Echoes of Goodbye

by Emerald1

Summary

When tragedy strikes and an agent is unable to turn to his team, he turns to the one other person he trusts to help him.

The missing chapter 3 has been restored.
Chapter 1

Echoes of Goodbye

After kissing her goodnight, Tobias Fornell quietly closed the door to his daughter's bedroom and walked back out to the living room. A sudden and heavy fall downpour made the air heavy and oppressive as he walked through the house checking the doors and windows. A small car parked in front caught his attention; the driver slumped over the steering wheel. Just as Fornell was about to go out and check, the driver straightened. He watched, hand on his weapon, as the driver exited the car and came up his front walkway. Once the driver was close enough for the porch light to illuminate his face, Fornell threw open the door.

"Agent McGee, what are you doing here?"

The young agent looked like he was carrying the weight of the world on his shoulders. "I'm sorry, Agent Fornell, I didn't know where else to go."

Fornell studied the dripping, shivering man standing in his foyer at nine thirty at night on a Tuesday. He couldn't imagine anything that would drive one of Gibbs' people to his doorstep instead of Gibbs' but he couldn't turn the man away. If nothing else, there was the curiosity factor, not to mention that he knew Gibbs would not turn away one of his people if the situation were reversed. "Looks like you need a hot shower first, and then we'll talk, alright?" An exhausted nod was the only response as McGee followed him through the house, leaving his backpack in the tiled entryway.

The dryer was just finishing and Fornell detoured long enough to pull out a warm towel and a set of sweats. McGee was taller and broader in the shoulders, but they would do in a pinch. While the younger man warmed up in the shower, Fornell started a pot of coffee, suspicious that it would be a rather long night. He debated calling Gibbs, but decided that if McGee had wanted to talk to him, he wouldn't be here right now.

"Thanks, Agent Fornell." McGee walked into the kitchen wearing the sweats, the towel draped around his neck. Seeing him dressed like that and barefoot made Fornell realize how young the other man was.

"No problem, kid. Why don't you toss your clothes in the washer then grab a cup of coffee." Not one for going out of his way when someone dropped by, Fornell unexpectedly found himself cutting two slices out of the pie he had bought the day before. Once the two of them were at the table, he decided to help the other man ease into the conversation.

"Last week," he cleared his throat and tried again. "Last week, somebody murdered my father."
"Ah crap, kid." He reached out and grasped McGee's arm as the younger man fought to keep his emotions under control. Of all the problems that would drive one of the NCIS agents to his home, this one had never crossed his mind. "Are the locals handling the investigation?"

McGee's knee was bouncing. "No, they've determined that it was natural causes."

"What makes you think otherwise?" Fornell was careful in his questioning. He did not want to insult a fellow investigator, but at the same time he understood how difficult it was to accept the death of a parent and how easy it was to insist someone was at fault.

"He was sick and in a lot of pain, but years away from the terminal stage. I… I took samples before the funeral home prepared his body and had a lab I trust run the tests for me."

The image in his mind was heartbreaking. This overgrown kid, the rookie among a group of hardcore agents, methodically taking evidence samples from the dead body of his own father, alone and unable to reach out for someone to help him at such a terrible time. "What did they find?"

McGee walked back to the entry and retrieved his backpack, pulling out a stack of papers. He looked at them without unfolding them and then returned to the table and handed them to Fornell. As an FBI agent he had seen many reports like this one and skimmed down the list of drugs found in the samples. At the top of the list was morphine. Fornell didn't know how big of a man the senior McGee had been but it didn't really matter, that level of morphine would be fatal to an elephant.

"A mercy killing?" As much as he hated the term, it fit. This wouldn't be the first time someone took it upon themselves to end a patient's suffering. McGee shook his head.

"Keep reading."

Fornell flipped through the pages, his confidence in reading them faltering the further he got down the list of results. Some of the drugs on the list only showed up in hair samples, while others in the victim's liver. He pointed out the only one he recognized besides the morphine. "That one is familiar, but I don't know what it's for." McGee didn't seem surprised by his comment.

