dryer, but will people be able to afford the machines? And yes, I remember we already decided not to provide those. But how will they wash their clothes? From what we've been told, most of these folks have very little money, no jobs and no vehicles, only the clothes on their backs. I propose we build a laundry facility. We could have one for the whole development and make it centrally located so people can easily walk there." She smiled, "We could move one of the outbuildings over here or buy an extra container, have it properly vented, wired and plumbed and
lease the machines, perhaps several washers and dryers to start with."

The Design team smiled as this was part of their alternate plan. They expanded Cissy's idea with a laundry facility for each group of homes. After some discussion and debate, the expanded plan was conceptually approved and the team thanked Cissy for raising the topic.

The Container team recommended buying smaller containers for the laundries. The vendor would level the sites and install them, a big plus. The LLC approved the modification and Cissy's plan was in place.

Jethro and Jerry offered to do the drywalling and any structural work for the laundry building while Tim, Freddy and Jose said they'd do the electrical and plumbing work. When HVAC/heating and air systems were installed in the homes, one would also be installed in the laundry buildings, already nicknamed Laundry Barns. The Furnishing team added chairs, benches and a table for folding clothes to their list while the Appliance team added researching leasing washers and dryers versus purchasing used machines to their list.

Their last order of business that day was the decision to call for bids from qualified contractors for the container conversions. Before the meeting was over, Jethro and Tim announced they would have to abstain from the contractor decision because of their friendship with the owner of Ortiz Construction. As Bill Colter would be working for Ortiz, he also abstained.

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While they waited for the containers to arrive and the bids to be submitted, the LLC shareholders decided to have a proper road made into the property from the county road. For now, gravel would do; it would be paved after they had all the containers in and were finished with the heavy equipment.

With the help of professional consultants, the first 20 housing and laundry barn plots were carefully mapped out and prepared, including grading the land, bringing in the utility and water lines and removing a few trees and shrubs. After much discussion, they settled on a contractor. In the end, Ortiz Construction was chosen. They were the most qualified with the best reviews, experience and crew and provided carefully detailed estimates.

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A week after the diner opening in Taos, the two Cyber Crime Unit techs who'd sheltered in Galveston arrived in Albuquerque with their families. For now, they would work and live at the ranch. The techs and their families were all smiles at the hearty welcome they received.

The following week, Leon stood after dinner in the shelter one night to make an announcement. "I'm pleased and relieved to tell you the Department of Defense has signed the lease on the new NCIS headquarters! The building will be ready for occupation by November 12th."

After the cheers of his employees and friends died down, he continued, "The federal employees already here will move in first while HR, Legal, and other administrative staff relocate from their sheltering locations. Most of them, including Pamela Cook and three of the Intel analysts, are expected the same week the building opens. Eight more of the CCU staff will also be relocating that week, four from Seattle and four from San Diego. And I'm proud to announce that our new arrivals from Galveston will be the first occupants of the residential suites in the NCIS building."

That got more cheers and the new families smiled happily. While they would occupy the residential suites, the others relocating would stay in the barn rooms or the shelter. Bill and Pete, two of the
original residents were still sleeping in there. The group also had dinners in the shelter, as they were
tonight, when everyone was there and outdoors was not feasible. However, the nursery and four
dormitory rooms would quickly be converted to single or double rooms. Between those new rooms
and the rooms vacated by those now living in town, the house or guesthouses, there would be plenty
of room for relocating NCIS employees including Tim's techs. For those without furniture, the
agency would rent beds and dressers.

When Ed and Ginny Slater offered one of their guest bedrooms, Pam Cook and her husband decided
to stay with them while they figured out their new hometown. It would be easier for Pam to live in
the city, as she would be very busy the first few months and her husband worked from anywhere
with an internet connection. They'd left DC in time to drive rental trucks with their belongings and
towing their vehicles west to Utah. Now they had two vehicles and their furniture was in storage, a
luxury Pam realized most evacuees didn't have.

Two nights later, it was Lara Vance's turn for an announcement. "I'm now officially licensed in New
Mexico for a day-care business, including infant care, preschool and an after-school center! I've
signed a lease for the day-care space next to the office; we will be up and running within a week of
the NCIS opening. Along with the traditional day-care and preschool, we'll have a before-and-after
school center for kids up to 15 years old. I'm working on a contract with the school districts to pick
up and drop off students."

That got happy cheers from the parents and kids. By the end of the evening, Lara hired Jazzy and
Eileen to work at the day-care and after-school center once the schools reopened. Shannon and
Barbara would volunteer when they had time but would also be involved with the container homes.
Sarah was already involved with the housing project. Bec was also involved with Evacuee housing
in between searching for a teaching position at local colleges and universities. She and Tim also
managed the two garden areas, with food crops now growing safely in the basement as well as the
shelter. When Bec was offered a full professorship at UNM, everyone was pleased.

Rob and Kelly were among the first to return to work, hired by the medical center at UNM and like
Barry had their orientations and first duty shifts within a day or so of their hiring. Because the two
were the 'newbies' on staff, they worked many night shifts. The siblings quickly decided they needed
to live in town and as they weren't working the same shifts, decided to rent a place together.

NCIS NCIS NCIS NCIS

As life slowly evolved to normal or whatever the new normal would be, Rancho La Serenidad
welcomed the first evacuee families. Several people relocated from the school shelter; two families
took the vacant guesthouses and the others, some with children, moved into the barn. As promised,
the larger beds were replaced with bunk beds or singles to accommodate the children.

That first group was greeted with a banner welcoming them home, which brought many smiles. Each
individual, couple or family was given a gift basket with toiletries and food. Their rooms were
complete with bedding and towels. The guesthouse and barn kitchens were outfitted with cookware,
dishes, cutlery, basic staples and all the appliances the new folks would need. The refrigerators and
freezers were full.

The clan planned a welcome barbecue that first night but when they saw how exhausted most of the
evacuees were, they rescheduled for the next night. To ease the transition, Tim, Tony, Shannon and
Barbara put together first night meals for all of them.

After the cooks delivered the meals, they reconvened in the ranch kitchen.

Shannon shook her head, "We thought of almost everything."
Jethro was puzzled, “What'd we miss?”

Barbara made a face, “Clothes. These folks were all picked up by the Evacuation buses and had one suitcase each. They've lived in those clothes and only those clothes for nearly five months. They had limited laundry facilities. If that happened to me, I'd be ready to toss everything I had.” She huffed, “I have more than they do and I'm ready to burn it all!”

Tim frowned, “They have access to the washers and dryers in the shelters. I checked and there’s plenty of detergent. Should we buy clothes for them or give them gift cards to local stores or what?”

Ellie looked thoughtful, “For one thing, the children may have grown out of what they brought. Might be easier if we take them into town to the thrift stores. They can use their first month's government vouchers for clothes; we stocked the kitchens with enough food for a couple of weeks, which should help. And if they don't find what they need at the thrift stores, we can take them to Walmart, Costco and other inexpensive stores.”

Jerry nodded, “That's a good idea. We'll need several vehicles and drivers. It'd be great if we could do it before you NCIS'ers move into the new office, that way we can use your big van as well as the SUVs and sedans.”

Rick Carter, in the kitchen making coffee, made a suggestion, “Why don't we have a meeting and a sign-up sheet? I'll volunteer to drive our car, now that we have four good tires. I can take four, five if they don't mind squeezing in the backseat.” He grinned, “I'll even volunteer to make the sign-up sheet, how's that?”

"Great, Rick, thanks!” Sketching a salute, he disappeared to the library to get started.

After dinner, they convened a meeting and found plenty of volunteers to drive their evacuees into town. They had 23 evacuees, including five children. Tim and Ellie's van could hold 14 adults or children not needing a safety seat but that left only the rooftop container for their purchases. The Vances, Carters, Hubbards and Bishops volunteered their vehicles and a driver each. That was all they needed.

The next morning, the evacuees heard the plan and most sighed in relief. As one woman, Letty Shields told them, "Last night was the first night we've slept in real beds and in actual rooms with walls and a door since we left home. Speaking for my husband David and me this was the first full night's sleep we've had. We're grateful for the evacuation and shelter, thankful to be alive. But, oh boy, did it feel good to stretch out on a real bed, close the door and sleep! Now I can think again and yes, please, my family needs clothes!”

While the clan thought the Evacuees' first order of business would be laundry, they found it was more personal. Each one wanted to bathe before they did anything else.

David Shields laughed, "You'd think we'd traveled hundreds of miles to the ranch instead of 20 something from Albuquerque. This feels like heaven to us! No more cots or communal showers. And we'll have clean clothes."

The caravan finally headed into town after lunch. Ellie and Sarah stayed home with Barbara and Shannon while Jerry, Claire, Tim, Rick and Lara drove.

Most of the folks found sufficient clothing at the thrift stores in town although Jerry took one family to Walmart. Reconvening at the ranch, the evacuees used the sign-up sheet for the shelter laundry facilities and presented much happier faces at the barbecue that evening.
With city schools empty after their evacuees moved out, cleanup and repairs got underway. All of the Albuquerque schools were scheduled to reopen on November 12, the Tuesday after Veterans’ Day. The ranch kids were all registered, the Bishops as temporary students, and the grades of all the students from the shelter school were entered into their permanent records. It was an extraordinary move by the Board of Education recognizing the talent, skills and diligence of Shannon, Eileen, Jazzy, Bec and Geordie and the hard work of the children.

Because only Bec and Geordie were qualified college and university education instructors, the college kids would have to prove the knowledge taught by the other instructors. They’d take exams in the topics covered in the shelter and if they passed, they’d be credited with the class. If not, they’d have to take the course again. That wasn’t a surprise; they’d known that from the beginning.

Cousin Ali Bishop found work as a paralegal at an Albuquerque law firm while she continued to seek an attorney's position. When Kelly and Rob found a 3-bedroom apartment, she moved in with them, helping to furnish the place and the three had a good time putting everything together. Their shelter beds and dressers came with them and Ali brought her portion of the furniture she and her sister had shared in their Oklahoma City apartment. Once all that was in place, they found other items in thrift stores and a couple of items on craigslist.

While Ali had a car, Rob didn't and Kelly's didn't have long to live. The long trek from Virginia had nearly done it in. Kelly shook her head as she and Rob looked at it one day, "Not even Dad can keep it going much longer. I think it needs to be retired."

"Are you going to buy another car?"

"Not right away. We'll drive this one until it gives up the ghost and then I guess we can walk or take the bus to and from the hospital."

Rob nodded, that was fine with him. Their apartment was less than a mile from the hospital; it wouldn't be far to walk or take the bus. However, their father did not want either of them strolling around town during the wee hours. Albuquerque was a great place to live but it was not crime free. Dad took each of them used car shopping, telling them it was an early Christmas present.

When Ginny and Ed Slater decided to sell the Buick and buy a newer one, no one was surprised. Their family and friends figured that buying it from Pete was a way to put more money in his pocket. What was a surprise was the purchase of the car by the senior Gibbses who then presented the car to Mateo. He accepted it on condition he be allowed to pay them back.

They came to an agreement that satisfied Mateo's pride and sense of fair play. These people had been supporting him for several months now, feeding, clothing and sheltering him and he wanted to pull his own weight again, wanted his independence.

NCIS NCIS NCIS NCIS

While all this was going on, October 31st sneaked up on them and the Gibbs clan threw a Halloween party, inviting the Ortizes and others they'd met in Albuquerque.

After their first experience at church, Jethro and Tim met with the Reverend Miller and told him the undercover version of their previous lives in Albuquerque. He gracefully accepted their explanation and the next time the Gibbses were in church, he reintroduced them at the end of the service, leading to some interesting conversations afterward. Many people remembered the two violent killers who'd been arrested shortly before the Hulls moved away three years ago and arrived at their own conclusions.
When the invitations for the Halloween party went out, several members of the church, including the Reverend and his family, were invited as well as all of the evacuees at the ranch.

The party was held both indoors and outdoors as the evenings were too chilly for the youngsters to stay out long. With the enthusiastic cooperation of the barn residents, tables and chairs were moved out of the common area and a haunted house was constructed using prefabricated walls from the shelter. Other areas had carnival style games and a Face Painting booth. The evacuee kids would have their faces painted before the party started, so that their faces would go with their costumes. Several of the unoccupied bunkrooms were set up for trick or treating, each door decorated with a Halloween theme and each greeter was in costume. The guesthouses were also decorated with Halloween themes and all of the ranch kids, temporary or permanent, had fun trick or treating.

NCIS NCIS NCIS NCIS

The first delivery of shipping containers arrived from Texas the next day. Nearly the entire population of the ranch and a few of the Ortizes made their way to the Adams' parcel, as they still called it, to watch as the trucks rolled in with them.

The sites were ready! Because the soil was naturally hard, the foundations installed for the homes were concrete piers. Six per container and they were already in place along with all the necessary connecting lines: utilities, water and septic.

The trucks stopped at the entrance and then one by one were directed to the housing plots. A crane lifted each container off and into place. It took a few hours but finally they were all in place and the conversion could begin. As the last container was set down, there were cheers and sparkling beverages were served in celebration. When everyone, including the crane operator, construction crews and truck drivers, had a glass of something bubbly, toasts were called out and Kayla Vance proudly announced the opening of "The Grove", the name the LLC selected to call the housing development.

While they worked to prepare their first evacuee homes and the arrival of the first Returnees, the rest of the country was working in various ways to do the same thing. Jared and Matt's survey, now titled the Vance-Crane survey, was assigned a form number by the federal government, a sure sign of acceptance. It was distributed nationwide and all types of municipalities responded immediately.

City and county governments held emergency rezoning meetings and owners of office buildings, empty buildings, vacant apartments and people with empty guestrooms, RVs and travel trailers pledged their help. Buildings that had been boarded up were quickly brought up to legal building codes and rehabilitated, empty offices converted to residential space, empty storefronts modified to house Evacuees, those who'd sheltered in the U.S., and Returnees, those who had been evacuated to locations outside of the country.

Gradually, shelters in Ohio, Michigan, Illinois, Kentucky and farther south were released. As those folks returned home, many soon became part of the grass roots efforts to bring their neighbors home. As evacuees were released from shelters in the far north and south of the East Coast, those who no longer had homes were offered homes farther west. Not every person wanted to leave and she or he was accommodated whenever possible.

NCIS NCIS NCIS NCIS

The Friday before the NCIS office officially opened, Leon and his employees had a personal tour of their new quarters. Pam Cook arrived in town on Thursday and when she saw everyone on Friday, she hugged them all. Ellie received a very gentle hug while Maggie's came with a surprised look as Pam noticed her baby bump. The littles were with them and Pam greeted Lia and Ricky and was
introduced to Arin DiNozzo, Zoey and Zach Vance.

The two Galveston Cyber Techs and their families were moving into the residential suites on Saturday and gave everyone a tour. Leon recorded it so Kayla could see and - he hoped - approve. Three more suites had been completed with the last five still under construction. The architect reconfigured the office space on that floor, leaving enough square footage available for 10 residential suites and a laundry room.

After the tour of the suites, they split into groups, most of the parents with kids sticking together to explore the building. The lab looked good; Tony and Tim looked at each other, thinking how much Abby would love a brand new lab. They peeked into autopsy at a very large screen, the one Jimmy would use as he performed remote autopsies. There were also two autopsy tables in the room with booms overhead that Tony said looked like camera booms and Tim agreed. If Jimmy was not available to perform a local autopsy, someone else would dial in to handle it.

The holding cells looked like holding cells everywhere but the security check-in was set up more efficiently. Dorneget had already blessed the evidence lockup and garage so after looking at the fitness center and the pool they went to the fourth floor, new home of the field agents.

They smiled as they spotted the one orange wall, something they'd specifically asked to be included. The DoD representative thought they were crazy but it meant home to them and right now, they'd take every hint of their old home they could get.

The construction crew was hanging the "Most Wanted" photos and one of them was holding up Bin Laden's picture. "We got this guy years ago, why is he still up here?"

Tony answered for all of them. "Because he murdered our friends and neighbors and we got him. We don't ever forget."

"And you are?"

With a great deal of satisfaction, Tony flipped out his badge and ID. "An American. Special Agent Anthony DiNozzo."

The worker nodded and turned around to hang the photo with the big red X marked across it on the wall.

Tim cleared his throat, "Excuse me, where are The Fallen and the Wall of Fame?"

Another one of the workers gestured and they followed his direction. When they reached the wall with 'The Fallen', Tim and Tony pressed their fingertips to the photos of Kate, Paula, Jim Nelson, Rick Hall, Chris Pacci, Jenny Shepard, Brent Langer and Mike Franks, who although he'd been retired for many years, was considered to have died in the line of duty. They also paid tribute to several others: Agent Macy, Agent Patterson and sadly, the agents from the Marseille office.

Tim stared at Kate's photo. "It's been so long, Tony, more than 14 years since Ari killed her. So much has happened, changed. We're married with kids, having more kids. Wonder what she'd think?"

"I hope she'd be proud of the three of us, Tim. You, me, Boss, we've hung together through some tough times. Few times we didn't think we'd make it but here we are."

Tim nodded and lapsed into silence; Tony thought he might be thinking of his brother Patrick. Putting his free hand on his little brother's shoulder, he squeezed, "Hey, think of Kate as our angel in heaven, Probie, with Patrick, your friend Jim Nelson, Paula, Mike Franks, and Jenny."
To his own amazement, Tim started to laugh and Tony and Maggie stared at him. Finally, he caught his breath enough to explain, "Mike Franks in white robes, with wings, a halo and a cigar, drifting on a cloud!"

That got Tony going too while Maggie stared at them. Then she glanced back at the photo of Franks and chuckled, she'd never met him but she'd heard enough that she could see the humor.

"And Kate is in charge, most definitely. Telling the other angels what morons they are."

"Oh yeah. Come on, I want to see my department."
Chapter 6

NCIS IN THE DESERT; OLD TIES

Two floors up they opened the door to the CCU and Tim grinned. It had taken him months to get building maintenance aboard the Navy Yard to change his old department around and he'd never been satisfied with what they'd done. Now he had the setup and equipment he wanted. State of the art or what had been state of the art when he ordered it a month ago.

Tony eyed the vending machines but Tim shook his head, "No. Those are for my techs. They work like Ellie does - a flow of food and beverages helps them think. You cannot have anything from here. You know, Leon may have ordered the same thing for the Break Room."

Tony's downcast face lit up while Maggie laughed at them both. They heard the elevator ding and then Leon opened the door to the CCU, pulling the twins' stroller in backwards. "Thought I'd find you up here. We're on our way to the Roof Garden, anyone interested?"

As Lia and Arin were restless, the Roof Garden sounded like a great idea. When he saw it, Tim laughed. It was so much like the Marshals' rooftop that he decided the FBI had copied them. That made sense; the DoD probably handled both buildings. The edge of the roof and building was fenced off with the same no man's land wire fencing. The trees up there were about 12 feet tall but not looking very healthy. Tim thought they needed help, fast.

"Leon, do you know if anyone's cleaned these trees? They probably took a lot of fallout; they might need new soil or maybe even replacement."

"I don't know, we'll ask building maintenance." He looked at them, "And by 'we' I mean Pam."

They grinned at him and he smiled back, he couldn't wait to get back to work. They were having a Welcome reception when everyone got here. Before that, he wanted a photo of the employees who'd sheltered together before they turned back to The Director, Agents, CCU Manager and Medical Examiner. He also wanted to include Gibbs, Mallard and Fornell in that. He had a sudden mental image of some young hot shot looking at the photo many years from now, wondering who they were and what the significance was.

"Maggie, Tony, Tim, what would you think of creating a montage of shelter photos? Not just us but from wherever our folks sheltered. Do you think that might help bring us back together?"

Tim thought about it, "I like the idea. A reminder that we survived and we're here now."

Maggie added, "It would be great if we had a photo of the Navy Yard in the middle. That's where we started from."

Tony sighed, "And a photo underneath, when we can get one, of the Navy Yard post attack."

"And then surround both photos with those of our survival. Excellent."

"And intersperse our shelter photos with those of the overseas and western offices working. And
maybe a photo of us working in the shelter library. And whatever setup Great Lakes has in their shelters.

Maggie grinned, "Let's see if we can find an aerial photo of the caravan!"

Tim smiled, "It was all over the internet, I'm sure we can find one to download or ask the photographer for a copy. I'd like to give Dad and Mom one anyway."

Maggie and Tony laughed, "We had the same idea."

"Could be from all of us? And maybe one for Pete, help him remember the good stuff."

They'd been looking into the small shed on the roof while they were chatting but didn't see any of the games and toys Tim said the Marshals' had. They were sure that would change. The wind blew through and they shivered, it was November after all, time to go in.

They had a quick visit to MTAC and the Director's suite. Technicians were in the inner office installing the SCIF and Leon watched Tim not watching the techs. No one at NCIS but Jethro Gibbs and Vance knew Tim had developed the system or that the DoD paid his LLC an annual fee for each agency that used it. No one needed to know.

With that, their tour was concluded. The little ones were clearly tired of the strollers and other than running around in the bullpen hadn't found much to amuse them. They went back to day-care for lunch and naps while their parents had lunch out in one of the cafes close to the office, Vance's treat. While they missed the Rourkes' cooking, always would, they enjoyed their lunch and told their server that they'd be back; they would be working nearby. She smiled; glad to see people returning to work and relaxing enough to dine out. There were takeout menus next to the cashier and each of them took one. One of the men asked if he could take two. "I want one for my office but we'll put the other one up on the board so my staff can see it too."

"Oh, certainly! Take some for home too."

Most of them chuckled at that but Ned and Evan each took one. Tony frowned, "Do you deliver?"

"Downtown, yes. Residential, no."

"Oh, I guess not 30 miles out then."

"Heavens, do you live on one of the ranches?"

"Yes, La Serenidad, next to the Ortizes."

"Is that where the other big shelter is?"

"Yes. Also, we have other evacuees who're living on site, any chance of a meal voucher or discount for them?"

"Yes there will be but we haven't gotten them together yet. How many do you think you'll have?"

"Right now we have 23 folks but we're planning on putting in 100 homes. We've got 20 that will be up in a couple of weeks and we'll add more in increments"

"Goodness, you're building 100 homes on your ranch?"

"No, we can house 12 more on the ranch but we bought another parcel of land near us and are converting shipping containers to houses."
"Are you the people who bought Zeb Adams' land?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Bless you; he's so happy he can finally afford to retire. It's wonderful what you're doing. Do you have a business card? I'll certainly let you know when the vouchers and discounts are ready."

Tim handed her one of his new cards. "Thanks, we're putting together a 'Welcome' packet for each household."

Tony peered at the card, "How'd you get those so fast?"

Ned snickered, "He ordered them online from Vista Print."

"And you can use the NCIS logo?"

"Got permission from DoD years ago. It's a lot easier and much cheaper, as many cards as field agents hand out."

"Do you get reimbursed?"

Ned answered, "Yes, you put it on your monthly expenses, just have to print out the receipt for Fred."

As one, the agents turned to look at Vance who chuckled, "Yes, Fred, Delores Bromstead, Natalie and Dr. Bracco will be here in the next couple of weeks."

Full of good food, information and excited about their new facilities, most of them started for home. Tim stopped Maggie and Tony, "Are you taking Arin home?"

"We were but he's probably asleep by now so we'll ask Lara to bring him home." Lara had extra seats for all the current ranch kids.

"I've got some shopping to do, probably take me a couple of hours. I can bring him home with Lia if that's all right with you two."

"Sure, that'd be great. Let's tell Lara and then we'll get his seat out of the car for you."

Lara was fine with the idea; the seat was transferred, secured and Tim set out to do his shopping. Jared and Jimmy were leaving for San Diego the following week and he'd decided to buy them both T-shirts that said either Albuquerque or New Mexico on them. He didn't care if they wore them, he knew both would be homesick and wanted them to have something to remind them of home.

He and Ellie wanted to send something for Abby with Jimmy, to let her know they were thinking of her, that they missed her. They'd selected a particular item and looked online for who might carry it locally. He also wanted to buy some pretty things for Ellie for post-baby. He knew they had to be practical, but that didn't mean they had to be ugly!

And Christmas shopping was next on his task list. Once the baby arrived, he figured he'd be bouncing between the office and home with no time or energy for anything else. Then he realized he'd be on family leave. That was four weeks so he might be off until shortly before Christmas. He sighed, if he could manage it he'd work from home. He thought about the leave he'd had when Ty and Brynie came to live with him, he'd had an entire summer off. He thought of the playroom Dad taught him to build, helped him build and had to pull off the road as a wave of grief, anger and homesickness nearly overwhelmed him. Albuquerque was great, the ranch, the people and the new
office, all great. But he missed the Navy Yard, he missed the damn orange walls, he missed their home, the playroom and backyard, his parents' house, so long a bastion of safety for their work family. He missed Abby, Baltimore, Nate, the Smithsonian and all the museums, he missed the Capitol building, Embassy Row and the vibrancy of DC; he missed living and working in the center of America's power. Heck, he even missed sitting in traffic on the Beltway.

The only thing he could honestly say he didn't miss was the weather. As hot as it was here, he preferred the dry desert heat to the humidity of DC.

NCIS NCIS NCIS NCIS

While the federal employees went with Leon to see the new office, Jethro, Tobias and Jerry were busy finishing the second bassinet and starting another crib. Ellie said Lia wasn't ready for a toddler bed yet and they already had all the pieces cut for one crib, now Jethro was cutting the pieces for the second one. He shook his head, little Mac would be done with the bassinet by the time Bec and Maggie's babies were born so he'd only have one to make between now and then.

Sarah and Bob would use the antique bassinet they'd brought from Penny's home in Arlington and that helped cut back the number needed. However, that was still two more cribs. Maybe Lia would be ready for a change up by then and they'd just have to make one more. He thought the changing tables/bureaus from the shelter, now in storage, were going to have to do for little Mac and possibly he could get something done for the other three.

Jerry patted him on the shoulder, "It'll be fine, Jethro. If we buy the wood you want here, I'll make a copy of the pattern, take it home and cut the pieces for the other cribs. And Tobias and I will do the cuts for the rocking chairs tomorrow."

Tobias nodded, "You should go into business, Jethro."

"Gonna have to build houses after this."

"No, you don't. With the possible exception of Kelly and Rob, the other four have money enough to have their homes built. You can do some of the finishing and they'll be happy."

"Yeah, that's a good idea, guys; thanks."

"They could even have shipping container homes."

Jethro pursed his lips. He liked the way they looked now that a few were finished on the outside but wanted permanent structures for his children. Then he laughed at himself.

"What?"

"Thinking I want permanent structures for the kids. Then I realized termites eat wood, it burns, warps and rots. A metal home needs more insulation but if it gets rusty that can be fixed and no bugs!"

Tobias again, "That reminds me, I saw an ad somewhere for an old train car. Think we could convert that too?"

"Yes, that sounds like fun!"

"Where'd you see it, Tobias?"

"Uh, think it was in a real estate magazine. The free ones."
"Uh huh."

"Hey, we were just looking."

"You and Em?"

"No, me and Mel."

Both men stopped what they were doing to look at him and he smiled.

"Yeah so, we like each other. Maybe more than like. We're not in a hurry though and neither of us cares if we ever get legally hitched."

Jethro's lips twitched upward, "You've talked about it."

"The subject has come up, yes. Emily really likes her and Mel likes Emily."

"We like Mel too."

"Oh, so we need your approval too?"

With a laugh, the three men went back to work.

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Jimmy's remote autopsy training started on the same day as Jared's UCSD classes, November 12th, the same day everything else seemed to be opening, starting or resuming. The Vances and Jimmy were flying to San Diego on Saturday the 9th, giving Jared and Jimmy a couple of days to settle in before class and work. Jimmy would stay at a residential hotel for the three weeks he'd be there while Jared would live on campus. Leon and Lara wanted to meet Jared's roommate, see his room in the dormitory and check out the campus. Kayla would drive the four of them to the airport and then return to the ranch where she'd take care of her toddler brother and sister with the help of a house full of honorary aunts, uncles and grandparents.

NCIS NCIS NCIS NCIS

When Maisie finally unpacked all her belongings, she gave Sarah the book she'd promised her, the short stories written by her aunt, Charlotte Stirling. As Sarah read them, she wondered about this woman, how her life had changed after she was disowned by her parents and moved to a new country. One afternoon Tim came upon his sister in the library, Googling madly away.

"Researching your next book?"

She shook her head, "You have to see this."

Sitting down next to her, he looked at the screen and then at her. "Are you researching my great-grandmother? Charlotte Stirling Baxter is the name of Dad's maternal grandmother."

"Was she disowned by her parents in Scotland for marrying an Englishman?"

"Yeah, Dad told me about that. In the early 20th century, before the First World War."

"Tim, this is Maisie's aunt, my two times great-aunt."

She nodded as his mouth dropped open. "Sarah, are you saying my great-grandmother is your great-aunt, times two? The same woman?"
"I think so. Let me show you how I got here."

He nodded, still stunned as his sister explained. "I started with Google. There was more than I expected, though. I found what must have been the original jacket information saying she was born in Scotland, married and immigrated to America where she had four children and died in 1964. I looked on the copyright page of the book and it lists her as Charlotte Stirling Baxter. I Googled her obituary in 1964 and that listed her children: Robert Jr., Cyrus, Margaret and Anne."

"Oh my God, Sarah! That's my grandmother, Anne Baxter Gibbs. Dad has a photo of him with his grandmother when he was little and another one when Charlotte was a young girl, I've seen them. He said she died when he was around 5. But why didn't we show up on each other's DNA chart?"

"Too distant?"

"Yeah, maybe. It didn't show anyone who was deceased but I thought that was because people died before DNA was registered. Have to check the parameters of the system. See how wide it goes or how far back. I'll ask Abby, she'll know."

"What does this make us, if we're right?"

"Oh geez. Let's write it out, this stuff makes my mind go numb."

She laughed at him and handed him a paper notebook. "Go for it."

"Ok, what's your great-grandmother's name, Maisie's mother?"

"Iona."

"Ok, she and Charlotte are sisters so they're next to each other on the chart. That means Maisie is Charlotte's niece and Charlotte's children are Maisie's first cousins. Grandma Anne was Maisie's first cousin. Are you good with this so far?"

"Yes."

"Gets confusing after that." They worked on it for several minutes before shaking their heads.

Sarah huffed, "So we're third or fourth cousins."

"Yes. Not first, that would be Maisie and Grandma Anne. Second cousins would be Lily, Jim, and Dad. That makes sense, right?" Sarah nodded and he continued, "Ok, it's clear that Jim, Lily, and Dad are second cousins. You're Lily's daughter and Kelly and I are Jethro's biological children, so we're third cousins. And you are maybe second cousins once removed to Dad."

She looked at him and they both started laughing. Finally, Sarah said, "We are related on some level anyway."

"That explains the writing, why we both write. It's from the Stirlings." Tim couldn't believe how happy this made him! He kissed his sister, "I'm really glad to share DNA with you, little sister."

She hugged him, "Me too, big bro! Who should we tell first, Dad or Grammie? Or both at once?"

Tim scrunched his face while he thought. "Dad has a cousin named Richard Baxter who was at Jack's funeral. He's Dad's first cousin, son of Uncle Robert or Uncle Cyrus - I don't remember which. Anyway, he's still alive or was 6 years ago. Let's tell Dad first, maybe he'll contact his cousin and verify we've got the right Charlotte before we tell Grammie."
"All right."

The two found their father in the nursery, playing with Lia and Ricky. "Dad, can we borrow you for a few minutes?"

"Sure. What's up?"

Sarah rolled her neck. "Maisie loaned me a book of short stories written by her aunt, who emigrated here from Scotland after her parents disowned her for marrying an Englishman."

Dad's eyebrow went up and he looked at Tim. "That's the same story as my grandmother's."

"Yeah Dad, that's what I told Sarah. She's done more research. The woman who wrote the book, Maisie's aunt, used her maiden name, Stirling. Charlotte Stirling."

Sarah continued, "I found her married name on the copyright page; it's Baxter. I discovered she died in 1964 and found an obituary. It lists her late husband as Robert Baxter and her four children as Robert Jr., Cyrus, Margaret, and Anne."

Dad's eyes were nearly popping out now. "That's my mother! Are we related? Is Maisie a cousin of some sort?"

Tim nodded, "We think she's your first cousin once removed but you're definitely second cousins with Jim Hubbard and with Lily. Which means that you and Sarah are seconds once removed and Sarah, Kelly and I are third cousins. At least we think that's the way it goes, the 'removes' are confusing. We thought maybe you could contact your cousin Richard to see what he knows about it."

"Have you told Maisie?"

"No, came to you first."

"All right, I have Richard's number somewhere." He chuckled, "I think it's in the family bible, Timiny, with all those other numbers and addresses. Your mother updated it when you adopted Lia. She was looking at it the other day; I know it's here somewhere."

Smiling, Tim whipped out his phone, calling his mother. "Hey Mom, you know where the Gibbs' family bible is?"

"It's in the house library, the second bookshelf in from the door on the left, fourth or fifth shelf from the bottom; I just put it back the other day. Why?"

"Sarah and I are working on something and need to confirm the information. We'll fill you in later. Thanks!"

"Ok, have fun!"

The three of them headed for the library and found the bible just where Shannon remembered. Sarah watched as her father took the book to the table, held it carefully in the middle and gently shook it. Tim chuckled, "Now we hope we put everything back when we did that to find Grandpa's number."

"Hush you, it'll be here."

They went through the papers that drifted out of the book; Sarah held up a scrap of paper. "This says Richard B. and has a phone number. Looks like your handwriting, Dad."
He grinned, "Good! Ok, I think this is a cell so it'll still be good, right Tim?"

"Yeah, most people don't get new numbers when they move – or you know, have to evacuate their homes. Won't know until we try."

When their father squinted at the number, Tim took the paper while Sarah grabbed Dad's phone and punched the number in before giving it back to her father, smiling sweetly. He rolled his eyes at her and then smiled when a voice answered, "Hello?"

"Hello Richard, it's your cousin Jethro."

"Jethro, how wonderful to hear from you! How are you, where are you?"

"Living in New Mexico now. Bought a ranch and moved here before the attack. Where are you?"

"That's good news. I'm in Caribou, Maine with my grandson and his family. We took shelter here and now we're staying with a relative of his wife. We can't go home yet, our house is intact but they tell us it'll be another few weeks before it'll be safe enough."

"Thank God you and your family are all right!"

"And you, Jethro. What are you up to these days? Have you retired?"

"Sort of; I retired right before the attack so my family would have my pension to live on but now my boss wants me to come back part-time."

"Your family?"

"Got a lot to tell you, Richard. Found out I have a grown son, he's married and has three kids, so I'm a grandpa. Turns out my wife and daughter, who I'd been told were killed in a crash in 1991, were actually in protective custody. You met Shannon at the party Dad threw for us after we got married. We are happily re-married and have 6 grown children. Shannon and I adopted our son's siblings. Now something else has popped up and I need your help."

"My goodness, that's all wonderful news, Jethro, congratulations! I know your parents would be over the moon for you."

"Thank you, I think they would be too. I have a few questions about our grandmother."

"Charlotte or as we called her, Shenavar."

"Yes. My recollection is that when she married our grandfather, Robert Baxter, her Scots family disowned her."

"Yes, sadly they did."

"Do you know anything about her family?"

"The Stirlings, yes a little bit. She had siblings, three older brothers and one sister several years younger than she was, more than a decade as I recall. I remember my father telling me his mother used to pine for her baby sister."

"Do you remember baby sister's name?"

"Yes, Iona."
Jethro took a deep breath, "Richard, thank you, that's wonderful news. The great-grandmother of my adopted daughter Sarah was Iona Stirling MacNeill. Sarah's grandmother Maisie, Iona's daughter, is here at the ranch with us."

"Astounding! How on earth did you find all this?"

"Did Charlotte write a book?"

"Yes, a book of short stories. My father left me his copy when he died."

"And Sarah's sitting next to me holding a copy loaned to her by her grandmother Maisie. Written by the aunt Maisie never met. Maisie only found out about her when she left the UK for the US. Her mother mentioned a sister in a letter but said she didn't know her married name. All these years…"

"Your Sarah traced her?"

"Yes, my Sarah. And she told my son Tim and remembering you, they came to me."

"That name sounds familiar, was he one of the young men with you at Jack's funeral?"

"Yes, the younger one with green eyes."

"My word, Jethro!"

"I know. Listen, do you have an e-mail address or maybe your grandson does?"

"He does but I have my own. I'll send you a text with it. Perhaps you could have Maisie contact me. What's her surname?"

Tim had to turn his head so his father wouldn't see him holding back his laughter. His father couldn't be bothered with electronics and yet his older cousin had embraced them, just as Jack had.

After Dad ended the call with his cousin, they decided to tell the Mallards and Hubbards, also including Shannon and Kelly in the meeting. The rest of the siblings were at work and Ellie was asleep; they'd hear later.

Ducky, Maisie, the Hubbards, Shannon and Kelly looked curious as they joined the Gibbses in the library. When Maisie spotted the book in Sarah's hands, she smiled warmly. "They're wonderful stories, aren't they?"

"Yes, and they've led me to an amazing discovery."

She waited for everyone to be seated. "Grammie, these stories were written by your aunt Charlotte, whom you never met."

"That's right."

"Do you know anything about her?"

"Only that she was 13 years older than my mother and Mum was 4 when Charlotte went to London for work and married an Englishman. She never saw or heard from her again."

"Because their parents disowned Charlotte."

"Yes, and she moved here with her husband. I suppose they might have softened their stance in later years but I don't think they knew where she was."
Sarah blinked back tears. "She and Robert Baxter, her husband, lived in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania and had four children, Robert Jr., Cyrus, Margaret and Anne. Robert died in 1957 and Charlotte died in 1964. Her son Robert Jr. had a son named Richard Baxter who also lived in Harrisburg until the evacuation, he's in Maine now with his grandson's family. He's your cousin of some sort, Tim and I tried to figure it out.

"The best part, Grammie, is that Charlotte's daughter Anne, your first cousin, married a man called Jackson Gibbs. They had a son named Leroy Jethro, who has two biological children, Timothy and Kelly.

"You married Andrew Hubbard and had two children, Lily and Jim. Lily had me and Patrick and Jim had Ainsley and Callum. Grammie, Jethro is your cousin, we think first once removed. Ainsley, Callum, and I are Jethro, Kelly, and Tim's cousins. We're related, the Hubbards and Gibses."

Sarah was crying by the time she finished. Maisie sat quietly for a minute, tears in her eyes, trying to process the news. Jethro almost laughed, Tim was definitely a Stirling, he processed things the same as Maisie and Jim. Of course so did Shannon so maybe Tim had a double dose.

The others were as surprised as Maisie while Ainsley and Callum looked confused.

Maisie finally took a deep breath, "Let's go over that one more time. My mother Iona was Charlotte's much younger sister."

"And she told you about her sister when you came to the U.S. with Grandpa Andrew."

"Yes."

"Years later you found a book, this book," Sarah held up the book, "in a used bookshop and bought it based on the author's name, Charlotte Stirling."

"Yes, it was a fanciful dream that it might be my long lost aunt. I never looked for her, the book was published in 1947 and I found it in 2003. She would have been over a hundred years old."

"Yes, she was born in 1894."

"I didn't think to look any further, it never occurred to me."

"But Tim taught me not to take things at face value and I had to know if the author was our Charlotte Stirling. I found what I assumed was her married name on the copyright page and then Googled her. I found her obituary and the names of her children. That's when Tim came along, saw the information on the screen and wanted to know if I was researching his great-grandmother. We looked further and then asked Dad, who called his cousin Richard. Huh, our cousin Richard. Anyway, Dad asked him questions and he confirmed the information we know."

Tim smiled at Maisie, "Grammie, the wedding ring you've been wearing was Charlotte's. Dad has a box of heritage jewelry and I picked it for Ellie's wedding ring without knowing whose it had been."

"Oh my heavens, oh children, this is wonderful! We're blood relatives!" She gathered Sarah, Tim, and Kelly to her, kissing them and then kissed Jethro who hugged her, kissing the top of her head. While she gathered Ainsley and Callum to her, Jethro added to the saga.

"Maisie, I have two photos of my Shenavar Charlotte. Tim helped me dig them out a few years ago. I haven't had time to look for them yet."

Tim stirred, "We put them in a photo album and they're online on our family tree." He grinned,
"Which just grew more branches!"

Shannon left the room, returning with a photo album. "I found Charlotte's photos."

Maisie beamed; finally, she would see what her long-lost aunt looked like. She blinked in surprise when she looked at the photo of her aunt as a young girl, exclaiming, "Mum! Oh, she looks just like my mother."

The second photo was a much older Charlotte, holding Jethro who looked like he was 3 or 4. Maisie smiled, noticing Charlotte was wearing the ring, Ellie's wedding ring, now on loan to her. Jethro tapped the photo, "She died when I was about 5. I remember my mother saying this was the last photo we had of her."

Sarah nodded, "She was only 70."

Maisie reached out to touch the image, "I can't believe how much she looks like my mother. I'll dig my photos out so we can compare."

Sarah put her hand on Maisie's, "We should scan those online, Gram, so we'll have them for keeps."

"Yes, we'll do that."

Kelly had been quiet during the conversation and when everyone but Tim left, she pulled the chart over. Then she laughed, "I'm a doctor, I need to understand blood relationships!"

Tim huffed, "You know you understand, Kels, it's the 'removed' designations that are confusing. Something about generations."

"If you say so. I understand Charlotte and Maisie are descended from the same people so we're related. It's pretty cool that Sarah is our sister and our cousin."

He laughed at that, "You're right, it is."

Chapter End Notes

Notes:

For those who don't remember all the names of the agents killed in the line of duty (aka The Fallen), they are: Jim Nelson and Rick Hall were Paula Cassidy's team, the first two agents murdered in the episode "Grace Period". Agent Chris Pacci was found murdered in the episode "Dead Man Talking", we saw him alive in "Bete Noir" and in a flashback during the episode "Baltimore". Agent Macy was introduced in Legend, Part I, her body was found in "Patriot Down". Agent Patterson was Abby's friend murdered on the way to bring or mail something to her in "South by Southwest". Tony found five dead bodies, the Marseille NCIS agents (and possibly the office staff) in the Marseille office during the episode "The Admiral's Daughter". The others are Kate Todd, Jenny Shepard and Mike Franks.

For anyone interested in a little more about Richard Baxter, he first appears at the
funeral of Jackson Gibbs in "Finding Home", Chapters 76 (the elderly man who enters
the church and is acknowledged by Gibbs) and 77, where we find out who he is. I
created him (and his cryptic remarks) as part of a side story I planned for an ancestry
challenge on the NFA site but decided I already had Tim related to another canon
character, that was enough.

However, I remain interested in genealogy and frustrated with tracing my own. When I
was outlining this story, I found my notes about Maisie, Charlotte and the Baxters and
decided to add it to this universe. Voilà, the cousins were born!

As for "Finding Home", months after the challenge ended, I gave Rob more of a
background in a little side story called "Finding Home, Roots before Branches",
concluding it in chapter 3 of "Finding Home, Through the Years".

Also for anyone who's forgotten Tim's 'reclaimed' family/original characters, look in
Finding Home for a character list. I will not include one in this series.
Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

Happy Independence Day!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 7

HELPING OUT 2, LITTLE MAC, ARRIVALS AND DEPARTURES

As the first 20 container conversions were completed, the Furnishings team swung into action. Working together with the Appliance team, they arranged to buy the kitchen appliances, lighting, and plumbing fixtures wholesale and those were delivered and installed. The stores in town that sold furniture donated mattresses, box springs and basic metal bed frames for each home. Jethro, Jerry and Tobias took a break from baby furniture to build several basic platform beds. The next batch of homes would only need mattresses, no box springs, less expensive and easier to move.

Once all that was arranged, the Furnishings team got busy scouring thrift stores, flea markets, local ads, online sites and local Facebook swap groups for couches, occasional chairs, kitchen tables and chairs, dressers and nightstands. Tim wished they'd been able to bring all the extra furniture they'd left at the warehouse.

With everyone in New Mexico, parts of Texas and the other states bordering New Mexico out of shelters, the team expanded their search to include Arizona, Colorado, Utah and West Texas.

They found a shipment of metal footlockers, rectangular storage containers about 30 inches long and 15 inches wide with hinged lids, originally scheduled for delivery to a Maryland business that no longer existed; the entire lot was donated to the LLC. Hitching the Bishops' trailer to one of the pickups, John Bishop and Jim Hubbard drove to the town of Mexican Hat in southeastern Utah to pick them up. After adding small wooden "feet" and painting them, they had coffee tables with storage, enough for all 100 homes.

Not yet satisfied, the team continued their search for desks, desk chairs, table and floor lamps. When the sellers heard why the items were being purchased, they frequently gave the items away or provided deep discounts. The LLC members enjoyed fixing up the tired old things they bought, repairing, refinishing, reupholstering and sometimes repurposing.

While the Furnishings team was scavenging, the interior walls of the container homes were insulated and covered with drywall, with a synthetic flooring commonly referred to as laminate laid throughout each new home. When the team bought several dozen throw rugs at a bargain store, they washed them and placed one or two in each home. For the single container homes, the teams would add a bed or desk for the small extra room as required.

The Exterior team decided that the outsides of the homes should be painted in a variety of colors. Nobody wanted a development of homes that all looked the same. There was quite a discussion about the colors. Some people wanted to stick with earth tones to better fit the New Mexican
landscape. Others wanted a variety of bright cheerful colors, others more traditional colors. In the end, they compromised.

Homes in the first phase of completion would be painted terra cotta, sage green, a sandy neutral, orange, yellow and turquoise - the traditional colors of the southwest. The second phase containers would expand the color palette to include deep blues, rich grays (including one that was almost a lavender) and deep reds. The third phase would have the bright cheerful colors, unless that group changed their mind and went with the second phase colors. One thing they did agree on, each front door would be a different color than the house.

Each home had a concrete patio outside with enough room for a grill, table, and chairs although those would be up to the residents to supply. Or so they thought, until the Furnishings team quietly expanded their list of furnishings, finding plenty of old patio chairs and small outdoor tables, refurbished them and tucked them into storage until needed. All the homes had skylights; the doubles had one in the long hallway, the singles in the kitchen.

Once the homes were inspected and approved, the entire LLC started the long process of deciding on street names. That was interesting; at first, the group came up with some silly names like "Don't Stay Long" and "Park It Here", and some serious ones like "Haven" and "Refuge", and talked about naming the streets after the kids. Finally they realized they wanted to memorialize where they'd come from, the homes they'd been forced to leave and then it was easier and in a way, more satisfying.

The first street that housed 10 of the first 20 homes would be called Alexandria Avenue after the lost hometown of the Gibbses. They wanted to call the other street in that first section Columbia but the name was already in use in the county. Instead, they voted in Georgetown Boulevard. The next section, already being prepped for 30 more homes, would have 3 streets: Baltimore Lane, Silver Spring Way and Shenandoah Drive. The streets for the third section, another 20, would be Fenwick Boulevard and Chesapeake Place.

The fourth and fifth sections, split into 15 homes each, would have Trenton Ave., Fairfax Pl., Annapolis Blvd., Bowie Ln., Arlington Dr., Bethesda Way, Clarksburg Dr., Hanover Loop, Salem Pl. and lastly, Pennsylvania Ave. The names represented their lost hometowns, each of the states that had been devastated and of course, Pennsylvania Avenue was where the White House had been. Called "America's Main Street", it connected the White House, the President's residence, with the United States Capitol.

These names were not in use in the county and the Post Office approved them after visiting the site for their own assessment. Individual addresses were assigned to each lot and the LLC paid for cluster mailboxes installed just outside the gate.

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Impressed with what their friends were doing, the Ortizes cleared several acres of their land previously used for grazing. Once clear, they leveled and prepared the area before bringing in dwellings. Purchasing 30 old mobile homes, the Ortizes brought them in, put them on concrete blocks, added skirting to hide the blocks, rehabbed the interiors and painted the outsides, also adding small concrete patios. Once those were done, they bought more and followed the same routine.

Within weeks, there was housing for 250 families between the two ranches and The Grove. Other ranchers and homeowners, inspired by them, bought old RVs and travel trailers, converted playhouses, sheds and garages into housing with plumbing, electricity, heat and air, beds, chairs and a table, some form of kitchen and a solid roof.

By mid-November, the evacuees who'd been sent out of the country, known as Returnees, were on
their way home. Bernalillo County sent in a revised Vance-Crane survey with the current number of rooms and dwellings available and received word that their first group of Returnees would arrive within a week.

County officials met with the ranch owners and LLC, deciding the first groups would be housed at The Grove, Rancho La Serenidad and the Ortiz Ranch mobile homes. They authorized a new grocery store on Quail Hill Road across from and midway between the three properties, which would really help those without transportation. The LLC, La Serenidad owners and Ortiz family successfully lobbied to add a bus stop between the three properties. That meant people could take the bus into town for interviews and to their jobs once they had them. The grocery store would be within walking distance.

While all this was going on, the NCIS office opened and returning employees were greeted with open arms. At the end of that first week, they had a "Welcome Home" party and Leon considered having an Open House for the community once they settled in. Although his field agents probably wouldn't attend. They weren't as covert as the Marshals were but they did undercover work occasionally.

At the ranch, Ellie and Tim moved to the first floor until the baby was born, swapping rooms with the senior Gibbeses, and on the 13th of November, Tim celebrated his 42nd birthday.

Three nights later, Ellie woke him. "Honey, I think my water just broke, it's time to go."

Tim put a firm lock on the panic caused by those few words. Get her to the hospital; that was his job right now. "All right. Calling Dad and then I'll help you up."

He called his father; when he answered, Tim said: "Gear up!"

Disconnecting, he helped Ellie to the bathroom, called the doctor, got her changed and then helped her to his mother-in-law's car. Ellie's bag was already in the trunk, all they had to do was get in and drive. He opened the front passenger door but his father appeared, shaking his head. "I'm driving. Ellie will be more comfortable in the backseat and you ride with her."

Ellie nodded and they climbed in the back. She lay sideways and curled up on the seat with her torso and head on Tim. Barbara jumped in the front seat. "Honey, your dad and Shannon are right behind us. They're waking Mac and the Cranes to watch the kids."

Ellie made a noise and turned her head into Tim's chest. He murmured a question to her and she answered, there was some pain but she was mostly uncomfortable. Her contractions were 8 minutes apart. It was early for the hospital but with the amniotic fluid breaking, the baby 2 weeks early and this being her first pregnancy, they were going. Thirty miles to town.

Fifteen minutes later Tim wondered what on earth made them think living 33 miles from a hospital was a good idea. The contractions were coming every 7 minutes now and Ellie said they were getting painful.

Finally, they were in the city limits with 3 miles to the hospital. Feeling helpless, Tim helped her breathe through each contraction. Then they were at the hospital and Ellie was helped into a wheelchair and rolled inside, Tim following with her bag.

Ten hours later, Tim held his newborn son in his arms, tears in his eyes, gently kissing baby Mac and his exhausted, sore wife. Eventually he and Barbara emerged from Ellie's room, taking the time to share the news and first photos of McKenzie Gerard Gibbs while mother and son had a first go at feeding. Dad and Grandma were tired but exuberant as they walked into the waiting room.
Tim grinned at his family and friends, "Ellie's exhausted, sore and happy, the baby is here and beautiful. Right now he and his mama are working on getting him fed."

He looked around, not seeing Ty or Brynie. The plan had been to bring them once the baby was born and he thought Barbara had notified the ranch. Rob saw his frown and smiled, "Mom and Dad are on the way with the kids and Grandpa. They should be here in five minutes."

"Thanks, Robbie." He looked at John and Eileen who were currently representing the Bishop siblings. "Baby Mac is a beautiful blend of Bishop and Gibbs, wait until you see him!"

"He doesn't look like Mac, you, Ty, and Brynie?"

"Little bit but he's definitely got the Bishop and Gibbs' looks too." He showed them the photos and then grinned when his son and daughter ran in, followed by his grandfather and parents. Hugs and congratulatory kisses were given all around and then the kids were taken in to see their baby brother.

During baby Mac's first weeks on the outside his parents developed a deeper appreciation for sleep and for their own parents who helped them every step of the way.

Little Mac was nearly four months old before he slept for six hours straight through. Those few residents of the ranch house who hadn't yet fled to the barn, shelter or a guesthouse were astoundingly happy the next morning. They could barely remember getting six hours of uninterrupted sleep!

In the meantime, the LLC continued working on the container homes and helped their evacuees celebrate Thanksgiving, everyone giving sincere thanks for their lives and remembering those who'd died. By the first of December, when Little Mac was almost two weeks old and sleeping in the bassinet his Poppy made for him, they had 70 of the homes ready for occupancy and the Returnees poured in, filling not only those 70 but the guesthouses and bunkrooms in the barn as well. The Ortizes' rehabbed mobiles were also full and the new grocery store and the bus company had thriving businesses. That week also brought Brynie's 6th birthday and her family and friends helped her celebrate properly.

Even with government subsidies Christmas was going to be a bleak one for the Returnees and Evacuees still without employment or permanent homes. The LLC, ranch owners and the Ortiz family put their heads together. Ultimately they decided to have community Christmas celebrations. Residents who celebrated the holiday were given a four-foot artificial Christmas tree with lights and a box of ornaments, purchased wholesale. Their Jewish residents were given Menorahs, a supply of candles and the ingredients for traditional Hanukkah treats. Large living trees were brought in for each block of homes and lighting ceremonies were held.

Two weekends before Christmas, Santa arrived and the children sat on his lap to tell him what they wanted. The group decided none of the dads of ranch children over 1 year and under 12 should play Santa, which left Uncles, Grandfathers and Great-Grandfathers. Accordingly, Geo, Bob, Jethro, Mac, Dave, Colonel Barnes, Jerry, Leon, Steve, Tomas and Roger Ortiz rotated Santa duties. They swapped ranches so Ortiz Ranch Returnees and Evacuees were visited by the La Serenidad Santas while the Ortiz Santas held court at La Serenidad and a combined group visited The Grove.

While the Santas were busy, other volunteers were distributing Hanukkah gifts, toys and clothes for the children, gift cards and bus passes for the adults, and traditional meal ingredients for their Jewish families. Because there were several families, they decided to celebrate the Festival of Lights together. While the original plan was to have them use the shelter for their gatherings, the LLC quickly realized everyone would have to be transported. Instead, one of the laundry barns was closed for use before sunset during Hanukkah, the machines curtained off, tables and chairs brought in for
the 8-day festival. The Gibbses and others were invited and all of the Gibbses went to First Night. They'd helped Ziva celebrate Hanukkah in the past and celebrating with their new friends helped ease their longing for her return home.

Other folks whose faith was neither Christian nor Jewish, let the LLC and Ortizes know the various holidays, if any, that they celebrated and those were marked on calendars.

In the meantime, Santa's helpers kept track of at least two items each child wanted and on Christmas Eve, each ranch had a grand party for their Returnees and Evacuees. Each child received three presents, something practical such as hand-knit socks or gloves, something fun such as a little game and a third from Santa, something they'd wanted. Adults were given gift cards and bus passes. The days before the party, LLC members and the Ortiz family knocked on the doors of each home with a basket containing the makings of a holiday dinner: a frozen ham, chicken or vegetarian option, potatoes, vegetables, milk, butter, dry mix for rolls or biscuits, and the makings for a pie, courtesy of the area churches.

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By January, the homes were experiencing turnover as the Evacuees and Returnees found employment and either moved away or found housing in town. There was barely enough time to clean the houses before the next folks arrived to take up residence.

At Rancho La Serenidad, life continued changing and evolving. The Vances bought a house in town and moved, depriving Lia, Ricky, Teddy and Arin of two of their playmates. Pete Ware returned home from visiting his grown children feeling much better. He was seldom at the ranch for long as he and his rig were in high demand. When he was contacted by the other movers involved in the caravan, the four formed a partnership that blanketed the country.

Toni Ware was finally in a step-down unit at the hospital but her doctors told Pete not to expect much more than that. Within months, she was moved to a state-run mental health facility where she lived quite peacefully. While Pete still struggled to accept his wife’s condition, the move greatly eased his financial burden.

Rick Carter was promoted to the SAIC position for the NCIS London office and he and Denise left the ranch for the UK. A huge going-away party was hosted for the Carters at the ranch. The couple was sorely missed, as they were old friends of Jethro, Tim, Tony, and Leon.

Rick and Jim O'Brien had provided immeasurable support and training to young Probie McGee back in the bad old days when he was subjected to hazing and felt he had little support or training from his own team. When Jim transferred from Southern California to the new HQ, his friends gave him a warm welcome. A surprise was the companion he brought with him, a man named Garrett, close to Jim's age. Jethro and Rick had been two of the few in the former Navy Yard group who knew O'Brien was gay. Alerted by Jethro, Rick called his friend from London; he and Jethro congratulated Jim and welcomed Garrett.

Maggie was promoted to Team Leader of Rick's former team. Leon began looking for an experienced SFA to step in for her when the baby arrived. Evan Fuller would handle DiNozzo's team during Tony's family leave.

Mateo quickly completed his undergrad courses and his former shelter mates turned out en masse for his graduation. He'd been accepted to George Washington University Law School, housed on the new Santa Fe campus. While his relationship with Kelly seemed to be in a state of flux, she and her family professed their pride in his work.
Ellie's cousin Ali found an attorney's position in town, much to Rob's relief, while Ali's sister Trish moved to Taos to manage an art gallery. Aunt Cissy and Uncle John sold their home in Tulsa and moved to Albuquerque, not wanting to be too far from their girls.

The moment Ellie, Tim, their children and everyone else at the ranch dreaded came shortly after Christmas when the Bishops departed for their homes in Tahlequah after more than 6 months on the ranch. They were dearly missed.

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The NCIS agents rolled with the times as their jobs shifted and changed. For a few months, they continued running searches and consulting for other teams before the Albuquerque office was finally given a travel budget. Then they became mobile again and took responsibility for cases in New Mexico, Arizona, Colorado, Utah, Kansas, Nebraska, and the Dakotas and up into the Canadian provinces of Ontario, Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba. That took the pressure off other offices and made Leon's field agents very happy. Leon also considered closing Galveston and having the agents transferred to Albuquerque but Secretary Porter wanted to keep the NCIS presence there.

In January, a leading magazine interviewed members of the LLC about the housing development for the Returnees. As written into the contract, no photos were taken and no names were mentioned; the LLC supplied photos of the container homes.

When Tim returned to work full-time after baby Mac arrived, he was promoted to Regional Director of the Albuquerque, Seattle, Great Lakes, and San Diego CCUs. At his request the three staffers who'd transferred to Great Lakes before the attack remained there as his core staff. In the meantime, he hired new techs and in a new twist, sent them to FLETC.

At Leon's request, once most of the baby furniture was completed Jethro went back to work part-time, resuming his training classes with New Mexico's FLETC graduates.

Chapter End Notes

For inquiring minds, here are the states memorialized in the street names selected by the LLC for their Evacuee housing development. I've also included which of the gang (if anyone) lived there.

Alexandria (Alexandria Avenue), Virginia; Senior Gibbes and the Tim Gibbes
Georgetown (Georgetown Boulevard), District of Columbia; Ducky, Sarah & Bob Chalmers
Baltimore (Baltimore Lane), Maryland; Lu (from shelter), Bill, Barry, Freddie and Jose (homeless camp alumni/friends)
Silver Spring (Silver Spring Way), Maryland; Diner owner Nancy Fendlay and the former home of the McGee siblings
Shenandoah, a town and a national park (Shenandoah Drive), Virginia
Fenwick (Fenwick Boulevard), Delaware; Grandpa Mac's beach house
Chesapeake, town(s) and huge bay (Chesapeake Place), there are towns named
Chesapeake in both Maryland and Virginia; the bay touches the states of Delaware,
Maryland, New York, Pennsylvania, Virginia, West Virginia and DC.

Trenton (Trenton Ave.), New Jersey

Fairfax (Fairfax Pl.), Virginia

Annapolis (Annapolis Blvd.), Maryland; the home of the Hubbards (Sarah's
grandmother, uncle, aunt and cousins) and the Cranes (godparents to Tim, Sarah and
Patrick)

Bowie (Bowie Ln.), Maryland

Arlington (Arlington Dr.) Virginia; Geordie & Bec Perry, Penny Langston McGee and
the Fornells. Also Arlington National Cemetery with the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier
and the burial sites of Mike Franks and many heroes.

Bethesda (Bethesda Way), Maryland

Clarksburg (Clarksburg Dr.), West Virginia

Hanover (Hanover Loop), Pennsylvania

Salem (Salem Pl.), Ohio

Pennsylvania Ave. is named for Pennsylvania Avenue in Washington DC, the President
lives there.
Chapter 8

A GOODBYE, NEW BEGINNINGS AND PRODIGAL ABBY

By the second week in January, each of the families with children or expecting a child was meeting with the architect, putting together plans for the individual houses. After listening to their plans, taking several tours of the available acreage and looking closely at the guesthouses, she made a radical suggestion. There were 20 outbuildings on the ranch and 18 of them had been renovated as guesthouses. Of those 18, seven were currently occupied by Returnees. The rest were occupied by former shelter residents or being held for them. Her suggestion was that the guesthouses for the Returnees be relocated farther back on the property or moved to the Adams' parcel, also known as The Grove. Those that would be permanently occupied would remain closer to the ranch house. That would open up space closer to the main house.

After much discussion that included the Returnee guesthouse residents, and research into the cost of moving buildings, the families came to an agreement. The guesthouses used for the Returnees would be moved to the Adams' parcel, to be grouped together.

While that was being organized and executed, plans for the new barn and paddock were quickly drawn; they'd be built first, followed by the new homes.

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One weekend when Kelly was home Tim remarked to Ellie that he thought something was off with her. Ellie nodded, "She needs you. It's nothing scary but she needs her big brother."

After dinner that night, Tim asked his sister to join him in the library. He sat on the couch, patting the seat next to him. "Come sit, Kels. Tell me what's going on with you. We haven't had a chance to talk in weeks. Too many weeks!"

She nodded as she sat next to him. Taking a deep breath, she told him what was going on, or not going on, with Mateo.

"I've come to believe I'm the only one in the relationship. He doesn't answer his phone, doesn't return my calls. He'll answer my texts, mostly saying he's busy at work or school but he never initiates anything. I wanted to visit him in Santa Fe for a couple of days but he turned me down flat. I know he's fixated on his goals and that's good but now I don't know whether anything was ever real or if it was just sort of a 'temporary someone to hold onto while the world ends' situation? I thought we were more than that." She sighed and Tim embraced her.

He thought for a minute before asking a few questions, "When you first met, you two were nearly inseparable. He had plenty of time for you then. Do you think that was because of what was happening? Is that what you're saying - that he felt he could take the time because he couldn't go to school or work?" He added, "I don't mean that it was a matter of convenience but more that he felt he could stop and take a breath, get to know you because his goals were temporarily on hold."

She thought about that. "Maybe. The threat and all the preparations leveled the playing field, if you will. We were all equally threatened, unable to continue working or living there, having to pack up our lives and make a run for it. Do you suppose that gave us a false sense of commonality? Something we shared that's behind us now?"
Tim shook his head, "No, well actually I don't know but that's not where I was headed. I wondered if that was the first time he'd taken a break since he was old enough to work. And he had to, it wasn't his choice, so he could relax and enjoy himself, not feel guilty for slacking off."

He paused, "I might be going in the wrong direction but having been in a similar living situation, I can see why he might feel he's not ready for a serious relationship. And it wouldn't necessarily be that he's not crazy about you. From my formerly homeless position, it's more that he can't pursue a relationship with you until he's achieved his goals, brought himself up to your level. In his mind, not mine! So yeah, maybe in that sense you did start with a shared sense of impending disaster. But I'd say that it was a temporary sharing rather than false."

"Oh. So he's putting me off because he no longer feels like I'm his equal. He has to bring himself 'up' to what he perceives as my level?" She sighed. "I was afraid it was something like that." She sighed again. "There's more. No judging, ok?"

"I promise to listen and why would you think I'd judge you?"

"Because of that woman who cheated on you and Ellie's ex." She looked at Tim. "I'm not cheating on Mateo, not sure that's possible because I don't even know if we're in a relationship; I sure don't feel like I am. But I am interested in someone and that someone has shown interest in me. He's also a doctor at the hospital, an orthopedic surgeon specializing in hand and foot surgery; he's my age, started at UNM on July 2nd, right before the attack. He didn't get his orientation so when Rob and I went through ours he joined us. He asked me out for coffee and I told him I was in a relationship but I'm afraid I didn't sound very convincing. Or happy."

"You said you're interested in him?"

"Yes, we haven't been on a date or even had coffee but we've talked a lot. We have a lot in common besides medicine! He was raised as an only child whose father was in the Army. He died when Matt, I know weird huh, was 9. His mom remarried when he was 14 and had a baby girl, so now he's not an only child and he's close to his stepfather. His stepdad also has a couple of kids close to Matt's age so they were all raised together and remain close." She smiled at her brother, "He likes to bowl. He swims, loves to read and ride horseback, likes the country although he's not sure he wants to live in a rural area. He loves baseball and wants a family."

Tim pulled her in for a hug. "That's the biggest smile I've seen on your face in weeks, little sister. Sounds like a nice guy."

She blushed, "Uh, Ellie ran a background check and he's clean."

Tim chuckled, "And you didn't yell and scream at her like your sister did to me, every single time?"

"No! I said I was going to ask you and Ellie said she could do it. It didn't take long."

"Good! So…?"

"So I'm going to call Mateo and break up with him, although I'll probably have to leave a message, he never answers his phone. Maybe I'll write him a letter, that isn't as impersonal as leaving a message. Although that's not my fault. ARGH, I have to end this! After I leave the message or mail the letter, I'm going to have coffee with Matt."

"What if Mateo says he'll change, that he loves you?"

Kelly twisted her lips in thought. "I don't want anyone to have to 'change' to accommodate a relationship with me. I know Dad doesn't always speak much but he and Mom communicated when
they were dating. I asked Mom, told her why. She said she never had a doubt that Dad loved her, when they had problems, he acknowledged them and they worked things out together. I have many doubts about Mateo! I worry that his lack of communication skills is ingrained and I'm not interested in trying to change my mate - that never works anyway. This sounds petty but I'm…well, you know how old I am and I don't want to wait another 5 years for a serious relationship. He'll graduate, pass the bar, have to get a job and then want to be established. I don't want to work as hard as I've been for something that might never happen. I guess I'll chalk this up to some sort of doomsday relationship." She exhaled noisily. "Thank you, I feel so much better!"

"You had it all figured out. And it's not petty. It's your life. Sounds like you've done more than your fair share of communicating, with zero return. You need to take care of you, Kelly."

"I know but I needed your opinion. I told Ellie that talking with Matt is so different than talking with Mateo. I don't worry about what I say or how I say it; I don't worry about offending him or that I'm nagging him. Everything just feels right. Ellie said to tell you that."

"Because I told her that before we got married. I truly thought I was in love with Delilah. After I left her I realized I'd had to watch what I said, what I did; she'd been trying to change me. To what end I don't know because she was already cheating on me. I didn't realize any of that until Ellie and I were together. Then it was so easy, so right. Delilah and I were like a shoe that doesn't fit right. It looked good on the outside but over time, it hurt to wear. Ellie and I work, in every way. Anyway, I'm flattered and I'll always support you, Kels."

As his sister went off to bed, Tim smiled to himself. Over the past three years, he and Kelly had realized how alike they were. Both as stubborn as their father, intensely curious, good at puzzles, math and science, which their father found amusing, avid readers like their mother, dedicated to their family and passionate about their chosen work. Kelly sometimes took a little longer to relax and 'loosen up' than Tim but he attributed that to having always had siblings while she had none. He'd grown up with Patrick, Sarah, Rob and Geordie. He was glad Kelly confided in him. While he liked Mateo, he'd seen signs that the man was a loner and worried about his little sister's heart being broken.

NCIS NCIS NCIS NCIS

Once Mackie was consistently sleeping through the night, his parents slipped away for a few days. The timing was good, it was early spring and the new babies weren't due for another few weeks. It would also be the first time in over a year that Tim and Ellie had an overnight without the children. That occasion, before all the trouble started, had been their first time alone since they'd brought Lia home and they'd celebrated by conceiving baby Mac. Now, as they were packing for their trip, Tim mentioned that to Ellie and she gave him a mischievous glance. "You're right! Let's talk about that."

Tim chose to respond with an enthusiastic nod, not certain what she meant by the comment. They were going to Santa Fe, staying in a boutique hotel and spending their time doing whatever they wanted, on their schedule. As much as they loved their children, it would be wonderful to be Ellie and Tim, lovers and friends, for four whole days.

Having prearranged an early check-in, they hightailed it out of the ranch soon after the school bus rumbled down Quail Hill Road toward town. The kids knew they'd be gone so there would be no surprises and the couple didn't want to waste a minute. At the hotel, they nearly threw their bags in the room before heading out again. They were going to play, visiting museums, shops and art galleries followed by dinner at the best restaurant in town and dancing under the stars. Tomorrow they were going horseback riding together and would then spend a few hours being pleasantly tortured at a spa. They'd left the other days open, knowing something fun and interesting would turn
That afternoon they were wandering through town, Tim having finally gotten his fill of the Museum of International Folk Art, when he remembered Ellie's comment. He reminded her and she nodded. Batting her eyelashes at him, she gave him a flirtatious smile, making sure she flipped her hair back with the hand that once again bore her wedding and engagement rings. When his wife didn't say anything, Tim still wasn't quite sure what was going on and asked, "What would you like to do now?"

She gave him a sultry look and he grinned, always happy to oblige. They hurried back to the hotel, spending the rest of the afternoon making love. Later as they cuddled, he said, "Going to tell me now? I know it's something to do with making babies. Or making Mackie anyway."

"Yes. I know this is going to sound crazy and I'm not sure how to explain it, but I want us to make another baby. That is if you also want another baby."

"You want to get pregnant, go through all that and childbirth again, so soon? And more months of being zombies?" He gulped, "Five kids?"

"Yes. I want it all. I hope our next child does better with sleeping. And yes to five kids although I'd rather have six. However, I only want to be pregnant one more time so maybe we could adopt another one after number five."

"Six kids? Uh...let's focus on the pregnancy thing first. I understand you want this and I'm fine with another child but would you please give me a hint why?"

"I love all of our children, you know that. However, two started out as Sue, Deeny's and yours, one started out with other parents and one is mine. I want two to start out as ours. Where I'm their first and only mother and we get to start from scratch. If this sounds selfish or self-centered, sorry, can't help it."

"Oh, honey." He held her close. She finally pulled back with a sigh, continuing her explanation.

"I know none of us can help what happened to Sue and Deeny or that the kids believe they are angels in heaven. I know that - I get that. I'm their third mommy and I get that too; I know I'm their mother, that they love me as their mother. But I still want another baby that you and I make together."

Tim gathered her into his arms and held her close to his heart. "Eleanor, I will happily make another baby with you, as many as you want, my sweet sexy bride. And we'll raise them and their siblings with all the love we have."

He paused, "However, right now I do need a little more time."

She giggled at that.

While Ellie was in the shower, Tim slipped out to make a phone call. This was supremely awkward but he wanted to make sure his wife's desire for another baby so soon was not some sort of postpartum/hormonally induced issue. Who to call was an easy decision as he hit the button to call his sister Dr. Kelly. When she answered, he quickly explained the situation.

On her end, Kelly nodded; she'd anticipated this and was glad her brother called. "After her last doctor's appointment, Ellie told me about wanting another baby and a little bit of the why. With her permission, I spoke with her OBGYN and confirmed that her hormone levels are right where they should be. She'd asked the OBGYN if it was safe for her to have another pregnancy so soon and
they discussed that too. I believe this is a genuine want, Tim, not because of post-pregnancy hormones or anything else. She's healthy, 5 months past delivering Mackie and while I'd prefer she waited longer, she can handle another pregnancy. Tell her you spoke with me, we thought you might call and she knows you're looking out for her and your children."

"Thanks, Kels! Love you sis!" Disconnecting, he hurried back to their room where Ellie was toweling dry after her shower. After his turn in the shower, they dressed and called the children to say hello before keeping their dinner reservation, enjoying the romantic ambiance and the excellent meal. They enjoyed dancing with each other before returning to their love nest. When Tim admitted he'd spoken with Kelly, Ellie smiled, glad for his concern.

Changing their plans, they canceled horseback riding and spent the morning wrapped up in each other. Later they visited the art galleries, purchasing a small watercolor for Uncle Dave's birthday and sending a postcard to the kids. They'd buy presents for them before they left. After their appointment at the spa and another delicious dinner, they spent the evening again wrapped up in each other.

Sunday morning they drove to Taos for breakfast at Diner the Great, surprising Nancy and Cousin Trish, who joined them. Afterward they wandered through town, enjoying the galleries and overall ambiance.

They had an early dinner before driving back to Santa Fe. On the way, they talked about taking the kids to Ruidoso or perhaps Four Corners for a week or 10 days during the summer. They'd rent a cabin again and see who else might want to go. They'd ask Ellie's family and hope some if not all of them could join them. And if they waited until July or even early August, the currently expected babies would be at least 3 months old and perhaps some of the non-parental baby-minders could go too.

When they returned to their room, Ellie had a message to go to the front desk. There they discovered an envelope with tickets to a concert that evening; one of Ellie's favorite singers was performing at a local club. The tickets were from Barbara and Jerry, an early birthday present for their daughter. They would just have time to change. Ellie looked at Tim who grinned at her. "Yes, I knew. They called to ask if I thought it was a good idea."

"That's why the early dinner!"

"Yes, that and we were in Taos, why not try something new?"

"Good point. This is going to be awesome! But I don't have the right clothes or boots."

"Yes you do; I packed them with mine and hung them with my stuff in the closet Friday. I arranged to have everything pressed and returned while we were out so we're all set."

Dressed in their best western clothes, they headed out for the concert where they had a wonderful time. When they woke Monday morning, Ellie stretched, "You're good! I know we made a baby this weekend."

Tim smirked as he wrapped his arms around her, "You always inspire me!" He pulled back to look at her, "Did you know this quickly with Mackie?"

"I thought we had but I wasn't sure. Now I trust my instincts. But we should keep practicing in case I'm wrong."

"Your wish, my lady, is my command."
Eventually, they made it downstairs for breakfast, checked out of their room, placing their bags in storage at the hotel and spent the rest of the day in Old Town, watching the native dancers and wandering in and out of the shops. They bought presents for the children, Poppy, Nonny, the Hubbards and the Cranes who had rotated care of their kids while they were away.

Feeling refreshed, in the late afternoon they reclaimed their bags and drove home. They smiled at each other as their children rushed into their arms and Mackie squealed happily. After they caught up with the kids, they heard from the adults. While nothing earth-shattering had happened and no babies made their debut, they'd heard from Abby!

NCIS NCIS NCIS NCIS

They'd been in touch with her sporadically since her return to the U.S. but the conversations felt strained and Jethro and Ducky were afraid they were losing her. Even before the threat they'd felt she was pulling away from them, or to be more accurate, not moving along with them as their lives changed from the first iteration of Gibbs' new family – the serendipitous discovery that Tim was his son.

Her drift came to a temporary halt when the Gibbses were in WITSEC and for a brief time after their return but when Shannon and Kelly joined them, she pulled away again and it felt like she had continued moving out of their family right up until she physically left. While Tony soon lost his pique over her strange responses on that first post-attack phone call, none of them felt she was really connecting with them. One of them, usually Ducky or Jethro, always initiated contact with her; she never called or wrote on her own.

When the house phone rang one evening, the last voice any of them expected to hear was Abby's. Grandpa was closest and answered the phone. He greeted her warmly when he heard her voice and Ducky asked Callum to get Jethro, Tony, Jimmy, Breena, Maggie and Bob. Callum sent texts that someone named Abby was on the house phone.

In minutes, the group appeared to find Ducky on the phone with a big smile on his face. "Abby, hang on a second. Everyone's here now, let me put you on speaker."

Tony reached around, pressing the speaker button and they all smiled as they heard her voice. When she quieted, they each said hello. She took a deep breath, "I miss you all so much. I mean, it's nice here; great living by the ocean but it's not home, not even with Kyle here too. I promised I'd come to Albuquerque so I'm gonna."

In her apartment she smiled happily, hearing cheers from her friends. Then Gibbs spoke and she relaxed at the sound of his voice, "Abby, if you fly in, then you can drive the hot rod home. If you time it right, Jared Vance will be home for spring break, maybe he'd drive back with you."

"Oh, that would be fun! Do you know when he's off?"

Another beloved voice, Tony, said, "Not yet, Jimmy's texting Leon now. By the way, Tim and Ellie are away for the weekend."

"Good for them! So with all the Returnees and the kids, is there room for me to stay? Because I can stay in town, it's not a problem."

In her apartment in San Diego, she smiled, tears running down her face, as she was disabused of that idea. Maggie said, "You can stay in Kelly's room here. She, Rob, and Ellie's cousin have an apartment in town."
"Cool, thank you!"

Jimmy was up next, "Hi, Abby! Can't wait for you to meet all the new kids and people and to see the ranch! Geez, we have a lot to tell and show you! Leon sent me the dates Jared will be home and his contact info; I'll send it on to you."

"Great, thanks, Jimmy! What do I need to bring?"

Breena answered, "Jeans, sneakers, your cowgirl boots. This is a ranch so you'll get grubby. Casual clothes, bring a jacket, the evenings will be cool and something to wear to the office; I'm sure you'll have a tour. And something for clubbing, it's more casual here than DC. We'll get you up to Taos to see Nancy's new diner and because Taos is awesome, you're gonna love it."

"I can't wait to see you all, it's been so long!"

They talked with her for another fifteen minutes before the parents of young children said goodbye, as it was bath and bedtime for them. When Leon confirmed later in the week that Abby contacted Jared, they started making plans.

NCIS NCIS NCIS NCIS

While the family waited for her arrival, Abby thought long and hard about a request she hoped to make of Director Vance. She knew he'd done some shifting and extra budgeting to get a spot for her in San Diego and again to allow her to work by herself. She appreciated his efforts and she loved having the lab to herself. However and she knew this was an odd problem, she felt she was not physically or culturally compatible with San Diego. Part of the situation was that she was home in the mornings and early afternoon, sun time. She admitted that was a problem of her own making because she didn't want to work in the lab with other people.

Another part was that she was not a big fan of beaches. For walking in the rain or after the heat of the day, yes but not for swimming or surfing. Everyone she met seemed obsessed with one or the other - or both. While she knew there was far more going on in the area, she didn't feel comfortable 'stepping out' on her own and nothing really appealed to her. And really, as far as she was concerned there was too much sunshine. There was morning mist and she was told the fog would roll in from the ocean in May and disappear in July but that wasn't enough for her.

She understood that people loved the area because there were more than a hundred days of sunshine annually; however, she needed seasons, changes in the air, colorful autumn leaves and rain. While she was grateful, she didn't think San Diego was the place for her. She'd been in the mid-Atlantic for too long.

Studying the climates of various cities around the U.S., she'd also, sadly, ruled out Albuquerque. While she'd love to work with her family again, their new home was high desert, received very little rain, and was too dry for her skin. The region averaged more than 200 days of sunshine annually, twice as many as San Diego.

After further research, she'd decided to ask for a transfer to Seattle. It had a vibe she knew she'd like, there was a lot of rain but the average temperatures were mild, neither too hot nor too cold. Her selection made, now she had to convince Vance. She didn't know Jane Melankovic, the SSAIC, but thought that Tim did; she remembered him saying he was sending several of his staff to her when they were evacuating.

While she worked to put together a request that would make sense for the agency, she was also excited about seeing everyone. She'd asked Kyle if he wanted to go but he'd started a dog training
business and was too busy to leave. Once he knew Abby would not be driving the car back by herself, he relaxed.

Finally, the great day arrived and Abby walked the gangway to the jet that would take her to her family. Jared was on the same flight, they'd waited together for the boarding process to begin. An hour and forty minutes after takeoff, they disembarked in Albuquerque.

NCIS NCIS NCIS NCIS

Making the decision about who would meet Abby was tough. While nearly everyone wanted to be there, there were considerations. First, she and Jared were arriving on a Friday morning, ruling out those who had work or school. Second, they didn't want to overwhelm her. Third, although Maggie was in the running, the newest DiNozzo was due in a month and she was as uncomfortable as Ellie had been.

Oddly enough, although the DiNozzos had been the last to announce they were pregnant, their obstetrician predicted their little one would arrive first. As far as preparations went, Lia was still camping out quite happily in her crib and her Poppy and Uncle Tobias finally built crib number four.

In the end, Jethro and Ducky were at the airport to meet her, with a family welcome dinner planned for that evening. The Vances were also there; Leon had tried his best to make himself work through Jared's arrival but found he was nearly useless that morning. He compromised, he'd join Lara and Kayla at the airport and then he'd return to work after he welcomed his son home. Probably. Tim was at the office today and Leon found he made an excellent second in command.

Impatient to see their loved ones, the group kept moving, walking around the terminal. The twins remained at the day-care center; their parents wanted to enjoy Jared's arrival without chasing after them and the littles didn't do well with loud noises and crowds. They'd been fine in the nursery shelter and were comfortable with the other parents. However, now they lived in a house with only their parents, enjoying visits from big sister; they were used to a quieter, less crowded atmosphere.

They saw their big brother on Skype at least once a week but were a little confused about him coming home. They missed all the babies and loved going to the day-care to see Lia, Ricky and Arin. Little Mac would join them in another couple of weeks and all the littles were looking forward to a new baby.

When the flight arrival was announced, the greeters smiled at each other. Jethro looked at his watch, "Six minutes."

Leon scoffed, "Takes longer than that to clear the plane. And we don't know where they sat."

Ducky chuckled, "Abby always sits as close to the front as possible. Too many people around her otherwise."

Lara was puzzled, "Isn't she the one that used to go to all those concerts? There are large numbers of people at those!"

Jethro shrugged, "We never asked. Some things you don't want to know. Although she dragged Tim with her for several years."

"As her bodyguard?"

"Essentially, yes."

Kayla made a noise, "There they are, on the escalator!"
They waved and the pair waved back. And then they were with them. Abby nearly knocked Ducky over and Jethro was glad he'd been standing close to him so he could support his friend.

She transferred to Jethro, giving Ducky time to reclaim his breath. Lord, he'd forgotten about those hugs. When he had enough breath to speak, he turned to Leon, "If you go back to the office, please warn Tony and the others!"

Lara shook her head, "Breena told me Jimmy's already got oxygen masks and a few canisters at home."

"Thank you, my dear." With Leon's help, Ducky started pulling Abby off Jethro who was getting a little short of breath.

Eventually, they were sorted and both travelers properly welcomed. The group split and the ranch contingent reminded the town contingent of the 'all family' dinner Saturday night. Lara nodded, "We're bringing Jared's favorite pie. It isn't anybody's birthday, is it?"

Most of them chuckled; the extended family was now so large that birthdays for anyone over 21 were celebrated in groups by season instead of by month.

"No littles, unless one of the new babies arrives this weekend."

Leon smiled, "I have Maggie in the pool but I covered Sarah and Bec too. All three look like they're ready to go."

Jethro smiled a little smugly. "Got the last of the cribs done, I'm ready."

Abby listened, hoping to herself that none of the new babies would arrive during her visit. She'd never told anyone but between their fragility and appearance, newborns freaked her out. She grinned when she saw the Challenger in the parking lot. "Gibbs, I didn't know you brought it with you!" She frowned, "I watched the caravan on YouTube and didn't see it."

"That's because it was inside one of the moving trucks, a surprise for me. Tim convinced his mother that the car needed to come with us. The morning we left, someone drove it from our house to the warehouse while we were at the airfield loading the plane. The drivers loaded it into the back of the fourth truck and then filled up the rest of it so I wouldn't see it. I had no idea until we got here and were unloading the moving trucks. All of a sudden, there it was."

Ducky grinned, "He pretended to be mad for about 5 seconds."

Jethro grinned back at him. "Losing my touch, no one believed me."

Abby was quiet on the drive to the ranch, watching everything they passed. Finally, she commented. "It's so different here! From DC and San Diego. Like another world."

Ducky nodded, "Yes my dear, it is. Most of the time a much more peaceful world."

"I can't wait to meet your wife, Ducky; it's so cool that you two found each other and got married!"

He chuckled, "Yes, it is cool. At least Maisie and I think so!"

Jethro grinned at him, "Aw, you were copying Shannie and me!"

"There are a few similarities but certainly not enough to call us copycats!"

Abby giggled and both men smiled. Jethro looked at her, "What do you do for fun in Southern
"California?"

"Oh, you know me. I find ways to stay out of the eternal sunshine there, go to concerts and clubs on the weekends."

"Never thought of the sunshine. Is it a problem?"

"Yeah, kind of. I sometimes feel like I'm the only one there who doesn't like being in the sun. And the culture is so different. Busy, rushed, always in a hurry like DC but with surfer dude overtones and not the political power stuff that was always going on at home."

"Yes, we enjoy the lack of that here."

"Have you heard anything about where the new capital will be?"

"Not recently."

"I wonder if they can't decide because everyone wants it or nobody does."

Jethro huffed, "Good question." They were turning onto Quail Hill Road now and as they drew closer to home, Ducky pointed to the Ortiz ranch on one side, the new grocery store and gas station on the other and the bus stop. A bus was there now, some of The Grove residents were getting off.

"Where do those people live? Are those your Returnees?"

"Yes, they are a mix of Returnees and Evacuees; we're starting to drop the use of the term 'Returnees' as all of us are Evacuees, all forced from home and jobs. We'll take you on a tour of the housing development. We have over 100 homes on a plot of land next to us; see where that gate is? We also have 35 people in our bunkrooms."

"32 Duck; Letty Shields' new job pays her enough for a furnished apartment in town for the three of them and the building owner waived any deposits. They're moving this weekend."

"Wonderful, Jethro, that's so good to hear! We'll miss them." He turned to Abby, "Letty, David, and little Marika Shields were among our first evacuees. Letty is a paralegal but had to retake the exam to be licensed in New Mexico. David works in construction but only found part-time employment during the winter months. Now with Letty's new job and David's income, they'll have their own home again. Splendid!"

"Are they the first ones to leave?"

"Oh no, we've had fairly steady turnover at the houses. Some weeks we can't get the cleaning crew out here fast enough to have the places ready for the next group."

"I've heard that the people doing the most for the Evacuees are the ones who also evacuated. Like you guys."

"And you too, Abigail. You were certainly an Evacuee! We probably have a clearer understanding of what they need, what they've experienced. If it hadn't been for our Timothy, most of us would be with them."

Jethro shook his head, "You're right and you're wrong, Duck. He would never allow that to happen. Barbara believes that Tim learned early on to protect the people he loves. That's just what he did. Gathered everyone, made sure we had what we'd need and here we are."
Abby didn't want to think about that. There were too many times she'd rejected Tim's protection, even when they were both under orders. At the same time, she frequently demanded he accompany her for protection. Quickly she changed the subject, "What was it like, living in the shelter?"

"Busy. Active. A lot of people but it wasn't too noisy, not all the time anyway. The best things we did were adding on a classroom, building a playroom and adding the media room."

"And the library, Jethro. One could always escape for a little peace and quiet."

"That's true."

"Are people living in there now?"

Ducky nodded, "Yes, Bill, Geordie's former tent mate from the transient camp and Pete, our mover and friend, still sleep in there. A few of the NCIS folks who sheltered elsewhere are also staying there. And the shelter is the only indoor area big enough to hold all of the extended family for a meal. The Evacuees don't always want to stay in there. If we run out of room or a house hasn't been cleaned, they'll stay but most prefer not to."

Jethro chuckled, "One lady said she'd rather sleep outside in a tent. And she did, Tim and Geo told us what she'd need and we provided a tent for her and her sister; we pitched it near the barn so they could use the facilities in there and they lived in it for a month or so, even had a catalytic heater for cold nights."

"Wow! I have to see this shelter; I can't decide whether it's going to feel huge or claustrophobic."

"It's not claustrophobic. Gemcity bought the deluxe version so we'd have plenty of room to move around."

Abby sighed, "I wish we'd stayed. I know it wasn't fun but it seems like sheltering together brought everyone closer."

"I guess it did but we were close before and then having to prepare for an attack helped, we didn't have time to think much about anything but leaving."

She nodded. "You were already doing that when you came to the convent that day."

"I'd known for less than 24 hours. Tim was the only one who knew all the available information and Ellie's dad knew part of it just from rumors. How are the Sisters?"

"Sad and trying to move forward, like all of us. They like Vancouver but their order wants to find another post for them."

"Will those four stay together?"

She shrugged, "They don't know yet. Probably because they're the only ones displaced, but they won't know until they're told their new assignment."

"Do you miss them?"

She nodded, "I do, Sister Rosita especially. Sometimes she's the only one who can get me to see things differently. And the four of them are a lot of fun, too." She sighed, "I miss everyone; I miss all of you. It's weird, before this happened I believed I was as involved in your family as I wanted to be. Now I know that wasn't true. I feel like everything's changed and it has but many of the changes happened when we were still in DC, I just didn't notice. Or I didn't want to be part of them."
Ducky patted her hand. "We're all here and we consider you part of the family, our family. The ties that bind us together may have become more elastic in your case; nevertheless you are here now."
Chapter 9

WELCOME HOME!

They'd been sitting at the kitchen table talking and now Ducky stood up. "Enough sitting! Jethro will show you to your room and you can settle in or we'll show you around the ranch, including the shelter and The Grove if you'd like."

"I'd like to meet your wife and Tim and Ellie's new baby."

"Then that is what we shall do! Jethro, would you do the honors?"

"Sure. Your room is on the third floor, Abby. Has beautiful views and you're 2 floors away from the mighty lungs of our youngest grandchild."

She chuckled, "Does he sleep all night yet?"

Ducky smiled, "Finally, yes. Our lad slept 6 hours straight one glorious night last month and has continued the pattern; he's up to 8 hours straight now, much to everyone's joy."

"How old is he?"

"Five months on the 16th."

She laughed, "You've had a month of no baby crying during the night and any minute you'll have another one!"

"Three more! Sarah, Geordie's wife Bec, and Maggie are all due the same week. However, the obstetrician feels Maggie's child will be the first of the three."

"Wow, that's going to be chaotic."

Ducky chuckled, "Nearly everyone without infants or a child in the nursery has moved out of the house, at least for a few months. Maisie and I have already decamped to one of the guesthouses; I believe you and Shannon are doing the same, Jethro?"

He nodded, "Yes, we help with the baby during the day and will continue to do that with the new ones but we're too old to do the up and down at night and we need our rest."

"You'll have 4 babies to take care of during the day?"

"Three babies, once they're on the outside. Little Mac will go to Lara Vance's day-care beginning next week. Ellie's been back at work for a couple of months now; she and Tim can see the baby and Lia any time during the day. Ty and Brynie are there after school."

"That's handy! And the new babies will go there too?"

"Sarah will probably keep hers at home most of the time but yes for the other two. Bec is a professor at UNM, not far from NCIS and Geordie's working at Kirtland Air Base, on the other side of the city. No working at home for either of them, at least not until Geo is released to the reserves. But day-care won't be full-time for any of the babies or the older kids; it's good socializing for them but we grands and greats want them with us too."
Jethro grabbed Abby's suitcase and they started their climb to the third floor. Once there, she looked out of every window, loving the views. "Kelly really doesn't live here?"

"No. She and Rob both work at UNM Medical Center. Because they're still seen as the newbies, they work the shifts no one else wants, mostly PMs and weekends. The two of them tried commuting from here for the first couple of weeks and then rented an apartment together. It's a 3-bedroom so Ali, who is Rob's girlfriend and Ellie's cousin, took the third room. They pop in on their days off and Kelly stays over sometimes."

"But not Rob?"

Jethro smirked, "I suppose if Ali is ever called out of town he might, but I think he feels it might be awkward to come home with Ali."

"Do you like her?"

"Yes, she's good for him, draws him out of his shell and he's good for her too."

"Is Kelly seeing anyone?"

"She was seeing someone Tim invited to shelter with us; they've recently broken up. I think you were gone by the time they met. Do you remember the guy who delivered Chinese food to NCIS?"

"Sure, Mateo, great guy, pre-law at GW. He was at the diner the day Kyle and I left."

"That's right. He was one semester shy of his degree. When our teachers pulled together college level information for the others, they included Ali, who's an attorney and between the four college instructors and help from their former professors, they managed to teach Mateo everything he needed for that last semester. He had to take tests to prove he knew the subject matter but he passed them. He graduated and is now attending GWU's Law School in Santa Fe. We're very proud of him. He and Kelly hit it off when they first met and were close while we were inside but he's too busy with work and school, apparently doesn't have time for my daughter. I'm not supposed to know but she's seeing someone else now."

Abby grinned, "How does Kelly's father feel about that?"

"As long as she's happy, I'm happy. I still have problems seeing Kelly as my little girl but Dave, that's Tim and Sarah's godfather, assures me feeling that way is normal. He has a daughter older than Tim and still wonders how it happened. Although he didn't spend 25 years mourning his daughter's death." Shaking off the bitter comment, he shrugged, "Let's go. We have plenty of time to talk."

"Good, because I have something I need to talk about with you. Not a serious problem but something I'd like to run by you and Ducky."

"All right."

When they'd driven onto the property, she'd seen the house, barn, and a few guesthouses but hadn't looked further. Now as they stepped onto the back porch, she looked around. "This place is huge!"

"600 acres."

She frowned at the sounds she was hearing, "Construction?"

"Yes, the ranch house will eventually be home for the Greats, Grands and visitors. When we bought this place it was for vacations, now we live here." He filled her in on the new plans.
"So first the barn and then a new house for Tim and Ellie followed by the DiNozzos?"

"The current lineup is Tim and Ellie, the Palmers and Hubbards, who are Tim and Sarah's uncle and aunt. Then the DiNozzos, Cranes, Tim and Sarah's godparents, and the Chalmers. Geordie and Bec will be last as they're the least crowded and their lot needs less preparation.

"Right now, most of the kids sleep in dormitory-style rooms, school age and up. All the girls in one, the boys in another. The littles aged five and under sleep in the nursery. That's our Lia, Ricky and Teddy Palmer, Arin DiNozzo. Baby Mac will move into the nursery soon. He sleeps there during the day now."

"Yeah, I can see why they need their own places. Geez, Tim and Ellie have four kids!"

Jethro nodded, "It's a big change. Ty and Brynie were toddlers when Tim brought them home and Lia was about 3 ½ months old. Mackie is our first newborn."

"Mackie, is that what he'll be called?"

"Can't call him little Mac or baby Mac forever."

"Do you know names for the other babies yet?"

"No, they all decided they didn't want to know gender ahead of time."

"Sounds like fun!" She looked around, "That's the biggest barn I've ever seen!"

"Yeah, we've got 35 bunkrooms in there."

"How many guesthouses?"

"20 total. We moved all but the ones you see over to the housing development. I'll show you on the ATV, we'll stop at the Mallards so you can meet Maisie. Did you know we're cousins?"

"What? Isn't she Sarah's grandmother?"

"Yes."

"That must be a story!"

"Oh yeah."

She laughed as they climbed on the ATV, glad she'd worn jeans and sneakers. Gibbs drove her around three-quarters of the ranch house first. For the remaining quarter, he drove in a very large circle away from the house and he pointed to a low mound close to the driveway. "We've just driven around the perimeter of the shelter, that mound is the above-ground entrance. There's a tunnel entrance in the basement of the house. Show you that later."

"Ok. Yeah, that's huge." She chuckled, "My word of the day."

She smiled at the guesthouses. Each of them had a shaded front porch, just big enough for a small table, a couple of chairs, a few plants and a ceiling fan. And they faced each other, making a little lane in between. There were six guesthouses per block, three on each side of the lane. The lane was lined with small trees.

"There are three blocks, with different types of trees. We had mature trees but the fallout smothered them; the rains didn't come soon enough. You'll see the rest of these across the bridge in the housing
development. Some of them have fenced backyards for those with kids. Don't know what we're going to do with them long-term. Once everyone's back in the country, I guess people could stay and rent from us. Haven't talked about that yet. The kids are calling it a village and say their homes will be a little village too." He drove back up the lane to the first guesthouse and parked. "This is the Mallards."

"Yay!" Abby admired the blooming flowers in their cheerful pots on the porch as well as the scattering of comfortable chairs and small tables.

The door opened and Ducky appeared, "Welcome to the new Mallard Inn!"

A pretty, white-haired, blue-eyed woman stood next to him, smiling. Ducky introduced them and Maisie gave her a gentle hug. "Welcome, my dear! I'm so pleased to finally meet you! The children have been so excited about your visit - I'm surprised they haven't sneaked out of work!"

Abby gave a surprised laugh as she realized the "children" were her friends, not the littles. She was given a tour of the Mallards' home, which looked very comfortable if tiny compared with either of Ducky's previous homes. She smiled at the china hutch with its pretty treasures, recognizing a few things. She nodded in approval at the photos of Ducky and his brother Nicholas; she remembered Breena mentioning that Tim 'rescued' them. She wondered if Maisie had met Nicholas when he lived in London. The timing seemed right.

Over generous glasses of iced tea, she heard the story of Charlotte and Iona Stirling and their descendants. Maisie picked up a photo, showing it to Abby, "This is the ring Donald used for my wedding ring. It was on loan from Eleanor."

Jethro smiled at her, "I brought a box of jewelry home from Stillwater after Jack died and that was in it. When Tim and Ellie were selecting wedding rings, they looked in the box first. This ring originally belonged to Charlotte Stirling Baxter, my grandmother, and Maisie's aunt."

Maisie continued the tale, "At the time of our wedding, we didn't yet know of our familial connection, besides Sarah of course. You can imagine how I felt when I discovered the importance of the ring."

Abby shook her head, "That's amazing! In Gibbs' family, we don't believe in coincidences, which makes this even more special!"

Ducky and Gibbs exchanged smiles, happy to hear Abby once again include herself in the family.

From the Mallards, Gibbs drove over the wooden bridge built over the dry wash between the ranch and The Grove. He waved at some of the residents as he throttled down and slowly drove through each neighborhood. She was astounded and impressed by the setup, the look of the container homes and commented on the street names.

Gibbs pulled up to a house he believed was empty, confirming that with one of the neighbors. "Hey, Henry!"

"Jethro, hello!"

"This is Abby, making her first visit. The Stevens family moved out, correct?"

"That's right, he was hired by a geothermal outfit in California and I believe the new folks won't be here until Monday. The cleaning crew was here yesterday."

"Good to know, thanks. Thought I'd show her what the places look like inside."
The elderly man smiled at Abby, "Nicely decorated, warm and comfortable with everything we need, Miss. Will you be moving in here?"

"No, Sir. I'm also a Returnee but I'm one of the lucky ones, I came home to a job in San Diego."

"Wonderful!"

Abby returned his smile, following Jethro inside the "L" shaped home. When she entered, she looked around, nodding her head. "This is great; you guys did a good job with this. You drywalled?"

"Needed to insulate."

"Makes sense. You'd never know it's the inside of a shipping container!"

Gibbs huffed, "Tony still hasn't been in one. Says they still give him nightmares after being trapped in one with Ziva. He helped with the sites, was on the Exterior team choosing colors, painting doors and trim but never inside."

"On the docks, I remember that. Guess I can't blame him." She moved around, looking into the bedrooms and bathrooms. "Henry is right, there's everything anyone would need."

"The basics, anyway. Be nice to add a wraparound porch or a roof deck. Playrooms for the kids, I'm a big believer in those."

"Is Henry here with his family?"

"He and his wife have three grown kids they say are scattered around the world. When they arrived, the only unit available was the larger one. We were so crowded that at one point they had another family sharing with them."

"They're retired, right? Are they staying or will they have to move out?"

"They've asked to stay and rent one of the single units. Those have a small second room, which he and his wife Bess say will be just perfect. They know the unit they want and will wait until it's available. The LLC, do you know about that?"

She nodded, saying, "Yes, Ducky wrote me about it."

Jethro continued, "Good. We discussed whether we wanted to have rentals, how to handle utilities and then met with our real estate attorney and determined the monthly rent. Before they move, the power company will disconnect their new place from the development grid and add a new box for them and the water company will do the same. The whole community is on a series of septic tanks so there's no change there. Last night Tobias and I decided to build that wraparound porch for them."

"Oh, that will be great! I bet there will be several people who want to stay, a lot of retirees."

"Could be but we're thirty-three miles from the closest hospital and it's thirty miles into town. The Evacuees don't have cars when they first get here and most still don't when they leave." He shook his head, "Banking...I'm grateful Tim told us to clean out our accounts and bring the information with us. Most people live paycheck to paycheck and if they didn't have time to clean out their accounts or haven't had access to their bank, they're penniless when they arrive."

"The banking world is still working with the Evacuees to make their money accessible to them. The financial world is the slowest to respond in this whole situation, frequently the biggest obstacle to a person's recovery. Makes me wonder...the financial institutions suddenly had all this money not
immediately accessible to their customers and now they're dragging their feet about releasing the funds.

"Many of the retirees are actually better off because their pensions, annuities and Social Security checks never stopped. The grocery store is within walking distance and the manager stocks household goods too. There's also the bus and there's almost always someone at the ranch to drive people into town but we're concerned about the older folks."

"Maybe when things are sorted, you can research what's involved in a retirement community, what it would need in place and how to run it."

"Yeah, maybe. Anyway, I'm glad you like the place."

"That painting in the bedroom is beautiful."

"Thank Ellie for that! She's taken up painting or resumed painting to relieve stress, says she first started while she was at the NSA. She's also in touch with three artists who live in Greece; one of them is a cousin of our neighbors the Ortizes. The three of them had an auction in Athens for some of their works and then donated the money to the Evacuees. They've also sent clothes and other items to help out."

"Wow, that's something, grass roots help on a global scale!"

Gibbs nodded, "We've heard that clothing, shoes, and household items have been sent from countries, allies or not, on every continent. Tim told me a group of scientists in Antarctica sent boxes, which makes the relief effort truly global."

Abby thought about that. "Sometimes instantly knowing what's happening in the world is a headache - and heartache. In this case, it's pretty cool that people everywhere are responding to our need for help."

They left the house, Gibbs locking the door behind them. Waving goodbye to Henry, they climbed back on the ATV. "By now, the construction crew is done for the day; want to see the horse barn and new home sites?"

"Yes please!"

Gibbs took a long way around, first showing her the rest of the container homes, the Laundry Barns and the small grouping of guesthouses before driving over the bridge. Back on ranch property, he turned left and using a well-worn path, drove through a field of wildflowers to the new barn. Steve's crew was finished with the building and nearly finished with the paddock.

Abby shook her head at the barn. "My tough as nails, metropolitan DC feds have totally gone country! I know Ellie has a horse in Oklahoma, is it moving here?"

"Yes, Acorn and she's here already. Tim owns a horse now too, Vámonos. He learned to ride him over at the Ortiz ranch and he's still stabled there along with Acorn. When the barn and corral are ready, they'll move over. Ty and Brynie are still wild about riding so they'll probably end up with ponies or horses too." He looked at Abby, "You ride?"

"Only carousel horses!"

Chuckling, he maneuvered the ATV back onto the graveled road and headed for the new home sites. Abby gasped as they rode over a small rise. Except for the work on the first three homes, which looked about halfway complete, the surrounding terrain sprawled out before them was beautiful and
looked pristine, untouched. She muttered "Lewis and Clark" to herself.

Gibbs was puzzled, "Did you say 'Lewis and Clark'? They were farther north."

"Well yes but the effect is the same. Virgin land untouched by American/European/Western civilization." She looked around, "How far are we from the ranch house?"

"Just over that rise." He pointed, "About an eighth of a mile."

"Wow, this is incredible! Will they be the only ones out here?"

"No, there's room for Kelly and Rob to build if/when they want."

"All your kids."

Not quite ready to address that particular elephant in the ATV with them, Gibbs chose to deflect.

"When they first started the project, they were going to build out beyond the horse barn. Then the architect suggested moving the guesthouses. Much to our relief!"

"Here they'll be close to the main house but far enough away to build the houses they want?"

"Yeah. And we have 600 acres, no reason for all of us to be jammed onto two or three of them."

"How big are the sites?"

"Two acres each. Tim and Ellie's will be the closest to the barn and paddock. You can see a bit of the layout from the first three buildings. There will also be a pool that we'll share, heavily fenced and secured, of course. The fence surrounding the Ortiz pool is 12-foot high with a mechanized cover when it's not in use and we'll do that too. The kids, that is, my kids, have also been talking about a community garden, which means guarding against deer and rabbits and I wouldn't be surprised if we end up with a few goats and sheep. They'd help keep the grasses down and we could shear them and sell the wool. It'll be a lot of work though as the animals have to be inside at night. I know from my Gibbs' grandparents that sheep and goats can be stubborn. So we'll see."

"This road will be paved after construction is done. No sense doing it now, it'd be all torn up by the time the houses are done. If you look closely, you can see the stakes for each site."

"Oh yeah. Those are big sites! Will they all be the same style?" She squinted after she asked; the three houses in progress didn't look like they were the same style.

"So far, no. They've each met with the architect and have their own wish lists. All of them will be one story. Tim and Ellie's is...I've lost track of the number of bedrooms, 6 last I heard, with 3½ baths. It'll be New Mexican adobe with a usable courtyard in front and a very large fenced backyard with a shaded patio, fenced play area, garden and native trees.

"Tony and Maggie's will be rustic modern, built of woods native to the region. Geordie and Bec are going for a cabin-style house built of wood with a metal roof. They're taking that plot," he pointed to one that was nestled closer to the trees. "The Palmers are going with an adobe with an interior courtyard. I haven't seen the plans for the Hubbards or Cranes."

She thought about Jimmy and Breena's plans, "Interior courtyard? Does that mean the house will be built around it? That sounds interesting."

"The original interior courtyard homes were Mexican or maybe Spanish, I'm not sure. Jimmy and
Breena have been looking at photos online, some are spectacular.”

She nodded, thinking she'd ask her friends to show her.

Once she'd had her fill of looking at the home sites, they drove back to the house and Gibbs took her through the basement to the shelter tunnel, flicking on the overhead light when they came to his workbench. It was still outside the last door into the shelter. Abby smiled at the light and Jethro nodded, "Tim wired an overhead light and an outlet so I had a floor lamp too. Worked well."

"That's so cool you had a workbench. Were you working on baby furniture?"

"Some toward the end. In the beginning, I was making shelves for everyone. Rick and Denise have a shelf that fastens onto their headboard and I made similar ones for the kids and several other people too. And Abby, I brought my workbench from home; I'll show you our workshop later."

She smiled, loving that and then gasped as they walked into the shelter, "It's a giant cave, a giant round cave!"

"Yeah, that's what Shannon calls it, a concrete cave."

She examined the kitchen, approving of the three dressers still in use as a kitchen island and the tables and chairs that were still there. She also liked the setup of the common area with the few pieces of furniture still in place.

He showed her the various rooms, telling her the story of the teens' rooms with the nearly deaf couple on one side, a bathroom in the middle and Ellie's two night owl cousins on the other side. She got a kick out of that.

The NCIS folks still staying in the existing rooms had their names on their bedroom doors. Abby touched the signs of people she knew. When she came to an empty room, she poked her head inside and understood why the dressers were outside the rooms themselves.

"I can't believe this, I mean I can because obviously you lived in here but it's so big and you have everything!"

She saw the garden room, commenting on the still flourishing plants, smiled as she saw the bookshelves in the library, nearly empty now as the books were gradually moved up to the house library. Gibbs told her how the NCIS agents had commandeered the room once they had internet capability. "They could work in private in here but when they needed to make phone calls, they had to go out to one of the tunnels." She just shook her head.

The media room had a couple of TVs, DVD players and a few DVDs still there and Abby grinned as she heard about their daily Disney movies and the marathons of TV shows, movie series and what Tony called "Actors' Showcase" where every film with a specific actor was shown. Vance's boxing ring was still set up in the fitness room as well as some of the other equipment. The cork from the walking path and the other cork flooring was now in the house nursery and playroom but Abby could see the lines where Shannon marked off parts of a mile on the concrete.

She smiled at the aquariums still there and going strong. With the power still on, Tim and Ellie decided to leave the fish and turtles where they were until their new house was ready. The NCIS folks and other evacuees who stayed in the shelter commented on how soothing it was to watch the fish and fun to watch the turtles.

The classroom was empty of textbooks, students, and teachers but some of the tables, chairs and Mel's room divider were still there. From there, Abby looked at the animal shelter, laughing at some
of the signs over what had obviously been pet beds. She especially liked the one Tim's kids made for their dog, including a photo of their pet. It said, "This spot belongs to Neo Gibbs. Trespassing is prohibited unless you have treats!"