"It's a masking agent. It took a lot of work to get the other results. That's why I didn't get them until today." He waited for Fornell to connect the dots.

"They tried to cover up what drugs were in your father's body at the time of his death? Why? What are the rest of these drugs for? I've never heard of any of them." He watched as one tear was angrily brushed away.

"That's because they're still in research. They're not available to the medical community yet." A second tear was just as quickly wiped away. "My father was trapped in his own body, unable to move, to speak, to ask for help and they used him for illegal research and when they thought I was going to find out, they killed him. They killed my dad and I don't think he's the only one."

"McGee? Tim?" Fornell leaned across the table and rested his hand on the bowed head. "Tim, we're going to figure this all out. Now I want you to start at the beginning and tell me everything that's happened, all right?"
Fornell refilled their coffees, this time adding a healthy shot of bourbon to each one, before they moved out to the living room. He steered McGee to the sofa, tossing him a blanket that was draped across the back. "Start back when you first got word about your dad; tell me exactly what happened." Tim wrapped the blanket around himself and nodded, thinking back to that day the previous week in the squad room.

~flashback~

"McGee, have you found the connection yet? DiNozzo, where are the police reports I asked for? David, get down to Ducky and get him moving. There has to be something we've missed." Gibbs was angry and had been yelling at his team for over an hour. He slammed his hands down on the desk surface before storming up the stairs to the director's office to demand more access to the civilian investigation he suspected was tied into their own. DiNozzo was on the phone, trying to get the reports to magically appear while McGee was running three different programs in an attempt to find how the suspect was tracking and kidnapping the young girls. His cell phone rang and he almost missed it, so intent on the screen in front of him.

"Yeah, Agent McGee." It didn't register at first who was on the other end of the phone call as one of his searches came back with a positive result.

~Timmy?~

"Mom, what it is, what's wrong?"

~Oh sweetheart, it's your dad, he... he's gone.~

He grabbed the edge of his desk to keep from falling. "What do you mean, gone?" In the background he could hear the sounds of the nursing home his father had been confined to for the last two years.

~It was very sudden. The doctor said that his heart just gave out. How soon can you come home?~

He wasn't quite sure how to answer her, so he asked a question of his own. "Have you told Sarah yet?" He heard his mother stifle a sob before she responded.

~No, she's still so young. I didn't want her to hear this over the phone.~

Tim hung his head. He could hear Gibbs coming back down the stairs, still yelling. "I'll take care of it, Mom, and get her on a flight home. I'll be there as soon as I can, but we're literally in the middle of chasing a child rapist. You know Dad would want me to catch this guy, but I'll be there, I promise." He closed his phone just as Gibbs came around the corner.

"Tell me somebody has something we can use."

Taking a deep breath, McGee stood up and reported his findings. It was enough to give them a direction and a timeline for the next attack.

"Good," Gibbs checked the time; the team had been working nineteen hours straight without a break. "Everybody take two hours, grab something to eat, and then meet back here to coordinate surveillance teams with Metro. Now go." Without looking back at his team, Gibbs strode out of the bullpen, not noticing McGee's attempt to get his attention. Unfortunately, Tony did notice.

"What's the matter, Probilicious, not enough of a pat on the back?"
McGee's voice was rough as he fought to keep his emotions under control. "Forget it, Tony."

DiNozzo picked up on the stress in his younger partner's voice, but not the significance. "Come on; tell Uncle Tony all about it." He reached out and slung his arm around McGee's shoulder in an attempt to lighten the mood.

"Not every part of my life is waiting for you to add a punch line, DiNozzo." McGee shoved the arm off his shoulder and stormed off.

Forcing a calmness he didn't feel, Tim drove to the college and broke the news to his sister, managed to get her packed, the dean's office informed, and a flight home arranged. He would have preferred to drive Sarah to the airport himself, but a sympathetic roommate offered her services and allowed him to return to NCIS.

McGee walked back into the squad room exactly two hours and six minutes after the break had been authorized, but that extra six minutes had been enough to earn Gibbs' ire.