She was still marveling at everything as they returned to the house and now she noticed the planter boxes in the basement, complete with grow lights and another small water tank and oddly, rectangular chalk marks up high on the wall. "Why still inside?"

He told her about Bec's concerns and priorities, adding in Tim's use of Amazon to ship large bags of clean soil to the ranch, their use of the seeds and rootstock from the Virginia grown plants. He looked around, saying, "Unless we build a greenhouse, which I can see happening after the houses are done, we'll keep plants going in here, we can grow year around that way. Those marks are for clerestory windows we'll have put in. Tim plans to do something to them so they can be opened with a remote."

Abby huffed, "This was a massive undertaking, all of it. So much planning and doing, I'm really impressed."

"That's my boy. Tim was the one who got us going and kept us going. The first night he told Ellie what the threat was they made a list of people, things that had to be done, things that were needed. And then he got to work. Jerry, Ellie's dad, heard the rumors and told Tim when we were here at Easter, geez that's nearly a year ago!" Gibbs told her more of what happened, finishing with, "By the time we heard about it, Jerry had already found this shelter for us and Tim had already moved funds to pay for it."

"He knew all that time? He paid for it? You said that before, that Gemcity bought a luxury shelter."

"Yep, Jerry told him the total and he didn't even blink. Said later it was only money and family comes first. Shannon and I paid for our kids, grandkids, Mac and us. The Bishops paid their share, although we first deducted what Jerry paid for the generators and a few other things. And others have chipped in. Ducky paid for himself and the Palmers, the Slates paid their way, the Vances, Hubbards, and Cranes paid for their families. You haven't met them yet. Yes, Tim was determined. And no, he didn't know everything when Jerry told him the rumor. He didn't figure out the 'when' until the day before we left. He went over to Ducky's and," Gibbs told Abby how Tim figured out the last piece of information.

"Oh my God, Gibbs, I had no idea! We missed so much. It was hard to get U.S. news where we were living in Belize; we only heard what made it to the international news."

"The President's addresses are all on YouTube."

"I'll watch those." She looked at him in surprise, "You know about YouTube?"

"Sure. They played the All-Star game a few weeks after the attack but we didn't get to see it. Jerry found the game on YouTube when the internet was available again and we watched the whole thing plus the rest of the games we missed. Found some woodworking tutorials too, it's great!"

Wisely, she kept her comments to herself, thinking all he'd really needed to join the electronic world were things that interested him. Things he didn't need a team to find for him in order to solve crimes.

NCIS NCIS NCIS NCIS

Back on the main floor of the house, Sarah and Shannon were home from Sarah's medical appointment. Sarah was resting while Shannon was heating a bottle for Mackie, who'd gone with
them. He was in his little carry seat, sitting on the table, watching his grandmother fix his lunch. As Jethro and Abby entered the kitchen, Shannon turned.

"There you are! Abby, welcome to Rancho La Serenidad!" She handed the bottle to her husband and kissed Abby.

"Thank you, Shannon; I'm excited to finally be here! Gibbs gave me the grand tour."

"Ah, you saw all our houses?"

"Even the interior of one. And met one of the residents. I also met Maisie; we had tea with them, saw the new barn and the home sites and had a tour of the shelter."

"Isn't that something? Took nearly 16 months to rehab this house for family vacations and then those idiots decide to blow up DC. Anyway, here we are, safe and sound, if a bit crowded at present." Shannon smiled as Jethro removed Mackie from his seat and sat down to feed him.

"And this is Mackie. Isn't he beautiful?"

Abby was glad she didn't have to lie, most newborns looked like aliens to her but at five months, little Mackie was a beautiful blend of his parents and...

"He is, looks like both Tim and Ellie. And Gibbs, he looks like you too!"

Jethro nodded, a little smug.

Shannon smiled, "Ellie says she never thought she looked anything like Jerry, her dad, but now she sees him in Mackie. And that's fitting because his middle name is Gerard."

"For Ellie's dad, that's sweet." She looked at Gibbs, "Is one of the others going to have Leroy or Jethro in his name?"

Gibbs shook his head. "Asked them not to. None of them will have Gibbs as a surname so I wouldn't mind that as a middle name but LJ's gone and I don't see any need to perpetuate the names. Rather they use Jackson, Anne, Charlotte or Robert if they want to use Gibbs' family names."

"What about Jack's parents?"

"Zebulon and Esther."

"Zeb's kind of cool and Esther is a pretty name."

Shannon smiled again before saying, "We don't know whether the new babies will have family names or names all their own. I'm pretty sure Baby DiNozzo is a girl but I don't have feelings either way on the other two."

Abby grinned at her, "You think it's a girl because Tony was such a player."

Shannon grinned back at her. "You know what they say about payback!"

Jethro made an amused noise, jostling the baby a little and Mackie stopped guzzling his bottle to give him a look, making all three adults laugh aloud.

Still laughing, Abby said, "He may look like a blend of his parents but that was definitely a Tim look!"
After he finished lunch, Abby held him for a few minutes. He was quiet, examining her with his big brown eyes. She smiled at him, "Brown eyes from his mom."

"Yes and that will be nice for Lia as she grows up, to have a brown-eyed sibling."

Sarah appeared in the doorway, "I'm sure they'll have at least one brown-eyed cousin. I mean besides their Bishop cousins. Hi, Abby!"

She waddled over to give her a hug, making sure not to squish Mackie in the process.

"Wow Sarah, you look like you're ready to go any minute!"

She chuckled, "You think this is bad, wait until you see Maggie! She looks like she's got three kids inside her!"

"How about Geordie's wife?"

"Not quite as elephant sized as Maggie and I are."

Gibbs looked at his daughter, "Had a swim yet today?"

"No, you want to go with me?"

"Sure. Abby, did you bring your swim things?"

"Yes and I'm excited about swimming without worrying about sunburn!"

Shannon nodded, "It's wonderful; we swam all winter. Of course, we drove to the pool, which is a three-minute walk and huddled in blankets all the way back! We're still driving over; it's easier with all of the baby's paraphernalia. It'll be a challenge to see how we fit all four babies and their stuff into one car after everyone's on the outside."

Gibbs frowned, "Is Maggie lying down? I thought she had an appointment too."

"She did but another patient went into labor so Maggie had to wait to see the other OB. Tony's with her."

"He's bringing her home?"

"Yes. Tim and Ellie will bring Arin home with their gang."

Abby shook her head, "It's already hard to keep them straight!"

Shannon laughed, "Oh we know, Abby, we know! It's going to be complete chaos for several months and then things will settle down."

When Jethro snorted, they all laughed and Mackie made a happy noise.

After carefully handing over the baby, Abby went upstairs to change into her swimsuit. She grabbed her towel and then on second thought, emptied out her carry-on bag and put her dry clothes in it. No need to climb the stairs again. When she appeared in the kitchen with her bag, Shannon nodded, "Smart! A couple of times a day are enough on those stairs. The good news is it's quieter up there. Mackie is still sleeping in his parents' room and they're on the first floor until he's ready to sleep in the nursery."

Shannon had the baby in a baby sling and Abby helped Gibbs carry some of the baby gear. Sarah
reappeared with a towel. "Sorry I can't carry anything."

"That's all right, Sari. You're carrying enough already!"

Inside the climate control dome, they found Ducky and Maisie relaxing in the water. Mackie sat in a little flotation chair on a deck around the pool built by Jethro, Jerry and Tobias. He watched, mouthing a baby-safe soft toy while his Nonny and Poppy swam a few laps. Sarah floated, moaning in happiness as the buoyancy of the water helped relieve her pregnancy weight. Abby plunged right in, squealing in glee at the warm temperature. She laughed when Mackie squealed back at her.
Chapter 10

MEETING THE CLAN, SURPRISES

By 1800, everyone but the on duty Dr. Kelly and the sleeping Dr. Rob was at the ranch and Abby couldn't stop smiling, she was so happy to see them all. Tim, Tony, Maggie, Ellie and Jimmy had tears in their eyes when they hugged and kissed her in greeting. Tim said, "When Dad told us you weren't going with us, I almost cried. We were so afraid we'd never see you again once we all left. Then we saw you at the diner and that was it."

Tony nodded, "The day you called the shelter, Pete Ware answered the phone and he came into the library saying someone asked for 'el jefe'. We nearly knocked him down as we ran out, knowing it was you." He didn't think it necessary to tell her that Pete reported someone screeching at Jethro.

"I missed you guys too. Tony, I'm sorry I was so weird that day. You must have thought I'd lost my mind."

"That's okay, Abby. Everyone's been under a lot of stress."

Gibbs cleared his throat and his former team, Jimmy and Maggie fell silent much to the amusement of the rest of the family. "We didn't want to overwhelm you the first night so it's just us for dinner. Tomorrow we're having a barbecue for everyone. Tobias and Mel, the Vances, Kelly, Rob and Ali, the Fullers, Ned, Tim's techs, Pam Cook and her husband and the rest of the NCIS gang. Plus our new relatives and family: Tim and Sarah's godparents, Maisie's son and his family. I believe we also invited several of the Ortiz family. Their ranch is next to us on the other side."

"Oh, the people you met when you and Tim were here?"

"Yes, when we were here on our undercover case."

When she frowned, several heads nodded yes, emphatically. She thought about it; they came back here, couldn't say they'd been in protective custody so must have made up an undercover case.

"Uh, does everyone know about that?"

"Yes."

"Ok, good! Who's Mel?"

Bec explained and Abby beamed, glad to hear Tobias was in a happy relationship. She liked happy, approved of happy, she just couldn't deal with the whole commitment thing.

Dinner was delicious and she enjoyed hearing about their lives in the shelter and sharing her stories of Belize with them, editing for young ears where necessary. After all the children were in bed, she, Tim, Jimmy, Tony, and Gibbs bundled up and borrowing Geo's Jeep, drove several minutes to the top of a hill. Standing beside the Jeep, Abby turned in circles, awed at the starlight. She thought it possible the entire Milky Way was visible and Tim said the elevation was only about 1000 feet! The utter lack of ambient light certainly helped.

"Ooh, Perseid Meteor showers, harvest moons, super moons! Falling stars, so much to see!"
"We were still in the shelter for the Perseid last year and Ellie was in labor during the last super moon. Huh, we'll have to tell Mackie that when he's older, record that in his baby book, he was born under a super moon. We bring the kids out here to teach them the constellations and to see falling stars. It's so cool!"

"You could camp out here!"

Gibbs shook his head. "It's not safe, Abby. Maybe in an RV with a rifle or two. There's plenty of wildlife around. Black bears, mountain lions, bobcats, coyotes, and grey foxes live out here and they can all be aggressive."

"Wow! Yeah, bears and mountain lions would have me sleeping in the car!"

As Abby later climbed the stairs to her room, she smiled in relief. She'd been a little worried about her reception; she knew she'd pulled away from the family when Gibbs and Tim discovered their relationship; actually, it was probably before that, when Tim got hurt in Somalia. It was as if Gibbs suddenly discovered he was a person and some of the attention usually given her transferred to Tim, or so it seemed. She hadn't liked that at all. Shannon and Kelly's reappearance drove her further away, no matter what a miracle that was or how close they held her. To be accurate, emotionally she pulled far and fast away from them.

There was just too much change for her, along with Gibbs confronting her about all the crap she'd pulled on Tim and other people. When his attitude changed from considering her a daughter to someone he couldn't trust, she was hurt, no matter how much she deserved his anger and disappointment. She was upset that she had to change; she was still working on that but at least she had a clearer idea of what she'd done over the years and how to avoid that mean streak in the future. There was a reason for the maxim 'power corrupts'.

Now she understood there was room for her in the family, probably always had been and that she'd always been loved. In the past year, she'd learned more about the complexities of families, learned about love, acceptance and forgiveness. In an ironic twist, spending time with Kyle and then with Jeanette's family in Belize taught her about much of that.

Yes, she would be miles away but she had an opportunity to start fresh with them. She'd resume her role of 'awesome Aunt Abby' with the children; she'd been happily surprised when Ty, Brynie and Victoria ran straight into her arms this afternoon. Teddy, Lia and Ricky were a little shy at first but they quickly warmed up, as did Tony and Maggie's son Arin. Holding the baby had been all right too.

Ellie and Breena showed her around town on Saturday; they met Kelly for lunch and they all had a good time. Sunday she was invited to attend a church service with the Gibbses or she could attend Mass with the DiNozzos. Afterward, Jimmy and Breena were taking her to Santa Fe to see the sights there. Monday she'd have her office tour and hoped for some time with Leon. Her trip to Taos was, by unanimous agreement, postponed until her next visit when there would not be three women ready to go into labor. She'd purposely made this trip short, in Friday, out Tuesday; next time she'd come for a full week.

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The party Saturday was something she would never have expected from Gibbs; it felt like a community barbecue. People started arriving around 4:00 and everyone brought something. Abby once again fought tears when the adult Vances folded her into their arms and she was greeted with hugs by the twins.
Seeing so many people from DC nearly did her in; in her brain, she knew Albuquerque was currently the agency's headquarters but her heart hadn't realized that meant familiar faces. Emily and Tobias Fornell, Jim O'Brien and a new significant other, she was glad Tony told her beforehand, Evan Fuller, Fred from Accounting, Pam Cook, Delores Bromstead, Natalie who'd sat the 'next aisle' over from the Gibbs/DiNozzo bullpen for more than a decade. Janice Bracco, Nikki Jardine, who said she was still warming up from Maine and Ned Dorneget who brought his partner, one of Tim's friends from the camp in Baltimore. Bill, another old friend from the camp, he was one of the original shelter folks still living in it. She even knew a few of Tim's staff.

Since her arrival, she felt like she'd returned home and now that feeling was reinforced by so many old friends. She missed Rick and Denise Carter, they'd always been a mainstay of the NCIS social group, but she was happy to hear how much they loved London and several people talked about visiting them.

New faces, new friends: she met Bec's aunt, Tobias' partner Mel Blake, Tim and Sarah's godparents Dave and Liz Crane and their boys, the Hubbards, Jim, Claire and the three children, the crowd of Ortizes attending, Pete Ware home in between runs, Aunty Cissy and Uncle John Bishop, Ali and Trish, Haley Chalmers and several others. She had a wonderful time and vowed to return as often as she could. It was too bad she couldn't live here but it really was too sunny and arid for her.

Sunday she went to an early church service with the Gibbses and smiled as she was introduced to more of their friends. Afterward, she climbed into the Palmers' car and they drove to Santa Fe. That was fun too; she loved the native dancers, Old Town, the art galleries and the museums. By Sunday evening, she was ready for an early night and her first visit to the new headquarters in the morning.

Over the busy weekend, she managed to find time with Ducky and Gibbs to further explain her problem with San Diego and her hope to transfer to Seattle. Both men thought about it, pointing out that Vance had gone to bat in San Diego in creating that second shift for her. They warned her to be prepared for some pushback from Vance and the SSAIC in Seattle who might not want the extra expense of a second shift in the lab.

Abby hadn't thought much about the extra cost money to keep the lab up and running from 7 AM to 12 AM five days a week. Because the San Diego and Seattle labs had multiple forensic scientists, they rarely worked overtime. Abby had not filled an empty spot on staff when she returned from Belize; she was additional staff, one that had not been budgeted for the office. That meant an extra salary as well as additional equipment and power usage. Vance moved funds around to meet San Diego's extra expenses but Gibbs pointed out he might not be so willing to do it again because she didn't like the sunshine and the culture in southern California.

Gently Ducky reminded her that the only reason she'd had to work such long hours in DC and Vance created a second shift for her in San Diego was because of her refusal to work with anyone. He thought she'd have a better chance of a transfer to Seattle if she agreed to work with the other scientists. Gibbs was glad his old friend was candid; she needed to hear the truth.

While she was grateful they'd been frank with her, she was unsure what to do. She hadn't thought about any of that. When she woke Monday morning, she'd decided to go ahead with her plan, although she'd tweak it a bit. She'd thank the director for his kindness and when she asked to move to Seattle, she'd agree to work the day shift with the others. She'd already looked them up and knew there was a supervisory position that was solidly occupied. If she wanted to do this, she'd not only have to work with others, she would have to report to one of them. That was a big piece of humble pie and she had until 10 AM to swallow it or abandon her plan and stick it out in San Diego.

Finally deciding to pitch her proposal and see what her boss had to say, she dressed in her new,
modified version of Abby normal, slacks, top and boots. No dog collar or pigtails; her hair was tucked behind her ears. At work, she usually wore it in a simple ponytail or a top knot. In Belize, with a little help from Lukas' former mother-in-law, she'd even mastered an upside down braided bun.

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Downstairs, she joined Tim for breakfast. The field agents were already at the office but Tim had conference calls on Monday morning that he preferred to handle from home. Most of the older folks were home today, keeping their eyes on Maggie, Bec, and Sarah and taking care of Mackie, Lia and Ricky. While the toddlers enjoyed day-care, they also enjoyed days at home with their older playmates. Or as Tobias nicknamed all the child-minders, the kids' 'minions'.

Tim smiled at Abby as they drove into town. "Are you excited about seeing the office?"

She laughed, "Yeah and I know it's weird but even after seeing almost everyone on Saturday, I feel like I still need to see the agency in action."

"Did Leon get in touch with you this morning?"

"No, why?"

"He called me earlier, said he wants to talk with you about something."

"I'll text him, thanks." A minute later she grimaced, "Uh oh, had my cell phone off!"

Tim chuckled, "That's okay, he doesn't follow Gibbs' rules and you are on vacation, after all!"

"Can I ask you something?"

"Sure."

"What's it like to be so happy? You're so different now. I mean I know you're stressed with a new baby and lack of sleep but otherwise you seem so happy."

"I am happy, the happiest I've ever been. In the year since we last saw each other, I've gone from being constantly worried about the threat of an attack and then getting everyone and everything here to the happiest guy on the planet. Sounds selfish with so many people dead and displaced, so much loss, but can't help it.

"I just know I'm so happy I'm reluctant to say it aloud. Happy and well satisfied with my life. I'm married to my best friend, the love of my life, blessed with four great kids and wonderful parents I never expected to have. Sure, I hoped that Gibbs would someday care about me as much as he did you and Tony but I never thought about actually being his son. And my mother, wow! I never had a mother before and I have to tell you, she's great. I had no idea how great having a mom could be."

She made a noise. "I forget you lost your adoptive mother when you were, what? Lia's age?"

He nodded, "Just about. I'm sure Lily would have been a great mother but by the time I reconnected with my mom, she was all broken in. Kelly did a great job with her."

She laughed at that. "Does she know that?"

"Kelly does. Haven't said it to Mom."

"You should someday; I bet she'd love it."
They both laughed lightly as Tim pulled into the parking garage. Abby's phone buzzed and she read the text from Vance. "He wants me to come directly to his office."

"All right, I'll take you up; it's the floor below us."

"Nice not to be in the basement, huh?"

"I like it but my staff is still a little freaked by it. Apparently, they liked the separation from the big scary field agents. And I want them to interact more with the field agents!"

"Maybe more off-hours interaction first, like Saturday?"

"That's a great idea, thanks!"

He signed her in at security, agreeing when she said she missed Henry their security guard. "Dad says they're having a great time in Puerto Rico."

"Good, he totally deserves it!"

She waved at people as they stepped out of the elevator and walked to Vance's office suite. Pam was waiting and told Tim she'd give Abby a tour after her chat with Vance. Tim flashed Abby a thumbs up as he left and she smiled.

This trip had been worth everything, no matter what Vance had to say, she felt like she'd found her way again. And maybe best of all, Tim was still her friend. Now she needed to be his friend too.

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While he waited for his forensic guru, Leon thought about what options he had if she wasn't interested in his idea. He could shuffle people around but they'd had so much of that this past year he wanted to avoid more. As Pam ushered Abby into his office, both visitor and Director relaxed.

Curious about Vance's call, Abby waited for him to start the conversation.

"Dr. Sciuto, we have a situation in one of our offices. Our lead forensic scientist in the Great Lakes office has given notice. I know you prefer to work by yourself and that you don't have a lot of supervisory experience. However, I wanted to run it by you, see if you're interested. And if you're not, perhaps you have a recommendation."

Abby was so astounded she had to clench her teeth to keep her jaw from dropping open. She sat like that for a full minute while Vance gave the appearance of waiting patiently, forcing himself not to fidget.

Finally, she said, "I love Chicago, there's so much to do and there are seasons there. Is it possible to have supervisory training before the start date?"

"Yes, we can do that. Bailey gave us 60 days' notice; I'm sure we can find a DoD course in management and we'll have you shadow him for part of that time. You don't mind leaving San Diego?"

She grinned at him. "I planned to ask if I could transfer to Seattle, for the weather mostly. Too much sun and surf in San Diego. I was also going to work with the rest of the staff."

He laughed, "Then this works for you! No danger of too much sun in Chicago; there are definitely four seasons! But that hot rod of yours won't work in the Chicago winters."
She shrugged, "I'll figure it out."

After a little more discussion, they both stood and he shook her hand. "Congratulations, Dr. Sciuto! You understand this is a promotion and a formal transfer, the agency will pay for your move?"

Her smile grew wider and he nodded.

Pam smiled as Abby floated out of the director's inner sanctum. "You ready for your tour or do you want a few minutes?"

Abby blinked. "Do you mind waiting a few minutes? I want to call Gibbs and Ducky."

The other woman nodded, "Not a problem, take your time. There's a conference room back there," she pointed over her shoulder, "it's all yours."

"Thanks!" Once inside the room with the door closed, Abby called Gibbs.

"Hey Abby, how did it go?"

"Is Ducky anywhere nearby?"

"He's right here; we were just having tea together. You're on speaker."

"I haven't told anyone else yet, I'm still in the director's suite. The forensic supervisor at Great Lakes gave notice and Leon offered me the job. I'm going to Chicago and I'm going to run the lab!"

"That's wonderful, congratulations!" She heard Ducky offering his congratulations too.

"The guy who's leaving gave 60 days' notice so there's time for me to take a management course and Vance indicated he'd arrange a mentor for me too. I'll also be able to shadow Bailey."

She grinned at the pleased comments from her mentors. "Thanks, guys. You gave me a lot to think about so I was prepared to say I could handle working with the other techs in Seattle. After he offered Great Lakes, I told him what I was going to ask for this morning. This is more than I ever expected!"

They talked for a few minutes before disconnecting. Returning to Pam, Abby beamed at her, "I'm ready for my tour!"

"Good and I have some information for you. There's a three-week DoD management course in Denver starting the week after next."

"Oh yay, I can do that! Is any of it online?"

"No, I looked at the 'Questions and Answers'. There are role-playing scenarios so it's all done in person."

"All right. What about a place to stay, do I pay for that?"

"No, the agency pays for your room and gives you a per diem for meals. Once the director signs off on the course, I'll get all that set up and send the information to you. Or do you want a printed copy?"

Abby shook her head, "Not necessary."

"Any preferences for hotel rooms?"
"Non-smoking and close to wherever I'm going to be. Will I need a car?"

"I'll let you know and we only book into non-smoking hotels."

Reassured, Abby nodded and the two of them left for the tour. They took the elevator down to the autopsy suite where Jimmy had just finished a remote robotic autopsy. The assistant at the other end was moving the body as Dr. Palmer signed off, ready to do his report. He grinned at the two women, "Perfect timing and I've already given my verbal report to the Team Lead. The written can wait two minutes while you take a look around."

Abby shook her head, "Fewer tables and freezer drawers, more electronics and a bigger office."

"Yes. All our suites will have this equipment now. So if I'm out on vacation and we have a body here one of my counterparts can handle the autopsy remotely."

"Do you like it?"

"Yeah, it's great. I can concentrate on the autopsy and I always have an assistant at the remote site."

She had a few more questions and then she and Pam moved on to the lab. Abby smiled as she saw the familiar face, her former vacation fill-in Ginger had been hired for the lab here although she was not the supervisor. Two others were currently off-site for training. Abby was ready to burst with her news but didn't say anything. She was having lunch with Tony, Tim, Ellie, Jimmy, Bob and Ned and wanted to tell them first.

From the lab, they took a quick peek at the holding cells, currently empty and the fitness center where a couple of people were using the treadmills. From there the two visited the evidence garage and lockup before traveling upstairs to the squad room where Abby made a beeline to DiNozzo's bullpen. His team had closed a particularly complex case the previous week and was off rotation, concentrating on the paperwork. Now the agents greeted her with smiles and hugs. Natalie, Jim O'Brien and some of the others joined the crowd and it was several minutes before everyone quieted down. As Abby had seen most of them Saturday, there was no need for a long stay and after she gave a loving pat to the orange wall, she was on her way to Tim's lair.

Pam took her to the door and then left her to return to work. When Abby walked in, she grinned. The large room was bright and airy. While there were cubicles, there were also comfortable looking couches and chairs scattered in the corners and along the back wall along with a few vending machines. She saw a couple of techs on the couches with their laptops but more were at the workstations. There were posters along with a banner welcoming someone new and she remembered Tim mentioning he'd just brought on a new tech. She waved to Pringle and the others as she made her way to Tim's office, which was bigger than she expected. She thought it would be large enough for a desk, a credenza and a couple of chairs for visitors but he had a full-size couch, conference table and chairs. The office of a regional director.

Tim smiled, saying, "You're awfully happy."

"I am! I'll tell everyone at lunch. I called Ducky and your dad."

He grinned at her; this was the first time she'd ever referred to Gibbs as his father. This must be big, whatever it was. He'd heard a rumor but decided to be patient.

He didn't have long to wait. After a peek at the rooftop deck, they took the elevator down to the lobby where they met the rest of the lunch bunch. From there they walked to their favorite café. Once everyone was seated, Tony and Tim looked at each other, then at Abby, saying in unison,
"Spill!"

She laughed while she nodded. "Over the weekend I spoke with Gibbs and Ducky about an idea I had. I'm not crazy about San Diego; I'm off in the mornings and early afternoon and it's all sunshine and surfers. It isn't really but the vibe isn't anywhere close to my comfort zone and I need at least two seasons, four is better.

"Anyway, I wanted to talk with Vance today but thought I'd run it by my mentors first. They had some points for me to consider and I did, so I went into the director's office with a modified request. However, he beat me to it. The lead forensic scientist at Great Lakes just gave notice and he offered me the job! It's a transfer and a promotion; I'll be in charge of four other techs. The tech that's leaving, Bailey, gave 60 days' notice, which gives me time to take a management-training course and to spend a week or so learning from him."

"Wow, that's wonderful, congratulations!" Abby beamed as her friends responded to her good news. Ellie looked at her, "Out of curiosity, what were you going to request?"

"A lateral transfer to Seattle and I'd be willing to work with the other techs."

"Seattle would be good too, it's a great city. But this is a promotion and it's Chicago!"

"I know, huh? I'm so excited! My training class starts the week after next in Denver, so I'll fly home and start packing, do the course and then return to San Diego one last time to get moved."

Bob remembered his permanent transfer four years ago. "Pam will send you a whole packet of information. You'll have 30 days to find a new place to live and when you do, the agency flies you home to meet the movers. During those 30 days, you'll probably stay in a residence hotel near the office and you'll have a relocation agent who'll do the research for you."

"Wow, that's more than I thought! Thanks, Bob."

After lunch, she walked back to the office with them and then took Tim's keys. She'd drive Ellie's truck back to the ranch while he'd ride home in the van with Ellie, Ty, and Brynie. Having seen a few stores she wanted to revisit, she made a few stops but was back early enough for a nice long swim with the pregnant ladies, the Grands, Greats, Lia, Ricky and Mackie. The ladies sighed in relief as they floated in the water. Mackie floated on his little mat, squealing happily while Lia and Ricky played with each other and the adults.

Abby never stopped smiling the rest of the day. During her swim, she decided to sell the hot rod. She knew parking could be a problem in Chicago and she wouldn't be able to drive it in the winter. Why keep it when there was plenty of public transportation? She said as much to Gibbs and he immediately offered to buy it. After letting Jared know and making a flight reservation for the next morning, she and Gibbs figured out the details of the sale.

Saying goodbye Tuesday morning wasn't easy but now she knew she still belonged and was determined to spend more time with her family. She thought she'd spend holidays with them, maybe not both Thanksgiving and Christmas but one of the two every year. Plus Easter and the Fourth of July, maybe even the Presidents' Day weekend. Tony drove her to the airport on his way to work, giving her a good strong hug to hold her until her next visit.

When Shannon asked her husband what he planned to do with the hot rod, he smiled, "Disconnect the battery, remove the tires and put it up on blocks until Abby's next visit, then she'll have her own wheels." Shannon smiled, loving her husband's generosity.
The family had no time to dwell on Abby's departure as Maggie went into labor shortly before noon that day. Her father, Shannon and Jethro drove her to the hospital where they were joined by an anxious Tony and Dr. Rob.

Juliet Patricia DiNozzo entered the world at 6:45 the next morning, weighing in at a healthy 8 lbs. 11 oz., measuring 20 inches long. She was named for her two grandmothers: Juliet DiNozzo and Patricia Barnes. Mother and daughter did well and Daddy was all right once he knew his wife and baby were fine. Rob never told anyone that he'd had to catch his eldest brother from falling at one point, maneuvering him onto a stool and giving him oxygen.

The day before Maggie and their baby daughter came home from the hospital, Tony approached his adoptive parents. "Mm, do you two have a moment?"

Shannon smiled, patting the chair next to her in the ranch kitchen where she and Jethro were enjoying a mid-morning coffee. "Of course, son. Sit!"

He sat down but was almost immediately up again. Jethro watched him, having an idea what was bothering him. "Rip it off, Tony, like a bandage."

Tony nodded, took a deep breath and said, "I don't know what to do about Senior."

Shannon frowned, "You mean as far as the baby?"

"Yes. We told him when we got married and we told him we were evacuating here. And you know his response to my news that we were safe. "Good" and nothing else. We haven't told him about Arin or that Maggie was pregnant."

Jethro added, "Or your adoption."

"Right. This probably sounds like a whine but if he can't be bothered with positive attention, I'm not going to risk any negative attention from him. He's not worth it."

Shannon looked at him, "You don't want him to know anything about your life?"

Tony nodded, "He doesn't care and if I tell him about Juliet I'll have to tell him everything."

"And what do you think he'd do? What would the consequences be?"

He shrugged, "Nothing. Oh, he might officially write me out of his will but I don't want his money anyway."

"What if he opted to leave money or property for your children?"

"Yeah, see that's another problem. I'm afraid he'd snub Arin; he wouldn't count because he wasn't born a DiNozzo and it'd go to Juliet. And I don't want to create a situation with my children."

Jethro sighed, "What if you're wrong? What if he'd be happy for you?"
Tony's eyes widened, "Dad, when was the last time he made any effort toward me?"

That point was conceded by a tilt of Jethro's head.

Shannon shook her head, "Tell me more about him. I know you lost your mother when you were little and the rest of your childhood was rough, but I don't know details."

Tony huffed, telling her about his mother's illness and death, Senior's subsequent serial marriages and divorces, warehousing him at boarding schools, summer camps, leaving him behind at a hotel in Hawaii for several days, neglecting to show up for any of his graduations. "He sent his personal assistant for my high school graduation but didn't bother with anyone for college. I got through college on athletic scholarships, which was fine. But he never came to any of my games or acknowledged that I was doing well or called when I was injured, nothing." He huffed again, "Last time we talked about his marriages, there was one he'd never even bothered to tell me about until it was over."

Shannon sighed, "I can't fault you for wanting to withhold information from him, sure doesn't sound like he cares. But he also sounds conflicted and impulsive, especially where you're concerned. I understand he showed up at the agency a few times."

Jethro and Tony both huffed, "And caused trouble every time."

"Intentionally?"

Tony grimaced, "He claimed it was never intentional but he does like attention, especially if he can make money from it."

Jethro nodded emphatically. "Yes." He thought for a moment before facing his eldest, "Tony, it really is up to you; you know we'll support your decision. And there's no judgment, son, if that's what you're worried about."

"I want to do the right thing. I'm a dad, have to think of my children and I'm afraid he'll hurt them the same way he hurt me. Not directly of course, but the same negligence."

Jethro frowned, "He'd have to actually show up, meet them and then disappear again to do that. And remember your kids have 3 grandparents, 4 if you add in Mac."

"I know. I don't want him to influence them."

Shannon opened her mouth, frowned and then shook her head. When Tony pressed, she said, "No, it was something I'm ashamed for even thinking, very 'Cats in the Cradle' if you know that old song. In considering your children, Tony, I know you'll make the right decision. And as long as the man is alive, you can always change your mind. It'd be awkward but it would be awkward no matter when you tell him."

He sat back in his chair, taking a deep breath. "Ok, then Maggie and I are not telling him anything."

"Are you sending out birth announcements?"

"Not to anyone that knows him."

Jethro frowned again, "What about your family in Italy and in the UK? You keep in touch with them, don't you?"

"I do, he doesn't. He's never met the Italian family and the English family can't stand him, they blame
him for my mother's death. And if he somehow finds out from either family, I'll deal with it."

Feeling better with his decision, knowing he had his parents' support, Tony was relieved and happy driving his wife and daughter home the next day. Arin went with him, always happy to be with his parents and excited about his new baby sister.

BABIES BABIES BABIES BABIES

Three days later, little Juliet and her mom were barely settled in at home when Bec's water broke. Aunt Mel, Liz and Shannon helped Bec clean up and got her into the car with Jethro once again driving. In the meantime, Mac called Geordie on base. Geo was so nervous he was almost afraid to drive himself to the hospital.

When he emerged from Bec's room a few hours later to report no baby yet, he found Tobias waiting with Mel, Grandpa and his parents. Jethro got a kick out of Tobias' nervousness, thinking that his old friend had found a way to become a grandfather without involving his daughter. Geordie returned to Bec with Aunt Mel. The Perrys' infant son joined his parents and Great Aunt Mel three hours later, weighing in at 6 lbs. 7 oz., measuring 19 inches long. When Geo and Mel reached the waiting room, they found Tim, Rob and Kelly waiting with their parents, Grandpa, and Tobias.

Mel sat next to Tobias, emotionally tired and ecstatic. Geordie sat on a table in front of them and his parents.

"Bec and our son are doing well. What I want to tell you is something Bec and I thought about long and hard. Mel, you raised Bec, giving her all the love and tender care a child needs and we want to honor you. Modifying your middle name for our son, our baby's first name is Alexander. His middle name is Reid to honor my first mother and his surname will be Gibbs to honor the parents who've given me so much."

Jethro didn't try to stop the tears at the surprise. He'd never minded Geordie retaining his father's surname; he thought it said much of the son. He, Shannon and Mel each kissed Geordie.

Geordie continued, "And with your permission, Mel, we'd like you to be our son's grandmother. We've tossed around names but decided it's up to you and Alex. Although we both really like Grandmellie."

Beaming through her tears, Mel kissed Geordie again, saying, "I love Grandmellie. I'll just have to influence our boy to call me that!"

Three days later, little Alexander was home with his mama. The family held their breaths but Sarah's obstetrician believed she had a few days to go. While they waited, those few left in the house who didn't have new babies or children in the nursery moved into the guesthouses. Luckily, they had no Evacuees on the ranch at present, those who'd been in residence moved to homes in The Grove as vacancies occurred.

BABIES BABIES BABIES BABIES

Now that her sisters-in-law had produced their babies, Sarah felt like she was under a microscope. Still, she and Bob waited patiently. While the 2 sets of parents with newborns dragged themselves around, counting days until Juliet and Alexander started sleeping more than two or three hours at a time, Bob and Sarah stuffed earplugs in their ears and slept, knowing their time was coming soon.

The week Juliet DiNozzo was born also contained a milestone for Lia Gibbs. With Mackie sleeping through the night, he and his parents moved back to the second floor although he was still in his
bassinet during the night. A strange noise woke Tim early one morning. He checked Mackie, blessedly still asleep. Investigating farther, he found his 18-month old daughter standing in the hallway, very proud of herself. She'd not only climbed out of her crib, she'd also figured out how to open the nursery door. She slept in her toddler bed that night with a newly installed "Door Monkey™" preventing her from slipping into the hallway.

When her Poppy heard the news, he barely refrained from rolling his eyes and Tobias laughed at him. Each newborn had or would have a new crib and now they had an extra.

BABIES BABIES BABIES BABIES

Sarah's labor started 6 days after Alexander's birth and the family joked about having given the hospital time to change the linens before the next Gibbs showed up.

DiNozzo's team, now under the temporary leadership of Evan Fuller, had chalked up nearly three days of overtime recently and Leon stood the whole team down Thursday night; they were off duty Friday through Sunday. That made Bob happy as Sarah's OB had decided to induce labor Friday afternoon if it didn't start naturally.

The threat/promise worked as Sarah woke at 0300 Friday morning experiencing contractions every 6 minutes. Within 8 minutes, the pair was on the way to the hospital with Gibbs driving and Shannon riding shotgun. At home, big brother Tim placed a call to the senior Chalmers on the island of Bohol in the Philippines to let them know their first grandchild was about to enter the world. They had reservations to fly today anyway, now they knew they wouldn't have to wait to meet the baby. They'd fly to Manila where they'd board an international flight to Los Angeles, followed by a much shorter flight to Albuquerque. Tim would meet them, delivering them to the hospital. As the flight from the Philippines to Los Angeles was 12 ½ hours, followed by the 1 hour 40 minute flight to Albuquerque, he wasn't in any hurry.

When it was Bob's turn to deliver news to the waiting room, he was almost giddy with joy. Rather than tell everyone, he turned to Jethro, Shannon, Tim, Rob, Grandpa, Haley, Maisie, Ducky, Jim and Liz. "Sarah would like to see you. Is Ellie here?"

Tim shook his head, "She's home with the kids."

"Then please come with me."

The ten followed him, pleased they were to see Sarah and the new baby. When they entered, Shannon, Maisie, Liz and Haley had to stifle cries of surprise and joy as they saw not one but two bassinets. Tim, Jethro, Rob, Jim, Mac and Ducky stood staring, finally turning to look at Bob. He grinned at them but before he could say a word, Sarah giggled, "Surprise!"

"Twins? You have twins?"

"Yes, a girl and boy. Come look!"

They quietly hurried to the bassinets where the babies lay sleeping. Bob was still grinning. "Tim, we're naming our son for you, the man who raised Sarah. His name is Patrick Timothy Chalmers, Patrick after your little brother and my paternal grandfather. The only reason we turned the names around is because Sarah doesn't want his initials to be TP. But we'll call him Timmy."

"Our daughter's name needs a little more explanation. Gram, we wanted to honor your family and especially the one who brought both families together. We've named our daughter for your aunt and for Shannon, the only mother Sarah's ever had. Our daughter's name is Shannon Charlotte Chalmers
and we'll wait to see which name or nickname works best for her as we get to know her."

Shannon was beaming but still had a question, "Bob, you're not including your mother's name? Marisol is such a pretty name."

He shook his head, "Like Jethro, she's not fond of her name although Sarah and I agree both names are admirable. Anyway, she begged us not to use it. However, my maternal great-grandmother's middle name is a variation of Charlotte. Rob, Haley, we'd like you to stand as godparents to our children."

Rob had been quiet, in awe that his sister had produced two beautiful babies. Now he and Haley nodded their agreement. Tim gently wrapped his arms around his little sister and kissed her forehead, finally whispering 'thank you'. Then he hugged Bob, also thanking him.

After everyone else hugged and kissed Sarah and Bob, Shannon looked at her daughter, "How long have you known?"

Bob answered for her, knowing Sarah was quickly tiring. "We had our first ultrasound in mid-October. In that first image, the doctor saw a shadow she thought might be another fetus. We had a second one a month later but didn't tell anyone. That one definitely had a second fetus and then we knew for sure we were having twins. We knew at least one was a boy because Sarah took the same blood test Ellie did for the presence of a Y-chromosome. We decided to keep the twins a secret although we've stocked up on diapers and onesies for two babies."

Bob suddenly laughed, "Jethro, we figured the babies would be small and could sleep in their bassinets until you had another crib built. Lucky for us Lia decided to take a walk in the middle of the night!"

"Lucky for me, you mean! Glad that extra crib has a home!"

AND… MORE TO COME…

Three weeks later, Tim found a bag on the top of his dresser one evening. Peeking inside, he smiled when he saw two pregnancy tests. When he turned around, he found Ellie waiting for him and he waved the bag at her. "Want to do this now?"

"Sure. Our kids are asleep and none of the babies are awake right now."

He nodded at that, four newborns made a lot of noise. All of the new parents were now on the first floor, their babies with them while Mackie finally made the night-time move to the nursery two doors down. Still, the noise was considerable and the dormitory rooms for the school age children had been moved to the third floor, taking up Kelly, Rob and Sarah's rooms. They were a little crowded but at least they'd sleep! Tim and Ellie bought earplugs and that helped as well as knowing that none of the cries came from their children. Mackie and Lia both had monitors next to them.

Ellie took the first test and they both looked, grinning at the pink stripe that told them they were pregnant. Ellie smiled smugly, "I was right; you hit the target in Santa Fe."

Tim laughed at her words, "Please don't say that to anyone else!"

"Why not? I'm proud of you!"

"Maybe you could be privately proud?"

She laughed, "All right. So we know the date of conception, I'm six weeks pregnant. What do you
Tim stopped to think, "That's fine, it'll be the first week of July, we can tell them over the Fourth. It'll make everyone feel good, considering it'll be the first anniversary of the Attack."

Ellie nodded, happy with their plan. A few minutes later, she did the second test. They had to wait for that but it too showed positive. Child number 5 was on the way! Working it out, they figured the baby was due the second week of January.

PENNYPENNY PENNY PENNY PENNY

Toward the end of May, Penny called Maisie to tell her she was finally on her way to Albuquerque; her flight was booked for May 29th. Sarah's paternal grandmother had been trying to get there since before the Attack. She thought she'd finally made it when she landed in San Francisco while her family was sheltering but by the time they were released, she'd been forced to resume her lecture schedule. She was under contract and wasn't a rock star who could just cancel. It'd taken all the months since to make a big enough hole in her calendar to see her family and explore her new home for more than a day or two.

Now, flying in from Chile she couldn't stop smiling. Finally she would reconnect with her two grown grandchildren, meet their spouses and their children! She'd worried about Timothy at first but Maisie reassured her that neither he nor his parents blamed any of them for the kidnapping or purchase of infant Tim. She'd been horrified when Maisie told her; she did not understand how her son and daughter-in-law could have been so stupid and irresponsible!

But then she'd never been able to reconcile Dan's idiocy in regards to his second wife either. And now it seemed they were never married, which explained why the Navy never vetted her. When she thought of that whole mess and what had really happened to the children, she shuddered. Part of her hoped she'd learn more once the kids were comfortable with her and part of her hoped they never had to talk about it.

Although it was a short flight from Los Angeles to Albuquerque, she was impatient. She'd managed the 11-hour flight from Santiago just fine but now she needed to be there! Finally, the jet landed and she made her way to Baggage Claim.

When she entered the area, it was the usual noisy mass of signs, unintelligible announcements, squeaky baggage carousels and rental car counters. She didn't see any of that. Her eyes were fixed on a tall handsome young man with green eyes standing next to Maisie and a beautiful young woman with brown eyes and curly brown hair. She would know those two anywhere, no matter how many years it had been, even if Maisie weren't with them.

She flew to them, gathering her precious grandchildren to her. She knew she was crying and felt Sarah crying into her shoulder while Tim kissed the top of her head and held on. And Maisie – Maisie had her arms as far around the three of them as she could reach. When they finally stepped back a little to catch their breaths, Maisie handed each a tissue. "Now mop up, Penelope so the children can see you properly!"

Laughing, Penny pulled her in for a kiss and then kissed each of the kids. "You know I would have recognized you two anywhere, even without Maisie. Timothy, you look just like you did at age 8 only a lot taller, grown up and your hair is much darker. And Sarah, you look like a Langston!"

Sarah beamed, "Really? I've never looked like anyone, I'm so glad!"

Tim nudged her, "Your son looks like you and so did Patrick."
"True, thanks for reminding me."

"I can't wait to meet Ellie, Bob and the children! And your siblings and parents and Maisie's new hubby!"

She'd started toward the door when Tim laughed, "Penny, don't you have any luggage?"

"Oh heavens, what an old woman! Of course and I have presents for all the children. Yes, Maisie, I remembered Hannah; I can't wait to meet her too! I hope you brought a big car!"

Tim laughed, "Grammie said you'd have a lot of stuff, she says you always come home with an extra suitcase. We brought my family's 14 passenger van."

Sarah grinned, "It's huge, Penny, especially after we took out all the kids' seats."

"Oh my! Well, let's see if my luggage is here yet."

Tim's eyes widened as Penny pointed out her four large pieces of luggage. Sarah got a luggage cart and Tim carefully piled it on. "All right, next step. You ladies can wait in here or outside in the shade while I bring the van around."

All three of them said outside so he wheeled the cart out and then went to get the van. Back at the terminal, he loaded the bags in the back; made sure his passengers were buckled in and comfortable before taking off. As he drove, Sarah fired questions at her grandmother, first asking about her flights. "I slept most of the way from Santiago. I had enough frequent flier points to upgrade to first class, which wasn't full. I was quite comfortable. The flight from LA was only an hour and forty minutes and seemed to take forever."

"Have you ever been to Albuquerque before?"

"Yes, once, many years ago. Your grandfather wanted to see the missiles at White Sands and somehow inveigled a tour. We flew into Kirtland Air Base and his adjutant dropped me at a lovely hotel in Albuquerque. I had a wonderful day and a half to myself while Nelson made sure the missiles were up to his standards." She winked as she said that and Tim smiled.

Sarah told her a little about the ranch house, the babies and the guesthouse they'd saved for Penny. "We didn't know how long you're staying but figured you'd sleep better in one of the guesthouses; Tim's youngest is the only baby sleeping through the night. You're across the street from Grammie and Ducky and next door to the Hubbards. The Cranes live next door to the Mallards and our parents, Shannon and Jethro, are currently staying in the guesthouse next to you on the other side. On the other side of them are Tobias Fornell and his partner, Mel. She's our sister-in-law Bec's aunt; she raised her. She and Tobias met during the caravan from Virginia and now they're together. Oh, Tobias is a good friend of Dad's; he's retired from the FBI, not NCIS."

Tim nodded, "So your neighborhood is a mix of the familiar and new."

"Wonderful! Now, are all of you children living in the house?"

Sarah tilted her head back and forth, "Yes and no. Our sister Kelly and brother Rob are doctors at University of New Mexico Medical Center. While they have rooms in the house, they share an apartment in town; it's easier. And the school aged kids are crammed in their rooms at the house now anyway, too noisy downstairs with four infants."

"At the house, we have Bob, me and the twins, Tim, Ellie and their four kids, our brother Geordie, his wife Bec and their baby boy, our brother Tony, his wife Maggie, their three-year-old son and..."
their baby girl. Jimmy Palmer, his wife Breena and their three kids also live in the house. They don't have a newborn but their youngest is still in the nursery with Tim's two youngest so they haven't moved out. Jimmy is Ducky's unofficial son."

Tim laughed, "The Palmer kids and my kids call Ducky 'Granducky' and the other kids picked it up too. But Penny, please don't try and remember names, you'll give yourself a headache!"

She chuckled, "It will be easier once I've met them all. Now, I know there are some other older gentlemen."

"Yes. Grandpa Mac Fielding, our mother's father and Colonel Barnes, whose given name is Richard. He's Maggie DiNozzo's father. They're currently sharing a guesthouse; normally they live in the ranch house. They both help with the babies during the day but not at night."

"Good grief, that house must be huge!"

"It's three floors plus an unfinished basement. Twelve bedrooms, a nursery, two dorm rooms for the kids, well, three dorm rooms now, playroom, library, family room, large dining room and kitchen."

Penny's eyes widened and then she laughed, "Communal living for the family!"

Sarah shrugged, "We thought so, but then we only planned to vacation here and all of us being here at the same time would have been rare."

Tim nodded, "Seven of us are having new homes built on the property for our families. The main house will be home for our parents, grandparents and visitors."

"And Pete."

"Yes, and Pete."

They explained Pete and Penny shook her head at his ordeal. "I'm glad he was with friends, poor man. And that poor woman, think of the torment she went through to become so disturbed."

She smiled as Tim pointed to the Ortiz Ranch. "The Ortizes are close friends. Do you know about my dad, the kids and me living here for 10 months three years ago?"

"Something about an undercover case?"

"Yes. That's when we met the Ortiz family. Steve was the general contractor who renovated the house we rented and both Dad and I eventually went to work for him."

That surprised Penny, "In construction?"

"Yes, Dad is a skilled carpenter and loves detailed woodwork. He also learned how to build with adobe. One of my hobbies is building and rebuilding electronics and from that, more or less, I became a licensed electrician. Comes in handy."

"An electrician, a writer, federal agent, my goodness Timothy, that's quite a range!"

He grinned as they turned in at their gate, pointing to the sign. "Rancho La Serenidad, oh that's a lovely name!"

Driving slowly, they passed the ranch house, continuing to the guesthouses. Penny smiled as soon as she saw the first one, Maisie's, she knew by the flowers. Tim pulled up in front of her new home, unloading her bags while Maisie showed her where everything was. She looked around, noticing her
family painting hung over a mantel, although there wasn't a fireplace below. On a quick tour, she found her late husband's desk in the second bedroom. Those two items and her photos were really the only things she'd cared about saving. She beamed in surprise when she saw her bedroom furniture. Maisie told her it was Tim's idea to bring it, said he couldn't stand that she'd asked for so little to be moved.

"Do you want to get settled in or come up to the house?"

Penny grinned, "I can unpack anytime! To the house, please!"

Parking the van, they escorted Penny to the front door of the house, knowing there were several people waiting to greet her. All the family not at work, school or asleep was inside.

As they walked across the front porch, Penny smiled at the comfortable looking chairs and then blinked in surprise at a familiar small table. Maisie, Tim and Sarah followed her glance and smiled.

Maisie said, "I hope you don't mind but the children wanted to see your house and we ended up bringing more than you requested. More than your bedroom furniture, I, uh, didn't mention the rest."

Sarah nodded, a little nervous. "Bob saw a bedroom set he knew I'd love and he, Dad, Uncle Jim and Tim moved it to the warehouse where we had everything stored before we left. And our daughter is sleeping in an antique bassinet they found in the nursery."

Tim cleared his throat, "We brought all the photos of you and Grandpa as babies, the ones on the wall in the nursery. And some things that belonged to Grandpa Nelson, Dad McGee, and Uncle Mark. They're part of the family too; we couldn't just let it all go. Grammie cleared out your spice cabinet and I took the KitchenAid." He said the last five words very quickly and Penny, who'd been on the verge of tears, laughed instead.

"That's wonderful, all of it is wonderful! I didn't want to add much to the massive load I was sure you were transporting across country but I'm very happy that you took what you wanted and I'm grateful you brought my bedroom furniture. I almost cried when I saw it."

With a lighter heart, she entered the house and again smiled with tears in her eyes as she was embraced by Jim, Claire, Liz and Dave, welcoming her home. Then she met Maisie's new husband who seemed a lovely man as Penny knew he would be. Next she turned to the man and woman she knew were Tim's biological and Sarah's adoptive parents.

Taking a deep breath, she held out her hand, "I expect it will take time to trust me but for now I do want to tell you neither my husband nor I ever suspected Tim was not Dan and Lily's child. We were posted out of the country during the time Lily would have been pregnant and afterwards they told us they wanted to surprise everyone. And our Timothy looked enough like Maisie's family that we never considered he wasn't their child. I am so sorry all that happened."

Shannon nodded, "Thank you. As I've gotten to know your family, our new family, I've come to believe that nobody but Dan and Lily knew or even suspected. And it is likely Dan and Lily believed they'd helped me and my family." She leaned forward, kissing Penny on the cheek. "The only one at fault is my mother and she's safely behind bars. We welcome you to our family and to your new home."

Penny blinked away more tears as Jethro held out his hand. "Welcome home and welcome to the family!"

She relaxed then, she'd been so afraid Shannon would be angry with her. Maisie told her the woman
was polite when they met but that it had taken some time for Shannon to warm up to her. Now they were family.

Mac and the Colonel were also waiting to meet her and she smiled at both of them, how nice to have men around who were her age and not doddering on the edge of the grave. Like Ducky, both looked fit and their eyes were alive with interest.

Figuring she'd be hungry and tired after her long journey, Shannon had brunch ready for them and they sat. Penny chuckled, "I've been off the plane for close to an hour and after 12 hours of sitting, it feels good to sit again!"

Jim grinned, "You just need to get your land legs, Penny!"

Sarah and Tim reappeared each holding a tiny being and her smile grew even wider.

"Penny, Tim's holding Charlotte and I have Timmy."

She hadn't held a newborn since Cal was born over a decade ago but Penny eagerly held her arms out. Sarah carefully transferred Timmy to her while Tim held onto his niece. He didn't get to hold her very often and he wasn't giving her up just yet. Eventually Maisie claimed her but he had her for a solid 7 minutes, a new record for him with any of the infants except his own baby boy.
Chapter 12

PENNY AND TIM

When Mackie woke, he gave Penny a sweet smile, just like his daddy's smile as a baby. Maisie laughed when Penny said that, nudging Tim. "I told you, Timothy! He may not resemble you as much as Ty and Brynie do but he is most definitely your son!"

Tim's face lit up as he kissed his baby son, settling him in his seat to feed him. He was starting to eat solids now, baby food. He fussed a little but Tim was patient. Soon the little guy swallowed his rice goop followed by apple mush and a little sweet potato. Father and son grinned at each other when they were finished. Mackie giggled when Daddy made a funny noise as he wiped his face and hands clean. Then they showed Penny how they played peek-a-boo, a favorite of Mackie's.

After that, he went into Penny's arms and cooed at her as she introduced herself. "Hello Mackie! I'm your other great-grandma. You know your Grammie and now I'm your Penny. I know, what a silly name, huh?"

Mackie responded with a noise and she laughed, "Oh, aren't you the sweetie pie! I don't know, Mackie, with your sisters, brother and cousins, I just might have to stay and watch you grow up! What do you think of that?" He cooed at her again and she grinned, "This is fun!"

Tim laughed, "Yeah it is! Want to move into the big house, help with night-time feedings?"

She pretended to think about it while the others laughed and Mackie squealed. They adjourned to the playroom; the little guy got excited when he saw his favorite play mat. Engrossed with that, he didn't notice Daddy slipping out to help Aunty Sarah with his twin cousins. He did look up when another baby cousin entered with Aunty Bec.

As each of the babies and their mamas woke, they were introduced to Penny who fussed over them. When Maisie told her in a Skype call how many babies were on the way, she'd laughed herself silly. Of course, there were new babies; it was a natural reaction to the threat of extinction: make new people.

She hadn't been kidding when she proposed staying put. That evening as the family, including Rob and Kelly, sat around the dinner table, she took a deep breath. "I don't know what I'll contribute to the family but I'd like to stay."

Dave and Liz fist bumped, they'd hoped she'd come home for good. Shannon smiled, "Does that mean you're done with your lecture tours?"

"Yes, I'm missing too much here! I've fulfilled my contract and am under no obligation and I have plenty of money to live on, that's never been a problem."

She smiled happily when the family, her reclaimed and new family, cheered. Maisie was so happy her friend was staying that she cried. Jim and Claire beamed, as did Ainsley and Callum although both reflected privately that this was the end of Penny's cool presents from around the globe. Tim, Sarah and the rest of the family also expressed their happiness.

Tim sighed in relief and happiness. Even though he had no memories of Penny, since he'd met the Hubbards and Cranes he'd hoped she would come home to stay. Somehow, having her here tied
everything together, having all three of his families close. McGee-Hubbard, Sibs, Gibbs, yes three. Four counting the Bishops. Ellie sat next to him and she took his hand, squeezing gently. Yep, she understood. He grinned at her, he couldn't wait until their first trimester was through and they'd make their announcement. Four more weeks!

Penny slept 12 hours, waking refreshed and ready for anything. She breakfasted with Tim, Tyler, Bryn, Lia and Mackie along with the Palmer children and their father Jimmy. Victoria explained that their dads always had breakfast with them on Saturdays so their moms could sleep in. Brynie laughed, "Mommy doesn't like to cook. She says she's a designated eater." She said the big word slowly and her father patted her hand. "Good job on that, Brynie!"

Penny smiled, "I don't like to cook much either."

Tyler finished chewing a bite of pancake before saying, "Daddy lets us help. We pick vegetables for him when he's cooking."

"Is that fun?"

"Yes. At our old house we went outside to our garden, now we have two gardens and they're both inside!"

Bryn nodded, "One's in our shelter and the other one's in the basement. Aunty Bec says that next year we can plant outside again. Daddy, are you and Poppy going to make more planter boxes?"

"Maybe. We might plant straight in the ground. And yes Brynie, if we make boxes we'll need your help."

Ty grinned at his sister, "She's a builder, just like Poppy!"

"Oh my, that's wonderful, Brynie! What have you built?"

"Poppy and I built the planter boxes in the basement and I helped with the furniture for the new babies. And Daddy and I built Grandpa's new dresser!"

Tim smiled, "I was glad you were there, Brynie, you had it all figured out!"

Ty nudged her, "You helped put Penny's bed thing together too."

"Oh, I forgot."

Penny was impressed with the family's support of Bryn's apparent love of carpentry, especially her brother's.

"And Tyler, what do you like to do?"

"Help organize and count. I like numbers."

"And what do you do with them?"

"When we lived here before I was still little but I helped Daddy and Poppy count people when everyone was here to catch the mean-eyed lady. Before we left on the plane to come here this time, I helped Daddy with the stuff at the warehouse. There were too many couches and chairs and I counted them by person. Ooh and I sorted all the boxes in our garage too, there were boxes for the plane and boxes for the truck and they were all mixed up. I organized those and counted them."

Penny nodded, "That's wonderful! It sounds like the things you two love to do are also a big help,
isn't that fun?"

They nodded with big grins while Penny reached over and tickled Lia who giggled.

Penny turned to Victoria and asked her what she liked to do. "I like to play school! I love school. And my mom and dad are teaching me how to cook; I like that too. I want to grill steaks like Uncle Jethro but my dad says I have to wait until I'm twelve to use the grill. I'm not tall enough to reach yet. I learned how to marinade though; that's fun. You pick things you have and if they taste good together, you make a sauce and then the meat sits in it and soaks up all the sauce. Yum!"

"Mm, that sounds good!" She turned to Teddy, "What do you like to do?"

He smiled shyly, "Read! I love books, lots and lots of books!"

"Oh, that's wonderful!"

Reaching over, she tickled Ricky too and he giggled. Tim had been feeding Mackie; once he was cleaned up and out of his highchair, he wanted to go to Penny. As she played with him, the four older children cleared the table, putting the butter and jam away and the dishes in the dishwasher. When they were done, they asked if there was anything else and Tim and Jimmy shook their heads, "No, thank you for your help."

After the older kids left, to make their beds, brush their teeth and dress, the three adults relaxed with beverages while Lia and Ricky played and Mackie watched.

When Penny asked Jimmy what he did at NCIS, he smiled, "I'm a medical examiner. When someone dies, I examine them to see what happened and what they can tell us about how they lived and how they died."

"That's right, you were Ducky's protégé; I remember Maisie telling me. And now you run the department."

"Yes ma'am. It's changed since…since we opened the office here. I now do post-mortems all over the country, even overseas, via electronics and robotic equipment."

"Oh my heavens! How does that work?"

"In the larger offices, there's an assistant who goes out with the field teams to photograph the body, do a visual check and transport it back to the NCIS office. Once the body is prepared, I link in via something like Skype except I have control of the equipment in that office. Some of it is truly robotic but right now, I'm still operating the tools. The assistant is there too in case I need something and that person is responsible for getting samples to the forensic technicians. Once I know the cause of death, I contact the field agents and let them know the results.

"In smaller offices, the agency used to contract out the autopsies. Now we, there are four of us currently trained, do them all but we still contract with county or city ME offices for assistance at the crime scenes."

"That's wonderful; I imagine it's far more efficient for the agency."

"Yes and over time, it'll be a real cost saving." Jimmy smiled, "And I don't have to travel. I can do it from here which makes life a lot easier for my wife."

"What does she do?"
He grinned, "She's a mortician. Her family owned mortuaries in DC, Virginia, Maryland and North Carolina. When Tim told us what was going on, my in-laws sold two of the shops in North Carolina, shipped the equipment, inventory and furnishings to storage here, applied for a business license in New Mexico, bought a building here and opened for business before we'd been on the surface a month."

Her eyes wide, she shook her head, "Now that's organization!"

Tim took Mackie for a diaper change; when they returned, he had all his kids with him. "Thought we'd take Ellie's truck to see the place."

"Do the kids all fit?"

"Yes because Mackie's car seat faces the back so he's not scrunched in with his brother and sisters. He sits opposite Lia. We have two more months before he has to go in a regular baby seat facing forward. Then...don't know. Not giving up the truck, we need them around here. But that means one less vehicle the kids can all fit in."

Jimmy shrugged, "You use the van for family outings anyway and to and from work."

"Yeah, just scary to be limited to one vehicle."

Jimmy bit back a smile and Tim huffed, "We don't need a bus, Palmer."

"I didn't say anything!"

Penny watched as both men chuckled, obviously this was a familiar tease.

They were all just leaving the kitchen when Tony staggered in with baby Juliet, Arin holding on to his father's shirt. Without a word, Jimmy gave Arin a kiss; put him in a booster seat, breaking off part of a banana for him. The little boy grinned as he started to eat it. Tim took the baby who was more than ready for her bottle, giving her his finger to suck while her daddy found the stash of Mama's breast milk and heated it. Then Tony sat with the baby while Tim made a pot of coffee and Jimmy made cream of wheat cereal and poured a sippy cup of milk for Arin.

Arin started to eat his cereal while his father was given a mug of coffee, fixed just the way he liked it. Tony sighed, "Thanks, guys. I don't know what I'd do without you! How many times did we work a case straight through, three to four hours of sleep at our desks for days, sometimes a full week?"

Tim grinned, "You and I figured out the count once. You saying this is harder?"

"Yes! Absolutely!"

Jimmy chuckled, "It'll get easier, Tony. The baby will start sleeping more hours at a time and she'll get past the scary stage when you're afraid you're going to break her."

Tim huffed and Tony looked up, "You guys too? I thought it was just me!"

Penny chuckled, "Tony, I bet every new parent since the beginning of time has felt that way. Newborns and infants are so small and seem so vulnerable. Just think, we were all that small once and we're here, we made it."

Tony blinked and nodded, "If you knew my parents, you'd know what a miracle that is for me. I just don't want to be like them."
Tim squatted down by him. "Tony, you're a great dad! And that started with being a great uncle to our kids, right, Jimmy?"

Palmer nodded, "Yeah, man. And except for looking like him, you're nothing like Senior."

Tony snorted, "Darn sure he never changed a diaper."

"Probably not but there are other ways you're not like him. You don't neglect Arin, you're patient with him, you don't run off at the first sign of trouble, you show your love and pride in him. That's nothing like Senior."

Tony sighed, "Sorry I'm such a wimp; it's just that this is the scariest thing I've ever done. And that includes surviving the plague and being stuck with that serial killer for two days."

Jimmy snorted, "You forgot working with a ninja for 8 years."

Tim nodded, "Oh yeah! And Tony, don't forget you were the only one brave and tough enough to work for Boss as long as you did."

All three of them laughed at that. Arin finished and Tim took his dishes to the sink, bringing back a baby wipe. "Ok, big boy, let's get you cleaned up."

Arin tilted his face up with a smile for Uncle Tim. Then he squirmed a bit, "Daddy, I hafta go!"

Jimmy took the baby while Tony and Arin hurried off to the bathroom. Tim excused himself to check on the Gibbs and Palmer kids who were in the playroom. He returned with Ricky and Lia. When Jimmy looked up with a question on his face, Tim shook his head, "Their days in the kiddie corral are done."

"What were they doing?"

"Lia was climbing out, Ricky right behind her while Ty and Victoria were trying to stop them. Brynie and Teddy were on their way to get us."

"Baby gates?"

"Yes, until one of them figures how to work the latch. We should do a sweep of the room though. Might be things the older kids have brought in."

Penny started laughing, "Some things never change!"

"What did you do with your two?"

"Once they climbed out of their playpens, I had to watch them every second. One time I looked away for perhaps 30 seconds, I was doing dishes and they were at the kitchen table, playing with Play Doh. Next thing I know I hear the front door open, thank God it had a squeak! Nelson had to put one of those flip latches up high where they couldn't reach. That lasted for two months until they figured out the kitchen stool was tall enough so they could reach the latch. Luckily the stool also squeaked and it took both of them to move it."

Tim wanted to laugh but he remembered Brynie's escape from their house here and her naked run. He'd never been so scared in his life, certain his little girl was going to run into the street. He told the story to Penny who did laugh until she heard the story of how Tim, Sarah and Geordie met Robbie. Two years old, he was running into traffic, running after his mother who'd left him behind, too little for drivers to see when Tim spotted him from the sidewalk, ran into the street and grabbed him.
Tony and Arin returned to collect the baby who'd finished her bottle. As the others left, Tony tried to thank them but, smiling, they waved him off. Gathering the Gibbs' kids, Tim and Penny got them into Ellie's truck for the tour of the Grove and the ranch.

Penny laughed to herself as she noticed everyone but Mackie was wearing cowgirl/boy boots, including her grandson. When she mentioned it, Tim grinned at her. "When we were here before, the kids had boots and then Dad and I wanted them too. And Stetsons. We didn't get to wear them much in DC, mostly when we went riding."

"You ride?"

"Yes. Ellie and I have our own horses and Ty and Brynie have been riding since they were toddlers, two and three. Not by themselves but they know how to handle a pony."

Ty piped in, "Daddy, Brynie and I learned at the Ortizes."

"The ranch next door? Oh, you worked for someone by that name."

"Yep and his family owns the ranch, have since before statehood. I'll show you our new barn and our almost finished house when we come back this way."

They drove down Quail Hill Road to The Grove, rather than take the bridge. Tim was a little skittish about driving a full-sized vehicle over it although it had been engineered and built for road vehicles.

At the gate, he punched in the family passcode and drove in. Penny looked puzzled, "Why is there a gate?"

"An extra security precaution for our residents. There's no sheriff's substation out here and after what these folks have been through, we want them to feel safe. We haven't had any problems but I suspect the fact that the place is owned by a family of cops and military folks might have something to do with that."

She nodded, thinking how sad that out here in the country where there should be peace and quiet, they had to have a security gate and fences.

Tim said quietly, "Many people who come here are from cities, they don't feel safe in the country at night; it feels too dark and empty to them. The gate helps; at least they feel safe from humans."

He continued, "We have a gate at the ranch because we weren't planning on living here full-time and didn't want people driving around on our land or breaking into the house. Then when the threat… well we ordered many things online, had them delivered here. The gate was handy keeping thieves out."

He turned onto the first street, Alexandria Avenue and Penny smiled in delight as she saw the first homes.

"This is a neighborhood!"

"Yes, we planned it that way, left as many of the trees and shrubs as we could. There are 100 homes plus a few guesthouses like yours. We split them into groups of 10 or 15 per street so people would know their neighbors."

The kids waved at people who were working in their yards, on the patios, washing windows, sweeping leaves. "We set the speed limit at 5 mph because very few Evacuees have cars. All the kids and many of the adults have bikes and the kids roller skate in here too."
"Do they take the school bus with your kids?"

"Sure. The high school sends one out too. Ainsley and Chase Ortiz will take that in the fall, along with any high schoolers here or at either ranch."

"And the city bus goes as far as the University?"

"Have to transfer once in town, but yes."

When Penny leaned back with a smile, Tim looked at her. "Have something in mind?"

"Maybe I can do some lectures here."

"Great idea!"

"We'll see."

They drove through the second set of homes and Penny commented on the colors. "I love the different colors, great that they're not all the same color or a dreary color. The front doors are wonderful too."

"We figured most folks were going to be depressed and sad. We wanted to make them feel at home and give them a sense of moving forward."

"While still acknowledging our losses."

"Yes."

They rolled on through the neighborhoods, waving. Ty called out, "Hey, there's Max, he's in my class."

They stopped to say hello to Max and his parents, out for a bike ride. Ty said, "This is my great-grandmother Penny, she's never been here before so we're giving her a tour."

"Great, welcome Penny! We're Rose and Nate."

"Thank you. Where are you folks from originally?"

"Fairfax; we evacuated to Florida but didn't want to stay there. My husband is a mechanic who worked at a car dealership in northern Virginia. A customer told one of the salesmen to leave, that there was going to be a nuclear attack. He told everyone and we all left; we told everyone we knew; our whole neighborhood left. Whoever that guy is, he sure saved us! The owner of the dealership had enough time to move his inventory to safety, sold it all and now he's working on a deal to open a dealership here in the southwest. He's told his former staff that once the deal goes through he'll rehire everyone. In the meantime, we're living in this beautiful place. Where are you folks from?"

Tim swallowed, "Alexandria and Arlington. I was born in Bethesda and grew up in Baltimore, lived in Silver Spring for several years."

"Oh dear. And you evacuated here?"

Ty nodded, "We were the big caravan!"

Max's eyes widened, "The one with the big trucks and all the cars and pickups? That was so cool!"

"Yes, that was us."
Tim smiled, "Ty."

"We weren't in it, our grandparents, aunts, uncles and friends were. Our family flew out first, all the people with kids did. My dad planned it all though. We had a big warehouse full of stuff to take and everything!"

The couple looked at Tim. "A warehouse?"

"Long story, belonged to someone we knew. Our family and friends were scattered in Virginia, Maryland and DC. We decided to hire movers to take our stuff out and it was easier for them if we brought all the stuff to the warehouse."

"Oh, that makes sense. Wow, so you really had a crowd!"

Brynie nodded, "We had 84 people in our shelter."

"My goodness that must have been crowded."

Tim was grateful when Mackie started to fuss. "Looks like we better get the little guy home. Been great talking with you! Good luck with the job, Nate!"

"Thanks, Tim!"

They drove off, Tim still trying not to hyperventilate. It had taken all his training to remain calm when they'd mentioned the car dealership. Penny gave him a look but he gave a quick shake of his head.

Mackie was now moving into full voice, so they postponed the rest of Penny's sightseeing until after lunch when he and Lia would nap.

NCIS NCIS NCIS NCIS

That evening, Penny pulled Tim aside. "What happened today?"

He'd already told Ellie, who was with him now. He shook his head, "I'll tell you, but please don't make a big deal out of it, Penny. I'm still struggling with it.

"Ellie and I were the customers at that dealership, the ones who told Jack the salesman to get out. If we'd been in the van today, they might have seen that the license plate holder is from that dealership."

She stood there in shock and then grinned, "You're a hero."

Tim shook his head violently, keeping his voice low and emphatic. "No! Please don't!"

Shocked at his vehemence she stepped back. "All right. I don't understand but I'll respect your request and your obvious feelings."

His eyes closed, he nodded. Jethro came into the room, took one look at his son, frowned and glanced at Ellie who made a little moue at him. He stood next to his son, putting his arm around him. "Timson?"

Quickly Ellie told him what happened and Jethro swallowed a sigh. "How many?"

"I don't know, Dad, 3 million something."
"You agreed you're not God and that you don't have superpowers. And you sure as hell didn't fire those missiles."

Tim nodded, "I know. I didn't kill anyone. I know that, Dad."

"Come on, let's go find a quiet place to sit and talk. And maybe Penny will come with us so she'll understand." He looked up at Penny who nodded, saddened and a little frightened by her grandson's distress.

The kids were all in bed and the house library was empty. The four of them went in there and sat, Ellie and Dad on either side of Tim.

"Ok, how many, 5 iterations and don't shrug your shoulders."

Tim looked at him and his father pulled his head to him, kissing him. "Hold on, sweet boy. Say the number."

"3 million, 200 thousand."

"And that is?"

"How many people I saved by telling 20 people to leave."

"Who should you have told? Who were you really responsible for?"

Tim looked at him, seeing some light. "Ellie, you and Mom, Grandpa, the sibs, the Palmers, Ducky, Rick, Jim O'Brien, Ned, Abby, Secretary Porter, Leon, the Bishops, Lu and the guys, Nate. Lyndi Crenshaw, my attorney, D'arcy McKinna, the neighbors."

"Anyone else that was your responsibility to tell?"

"The President."

"Good! Now how many of those people did you tell?"

"All of them."

"That's right, all of them, you fulfilled your responsibility. You sure you didn't miss anyone?"

Tim gave him a look and his father chuckled, "Dave tells me you've always had that look. You may have inherited it from me, but I didn't teach it to you!"

That earned a half smile and Ellie relaxed, hoping Tim was finally getting it.

"Tim, remember the years when you, the sibs, the guys and the non-profit organization kept the camp folks alive?"

"Yes."

"What did I tell you when Nate died?"

"That he didn't want us to carry the responsibility; that it wasn't ours to carry."

"Did you accept that?"

Tim thought about it, "Yes, because the camp was closed when you told us."
"Would you have before that?"

"Not while there were kids there who needed help."

"Ok, what if there had been no children or innocents? No Big John."

"Only Nate and Juanita."

"Because they kept you kids out of trouble."

"Yes, they were our de facto parents. And Lu."

"Okay, that's good, son. That's progress. You've been fighting this your entire life, Tim." He looked at Penny.

"Penny, I have things to say about your son that you're not going to like but Tim needs to hear them again. I've said it to him before, his mother has, Ellie has said it and we'll keep saying it."

She nodded sadly, thinking they were probably the things she wished she'd said to Dan.

"Timothy, you were not created to be responsible for the world. It's horrible, an example of horrible parenting that you were made responsible for your baby brother at age 19 months. That you had to take care of Patrick and yourself when you were Teddy's age. That you taught yourself how to cook so you and Pat wouldn't starve, before you were tall enough to reach the microwave without climbing on the counter. That you were forced to be responsible when your father wasn't.

"He pushed you into it. He told you to be 'the little man', the 'big brother'. What was he thinking? Did he have any idea what effect that had on you, a toddler? And to hear it every time he saw you, spoke with you, with no mother at home to temper that, to allow you to be a little boy? When he left you in the care of a stranger who abused you? That the two of you had to take care of your baby sister, that you were left alone with a monster because, I'm guessing your father was too concerned with his career and rejected his family's help?

"Too proud. Liz, Dave, Maisie and Jim have told me that after Lily died, before and during Okinawa and San Diego, each of them and Penny begged McGee to let them take you, Patrick, and Sarah when she came along. McGee refused, not willing to give. And as you've said, not that we don't love Sarah, but why was McGee so obsessed with having another child of his dead wife that he literally handed over the two children he had to a complete stranger, one with a womb? He knew it was wrong, otherwise why did he keep it a secret until she was born? Just as they did with you, Timomine.

"His pride or neglect, whatever it was, cost Patrick his life, cost you your childhood and nearly your life, more physical and emotional pain than any child should have to endure, forced you into more responsibility and years of living in danger.

"He caused horrible grief to his family and that was his choice. When I think how I grieved most of my adult life because he brought that zona back into the country...but this isn't about me. His carelessness, thoughtlessness and stupidity likely caused the stroke that killed Drew Hubbard. To me, he is just as responsible as Stacevyko for everything that has happened to you, Kelly, Mom and me. He wasn't stupid; he and Lily had to know buying you was morally and ethically wrong, even if they were somehow ignorant of Abraham Lincoln and the outlawing of the sale of human beings in this country. His actions are unconscionable. We think Tony's parents were bad but Dan McGee wins the prize. He was every bit as bad as Eli was, maybe worse. At least Eli believed he was protecting his country. McGee was a selfish buzzard, never giving a thought to his actions."
Tim's eyes nearly fell out of his head but he nodded his understanding. "Ziva was a grown woman when he told her to sacrifice herself and then left her to die."

"Yes. McGee wasn't a good man. Neither was Eli. Neither was outright evil, but damn careless and full of hubris."

Tim sighed, "They were both obsessed, blind to everything else. I think McGee was obsessed with Lily, even in death although that doesn't explain them buying a baby - and Eli was obsessed with saving his country. And as you say, Ziva was a grown woman, she could have said no. Stayed here."

"Yeah I agree but this is your life we're talking about. Just comparing those two."

"I get it, Dad. I met my responsibilities with the attack, there's no hook to put myself on. That's going to be my mantra. I finally understand what you and Ellie, Mom, Ducky, Liz and Dave have been telling me. Commander McGee failed in his responsibilities all the way around. And caused a lot of misery by his actions and inactions."

"Yes."

Penny frowned. "Tim, you didn't want those people to know."

"No, I didn't and I don't. I don't want the spotlight, Penny. That's not who I am, not at all. I will agree that this was an extraordinary situation but I was doing my job, with the encryptions, the cipher and the warnings. Oops."

Penny's eyes widened. "The encryptions, oh my God, Timothy, you were part of that team? Thank God you weren't murdered!"

She wrapped her arms around him as he shook his head. "The two agents who were murdered weren't part of the team. I mean, they found the files but they were dead by the time I was called in."

"But your team, Tim? Are you the one that cracked that last cipher?"

He nodded. "Yes and I've worked really hard to keep that quiet."

"Are you also the Federal Agent who called the President with the probable locations?"

He shook his head, "She called me."

"Timothy."

He sighed, "Yes, ma'am."

"Does Maisie know, is it all right if I talk about it with her? And may I be quietly proud of you?"

Now he laughed and they all relaxed. Jethro had real hope now that his son understood and accepted the truth.
Chapter 13

TANGLING WITH KARMA…

In the old prison where they'd sheltered after the evacuation, prisoner 2349FLJ rolled her eyes as her
cellmate gibbered about the visitor she expected that day. As the shelters emptied and most of the
evacuees were placed at least temporarily, the inmates were finally hearing from friends and family.

2349FLJ didn't pay much attention, she acknowledged no family and the only person she wouldn't
mind seeing was imprisoned at Guantanamo Bay. Her cellmate's excitement was irritating but at least
the visit would be over soon.

Her cellmate returned to the cell with a stack of newspapers, magazines and books, a must for bored
and restless inmates. When she told 2349FLJ to help herself to her new treasures, the woman didn't
hesitate. She grabbed two magazines and one of the newspapers. She'd look at the books later.

The newspaper was full of news about people returning to the U.S. from wherever they'd been
evacuated. 2349FLJ read a little about that, noting that there was apparently a grass roots effort to
provide housing for the returnees and evacuees who were now homeless. Her eyes widened when
she saw the number of people who needed new homes and jobs, tens of millions. With a smirk, she
thought maybe things weren't so bad here after all. She had a guaranteed roof over her head and
three meals a day for the rest of her miserable life.

Finishing the newspaper, she picked up one of the magazines and leafed through it, pausing at an
article about the grass roots groups mentioned in the paper. She started reading the article, thinking
the types of housing people were coming up with were interesting. Rehabbed mobile homes, travel
trailers, RVs, old buses, office buildings; one town had an empty bowling alley they'd converted, old
schools, empty warehouses, even an old hospital or two. She turned to a feature article about two
ranches in New Mexico who were providing 250 temporary homes to evacuees. One ranch owner
was providing mobile homes while the other owner purchased several dozen shipping containers and
converted them. That was interesting and she studied the photo of a converted container.

When her eyes slid to the next photo, a shot of the ranch owners, she froze. There in all his dumb-
hick glory was her former son-in-law. When she could finally move her eyes again, she looked at the
other people in the picture and then had to fight to breathe. Standing with the leatherneck was her
daughter, her long-dead daughter; there was no way it could be anyone else. 2349FLJ's ex-husband
stood next to her, his arm around a tall man she also recognized, a man she knew as a federal agent.

Nine years ago when she met him, she'd strongly suspected he was the little bastard she'd sold, now
seeing him standing next to her ex, she was dead certain. A little boy stood between the ex and the
Fed and he too resembled her former husband. Damn the man! Damn all of them! No one had
bothered telling her that her daughter was alive! She wondered if her granddaughter was alive too.
Her shock soon turned to fury. She would demand to see her daughter. How dare they keep her from
her own flesh and blood!

She tried to remain patient over the next few days, channeling her fury into putting together a plan.
Finally, while her cellmate was in the prison library 2349FLJ dug her weapon out of her mattress,
making sure it was ready. She'd lost a sock in the laundry months ago and used its mate as a wrap to
keep the weapon from prying eyes. She hid it in a new place, one more accessible. Her anger vying
with her longing to see her daughter, she waited.
After too many days of waiting, she started carrying her weapon with her. As long as she didn't act out, she wouldn't be subjected to a weapons check. She had to be ready when it was time.

And then suddenly she had the opening she needed. Three long weeks after she'd first seen the photo, one of the less obnoxious guards was escorting her to the prison store to spend the pittance she earned working in the kitchen. In this old building, the store was located near the front of the prison.

They walked across an open area where they could see into what was euphemistically called the lobby, just past the security entrance. As she and her guard moved across that section, she spotted two civilians, visitors. Both female, one short, one tall. The tall one was being led away, presumably to see a prisoner, while the shorter one looked around, probably for a place to wait.

With a move so swift she surprised herself, 2349FLJ stabbed the guard with her shiv. Before anyone could react, she'd crossed into the open area and had an arm wrapped around the singular visitor, the homemade knife pressed to the woman's neck, the guard's firearm tucked in her clothing.

Her goal to get the two of them out of the prison was thwarted as the guard she thought she'd killed raised the alarm. She was stuck. Still, she had a hostage. Because the woman had not been inside the prison proper and the general population was not involved, 2349FLJ believed she had a better chance of getting what she wanted.

She told the woman what she wanted, to see her daughter and that she didn't want to have to hurt her, it was up to the prison officials. The woman said wanting to see her daughter seemed reasonable, how far would the daughter have to travel? When 2349FLJ said from New Mexico, the woman took a breath and said, "Then we'll have a few hours to wait."

2349FLJ nodded although she was sure her daughter could be whisked onto a helicopter and then a government jet to get here fast. While she'd never admit it, she'd been a little impressed by her son-in-law's apparent connections during the investigation into Norton's death. Although she'd appreciated his naïveté even more.

Within a minute, the two women were surrounded by armed guards. When the warden appeared, asking what the prisoner wanted, 2349FLJ nudged the woman who responded. "All she wants is to see her daughter."

The warden had taken a couple of minutes to look up the prisoner's records and noted that her only daughter and grandchild had been murdered by a cartel 28 years ago. Now he frowned in confusion, "Your daughter is dead."

2349FLJ snarled although internally she was a little glad she hadn't been the only one not informed. This guy was usually poker-faced but now he seemed genuinely confused.

"She's not! I saw a photo of her in a recent magazine, standing with my useless ex-husband and son-in-law."

The hostage whispered something to her and 2349FLJ liked the suggestion. "The magazine is in my cell, under the mattress."

One of the guards scurried off and they waited.

While the drama unfolded inside the prison, outside forces were already gathering. When an assistant director of the FBI was notified, he pulled up the woman's information from the Bureau database and groaned before making a call to his boss. When the director pulled up the file, his groan was even
more heartfelt. Not only was another agency involved, at least two of the top agents from that agency were directly affected. And the agent he needed to fix this was retired.

Shaking his head, he made two calls, one to his retired agent and the other to his counterpart at the other agency, ruining the days of several people.

... IS NEVER A GOOD IDEA

Tobias and Mel had just ordered their lunch when his phone rang. He ignored it; after all, he and Mel were on their honeymoon. Ok, they weren't married but they were on a trip by themselves. They'd picked Colorado Springs because neither of them had ever been there. This morning they'd splurged on a room service breakfast and then toured a museum Mel wanted to see. Tobias was interested in anything she was and actually enjoyed the exhibits. His phone finally stopped and Mel shook her head, "What if that was Emily and something was wrong?"

He looked at her, horrified. "I can't believe I never thought of that! I'll call her now." As he pulled out his phone, it began to ring again and he growled at the ID that showed. "I'm retired, damn it, leave me alone!"

Sighing, he took the call and the caller started speaking immediately. "Tobias, Director Sailes here and we have a situation. I'm going to have to temporarily reinstate you as an active agent. Just listen."

Fornell listened, wondering what sorry ass case of his had chosen this moment to resurface. When he heard the name, he frowned, "What has she done now?"

His eyebrows lifted as he was told and he growled, "Over my dead body and those of her husband and at least three of her sons. She is not going anywhere to see her. Not after what the prisoner did to her."

He listened again, "Yes I will be most happy to tell her that. What authorizations do I have?"

He nodded, "Good; that should have happened years ago. Send it in writing." Clicking off, he turned to his concerned lover, "I have to go. Old case has a new development and the Bureau has given me the authority to handle it."

Mel frowned, "Does that mean you have to go arrest someone? Will you have to use a weapon?"

"No and no, other people will have weapons; I'll give the person a choice and then give an order depending on the answer. They'll be here in a minute to take me to a helicopter and then a jet. I'll be back in a few hours. Might want to plan for a late dinner tonight, all right, sweetheart?"

Nodding, she kissed him and he walked to a dark colored SUV just pulling up, opened the door and got in, waving to her.

While Tobias was en route, Leon Vance was struggling. He didn't want to tell Shannon Gibbs what was going on but knew she would be angry at being left in the dark. And if this thing hit the media, which it would eventually, the shit would hit the fan if the Gibbses were left out of the loop. Sighing, he picked up his phone.

At the ranch, Shannon and Gibbs had just finished a late breakfast, dawdling over coffee. Gibbs' gut was stirring but he ignored it, after all, his eldest son and three of his in-laws were field agents. He'd
wait to see if it became more defined. When a phone rang, he felt a surge and knew this was it. However, Shannon's phone was ringing, not his.

His wife frowned as she took the call. "Good morning."

Leon returned the greeting and then told her what was happening in Idaho and the plan as relayed to him by the FBI Director. While she listened, she put her phone on speaker and Jethro listened with a deep frown. When Vance stopped speaking, Jethro opened his mouth but Shannon shook her head. "Leon, unless it's necessary for me to be there to save that poor woman, I will not go anywhere near Fielding. I won't give her that satisfaction. How did she find out?"

"Something about a photo in a magazine. Perhaps the article about the Returnees' housing? Although I distinctly remember Tim saying you had a 'no photos, images or names' clause in the contract."

"We did; no photos were taken and no names were in the advance copy of the magazine we were sent. There wasn't even a photographer with the correspondent."

"Looks like a photo got into it somehow."

Jethro leaned in, "We'll look into that later. Is Tobias involved?"

"Yes, Sailes has reactivated him and he's on his way via helicopter and jet. He should be on site within the next 30 minutes."

"And what's the plan?"

"Dearing."

Gibbs sighed and turning to his wife, said, "Honey, they've been given permission to use extreme prejudice. That means if Fielding doesn't surrender, they'll shoot to kill."

"What about the hostage? And who will shoot the prisoner, Tobias?"

Leon added more information, "Sailes reports the hostage knows ASL as does one of the guards there. They're in communication with her and will clue her in when it's time to make a move. She's a 9-1-1 dispatcher in her usual life, trained to be calm in all situations. She's done that so far and they're 94% confident they can contain Fielding without any harm to the hostage."

Jethro added, "Tobias is not a sharpshooter. He'll give the order and others will take Fielding out if she doesn't surrender."

"Why only 94%?"

"Because Fielding's reaction is an unknown and she already gravely injured a guard. And anyone in this kind of situation who claims more than 95% confidence is a liar."

"So 94% is really pretty good?"

"Yes."

"Leon, I want to meet that hostage after this is done."

"I can have a helo to the ranch in 10 minutes followed by a flight to the airfield closest to the prison."

Jethro closed his eyes, "Shannie…"
"No, Jethro, I won't see Fielding, dead or alive. What she did to her own daughter and grandchildren can never be changed or forgiven and I know she's also a traitor and murderer. But that poor hostage has done nothing wrong and I want to see her once she's safe. I don't know why but I believe it's important to both of us. And Leon, I want Fielding to know I personally refused to see her and why."

"All right, Sailes will pass the word to Fornell."

Jethro sighed, "Yes, we'll go. Leon, do your agents know?"

"No, I haven't told anyone other than yourselves. They'll want to go with you."

Shannon shook her head, "No, I appreciate their love and concern but this is something I need to do. Oh God, Dad."

"Will you tell him?"

"He's in Wyoming visiting his friend Bernie. We'll tell him after it's over."

"The prison is in a remote area of the state, it's now in lockdown and prison officials have imposed a full media lid. From what I've been told, no one has yet noticed. Sailes and the warden anticipate the first media release will be after the situation is resolved. And yes, they'll do their best to keep names out of it, citing notification of next of kin but Mac will need to be warned. I'll wait until the situation is resolved and then contact him immediately."

"Thank you, Leon, and please tell him we'll also contact him. And please tell our agent children that too?"

"Yes but not until you're in the air."

Gibbs disconnected while Shannon left to change and grab jackets for both of them. They were ready by the time the helo arrived, landing on the pavement with military precision and that was because the helo was dispatched from Kirtland Base.

When they reached the base, Geordie was waiting for them. "I'm going with you, representing the family. Oh yeah, they know. Fornell called me on his way to Idaho and I called them. We decided one of us should go and as Leon hadn't told them yet and we thought that was probably your request, I decided no feds. So here I am. I won't interfere and I won't be involved except with the two of you."

He smiled as his parents kissed him. "Hey, military base here. I'm a badass Marine Major, not supposed to have Mommy and Daddy kissing him."

"Tough!"

They were aboard the jet and moving swiftly down the runway in less than 5 minutes. En route, Jethro asked his son how Leon had received permission to fly two civilians via Air Force helicopter and jet to a prison in Idaho.

"I don't know exactly what happened, Dad, but the scuttlebutt is that when the Brass heard a Gibbs needed help, the flights were cleared without any pushback. Guess one of you Feds helped the Air Force at some point."

His father nodded with a smile while Shannon looked at him quizzically. "Sorry, Hon."
"I know, classified!"

They touched down on a bleak, isolated runway less than an hour later. Before they could disembark, two prison officials climbed aboard.

_BECause KarMa…_

When Fornell disconnected after contacting Geordie, he felt better. He knew Vance had to put the agency first; he could not have half of his field and management staff go haring off on a family quest. The way he figured it, the major was the logical choice to accompany Shannon and Jethro. He knew damn well they'd go to Idaho although he also knew Shannon would never reveal herself to the prisoner, never give her the satisfaction.

Before he entered the prison, his vehicle stopped at the edge of the prison grounds to meet with the sharpshooters. The lobby of the prison had a large skylight through which they'd be firing if that was Fielding's choice. He knew from previous experience that sharpshooters routinely accounted for every factor and the skylight presented several challenges. The squad not only assured him of their confidence level, they reviewed the factors with him. Satisfied and agreeing with their level of confidence he returned to the car, continuing to the prison.

Once there, he met briefly with the warden for an update, had a quick conversation with Sailes and gave a specifically worded order to be communicated to the hostage. Fielding now had chairs and water for her hostage and herself. Sitting close to her prisoner, the shiv still in evidence, she was apparently settled in for a long wait. Fornell would need her standing and away from the chairs but wasn't worried about that. He'd confirmed the Gibbses were on the way, as expected Shannon had no plans to see the prisoner.

Finally, he strode into the center of the lobby. "Prisoner 2349FLJ, I'm Special Agent Fornell with the FBI. I'm the one who helped set up the plea bargain that got you here instead of Guantanamo Bay or Death Row in Virginia. You're now in violation of that plea bargain."

"I want to see my daughter. They kept her from me; I know she's alive."

"She has refused to see you. Why would she want to? You stole her child from her, broke her heart by lying to her that he'd died and then sold him. Furthermore, you are an accomplice to the murder and attempted murders of Agent Mitchell, Shannon and Kelly Gibbs. Your own daughter and granddaughter. You're the reason they were in protective custody for 25 years."

She jumped out of the chair, "I most certainly am not."

In his peripheral vision, Fornell saw the hostage tensing, ready to move. Focusing on the prisoner, he continued, "Prisoner, you befriended Svetlana Stacevyko and on occasion provided her with shelter, money, and weapons, even though you knew she was a spy for a country and entity hostile to your own country. That makes you a traitor. Further, you're to be charged as an accessory to murder. Stacevyko is the one who set up the sniper's nest for her cartel boss to murder a federal agent, your daughter, and granddaughter. This time we won't bother with Gitmo, you're headed for a traitor's death. What a mess you've made, helping an enemy to murder your own family."

2349FLJ was so shocked at his words, she stepped back, "No, that can't be right, she, no, she wouldn't do that."
As she moved, the guard gave the signal to the hostage and the woman ran to the side where she was quickly ushered to safety. Knowing the end was approaching, the guards followed orders given previously and discreetly moved out of her firing range.

For a split second, 2349FLJ didn't notice she'd lost her hostage as Fornell replied, "She would and she did, knowing who they were."

With a roar, the prisoner raised the gun she'd stolen from the guard she'd stabbed, her finger squeezing the trigger. The last thing she saw were tiny objects flying towards her through the ruined skylight. Her last thought was to wonder if they were angels coming for her.

They were not.

... ALWAYS WINS...

When the prison officials boarded the jet, they stood in front of Shannon. "Mrs. Gibbs, the situation has been resolved. The hostage is unharmed."

"Good! Is Agent Fornell all right?"

"Yes, he was not injured. Unfortunately, the prisoner chose her own fate. Agent Fornell engaged her in dialogue. However, she became enraged when he informed her that she was an accessory to the murder of a federal agent and attempted murder of her own daughter and granddaughter. She stole a firearm from the guard she stabbed when this started. With the information from Agent Fornell, she drew and fired a wild shot, hitting the skylight. She was hit by return fire."

"She's dead."

"Yes, ma'am. We're told you want to see the former hostage. She's agreed and ready when you are."

"Thank you, I'll see her now." She turned to her husband, "Jethro, if you'll see to Tobias, I'd like to meet with this woman alone."

He looked at her and then at Geordie who nodded. "Mom, I want to be in the room with you."

"All right, Major." She started forward and then stopped, "Jethro, will you please call Mac, the kids, and the ranch?"

He started to say something when he saw Geo's face. "Just Grandpa, Dad. I've already texted the sibs and Uncle Dave."

"Thank you, son."

The three of them disembarked with the officials and split into two groups. Jethro went to find Tobias and then would track down the magazine that had caused this fubar. He was going to kick some serious ass once he knew how the photo was obtained.

Geordie walked with his mother, hoping this wouldn't take long; his brothers and sisters were driving him crazy with their texts, wanting to know what was happening. They already knew that the hostage was safe and Fielding was dead. He finally got the NCIS sibs and in-laws off his back by threatening to contact Leon; his wife, little brother and sisters quieted after that.
The former hostage, whose name was Rebecca Ralston, was sitting at a small table with a cup of coffee. It looked like she'd eaten a sandwich; there was a lone crust on the plate. She looked up when Shannon walked into the room, asking, "Are you Shannon?"

"Yes, and thank you for agreeing to see me. I'm not even sure why I feel it's important but here I am. First, are you all right? I know you weren't physically injured but this had to be a horrible experience for you."

Rebecca gave her a wan half smile. "I'll be all right. The chaplain advised I have counseling and I'll follow through with that. I probably won't sleep much the next few nights but I have strong support at home, I believe I will be all right eventually. I do have some questions for you; perhaps you can tell me more about your mother?"

Shannon nodded, "Anything to help you. Joann Fielding was a twisted, bitter woman as I'm sure you've figured out. When I was a child, she began plotting to marry me off to a rich man so she could move up in the world. She was the daughter of a coal miner and married up when she married my father, an accountant. He always made good money and treated her like a queen; she had no reason to complain. As far back as I can remember she was never happy.

"When I fell in love with a Marine from the same coal-mining town, she tried everything to break us up. She started her life of crime by kidnapping and selling my firstborn when he was less than 24 hours old, telling my father and me that my baby died. After that, it got more complicated until she murdered a navy officer she believed was indirectly involved in my death. In fact, she was more directly involved than he was.

"This morning when I was told what she was doing, my first concern was for you. My daughter and I were in protective custody for 25 years, partly her doing. When we were released, I learned what a monster she was and determined she would never know we were alive.

"Today I said I'd reveal myself to her if it meant your safe release but the FBI agent who confronted her is a dear friend of ours. He let us know he would ensure your safety without involving me. And from what I've been told, you were wonderful! Knowing ASL is obviously a good thing. My husband and some of our family are federal agents and they say knowing ASL has saved their lives more than once. Now I'm done babbling and I apologize for that."

"No, no, I think knowing who she was will help me. I have more questions, though. What happened to your baby son? And the daughter who was supposedly also dead, what happened to her? Also, I heard her say she saw your photo in a magazine, do you know what that was all about?"

"My son is one of the federal agents I spoke of. His so-called adoptive parents left him an orphan at age 9 and he raised his younger sister and another youngster by himself. That's another long cruel story but he eventually went to work for the same agency my husband worked for and Tim, that's my boy, ended up working for him. It took over a decade for them to discover they were father and son but they did. My daughter is also very much alive; she's a pediatrician. And when Tim and his father made their connection, Jethro adopted Tim's younger sister, the little boy he raised and the Major here."

"Oh my, Major, you're her son?"

"Yes, ma'am, a very lucky and grateful son."

"This is lovely. Shannon, how many children do you have?"

"Six with three daughters-in-law and one son-in-law. And we have 9 grandchildren!"
"My goodness, you've certainly been blessed. I'm so glad I've met you and heard your story, I feel so much better knowing there's been happiness for you and that her misguided ways have been stopped forever. Now, what about your father?"

"He's visiting a friend in Wyoming; by now my husband has spoken with him. He lives with us on our ranch in New Mexico. We evacuated from DC before the attack."

"Oh, my heavens, all that and you had to evacuate! Did you move together?"

Geordie and Shannon laughed, "Everyone with children and our elders flew out and the rest of us formed a caravan with the moving trucks that carried our belongings."

"That was your family? I saw that on the news, thank God you're safe!"

They spoke for a few more minutes before Tobias and Jethro entered the room. Tobias clapped Geordie on the shoulder, kissed Shannon and said, "Ms. Ralston, I'm afraid there's a bit more unpleasantness ahead for you, we need to have a debriefing session. A counselor will sit in with us, it won't take long but it does need to be done."

"That's all right, Agent Fornell, I feel so much better after speaking with Shannon. And is this Mr. Gibbs?"

Jethro smiled as he shook her hand, "Jethro Gibbs, Ms. Ralston. I'm sorry you had to go through this."

"I appreciate that. I feel confident now that I'll be all right. It will take time, but I'll get there. It's obvious she was deeply disturbed."

Fornell gave Gibbs a look and he nodded, gesturing to his wife and son. "It's time we leave and let Ms. Ralston get started."

As they left the room, Shannon suddenly realized where Tobias was supposed to be and turned to ask but Jethro steered her forward. "I've already spoken with Mel; she knows he's safe and will return to her later today. He can tell her what happened; I didn't think that was something I should do."

Behind them, Geordie smiled as his mother nodded her approval. They had one more surprise. When they boarded the Air Force jet to return to Albuquerque, they found Mac waiting for them. He folded his daughter in his arms and they spent the flight comforting each other. Geordie nodded as he wrapped his arms around his father, "You're the best; do you know that?"

Jethro patted his son's shoulders, "Thanks, son, I'm still learning."

Before they left the prison, the Gibbses were shown the photo that had so infuriated Fielding. Shannon recognized it as one taken by Ellie at their first reunited family celebration of Tyler and Jethro's birthdays.

NCIS NCIS NCIS NCIS

When they reached home that afternoon, Jethro and Geo went looking for the framed photo, finding it in the library. When one of their feds got home that evening, the frame would be tested for fingerprints. They'd hold onto the results until they found a private lab to run the prints.

Jethro's next action was contacting Ali Bishop for legal advice. While the situation was outside her field of expertise, she took it to one of the partners of the firm. By the end of the day, the attorney
had filed a complaint against the journalist, her editor, supervisor and the magazine for breach of contract. Jethro faxed him a copy of the contract and he found what he was looking for, the clause that specifically said no photos, images or names of any of the family were to be taken or used in the article.

It looked like at least the photo happened; they could only surmise the journalist had slipped into the library when Shannon went to the kitchen to get her a glass of water. She'd likely spotted the photo and taken a photo of it. That was the only explanation they could think of. The attorney had a lab he worked with and sent a courier for the frame prints as well as the advance copy of the magazine. He told Gibbs that mentioning that they'd tested for prints might be enough without actually doing the lab work.

As far as Gibbs was concerned, the journalist and her manager were directly responsible for Fielding's actions and her death. They should pay for the sharpshooters, medical costs, rehab care and any loss of income for the wounded guard, transportation costs for Fornell, the Gibbses and most of all, counseling fees and anything else needed for Ms. Ralston.

Everyone came home that weekend, Kelly and Rob took time off and Ali came to the ranch with them, Kelly's boyfriend Matt arrived after working a shift, approaching La Serenidad via the back road from the Ortiz ranch. Even with the crowd and the five babies, the ranch was quiet as Shannon, Mac, Jethro, Tim and Kelly dealt with Fielding's last actions.

By Saturday, the media had the story and the house phone was unplugged. Their names were not in the article but Mac's name was listed for the house phone. That would be changed on Monday. The front gate was locked, the gate on the bridge to The Grove was shut and the family used the shortcut to the Ortiz Ranch to get in and out. It was a herculean effort but the entire clan stayed away from social media and the internet in general. The Bishops were advised, reassured that although shaken, their family was all right.

By Monday, a sports star was caught in a scandal, bumping the Fielding drama lower on the Trending lists, social media and the front page. By Thursday, the magazine had responded to the complaint. After investigating, they'd fired the journalist and were negotiating to settle out of court, knowing the next step was a lawsuit. The attorney representing the Gibbses told them to write down what they wanted out of this.

A family meeting was held to determine what they wanted to happen. First on the list were the items Gibbs originally considered. Reimbursing the state of Idaho for the sharpshooters, ensuring the wounded guard had the best care, compensating her for her pain, suffering, any loss of income, reimbursing her family for any expenses they'd incurred, any other additional costs to the prison created by Fielding's fury. Which was initiated by seeing the illegally obtained photo that violated the safety and privacy of Shannon Gibbs and her family. Next came payment for Ms. Ralston's needs, with no set dollar or time limit. After that came the costs of transporting Agent Fornell, Mac Fielding, Jethro and Shannon Gibbs, and Major G. Perry. After talking it over with Ellie and his mother, Tim requested healthy donations to The National Coalition for the Homeless, The National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, the Polly Klaas Foundation and Child Protective Services. Lastly, their attorney fees were to be paid by the magazine.

When the attorney received the list, he called his clients. "You haven't asked for anything for yourselves."

"Don't want anything from them, except paying your fees. They need to take responsibility for what they've done. Fielding kidnapped and sold my son, her grandson, as an infant. Abandoned at age 9, he grew up a homeless orphan on the streets of Baltimore. When Fielding took Ms. Ralston hostage
and demanded to see her daughter, all that old trouble surfaced for my boy. The donations we have listed are for his peace of mind. Other than that, they need to pay for what they caused. Make sure the guard and Ms. Ralston are properly taken care of." Jethro sighed, "The journalist got fired, is that it? She walks away, probably hired by some sleazy publication who'll congratulate her for getting the photo. She's the one who should be paying for this!"

"I'll put this in motion with the magazine. As for the 'journalist', we can take her to civil court. Doubt she has any money but by the time we're done the world will know what she did. Word of warning, one or more of you may have to appear in court."

"Can we ban the media? Is it possible to keep our names out of everything but the court transcripts?"

"We can limit media attendance, say to one newspaper reporter, otherwise the courts feel there may not be fair trials. And we can try for a John Doe plaintiff but I don't know that the courts will allow that in your case. You're asking on behalf of your federal agent children right?"

"Yes."

"Do they all use Gibbs as their surname? I'd think that would be confusing!"

"No, only my son Tim. My two eldest boys use their pre-adoption surnames and my daughter-in-law uses her maiden name. Of course, our second eldest Geordie is a Marine, not a fed."

"Then I'm afraid the answer is no. I understand you want to avoid the mess but the best we can do is limit media presence and have your family stay off social media for the duration of the trial."

"There's no other way to make our point with the journalist?"

"We can have her former employer publish an article about the consequences of what she did. An article that we'd have to approve before it's published. Every journalist I've ever known has been proud of the amount of research he or she does for a feature article like that one. Not just the subject matter, the home conversions, but the people involved. She doesn't appear to have done any of that nor did she have any thought or regard for her employer's liability in the matter. I've got an idea but let me think about it, flesh out the details and I'll call you back."

He called back three hours later. "Have a couple of things to tell you. One is that many journalists carry a professional liability policy separate from what their employers carry. So if the magazine's insurance kicks in a million bucks for damages, her own policy may kick in too. I know we're not talking millions here, that's just an example. That would be our basis for civil court."

"And we could still have the money sent elsewhere – not to us?"

"If we win, you can have it paid to the state of Idaho and your other requests."

"Ok, that sounds good."

"The other thing is that I have a friend who's a friend of a respected journalist. As I've met him before, I called my friend to see if he could get me some time with him. He did and I'm amazed to tell you the world of journalism already knows what she did. Seems to be a big scandal and she's not looking good at all. She broke the contract you signed in good faith, leaving her employer liable, and she didn't do the research she should have. This article was a chance to make a real name for herself and our expert journalist says he believes she was so caught up in her reach for the big prize that she ignored the basic rules of journalism. He was passionate talking about it, saying that every time something like this happens, whether it's a breach or someone publishing an article that's full of lies, it damages the credibility of all of them, breaks the public's trust. He cited several cases where
untruths were published knowingly and a few cases like yours.

"He says she won't be hired by any respectable publication again, that the most she can hope for is that publications will buy her pieces and as an independent contractor, she'll have to carry her own liability insurance. He said the price for her single policy will be astronomical."

Jethro told him he needed to talk with his family again and would be back in touch. After relaying what he'd learned, the family voted to proceed with suing her individually in civil court.

They filed suit a week later. To their relief, the former journalist's insurance company settled out of court for the amount claimed for damages. The state of Idaho, the wounded guard, Fielding's hostage Ms. Ralston, the DoD (for the Air Force and USMC expenses), the charities and Child Protective Services were all compensated by or received donations from the magazine and the journalist's insurance company.

While the lawyers hashed out the settlement, life moved on. Little Alex rolled over for the first time, baby Timmy smiled at his mother while soon-to-be-sassy Charlotte already had her father wrapped around her tiny finger. Young Juliet outdid them all – she was the first to sleep 8 hours straight. In the Timothy Gibbs family, Mackie cut a tooth, Lia had her first pony ride, Brynie won her first grade spelling bee and Ty won a math contest.
Chapter 14

Chapter 14

SUMMER FUN!

On June 13th, a year to the day that Tim called Jerry Bishop to tell him that the rumors he heard about a nuclear attack were true, the family packed up again, although this time for a much happier reason.

Grandpa, the senior and junior Gibbses prepared to begin their trek to Ruidoso for a week's vacation. As Tim, Jethro and Ty loaded luggage into their vehicles early that morning, they laughed at the sight around the ranch house. Eight other vehicles were loading up, a mini caravan. Ellie's parents, her brother John and family arrived yesterday. Behind their SUVs were the Cranes, Hubbards, Palmers, Mallards, Penny and Ms. Lu riding with Kelly, her boyfriend Matt, Rob and Ali in Matt's large SUV with rooftop storage. Another vehicle contained Tobias, Mel, Emily and Haley Chalmers who was riding with them and would share their cabin.

After much discussion, the 3 sets of parents with infants decided not to go and the Colonel opted to stay home with his family. Pete originally planned to go but ended up working. Haley felt bad going without her family but Bob and Sarah felt she needed some fun. Likewise, Mel felt guilty for going but Bec and Geo insisted.

Rob worried that all of the family doctors would be gone but Timpa pointed out that he and Kelly didn't live there anyway. And that most families don't have resident doctors. The babies were all healthy, past the 'scary' stage of their infancy and sleeping through the night. Finally reassured, Dr. Rob Gibbs was excited about returning to what Ty and Brynie still referred to as 'our lake'.

The Vances thought of going but then Jared won an internship in Southern California and they decided to take the twins out west to visit big brother and Disneyland. At 2½, they were the perfect age to meet the Mouse. Not about to miss any family time, Kayla was going with them.

The vacationers reached the resort at Ruidoso in late morning. They'd arranged an early check-in and their cabins and motel rooms were ready for them. After unpacking their swim and beach clothing, towels and toys, the Tim Gibbs family had a light snack, changed, and lathered on the sunscreen.

Dr. Kelly knew about Ellie's pregnancy after Tim insisted they ask about the high altitude. Now she came by to take Ellie's vitals, which were fine. Dr. Kelly said that due to the altitude Ellie was going to be unusually tired for a couple of days.