"Two hours means two hours, McGee. What part of that did you not get?" The younger man sagged, still reeling from the news and not knowing how to explain in a room now full of the cops from Metro that were part of the new task force.

"I had to go tell Sarah about…"

"No, nothing else matters until we get this bastard in handcuffs. Is that understood?"

McGee sighed and gave a slight nod. "I'm sorry, Boss."

"Don't apologize, just get to work."

Silently, he did. Over the next twenty-four hours he worked the case in near silence, only speaking when the work called for it. When the suspect was captured and the next victim rescued unharmed the rest of the task force went out for drinks and celebrated with a two day vacation. Timothy McGee went home and packed his best suit before taking the red-eye flight back home to do his duty as the eldest son.

~end flashback~

Fornell leaned back and rubbed at his face. "You still haven't told Gibbs about your dad's death."

"There's no point." McGee was starting to tilt, a combination of the bourbon in the coffee and the emotions of the evening. "It would just…" he paused, not knowing how to explain.

He didn't have to explain. Fornell had spent enough time with the team at NCIS to know how they thought. "Gibbs would realize he'd been an ass, and you don't want him to feel guilty." When McGee didn't answer, Fornell just shook his head and pushed him further down on the couch. "You're in no condition to drive home tonight, kid. I'll make sure you're up in time to get to work." His house guest was already down for the count, so Fornell just covered him better with the blanket and tossed his clothes in the dryer before retiring to his own bed, but sleep was a long time coming to the older man.
"Psst, psst, wake up."

McGee opened his eyes to the sight of upside down blonde pigtails and a happy, childish face. "Umm, good morning." She bounced backwards as he sat up.

"Daddy put your clothes in the bathroom for you and one of his shirts because he said you can't wear an old t-shirt to work. You've got to hurry, though; he's making Mickey Mouse pancakes."

It took a minute for him to catch up with all her excited chatter and by then she was at the table, eagerly waiting for her pancakes. McGee folded the blanket as he stood up, and then waved an acknowledgement to Fornell as he made his way to the bathroom. As stated, his clothing was neatly folded on the counter along with a fresh towel. His jeans were fine for work today, but Fornell had been correct; the faded t-shirt he had worn the night before was not work appropriate. He took a quick look at the offered shirt. It was a light weight pullover that would work well as it was not too fitted. After a fast shower he joined Emily Fornell at the kitchen table. Under the circumstances he didn't think anything could make him smile, but the sight of Tobias Fornell carefully flipping mouse shaped pancakes while wearing a lime green apron over his shirt and tie came pretty close.

The two men stood on the front porch watching as Emily waited on the corner for the school bus. Once his little girl was out of earshot, Fornell turned serious. "You think there are other victims like your dad?"

"I think so." McGee hitched one hip up on the railing, mirroring Fornell who was perched on the other rail. "I could only go so far without making it an official investigation, but there have been at least two dozen deaths over the last six months that have questionable circumstances. That's just at the three nursing homes the company owns in the area. I didn't want them to know I was suspicious yet, but that much I was able to get from local obituaries. We're not going to get any help from the locals. The sheriff is married to the owner's daughter."

"Ouch. Well at least with the possibility of local corruption there's clear cause for the FBI to be investigating. How many nursing homes does the company own all together?"

"I'm not exactly sure. I do know that they own homes in at least five states."

Fornell seemed uncomfortable with his next line of questioning. "It's not that I have any doubts in regards to the samples or the lab you used, but as part of the official investigation…"

"You need to exhume my father's body and conduct your own autopsy and tests." McGee had known it was coming and understood. If the situation were reversed, Gibbs would have wanted Ducky to do his own autopsy. "I warned my mom that this might happen."

"How is she handling all of this?"

"She doesn't know the details yet; just that I have some questions that I need answered. I didn't see the point in upsetting her until I knew something could be done about them."

He'd gotten to know the young man well enough the night before that his decision to protect his mother didn't come as a surprise, but the loneliness in his voice was painful to hear. The bus arrived and Fornell stopped to wave as Emily climbed the steps. Behind the school bus he saw Sacks waiting in one of the agency sedans. Once the flashing red lights were off and the large vehicle was moving, Sacks pulled into the driveway. While they were waiting for him, Fornell explained his
"I asked him to bring the paperwork we need to get started."