With Mackie and Lia in the double stroller, the family finally headed for the beach. The insulated bag with their lunch was tucked under the stroller, gently pushed over the rough terrain by Daddy who had a backpack full of baby necessities and towels while Mama pushed a roller bag and Ty and Brynie carried more towels and water toys. As Mackie and Lia slept in the car on the way, they were good for a few hours of play.

Poppy and Nonny caught up to the family before they reached the beach, helping them carry everything. Ellie smiled gratefully, she felt fine and Kelly said her BP, pulse and the baby's heartbeat were fine. Still, as Kelly predicted, she was tired and looking forward to stretching out on the beach.

On top of the high altitude, she'd had an emotional week as she ended her career as a field agent. The change had been under discussion since Mackie's birth. She'd loved staying home with him and Lia
and had a difficult time returning to the field. Tim was supportive of his wife doing whatever felt right to her. Whether it was changing jobs, being a stay-at-home Mom or anything else.

After deep reflection, Ellie decided she wasn't yet ready to throw in the towel on her career. Instead, she'd opted to become an Intel Analyst, a position where she would use many of the skills and experiences learned as a field agent and at the NSA. The hours weren't always regular but she could work from home if necessary and she wouldn't be putting her life on the line every day.

Tony was not surprised when she told him she was leaving the team. He'd nodded, saying, "I know how hard it was for me to return to the field after my leave, I can only imagine what it must be like for you and Maggie. We've had a good run together, Bishop, 3 years on Gibbs' team and 2 more on mine! I wish you the best and I'm really glad we're family!" He added, "Thank you for breaking the curse on that desk, you're alive and haven't disappeared anywhere without a word in years!"

She didn't bother pointing out 'that desk' had been blown to smithereens; the workstations here had new furniture. She understood the sentiment. When she'd cleaned out her desk before leaving the Navy Yard for the last time, she found the objects from Kate and Ziva. She thought of leaving them but decided to preserve, or resume, the continuity and brought them with her. Their first official day in the office, she'd slipped both items into a drawer, feeling silly but determined.

Yesterday was her last day on Tony's team; they had a team lunch out and thankfully enjoyed a quiet day. When they returned from vacation, she'd go to her new department. She took comfort in knowing that her husband understood how she felt about leaving the team, the field. And before she left the bullpen, she slipped something of hers in with Kate and Ziva's things, along with a note as to their origins and importance.

Now, she smiled at Tim as he pulled a small pillow out of their wheeled sports bag, handing it to her. She laughed outright when her sister-in-law Jazzy arrived carrying an exercise mat for her nap. "Is it that obvious that I'm tired?"

"How can you not be, working full-time with 4 young children? Add in a big change in altitude and yep, you need to rest!"

Ellie grinned, "You forget my very supportive husband. He does all the cooking, at least half the child care and lately most of the household chores."

Tim huffed, "I'm not out chasing dirt bags all day long. I sit in a chair at a desk and yes, I catch criminals too but I don't get any exercise at work, other than the fitness center. So I'm not physically tired at the end of the day and I need to get my circulation moving, doing things when we're at home. And I've always done the cooking."

"That's true but lately I haven't even done the post-meal cleanups."

He chuckled, "Don't worry about it; Ty and Brynie still love to help."

Mackie squawked at them, he wanted up from the stroller. They'd borrowed an old playpen, one with a bottom to it so that the baby wouldn't be directly on the rocky sand and dirt. Tim quickly set it up in the shade before placing his very happy, squealing baby son into it.

Ty, Brynie, Victoria, Teddy and the Bishop cousins were in the water with Grandma, Grandpa Jerry, Poppy, Nonny and Penny. Lia and Ricky played along the water's edge with Kelly and Matt while Jim and Claire were swimming with all three of their kids. Rob and Ali were halfway in, daring each other to dip and swim. The Crane boys were out on the diving platform, jumping in and goofing off for their parents who were on the beach. Taking advantage of all the child minders, Jimmy and
Breena had slipped off for time alone.

Tobias, Ducky, Mac and Haley stood in the shallows, the older men willing their feet to go numb while Haley shivered. Mel and Emily dived right in; they were racing each other to the diving platform. The younger kids knew they were not allowed to swim past the rope. They were all good swimmers but their parents collectively decided the rope was far enough and then only with plenty of their adults around.

In a manner of speaking, Ms. Lu and Maisie were already in the water. They'd moved their chairs into the shallow water, secured them and were having a wonderful time watching everyone, calling out encouragement and chatting to each other.

A cheer rose as Haley finally took the plunge, followed by Tim who waded in before dropping and swimming. Nonny returned to shore, urging Kelly and Matt into the water. Daring each other, the two followed Tim. Once away from the children and other swimmers, they caught up to Tim, Rob and Ali. Kelly splashed her brothers. After sputtering through the unexpected wave of water, they returned the splash and a splash battle followed with Matt wisely taking Kelly's side. They 'fought' until Tim heard Mackie calling for him. Or said he did.

Mackie first uttered the magic words, "Mama and Dada" a week before Ruidoso, several days before he hit the 7-month mark, and loved to practice them. Now he squealed happily when his daddy gave him a raspberry kiss on his tummy. After applying baby-safe sunscreen and putting a sunhat on the little guy, Tim took him into the water.

His back held securely against Tim's chest, Mackie was almost bent in half looking at Daddy's feet, trying to figure out what Daddy was walking in and where he was taking them. Tim scooped a little of the warm-ish surface water, dribbling a little bit on baby's arm. When he was rewarded with a giggle, he held Mackie up, saying, "Ok, we're going to dip your toes in, just a little."

Watching from nearby, Ty and Brynie were laughing, knowing their baby brother probably didn't understand what Daddy was saying. However, just as when they were little, Mackie was calm and happy because Daddy was calm and happy. With a big smile, Daddy moved Mackie so his feet were dangling and then he felt water, just like his bath. This water wasn't as warm but it tickled and the little boy squealed; he liked that! He squealed again when all his big people laughed. In less than a minute, Lia and Ricky abandoned beach buckets and shovels, toddling to Tim's side, holding their arms up. Poppy and Grandpa Jerry appeared and the three youngest littles laughed and squealed as their toes were dipped and swept quickly through the water.

Tim spent most of the afternoon playing with the kids, his and everyone else's. After their picnic lunch, the two little ones and their daddy returned to the cabin for naps. After he put them in their portable cribs, he set up the baby monitor and decided to have a nap himself. He wasn't worried about Lia climbing out of the crib; she'd played extra hard and would probably sleep the rest of the day if he let her. Just to be sure, he settled into the comfortable well-worn recliner in the main room of the cabin.

The smell of coffee woke him up; he smiled as he spotted his dad sitting at the table reading the newspaper he'd brought with him.

"Hey, kiddo, have a good nap?"

"Yeah Dad, guess I needed it. Babies still asleep?"

"Out like rocks, both of them. If you want to go back to the beach, I'll stay."
"Nah, I'll wait. I've probably had enough sun for today anyway."

Dad laughed, "Yeah, Duck made everyone get out for what he called a 'shade break'."

It was good spending time with his dad. They'd had plenty of time together in the shelter but going back to work and now living in separate houses meant they didn't get to see each other as often.

Jethro looked his boy over carefully; he looked tired but content. Shannon thought Ellie might be pregnant again and was impatient to know. She had more baby things to make if it was true.

Tim smiled, "I pass muster?"

"Yup. Looking fine, Elf Lord. Glad you're all moved into the new house; your mother was a little afraid we'd have to postpone this trip."

Tim shook his head, "No way, we need this too much! The past year, nearly a year and a half, has been too crazy, needed some fun and sun. The house is fine for now; we have beds to sleep on and enough furniture to be comfortable. If there's anything else that Ellie decides we need, we'll look in the storage shed or buy new."

"How are you doing with the Fielding mess?"

Tim looked at his father, "I'm doing all right. Dr. Tack cut my sessions back to one session a month. I worry about Mom, Grandpa, you and Kelly."

Dad shook his head, "Nothing we can do to change the past, Timson. What she did is with us for good. Your mother, with help from her doc, is determined to focus on the present and that helps Mac, Kelly and me – and I think you too."

"It does, Dad, as long as we still acknowledge our feelings."

"And we are, sweet boy, we all are." Smiling at his son, Jethro pointed to the newspaper, "Congress has finally passed the Recovery bills."

"Great! So…mortgages are on hold until new appraisals or did they find a solution to that?"

"Yes, using the satellites, they've been able to find some buildings in parts of the blast zone, at least 100 miles from Ground Zero, that are still intact, four walls and a roof, even though no one can currently live or work there. Mac's is one of them and there are a few others. As there are no humans living there, there's no government to support - no property taxes until they can start recovery in a few years and probably none until the area is safe to live in.

"Because the area is unsafe, mortgages for the few buildings standing are frozen until new appraisals can be done and that won't happen until...it's safe to live there. Mortgages where the property still exists but homes are gone are also frozen. They've done something more for the area flooded by Chesapeake Bay.

"Credit companies have agreed to ignore the frozen mortgages and unpaid bills after June 28th 2019; the day the government evacuation began and will extend the credit ratings existing on that day for another 18 months from now, but will also adjust for any payments made since then. The credit community has also agreed to drop their interest rates for evacuees."

"So the mortgage and credit industries will have to survive on the business they do in the rest of the country."
"Yes and that was another piece of the bills, the mortgage and credit companies are not allowed to raise interest rates for 36 months."

"Wow!"

"Yep. Well, with 40 million people displaced, everyone's in on this."

Tim nodded, "Yes, the latest statistics show 36 million of those 40 million were employed before July 28th and 17 million of us are again employed. Not necessarily at jobs that equal previous salaries, but something. That's nearly half."

Dad chuckled, "Considering how many of the 36 million are government employees, that's not too surprising."

"Any news on the new capital?"

His father shook his head before asking, "When did you stop reading the news?"

"November 16, 2019, the day Mackie was born. Between family, work and everything else, something had to go; it was either read the news or sleep."

"And sleep won."

"You betcha."

"Got plans for the rest of the summer?"

"Mm, I'll probably do a tour of my CCUs in the next few months. Originally thought Ellie could join me but she won't want to leave the new job so soon. Might wait and go later if she feels like she can take the time then."

"Think she's going to like the job?"

"Yeah, she's pretty excited about it. Just didn't want to continue risking her life every day."

"I expect Maggie will do something like that too."

"Or Tony, he's only a few years off his mandatory. And his lungs…"

"They've been fine so far, thank God!"

Tim nodded, "Copy that."

They talked and played cards for another hour before Lia woke up, Mackie not far behind her. Tim gave the baby a bottle while Lia had a snack, then they packed up and wandered back down to the beach.

Over the next week, the vacationers thoroughly relaxed, taking advantage of every bit of fun offered at Pinecrest. With the possible exception of Dr. Matt Jansen. He found Kelly's father, grandfather and older brother very interested in getting to know him better. Having been warned by Kelly and his stepfather, he did his best to be himself and apparently, like Bob before him, gained approval. If he'd done a little preparation by talking with the other Gibbs' in-laws, that is Ellie, Bob, Maggie and Bec, beforehand, no one else needed to know.

Leaving Mackie with the Cranes and Lia with the Palmers one day, Tim, Ellie, Ty and Brynie joined John, Jazzy and their kids on a hike. Remembering they'd gone too far the first time they were here,
they turned back a little sooner.

One afternoon, Tim and Ellie rented paddleboards and spent a few hours on the lake. The next time they went, Ty and Brynie went with them, sharing their boards. That was a lot of fun and when they saw a class offered at the marina, they signed the two older kids up for it. While Lia was a good swimmer for her young age, they decided to wait a year to introduce her to paddleboarding. And Mackie was just learning how to hold his breath and do his baby version of swimming.

Another day Tim, Poppy and Jerry took the kids Teddy's age and up horseback riding while Ellie and several of the women drove halfway down the mountain to an old town that had many fun shops, both antique and crafty.

There were hikes, walks and visits to the campfire circle where they learned more about the constellations, the local Native Americans and other topics. They even watched a movie out there one night! The kids thought that was funny after watching so many movies inside their shelter.

When the ranger heard John, Jazzy, Jimmy and Jim playing guitar and singing in front of the cabins one night, he asked them to perform at a campfire. That was fun as the quartet played and sang songs the adults knew and the kids soon learned.

Most dinners were grilled out in front of the cabins, which frequently turned into a laugh fest as the men teasingly inspected everyone else's dinner. Poppy, Grandpa, Uncle Jim and Uncle Dave took Hannah, Victoria, Teddy and the two older Gibbs' kids fishing a few times. That was nice as Penny, Ms. Lu and Maisie took the littles at the same time giving the Palmers and the junior Gibses precious time alone.

Tim was amazed how much Tyler remembered of their first stay here. Brynie remembered the lake, the horses and the ice cream shack, but not much else. Both of them remembered Uncle Tobias' cold feet.

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Back home after all the fun, the adults unpacked, washed clothes and prepared to return to work. They said goodbye to the Bishops as they left Saturday night. George had been holding the ranch together while Jerry and John were away. Once they reached home, he, Eileen and their kids would head out for their own vacation. Tim and Ellie made plans to spend the kids' school break in Tahlequah the following spring. It seemed an impossibly long way off but they knew the time would go quickly.

The City of Albuquerque, in partnership with 3 day-care centers, including Lara's, sponsored a day camp for kids 5 and up. Ty, Brynie, Victoria, Teddy and Hannah were very excited about attending. The camp would be held at one of the city parks with plenty of fun activities ranging from arts and crafts to sports, including swimming. The day-care centers would transport the kids to and from the camp and the kids would return before their parents arrived in late afternoon.

Camp Fun, as it was called, would be in session for two weeks. After it was over, Lara had plenty of other plans for the kids' summer. Continuing his educational talks, Granducky would pay a few visits and tell some of his stories; other visitors would include Native Americans who would tell them about ancient Albuquerque and teach them some of their culture. For the school-age kids, there would be outings to a senior center in town where the kids would adopt a grandparent. The kids would read to them and there would be simple craft projects done together. A trip to the Ortiz ranch would include visiting the animals, now back in their own pastures and swimming in their pool. There would be a surprise visit to Explora and the zoo. All that would take them through the summer. Lara thought they'd have a second trip to the Ortizes or the city pool for one last swim
before school started in August.
Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

This next adventure of the Gibbs clan, et al., involves the U.S. State Department. Rather than create new characters, I've borrowed them from "Madam Secretary", another of my favorite TV shows. The main character, the Secretary of State, is Elizabeth McCord and her husband is named Henry. Her executive assistant is Blake Moran; her chief policy advisor is Jay Whitman. The President that Secretary McCord works with on her show is not the one in our story (but the actor was a guest star on NCIS in Season 11) and the country of Bacia is fictional. Other than this information, you don't need to have watched "Madam Secretary" or know anything else about it to follow (and enjoy!) the story.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 15

SURPRISES

Two weeks after their vacation, Tim was well back in his work groove. He was pitching in, doing some preliminary work on a new case, when his desk phone rang.

He answered, saying, "Hello, this is Gibbs."

A male voice said, "Agent Gibbs, my name is Blake Moran, personal assistant to Secretary of State McCord. At your convenience, the Secretary's policy advisor, Jay Whitman, would like to speak with you."

"State? Can you tell me why? Is there a cyber-crime involving NCIS?"

"No, there's no cyber-crime nor is NCIS involved. Mr. Whitman is heading up a relief effort in the country of Bacia and is hoping for some advice."

"Advice, interesting. Yes, Mr. Moran, I'll speak with Mr. Whitman although I'm curious to know why he's seeking my advice. I'm a regional director for several cybercrime units at NCIS."

"Regional Director? Ah, sir, are you also Agent Gibbs, Agent Jethro Gibbs?"

"That explains it. I am an agent underneath the fancy title but I'm Timothy Gibbs, son of Jethro Gibbs."

"I'm sorry to have disturbed you, Director. Although puzzled as I asked for Jethro Gibbs when I called. Do you know if he's available?"

"He's probably not; he was taking my grandfather somewhere this morning. He's semi-retired, Mr. Moran, and when he works it's at FLETC's New Mexico location. If you think I can be of help, I'm happy to speak with Mr. Whitman."

"May I ask your security clearance?"
Tim told him adding, "Feel free to check with Director Vance or Secretary Porter, I report to both."

"Thank you, I appreciate your candor and cooperation, considering I'm asking you for a favor. I'll check with the Director or Secretary to ensure protocols are followed."

"I'll be here until 1200 Mountain Time, and then I'll be out until 1500."

"Very well, I expect I'll be calling back in a few minutes."

After disconnecting, Tim did a little research on Bacia, remembering hearing something about it on the international news, now that Dad had encouraged him to start following the news again. When he saw what was currently happening, he nodded, that made some sense. The name Jay Whitman was tickling the back of his mind but he had no memory of what he looked like or of meeting the man.

Forwarding his desk phone to his cell, he headed up to the roof garden for some fresh air. He needed to stretch; he'd been sitting for too many hours.

He didn't stay long as the day – and the roof – was heating up. Back on his floor, he used the restroom, went back into his department for a cup of iced coffee before returning to his office, closing the door behind him.

After turning off call forwarding, he was just logging on to his laptop when his desk phone rang. He smirked; his security clearance must be high enough for whatever this was.

"Hello, this is Timothy Gibbs."

"Director Gibbs, this is Blake Moran again. We have clearance for you to speak with Jay Whitman if that still works for you."

"Sure."

"Jay's in our embassy in Bacia; I'm setting up a video chat with him now. Sorry this is complicated; we need a tightly secured line."

"I understand. I'll swap over to my laptop, I've got better security there than on the phone lines."

"Of course."

Tim quickly finished logging on and transferred the call. He smiled at the man on the screen, "Ok, all done."

"That was fast!"

Tim quirked his lips, "What can I say, I'm a geek!"

Moran smiled, those who knew him would recognize his genuine amusement. "All right, stand by please and I'll bring Jay on with us, then I'll drop off. If either of you need anything, Jay will ping me."

Tim nodded and the next image he saw was a man about his age. "Mr. Whitman, I thought the name was familiar and you look familiar, we must have met somewhere along the line. How can I help you?"

"Director Gibbs, thanks for taking the time to talk with me. And yes, you look familiar too although I don't know when we would have met. I'm in our embassy in Bacia, gathering our expatriate citizens
to bring them home. One of the problems I'm facing is where to take them. I remembered hearing around the department that somebody from NCIS spearheaded moving a large group from DC to New Mexico and about the two ranches that built homes for Evacuees. My boss called Secretary Porter and she advised us to contact Agent Jethro Gibbs. My apologies if I gave Blake the wrong name. I hoped you might have some suggestions."

Tim nodded, "That's all right; both were family endeavors. How many people will you have?"

"We don't have final numbers yet. We've sent word to everyone but I'm learning that at least a quarter of the American citizens here have already left. Right now, I can only give you a range of 25-40 people."

"All right. Are there families with children, couples, singles - age ranges?"

"We know of 4 elderly couples, ages between 82 and 92. The oldest couple has been here for 35 years. They have not been to the U.S. in 20 years and truly have no family or friends left at home. There are 5 other couples, ages from mid-50's to mid-60's, recent retirees. There are 5 singles in their 20s and 30s and 7 families, parents and anywhere from 1-4 kids. The parents range from 30s-40s and the kids' ages range from 6 months to 15 years old."

"And what kind of housing are you looking for, temporary, permanent, something in between?"

"Yes."

Tim chuckled, "I understand. Next question, do you know if any of these folks have criminal records?"

"These people do not. Some of the Americans we've contacted have refused to respond. The FBI confirmed most of those folks are wanted for questioning, have warrants against them or past criminal records. After hearing that we sent everyone's names in but the folks we're talking about are clean."

"Thanks; I'm sure the expat criminals are now long gone from Bacia."

"As long as they don't hurt anyone and I don't have to deal with them."

"Your best bet is to find a community that can handle a range of ages and needs. I know we have a few vacancies, not sure how many. Having said that, I have no authority to offer you anything, it would be up to the Limited Liability Corporation that owns and operates The Grove, the name of our Evacuee community. The other possibility is the Ortiz Ranch next to us; they may also have vacancies. When are you leaving?"

"Our deadline is next Tuesday, a week from today. The government here is very pleased that we're being cooperative, collecting our citizens. Secretary McCord was proactive in contacting the government and negotiating some time. But the unrest towards non-natives is growing every day. The sooner we leave the better."

"I'll present this to our group, the LLC I mentioned. Only a very few of them have any sort of security classification, most are civilians. That's going to make things difficult."

"It doesn't have to be, I have the authority to waive the security clearance. Blake is a stickler for protocol, in his position he has to be. Besides, the media is already on the story, there's really no reason to try to keep this quiet. Contained would be nice but as I said, the story is already out there."

"All right, then I'll send out a notice, arrange for a meeting tonight. Most of us live on the ranch and
those who don't can attend by video chat. And I will ask for their discretion. Do you have any questions for me, other than how soon I can let you know?"

Whitman gave him a half-smile. "Yes. How much rent will you charge them? And where will they live? Keep in mind most of these people are living here because of the lower cost of living."

"Again, I can't promise anything but I will suggest we charge them what they've been paying in Bacia. We have evacuee housing on a plot of land next to our ranch as well as 30+ rooms in a converted barn on the ranch."

"All right, I'll see if we can figure out the rents they're paying now. What would you advise them to bring?"

"I'm sure you've already told them this but they need to close their bank accounts in Bacia and convert it to cash, American cash depending on the exchange rate. Tell them no cashier or bank checks; cash is the only answer. I don't know whether the exchange rate would be better there or back here; your folks in the Embassy would know that. Clothes, medications, written prescriptions if they can get them, their jewelry, photos, toys for the kids, their favorite artwork and treasures, books and favorite pillows, probably limit that to 2 per person – I mean pillows to sleep on, not throw pillows. For us, it was comforting to have our pillows. It'll be rough, they'll want to bring their entire lives and you don't have time or space. I'm assuming you're limited to 1 plane?"

Jay answered in the affirmative and Tim continued, "Give them definite numbers: 2 suitcases per person, give them a weight limit per bag, check with your pilots or maybe use what the commercial airlines do, 50 pounds per bag. Say 5 toys per child, 4 pieces of artwork per couple or family and their electronics. You don't want to limit the photos but you could have them bring the albums to the Embassy and then they can remove the photos and leave the empty albums behind. Maybe they can bring two big garbage bags per family too, have them double up the bags.

"If I had to do this again and please God I won't ever have to, I'd bring all my clothes and the kids' toys in doubled up garbage bags and pack the artwork, books, treasures and photos in the suitcases. Clothes can be washed, repaired or replaced; old photos, unless they're online, are irreplaceable as is a lot of artwork. We packed in boxes, which cost money and then have to be recycled after."

"What about furniture?"

"Up to you but I'd say probably not; it would take too much time and effort to transport to the Embassy and might be a problem as far as cargo weight, with everything else. Again, you can check with the flight crew. Even if you said, 'light furniture', you'd likely end up with a 500 pound hand-carved beautiful table that will break everyone's heart to leave behind. My godparents had one we had to leave behind. We had a week or two more time to prepare than you do and still had to leave many things. How about this – see if people can ship their furniture to the U.S. That way you're off the hook for the weight and the cost and I bet the international shipping companies would love the good publicity.

"If they stay at The Grove, La Serenidad or at the Ortiz Ranch, the houses – and the bunkrooms in our barn - are completely furnished, including dishes and utensils so they could leave those behind. We brought books – one of the family had a huge collection of books and we brought a tiny fraction of them. But those weigh more than clothes and you'll have to watch that."

"Ok, that sounds reasonable."

"What about pets?"
"Do you allow them?"

"Most, with conditions. We'd need to know what they are and how many. We do not allow snakes, venomous or not, or anything poisonous, like scorpions, spiders or tarantulas. Dogs, cats, birds and fish are fine, if the birds and fish are legal in the U.S. Most states have a list of fish that are forbidden, I'll send the one for New Mexico to Blake. And there are rules around bringing birds in, we have a copy somewhere I'll also send to Blake or he can Google the information. My family has turtles we adopted but we've learned since then that they're not good pets, both for their sake and ours. That means no turtles are allowed either. La Serenidad has a barn and paddock and can handle alpacas, llamas, sheep, goats and horses. Although I don't know how you'd transport them!

"We cannot accept dogs who have a history of biting, too many vulnerable people around. The owners need to bring copies of the veterinarian records and all dogs and cats, even indoor cats, must have had all their shots and vaccinations. That's state law. If any of the animals come from a herd or group under quarantine, they cannot enter the state of New Mexico or I suppose any other state. Because the pets lived outside the U.S., each animal will have to be examined by a veterinarian here. If they come here, we'll have a vet with a truck pick them up when the plane arrives, check them out at the vet hospital and bring them back. That's worked well with our Returnees.

"We have a few houses designated for cat owners. My kids and I are allergic to them; there were sufficient allergies amongst the Evacuees to go ahead with the separate homes so we know never to place non-cat owners in them and my kids and I know not to get within 20 feet of any of them. Cats are not allowed outdoors, this is a rural area with many wild predators. Our first evacuees didn't listen until two cats were mutilated by coyotes. On top of the danger, we don't want feral cats, too many problems there. Indoor cats only and we prefer both dogs and cats be spayed or neutered. There is a limit of three cats or dogs per household; if residents have both, the limit is still 3 in total. There is a cleaning deposit for each animal although I'll suggest that be paid over time. Dogs on leashes when outside the house, even on the patio. There's a dog park in Albuquerque where they can take their pups. All these rules apply to The Grove, Rancho La Serenidad and the Ortiz Ranch."

He paused, "For our own evac group, all dogs and cats had to travel in kennels, the rest in cages, tanks or whatever their habitat is. I don't know how you're going to get them here. We ended up hiring a pet transport company, so much easier."

Whitman sighed, "I'd say no pets but that's cruel and people will especially need them. I wonder if we could find a pet transport."

Tim scrolled through his phone, "Here's a couple of numbers to try. If these companies can't help you, they might have contacts who can."

"Thanks, it's worth a shot."

After setting up a time to talk again the next day, they disconnected. Before Tim resumed his work, he took a quick look at The Grove database, finding 20 houses available.

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Tim sent out a request for a LLC meeting that evening, telling the membership he had an interesting suggestion for their vacancies. Then he settled into work, concentrating on and completing the coding he'd started earlier. Somehow, he got through the hours until he and Ellie left for her doctor's appointment.

They were both excited about the appointment. After they saw the doctor, they were having an ultrasound. It was easy to focus on that and not the chats with the State Department. The doctor was
pleased with Ellie's health and smiled at their excitement over the ultrasound. When the tech came in for the ultrasound, the doc shook his head, "I forgot you weren't able to have Mackie's ultrasound until we were all released from our shelters. This is a lot earlier, right?"

They nodded and he grinned. "Cool!"

The doc left while Ellie was prepped, the tech got busy with the wand and Tim started recording. He grabbed Ellie's hand when they heard their child's heartbeat. It was a little like an underwater electronic version of the word "wow" being rapidly repeated without end. Then the baby seemingly danced around and they watched, enthralled. Ellie laughed, "It's a little dancer! I'll bet you $50 it's a girl."

Smiling at his wife, he responded, "I shouldn't take you up on the bet, but I will." Minutes later, Ellie was still smiling, watching.

They continued watching the tiny figure bouncing around while the tech measured the baby. After Ellie cleaned up and dressed, they drove back to the day care to pick up their children.

As they drove toward the day care, they talked about telling the family. There was a family dinner on Sunday where for once all 6 siblings would be there along with Ali as well as Kelly's boyfriend Matt. They'd make their announcement then.

They'd first have a video chat with the Bishops in Oklahoma when the family gathered for lunch at their ranch early Sunday afternoon. They'd also need to let the extended family know but they'd worry about that later. Ellie reminded Tim that Jenna, her maid of honor at their wedding, was coming for a visit in August. She'd sheltered with family in Florida and was currently living and working in Atlanta.

Now the only thing they had to worry about was keeping their secret to themselves for a few more days.

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After dinner that evening, the LLC convened in the shelter or called in. The kids were there too, either listening or playing in the old playroom. Shannon thought to bring the baby corral and the babies camped out in that.

Once Geordie, the current chairperson, brought the meeting to order, Tim walked to the front, making sure he was in hearing range of those attending via video chats. Briefly, he recounted the call from State, explaining the problem in Bacia: foreigners were on the verge of being expelled. "The movement is called Nativism. The native Bacians don't want any non-natives in their country."

After giving them all the information he had, he paused and Penny stood. "These people are refugees, evacuees just as all of you were. Why don't we offer them housing here? We could charge them a little rent, maybe what they've been paying in Bacia?"

There were nods and then Shannon whispered to her. Penny chuckled, "Oops, I forgot I'm a member now! I move we offer to rent our available homes to the Bacian evacuees charging them the same prices they were paying in Bacia."

Jimmy stood, "I second the motion."

Tim took the floor again to explain the rationale behind the suggestion: that many of the expats were retirees who'd left the U.S. in search of a lower cost of living. Most of the others worked online and were not necessarily on fixed incomes. A great deal of discussion followed until Grammie proposed
they include a yearly or half-yearly review of the rents and use a sliding scale to determine the amount of rent. That appealed to everyone. The motion was amended to include a half-year review for the first year, moving to an annual review after that, using a sliding scale. They also agreed to allow monthly installments on the cleaning deposits for pet owners. The amended motions were approved.

After the meeting, Tim sent a text to Blake Moran who replied with a happy emoticon, adding that he and Jay would be in touch as soon as they had more information.

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By Wednesday afternoon, Tim was becoming a little antsy; he hadn't heard anything further from the State Department. He knew they were likely swamped organizing and arranging the transport of the expat Americans to the Embassy but he was impatient to know about the final head count, the number of pets and the other information he'd requested. He smiled; as happy as he was to help these people he was even more excited about the baby.

Taking a break, he started making a list of names. As they'd decided they didn't want to be told the gender ahead of the baby's arrival, he jotted down names for girls and boys, including some currently used for either males or females. Off the top of his head, he jotted down Jackson, Anne, Amelia, Henry, Barbara, Patrick, Sean, Mason, Blair, Cameron, Bradley, Scott, Collin, Emma, Nathaniel, Colleen, Elizabeth, David, Andrew, Lauren, Kathleen, Mark. He stopped there, Ellie would have more names to add and he needed to work!

Thursday morning, he was contemplating another cup of coffee when his laptop pinged. He hoped it was either Moran or Whitman. It was Moran and he was smiling. "I've got details for you."

"Great!"

"I'll send you an e-mail but I thought you'd want a call too. First, they're leaving Bacia on Monday as planned. They'll fly here and meet with Secretary McCord and staff for a debriefing. We've arranged for rooms for them that night. We have clearance to transport them to Ortiz Regional Airfield on Tuesday. Is that related to the Ortiz ranch?"

"Yes; it's on the Ortiz ranch, which is next to La Serenidad. We have a back road between our two properties. We'll have trucks and cars there to transport everyone and everything over to The Grove."

"Great, I wondered about getting everything moved. Figure arrival time for early afternoon, we'll get you an ETA closer to the flight. Next, how many homes do you have available?"

"We'll have to keep some open for Evacuees; they're still moving and settling around the country. Now we're getting folks who are coming here for new jobs and they stay with us until they can afford a place of their own. Having said that, we have 16 homes we can offer your folks plus some of the bunkrooms in our converted barn. I don't have current numbers for the bunkrooms, my guesstimate is 30 rooms.

"The homes are fully furnished, dishes and all. There are 6 one-bed, one-bath homes empty right now and the rest are three or four bedrooms with two baths. Each of them has heat and air conditioning as well as a shaded patio. There are several neighborhoods and each has a communal laundry building. The bunkrooms all have beds and some storage; we can shift the beds around as needed. There are plenty of bathrooms, although they're shared, and there is a fully equipped kitchen, a laundry closet and common area on the first floor."

"Wonderful! Do you have photos to show the group?"
"Yes, we have a slideshow of the homes and photos of the converted barn rooms and common areas that I'll send you. It would help if I knew the number of people, split into singles, couples, families and how many kids or other relatives, then we'll know how many of the singles and doubles we'll need to prepare. They've all been cleaned but the LLC likes to add some personal touches. I need to know about pets, too."

Moran smiled, "I have all the numbers if you have time now."

"Great and yes, I do." Blake gave him the breakdown, which Tim promptly loaded into a spreadsheet. He raised an eyebrow when he was told a pet transport company would bring the 5 cats, 9 dogs, 4 alpacas, 3 llamas, 10 sheep and 12 goats, assorted fish and 4 birds.

"That's going to be fun and I hope whoever owns the llamas, sheep and goats will rent them to us to clear the ranch and The Grove."

"Llamas eat weeds?"

"No, they protect the sheep and goats who do eat them."

"Ah, I see."

Tim laughed at Blake's professionally neutral tone, finally saying, "I was a Navy brat as a child, then moved to Baltimore and lived in the DC Metro area most of my adult life. Ranch living is definitely a learning experience!"

"I'd never know you were an amateur South-westerner."

"Huh, I guess we really have gone country!"

Moving on, Blake verified all the animals were legal in the U.S., had had the appropriate shots, the dogs, cats spayed or neutered, and that pet owners were bringing their records. Then he reported the range of rents and utilities people had been paying. Tim was heartened by those, while they were low by U.S. standards, they would at least bring some income to the LLC, who would use it for maintenance of The Grove.

When they finished, Blake added, "Jay said to tell you one of the embassy staffers found an international furniture transport company. If people have furniture shipped, will they have to store it or will you move your furniture out?"

"That's great! Sure, we'll move our stuff into storage. Any idea when the stuff will arrive?"

"The least expensive way is by ship. The timeframe Jay gave me was 3-4 weeks. He said the ship it's coming on isn't sailing directly to the U.S."

"Ok. That makes it a little easier. The newcomers will have some time to settle in a bit before it gets here. Gives us some breathing room too."

"Great! That's all I have. If you have any more questions or details, just send me a text or email."

"You check them on personal time?"

Blake made a noise and Tim laughed, "Right, sorry, what's personal time? All right, if they arrive during the day on Tuesday, most of us will be at work. And that might be easier on the new arrivals; they won't be mobbed by the whole crowd!"
"But there will be people available?"

"Oh sure, 40 of us live on the ranch and several people are retired. They'll be here. If you need a contact for that day, here's my mother's cell number; she's better at answering than my father now that he's retired-ish." He gave Blake the number.

"Thanks for that. Jay or I, possibly both of us, will be on the flight, we were looking forward to meeting you."

"Hm, tell you what, if the flight arrives around 1500, I can get away early, work from home later."

"I'll see what I can do."

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After the call with Blake, Tim sent the slideshow and photos. Then he tried to return to the case file reports he'd been reviewing. That was a useless endeavor. Instead, he spent a few minutes looking at the database for their evacuee homes, noting that the 20 homes were comprised of 6 singles, 13 doubles and 1 guesthouse. He had a note from Geordie correcting his house count, saying they only needed to hold back 2 homes for potential Evacuees. Geordie also confirmed the availability of 30 bunkrooms in the barn. Tim sent the numbers to Blake.

He sent out an e-mail asking for another quick LLC meeting that evening, meeting via Skype/video chat was fine; he wanted to give the group the latest details. Finally, Ellie called to say she was ready to leave. When they met in the parking garage, she smiled at her husband's face; he seemed relieved and she guessed he'd finally heard from the State Department.

"The Bacia group is coming here, flying in on Tuesday. I got the final head count of people and animals. The kids are going to be over the moon, there are alpacas, llamas, goats and sheep coming!"

Ellie laughed, "You're more excited about them than the people."

"I'm hoping we can rent the sheep and goats to clear the ranch and The Grove and the llamas will guard them while they're working. I'd rather do that than be stuck inside listening to weed whackers for days on end! Plus, there won't be bits of stuff flying all over the place. Although I guess with all the land to be cleared it would be tractors dragging a cutter or something like that."

They told the kids about the llamas, alpacas, sheep and goats as they were driving home and as predicted, Ty and Brynie were very excited. "Can we play with them, Daddy?"

"No, Bryniegirl, they're not like dogs, not pets. You can visit them and maybe their owners will show you how to pet them, give them treats."

"Cool!"

Ty frowned, "Where are they going to live, Daddy?"

"They'll share the barn and paddock with our horses, Ty."

"Oh boy, we can see them every day!"

Lia knew what horses were, she'd been riding with her mommy and daddy. She babbled something that included the word horsies. Brynie turned to her, "Lia, there are new animals coming to the barn. We'll get to see them!"
Lia beamed, her big sister was excited and happy so she would be too. New animals sounded fun to her!

After dinner, Tim gave the LLC an update.

"The State Department has approved us taking the American Expats. They're flying out of Bacia on Monday, they'll stay overnight somewhere near the State Department after a debriefing and then flown to the Ortiz Airfield on Tuesday."

Uncle Dave looked surprised, "A private plane? The government's flying them here?"

"Yes, to the U.S. and here. I was surprised too. Don't know about a private plane, for all I know, they're flying from Bacia on C-130s." That got a chuckle out of the agency and military people and then their laughter had to be explained.

Tim continued in a more serious vein. "Because of the rapidly deteriorating political climate against anyone not a native of Bacia, the State Department sent a jet to extract the Ambassador, the staff and their families. That's standard procedure, although they may sometimes fly out on a military transport. The flight was happening anyway; State added 33 more passengers. And hired a pet transport."

Jim frowned, "Where is the State Department these days?"

Geordie grinned, "In Charlotte, North Carolina. Don't know where the Secretary sheltered. But the McCord family and many of Secretary McCord's staff are living and working in Charlotte. The McCords have horses and brought them back to the East Coast as soon as it was safe."

Nobody asked how he knew although it was probably public information. But one never knew with Geordie and he rarely answered questions.

After that, Tim looked around, "We have 18 houses we can rent to them; we need to hold back 2 for any Evacuees. Although these folks qualify as Evacuees from a different event."

After reviewing the specific houses, what needed to be done between now and Tuesday, Maisie raised her hand. "These people are likely strangers to each other and to us. It would be great if we could send them a photo so they'd at least know what we look like."

With a smile, Tim set up his phone and then scooted into the frame, taking a photo of everyone, phones and tablets held up for those on video links and sent it to Blake Moran with the caption, "Welcome from all of us, we can't wait to meet everyone!"

A few minutes later, he was surprised when his phone rang with a call from Secretary McCord. When he answered, she asked to be put on speaker; he shushed the crowd and waded into the middle of them holding the phone up, using a volume boost app to increase the volume beyond the phone's capacity.

"Blake sent me your photo with the wonderful caption. I wanted to say a personal thanks to all of you for your generosity! This is great news; I've sent it on to Jay Whitman who replied that he'll share with our returning citizens. We believe this will really lift their spirits; as you can imagine they're upset at being forced out of their homes, some of them have been there for more than 30 years. After this past year, we all know how that feels. I won't keep you, I just wanted to say thank you from all of us at State! Along with your generosity, you've made us very happy and that doesn't often happen!"

Once she was off the call, Tim found a long text from Blake with the travel information including the arrival time at Ortiz Regional Airfield. Just about everyone but the ones on video chats were still
there so Tim shared the information:

"The flight is cleared to land at the Ortiz airfield, that's great! Arrival time is 1500, that's 3:00 PM. Not much furniture, most of what's being saved has been shipped by a moving company. Anyway, there are bicycles, a lot of suitcases and plastic bags full of belongings."

Uncle Jim frowned, "Tim, how do they already know that?"

Tim was reading further and looked up with a frown, "Good question, Uncle Jim. Listen to this… they're holed up in the Embassy until the flight is cleared to leave on Monday. The note says they have plenty of food, water and the power is on. There hasn't been any violence directed at them or the Embassy but once the government knew they were going, they asked, and the word asked has quotation marks, that they be moved to the Embassy compound immediately. The note says they're safe behind the gates, the Bacian government has given their word and our Marines are guarding them, Hoo Rah! They'll be leaving at the same time. They'll be taken by helicopters straight from the Embassy grounds to the planes."

Breena exclaimed, "Wow, gonna be a tense weekend."

Colonel Barnes exchanged a look with his daughter, Geordie and Jethro, all four Marines very familiar with the challenges of guarding embassies. Maggie suddenly frowned as her phone buzzed. Stopping to read the text, she shook her head, "Gotta go, my turn! Some of those Marines have dependents with them."

Penny was horrified, "Will they fly with the Marines or the others?"

"Wherever there's room. My job to find out." She hurried out of the shelter, the others soon following.

Chapter End Notes

Sliding scale fees are variable prices for products, services or taxes (and in the case here, rents) based on a customer's ability to pay. Such fees are thereby reduced for those who have lower incomes, or alternatively, less money to spare after their personal expenses, regardless of income.
Saturday was a blur of activity at the ranch and The Grove. While the children had plenty of attention from the adults, there was a lot of quiet talk, worry and cleaning.

As he ate breakfast that morning, Mackie on his lap playing with a spoon, Tim read a text from Blake about The Grove slideshow that he, Kayla and Jimmy made last year.

Ty, Brynie, Victoria, Teddy and Lissie Fuller were in it pretending to be prospective occupants. Lia, Ricky and the Vance twins were in a piece of it, playing in a playground next to a Laundry Barn. Even Henry and Bess, their first retiree tenants, were included, telling a bit of their story. Along with the shots of the neighborhoods, there were slides of the interior and exterior of each type of model, slides showing the bus stop shelter (complete with the spray mister for the hot weather and the solar powered heater for the cold) and the nearby grocery store.

They'd also included a few slides of Albuquerque so people could see what the area was like. Blake reported that he, the Secretary and her Chief of Staff had viewed it and thought it was wonderful; they'd show it to the group when they arrived.

The commercial cleaning crew had already cleaned the vacant homes. The ones to be occupied only needed dusting and the exteriors of the windows washed again. Sheets, blankets and covers were washed, dried and put back on the beds, towels washed, folded and hung in the bathrooms. Dishes, cups, glasses and cutlery were put through the dishwasher. Supplies of toilet paper, soap, dishwasher and dish soap were checked.

For the homes that would also have cat residents, a litter box and bag of kitty litter were provided. Dog and cat food were provided for the appropriate houses. The power was turned on, the thermostats set to a cool setting. They were testing them today but would turn the air-conditioning on again Tuesday morning, the retirees on the LLC committed to handling that.

Tim and the guys moved a few of the TVs out of storage where they'd been since the last occupants left, making a note of the serial numbers on the inventory list. They'd hook them up to the satellite service when the newcomers arrived, although they thought some of the Bacian evacuees might have their own TVs with them. The patios and walkways would be swept Tuesday morning; it was pointless to do before then. A list of groceries was made, mostly staples: milk, bread, eggs, cheese, butter, cereal and peanut butter, with a few frozen meals until people had a chance to go shopping themselves. Uncle Dave and Aunty Liz took the list to the bulk grocery store in town. Vegetables and fresh flowers would come from their own gardens and they'd buy fresh fruit and berries at the local stands on Sunday.

All day long, the group kept eyes and ears on the news. They weren't as tense, fearful and worried as they'd been before the Attack a year ago but they were concerned for their future new friends and tenants.

By Saturday night, they knew they'd been right to worry; Bacia was now live on the news. The capital city, where the Embassy was located, had a lot of unrest that day and toward nightfall, it got
worse. They saw the Marines in their combat gear, their stance defensive. No shots had yet been fired near the Embassy grounds; the local police appeared to be doing their best to keep the crowds away. But the city was growing wild, two citizens of other countries were beaten to death, three others badly injured before they were rescued by the police.

When the news stations reported that the militia had been called in to keep the rioters in check, Tim and Ellie wondered if the travelers would leave early.

The answer came in a text from Blake Moran at 0300 Sunday morning. "They're in the air, all good, animals too. Will keep them here until Tuesday unless otherwise notified."

Tim was reading that aloud to Ellie when her phone rang. It was Tony, "Maggie says they're out safe, everyone got out. The government called the army in to protect them. Their president was quoted as saying he'd given his word to the Americans; that we'd kept our word about removing our citizens and the delay was due to the weather forecast and air traffic, not any fault of the Americans."

The trio spoke for a few minutes before Tim's phone chimed with a call from his father. "You heard?"

"Yes, I had a text from Blake Moran that they got out safely. He said they'd hold them in Wash… Charlotte until Tuesday."

"Do we need to do that, to wait?"

"The houses are ready. The power's on, groceries are put away, we have food for the animals, the TVs we have are in place." He looked at Ellie, "We'll have to reschedule the veterinarian - can you think of any other reason to wait?"

"No, they'll have to be debriefed tomorrow, I mean later today. I can't think of any reason not to bring them out Monday. Maybe still bring the animals on Tuesday, be easier."

The four of them, Tony still on Ellie's phone, agreed and Tim sent Blake a text that they were ready, to bring them on Monday with questions about the animals. Blake's response was Tuesday for the animals. Tim wrote a text to the LLC membership, setting it for a delayed send. No use waking everyone!

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When they woke again later that morning, the news outlets reported that all American citizens who'd been residents in Bacia had been safely evacuated, along with the Marines, their families and of course the Embassy staff.

They reached their Bishop family as they were sitting down to lunch together and Ellie and Tim chatted with them for several minutes, telling them about the baby. While they were in Ruidoso, Barbara and Shannon had decided that Ellie was pregnant; now she and Jerry were over the moon happy to have that confirmed. A smiling Jazzy shook her finger at Ellie, "I knew there was more going on than just the altitude!"

After ending the call, the couple decided to spend the day with their children. At first they thought of a bike ride but it was already too hot, they'd save that for an early morning outing. Instead, they went for a swim.

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As they prepared for the family gathering later that afternoon, Tim and Ellie told the children about
the baby. As expected, they were very excited! Ty remembered that they'd also told everyone about Mackie at a dinner here and they had a giggle over that.

While the shelter was handy, the Gibbs clan didn't want to have to eat in there all the time and hadn't yet renovated the ranch house dining room to fit all of them. As Grandpa said, it was hard to plan a renovation when the family kept expanding!

Instead, they'd looked at ideas for a family gathering spot outdoors. While there were many solutions, the one that most appealed to them was the use of open-air canopies, the shelters used at farmers' markets and street fairs. Tim did some research online before he, Dad and Jimmy started going to the markets and fairs to study them. Eventually the trio figured out how they were made, the different options and what would be best for their family. With the large and growing clan, they'd need several of these things and they were not cheap.

After pricing the components and talking with the seamstresses in the family, they determined it would be less expensive to make them. Finding the material for the tops was tricky, as it was not generally sold to individuals in the amounts they needed.

In the end, enough of the fabric was found, purchased and the seamstresses went to work. It took a few weeks but now they had canopies with UV and water resistant tops and enough 'side walls' that could be moved from side to side or end to end as the sun moved. There were four large tops, connected at the ends with zip ties, with enough legs to support them. The Gibbses had improved upon the models they'd seen by slanting the legs outward so people would have more freedom of movement.

To further help combat the heat, they fastened a high-pressured water misting system providing a cooling mist. Done properly, the system reduced the heat by as much as 25 degrees. Tim and Jethro were proud that, just as with the canopies, they'd studied the makeup of the commercially sold systems and made their own.

The grills were at the edge of the cover, not quite in the sun but not affecting the cooling system. Coolers full of ice had plenty of pitchers, cans and bottles of water, lemonade, iced tea, iced coffee, fruit drinks and beer. Under the canopies were enough tables, benches and chairs to comfortably seat the entire clan. These would do fine for now, eventually they planned to build a permanent wooden pavilion with enough room for a hundred people.

When everyone, including the 'townies' Rob, Ali, Kelly and Matt, had gathered and had something cold to drink, Tim and Ellie stood up. The two of them, Tyler and Bryn were grinning madly while Lia squealed and Mackie echoed his big sister. "Ellie and I have news to share."

As Ellie stood, Shannon grinned, she and Barb had been right! Her son took her daughter-in-law's hand and Ellie smiled at him, turning to the group, "We have déjà vu all over again. Yes, we're pregnant! We're 12 weeks; we waited to tell you this time. And before anyone thinks of a polite way to ask, yes, this was planned."

Their kids joined them while the others cheered and then swarmed them with hugs, gentle ones for Ellie and thumps on the back for Tim whose grin just got bigger.

When the tumult finally died back, Tim looked at his younger sister and brother who were both beaming…as were Ali and Matt. "Something tells me there's more news to come?"

Having won the coin toss, Kelly and Matt stood. Matt opened his mouth but Kelly was too excited to wait. She held up her left hand, which featured a lovely ring, "We're getting married!" Matt grinned in happiness and a big dose of relief. He'd already survived the "chat" with her father - with the help
and advice of his stepdad and the Gibbs' in-laws, mostly Bob, the only other male in-law. Now he laughed as he wrapped his arms around Kelly and held on while the two of them were swarmed.

When the noise died down again, Kelly grinned, "And there's more…"

Grabbing Ali's hand, Rob held it up. "We're engaged!" And then they laughed, as it was their turn for the swarm.

When relative quiet was restored, Grandpa looked around, "Anyone else?"

The two engaged couples smiled at each other, standing again. Kelly spoke, "We don't want big fancy weddings, we'd like to double up like Sarah, Bob, Geordie, and Bec did. And we want to be married on the ranch with everyone here. Matt's family, all the Bishops and all of us, the extended family too."

Ellie opened her mouth but Ali smiled at her, "We had dinner with Trish, Aunt Cissy and Uncle John last night. You?"

"Skyped with Mom, Dad and the gang when they were at the ranch for lunch today."

Smiling, the cousins hugged each other. They pulled apart as Grandpa, who'd left the group, returned holding a calendar. "All right, as long as we have so many of us here, let's talk dates."

The two couples agreed on a Saturday, easier for everyone, and they started going through dates. Luckily, all of the siblings and some of the older folks had their schedules on their phones. They found two weekends in September when everyone here was available so they'd hold those open while the Bishops and the Rowes, Matt's family, were consulted.

The announcements and scheduling done, Jethro and Uncle Jim put the burgers and hot dogs on the grills. Grammie, Tim, Tobias, Tony and Shannon retrieved the bowls of salads, potato and veggie with greens, and sliced tomatoes and onions from the coolers. Pickles were popped into bowls and put on the table with the rest of the fixings. With this crowd, it was always easier to eat buffet-style.

Everything but the meat, buns, ketchup, mustard and the salad dressings was produced on the ranch and those commercial items had been carefully selected from reputable grocers. Maisie, Shannon and Bec had a date to make their first batches of ketchup, mustard and mayonnaise but the mustard seed pods were still maturing in a paper bag and they wanted to do all three the same weekend.

The potatoes were grown in the basement garden, the onions, tomatoes, salad greens, the cucumbers for the pickles and the veggies came from the shelter garden. The cucumbers had been pickled and jarred in the shelter kitchen, stored in the basement root cellar. Mac loved to tease his daughter about returning to the ways of his grandparents.

The simple dinner was delicious, noisy and fun. Before they ate dessert, they went for a walk. It was nearly 6:30 PM by this time and the worst of the heat was gone. With the littles in strollers or riding on various shoulders or backs, they walked down past the dry creek bed to the spot where they could see over the rise to the new homes. There they could see the skeletons of the next three houses under construction, the Chalmers', Cranes' and DiNozzos'. The Tim Gibbses, Palmers and Hubbards were already in; the Perrys would be last as they were the least crowded in a guesthouse.

Construction was on schedule; for those who hadn't looked in a while, the huge half circle cul-de-sac was impressive. In the middle of the half circle was a large fenced area with the already excavated areas for the community pool, play area and hydroponic greenhouse. After worrying about uncontaminated soil, Bec decided they should use hydroponics for the new garden. They'd
purchased a small system and after learning how it worked, made their own larger system. From there it was an easy step to the greenhouse, surprising nobody. With the three gardens, shelter, basement and greenhouse, they now grew all their own vegetables, had a beautiful flower garden, had recently planted Bec's avocado and Tim's apple trees and could feed the whole ranch and likely the residents of The Grove.

Dave and Liz smiled as they viewed the progress on their future home. The exterior needed painting, most of the interior work was done; it wouldn't be long now. The three of them had been comfortable in the guesthouse during the school year. With Jeff living on campus, he was only home on weekends. He was taking advantage of the summer session, working part-time in town and staying with Freddie and Jose. Summer classes would be over in less than a month and then the guesthouse accommodations would be tight. However, by then they should be moving into their permanent home. They'd better be, as the Cranes' daughter would be visiting in September, over Labor Day weekend.

The Chalmers were still in the ranch house and although their little ones were now sleeping through the night, the elder Gibbises were the only ones of those who fled the crying newborns to return to the house.

Unless she was the only one in a guesthouse, Penny didn't want to move, she loved her little house. She wasn't too worried, knowing Maisie and Don were also quite happy where they were. Richard and Mac might move; Mac back to the house and Richard possibly in with his family. He'd have a whole suite to himself. Then again, he might go back to the house or stay where he was; he really enjoyed the company of his contemporaries. Lu wasn't going anywhere; she and Penny were becoming good friends as they swapped stories of Tim and Sarah as children. The Fornells, Tobias and Mel, were happy in their place and didn't want to move. When Emily visited, she usually stayed in the big house, as long as she could stay on the 3rd floor.

After they'd checked out the new neighborhood, the family reversed course and walked back to the canopies where they'd enjoy their fresh berry pie and ice cream. Following Elaine's recipe, Shannon made a diabetic-friendly berry dessert for Jimmy, making extra to freeze.

Elaine reported from Oregon that she and Jacob were still settling in to their new home. They missed all their friends although they were slowly making new ones. Due to their children's busy schedules, they hadn't seen as much of them as they'd hoped. They missed their diner and having something to do with their time and spoke of flying in for a week's vacation. While they still had the RV, neither wanted to repeat the drive between Oregon and New Mexico.

After dessert, the tables were cleared, the dishes taken to the shelter dishwasher, the canopies were dismantled and stored, the tables returned to their rightful owners. Pushing strollers, Jimmy carrying a tired Teddy, the three cul-de-sac families walking over and down the rise to their homes. It really wasn't far but after a long eventful weekend, they were all tired. And tomorrow would be even busier.

NCIS NCIS NCIS NCIS

With day camp over until next summer, all the children would stay on the ranch Monday while their parents worked. The plane with the expats was due to arrive at 1500 and Tim hoped he could get away. He drove Ellie's truck to work, leaving the van for his parents, while Ellie drove Shannon's car.

Planning to leave early, Tim worked through lunch and was making his way through more case files when Leon called. "Pack it up and go home, now. I'm going; I've taken Maggie and Tony's teams off rotation so they can go and I've spoken with Ellie's supervisor. Evan and Jim will be here and the
others. We're only a few minutes away if we're needed. By order of Secretary Porter."

"Huh?"

Leon chuckled; he'd certainly surprised Tim. His regional director was usually more eloquent than that!

"Go! The plane is about 30 minutes out, if you get your butt in gear you can be there when it lands; I'm told it's important for all of us to be there."

"All right, thanks, Leon, see you there!"

Tim grabbed his gear, hustling out of the office, telling his second in command he'd be working from home later and reachable by phone. As Maggie was on a conference call that would run several minutes more, Tony drove Shannon's car home while Ellie rode with Tim.

They found everyone excited, on 'pins and needles' at the ranch. The kids were nearly dancing with excitement while Shannon gave her word none of them had had any extra sugar.

While they'd expected to see several pickup trucks lined up to bring the newcomers' belongings over to The Grove, they were happily surprised to see Pete's truck parked at the edge of the back road to the Ortizes. Home a few days earlier than expected, he'd eaten and had a nap. When he heard what was happening, he volunteered to transport people's belongings from the jet to The Grove. He'd need help loading and unloading but it would be a lot easier than using multiple trucks.

After a meet and greet in the shelter, the new folks would ride to their new homes in the Gibbs' big van and all the other vehicles they could round up. Tomas Ortiz had an old station wagon used to ferry their guests around the ranch and they'd borrowed it for the day. The gates between La Serenidad and The Grove were open, the houses ready.

They'd take the kids over in Jethro's truck, their seats had been removed from the van so that 14 adults plus the driver would fit. Jethro even had the Challenger ready in case it was needed. He'd thought of putting Abby's old hotrod back together but he didn't think that would be a very comfortable ride over the dirt roads.

While they sat in their vehicles behind Pete's truck, they first saw and then heard the jet descending and then landing. The parade waited on the La Serenidad side of the dirt road until the jet was on the runway and taxied to a stop. None of them remembered it being so noisy but everyone was holding their ears. Luckily, none of the kids was scared even though the roar reminded several of the adults of the roars they'd endured when the missiles hit.

Once Pete received a signal to proceed, he drove down the dirt road and then off to his left, the side with the cargo hold.

The other vehicles followed but split off to the right, leaving plenty of room for the gangplank and people to stand once they were off the stairs.

On their best behavior, the children, Gibbses, senior and junior, Kelly, Sarah and Bob, the Palmers, Tony and Arin DiNozzo, fidgeted quietly by the cars while the Greats tried not to fidget right along with them. Shannon handed out their nametags, something Brynie suggested, and everyone clipped them to their clothing.

Tim, Ellie, Tony, Maggie, Sarah, Bob and Kelly represented the Gibbs' offspring and in-laws today, as Rob, Geo, Bec, Ali and Matt were working. The twins plus Juliet and Alex were in the nursery at the house under the watchful eyes of Granddad Barnes, Aunty Mel, Uncle Tobias and Aunty Lu.
The babies slept while the four adults quietly played cards.

Finally, the hatch opened and the gangplank was lowered. Blake Moran was the first one off; he smiled at the crowd, nodding to Tim before positioning himself at the bottom of the gangway. As people walked down the steps, he handed them a nametag. Ty pointed that out, "Look, now we'll know everyone's names and they'll know ours!"

A family of 5 followed Blake down the gangplank. They smiled in relief and happiness when they saw the welcoming committee. An elderly couple was next, helped down by a crewmember. Shannon looked at Jethro, glad they'd prepared the empty single close to Henry and Bess. The newcomers smiled a little tentatively and then with more enthusiasm as they were welcomed.

The others were similarly welcomed, ushered to chairs and benches under a large canopy, which Tamara Ortiz had thankfully thought to set up. As the passengers continued disembarking, Maggie arrived, joining Tony and Arin.

A young couple descended the gangway, carrying a baby. As they reached Blake, he frowned, asking them a question. The woman shrugged and made a gesture toward the plane. Tim was watching; although he didn't know Blake well, he thought the man was angry. The couple took their nametags, moved into the shade, nodding at the welcoming committee and sitting apart from the others.

Just as the couple sat down, the welcoming committee was distracted by a vehicle approaching behind the jet. When the driver got out, several eyebrows raised as they recognized the woman. She was from the Albuquerque Child Protection Services office and had been the caseworker for the Cranes, DiNozzos, Vances and Hubbards when they adopted their foster children. She'd visited the ranch several times and now Ellie and Tim looked at each other, wondering what was going on. The woman, Ms. Clark, nodded to her former clients and the rest of the crowd, having met most of them and walked over to Blake, handing him a card. He said something to her, gesturing to the jet and she frowned.

Watching closely, Tim moved forward. "Ms. Clark, is there a foster child aboard? I notice you have a walking cast, I know from experience those are almost impossible for steps. May I help?" Ellie had joined them, listening.

She smiled at the couple, "Hello! You're the Gibses, right? Is your certification updated?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Then, yes, thank you. There is a toddler on the plane, he's had a difficult time on both flights and from what Mr. Moran says, didn't get much sleep last night. He's asleep now and I hate to wake him but I need to get him placed for tonight."

Ellie nodded and smiled at Tim; he grinned, kissing her before he walked up the gangplank. There was no way either of them would ever let a child go elsewhere if they had the capacity to care for him or her.

Once inside the jet, he started looking in the mostly empty seats at the front and quickly spotted a tiny boy about Lia's age. A baby, barely a toddler and he'd been left alone. This might be why Blake was angry with that couple. He gently lifted the little boy in his arms and turned to take him out of the plane, waiting while the line of people parted to let him through. He thanked those waiting and when the baby made a distressed noise, Tim held him against his shoulder, murmuring to him that he was all right, he was safe and he would be loved. The child instinctively snuggled into his shoulder and Tim smiled. Wherever he'd been, whatever had happened to him, he was home now.
Walking down the gangplank and joining his smiling wife, Tim gestured to Ms. Clark to join them in the shade. Chuckling, she held out her phone for signatures on the form, placing the boy with them. She handed them a file with his records, gently touching the baby's face and whispering, "His name is Henry Lorenz and he's an American citizen, born in the U.S. to American parents who abandoned him in Bacia when he was 3 months old. How about you bring him in later in the week?" With a nod and smile to the rest of the clan, she limped back to her car.

Tim and Ellie sat in the back of the canopy shelter, looking at their new foster son. He had long brown eyelashes, a mop of curly brown hair and sweet lips they could imagine curving into a smile. Tim looked at his facial features and then looked over at his father who was still greeting the newcomers while keeping an eye on his son. Dad and Mom were there in a flash. Ellie smiled, "His name is Henry."

Jethro and Shannon quietly kissed him on the head and when Mac, Kelly and Tony came over, they did the same.

Kelly grabbed Tim's arm. "He's beautiful!" she whispered to her brother. He nodded, "I know, look at that sweet face."

Jethro looked at the baby with a smile, "He'll be happy here."

Ellie touched the little boy's hand and still asleep, he curled his fingers around hers. She smiled, "Yes he will." She looked at her husband, mouthing 'Number 6!' to him. He grinned back at her.

The two of them smiled at their kids who quickly joined them, pushing Lia and Mackie in the stroller. "Ty, Brynie, Lia, Mackie, this is Henry. He's our new foster child, your new foster brother."

Ty frowned, "Does he get to stay with us? Forever?"

Tim tugged him closer, "We don't know yet but we hope so, Snuggly boy; we hope so."

Breena walked over with Ricky. "I've got extra diapers with me. And an extra bag at home." Ty helped her take the diaper bag off her shoulder and she handed four diapers to Ellie who shook her head with a smile. "Forever in diapers!"

Tim and the two women laughed while the newcomers watched them quietly. When Mackie started making the noise that was the beginning of his 'feed me' cry, they decided to take their family home; they'd all had enough excitement for the day.
Chapter 17

Chapter 17

Or so they thought. As they started to move out from the canopy, Tim heard a voice that sounded familiar if not quite right, "You said The Grove and an LLC; you did not tell us names!"

Tim looked at his dad, whose eyes were wide, both eyebrows raised. Near him, Tony's jaw had dropped and he was trying to say something to Maggie.

Ellie frowned, "Tim, who's that?"

He whispered in her ear, "She sounds like Ziva."

"Oh!"

Dad was already talking to Blake who was shaking his head, pointing to the passenger manifest. Catching movement out of the corner of his eye, Gibbs turned to see Ziva standing at the top of the gangway staring at him, tears rolling down her face. He opened his mouth but when she quickly shook her head, he shut it, holding his arms open.

Still under the canopy, Shannon frowned and turned to Ellie who shook her head, whoever it was, they weren't to talk about it here. Thinking about it, Shannon looked at her eldest who was pale and sweaty. Maggie was curious while Tony was clutching Maggie's hand on one side and Arin's on the other. He relaxed when Maggie said something to him, laughing a little at himself.

That told Shannon who this might be, the long absent Ziva David, her husband's last stray chick finally come home to roost. She laughed to herself, a new grandchild and a new daughter all at once, that hadn't happened since she and Kelly first came home.

Ziva, or whatever name she was using, was wrapped in Gibbs' arms. She whispered to him that her name was now Ana Campo and that she hadn't known her family was here until she thought she saw McGee on the plane with the little boy. Saying she had many questions, she felt the rumble of her surrogate father's laughter. "Think that goes both ways, Ana."

Turning, she took the proffered nametag from Blake, clipping it on. When she looked up, she blinked several times. "Is that DiNozzo, with a small boy?"

"Yes, that's his wife Maggie and their son Arin. Their baby Juliet is in the house, napping. Arin is 3 and the baby is new, four months old."

She shook her head as though to clear her thoughts. "I never thought he'd marry, much less have children."

"Eh, he was a late bloomer. Fell in love with Maggie and here we are."

She nodded, "And McGee?"

"He's no longer McGee. Few years after you left, he and I discovered we're father and son. He's now Timothy Jackson Gibbs and he's right there with the kids who look just like him, his wife Ellie, the double stroller and my newest grandbaby Henry."

"He…what?"
"He's my son, mine and Shannon's."

"How…I'm sorry, that is too personal."

Gibbs chuckled, "At some point we'll tell you our stories. By the way, after the discovery that he's mine, I adopted Sarah, Rob and Geordie. And Tony finally let me adopt him last year when they were pregnant with Juliet."

Her mouth dropped open again and she stood in disbelief. "That's…5 children?"

"Six. Turns out Shannon and Kelly were in protective custody. C'mon, I'll introduce you to everyone."

Watching her father-in-law with the woman, Ellie's eyes widened behind her sunglasses. She'd seen enough photos of Ziva David over the years but if that's who this was, she'd changed her appearance. Her hair was cut short in a trendy bob and was colored a light brown, close to Tim's hair color when he hadn't been in the sun. As she moved, Ellie could see there were streaks of blonde and a different color, she couldn't tell what. The woman wore sunglasses so she couldn't see the color of her eyes but she bet they were a lighter color too.

The DiNozzos suddenly appeared beside her, with Tony holding Maggie's hand and Arin holding his daddy's. That was good, that should help ground Tony. Breena and Ricky joined them.

Seeing that his agent was nervous, Leon decided to give him another minute or so of grace. He'd had a text from Jethro that the familiar woman was now called Ana Campo. As she approached, he stepped forward, "Ana, it's good to see you again!"

Ana smiled, remembering that in her current back-story she'd never worked for NCIS, kissing his cheek, "Leon, how wonderful to see you! You're looking well." He was interested to hear her accent completely changed and she'd used a contraction.

Kayla was there and Ana greeted her, genuinely surprised to find her an adult rather than the young teen she'd last seen.

Ana had already met Shannon and Mac. Now she greeted Tim and Tony together. Observing them, Ellie thought that was a good thing. Oops, now Ana was being introduced to Maggie and her.

Smiling, she gave the woman a light hug while over her shoulder Maggie stifled a chuckle; she and Ellie had already shared a concern that Ana would be a magnet for trouble. Breena was next to Maggie on the other side, offering support for all three of her friends.

When their kids asked to stay, Tim and Ellie agreed, they'd all stay. They gave Mackie some fruit, enough for now. Henry was sleeping peacefully next to Mackie in their double stroller while Lia and Ricky were chattering happily away in the Palmers' double.

As the space under the canopy was getting pretty crowded, they all donned their sunhats, earning smiles from Granducky, and joined their family. After Ana's former teammates greeted her and she'd met Ellie, Maggie and greeted Breena, the children were next. They smiled politely, having no idea who this was. Breena joined them, introducing her three and then pointing to Lia, "This is Lia, Tim and Ellie's younger daughter and my future daughter-in-law." They laughed while Lia and Ricky squealed.

Her hand on Ana's arm, Breena pulled her away a few steps. "What name would you like the children to call you? Aunty Ana or maybe Tia Ana? And just to let you know, it won't just be Palmers, Gibbs and DiNozzo kids, it'll be Alex, the Perrys' son, Sarah and Bob's twins, the Vances'
twins, the Hubbard kids and any other child who comes along."

"In that case, I love Tia Ana."

"Great! All right, kids," she motioned to all of them, "this is your Tia Ana."

Grinning, they greeted her, almost in unison.

Sarah had driven back to check on the twins and missed the dramatic entrances of her new nephew and her old friend Ana, formerly known as Ziva. Now when she saw a strange toddler asleep in the stroller with Mackie and her father grinning like a loon, she frowned. Then she spotted Ziva and opened her mouth to exclaim when her husband suddenly kissed her, whispering, "Don't say her name, she's changed it. She's now Ana Campo."

"Uh, ok. Who's the baby?"

"As far as I can tell, he's a new foster son. The caseworker who handled all the adoptions showed up right after you left and…" he told her what had transpired.

"Wow, that's incredible."

"Yes. Hang on; this is the last of the expats."

She smirked, "They're not expats anymore."

"You're right."

Realizing there was suddenly a new baby in their godson and nephew's family - along with a mystery guest - the Cranes and Hubbards were greeting the newcomers. Matt, Hannah, Ty, Ainsley and Callum were speaking with the children, telling them a little about their new home.

NCIS NCIS NCIS NCIS

As more people walked down the gangway, Tim smiled at the man following them, Jay Whitman. Squeezing Ellie's hand, he walked over to say hello. They shook hands and Blake congratulated him on his new son. Jay, who'd been busy helping his charges, missed the whole thing and now shook his head, "What?"

Blake replied, "Those people left Henry by himself on the plane. When the social worker arrived, she had a walking cast on and Tim asked if he could get the little boy for her. Apparently he and his wife are certified foster parents and they're going to foster him."

Jay broke into a full smile, "That's wonderful and a relief! I worried about him, poor little guy. His birth parents apparently came to Bacia to offer their children for adoption and when that didn't work, they left Henry behind. He ended up in a Catholic orphanage so he's been in good hands but not a family."

"Their children? Henry has a sibling?"

Jay nodded, "Yes, I didn't have time to track her down; she's his twin."

"Oh boy."

"The orphanage told us she's not in Bacia, whoever took her was traveling through the country."

"Ok, so she's not in danger there."
"No but it'll take some time to find her. If we can. The orphanage had someone who could tell me more but the woman wasn't around. And they left the day before we did, by truck not plane, on their way to Brazil."

"Do you have their contact information?"

"Sure, I'll send it to you. Is this crowd your family or the LLC?"

"Parts of both."

"I'd like to speak to them for a couple of minutes."

"Do you have time to wait until everyone is transported over to our place? We've got the A/C running in the shelter, with cold drinks and lots of goodies to share."

Blake smiled, "Free food, we're in!"

Jay laughed, "That should be our motto, 'will negotiate almost anything for free food!'"

"Are you guys like us in law enforcement - live on junk food because otherwise you'd starve?"

"Yes, that's us. If it weren't for official dinners, we'd never have sit-down meals."

"Wow. Thank you for your service."

He'd meant it half-jokingly but when both men beamed, he nodded.

Pete and his helpers soon emptied the jet's cargo hold. Before he left to drive to The Grove, Dave motioned him forward, "Folks, I'd like you to meet Pete Ware, our resident mover. I first met him a year ago when he drove his rig from New Mexico to Virginia to load our belongings onto his truck and lead us here to safety, outrunning a nuclear attack. He's one of my heroes! Today, he came home from a grueling 14-day cross-country triple move and when he heard what was happening, volunteered his services to get your belongings moved. He's eaten but hasn't had more than a four-hour nap in the last 30 hours. So give him some love and then we'll let him get moving before he falls asleep on his feet."

The newcomers applauded while Pete sketched a salute before returning to his truck.

NCIS NCIS NCIS NCIS

After Breena, Ana met Kelly who shook her hand, welcoming her home. Then she was in Sarah's arms. "Welcome home!" She was introduced to Bob who welcomed her, solemnly shaking her hand.

While Ana was being welcomed, other members of the family were still guiding the rest of the newly repatriated folks into the shade. After meeting the former NCIS agent, Bob joined the flight crew, Jim, Tony, Jethro, Tim, Dave, Matt and Callum in loading the suitcases, bicycles, bits of furniture and plastic bags full of photo albums and personal treasures, into Pete's trailer.

Each item had been tagged with a name but since the newcomers would go first to the shelter to select their houses, the men decided to take the moving truck over to The Grove and wait for further instructions. Pete was wilting fast in the heat; once the adrenaline rush was over, he was going to crash hard. Jim said he'd ride over with him; they could decouple the trailer from the cab so Pete could return to the ranch in the cab and get some sleep. The others would lock up the trailer once it was empty and he could pick it up later.
Pete's helpers returned to the crowd. The last few people were leaving the plane when Tim's mouth fell open. He grabbed the kids and beckoning to Ellie and Breena, he said, "Follow me quietly, you're about to meet the Secretary of State!" With Henry and Mackie in the stroller, Tim pushed it while Ty and Victoria pushed Ricky and Lia in the Palmers' stroller. Ellie, Brynie, Breena and Teddy walked with them, ready to help if needed.

Secretary McCord smiled as she reached the last step on the gangway. "Ah ha, who do we have here?"

Tim smiled, "Madam Secretary, I'm Timothy Gibbs and welcome to Albuquerque! This is a surprise!"

"Director Gibbs, I'm so glad to meet you! I asked Secretary Porter if you'd all be at work and she indicated she might be able to do something about that. Hope there are not any bad guys getting away!"

They shook hands, he quickly introduced her to Ellie, Breena, the children and the rest of his family who'd come over.

Looking up at the hatchway behind Tim and the Secretary, Leon's face burst into a surprised smile. Glancing back, Tim exclaimed, "Secretary Porter! It's good to see you again, welcome!"

"Thank you, Tim!" She laughed at Leon, "Ha, fooled you, Leon!"

"You sure did, Ma'am."

Jethro nodded, "Welcome! Let's get everyone over to the ranch and we'll reconvene in the shelter. It's the biggest and coolest place for all of us."

Pete's truck was already gone; the rest of the group gathered their new friends and surprise visitors, got them into vehicles and after introducing the two Secretaries to Tamara and Tomas Ortiz, drove back to Rancho La Serenidad. As Tim drove, Secretary McCord smiled to herself as she said, "Director Gibbs, I understand we're not the first folks from State you've dealt with in your career."

Tim's brow furrowed before remembering the undersecretary he'd told to 'stick it' during his probationary year. His eyes widened. "Ma'am – we were in the middle of an undercover case…she was…"

McCord patted his shoulder, "You did well. I've seen the report from Undersecretary Elliot – she admitted she'd been hounding you instead of giving your team time to do your job. She had little experience with the realities of law enforcement. When she heard the art thief was a serial killer and that your agent barely escaped with his life, her eyes were opened. She's retired now but still consults for us. When she heard that a group of NCIS agents was coming to the rescue of the Bacian refugees, she contacted me, told me the story and I read the report."

Tim nodded, "Thanks for telling me."

She chuckled, "The incident certainly hasn't hampered your career!" He smiled as he gave her a sideways head tilt.

NCIS NCIS NCIS NCIS

Parking close to the main entrance of the shelter, everyone went inside, sighing in relief at the cool air. Ana looked around, "This is where you sheltered? How long were you in here?"
Several voices answered, "Fourteen weeks."

The SecNav and SecState were looking around, "You have a commercial kitchen! This place is huge!"

Shannon chuckled, "It's the deluxe version. We had everything but sunshine and we had sun lamps for that."

Ty added, "There's another shelter attached, that's where our pets lived."

"Oh my!"

The newcomers had also been looking around, looking into the open, mostly empty bedrooms. "You had private bedrooms?"

"Yes, for the adults. The children slept in dormitory style rooms. A nursery for those under 5, girls' and boys' rooms for the young school age, separate teen and young adult girls' and boys' rooms."

"And a classroom!" That was from Secretary McCord who was walking the perimeter, "And a library, ooh my husband would love this!"

She smiled as she returned, "Love the garden too. This is far more interesting than the shelter we were in."

She turned to look at everyone. "Now, who among you helped set up the Evacuee housing and decided to help our newest group of returning citizens?"

Tim gathered the ranch residents and LLC members who were there. "When I told the LLC members what the State Department was doing in Bacia, my grandmother, Dr. Penelope Langston, asked if the LLC would entertain the idea of giving them homes. That's how it happened."

Penny was half-listening, mostly too thrilled at Tim calling her his grandmother to pay much attention. Nevertheless, she smiled when Claire gave her a gentle nudge and said, "I didn't shelter here during the Attack, I was overseas when the evacuation order was given and by the time I reached San Francisco, everyone east of Nevada was sheltering. Then I had to leave again and it was months before I could finally get here. So I missed all the fun of planning and putting everything together, greeting the Evacuees. And it seemed like a natural fit as many of the Evacuees have left for new jobs and new homes."

"That's wonderful, Dr. Langston, thank you! Now I realize not all of your residents are here, I know at least one NCIS employee is still at the office. Thank you." Several people were handing out cold beverages and circulating with trays of sandwiches and homemade cookies.

Leon nodded, "Yes, our Chief Medical Examiner. He had three autopsies to perform today, in Chicago, Mayport and Bremerton. His wife and children are here." Breena and the kids waved, Ricky squealing.

Jethro turned as he heard the tunnel door open, "Doc's here now. Good timing, Jimmy!" Dr. Palmer grinned as he walked into the shelter, "Sorry to be late, I wanted to welcome everyone before you see your new homes…Hello!"

The group chuckled at Jimmy's surprise when he saw the two Secretaries.

Secretary McCord smiled after shaking hands with Jimmy. "I'm here to thank you all for opening your hearts to our newest evacuees. Your generosity is wonderful. You've made them welcome and I
see smiles instead of anxiety. You've also made my staff and me very happy and believe me, in our work that doesn't happen often! Next time China's Foreign Minister hangs up on Blake or me, we'll have a happy thought to replace him. And the same goes for Jay and the rest of our staff."

She paused, "I know we're imposing but we've read about the homes you built before the Administration even had their program up and running. You and several other grass roots groups did a kick…ing job of providing homes and hope to so many people! So yes, I'm nosy, Blake's curious and Jay wants to make sure his people are happy. May we please see The Grove?"

Several of the adults smirked as they realized she'd been about to say 'kick-ass' but changed her wording in deference to the children.

The others laughed and Liz replied, "Of course! We just wanted everyone here to greet them, let them cool off and show them the models from which they'll choose their homes. We think we know what they'll want but don't want to assume."

Tony pulled the screen down against the outside wall of the media room. They'd used this to show the Disney movies when there were too many people to fit inside the room. They'd talked about moving the screen outside for summer movies but hadn't gotten around to it yet.

While Tony did that, Tim found the photos he wanted to show them. Putting them in the right order, he turned to the group. "I know you've seen the slideshow that we did last year. Now we're going to show you photos of specific homes, the ones you'll live in. We took these on Saturday while we were making sure everything was ready for tomorrow."

There were chuckles at that and he nodded to himself, overall they didn't sound too traumatized at having to leave early. Having to leave at all yes, but not leaving early, that might have been a relief.

"This first home has one bedroom, one bath. An extra room can be used as a small second bedroom, an office, den, a library or maybe a hobby or craft room. Once you decide what you want to do with it, let us know and we'll take you to our storage barn to pick out the furniture you need."

There were murmurs and then a hand raised. Tim nodded at the young woman who stood, "You have a barn full of furniture? We can just go pick it out?"

That brought smiles from their hosts. "It's not really a barn. It's a large storage shed but we jokingly call it a barn. We do have a lot of furniture. Each home is furnished with the basics: beds, dressers, nightstands, dining table, chairs, a couch, side tables, coffee table. When we were developing The Grove, we split into teams and one of the teams was Furnishings. The local stores donated all the beds, those are all new, but most of the rest has been acquired by scouring the state, through newspapers, online and by car, for good used furniture. Didn't matter if it needed repairs, my dad and father-in-law are skilled carpenters and can build or fix anything. We scrubbed, patched, painted or re-stained a lot of it. So when someone decided the second room should be an office and asked for a desk, we brought a desk and chair, along with a desk lamp and maybe a bookshelf or two. When that person left, the next resident might want to use it as a second bedroom, out comes the desk, chair and light, in goes a single bed or pull-out couch."

"Wow, that's cool, thanks!"

Smiling, he showed them Henry and Bess's current home, explaining who they were. "When they arrived, we only had one of the bigger models available so they moved in there. At one point, we were so crowded that they had another family sharing the house with them. They're retirees and didn't want to leave. They asked if they could move to one of the smaller units and pay rent. That took a few weeks to figure out but when the unit they wanted became vacant, we moved them over.
You'll meet them later today. This is their rental unit. As you can see, there is one big difference. Dad and Tobias… Tobias? Guess he's not here. Before Henry and Bess moved, my dad Jethro Gibbs and his friend Tobias Fornell built them a wrap-around deck.

"Here's a photo of the interior of their home before they moved in. There's the bonus room and as you can see, it's empty. Here's a photo showing what Bess has done with it. It's a sewing room for her and Henry has a little shed on the deck where he keeps his fishing gear. They purchased the shed - we need all of ours! Any questions before we go on?"

Someone asked about adding a deck and Tim asked that all add-on questions be held for a later date. "I'm putting you off for a good reason. You've had an exhausting, emotional experience and we want to get all of you into your homes so you can relax, unpack and settle in. When you've had some time to rest and get used to your new surroundings, we'll talk again. While we weren't forced out of a country, all of us here were forced to flee our homes a year ago. We understand having to leave things behind and wanting to make things as comfortable as possible. Jethro will be around for the next three weeks and then he and Shannon will be away for 6 weeks. The rest of us will be here but with the exception of Tobias-the-absent and my daughter Brynie, none of us are skilled carpenters."

Jethro grinned, "Tobias and Mel went into town to take Emily to dinner; it's her 20th birthday. And you and Tony are skilled carpenters, when you have time."

Tim smiled, "Thanks, Dad. And wow, Emily's 20, amazing! All right, here are the homes we prepped for you. Time to start choosing!"

As Shannon hoped, the oldest couple chose the small unit closest to Henry and Bess.

She smiled at them, "That's a lovely neighborhood; I hope you'll enjoy it. You're two steps from the laundry building and not far from the bridge that takes you here." She looked at Tim, "Do they know about the clinic?"

"Coming up in a minute, Mom - thanks. For the school kids and your parents, school in Albuquerque starts mid-August. The dates are on the information sheet your driver will give you. There are buses from the elementary, middle and high schools that come out here. You'll be riding the bus with our kids, kids from the Ortiz Ranch and some from ranches further east. The bus doesn't go out that far; those kids are driven to our bus stop. Until we applied for bus service, their parents had to drive them all the way into town, two round trips a day. The bus stop has a shelter with security cameras, lights, a spray Mister and a solar powered heater."

He paused when someone asked about monitoring the security cameras. Smiling, he shook his head, "That would be helpful to know! The monitors for the cameras are on the ranch. We review them randomly throughout any given day but there is always someone watching them while the children are waiting for the bus in the morning and when they get home in the afternoon. As far as the ranch goes, there's always an adult with our kids in the bus shelter in the morning and a grandparent, aunt or uncle waiting for them in the afternoons. We review the recordings once a week, that way we can identify any problems. In the past months, we've been able to nip a few problems in the bud."

"We're generally safe out here. If you feel your kids are old enough to walk from the bus stop to the front gate of The Grove and then to your home, that's up to you. There's also a security camera at that front gate and of course, we have one or two on ours. Had to while we were sealed in here." He paused again, "In case anyone hasn't figured it out, many of us here are in law enforcement. With one exception, our friend Barry who is a police officer in town, we're federal agents, our boss reports to Secretary of the Navy Porter."

Chuckling, Leon called out, "So do you, Regional Director Gibbs!"
Tim laughed, "Yes, Sir. In addition, there are several military folks among us, some retired, some on active duty. As you can imagine with our training and experiences, we're very security conscious."

"Moving on; while there are many wonderful doctors in the city of Albuquerque, including my siblings Kelly, Rob and Jimmy, my grandfather Donald and our very own registered nurse, Claire Hubbard, we worried about folks here without their own transportation during a sudden illness. There are paramedics and ambulances for emergencies, so that's not a problem. I'm talking about a sinus infection, an insect bite, a nail in the foot, something that requires a medical person as soon as possible but isn't a matter of life or death. There is a city bus and that works wonderfully for appointments and shopping but we worried about the unexpected.

"What we've started is something our four doctors did back in Baltimore. They're running a clinic across the street, near the grocery store and gas station. Currently a doctor or nurse is on duty five days a week; our goal is to have someone available every day. The clinic is sponsored by the University of New Mexico Medical Center so we have up-to-date equipment and supplies. You'll see it on the maps your driver will give you. It is not a free clinic but it is sliding scale, based on income."

He looked around, "Any more questions or are you ready to see your new homes?"

He smiled as Geordie walked into the shelter. Tim introduced him, "This is Major Geordie Perry, the chairperson of the LLC and my brother."

NCIS NCIS NCIS NCIS

Geordie smiled, waving to the newcomers. "Sorry I'm late and missed all the fun. As the head of the LLC for The Grove, I want to welcome you home! I know you've had to leave your homes, that it wasn't by choice and I understand. Everyone here understands because we had to do the same thing a year ago. I know this is gut-wrenching and it will take time and effort to deal with. But you're here now, you're safe and we're glad you're home.

"A few things. While we're offering you a home, you're under no obligation to stay! If you want to move somewhere else, that's not a problem as long as you let us know.

"Next, this is Rancho La Serenidad. The parcel of land you'll live on, named The Grove, is next door. We'll take you over and show you around. When we pull out from our front gate, you'll see the bus stop to your immediate right. And then make sure you look to your left. You'll see the grocery store, clinic and gas station.

"We won't do much today as once you get to your new home, you'll want to unpack, wander around, eat and then sleep or sleep and then eat. Over the next couple of weeks, we'll be over there to help you settle in, answer any questions and handle any issues that might come up.

"Your animals are arriving tomorrow, Tuesday, which gives you time to get ready for them. Now, who owns the llamas, alpacas, sheep and goats?"

Hands were raised and he nodded. "Great! Have to tell you, our kids are very excited about your animals. When they arrive, they'll be let out to graze in our paddock and they'll be locked in the barn with our horses every night. There are too many predators around here to risk leaving them outside. That's the same reason that cats have to be indoors only.

"Dogs must be on a leash at all times when outside your dwelling, including when on your patio. Dogs need to be inside before dusk. If they need out after dark, you go with them, with a headband light, a whistle and a baseball bat. We have enough for all of you. The whistle is to scare off predators and to call for help."
"If your dog doesn't do well with children, don't be shy about letting people know. As you can see, we have many young children here and as Tim's said, we're very protective of them. Although coyotes don't usually attack humans, other predators do so if anyone is outside at dusk or before dawn, do carry the headband light, or a flashlight you can wear around your neck, whistle and that baseball bat.

"This may be country but we take pride in The Grove, so doggie owners, pick up the poop. You'll find a supply of poop bags in your houses. We have trash barrels with lids outside of every laundry facility, the poop bags go in there. If we find that isn't happening, we will ask for an extra maintenance deposit from the offending owner."

"As you may have noticed, there are a lot of us. More than 40 people live here on the ranch, in various dwellings. Most of us are related, a few by blood, more by adoption and just being family."

Geordie laughed, "I won't introduce everyone; you'll meet us over time. We'll try to wear our name tags when we're around you."

After looking at the list of selected houses and passing out keys, Geo asked if there were any questions. He looked around the room and then stopped. His training kicking in, he didn't show any emotion but was very surprised to see his boss, Secretary Porter, and Secretary McCord there.

One of the young women raised her hand. "The mover, Pete, he lives in here?" He'd given them an exhausted wave as he and Jim came in, Pete going straight to bed.

"Yes, he's gone three weeks out of four and finds it more comfortable in here. We eat in here when we have a crowd so there are always leftovers in the refrigerator for him and Bill, another of our group who lives in here."

Another hand went up. "Secretary Porter, it's great that you're here but we're a long way from either the Atlantic or Pacific."

She smiled, "But we're not far from the Gulf Coast and the Navy and Coast Guard have interests there. However, I'm here to see what my folks at NCIS have been doing; I haven't seen them in person since we evacuated a year ago. As Timothy said, there are several Federal Agents and they work for NCIS. Leon Vance," she patted his shoulder, "is Director of the agency and Timothy Gibbs our Regional Director over the Cybercrimes division. Others are Team Leaders, Field Agents, Intelligence Analysts and Dr. Palmer is our Chief Medical Examiner. They sheltered here together and Leon decided to open an office in Albuquerque. This is the first opportunity I've had to see my staff and the new office. Also as Marines, Major Perry and Captain Barnes ultimately report to me." She smiled, "I'm grateful to Secretary McCord for allowing me to tag along."

With no additional questions, the group gathered their things. In turn, each driver called out the names of his or her passengers. Kelly took a group in the Gibbs' van while Tim drove her vehicle, Matt's large SUV, taking the Secretaries, Blake and Jay on a tour. Ellie, Breena, Maggie, the kids, Mac and those who weren't driving or helping unload stayed behind.
Chapter 18

As the drivers reached each new home, people climbed out, thanking them. As they were dropped off, they met volunteer Eagle Scouts who took their names and then brought their belongings to them.

The tour car was watching a family enter their new home when the woman came running out. "There's food in the refrigerator and the cabinets. The beds are made and there are fresh flowers in a vase! You people are angels, thank you so much!"

Tim waved as he drove on, his passengers digesting the woman's words. "You buy food for everyone?"

"This time, enough for the first week or so. When we had Attack evacuees coming in, they had the clothes on their backs, one suitcase each, their first month's government voucher and nothing else. Every single one of them needed clothes and shoes, especially the children returning to school shortly after arriving. We didn't want them to have to spend their vouchers on food when we could help for a week or two. We supplied two weeks of staples: bread, eggs, milk, flour, sugar, coffee, tea, orange juice and some fresh and frozen food. That way they'd have more funds for what they needed. We decided to do the same for these folks. We cut it back to a week although I think there's actually enough for 10 days. With three gardens, we now have more fresh fruits and veggies to share. We didn't know what resources they'd have, figured they'd be exhausted and didn't want them to worry about anything."

Secretary Porter shook her head in amazement, "You really are angels!"

Tim tilted his head, "You know my background, Ma'am. Sarah, Rob, Geordie and I grew up on the streets of Baltimore; we were homeless until I turned 18. We know what it's like to be scared, hungry and exhausted with few or no resources available."

Jay's jaw dropped while the others murmured. Then he nodded to himself. That explained much of what he'd noticed about Timothy Gibbs.

They loved the street names and the different colors of the homes, got a kick out of the Laundry Barns and smiled at the personal touches people had on their homes. At Secretary McCord's request, Tim stopped at one of the larger homes where an Evacuee family was outside on the patio. She and the SecNav went to say hello and tell them what was going on. Tim could see the family was pleased and excited to meet the Secretaries.

After seeing the last of the homes, they crossed the bridge to the ranch. Secretary Porter asked if they
could see the new homes; with a chuckle, Tim turned the vehicle toward the cul-de-sac. It was late enough now that the construction crews were done for the day and he smiled as his passengers ooh'd and ahh'd at the two adobe homes, something new to them and admired the Hubbards' New Mexican style ranch house. They were curious about the other homes and Tim quickly explained that the homes for the Chalmers, DiNozzos and Cranes were nearly finished and that the Perrys' home would be built last because they were the least crowded in their current place.

Elizabeth McCord smiled, "That's good, Tim. Now that things are returning to normal, the new normal, I expect most of our reservists will soon be standing down from active duty." Secretary Porter nodded and Tim smiled, "Thanks, I'll be happy again when the Major and the Captain tell us."

Porter smiled, "The Air Force will be sorry to lose Major Perry and Yuma will be sorry to lose Captain Barnes. She's doing excellent work getting our Marine dependent evacuee families placed. The major is also doing excellent work although that's not something I can speak to or even acknowledge." She chuckled, "I know Leon will be very happy to have Capt. Barnes return to the agency full-time and I'm sure the Major's wife and your parents will be happy to have him resume teaching history."

Tim nodded, "I'm thankful neither was posted away."

They drove through the lanes with the guesthouses, waving to Penny, the Colonel, Mac and the Mallards, having pre-dinner cocktails together on the Mallards' front porch. The two secretaries were half-tempted to join them but they had a journey to continue in a few minutes.

As the women wanted to see the ranch house, they stopped for a quick tour, a restroom break and more cold drinks. The babies were awake and all four of them were being fed in the kitchen. To Tim's surprise, Mackie was also there. Baby and Daddy grinned at each other and the little guy held out his arms, saying "Da-da". The littles were dutifully admired and then it was time to take the visitors back to the airfield for the rest of their journey.

Blake explained they were going on to San Diego and would return to Charlotte on Wednesday. Tim was a little embarrassed when his son insisted on giving each of the visitors a 'kiss' but at least he didn't slobber. As they drove away, Secretary Porter said, "When's your newest one due?"

Surprised, Tim told her, adding that he was sure they were having a girl.

"That's wonderful, congratulations! How about your newest book?"

Tim turned, mortified, "That's what...oh geez! Sorry, we just told the family yesterday, my mind went straight there."

She patted his shoulder, "That's all right, I don't mind knowing. Does Leon know yet?"

"No, Ma'am, unless Ellie told him today."

"I'll keep it to myself until he says something. Now, what about your new book?"

He shook his head, laughing. "That's due out in November."

"Oh thank you, I'll reread the others until that arrives. It's always fun to find out what all of you on your father's team really did, all the things that never get into reports."

Tim groaned, "Ma'am, you know the DoD doesn't allow the use of real cases!"

She laughed again, "I know; it's really too bad."
Jay's forehead was wrinkled in thought, "That's where we met, Tim! It was a week-long DoD seminar."

"Remember what it was about?"

Jay shook his head, "Not a clue."

"Me neither. Well, at least we recognized each other."

"Boston, it was in Boston. We sat next to each other the first day and we were bored. You knew where everything was, best time I've ever had in Boston or at a seminar!"

"All my old college haunts, yeah, I remember now."

Secretary McCord said, "Good, glad you two figured it out. Now, what books do you write? Are they under Gibbs?"

"No ma'am." He explained the Deep Six series and the pen name he used.

"I've read some of those, loved them! And now I've met the people who inspired the characters?"

Tim nodded and she smiled, "Henry will love them too, I'll have to get the rest of them."

Tim caught Blake's eye in the rear-view mirror and smiled, he'd send the books to him. He nodded when Blake held up 2 fingers with a raised eyebrow, yeah, he'd send two sets.

As they reached the tarmac, Tim turned, "One thing no one in my family has said yet. And that's thank you for bringing two people to us: little Henry Lorenz, we hope soon to be Henry Gibbs, and Ana Campo. Did you know about her?"

Blake shook his head while Jay smiled, "I knew something was up with her as we were disembarking. This must have happened while you were on the plane looking for Henry. I was standing in the aisle next to the row of seats Ana was sitting in although she was standing at her seat. I saw her face change, her eyes almost fell out of their sockets and then she smiled, the only smile I'd seen from her. It was a big happy 'oh my goodness I'm HOME' smile and then her eyes teared up. I don't know who she is to you but I'm glad she's here."

"Dad and I both heard her say something to you when she was on the gangway and then Dad just grabbed her. We haven't seen or heard from her in several years. She didn't know we were here and then poof, we're all here, her whole family."

"She's part of the family?"

"She was but left several years ago and we've had no word since." He smiled, "She's home now."

They nodded and he decided he'd better not say anything else.

The jet was ready to leave. Tim thanked them for the visit, adding that it had been fun showing them around, shook hands with the State folks and was given an upper arm pat and squeeze by Secretary Porter.

Tim sighed happily, glad his surprise hosting responsibilities were over and that their new folks were settling in. He turned the car around and headed for home and his family, including their new little one.

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When the others left for The Grove, Jethro held Ana back and they walked to the house, Poppy carrying Mackie. In the kitchen, he found a box of Ducky's tea and made her a cup. She smiled, "Thank you."

He looked at her, "Will you stay?"

"Yes, for a time."

"A month, two?"

She smiled, "A year, I hope more. I don't dare promise anything more. Although I have lived peacefully for nearly two years now and this move had nothing to do with me."

Gibbs grinned, "You're using contractions! The boys will go nuts when they hear you."

She chuckled, "Along with my name, I had to change my appearance, habits, my demeanor, my language and the way I speak. Using contractions is one of those changes. It will be fun to watch them when I speak! I have missed you all so much. When I saw Tim with the little boy today, I thought my heart would stop and I cried. And then he was gone before I could get through the line to him. When it was my turn to leave the plane, I saw you and I thought that maybe I'd died. But I didn't want you, Tim and the little boy to be dead…" She laughed at herself.

Jethro hugged her again. "And now you know we're alive and happy to see you. You have your choice of living quarters. This house has 12 bedrooms and several are vacant. Tim and Ellie have a room here they won't use again, they have their own home out on the ranch now, we'll show you later. The Palmers also have a room here and left for the same reason. The Mallards - did you know Ducky is married to Sarah's grandmother?"

"I know he's married to that pretty, sweet lady. I didn't realize she's Sarah's grandmother."

"Yes and Tim's too but not by blood. Anyway, when Mackie was born, most of us were living in the house. Within a week, just about everyone found somewhere else to stay. Our boy here has the healthiest lungs you've ever heard and he didn't sleep 6 hours straight until he was four months old. By that time, his parents and siblings, the Palmers and their kids were about the only ones left in the house. We had to move the kids up to the 3rd floor so they could sleep! And then just when Mackie was sleeping through the night, Maggie, then Bec, then Sarah had their babies. Shannon and I are the only ones to move back in so far. I don't know if the others will. Emily Fornell stays here when she visits, so does Abby, Sarah's in-laws and Ellie's family when they visit from Oklahoma."

He paused, "Another option is to live in one of the guesthouses. We have two vacant; they're furnished so you can take your pick. We have several guesthouses; that's where the great-grandparents and we grandparents moved when Mackie arrived. And Penny, that's Sarah's paternal grandmother, lives there too. They're nice houses, not as much room as here but each has two bedrooms; they're quiet and private. Duck and Maisie like to sit out on their front porch, Penny lives across the street. Tobias and his lady friend Mel live there, the Cranes, Dave, Liz and Matt, Geordie, his wife Bec and baby Alex, and Sarah, Bob and the twins. Although Sarah's family and the Cranes will be moving soon as their new homes are almost ready. The DiNozzos too."

Ana shook her head, "I know who Tobias is and now the grandmothers, Ducky of course and the DiNozzos but I don't know who the Cranes are or Geordie and his family."

"Ah, well quick rundown of our kids, Shannon's and mine. Tim and Kelly are our two biological children. You know Sarah, did you know Rob too?"
She shook her head and Jethro continued. "Tim, Sarah, Rob and Geordie grew up in a homeless camp in Baltimore." At the look in her eyes, he nodded, "You didn't know. Tim and Sarah's guardian abandoned them after Dan McGee and his son Patrick were killed. The kids ended up in Baltimore and met Geordie their first day there…" He explained the bus station; Tim's walking cast and Geordie helping them. "Geordie left for college when Tim was almost 16 and almost through earning his Bachelors of Science from Johns Hopkins. Geo was their legal guardian by then and Tim had money from scholarships so things were better.

"After Tim graduated from JH, he and the kids finally left the camp, moved to Cambridge, Massachusetts, and lived there for four years while he earned his Master's. After earning his bachelor's degree, Geo was accepted to Officer Candidates School. After MIT, Tim went to FLETC. Geordie graduated OCS as a 2nd Lieutenant in the Corps and eventually went into Special Ops. He left SpecOps in 2015 when Tim, Ty, Brynie and I were pulled away from home and nobody could tell Sarah or Rob what happened. Before we knew about the nuclear threat last year, Geo moved to the reserves but returned to active duty after we were released from shelter.

"Rob is the youngest of those four and he grew up wanting to be a pediatrician. He won scholarships to Johns Hopkins and graduated from college and medical school there. He completed his residency at Children's National Health Center in DC and was working there when we evacuated. Kelly also completed her residency and was working there."

He chuckled at the look on Ana's face. "Your children are all so accomplished!"

"Very proud of each of them!"

Ana hesitated and then shrugged, "When I left, Tim was dating Delilah, I don't remember her last name. As I recall, they were becoming serious."

"And two years later he was ready to propose when he walked in on her cheating on him."

"Zona!"

Gibbs nodded, "It was rough on him but he and Ellie are a much better match and he's a very happy man."

When she was ready, he and Mackie showed her the various rooms. She loved the layout and the roominess of the home. While she would enjoy the privacy of a guesthouse, she thought she'd feel safer here. This felt like family.

When they returned to the first floor, Ana said, "If it's all right with you and Shannon, I'd like to stay here in the house. At least for a few days, until my head clears enough to make a decision."

He nodded. "Know how that feels!"

She shook her head, "I can't believe how much you talk now."

He smiled, "Blame Tim and the grandkids. Kids need words."

"And Tim?"

"We had a lot of issues to work out between us. That took words, not just grunts and head slaps."

She chuckled and then yawned.

"Come on, let's get your stuff and get you moved in."
"I have my go bag with me – yes, I still call it that. Perhaps we could leave the rest for tomorrow?"

"Sure, up to you."

Shannon came in with Breena, Lia, Ricky and little Alex. She smiled, "Hello again Ana! I'm so glad to finally meet Jethro's last stray chick."

Ana laughed at that and then stopped, "Who else was a stray chick?"

"Abby."

Breena smiled, "I'll tell you sometime. It's good now."

"I'm glad."

Jethro frowned, "Where are Ellie and the rest of the kids?"

"They were all tired except Lia and you had Mackie so we drove them home. We watched Brynie and Ty while Henry had a bath, a cuddle and then Ellie put him to bed in Mackie's room. There's a single bed that Ellie says wasn't there this morning, was that you, Hon? Claire's over there now, Ellie was about to fall over so she'll stay until Tim gets home."

Jethro smirked, "Yeah, that was me. I grabbed Matt and we got the best looking one out of the storage barn. I figured the new little guy is probably so tired he won't move." He thought about his daughter-in-law. "It's been a long couple of days for Ellie, especially when she's pregnant and then to take on another little one."

Shannon nodded, "I'm glad she's already changed jobs. Five kids and a baby on the way, yikes!"

Ana listened, astounded, she hadn't realized Tim had so many children. She knew she'd met them but there were so many children around this afternoon she hadn't had time to sort them yet.

As if she'd read her thoughts, Breena smiled, "She'll be all right. Tim's like Jimmy, totally hands-on with the kids and the house."

Jethro smirked, "Tony, Bob and Geo are learning too. I hear they're doing great with the babies."

Ana shook her head again, "It's difficult to imagine Tony as a father. When I left he was still…uh…"

Breena patted her hand, "The word you want is 'player'. He was but he's grown up now."

Shannon nodded, "He told me that when Tim brought Ty and Brynie home, he discovered he could be an uncle without damaging the kids. He fell in love with them, who wouldn't but yes, that was the beginning. After he was confident with them he figured he could be a dad."

Jethro just beamed proudly; he was so damn happy to have all but one of his kids together he could hardly stand it. And a new grandbaby with another one arriving in January!

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After receiving a text that Lia and Mackie were with Breena at the big house, Tim stopped for them. After thanking Breena and Mom for all their help, he kissed everyone goodnight, with an extra hug for Ziva/Ana, and took his babies home.

Ty and Brynie were in the playroom with Claire when he arrived. Ellie and Henry were asleep. Lia joined her siblings while Mackie first had a detour to have a diaper change. When Tim worried about
Henry sleeping all day, Claire smiled, "He's all right. Don checked him over; he said Henry's exhausted, a little dehydrated and he's had some Pedialyte now. He probably hasn't slept well since he was taken from the orphanage. Don't forget that was the only home he's ever known and he's been with strangers ever since. He's sleeping peacefully; go kiss him goodnight, you'll feel better. Need any help with dinner?"

Tim shook his head, "No, Claire, thanks. The slow cooker's been working on our dinner all day. Would you like to stay? And thanks so much for taking care of our family!"

"You're welcome, Tim and thanks, but no thanks. Jim is taking me out for dinner tonight!"

With a smile, he kissed her as he padded quietly down the hall to the kids' rooms, finding Henry in Mackie's room. The toddler was sound asleep, tucked into a single bed new to the room. Tim mentally thanked the person or persons who brought that in. He thought his father probably brought it from the storage barn.

The baby monitor was already set up so Tim forwarded it to his smart watch and went to see his wife.

Ellie was sound asleep; he kissed her, kicked his shoes off and went back down the hall. Thanking Claire again, he watched until she reached her front door. With two acres per lot, whoever lived at the top of the cul-de-sac might end up driving to visit the rest of them! He thought about street lamps, they could control them and they'd be solar powered. Might come in handy, he made a mental note to bring it up to the other owners.

As he checked their dinner, he thought about the new child in the family. Realizing he'd missed a key component of family leave, he quickly wrote Leon and HR a quick note, letting them know they'd taken on a foster son, aged 19 months. He'd officially be out on family leave for four weeks. He'd argue with Leon later about working part-time at home. Completing a form requesting leave, he attached the form to the e-mail and sent it.

Lia and Mackie were still in the kiddie corral; Tim scooped them both up. Telling Ty and Brynie to wash their hands and asking them to set the table, Tim and the babies walked down the hallway to the master bedroom. He was betting that part of Ellie's fatigue was lack of food; she needed to eat!

Gently waking her, he waited until she stopped blinking her eyes. "Come on, sleepyhead, it's time for dinner. Don't forget you're eating for two now!" He quickly added, "Henry's still asleep. I've got Mackie and Lia right here. I'll get them settled, feed the Mackster and then I think we should probably wake Henry to eat too."

"That's three high chairs, we only have two."

"I thought we could try one of the booster seats. And move the kiddie corral closer to the table, Lia and Mackie can play after they eat. If Lia-Malia doesn't want the booster seat, maybe it'll work for Henry. If not, I'll hold one of them on my lap."

"Oh, that works! But Tim, I can help!"

"Of course, sweetie, I just don't want you getting overtired."

She smiled, "Come here…"

Lia and Mackie both squawked as Daddy suddenly bent over and that made Mommy laugh. Instead of Daddy being kissed, Lia was transferred into Mommy's arms and she chortled happily.
Tim headed back to the kitchen where he secured Mackie in one of the highchairs. Ty stayed with him while Tim and Brynie moved the kiddie corral into the large, eat-in kitchen. Mackie had his usual appetizers, Cheerios, and happily played with and ate those while Tim found the booster seats in the coat closet. He quickly wiped one clean and installed it on one of their extra kitchen chairs.

While Daddy got his food ready, Mackie bounced in excitement. The little guy loved the solid food he was eating now and with some help, did a good job of feeding himself. When he was done he wanted down, which was fine as long as he was close enough to be reached by his parents.

Ellie appeared with Lia, ready for her dinner. She sat in the booster seat, playing with one of her toys. Ellie stayed with the kids while Tim went to wake Henry.

When Tim called his name, Henry opened his eyes slowly. Tim kissed him on the forehead. "Hi, sweet boy. I'm your new Daddy." The boy regarded him solemnly before holding up his arms, the signal for "up". Tim gathered him in his arms, giving him another gentle kiss. He asked him if he was hungry and Henry nodded. "Good! Let's get a clean diaper on you and then we'll eat." Tim kept his voice quiet and upbeat but not silly. He mentally thanked whoever packed Henry's belongings for including a package of diapers. Those made him feel a little better about Henry's life in the orphanage. They hadn't opened the Palmers' diaper pack yet and would return them with thanks. Ellie found an envelope in Henry's bag but neither she nor Tim had yet had time to look at the contents.

He decided to carry him to the kitchen to maintain contact and so Henry could see where they were going. He had him settled in his high chair, removed Lia's toy (standard procedure) and was just sitting down when Mackie changed his mind about hanging out in the kiddie corral. He wanted to be with everyone else. As Lia was still in the booster seat, Mackie returned to the high chair. As Tim slid him in, Henry pointed to the booster seat, "Me too?"

"Sure, Henry. Next meal, you can sit in a booster seat too."

The little boy nodded.

Ellie snickered, "So much for worrying about high chairs!"

Finally, everyone was seated and served. They were reaching for their forks when Henry held out his hands, quite clearly expecting a blessing before eating. Tim started to stand up to push Lia's chair closer so she could reach Henry's hand but with a grin, Ty beat him to it. With the whole family linking hands, Mommy said grace, despite Mackie's best, extra cute efforts to distract her.

After they ate, Brynie, Ty and Ellie cleaned the kitchen while Tim put all three little ones in the kiddie corral and then climbed in with them. He lay on his back while Mackie sat on his chest and Lia played with one of his ears. Henry crawled the length and width of the corral, checking everything out and then pushed himself up, running up and down. Ellie and Tim watched him quietly; glad to see he was right on track in his motor skills. He'd had no trouble eating, holding a spoon or drinking from a cup.

When Mackie decided to show off his new crawling skills, Henry toddled over to Tim and stood there looking at him. With a smile, Tim held out his arms and Henry went into them, crawling onto his chest. He lay down, his head close to Tim's heart and then he looked up, eyes wide, "What dat?"

Remembering Brynie at this age and Ty discovering his heartbeat, Tim smiled. "It's my heart beating! What does it sound like to you?" Henry thought a moment before saying, "Thub thub thub."