McGee nodded and reached for the folder when Sacks stepped onto the porch. As he signed the exhumation order for his father's grave, Sacks leaned against the rail next to him. "I don't know all the details about what's going on, but I am sorry about your dad." Sacks seemed to be working up the nerve to ask something, so McGee waited for him. "I just have one question. If you don't want to tell me, that's okay but I have to ask."

"Shoot." McGee may have been channeling Gibbs at that moment, but it kept him in control of his emotions.

"Why us? I mean, Fornell said you had your reasons to not bring in your own team and I get that, but what I don't get is why come to us about it."

McGee shifted to better see the other man. What he saw was curiosity but no ridicule. He was genuinely interested. Off to the side, Fornell watched, wondering about the reasons also. His reasons were quite simple. "I trust Gibbs to do the right thing more than anyone I've ever met except for my dad. The one person Gibbs trusts outside of our team is Fornell. Who else would I go to?"

Even as they said their goodbyes, Fornell couldn't shake the sense of protectiveness he was feeling towards the young NCIS agent.

---NCIS---

Ziva David watched closely as McGee settled into his desk, right on time. There had been something off about his behavior starting part way through the case with the child rapist the week before. He had been quiet and reserved, not participating in the after arrest celebration after they had captured the suspect, then he had disappeared without saying a word to anyone else on the team. He had been even more withdrawn at work the day before, not even reacting to Tony's attempts to tease him. She had gone to his apartment to speak to him that night and then again early this morning. His apartment had been empty both times, his car not in the parking lot. She planned on approaching him right then but there was something about his appearance that stopped her. Instead, she pulled Tony off to the side.

"Have you noticed anything unusual about what McGee is wearing?"

DiNozzo looked at her blankly, and then turned to study the other man who seemed oblivious to anything other than his computer screen. "Not really. I think that's a new sweater, at least I don't think he's ever worn it to work before. Is there a point to this wardrobe consultation?"

Ziva was frustrated, but forced herself to keep her voice low to keep from attracting attention. "That's not his sweater, it's Fornell's."

One eyebrow went up. "Really? And just how did you deduce that?"

"Do you remember that anti-terrorism luncheon we represented the agency at last month?"

"Yeah?" He still wasn't sure where she was headed, but he did remember Fornell wearing something that day similar to McGee. "So what? There's probably a thousand of those sweaters floating around
DC. What's your point?"

She sighed as she clung to what little patience she had with DiNozzo. At times he could be quite obtuse. "My point is that he snagged the cuff of his sweater on the door to the conference room. The mark from the snag is still there. It's the same sweater."

"Really?" DiNozzo turned and looked back at their partner, still ignoring them from his desk. "Probie and Fornell? Wow, who'd a thought of that?" He gave a shudder and then a smirk as he returned to his desk, waiting for the moment he could hassle McGee about his new boyfriend.
Sacks entered his boss' office without bothering to knock and tossed a thick file on the desk. Fornell looked up and saw the expression on his face and immediately began skimming the file while he was waiting on the phone. By the time he reached the third page, he abandoned his phone call, setting the receiver down on its cradle as he continued to read.

"Are you sure?" Fornell leaned back in his chair, rubbing his face. "This is a lot worse than I thought."

"I'm afraid so. Luckily the kid was careful when he started poking around and they haven't picked up on him yet. The question is, do we tell him or not?" Sacks carefully moved the stack of files from the chair nearest him and sat down. "If we tell him, he's going to want to be part of it; I know I would."

Fornell studied him across the desk. "We've worked with them enough, what's your honest opinion of McGee?" Sacks pursed his lips as he thought about the question.

"He's smart and has good instincts, but he strikes me as a little naive at times, especially for as being an agent as long as he has." Sacks leaned forward, a serious expression on his face. "Anyone who puts up with DiNozzo the way he does has to have the patience of Job. He's also stubborn and honest to a fault."