Watching, Ellie smiled, they were going to be fine. Crazy until he settled in, then a few months of
'normal' until the baby arrived. She sat on a kitchen chair, thinking aloud. "I'm glad we won't need another highchair. Hopefully by the time the baby is old enough to sit in one, Mackie will be in a booster seat too."

"You know if we do need another one, we can raid the storage barn. Who brought the single bed?"

"Somebody with a key, it was here when we got home. Probably your dad, maybe Jimmy."

Henry was still listening to Tim's heart. Ty climbed in and lay next to them. "What are you hearing, Henry?"

"Daddy heart. Goes thub thub thub."

Tim grinned at Ellie, kissed Henry and then pulled Ty in for a kiss. Ty said, "What?"

"I remember the first time you called me Daddy and the first time you listened to my heart."

"At our house that got blown up?"

"You called me Daddy while we were staying at Poppy's house. You heard my heartbeat after we moved into our house."

"Was I little?"

"You were 2½ years old."

"That's little but bigger than Lia, Henry and Mackie."

"That's right, son. Henry, you know what?"

The toddler looked up, shaking his head "Wha'?"

"I need to get up, can you help me?"

"Ok. How?"

"How about you slide off me and then your mama, sisters, brothers and I will take you for a walk around the house."

Henry nodded, sliding off, crawling away a couple of feet before he stood up. "I ready Mama, Daddy."

Grinning, Tim got up, picked him up and blew a raspberry kiss on his tummy. Henry giggled, the first sign of laughter they'd heard from him. Ellie didn't think they'd even seen a smile yet. The other kids cheered and squealed. Henry's blue eyes grew as big as saucers and then he broke into almost helpless laughter when his new daddy gave him another raspberry kiss.

Tim swung him up and gave him a big kiss. "Welcome home, Henry."
Chapter 19

When the cats, dogs, birds and other animals arrived on Tuesday, Tim, Ellie and the kids stayed away. Instead, they introduced Henry to Neo. The two carefully checked each other out and then Neo gave the toddler a big face lick. Henry wasn't sure if he wanted to laugh or cry but laughing won. The whole family went for a walk with Neo, stopping when they heard someone calling them. It was Ana, out for a stroll.

She was greeted with hugs by Tim and Ellie while Ty and Brynie remembered she was a new aunt and gave her a warm Ty and Brynie welcome. She shook hands with Lia, who giggled, Henry, who smiled shyly and Mackie, who grinned at her with his 3 new teeth. Neo sniffed her politely and gave her a friendly hand lick, her sign of approval.

Ana joined them on their walk, her heart melting at Tim's children. Lia and Henry toddled along holding hands with Mommy and Daddy while Ty and Bryn walked a few steps ahead with Neo. When the toddlers got tired, they rode in the double stroller like royalty while Mackie continued his sky adventure, riding in his baby backpack on Daddy's back.

Ana looked at them all, "You have a beautiful family! I'm happy for you both."

Beaming with pride, Ellie and Tim thanked her. Then Tim squirmed as Mackie kicked him. "Oh boy, hon, we're going to need a triple stroller and soon."

Ellie nodded, holding Mackie's feet through the backpack. "Let's look in the storage barn first, then we'll hit Craigslist. Although we'll need it for at least two more years."

"Maybe not. Ty and Brynie were out by the time they were 3. Dad and I brought the stroller if we were going to walk any great distance but other than that, it usually ended up being used to store things or as a shopping cart. You remember, we were home and married before Brynie turned 3."

"That's right, I do remember. I also remember that when we were here for your case, Ty wasn't using the stroller at all and Brynie was hardly using it."

Ana looked at Tim, "Your case?"

"Long story, tell you later."

Ty turned around, "Daddy and Poppy arrested a really bad lady with mean eyes. She killed people and tried to hurt Daddy a bunch of times." His face lit up, "That was the first time we got to see Mommy, Uncle Tony, Uncle Tobias and Uncle Bob in a long time, almost a year. And Mr. Evan too, I forgot he was here. You should have seen them, Tia Ana! They were in their battle gear, with big boots, helmets and goggles. Daddy, you should show her the pictures of you and Mommy kissing in your battle gear and you, Poppy and Uncle Tony hugging and crying in your soldier stuff."

Ana hadn't heard that story yet but had to hold back a laugh at the horrified look on Tim's face. She'd ask later and maybe Gibbs, that is Jethro, would be a safer one to ask. Ellie smiled at her and responded to her son. "Remember that none of us were hurt that day, Tyler, and your father and I were very upset that the Marshal talked about it in front of you."

"I remember. Oh, I shouldn't talk about it in front of the littles. I'm sorry!"
Tim took off the baby pack, handing Mackie to Ellie. Then he walked over to Tyler, "It's all right this time because we never told you not to talk about it before. And the littles are younger than Brynie was that day. They won't remember you saying it. But don't mention it again, okay son?"

"Not even to you?"

"It's okay to talk about it with your mother, me and Poppy. But only when you're alone with Mommy, Poppy or me. And we're sorry we didn't tell you before now."

Ty smiled as he looked at his parents; usually he was the one apologizing. "I accept your apology, Mommy, Daddy."

Neo gave a little woof, he was done inspecting this area; it was time to move on. While he loved his spacious, covered dog run, being out in the open with his people was the best. As they continued walking, he sniffed at all the wonderful new smells and then stopped, turned in the direction of The Grove, sat down and woofed again, looking at his family. Why was there a new pack and where were they? After living in the shelter with a pack who had mostly disappeared when it was cold, Neo didn't understand why this was not the same pack.

Brynie quickly reassured him, "They're at The Grove, Neo, not here. You know, where Mr. Henry and Mrs. Bess live. They just got here, they're not your pack, I promise. Toby, River, Lucky and Blue went home to Oklahoma. You're our only doggie!"

Tim pulled a doggie treat out of his pocket and offered it to their pooch who gracefully accepted it and Brynie's explanation. They promised Mommy would take him to meet the other dogs someday soon.

When Mackie started fussing, they turned toward home, inviting Ana for lunch. She accepted with a happy smile. She offered to carry the baby and that distracted Mackie from his hunger and restlessness. He liked riding on Daddy's back but now he wanted to crawl.

She loved the house and had fun watching Tim and Ty put lunch together. She was surprised to see that Mackie was the only one in a high chair, the new little boy, Henry, and Lia sat proudly in their booster seats. Ty laughed, "Daddy, I remember when we moved home from here, I didn't need a booster seat anymore!"

"That's right, Tyler, you were 4 years old and big enough to reach the table."

After lunch, the kids went into the playroom, it was too hot to play outside, the three littles went down for naps and excusing herself, Ellie also went to rest. Keeping an ear out for the kids, Tim and Ana sat in the family room where he quietly told her the true story of their first sojourn in New Mexico, following it up with the version they'd told everyone else, so she wouldn't be confused if someone else referred to 'their case'.

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While Shannon assisted some of the new residents and Ana visited Tim and Ellie, Jethro helped the owners of the alpacas, llamas, sheep and goats move the animals into the animal paddock at the new barn. The horses, Acorn and Vámonos, were at the Ortizes and would be introduced to the new animals in a few days. The newly arrived animals found hay and water and in minutes were busy chowing down.

While the new folks and their animals settled in, the Serenidad residents relaxed after several very busy days. Uncle Dave said he hadn't been that busy since they brought the last cooler of food and
After spending some time with The Grove residents, Shannon, Penny and Maisie treated themselves to a trip into town to find a few things for Henry. Claire had looked at his clothes, noted the size and that he would need the next largest size very soon. She also noted the presence of toddler underwear and the packet of diapers in his suitcase and surmised he was potty training but not quite there yet.

Since they'd met Shannon, Penny and Maisie had grown very fond of her and she of them. In a way, they stepped into an empty spot where her mother could have been if she hadn't been broken her daughter's heart, sold her grandson, lied, committed murder, betrayed her country and ended her life as a convicted felon.

They had a wonderful time buying things for Henry. The first thing they did was to splurge on a triple seater stroller. This way the toddlers and baby Mackie could all ride comfortably. When the new baby came along, Lia and Henry would own the current double, the one Tim purchased for Ty and Brynie 6 years ago, while Mackie and the baby would own the triple, with room for storage in the third seat.

Stashing that away in the trunk, they moved on to clothes, shoes, toys and books. Maisie reported that Don would give Henry his 'first birthday' book on his second birthday. That stalled them but they finally decided Henry should have some books of his own. He'd share them with Lia and eventually Mackie but it was only fair for him to have his own. After selecting four books they knew Lia didn't have, they moved on. They had a wonderful time with shirts, jeans, toddler sneakers, swimwear, cute tee shirts, pajamas and a new teddy bear they had embroidered with his name. It was similar to those owned by Lia, Brynie and Ty. Maisie grinned as she found a darling sunhat. "It's too cute; he's got to have it."

Penny giggled at the denim overalls she found and in they went to the cart. Shannon finally stopped them. "He has a birthday in 4 months and you know he'll have outgrown a lot of this by then!"

Maisie's eyes looked almost maniacal, "We can buy the next size up now and hold onto it."

Shannon shook her head. "Then we won't have any fun buying for his birthday. And he'll need winter things then too."

"All right, we'll wait."

Penny snorted, "Never thought I'd see the day someone would out-practical Maisie!"

That set the three of them off and they giggled and laughed all the way to the car. They wouldn't give Henry everything today; each child would have something and they'd find time to give Ellie and Tim the rest of Henry's new things. It took them nearly 30 minutes to decide what to present today and what to hold back. The stroller didn't count as that was for Tim and Ellie.

Back at the ranch, they drove straight to Tim and Ellie's new home, being careful to avoid the construction crews and their vehicles. When they walked in through the gate to the enclosed courtyard, they smiled at the beds of native plants, the 5 ft. tall shade trees the couple splurged on, the adobe benches and chairs, all with comfortable looking cushions, the pretty, tiled fountain and two abandoned coffee mugs.

Chuckling, Shannon picked up the mugs while Penny knocked on the front door. Tim answered, Henry in his arms. "Ah, our Nonny, Grammy and Penny! Welcome, come on in! Hey, what's all bits of furniture into the shelter and then sealed themselves in a year ago.
this?” He turned his head, "Honey, come look!"

Ellie arrived, her face lighting up when she saw the triple stroller. "Oooh, thank you so much! Why are you standing out there in the heat, come in!"

They entered, Ellie helping with the packages. The group moved into the playroom where they found the rest of the kids. Lia and Mackie squealed when they spotted their Nonny and great-grandmothers. Henry was set down but didn't quite know who these people were. The women were quiet around him and didn't push. When he saw that his brothers and sisters were fine with them, he relaxed. When told their names, he repeated each one and then giggled when they kissed him.

They all sat down for presents. The kids took turns, Ty, and Brynie opening their own little gifts, Daddy helping Lia and Henry while Mama opened Mackie's presents. Henry loved everything! When he opened his overalls, Lia clapped, telling him she had some too. He liked that.

The best thing was his teddy bear. When he opened it, his face lit up and he squealed, the first squeal they'd heard from him. Ty and Brynie got all of the bears and showed them to him. He giggled when Brynie arranged the others in a circle around him but he wasn't ready to put his bear in, he was busy hugging it. Finally, Mama showed him his name on the bear and he looked up, "Mine? For Henry?"

"Yes, sweetheart, just for you."

"No share?"

"Right, everyone has their own. This one is yours."

"Oooh, thanks!" He smiled again, a big wide happy smile. Lia frowned, wondering why her Mommy and Daddy and the Grands were crying. But Ty whispered that it was all right, they were happy that Henry was with them now.

Henry watched as the other kids kissed his new grandmother and great-grandmothers in thanks and then with a determined look, toddled over to the ladies, following his siblings' example.

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On Wednesday, Tim and Ellie took Henry to the CPS office in town while Nonny and Poppy stayed with the other kids. When everyone was home again and after naps, they were all going swimming.

Henry watched out the window as they drove to town. When they saw some of the Ortiz alpacas through a break in the brush, he said, "Apacka!"

They told him yes, it was an alpaca, impressed with his knowledge. Of course, for all they knew, the orphanage was near an alpaca ranch. They passed a dairy farm before turning onto the freeway and Henry was puzzled, "What that?"

"Cows. They sound like this, moo, moo." Having grown up on a ranch, Ellie's cow sound was very realistic and Tim chuckled as he drove.

Looking surprised, Henry smiled at the strange noises Mama made.

Maybe he'd never seen a cow. Mackie had a book, passed down from Lia, with different animals and the sounds they made. They'd show it to Henry.

When they reached the building with CPS, they parked and unfolding the stroller they'd borrowed from Arin DiNozzo, put Henry in and off they went. His eyes got very big and a little scared when
the elevator started moving but Daddy squatted down next to him, holding his hand, speaking calmly to him. "It's ok, sweetie. This is an elevator; it's taking us up to the top of the building!"

By the time Henry thought about that, they'd arrived at their floor. He giggled as the doors whooshed open.

The appointment didn't take long as Ms. Clark was familiar with the Gibbses and had all the paperwork prepared. The first item of business, however, was a cheek swab for Henry. When he saw the Q-tip, he said, "What that?"

Daddy told him and then said, "This is what Ms. Clark is going to do." He opened his own mouth, took a quick swab of his cheek and then pulled it out. Henry was still frowning so Mama did it too, only she giggled as it tickled.

Henry thought it might be okay and opened his mouth to let Ms. Clark do her thing. It didn't hurt like a shot but it didn't taste good either. He started to fuss and then the lady held out a juice box. Now to Henry, juice boxes were a big treat, one that only happened maybe once in a lifetime. His lifetime, anyway. His eyes lit up and he looked at Daddy and Mama. "Mine?"

"Yes, sweet boy, all yours."

"Thanks!"

He held that juice box with both hands, drinking the delicious juice, forgetting all about the bad taste of the Q-tip.

While he was enjoying his apple juice, his parents and Ms. Clark discussed the cheek swab.

"It'll take a week to get the results."

Tim nodded, "Are you…will you request that all possible relatives show on the report?"

"You mean like distant cousins?"

Tim nodded, shrugging at the same time, "Not too distant. Children, grandchildren of great-grandparents and any of their siblings?"

"We don't usually. We go as far as great-grandparents and any of their siblings. We don't always look for the offspring and descendants of those siblings. Would you prefer we make the search wider?"

Ellie nodded, "Yes, please. Will doing the run wide-open take longer or cost more?"

"It will only take longer to print the results but we're talking minutes, not days. I suppose it might cost more to print if there are many blood relatives that show up. I believe they usually do the run wide-open anyway; they just narrow the results to what we request before printing. Our experience shows us that going beyond great-grandparents doesn't bring results."

Tim rolled his shoulders, "When you get the results and see his parents' names, will you contact them?"

"We'll send them a series of three written communications, registered letters that have to be signed for. If the letters are signed for by the parent but there's no answer then we mark Henry's file as 'no response', which in foster or adoption terms means the same as saying the relative is refusing the child. Same thing if the letter is refused outright."
Ellie explained, "Lia's parents and only other relative were killed in a car crash; we knew there wasn't anyone else in the U.S. and there was no response from anyone in Chile, her parents' native country. Her adoption went through in about 6 months. Ty and Brynie were already in Tim's custody, we weren't changing primary custody, more or less adding me as their mother and it went through in a matter of weeks. So we're clueless about this kind of adoption."

Ms. Clark looked surprised, "I had no idea Ty and Brynie weren't yours!"

Ellie beamed, "Thank you."

"In Henry's case, we'll be looking at a longer timeframe. We'll have to track down his birth parents and send the letters. If they were still underage, we'd have to contact the grandparents who might decide to keep him. Considering what the couple did, taking their child to a foreign country when he was so young and then abandoning him without anyone making inquiries - it is possible the grandparents are unaware of the child's existence."

Tim had another issue. "The initial report the orphanage gave Jay Whitman stated that there was another child, Henry's twin."

"Yes, I saw that. If her DNA has been registered, she'll show up on the results."

"Does the run look at international databases?"

"Not unless we ask. Do you have reason to believe the twin was taken elsewhere?"

"Anecdotal only, nothing evidential. Jay said someone at the orphanage told him the baby girl had been adopted or at least taken by someone traveling through Bacia. She told Jay that another one of the nuns knew more but she'd already left for Brazil and Jay didn't have time to investigate."

"Good grief, these poor children! Thank you for telling me this, I'll do some research into that. I have contact information for the sisters. If this bears out, I'll speak to our attorneys about even notifying these parents. They've certainly proven themselves unfit parents. In my opinion that is, we'll have to see about legally.

"And yes, we'll have the tech look at the international databases. The EU has one, thankfully, and most other countries feed their data to various organizations. Some are reluctant to share, though. I believe the International Red Cross has the most entries."

Ellie nodded. "We hope and pray that we'll be able to adopt Henry. We already love him. My husband says he's an 'old soul'. He's very bright and inquisitive with a strong vocabulary and understands even more. This child has been loved, even if he had to share with other children. Actually, that will do him well in our large family!"

On the way home, they stopped at the store for a few groceries, watching Henry's expressions as he rolled along in the grocery cart. Evidently, he'd never been in a large grocery store before. Or perhaps any grocery store.

As they were pulling into the driveway, Tim exclaimed, "The envelope!"

Ellie nodded, "I just remembered too. Let's have lunch, put the babies down for naps and then we can look at it."

The two of them sat down at their kitchen table with cold beverages and the manila envelope once their little ones were napping. Opening it, Tim emptied the contents onto the table.
Ellie picked up the first piece of paper in surprise, "Certificate of Live Birth, oh, it's a copy of
Henry's birth certificate!"

The certificate named Tiffany Brinker as the mother and Neil Lorenz as the father. Henry (no middle
name) Lorenz was born October 20th, 2018 at 3:45 AM in a hospital in Chicago, IL. Tiffany was 17
at the time, her place of birth listed as Helena, Montana and her occupation was student. Neil was 18,
his place of birth listed as Seattle, Washington, his occupation was also student.

They set that aside to give a copy to Ms. Clark and picked up the next paper. That was also a copy of
a certificate of live birth, also known as a birth certificate. It was for Christina (no middle name)
Lorenz, born October 20th, 2018 at 3:50 AM, in the same hospital. This was Henry's twin.

After taking photos of both certificates, Tim stapled them together, putting them back on the table.

The next item was in a long, legal sized envelope. Tim opened it, carefully pulling out the notepaper,
which he read aloud to Ellie. A letter from one of the nuns who raised Henry, it detailed his life from
the day he arrived to the night they took him to the Embassy. The writer included Henry's likes,
dislikes, and some personal observations about him. The Gibbeses were thrilled to have this. Not only
would it help them be better parents to the little boy, it also confirmed their belief that he'd been loved
and nurtured.

In the letter, the author said that Sister Bernice Matthews was the one who met the birth parents.
When she met them, Sister Matthews was told they had adoptive families lined up for both infants.
Sister Matthews did meet the adoptive parents of Henry's twin Christina.

Three days after Christina's departure with her new parents, a local hospital contacted the orphanage
to ask if they would take Henry. He'd been a patient there for a day and a half and would be
discharged the following day. They told a story that, the author wrote, broke the hearts of the medical
professionals as well as the sisters.

A man walking by a deserted shack heard the weak cry of a baby and investigating, found a tiny
infant. That was Henry, who was dehydrated, hungry, filthy, terrified and in need of medical
attention after what the doctors later estimated was at least 30 hours with no food, liquid or diaper
change. Calling for an ambulance, the man removed the baby's filthy clothing, gave him some water
and then wrapped the infant in his shirt, holding him next to his heart, warming and cuddling him,
speaking softly until help arrived.

Tim and Ellie stopped reading, both blinded by tears and anger. After they calmed, they quietly
checked on their new little one, each gently kissing his head.

Returning to the letter, they found the author included their new address in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil
with a note that all of the sisters would be there; their order had a large orphanage there.

When they finished, Tim scanned the letter and birth certificates, attaching them to an e-mail to Ms.
Clark. They hoped the DNA results would include Christina's information. They wanted to establish
communications between Christina's family and theirs so the twins would know each other as they
grew up. They also found photos of Henry taken as he matured from infant to toddler and copies of
his medical records.

They stopped to scan the photos into their family album and Ellie quickly merged them with the
other kids' photos. There were photos of Sue and Deeny with Ty and Brynie when they were
newborns and during their babyhood. Those were followed by their first photos with Tim and Jethro,
more of the four in New Mexico, then at their parents' wedding. Lia had photos as a newborn with
her birth parents, at her baptism with them and then her first photo with her new family, Mackie's
birth photo with his parents, his baptism and others. Family photos included those of the four children taken at Ruidoso, in the future they hoped those would include Henry.

NCIS NCIS NCIS NCIS

Watching her husband closely after reading the letter, Ellie sent a text to her father-in-law before she went to bed that night. She knew that if Tim had trouble with what they'd learned today, he'd need Jethro. She thought that was because Tim had a father when he was young and had Nate while he was homeless. But as motherly as Mrs. Ferguson had been and as much as Ms. Lu had helped, he'd never experienced maternal love as a young boy or at least did not remember experiencing maternal love. Thus, when he had problems he couldn't handle himself or with Ellie's help, he turned to his father.

Tim had nightmares that night and when he woke a third time covered in sweat, he slipped out to sleep in the guest bedroom. But sleep eluded him and when the darkness was just beginning to cede to the dawn, he called his father.

Jethro was in the kitchen pouring his first mug of coffee when his cell buzzed with a call from Tim. Frowning, he looked at the time as he answered the phone, glad for the warning from Ellie.

"Tim, everything all right?"

"Kids and Ellie are, I'm…I need you, Dad. Can we meet in the shelter? Neither Pete nor Bill are there."

"Of course, son, I'll be there in a couple of minutes."

They disconnected, Jethro wrote a quick note to Shannon, poured coffee into a travel mug for Tim before walking downstairs to the basement and into the shelter. He heard the main door open and Tim came in, tired and upset.

Putting the coffees down, Jethro wrapped his son in his arms. "Tell me."

"Henry…one of the nuns wrote us a letter with information about him. One of the things she told us was that someone abandoned him. He was three months old and by himself for at least 30 hours."

Heartbroken and angry, Jethro maneuvered his son to one of the few couches left in the shelter. When Tim could talk again, he told him the story. By the time he finished, he was crying and Jethro understood the tears were not only for Henry but were also a reaction to what Tim had been through as an infant and child. The hatred his grandmother had toward him, being torn from his mother, sold, and then later abandoned.

Tim managed to tell his father that he'd had nightmares all night and finally gave up trying to sleep, afraid of what would be waiting for him. He let himself lean into his father even more, feeling the warmth and comfort. He knew he was loved, had known for a long time now but sometimes the horrors of his childhood made their presence known. This wasn't the first time they threatened to overwhelm him and all the therapy in the world couldn't banish them; could only help him deal with them. And it did, in his everyday life he lived in the present with his wife, children, parents, siblings and the rest of his family. As he'd told Abby, he was the happiest he'd ever been. But not always and when things were this bad, when something hit him unexpectedly and as hard as the story of Henry's abandonment had, Dad was the only one who could provide the comfort he needed and help him regain his balance.

Jethro held on, giving his child love and support. When he felt Tim relax into sleep, he sat back, still
holding him. If he could sleep for a few hours without any nightmares, then he'd be all right. His son could handle nearly anything in daylight but the monsters of his past seemed to grab him when he tried to sleep. And in this case, Jethro knew it was also anger toward whoever abandoned Henry.

Later, as Tim started to wake, he took stock and realized he felt much better after a couple of hours of sleep in addition to the love and support of his father. When he opened his eyes, he smiled at Dad.

"Thanks, Daddy. I'm feeling much better. Guess it hit me hard."

His head still resting on his dad's chest, he could feel the rumble as he spoke. "Wasn't just the letter, son, although I can see why what happened to Henry would hit you hard, remind you of your horrors. I think the Bacia evacuation also dredged up your emotions about our own evacuation, all the fear and anger. And finding little Henry alone on the jet, that was rough. Even though there were plenty of people around, there was no one for him. And having Ziva appear out of nowhere was a shock to all of us and as we've discussed, brought up some bad memories as well as the good."

Tim nodded, "You're right. I get a little…panicky is the best term, when I can't sleep for the nightmares. If I could learn to deal with them, I could handle all of this."

Dad gave him a little shake, "Timothy, you need to let yourself lean on people. And I can say that now because I've learned to do that. Mostly. And yes, it would be great if you could control your brain even while you're asleep. I know when you're awake enough you apply all the techniques we've both learned but I don't know how you'd train your unconscious mind to react differently."

Tim gave him a little grin as he sat up, "There are all kinds of experts..."

His father ruffled his hair, "I'm sure there are, Elf Lord. Tell you what, you go first and let me know how it works out!"

He stopped Tim from getting up, "Hang on. You sure you're okay? Two hours sleep and you're ready to go? Monsters banished?"

"I'm about 60% but it's Saturday and we don't have to go anywhere or do anything. No birthday parties, games or anything else."

"Grocery shopping."

Tim gave him a tired smile, "I did it last weekend; Ellie's turn."

"Household chores?"

"You can help if you'd like but Ty and Brynie still like to help. Brynie likes to dust and Ty likes to sweep, they both like to make sure all the little 'specks' disappear and Ty helps me vacuum, he loves chasing after what little hair Neo sheds. It'll be nice when Lia and Henry are old enough to help a little. The bathrooms..."

"Never mind."

Tim chuckled, "I was going to say they're not too bad these days with the sprays and gadgets they make to help. And remember we had the new toilets installed - the ones that self-clean. They do a good job. I had the older kids convinced they needed to scrub the bathtub before they got out but now they take showers so that doesn't work. Although if they remember, they will squeegee the shower walls and door."

"Laundry?"
"Household on Saturday after we clean and clothes on Sunday. Ellie and I swap every week, this week I'm doing the clothes. Those are the main chores."

His father nodded, "Ok, you're all right. You can go."

Tim looked at him, "Because I know what chores need to be done?"

"Yep. You're back in the present."

"Huh, you're right." Then he laughed, "You don't need to look so smug about it!"

Dad grabbed him in a bear hug and ruffled his hair, grabbed the coffee mugs and headed for the door. "Love you always!"

"Back at ya!"

With a smile and now feeling 80% better, Tim went home.

NCIS NCIS NCIS NCIS

Once the farm animal owners felt the llamas, alpacas, sheep and goats were attuned to their new surroundings, they told Jethro the children could visit, although not all at once. The owners would be present and the children would be supervised by a family adult, no matter how old the child.

They took the kids in two groups. The older kids, Matt Crane, Ainsley, Callum, the two older Palmer children, Hannah Hubbard and the two older Gibbs' kids, met the animals first. Dave, Breena, Claire and Jethro accompanied the group one morning before the sheep, goats and their guard llamas had been turned out to pasture and they had a great time learning more about the animals, what treats they liked to eat, who to pet and where. Three of the sheep were lambs, born that spring and they were amenable to the children petting them and feeding them slices of apples.

The littles each had an adult when they visited. Ricky was so excited by the sheep he wanted to climb into the pen with them and had to be restrained by Aunt Maggie, who'd taken the morning off to see the animals. Arin talked to his sheep – the lambs – and giggled at the sounds they made. Lia wasn't shy either but didn't try anything after Ricky's failed attempt. Mackie just stared. When Nonny squatted so he could see the animals face to face, he squealed, scaring away some of the sheep although the lambs seemed to recognize a fellow baby.

From his vantage point in his grandfather's arms, when Henry saw the animals, he bounced and chortled, asking to see the 'apakas'. Obviously, he knew alpacas and today he spent some time with them, petting the one the owner said was used to children. When he looked at Poppy and said, "Lambies please?" Jethro thought he'd give him the moon; this little boy had his heart. Still in the safety of his Poppy's arms, Henry petted the lambs but didn't want to feed them. Instead, he watched the others feed sliced apples to the sheep and goats.

When one little goat, a kid, had a hard time getting through the herd to the yummy treats, Henry tugged on Poppy's shirt, "Baby needs apples!" He whispered 'thanks' when Poppy moved them to better reach the kid. He giggled when the little animal tried to nudge Poppy through the paddock fence and asked for 'Down'. On the ground, he and the tiny goat reached an agreement. Henry would scratch and pat his head and neck while baby goat would eat more apple slices and try to head butt Henry's hand.

Wanting to share the fun, he called out for Lia, Ricky, Arin and Mackie, now in Aunt Maggie's arms. They hurried over to meet 'his' baby goat. Lia and Ricky joined Henry in petting the kid and two of the lambs who'd wisely followed the treat givers. The little goat finally bleated and wandered
away. The children each petted the alpaca one more time and then waved goodbye to the animals.
Chapter 20

While their children had new adventures with the animals, the new children and the first summer above ground at the ranch, several long days passed for the Timothy Gibses with no word about the DNA results.

The couple was busy at work and home, too busy to think much about Henry's DNA. As long as they were able to adopt him, they didn't care about anything else. They were very happy when Barb and Jerry Bishop arrived on a surprise visit to meet their new grandson. They thought it would be easier to get to know him at home on the ranch rather than waiting for the trip to Ruidoso. Shy at first, Henry soon warmed up to his Grandma and Grandpa Jerry.

At work one Wednesday afternoon, Tim answered a call from Secretary Porter. "Good afternoon, Ma'am."

"Good afternoon, Timothy. Tell me, are you working on a case, anything you can't leave for the afternoon?"

Tim replied, "Your timing is impeccable, Madam Secretary. I've just finished my review of several cases going to court and was starting preliminary quarterly evaluations."

She chuckled, "I envy your organizational skills. All right then, then I'd like you to go home. I'm on my way to Albuquerque and I have something I want to talk about with you and Ellie. Leon's clearing her early leave with her supervisor. Are your parents and kids home?"

"Yes, the kids stayed home today and my parents are with them. Ellie's parents are here too, came down to meet their new grandson."

"Wonderful! All right, I'll see you in about...90 minutes, give or take a few."

"No hints?"

"Not a one!"

They disconnected and Tim scratched his head, wondering. He hoped it wasn't a transfer but that certainly wouldn't require a personal visit. The presence of Ellie seemed to preclude anything bad, some huge something he'd done wrong or forgotten. Again, that would have to be of major importance for a personal visit. It'd be more likely for him to be ordered to her office. He shrugged, guessing they'd find out soon enough and sent Ellie a text that he was ready to leave whenever she
One floor down, Ellie saw his text as her supervisor motioned her into the office. "Director Vance just called, saying Secretary Porter has requested that you be released from work this afternoon."

"The SECNAV…me? I don't understand."

The woman shrugged, "I believe she wants to see you and your husband."

"Oh, I under…no I still don't, but she is the Secretary, I guess I'd better go!"

Her boss chuckled, "I can't wait to find out what it is! I just hope it isn't a transfer."

Ellie made a face, "Me either!"

She met Tim in the parking garage, both of them shrugging at each other. Ellie frowned, "Did you hear from Leon or Porter?"

"Porter and she'd already talked to Leon."

"Any hints?"

"No, except she asked if my folks and the kids were home and seemed very happy when I mentioned that your folks are here."

"Huh."

With no kids, they'd driven Ellie's truck in this morning. They drove home, speculating all the way. Ellie frowned, "I wonder if she's staying for dinner, can't think what we have."

Tim huffed, "I know we have a lasagna in the freezer. Or we can order pizza."

When Ellie gave him a horrified look, he laughed, "You drop in on people with no notice, and you get what you get. Besides, she's seemed fine with casual other times."

"You're right."

They drove onto the property and on to their driveway, seeing that the kids and their grandparents and a few other people were in the pool.

Tim sighed, "Good, no one here seems to be getting ready for anything."

"Yeah, that's good. I want to get in that pool, how long do we have?"

"About 63 minutes."

"That's long enough, come on!"

Parking in the driveway next to Jethro's truck, they jumped out, waved to the swimmers and ran into the house. Within three minutes, they ran across the cul-de-sac in their swim gear, flip-flops, carrying beach towels.

Smiling at their parents and kids, they both jumped in the deep end of the new in-ground pool, surfacing together and racing each other to the shallow end, the kids cheering them on. Jethro and Jerry were waiting for them, declaring a tie.
Tim looked up, "So did you guys get a weird call this afternoon?"

Jerry shook his head but his eyes told the truth. He could read his father-in-law although rarely his father. And Dad was grinning, "What kind of weird call, Timson?"

"Secretary Porter called me, told me to come home and she'd already talked with Leon, cleared Ellie to come with me. But she wouldn't say why."

Jerry nodded, "Leon called your dad to tell him she was on her way but didn't say why."

Tim shook his head, "So weird. Just when you think you've got these people figured out…"

Ellie tapped his shoulder, "Come on, let's swim some more before we have to get out and get dressed."

"What, she can't see us in our swim…yeah ok."

They swam with each other, with their kids and played with the littles. When Jerry's smart phone buzzed, they sighed and got out, motioning to the kids. "Come on, she asked about our kids so she wants to see you too. Maybe we can get back in the pool afterward."

The Palmer kids frowned, "Do we have to get out too?"

Nonny nodded, "I'm afraid so, Victoria, Teddy, Ricky, you come too, I'll take you home. You can get dressed and then hang out with your cousins."

"Ok, Nonny."

Nonny and Grandma Barb took them to the Palmers house, across from the pool, while Poppy and Grandpa Jerry helped their kids with the grandkids.

Once inside the Gibbs' new house, adults and kids quickly dried off and dressed. Everyone wore shorts and tank or sleeveless tops except Ellie. She pulled out a new sundress and quickly put it on with a pair of sandals. Lia liked that and insisted on changing to her favorite sundress and sandals. Henry was a bit bewildered about what was going on but when his new mama and daddy didn't seem worried, he decided it was all right.

They lined the kids up and went down the row with a comb and hairbrush. When they finished, the kids giggled and Brynie said, "Daddy, your hair is sticking straight up in pieces, like Uncle Tony’s used to!"

Tim tried to pat it down with his hands but his father grabbed the brush and pulling his head to him, managed to get his hair flat. And then ruffled it before freeing his head. "There, now you can blame me!" Jerry was laughing so hard he had tears in his eyes. Until he and Jethro realized they hadn't changed yet, which made everyone else laugh.

They were back in the living room when Nonny and Grandma Barb came in with the Palmer children. Both Jerry and Tim's smart phones buzzed with a 7-minute warning. Tim frowned, "Where are we supposed to meet them? At the gate, the ranch house or here or…?"

Jethro smiled, "It's too hot to wait outside. Why don't we drive up to the ranch house and wait there?"

Tim gave his father a look; he knew something more than that Porter was on her way. There was no time to question him and he knew he wouldn't get any information anyway.
Moving Ellie's truck, all 8 kids were tucked into the van, Ricky on Ellie's lap and they followed Dad's truck to the ranch house.

NCIS NCIS NCIS NCIS

Tony was perplexed when Leon called and told him his team was off rotation and they were all to go to the ranch, even Evan Fuller. He added that he'd already told Maggie the same thing. When Tony balked, Vance chuckled, "It's a family thing, DiNozzo. Go on, get going."

So he did. The look on Evan's face was priceless when Tony told him they'd been ordered to the ranch. All of the clan kids were home at the ranch today. Arin and Juli were spending time with their granddad Barnes and whichever of the grandmas and aunties were around.

As Tony pulled out of the garage, he spotted Ned, Maggie, Evan and Jimmy doing the same thing. He'd also noticed Ellie's truck was gone. Wondering what was going on, his eyes opened even wider as he spotted Leon's SUV pull up to the curb at the day-care center and Lara and the twins climbing in. Evan, the Vances, Ned….was it all the NCIS'ers, their spouses and kids? Then he frowned, Leon hadn't said anything about Mindy Fuller and their kids. Or Breena or Ned's partner Barry, for that matter. Weirder and weirder.

The gate was open when they got to the ranch and Tony drove in following Tobias' car; he could see Breena's vehicle in front of him. Seeing Arin and the Colonel on the front porch of the ranch house, Tony parked across the way and most of those behind him did the same.

Jimmy hesitated but then pulled in and blinked as Rob, Ali, Kelly and Matt pulled in beside him in Matt's SUV. To his utter amazement, his in-laws parked next to Matt's big SUV. Climbing out, he grinned at Breena, who'd driven home, found the cul-de-sac empty and returned to the ranch house.

Looking at each other, they all shrugged and then hurried to get out of the way of other vehicles pulling in. They hurried across the driveway to the front porch and the air-conditioned house.

By now, the house was getting pretty crowded and several people wandered down to the shelter where there was plenty of room and cool air.

Almost the last to arrive were Bec and Geordie in their respective vehicles. Geo had been upset when he was ordered to go home but when his CO told him it was by order of Secretary Porter, he'd nodded, hoping nothing was wrong. Luckily, his wife's last class of the day was finished and Bec did not mind leaving early. She anticipated some sort of party and with any luck, pool time.

The Vances came in last, having first driven to Kirtland Air Force Base to meet Secretary Porter and assorted other people. Once everyone was welcomed and situated, Leon's driver led the way to the ranch. As they drove, Lara wondered, like everyone else but her husband and one other person, what was going on.

She turned to look behind them and shook her head at the string of large black SUVs. "Where did they bring them in from?"

Her husband chuckled, "I'm guessing Kirtland and perhaps the Marshals."

"Wow, there's….I can't even see how many of them!"

"Yep."

"You really can't say?"
Leon chuckled, "Hon, you'll know soon enough."

She made a face, "With the whole clan there we'll have to be in the shelter."

Her husband made a noncommittal noise and she sat back, still pondering.

NCIS NCIS NCIS NCIS

Tim, Ellie and their kids were in the ranch house. Henry had gone from bewildered to scared when people started pouring into the house and Tim had him in his arms in the house library, speaking softly to him, telling him he was safe and loved, no one was going to take him away or hurt him. Ellie had Mackie who was also frightened and the couple paced back and forth, passing each other, giving each child a kiss with each pass. Lia, Ty and Brynie were with their grandparents in the playroom where they’d taken the rest of the children.

Tim frowned when he heard helicopters overhead. Henry was calmer, so he took a chance, walking onto the front porch with him. Ellie and Mackie joined him and then quickly called for Ty, Brynie, Lia and their grandparents. As three helicopters flew over the area, several big black SUVS pulled in through the front gate, stopping in front of the house. Tim frowned at the first vehicle and then smiled as the Vance twins waved at them. Henry knew them, he'd met them twice now and he smiled. "Zach an' Zoey, Daddy."

"Yes, sweetie, and their mommy and daddy, Auntie Lara and Uncle Leon."

Henry clapped his hands and Tim gave him another kiss. "Want to get down?"

He shook his head and Tim hugged him closer, "Ok, Henry, that's fine."

As Lara and Leon got out of the car, each carrying one of the twins, the other SUVs stopped to allow them to cross the driveway. The Vances were welcomed, Henry and Mackie giving them kisses, the kids squealing their greetings to each other. Lia arrived in the arms of her Grandpa Jerry, along with Ty and Brynie.

The Vances stood on the porch, enjoying the spray mister, watching with the Gibbses and Bishops as more SUVs rolled in. Tim still could not imagine what was going on, it almost seemed like an invasion. He felt a hand on the back of his neck and half turned. "Dad, can you tell me now?"

"Only that they're here for you, Timothy. I am so proud of you, son."

His mother was suddenly there, kissing the side of his face that wasn't Henry occupied. "I am too, my sweet boy."

Her hair tickled Henry and he giggled. One of the SUVs stopped close to the house while the others made a square around it. Tim still didn't understand and the only time he'd seen this many SUVs and this type of security arrangement was when the President…oh. He sucked in a breath and again felt his father rubbing his neck. "Relax, son."

"Dad, that's…"

"Yep."

Jerry reached out to gently touch his arm. "We're here, Tim, all of your family. We're right here."

Tim nodded and relaxed a little when Ellie appeared beside him, still holding Mackie who was more curious about the cars than scared. Tim heard the front door opening, turning his head he saw his
brothers, sisters and their spouses, including the Palmers, joining them on the porch. He smiled at them, relieved to see them. Maisie, Ducky, Lu and Penny were next, followed by the Hubbards and Cranes. It was a good thing that front porch was built wide and long as Bill, Ana, Freddie, Jose, Barry and Ned were next to join them.

Tony and Geordie made their way up behind Tim, each touching him. He smiled, his two older brothers, how lucky could a guy be. He'd decided not to think about what was going on; just having everyone he loved here was wonderful.

He blinked several times when he saw the people exiting the SUV in the center of the square. First came the one he'd figured was here, the President. She was followed by Secretary Porter and then a man whom Tim recognized as one of New Mexico's senators. Empty of passengers, the SUV moved further into the ranch as another took its place. That one discharged Secretary Benson, the second senator from New Mexico and the governor of the state.

As the President approached the porch, Tim moved to walk down the steps, only to be stopped by his father. When Henry giggled, Tim realized someone behind him was making funny faces at him, probably one of his brothers as Mackie was also giggling. Ty and Brynie were brought up through the crowd while Jerry and Lia remained next to Ellie.

When the President reached him, Tim smiled, "Madam President, this is a wonderful surprise! Welcome to Rancho La Serenidad."

"Thank you, Director Gibbs, I'm pleased to be here and very pleased this is a surprise."

Tim introduced her personally to Ellie, then the children, his parents and in-laws. Then he paused, looking at the crowd and saying, "My siblings and their families are also here along with the rest of our family." With a smile, she waved and many of them waved back.

His father was by the front door and made a gesture, "Ma'am, there are more people inside the house and in the shelter where it's much cooler. If you'll follow me?"

He took Henry, while Mom took Mackie and the three littles disappeared inside. Tim, Ellie, Ty and Brynie stayed to greet Governor Martinez and the two senators, glad Leon remained with them. Once inside the house, they were told the Secret Service was in place in the shelter, it was safe for the President and the others to enter.

Glad they'd made a wide mulched path through the basement garden to the tunnel, Tim and Ellie led the way through the house to the basement stairs, the President and Secretary Porter following just behind them. Ellie silently blessed the SECNAV who was telling the President about the visit here just a few weeks ago.

When they got to the basement, the President stopped. "Oh, what a lovely garden!"

"Thank you, Ma'am. My sister-in-law Dr. Bec Childers is a botanist; she decided we would grow indoors in clean soil this year. Next year, we'll plant outdoors. We also maintain a garden in the shelter. Means all our vegetables and most of the fruit is home grown."

"Wonderful! Secretaries McCord and Porter are very impressed with all your work and I can certainly see why."

Tim just nodded, gesturing to the tunnel, "If you'll follow me, Ma'am." When he looked at the two Secret Service men with her, one gestured with his head to keep going. He and Ellie led them through the tunnel, answering questions about Dad's workbench, the lighting and the two storage
cabinets still there. "It's always cooler so we keep most of the foods we've canned down here."

As they walked into the shelter, there was a burst of cheers and applause and Tim stopped, turning to the President. She smiled, "Oh no, that's for you, Timothy."

Swallowing hard, he took Ellie's hand as they made their way in past the laundry, past Pete's room to the common area. He'd seen the cars, seen most of the people but it was still a shock to see nearly all of his former shelter mates there. Then he smiled as he saw laptops with familiar faces on them via Skype: Elaine and Jacob, Jared Vance, Pete Ware and to his astonishment, Rick and Denise Carter in London. He heard Abby's voice and grinned at Maggie who was holding her phone up.

He turned to find Secretaries Porter and Benson grinning at him. Secretary of Defense Benson had spotted the house phone, "Is that the phone you called us from, with the locations?"

"Yes, Mr. Secretary, except that you called me."

He let his head drop as his siblings made noises. The President chuckled, "And where is your friend who had the book?"

Ducky came forward and shook hands as he was introduced to the President and Secretary Benson. He smiled as he handed the book to Benson. "When I realized who might be coming today, I pulled this from our library upstairs. You can see Timothy's notes are still in there. He handed me a note where he'd scribbled the words he remembered, essentially having me do a blind check. The second note contains his thoughts on the translations leading to his belief the attack would be on the Fourth of July."

"Wonderful, thank you so much for showing us. Timothy, we'd like to make copies for posterity. You'll want to keep the originals."

Numbly, he nodded as Ellie squeezed his hand.

"Thank you."

Ty raised his hand, "I recorded it on Granducky's phone." He looked at his father, "I knew it was something big, Daddy. And then I didn't tell you because you were so sad after the bombs. I told Granducky so he wouldn't delete anything and then Aunt Breena. This afternoon when I saw the SUVs I told Poppy."

Ducky smiled, "My nickname is Ducky and I am known as Granducky to our children. Tyler, will you please show me where that is?"

"Sure." Ty started going through the phone, glad when his father put his hand on his shoulders. He'd been afraid Daddy would be mad at him for not telling. That day when they'd gone to look for treasures, he'd thought at first that it would be interesting to have something from their last day in Virginia and maybe to record all of the treasures they saw. But he didn't have his phone with him so he'd asked Granducky if he could borrow his. When he saw his father's face as he picked up the book, he recorded everything from that moment. "Here it is." Tyler handed the phone to Secretary Benson who looked around, "Is there another laptop down here?"

Ellie held out her hand, "We have a TV still in the media room and I know there's an HDMI cable down here somewhere."

Bob nodded, calling out, "Ellie, the HDMI cable was in the classroom last time I saw it. I'll go look for it if someone wants to roll the TV in to the common area."
Tony called, "Already on it, thanks Bob." He and Callum rolled it out, placing it next to the outer wall of the media room. "Ma'am, we've found this wall has the best lighting for viewing. This is where we ran movies when there were too many people for the media room."

Bob handed him the HDMI cable while Secretary Benson handed the phone to a teenager, Callum. Within a couple of minutes, the crowd was watching Ty's recording.

It started with his father picking up a book and his comments to Ducky.

Tim picked up a book, asking, "What's this?"

Ducky looked up, studying the cover of the book. "Ah, that is a fascinating look at ancient Greece and many things that are no longer commonly known. For example, did you know that the Greek language that loaned so many words to Latin and the rest of the world was not the main dialect? There are several ancient dialects, Arcadocypriot, for example is one of them."

Tim looked at him, staring but Ducky saw that he was thinking. Then he paled, saying, "Do you… are there examples of these dialects, with their words, alphabets? And I need my phone…no Ducky, I might need to use your landline, is it still working?"

"Yes Timothy, the dialects are here in the book and yes my phone is still working, cutoff is tomorrow."

Standing next to Tim, Ducky took the book and opened it to the chapter that had the most information about the various dialects. Tim ran his finger down, evidently looking for something specific. He stopped at something, flipped the page, and ran his finger down again, making an unhappy noise.

"Ok, I do need your phone. Then please take Ty, Lia and Ricky somewhere else in the house? Breena too." He shook his head, "No, first, Ducky, will you please tell me what you find for these?"

Tim quickly wrote down several things, handing the paper to Ducky.

The older man took the list, found them in the pages and writing down his answers, handed the list back to Tim who looked as if it were a venomous snake about to strike.

"I - thank you. Changed my mind; stay please, both of you and the kids too. Ducky, I might need you to find something else in the book and Breena needs to know. Tyler too."

"All right."

Tim was dialing as he spoke and when the call was answered, he said, "Timothy Jackson Gibbs, Senior Agent NCIS, ID 111803107-D, Passcode 57S*H9M6."

He waited before saying, "Imperative I speak with Secretary Benson immediately. I've solved the last cipher and it changes everything."

There was silence; Tyler stood with Granducky, Breena stood still, a book open and forgotten in her hand while Lia and Ricky played with an empty box.

Tim put the phone on speaker as a voice said, "This is Secretary Benson, Agent Gibbs. We're in the Situation Room and you're on speaker so the President can hear you."

"Thank you, Sir. Referencing the NSA files, as you know, we did not solve the last cipher in the third file. Until now. I'm at a friend's house sorting books; he has one on Ancient Greece and told me about some dialects most of us don't know about. And that's it. The last part of the third file had four
languages: Sumerian, Phoenician, Ugaratic and one we couldn't identify. Now I know it's called Arcadocypriot.

"The characters in the cipher that are in that dialect mean the number four, the number seven, the words day and month. The Ugaratic cipher had month and hours; there is no word for day in Ugaratic. The Sumerian and Phoenician both had characters that translate to the word freedom and the word tyranny. Madam President, I now believe the attack is going to happen the fourth day of the seventh month, July 4th, our Independence Day. The day we celebrate freedom from tyranny."

There was a huge explosion of background noise; Tim supposed they were talking about evacuation. Finally, he heard the President's voice speaking to him, "Agent Gibbs, what's your confidence level?"

"95%, Ma'am. It finally makes sense. The files talk about attack and unleashing nuclear devices but no date. We saw references to harvests and waning seasons and that led to our estimate of an autumn attack. And possibly that's what they meant us to think. If they're as arrogant as they must be then they wouldn't believe we'd have the knowledge to figure out the phrases in four ancient languages and what they meant."

"All right, well done. We have an evacuation plan ready, we'll start implementing it immediately. When are you leaving?"

"Tomorrow Ma'am. Those of us with children are flying out on a charter, the rest are following after loading up moving vans."

"And which group are you in?"

"The first one. My wife and I have three children and another on the way."

"Are any of your children with you now?"

"Yes, my son Ty and my baby daughter Lia."

"May I speak with them?"

"Of course."

Ducky brought Lia over and held her while Ty handed him something and then took the phone. "This is Tyler Dean Gibbs and my baby sister Lia Hope Gibbs is listening."

"How old are you and your sister, Tyler?"

"I'm 6½, Mrs. President and my sister is..." he looked at his father who whispered, "8 months."

"My sister is 8 months. Our other sister is 5½ but she's not here."

"I see. Well Tyler and Lia, I want to tell you that your father is a hero; he's just saved many lives. Did you hear what he said?"

"Yes, Ma'am but I don't know what those languages are."

"That's all right, Tyler, you'll learn all about them as you grow up."

"Cool, thank you!"

Tim got back on the phone and answered a few more questions, telling whomever he was speaking
with the name of the book and the author. He and the others then listened for a few minutes as the cabinet and the Joint Chiefs put things together.

When Benson got back on the phone, Tim had another epiphany, "Sir, time zones -we talked about this before; we don't know what time zone they're in. They may set off the attack at midnight their time."

"What's the greatest time difference?"

Tim had his chart up on his phone, "Tonga, 17 hours ahead of DC."

"Very well, Agent Gibbs that will be our deadline then. Thank you! Expect to hear from us once things are settled."

They disconnected and Tim patted Ducky's book. "Think that's going with us on the plane."

"Yes, I should say so!"

"And I think we'd better plan to get everything moved to the warehouse tonight. Maybe we'll all sleep there. It's closer to the airfield than most of our homes and there is a bathroom."

"We can stay here, Timothy, we're less than five miles from the airfield and I know the backroads. You're welcome to join us. All the extra beds are staying behind."

"Thanks, Ducky, we'll see. Now, we originally came over to pick out a treasure or two."

"You mean besides the answer to the cipher?"

Tim gave him a nervous nod, "Yes."

Breena went back to sorting books, still reeling with what she'd witnessed.

As the recording ended, the crowd erupted with whistles, applause and foot stomping. Tim gave them a weak smile, holding onto Ellie and Tyler, with Ducky next to them. When the noise died down, Breena stood up. "Ma'am, I'm Breena Slater Palmer and I have something to say to Tim, my thoughts about what happened that morning." At a nod, she continued, remembering her thoughts from that day, "Tim, I've known you as a friend for almost as long as I've known Jimmy. I've known you as a fellow parent, part of Gibbs' team, a member of Ducky's family and one of Jimmy's colleagues. But this…Jimmy's told me about your brains and I've seen things since that morning but not before. I'd never witnessed that side of you, the one who made the connection with the archaic language – from just a comment Ducky made! Then you just picked up the phone and called a number, got right through to the Secretary of Defense and the President. And they're here with us now! I'll never forget that morning, never. When Ty told me he'd recorded it, I was so relieved. I'll never forget and now no one else that's seen the recording will forget either."

With a nod, she sat down as the President smiled at her, "Thank you, Ms. Palmer. And Tyler, your recording is wonderful, thank you very much. When we're through with the trials and with our father's permission, I'd like to make that public." At the look on Tim's face, she smiled, "Or we'll wait a few years. I don't know much about filmmaking, young man, but you may have a budding career in it, judging from this. How did you know what to do?"

"Thank you, Mrs. President. My cousin Callum Hubbard taught me how to look for interesting things and film them; he makes short movies."

"Ah, then thanks also to Dr. Mallard and Callum Hubbard!" They nodded their heads, both grinning.
The President looked at the crowd, "This has been a very informative prologue to our reason for being here today. Timothy Jackson Gibbs, please step forward."

Reluctantly dropping Ellie's hand, Tim walked forward to stand next to the President. She smiled at him, "One of the happier duties of the presidency is giving credit where it's due, honoring Americans. Today, it is my great pleasure, in recognition of your part in our survival against nuclear attack, to honor you with the Presidential Medal of Freedom." Tim leaned down as she placed a wide ribbon with the large medal pinned onto it, around his neck. He swallowed hard, nodding and currently incapable of saying anything. Feeling his wife, children and parents joining him, he relaxed a little.

Then he smiled, turning to look at his family. "Thank you. All of you. Every single one of you plays a big part in my life, helps me in ways I don't know how to explain and I'm so grateful we're here. Madam President, I thank you for the honor, I'll treasure this and what it means for the rest of my life."

She shook his hand and then patted his shoulder, whispering, "Thank you Tim. Without your insight and dedication to your country, we wouldn't be here. This isn't just from your President; this is from me personally. You saved my child and her children."

He whispered back, "Ma'am, there's one more person here who was part of that but she can't be honored publicly, not even with this group. If I can introduce you to my siblings, she'll be part of them. Her name is now Ana Campo but it was Ziva David when she took that thumb drive from our dead or dying agents and got it to whoever she gave it to."

Her eyes widened, "She's here, now?"

"Yes, Ma'am, she arrived here with the refugees from Bacia. She had no idea we were here nor did we know until she exited the jet."

"All right, we have another award to present and then I'll need a few minutes of privacy, paper and a printer to put something together before I meet your siblings."

"The library is private and there's still an old laptop, printer, table and chairs in there."

"All right. Thank you so much for telling me. We looked for her but the CIA said she disappeared and I didn't want to chance endangering her."

Smiling, Tim stepped back and stood with his family. His father patted his shoulder, whispering, "I can still read lips, Elf Lord, although I only saw her half of the conversation."

"I know, Dad, I just hope no one else saw it. There's no media here, right?"