"You've spent a lot of time observing him."

Sacks just laughed. "Well, it was either study McGee or kill DiNozzo." He looked around at the stacks of files that continually threatened to take over Fornell's office. "Figured you didn't want the paperwork involved if I killed him."

Fornell returned the laugh as he picked up the phone. "At this point, I'm not sure I'd even notice the extra paperwork. Let's invite McGee to lunch and feel him out a bit more."

---NCIS---

It was a day of paperwork and Gibbs was glad for it. His team was distracted, edgy. Ziva kept smiling at McGee, while DiNozzo used a steady stream of paper wads and random comments to annoy the man. Much to DiNozzo's disgust, McGee never rose to the challenge as he worked through his paperwork and stared repeatedly at his phone. The longer it went without ringing, the more morose McGee became.

By late morning Gibbs had had enough. "DiNozzo, make the lunch run; David, go with him." Looking pleased to get out of the office, they scrambled to comply. Once the elevator door closed behind them, Gibbs moved over to sit on the edge of McGee's desk.

"You've been pretty quiet today, McGee."

The younger man gave a quick glance his direction as he pretended to focus on the report currently displayed on his monitor. "Just want to make sure Kale doesn't walk on a technicality. Paperwork is different on a shared case than just a NCIS case." His mouth closed with an audible snap as he realized he was rambling.
Gibbs sat silently, observing him. Yes, it was important that the child rapist currently in custody not be given a chance to weasel out of the charges against him, but one thing about McGee was that he never messed up on paperwork. The report he had completed the night of the arrest was already good enough to stand up against any attack by the best defense attorney. There was no reason for him to be reviewing it days later. Gibbs decided to ease into the subject.

"That was a pretty rough case for all of us." He watched as McGee's shoulders tensed slightly.

McGee didn't look up. "Those kind usually are."

Gibbs thought through what he knew of McGee, looking for a clue. "Sometimes those kinds of cases remind us of something. Is your sister all right?"

"My sister?"

McGee seemed genuinely startled by the question and Gibbs tried to explain. "Some of the victims had long brown hair, and your sister was almost raped the night of the murder."

"No, that never crossed my mind." The sadness the young man seemed to have been wearing since that case intensified as Gibbs watched him.

"But there is something? Something that happened during the case."

Tim never could lie to his boss. "Yeah, but it's being taken care of."

"You know you can come to me about anything, don't you, McGee? I realize I am not the easiest person to talk to at times, but I'll help if I can."

It would have been so easy to tell him everything, and he came close, but the words didn't come. How to tell a man you respected so much that he'd been yelling at you at almost the exact moment you were told of your father's death? How to tell him that you went to someone else when that death started to look like a murder? Most importantly, how to tell him why none of them knew why his father was confined to a nursing home? In the end he just shook his head. "There's nothing to say anymore; like I said, it's being taken care of. I'm fine now."

Gibbs could see the battle on his young agent's face and sighed when he saw the moment it was lost. Standing, he clapped him on the back before returning to his own desk. "All right, Tim, if you change your mind, you know where to find me." McGee nodded, apparently surprised at the use of his first name. For a moment he looked as if he might say something else to Gibbs, but the ringing of McGee's phone broke the moment.

"Agent McGee. Hang on; let me check with the boss and see if I can leave for an hour."

Whoever was on the other end had brought a smile to McGee's face and Gibbs decided to agree before he officially heard the question. "Go on, get out of here; you've earned it." McGee made quick plans to meet up and was out the door in a flash.

Gibbs shook his head while he picked up his own phone and hit the speed dial for DiNozzo. Tony picked up on the second ring. "DiNozzo, just food for three. McGee is meeting someone for lunch."

"Really? Man, Fornell works pretty fast." DiNozzo disconnected, leaving Gibbs to stare at his phone. He finally closed his phone as he walked over to McGee's desk, pressing the button on his landline that would show the last incoming call. He immediately recognized the number.

"Damn it, Fornell, what have you gotten him into?"
DiNozzo closed his phone and turned to Ziva. "Well, the Probster will not be having lunch with the rest of us today. Apparently, he got a better offer."