"No. Leon says that Secretary Porter convinced Madam President of the need for privacy, especially with the trials not yet started. Assume at some point in the future your name might be released as a winner of the medal but not anytime soon."

"That's a relief!"

The President cleared her throat and they quieted. "I'm also here to assist in honoring the work of many of you in helping the recovery of our fellow evacuees from the East Coast. Now, I should tell you, there's been a lot of discussion about this. Not if the award should be given but which award and by whom. Because I knew I was going to give Timothy the Presidential Medal of Freedom, I graciously…" she smiled mischievously and people laughed, "allowed our esteemed Senators from New Mexico to have the fun. They're both here, Senator Udall, Senator Heinrich, please join us."
Two men moved forward, both smiling. The older one spoke first, "Thank you, Madam President. Director Gibbs, congratulations on your award, I've never been so grateful for someone's work in achieving it."

Tim nodded before saying, "Thank you, Senator Udall. I do have one clarification. My title is Regional Director or Agent Gibbs. Leon Vance…" he motioned to his boss who laughingly waved his arm in the air, "is the director of NCIS, the entire agency. I'm in charge of several of our Cybercrime units."

The crowd chuckled and the Senator nodded to him, "Very well, Agent Gibbs, that's easier to say than Regional Director."

That got a big laugh from everyone who worked at the agency and knew Tim's preference for the title Agent. Tony called out, "It's actually Special Agent."

When Tim rolled his eyes, the Senator chuckled, acknowledging that with a nod and moved on. "The privilege my colleague and I wrested from the President is one that is voted upon and approved by both houses of Congress. Now, may I ask everyone to stand who is a member of The Grove Limited Liability Company?"

He nodded in approval when everyone stood, including some of the children. "Great! And who is your chairperson?"

The crowd cheered when Geordie, still in his fatigues, raised his hand. "Ah, Major, please join me."

Tim, Ellie and the kids moved into the crowd while Jethro and Shannon stayed put, beaming with pride.

The senator shook Geo's hand, "Major Perry, thank you for your service for our country and with the Marine Corps. Is your wife here as well?"

With a grin, Bec moved forward, baby Alex in her arms, Aunt Mel by her side.

Geordie introduced his wife, Dr. Childers, their son Alex Gibbs and Bec's aunt Mel, who'd raised her. The senator smiled, "She's part of your family."

"Yes, Sir."

"Great. Now, in the House of Representatives and Senate, we occasionally agree on an award. It has to be approved just like any other bill but in this case, there's usually no politicking around it or not as much.

"You folks, in doing all the work you did, epitomize the definition of a citizen's group helping your fellow evacuees, a grass roots organization. And you did it without waiting for government intervention. From the records we've researched, you were the first in the country to do what you did.

"In forming your LLC, purchasing the property, dividing into teams, putting all the work into the engineering, having a new environmental impact report done, designing the homes to be placed amongst the native vegetation and then purchasing used shipping containers and converting them, using solar power for the whole development…it's been an amazing process. Senator Heinrich and I have been watching since we first heard about it and agreed that your group deserved to be honored. For the work you've put in, for housing, giving comfort and sustenance to more than 8000 evacuees over the past 9 ½ months as well as inspiring thousands of our folks to also provide help, Congress has voted to honor your organization with the Congressional Gold Medal, along with our thanks for
your efforts. We were even prouder when you recently extended a welcome to the Americans repatriated from Bacia with less than a week's notice.

"Let me tell you a little about how this medal is awarded because it's not easy. First, legislation bestowing a Congressional Gold Medal upon a recipient or organization must be co-sponsored by two-thirds of the membership of both the House of Representatives and the Senate before their respective committees, the House Committee on Financial Services and the Senate Committee on Banking, Housing, and Urban Affairs, will consider it. As you can imagine, gaining approval for this is exceptional. Major Perry, please accept this award on behalf of The Grove LLC for the positive contributions to the recovery and welfare of your fellow Americans and Evacuees."

Geo smiled as the medal was put in his hand. He held it up. "This is for the entire LLC, congratulations to all of us!"

Ed Slater called out, "What's on it?"

"The front of a house with an open door, a welcome home sign, a basket of food, a man, woman and child with one suitcase standing in front of the door. The words The Grove LLC are on the bottom. The back is divided into four sections with the land before, then an excavator and two people working, then corners of two shipping containers and lastly, one person painting the exterior near a door where two other people are carrying in a piece of furniture. On the dividing lines, it says 'Grass' on the vertical line and 'Roots' on the horizontal line."

Geordie held the medal on the palm of his hand while Bec handed Alex to Mel, pulled out her phone, took photos of the front and back and then displayed them on the TV screen. After the group expressed their enthusiastic approval, Geordie turned to the senator, "Is there a way to have copies made, smaller ones, for everyone in the LLC?"

"Yes, Major. I admit we've done a little poking around to find out how many people make up the LLC. Luckily, formation of an LLC has to be published in public records and yours has been well documented, updated with additional members. We've had smaller medals struck for each member."

More cheers and applause followed that and then Liz and Shannon stepped forward, "For anyone who's hungry or thirsty, we have cake and beverages in the classroom. Jimmy, yours is in the refrigerator. Children, remember company first."

Tim shook his head grinning. "Ok, so someone knew about this."

His father and godfather laughed, "Yep, but we didn't find out until this morning when Secretary Porter called. And she didn't say exactly what was happening, just that we were going to have several visitors this afternoon and needed to have all the NCIS'ers and all members of the LLC present. Liz and Shannon called Elaine who said there was no time to bake a big enough sheet cake, to order one from Costco and reminded them to make something special for Jimmy."

One of the Secret Service men sidled over, "What's the something special?"

"Dr. Jimmy Palmer is diabetic and our shelter chefs always made him and one other diabetic shelter mate food they could safely enjoy. Elaine Rourke, who was on the laptop earlier, left several recipes behind for Jimmy and anyone else."

The man nodded, "Great, is there enough for two, would it be all right if I had some of his dessert rather than cake?"

"Of course!"
"Thanks, I appreciate it."

Everyone gathered around the table with the cake, waiting for a slice. Shannon looked up, "Let's do this our usual way. Kids!"

Those gathered around turned to the beverage table, grabbed their drinks and found a place to sit while the kids, including Kayla and the other college students, passed out slices of cake. Jethro took Jimmy's dessert out of the refrigerator, plating two pieces and carrying them into the classroom. Handing Jimmy his, he looked around for the Secret Service agent, who was standing against the wall behind the President. He smiled his thanks at the dessert. As Jethro turned away, the President turned around, "Ray?"

"It's diabetic-friendly, Ma'am."

She smiled, "Wonderful – enjoy!" She leaned over to Ellie, sitting near her. "He's been recently diagnosed and having a difficult time adjusting. Especially with our schedules."

Ellie nodded, "We have several recipes our chefs wrote up while we were in shelter. I can give him copies."

"That would be wonderful, thank you. He's been guarding my family for a long time. That long, people become family. Do you like to cook?"

"No, Ma'am. In our household, I take things from the freezer, make salads and do the cleanup with the kids. Luckily, Tim loves to cook."

"Good choice! I don't cook either and my husband only likes to barbecue. I'm afraid our poor daughter had to learn to cook or die of malnutrition."

Ellie laughed, "I'm pretty sure that's why Tim learned too."

The President chatted with everyone near her as the cake was enjoyed. As she dawdled over a cup of very strong coffee, she leaned over to Ellie. "Which one is Ana?"

Startled, Ellie wondered if Tim had said something or maybe one of the State Department people. "With the short light brown hair and hazel eyes. She's wearing a coral top and sitting next to Geordie."

"That's easy - he's the only one in fatigues! All right, I see her. I'd like to meet personally meet everyone here, will you help me?"

"Of course! Kids too?"

"Yes, that would be great!"

When Ellie saw that everyone was finished eating and drinking, she passed the word to Jethro who smiled, "Cool!"

With a whistle, he got everyone's attention, "Would everyone please stay seated for a bit? Ed, are you and Ginny in a hurry?"

They shook their heads, "Our daughter Colleen is handling things tonight Jethro, thanks."

"Ok." He looked at the President, nodding.

She rose, "I seldom get a chance to meet many people on a personal basis and your family, your clan
as I've heard some of you call yourselves, intrigues me. If you don't mind, I'd like to meet each one of you. I'm not running for anything, this is a personal interest."

She laughed when everyone stood. "Oh dear. Well, all right, let's do a receiving line then." Still laughing, she led them into the shelter proper. "One more thing, if you'd like to share your connection to either or both that would be great."

Standing against the kitchen 'island', she smiled at Mac, first in line, "Madam President, I'm McKenzie Fielding, the proud maternal grandfather of Tony, Geordie, Tim, Sarah, Rob and Kelly, honorary grandfather of Jimmy and Breena Palmer, Ana Campo and Abby Sciuto, who lives in Chicago. That makes me a very happy great-grandfather to all their children, there are 14 counting Ellie and Tim's unborn child. And my daughter Shannon is an only child!" She shook his hand, congratulating him on his family. He laughed, "I had nothing to do with it; it was all Tim and Jethro!"

Leaving her with that little mystery, he moved on. Next up was Colonel Barnes who saluted her. "Madam President, I'm Richard Barnes, retired from 40 years in the Corps. My daughter Maggie is married to Jethro and Shannon's adopted son Anthony DiNozzo. They've given me two wonderful grandchildren, Arin and baby Juli. I believe I'm the happiest I've ever been living here with my family and friends. Oh and I'm a member of the LLC."

"That's wonderful, Colonel, thank you." And there was another little piece of the puzzle about the Gibbs family, an adopted son.

She met Penny, Lu, the Cranes and Hubbards, all of whom came into the family via a connection to Tim. Next were the Mallards and her eyes widened as she heard of their double connection with the Gibses, to Jethro and Tim via work and to Tim via his adoptive mother. That was another revelation, that Tim had been adopted by people at some point.

The Slaters followed the Mallards. They told her they were the parents of Breena Palmer, who'd spoken earlier and the in-laws of Dr. Jimmy Palmer, who was regarded as the unofficial son of Donald Mallard as well as being part of the Gibbs' family. When questioned, Mrs. Slater smiled, "Jimmy was Ducky's protégé and as assistant medical examiner worked closely with Gibbs' team at NCIS. Jimmy's father died before we met him and over time, Ducky stepped into that role. In the meantime, Gibbs and team were evolving into a family, including the medical examiners."

"Thank you, that explains a great deal."

Pleased they could help, the couple moved on. The line moved on until Jethro and Shannon Gibbs reached her. She shook their hands, greeting them warmly. "I'm so impressed with your clan, it's wonderful! I don't think I've ever seen anything like it."

Shannon smiled, "I'm afraid I haven't had much to do with it. Our daughter Kelly and I were in protective custody for 25 years while Jethro built his team, which eventually grew into a family. When we were released 4 years ago, my husband had all these grown kids! And he'd discovered his connection with our son Tim, whom I'd been told died shortly after birth and I'd never told Jethro about him."

Jethro smiled, "Tim was a package deal. He'd grown up believing he was the son of a Navy officer and the older brother of Sarah. When the Navy officer was killed, Tim and Sarah were abandoned by their stepmother who told the rest of the family they were dead. The kids ended up in Baltimore where they met Geordie and Rob. They grew up together living in a transient camp where they became friends with Bill, Barry, Freddie and Jose, who are somewhere in line behind us. That's also where Lu comes into the family. Anyway, our four adopted each other. When we discovered that I'm
Tim's father, I adopted Sarah, Rob and Geordie. Tony and I met through NCIS, he worked for me for as my second in command, we grew into a surrogate father-son relationship and made it legal last year. Abby, who's not here, was our forensic scientist and became my surrogate child. Same with Ana."

"So neither of them is an official Gibbs?"

"Correct. There's also Jimmy."

"Ah yes, his in-laws explained his relationship with Dr. Mallard and your family."

She smiled as she continued to shake hands with Palmers, Perrys, DiNozzos, Chalmers and 2 sets of Gibbses who were both doctors. In line between the younger brother who was a doctor and Timothy and family was the woman Ellie pointed out earlier. The President smiled to herself, excited that she'd be able to thank the elusive woman responsible for rescuing that thumb drive and saving them.

When Ana introduced herself, giving her current back-story for her connection to the Gibbs' family, the President took her hand and held it, pressing a many times folded piece of paper into it. Leaning forward, she whispered, "Thank you Ana, for saving us. God bless you."

Ana nodded, confused and definitely overwhelmed. Like Tim, she hadn't wanted any sort of recognition but now she understood this President would keep her name to herself. While Tim and Ellie were introducing their children, she slipped out of the shelter and headed for the cul-de-sac. She had a key to Ellie's tiny house, given her so she could have absolute privacy or a hiding place if she needed it and today she did.

Once inside with the door locked, the a/c and the lights on, Ana got comfortable before carefully opening the folds of the paper given her by the President. She blinked away tears as she read, noting the date printed at the top:

"Dear Ana,

When Regional Director Timothy Gibbs whispered to me that there was someone else at the ranch, in the shelter with us, who deserved to be honored but had to remain anonymous, my heart started pounding. I hoped I knew who he meant, the mysterious woman who saved more than 40 million of us from certain death. Without revealing any details, he confirmed my unspoken question.

Thank you. You saved us by getting that thumb drive to us, which led to Tim joining the decryption team at the NSA and ultimately led to his successful deciphering of the third file and the evacuation that uprooted and saved us. I know a little of your background, know your life has been very difficult. I hope that the knowledge of the people, the children, you saved, makes the rest of your life easier. Never forget that you not only saved 40 million people, you saved your own family.

I had our overseas operatives quietly look for you. When they reported you'd disappeared and we could be further endangering your life by continuing the search, I ordered them to stand down. When we were processing the papers for Timothy's Presidential Medal of Freedom, I also prepared one for you, using a generic name previously used for an award winner who wished to remain anonymous. I've enclosed a photo of it and pray that someday you'll claim it.

Here in this place, your new home, it's clear to me that you are dearly loved by the clan. My hope and prayer for you is that you have peace in your heart.

With eternal gratitude,

It was signed with the President's full name, her title and # of presidency underneath
Ana later praised Ellie for her tiny house stock of facial tissue. When her friend looked confused, Ana explained, "Tim told the President about me. She wrote me a sweet letter that made me cry." She smiled, "I too earned the Presidential Medal of Freedom although it is currently registered as having been awarded to Kilroy, whoever that is."

Ellie stood in thought, finally remembering something her grandfather, a World War II vet, told her. It seemed wherever American soldiers went, in Europe or the Pacific, they would find a graffiti cartoon, or leave one behind, with a bald guy with a big nose and two hands looking over a wall, with an inscription that said, "Kilroy was here".

Both women found that amusing and Ana particularly liked that Kilroy was an anonymous American. She later learned that several countries had their own version of Kilroy. In Australia, he was named Foo. In the UK, he was Chad or Mr. Chad.

NCIS NCIS NCIS NCIS

The day after the award ceremony, life returned to normal-ish. Honored by the medal and happy his family was with him, Tim was monumentally relieved that it was over with and they could all return to their routines. However, his wife, children, parents and siblings were still processing everything that had happened yesterday. Mid-morning Tony sent him a text saying he was working on a great joke, was it too soon?

With a laugh, Tim replied, "Yes and major bonus points for asking. Try again in about 5 years."

Tony's reply: "5 months, got it!"

Shaking his head, Tim returned to work. His attention was diverted again that afternoon when Lara Vance sent out a new information sheet for the kids' day and after-school care. He looked and then returned to his work. He'd look at the thing on Saturday when he wasn't supposed to be working.

Saturday early afternoon, Ellie was out shopping with Ty and Brynie while the littles were napping. After checking on them, he settled in to read what changes were happening at Lara's center. He read several items before he started thinking about the kids.

School would start in mid-August with Tyler entering the 3rd grade and Brynie the 2nd. While Tim was proud of his children and would love them at any age, he was beginning to wish he could freeze time. Ty and Brynie, his second set of babies after raising Sarah and Rob, were still young. They still called their parents Mommy and Daddy, adored their grandparents and siblings and weren't yet caught up in the enticing spider webs of the outside world. He thought another year might be too late. He thought Time would have to be frozen soon, maybe after the new baby was past the 'scary' stage.

That particular whimsy disappeared with a scream as 22-month-old Lia, who had been asleep three minutes ago, decided to jump from her bed to her favorite beanbag chair and crash-landed instead. Luckily, she hit her target but definitely needed some training on landing. She was more scared than hurt. Uncle Jimmy checked her out at the clinic and found no broken bones, sprains or strains. After her bruises healed, she quickly forgot her disgrace while her parents still spoke of helmets, elbow and knee pads for their fledgling gymnast.

Within a few weeks, Lia's parents, with the help of Lara Vance, found an instructor for Lia, Henry and Mackie who would help them develop their landing skills, among other things, and would tailor their lessons to their age groups. Because Ricky did or tried to do everything Lia did, he joined them. Two and three months shy of their 2nd birthdays, Lia and Henry were taught together while Ricky had another toddler in his group and Mackie joined two other 8-month-old babies.
Tim told Ellie that next time he had the kids for naptime they were going to nap together in the playroom where he would sit and watch them.

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A few days later, they received news about Henry's DNA. One afternoon Ms. Clark called Tim at work, "The DNA test results are here. I can e-mail, mail them or leave them at the front desk for pickup. I have to warn you, it's a large stack of paper. We should be planting trees to replace the ones used for this."

Tim chuckled, "I planted three a couple of months ago, does that count? Ellie or I will come by after work to pick it up. Driver's licenses, agency IDs and badges enough to release it to us?"

"Yes, that's plenty. I've already sent the first round of registered letters to the birth parents."

"How long do you wait until you send the second one?"

"Fourteen days. Enough time for the Postal Service to return it if the addressee is no longer there or to forward it."

"Could be a long wait."

"It could be, yes."

He restrained himself from sighing, "One of us will be there by 5:00."

"That's fine, the receptionist leaves at 5 but the building is open to the public until 6:00. If either of you haven't been by before she leaves, I'll ask her to leave the packet with Security."

"Thanks."

Disconnecting, he sent a text to Ellie. He was in the middle of a case half his staff was working and he didn't want to leave until he cracked the piece he'd taken for himself. He might have a fancy title now but he was still a geek, good at cracking encryptions and solving puzzles. And he didn't want to lose that edge or he'd be useless to his staff and the agency, just another manager who'd lost touch with the work his staff performed. He'd been working on it for a few hours and was slowly making progress but he doubted he'd be done in time to make the 5:00 deadline.

Ellie replied that she could leave before 5:00 if he'd bring the kids home. That worked, if he wasn't through by 5:30 he'd take their babies home and start fresh in the morning.

He was anxious about the results, afraid there would be a relative - aunt, uncle, grandparent, cousin - who'd want to adopt Henry. The bond between the little guy, his foster parents and siblings grew stronger every day.

Channeling his anxiety and the lure of the DNA results, Tim broke through his part of the case and by 5:15, he'd sent his results to his team in Seattle. He smiled at his children as he entered the daycare. This was Henry's first week there and he was doing fine. As they'd noticed, he was used to being around other children.

His three little ones squealed when they saw him. Ty and Brynie gathered their things while their father picked up and kissed each of the littles, gently placing them in the triple stroller and stuffing the pack with their extra clothes and diapers on the rack below. When Ty and Brynie joined them, he kissed them too.
At home, they found Ellie had the air-conditioning on along with the oven. She looked at Tim, "Frozen lasagna ok tonight?"

He smiled, "Did I forget to take the chicken out of the freezer this morning?"

"Both of us forgot!"

"Ah well, not like we've been preoccupied or anything. Ok, we need an onion and a garlic. Want some toasted cheese bread with that?"

Ellie nodded, "You know I do!"

They'd visited the hydroponics garden over the weekend and now with Ty and Brynie's help, he prepared the onion and garlic to add to the lasagna before it was done. Then they prepared the cheese bread but once it was hot, covered and put it in the warming oven to keep from eating all of it before dinner.

While they waited for the lasagna to bake, they played with the kids. Ellie distracted herself for a few minutes by making a salad with mixed greens and slices of fresh veggies from their gardens. The large packet of paper was still on the entryway table when she finished. It looked like it would burst open any second and Tim said they really should plant a tree to replace the one he now believed had been used to print and make copies of Henry's DNA results. They laughed about taking photos of them planting a baby tree and putting them in Henry's memory book.

When they sat down to eat, Ty and Brynie took turns talking about that day's adventures, Lia and Henry told them what they'd done at day-care and Mackie made happy noises and babbled.

Tim usually played with the littles for a few minutes after dinner and even though he was starting to pulsate with impatience, the kids were more important than test results that would be the same later. He played with the littles while Ellie spent time with Ty and Brynie and then they switched, the last few minutes of playtime with all the kids together. The littles were bathed, dried and changed. Stories were read while cuddling and then it was time for the three little ones to sleep. Ty and Brynie had another 30 minutes before their nighttime routine and they chose to play outside in the backyard. Tim poured himself a lemonade and went outside to watch them while Ellie had some time to herself.

They'd both returned to work this week when the child psychologist they'd consulted about Henry recommended that he be introduced to day-care. He'd done so well the first day, he'd returned on Tuesday and today, Wednesday.

As he watched the kids, Tim smiled, happy to see them playing with each other. With Ty and Brynie there was little sibling rivalry and that blessing trickled down to their siblings. When his watch beeped at him, he called Ty and Brynie in. Time for their showers, stories, cuddles and bedtime.

Nearly an hour later, he and Ellie sat down and looking at each other, chuckled. It was 2045 and they finally had time to look at the DNA results!

Once again sitting at their table, they carefully opened the packet but this time didn't dump out the contents. Instead, Ellie used her smaller hands to grab the stack of paper and pull. That didn't work, it was wedged in too tightly and they joked about Ms. Clark having made the envelope to fit around the stack. Suspecting it wouldn't work, next they tried to shake out the contents but they were right and the mass of paper didn't budge. Finally, they carefully cut the envelope away from the paper.

Turning over the cover sheet with Henry's name, they looked at the next page. Parents: mother Tiffany Heather Brinker and father Neil Uther Lorenz with their birth-dates. Nothing new there.
Except the middle names which hadn't been on the birth certificate. Tim pointed out that Neil's middle name, as romantic as it was to include the name of King Arthur's father, made his initials read as NUL or null. As in null and void. From the little Tim already knew about Henry's father, he thought that fitting.

The following page held the mother's information. Tiffany and Henry were again listed and happily, so was Christina. Henry's twin had an "A" indicating she'd been adopted but there was no adoptive mother listed. It was a relief to know she'd been legally adopted. Tiffany's parents were listed above her name, both deceased. There were no other relatives. Tim took a deep breath, now he knew Tiffany wasn't one of his donor children. It had never entered his mind until Ellie raised the question.

The next page was the paternal page and like Ty and Brynie's, it was a busy page with many names and dates. Henry and Christina were again listed, with Neil Lorenz as their father. And now Tim understood the lack of adoptive mother listed on the maternal page as Christina had two adoptive fathers listed - a same sex couple. He thought back to Ty and Brynie's DNA report but he'd already known that Sue and Deeny were married so he hadn't been looking for anything else.

Neil Lorenz's mother was named Angela Mitchell, born in 1960, 40 when she had Neil. Across from her was what Tim mentally referred to as a 'dotted line' relative, his custodial father, Thaddeus Lorenz, born in 1940, making him 60 when Neil was born and 80 now.

Next was the listing Ellie thought might be there, his own name and birthdate. Neil was his donor son, making Henry and Christina his grandchildren. Tim sat back in shock. He'd thought Ellie's idea was just a whim, now here it was staring him in the face.

"Your hands are freezing, Tim! I'm going to make you some hot tea."

He nodded, still dealing with the shock. Then his logic kicked in. It wasn't so surprising, he'd been 21 when he made the donation and he was 42 now. He knew his sperm had been purchased; Ty and Brynie were proof of that. But he hadn't thought about any other donor children besides them, certainly not older ones. And this guy, NUL, er Neil, was 20 now.

When Ellie brought him the tea, with sugar in it, he drank it and then sat back. The two of them talked for several minutes, finally deciding that Tim having grandchildren wasn't that surprising. The important thing was the family he was raising with Ellie. That got him back on track.

Eventually they noticed that Neil's mother and his custodial father had sisters, both now in their mid-70s.

Tim chuckled at the pages after that as they detailed all the people with whom Henry shared paternal DNA: Jethro, Shannon, Mac, Kelly as well as Tim's children. They both laughed when they saw the list of Gibbs' children and grandchildren. All the Gibbs siblings but Tim and Kelly had an 'a' listed by their name and Tony's father was listed.

When Tim looked again, he sat back in surprise. Next to Rob's name was Ellen Brill, listed as his mother and there was no date of death. Her parents were also listed and to Tim's greater astonishment, there were listings for Rob's paternal side, a Tara Owens Cole and then something strange, a listing with no name although there was a birthdate of July 8th, 1963, with nothing else. The woman, Tara was Rob's aunt, but who was the guy with no name? Strange but then not
everyone wanted their name in a system. DNA was fine, as long as the name wasn't listed.

Ty, Brynie, Lia and Mackie were listed under Tim and Ellie, with an "a" next to Lia to indicate adoption and after Sue and Deeny's listings, a dotted line from Ty and Brynie to Eleanor's name with a note that Eleanor was their adopted mother. Ellie beamed at that, happy to know she'd always appear as their mother.

The next pages detailed the rest of Tim's donor children. No names were given, just the gender and birthdate. There was a trio of siblings, a girl aged 11 and twin boys aged 9, and the rest were separate: 3 girls and 2 boys between the ages of 5 and 11, 4 boys aged 12-14, 5 girls aged 12-15 and 2 boys aged 17, 1 girl aged 18.

Tim was a little overwhelmed and yet relieved there weren't more. And he might have felt a little smug at having fathered 25 children, including Ty, Brynie, Mackie and their unborn child. He thought he'd hidden his reaction but his wife knew him too well and laughed.

The next pages displayed the Baxters, the Mallards, Sarah and the twins, the Hubbards, with an "a" for adopted next to Hannah's name. Tim loved that Ducky was listed, that was cool! As Maisie's second husband, he appeared, with a dotted line, below Grandpa Andrew's name.

Cousin Richard Baxter had his own long line, 4 children, 12 grandchildren and 35 great-grandchildren along with his great-nieces and nephews and their children.

Other lines of relatives appeared with names Tim didn't recognize. He remembered that Grammie's mother Iona and her sister Charlotte had brothers and he thought these might be their descendants. Especially as some of their names seemed more 'old country'. Tim didn't think he'd ever met or heard of an American Elspeth, Ailis, Struan, Torquil or Aodh in his life. Of course, he also hadn't met every single person in the U.S; he'd look online later.

The surnames were recognizable but he knew there were millions of descendants of Scottish immigrants in the U.S. There were several Stirlings, a few Achesons, Forneys, Duncans, McKinleys and Clachers among others. When he caught the name Gibbs, he remembered the conversation he, Ellie, Dad and Grandpa had before their wedding about Gibbs being both Scots and English.

Wouldn't that be something if there was a secondary connection between the Gibbeses and the Stirlings! If he ever again had spare time, he'd resume the genealogical work he started in the years between marrying Ellie and Lia arriving in the family. He hadn't gone far enough back to find the first Gibbs in America.

The list ran on for many pages. By the time Tim reached the sixth page of the people he assumed were Charlotte and Iona's family, his eyes were glazing over; Ellie had her arms crossed on the table, her head pillowed on them, sound asleep.

Now that they knew for sure, the plan was to begin adoption proceedings in the morning. Belatedly remembering the online forms they'd used for Lia's adoption, Tim pulled up a set and completed it, noting his status as Henry's biological grandfather. When Ellie woke, she reviewed it and they attached their electronic signatures before sending the formal adoption request to the local CPS office.

They had an e-mail from Ms. Clark in the morning, "You two certainly didn't waste any time!"

When he had some time, Tim went looking for his dad, finding him in his workshop looking at plans to make Henry something. "Dad, have a minute?"
"Sure, Timson. How are you doing?"

"Mm, pretty good. Got Henry's DNA results."

One eyebrow rose. "You have a copy?" He knew Tim and Ellie wouldn't have been allowed a copy unless one of them was on the DNA chart.

Tim nodded and his father grinned, "So our boy is a Gibbs!"

"He is but not my son."

"Huh?"

"Dad…ok, it's weird and I'm still getting used to the idea. Henry's my grandson and his scumbag father, the one who abandoned him, is one of my donor offspring. That also means Henry is your great-grandson. Yours and Mom's. And he is Grandpa's two times great-grandson."

His father stared at him, his eyes wide. Tim held back a smile; he didn't remember ever having stumped his father – or Boss – like this.

"Great-grandson…wow! That's…I don't know what. We're not old enough. But obviously we are." He looked at his son, frowning.

Tim shook his head, anticipating the question. "We'll raise him as our son and your grandson. At some point we'll tell him but not until he's old enough to understand."

Dad nodded. "That's good, especially with his place in the family. I imagine it would be confusing to be the nephew of your brothers and sisters." He shook himself a little. "Need some time for this to sink in. How are you really doing?"

"I'm getting there. The DNA chart has all the donor offspring so now I know. You have 25 Timothy-sired grandchildren, including the ones you know and love. Neil Lorenz, Henry's birth father, is the eldest at 20."

When his father tucked his lips in, Tim knew he was trying hide a reaction. "It's okay Dad; I figured I could be smug with you though, right? I tried to hide it from Ellie and she called me out on it."

Jethro let out a bark of a laugh and then pounded his son on the back. "Twenty-five kids? Wow! Wait until I tell your grandfather!" He paused and Tim nodded, "Yeah, I wish Grandpa Jack was here too."

His dad grabbed him in a bear hug. "I'm so proud of you, Timiny! Not for fathering so many children, that didn't take much effort. Although that was a smart thing to do when you thought you'd be sterile. And I'm grateful you made the donation, we would never have known Ty, Brynie or Henry. And you and I might never have discovered our connection. Huh, don't like that."

Tim smiled, "Me neither. We might have if either of us ever needed a transfusion, or Sarah and I decided to run our DNA."

Dad huffed, "Or any of the Hubbards or Cranes deciphered the Gemcity anagram. That at least might have moved things along."

They hugged again and Dad said, "I'm proud of the way you handle things, son. Your life has been difficult but you don't let it affect how you live from day to day."
Tim buried his face in his dad's shoulder. "I'm not alone, Dad. Truth is, the only time I've really been alone and unloved was in that medical transport between the maternity clinic and Bethesda. After that, I had Lily and Dan, then Patrick, Sarah and even if I don't remember, Grammie, Penny, Uncle Jim, the Cranes and my grandfathers. Later, I had the siblings, the guys, Lu, Nate and Juanita. And then you and the others."

He was still holding on when his phone beeped at him. Frowning, he pulled back and Jethro watched as Tim's eyes widened. "Dad, according to Abby's friend, remember the guy from NASA?" His father nodded and Tim continued, "He says the atmosphere over Virginia is finally clear enough today to see details. Do you want to get Mom and look for the house?"

Jethro started to shake his head and then thought of the information he'd written on the basement wall. He would like to know if that survived. He nodded instead, "Yeah, should we go to the big house or your place?"

"Let's go to our place and then Ellie, Ty and Brynie can see too."

"What if there's nothing left, just rubble?"

"Then they'll know. They're old enough to see, Dad. They already know our homes were blown up."

After sending Shannon a text, they started walking and laughed when she came up behind them in their second ATV. This one was a four-seater with room for cargo at the very back.

Having also received a text, Ellie had Tim's laptop booted up and linked to their TV screen where any images would be easier to see. Hearing the ATV, the two older kids came in from the backyard. The group gathered around the TV while Tim input the coordinates of the house and they waited, Jethro and Shannon holding hands.

What they saw caused the adults to cheer and the kids to frown in sorrow. Ty and Brynie hoped the house had survived, like Grandpa's beach house. The adults knew better than to hope for that so close to the actual strike zone but they were thrilled to find the basement survived. The main level and 2nd floor of the house were gone and there were piles of rubble everywhere. The basement stood open to the elements but it stood. It was a mess. There was no sign of the stairs and chunks of concrete were gone from the walls. There were piles of debris covering the floor. They saw part of a sink they knew wasn't theirs and a lot of rubble.

Once they had their bearings, Tim zoomed in on the wall where Dad had written the family names and dates. Then they all cheered as everything was still there. Tim took photos and sent them to the rest of the family, using the address of the house as the subject of the e-mail.

There was only one other discernable feature in the rest of the neighborhood. A cinder block wall their neighbor Reg Walsh's wife had always hated was the only other feature that hadn't been blown up. Nothing else could be distinguished, just a mass of rubble and debris. The kids were disappointed their house was gone and pointed to where they thought it should be. Tim spotted what he thought might be a piece of brightly painted drywall from the basement playroom, an area of the wall the kids had painted, drawn or colored on, but he didn't say anything.

Encouraged by his wife and father, Tim entered the coordinates for the Navy Yard and they sat back in grief. The Yard, nearly at the center of the strike zone, was gone; it looked like a moonscape complete with craters. Then Tyler, with his young, sharp eyes, spotted a tiny bit of debris. Changing places with his father, Ty worked the keyboard to zoom in on it and then sat proudly as his parents and grandparents laughed. Nearly covered by the debris Ty spotted was a jagged, still standing, piece
of an orange wall. Later Jimmy and Ducky would look and they eventually found the concrete wall where they too had written names and dates.

NCIS NCIS NCIS NCIS

Busy as always with their family and work, neither Tim nor Ellie spared a thought for what might be happening with Neil and Tiffany's registered letters. Tim was amazed to receive a call from Ms. Clark one day, apparently those two weeks had whizzed by without notice. Ellie was on her way to his office with their lunches, they were going to eat on the rooftop deck, spend some time together. Instead, they put the call on speaker.

"We have an unusual situation with Henry's adoption. We've had word from each of his parents, Tiffany and Neil, that they're refusing custody. And there's been no word from Neil's mother or custodial father. You two are the ones qualified who have applied for adoption and I'm pleased to say your application has been accepted, pending the inspections and interviews. It'll take time, we'll inspect your new home and your childcare plans. Also, I noticed both of you have changed positions in the agency and we'll need to discuss those; interview your supervisors."

Tim chuckled and when she asked what was funny he replied, "I report to the Secretary of the Navy."

"Oh! Nevertheless, we'll still have to do the interview." She paused, "There is one thing. This won't be an obstacle to your adoption but you should know that Neil's aunts asked if they could adopt Henry together."

Ellie smiled, "That makes me feel a little better about the Lorenz family. We'll think about keeping in touch with them."

"Wonderful! That's not something we'd handle but I'm glad you'll at least consider it!"

"Will you let them know about us or how would that work?"

"I'll send a reply telling them that someone else has applied to adopt Henry and their - your - request has been approved pending the outcome of our review process."

"Will you tell them about us, about our family?"

"Not allowed to do that, privacy laws. However, if you decide you'd like to keep in touch with them, let me know and I'll send them a request to share their contact information."

"Did they receive a copy…never mind, Neil has a copy of the DNA results, he can share."

Ms. Clark smiled, "I know I teased about planting trees, but you're the only ones that got the full report. Tiffany and Neil only received the pages with their information. That does mean Neil has your names but nothing beyond that first paternal page. However, if either of them asks I will have to provide the whole report to them."

After setting an appointment for CPS to inspect their home, they disconnected. Tim and Ellie sent e-mails to their respective superiors to let them know they were in the process of adopting and to expect a call from someone with Child Protection Services. They still had twenty minutes of their lunch break and followed their original plan to eat in the rooftop garden. They sat in the shade while they ate, talking about their family.

Tim was a little concerned and confused that Ellie didn't seem to mind that he was Henry's grandfather. When asked, Ellie nodded with a smile. "He's yours but he had no relationship with his..."
birth parents other than the fact that someone must have fed and clothed him during his first 3 months. Maybe that was Neil's aunts. And while the nuns at the orphanage loved and cared for him, they weren't his mothers, not in my head. So I'm his first mother, the first one he called Mama."

Tim was glad to hear that she felt she was Henry's first mama, he knew that meant a lot to her. They both loved the child and that was enough.

NCIS NCIS NCIS NCIS

Jethro later thought this was one of his favorite summers. They were free, he and his beloved had a wonderful week in the mountains with a big part of their family, his children were happy, his grandchildren brought him more joy than he thought possible, everyone was healthy and just about everyone he loved and cared about was nearby.

When Ziva, now Ana, suddenly and literally landed back in their lives, he mentally added another check mark to those he loved being close. It was a great relief to give up the undercurrent of worry about his stray lamb.

His children amused and touched him as they started folding Ana into the clan. Not surprisingly, Tim and Ellie were first, actually – Jethro corrected himself, Breena was the first, having had the advantage of knowing her years ago and being on the tarmac as the Bacia passengers emerged. She'd made sure she was welcome, that she understood the basics of the family. While he'd hugged and cried, their practical Breena helped provide balance.

Sarah greeted her with warmth as did the others but Ana seemed to feel the most comfortable with Tim and Ellie. He guessed that made sense, Tim was her teammate and friend, there was never anything else between them. He'd also been the first one to welcome her when she originally joined the team and she probably hadn't forgotten that. He was very happy when Ana was invited to lunch with them.

He was just as happy and maybe the tiniest bit relieved when the DiNozzos invited her to brunch. That was easier with the kids although he and Shannon would have been happy to watch them. Then he shook his head, no, it was better to have the kids with them. For one thing, Ziv…Ana would see how much Tony had grown and for another if there was any awkwardness, they had the kids to fall back on. Then he laughed aloud, why should he be concerned when Maggie would be there? Like Breena, she was a very practical woman. She knew Tony loved her with all his heart and he knew she loved him with all of hers.

They all should have known better. The afternoon before the brunch, the MCRT was called out to a double homicide, 2 dead Marines in Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada. Although that was Seattle's jurisdiction, their teams were swamped chasing down a trio of serial killers targeting U.S. Navy personnel.

Within two hours, Tony's team was on their way, catching a commercial flight to Vancouver. Jimmy went home for a break and was back in the office in time to examine the bodies at the crime scene. There were a few jurisdictional issues; a detective team from the Vancouver P.D. was on the scene, along with their coroner, Dr. Betty Rogers. As it happened, she was an old friend of Ducky's and had met Dr. Palmer a few times. She took on the role as Jimmy's eyes and ears at the crime scene and during the autopsy. Her acceptance of an NCIS medical examiner helped resolve the jurisdictional issues and the two law enforcement teams worked the case together.

In the meantime, Maggie told Ana there was no reason not to stick with their plans and Ana thought it might actually be easier without Tony there. Maggie would drive them into town. When she picked Ana up, she was by herself, surprising the other woman.
Maggie smiled, "Thought we could have a grown-up brunch. My dad's watching the baby with Liz, Maisie and Penny hovering nearby and Arin is at the Gibbses, playing with the littles. He's a few months older than Lia and Henry, nearly 10 months older than Ricky Palmer but he doesn't seem to care and he's around kids his own age at pre-school all week. Tim and Ellie want Henry to get to know all the kids."

"They're watching 7 young children and their older ones?"

Maggie laughed, "No, no. Breena and the rest of her kids are there too, they're in the play area in the middle of the cul-de-sac. Ainsley…sorry, I'm throwing names at you! Sarah's teenage cousins Ainsley and Cal are watching the four older kids and their younger sister who is Ty and Victoria's age; they're riding bikes around the cul-de-sac. The three families moved in about six weeks ago but this is the first time they've really been able to spend any time in their new neighborhood." She smiled at Ana, "I can't wait for our new house to be ready! To be settled permanently!"

Ana smiled, "I know the feeling! Have I met your father? Let me see, I met Grandpa, he is Tim and Kelly's grandfather, yes?"

"Yes, although we all call him Grandpa."

"Of course, Breena told me about that. Oh, I did meet your father; he is Colonel Barnes, a retired Marine!"

Maggie beamed, "I don't know how you remembered that with all of us! I get confused and I've been part of the family for four years!"

Ana laughed, "But I have the advantage of knowing everyone who used to work with us at NCIS, so I have a good base to start from. Gibbs - that is Jethro and then Tony, Tim, Ducky, Jimmy, Abby and Leon. I met Breena; we all met her when she and Jimmy started dating. They were married the year before I left. We met Sarah on a case and she and I were friends, although I had no idea there were two additional siblings. I met Rob and Geordie when I arrived." Ana continued, "We learned about the deaths of Shannon and Kelly years ago when Gibbs was injured in an explosion. And Mike Franks, of course."

She sighed and Maggie remembered the boys giggling at the idea of Franks as an angel. Telling Ana the story, she was rewarded with astounded laughter. "Oh yes, that's funny! He'd likely set his angel wings and cloud on fire with his cigar." She paused, "We were shattered when we lost him, when he died. We were terrified we'd lose Gibbs too, that he'd walk off the job. But Mike's killer took Jimmy as one of his hostages and that was the end of that worry."

"Did you know Kate?"

"I met her, I didn't know her."

"Oh. Tony said something odd when we were talking about the angels and I haven't asked him or Tim about it. He said that Kate would be in charge of the angels, calling them all morons."

Ana tilted her head back and forth. "I believe Kate had a difficult time working with the men. This is what I know from Abby and…other sources. She and Tony fought constantly. He teased and she bit back, hard. And neither was kind to Mc…Tim. I wasn't either. Tony bullied him and I went right along with him."

Maggie nodded, "Tony's told me. At some point, he remembered he'd been bullied and that changed things. He and Tim have worked hard on their relationship and became best friends. Did you know
Tony finally let Gibbs adopt him?"

Ana nodded, "Yes, that was another surprise, although not as big a shock as the news that Tim is Gibbs' son!"

Maggie chuckled, "I missed all that. When I transferred aboard the Navy Yard, Jethro, Tim, Ty and Brynie were here in Albuquerque."

Ana smiled, "In WITSEC, yes Tim told me the story the day I had lunch with them. Tyler didn't realize he shouldn't talk about the bad lady with the mean eyes."

"That's right, Ellie told me. They were relieved it was you Ty spoke to. That's a lesson for all of us, kids remember things longer than we think they will and understand more than we believe they do. Tyler heard about the case the day they arrested Stacevyko. He was 3 ½ and laying down in a playroom they have set up at the Marshals' office. One of the marshals came in and told the marshal who was watching the kids all about Stacevyko and how much she'd hurt Tim. He thought Ty was asleep but he wasn't and the poor kid was terrified until he saw Tim and Jethro. The night Tony's team stayed over at the Gibbses, here, Tyler had a bad nightmare and Tim ended up sleeping with him."

"Oops! Tim told me a little about Stacevyko but not much."

"She was an accessory in his kidnapping as a newborn; she later murdered his adoptive father, McGee and his little brother before abandoning Tim and Sarah. While they were staying in a homeless shelter she found out they were still alive and paid someone to kill them. She told Ana the story, which made Ziva's heart hurt even more for her friend."

There was silence when Maggie finished and then Ana said, "I've wondered since I left – you know how you look back and see things differently?" Maggie nodded and Ana continued, "I've always wondered if Timothy McGee is not the strongest of all of us."

Maggie smiled, "He would have had to be! Now, here we are. I haven't been here before but I'm told they make wonderful mimosas. And I'm sure the food's good too."

They laughed together as they walked into the restaurant. Over their mimosas and delicious brunch, they stuck to personal topics, things that wouldn't matter if they were overheard. They spent the meal laughing a great deal; swapping stories of their early years and of course, whichever of their NCIS cases that were not classified.

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After Ana and Maggie left, Jethro and Shannon decided to visit Tim and his family. They knew they planned to let the kids play in the cul-de-sac and playground for the first time today but they didn't know how the kids had been organized or what they were doing.

Driving the ATV over, they stopped as soon as they saw the five older kids in the street. Ty, Hannah and Teddy were riding their bikes while Brynie and Victoria were roller-skating. Ainsley and Callum spotted them, blowing whistles to pull the kids off the street. Jethro was impressed, that was a great idea.

They moved forward slowly, parking in Tim's driveway. Surprised to see Sarah's car, they realized that made sense as Bob was in Canada with Tony. Now they could see several toddlers in the play area with Tim, Ellie, Sarah, Breena, Ducky and Jim. And then they saw the double stroller with their twin grandbabies. Jethro smiled, he loved seeing them all play together like this – both his
grandbabies and his kids. Geordie and Bec were missing from the group; they were in Taos for the weekend, taking little Alex with them. The 'townies' were likely working or planning their wedding.

When they asked, Jim and Ducky laughed, saying that Penny, Claire, Maisie and Liz were 'helping' Richard with little Juliet, meaning they were on the DiNozzos' front porch playing cards and drinking iced tea while the baby slept. When she was awake, they'd move inside to feed and play with her.

Jethro stayed with Tim helping push toddlers and little Mackie in the baby swings and taking them down slides. It brought back many memories of the two of them playing with Ty and Brynie when they were little.

Tim looked at him, "This time I'm reading your mind. Been thinking about that too, how quickly Ty and Brynie grew up. Once they hit kindergarten, seems like everything goes into super drive."

Dad ruffled his hair, "If your mom and I'd raised you, I'd be thinking the same thing about you."

Tim chuckled, "Sounds strange because we were all adults but having Ana here makes me feel like the Probie again. And I didn't think I was all that young!" He snorted, "Of course, I thought you and Tony were old."

His father started to raise his hand, grinning and then paused to think before agreeing, "Yeah, I think I know what you're saying. You don't feel old now, at least I don't, and you, Tony and I have grown together to the ages we are now. Now our girl is back and we're reminded we're not as young as we were that first day we found her sitting at Kate's desk."

Tim pointed out that Ana was in the same boat. Jethro shook his head, "No, son, not really. Yes, 7 years have passed, although it seems longer than that. That's because the three of us have had several life changing experiences in those years. Some of them we've shared between us, not just from work, as was the case when she was on the team, but life experiences. As I said, life-changing, wonderful things for each of us, and the three of us together. Tony was with us when you brought Ty and Brynie home. We saw the change in him as he fell in love with the kids. That changed him, Tim. And the two of us being taken by the marshals changed him too. He'd always been second in command and he stepped up, personally as well as professionally. As for Ana, we don't know what she's done with her life, we'll probably never know."

Tim nodded, "That about sums it up. She wants to stay, find work and live on the ranch with us."

"Yeah. Sounds good."

"Dad?" His father's tone of voice was less than convincing.

"Timothy, we've gone through this with her before. She thinks she wants to be with family and we're her family. Then either something will happen or she'll get restless and start reverting to her Mossad ways. If we're lucky, at that point she'll leave before there's real trouble."

Tim exhaled a big rush of air, "So it's okay to feel that way? Because I do and Ellie and Maggie do too. Besides what Tony and I have told them, both of them have heard things around the office over the years. We need to tell her, Dad, make sure she understands that our children come first. We can't bail her out of Somalia or play hide and seek chasing down someone for her. Our priorities have changed. Sad to say, I worry about her living here. I hope the identity change will help but she is or was a magnet for trouble. On the other hand, I love her like a sister and we're here, standing, breathing and alive because of her. Everyone who survived is alive due to her, all 40 million of us. And that has to be worth something, a big huge something."
His father nodded, "I know Ducky also has concerns. I'll talk with him; hope we can come up with some way to tell her without pushing her away."

Tim nodded and they turned the conversation to happier topics. When Dad's phone rang, he frowned, "That's Maggie…" He answered, "Hi, Maggie how was your brunch?"

"Great, we had a wonderful time. And I had an idea. Are you still looking for someone to do some kick-ass physical training at FLETC?"

"Yes, I am. Want to combine MMA with the style of fighting the Corps teaches and with street brawling."

"Ana can do all that."

Dad thought about it, "You're right, she'd be great; maybe she could do all the FLETCs, not just New Mexico and Georgia. Did you mention it to her?"

"No, thought I'd better check with you first. Is the position posted or is it unofficial?"

"Up to me to post it," He chuckled, "She'd report to me. I'll get it written up, have it approved and then we can let her know. Thanks, Captain, this is a great idea!"

Disconnecting, he told Tim Maggie's idea and smiled at his son's grin. "That would be perfect for her, Dad, and she can stay here in between FLETC sessions. So she'd have a home to come back to."

Jethro stood in thought, "Before the threat and attack, we'd planned to roll out the enhanced training to 2 more locations. If we go ahead with that, it'll be 6 FLETC locations, 36 weeks. That's not so bad. I'm only handling New Mexico but Leon wants me to manage the other trainers. She'd report directly to me for New Mexico but to the other trainers at the other locations."

"A steady paycheck."

"Yes, as long as she stays out of trouble."

Tim nodded and then smiled as his father took his cell phone from his pocket and stared at it for a half minute. Then shrugging, he hit a button; Tim thought he was probably calling Leon to run it by him. He was smiling when he disconnected. "He raised the same concerns we did and thinks FLETC is a great opportunity for her. He's waiting for approval on the budget for the two additional locations but doesn't anticipate any problems. He says she'll have to apply to Homeland and take her chances like everyone else."

"Will they be told her previous identity?"

"The change was her decision, not mandated by anyone, so it's up to her." Dad snorted, "If they figure it out, they may hire her. She'd do good work for them. And maybe without Eli breathing down her neck, the problems won't crop up."

Tim shook his head, "Leon won't hire her."

"No, this will be Homeland for FLETC or whatever else they have in mind."

"Homeland pays you?"

His father shook his head, "No, they pay NCIS and NCIS pays me. My request."
"Good!"

Eventually, Maggie with baby Juliet, Ana and the others wandered over to the cul-de-sac, sitting in the shade of a huge oak tree that anchored the center. When Jethro casually mentioned the additional training at FLETC, Ana was interested and asked several questions. Finally, her former boss asked her to think about applying to work with him and the other trainers. After explaining how it worked, she nodded, clearly deep in thought.

Ana applied for the job and underwent intense scrutiny by Homeland. In the meantime, she settled into her room at the house, the Palmers’ old room. Within days of her arrival, she was shopping for cowgirl boots and Ty, Brynie, Teddy and Victoria began teaching her how to line dance. She was in the shelter late one afternoon, practicing her dancing with the kids when Bill came in. While he was still working for Steve, they had a job up in Santa Fe and he was staying up there during the week. He’d briefly met Ana but hadn’t spent any time with her.

When he walked in and saw the 'new girl' dancing with the kids, he leaned against the wall, watching her. Victoria spotted him and called out, "Mr. Bill, come dance with us. We’re not tall enough to dance properly with Ana."

He had his work boots on, but they’d do for now. Walking forward, he tipped his hat to her, grinning, "Hello, I'm Bill Colter. I know we've met a couple of times but there are a lot of people around here."

She smiled as she took his hand, "You're right about that! I'm Ana Campo and I'd love to dance!"

Smiling, the kids restarted the music and then stood back and watched as Ana followed Bill's lead. When Tim and Jimmy came in to get the kids for dinner, they found them still watching as Bill and Ana danced. They interrupted long enough to invite them for dinner but Bill shook his head, "Thanks anyway but Ana and I are headed into town to dance to live music."

Ana smiled, nodding her thanks to her brothers, who managed to walk outside with the kids before they looked at each other, eyes wide. When Ty, Brynie and at the Palmers, Victoria and Teddy reported that they'd taught Ana how to line dance and Mr. Bill was taking her out to dance to live music, their mothers stared at them and then at their husbands who were both grinning and proclaiming their innocence.

Several days later Abby arrived for a week's vacation. She again stayed in Kelly's room and quickly caught up with all the news and happenings since her last visit. She toured the latest new homes, the Chalmers', DiNozzos' and Cranes' and loved the additions to the center circle.

The new pool and the surrounding 12-foot fence were complete and she thoroughly enjoyed swimming every day. Surprising even herself, she had a great time playing mermaid, doing handstands and walking underwater with the kids. Ana was just learning and they all had fun teaching her. Lia, Henry and Mackie were too little but had plenty of fun playing with each other and their adults in the toddler pool. When Uncle Tobias stepped into that pool to cool his feet, he was teased by Ty and Brynie who still remembered his frozen feet on their first trip to Ruidoso. Jethro played with his grandkids and Abby remarked to Ana that he hadn't stopped smiling since she'd arrived. Jethro heard them and nodded to himself. She was right; he hadn't stopped smiling.

Saturday afternoon, they dried off and gathered under the canopies for a barbecue, one with the extended family, to welcome Ana and Abby. As they sat at the elongated table, Tobias caught Jethro's eye and smiled, he understood. So did Ducky and Mac. And certainly, Tim, who like his father, hadn't stopped smiling in days. Their interviews and inspections for Henry's adoption had gone well and now it was just a matter of time before Henry would legally become Henry Baxter.
Gibbs. In the weeks he'd been with his new family, Henry had grown half an inch, gained a little weight, filled out a bit and Poppy thought he was beginning to look like Jackson while Henry's daddy thought he looked like Poppy.

Now Jethro nodded to Tim; it was his turn to say grace. Smiling, Tim took Ty and Ellie's hands, looking around the table, at Tony, Sarah, Kelly, Rob, Geo, his beloved wife, their children, his mother, grandfather, grandmothers, godparents, aunt, uncle, cousins, nieces, nephews, in-laws, Ducky, Jimmy, Breena, Ana, Abby and friends. Lastly, he turned to his father, his heart as full as Jethro's. Together, all of them were together. There wasn't anything better.

The End

Chapter End Notes

1) The show "Motive" which aired in Canada and the U.S. (when I could find it) was set in Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada and the actress who played the coroner, Dr. Betty Rogers, was none other than Lauren Holly, aka Jenny Shepard. I got a kick out of her playing a coroner and always wondered if she'd discussed their mutual roles with David McCallum, aka Ducky. I don't know if they're still making new episodes but it ran for a few years. Alix33 pointed out that Sasha Alexander (NCIS's Kate Todd) also played a medical examiner, on "Rizzoli and Isles", which ran for several years. It's fun to think of the three actors consulting each other about their fictional mutual occupations!

2) Stay tuned for more stories although not in this universe. Up next will be a couple of stories I've mentioned to a few people, in the At What Price universe...where Tim's AU early life started. Posting will likely start in the next week or two.

For those of you in the Northern Hemisphere, enjoy the rest of summer. For those in the Southern Hemisphere, winter won't last forever!

End Notes

Before I forget (again), the 'NoAgua' lotion with which the shelter folks bathed is a real product although I changed the name. The real product is called DryBath® and was developed by a teenager in South Africa. He's now grown and has a company called Headboy Industries Inc., which markets his DryBath® products. For the millions who live without running water, this must be a godsend.

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