"From Fornell? You are correct, he is moving fast. McGee showered at his place this morning and came to work in one of his shirts and now he is taking McGee to lunch. He is staking his claim on him." She started to climb out of the car, but Tony's hand on her arm pulled her back.

"How do you know he showered at Fornell's?"

She gave him an appraising look. "McGee did not smell like McGee this morning, he smelled like Fornell. He used Fornell's bathing products, not his own."

"Wait, what? You know what Fornell smells like?"

"I have been trained to be observant. You would do well to remember that." She pulled away from him and slammed the car door behind her while Tony made a mental note to put a bottle of his usual shampoo in his car, just in case.
Fornell sat across from Sacks, waiting for McGee to arrive. He'd chosen a small park slightly off the beaten path for the meet that was usually deserted during the day. The deli across from his office had provided hearty ham and cheese sandwiches, but he was pretty sure the kid wouldn't have much of an appetite after he learned what they had uncovered.

The two men watched as McGee pulled into the parking lot, Sacks whistling at the sight of the silver Porsche. "Man, how much better does NCIS pay? That is one sweet ride."

"Kid wrote a novel. His hobby turned out to be a bestseller." Fornell grinned at the look on his agent's face. "Maybe you need a new hobby."

Sacks didn't respond. There was something about working with NCIS that always seemed to bring out a strange side of Fornell and he couldn't tell if the man was joking or not. Before he could figure it out, McGee had walked up the path to the picnic table where they were waiting for him.

"Agent Fornell, Agent Sacks, I wasn't expecting to hear from you so soon. Was there a problem with the paperwork for the exhumation?" He watched as Fornell placed a wrapped sandwich similar to the ones he and Sacks already had on the table.

Fornell patted the table before returning his attention to his own lunch. "Have a seat, McGee. Did Gibbs give you a hard time about leaving?"

"No, it's pretty quiet today." McGee sat and picked at the wrappings of the sandwich, obviously worried about what had happened in the few hours since he'd left them. Fornell look pity on him.

"We ran a background check on the nursing home your father was at. The owner of record actually only owns about thirty percent of the chain." He knew it wouldn't take long for the questions.

"Thirty percent? Who owns controlling interest then? How long ago did this happen?"

Fornell held up his hand to stop the flood of questions. "There's no easy way to say this."

"Just tell me."

"Okay." Fornell and Sacks exchanged worried looks before Fornell continued. "The major partner of Evergreen Care, Inc. is a holding company we believe is a front for homegrown terrorists; Edmund Moore and his group to be precise."

McGee frowned as he tried to make sense of that discovery. "Moore, you mean the guy behind the Dawn of Tomorrow group? Why would he be interested in nursing homes? There can't be that much profit." It took just a few seconds for the young man to answer his own question. "It's not the legal profit he's interested in. If he's using the patients as test subjects, there's got to be some pretty big money in it. What is he financing with all that money?"

"That is the sixty-four thousand dollar question." One look at the other man's face and Fornell had to continue. "We're going to find out."

Sacks winced at his superior's words, knowing what McGee's answer would be, knowing that he would have the same exact response.

"I want in on the investigation."
"McGee, Tim…"

"They killed my father."

"I understand that." He really did, but this was the first crack they had discovered in Moore's armor in all the years the FBI had been after him. They had to be careful not to tip off the man before they could actually tie him to something that would stand up in court. On the other hand, not one person in the FBI's cybercrime unit could match McGee's ability to get into a secured database undetected. "If we do this, it has to be under very strict guidelines. I don't run a cowboy operation like Gibbs. You willing to work like that?"

McGee didn't even have to think it through. "If it takes Moore down, then yes."

There was one more question he had for the younger man before he was completely convinced. "What about Gibbs, are you going to tell him about your dad?"

McGee answered with a question of his own. "Will NCIS be read into the investigation?"

It was tempting, not that Fornell would ever admit it. "Our last two attempts to take him down resulted in the deaths of some of my best agents. This time I'm going to play it close to the vest with a very small group of hand picked people. When we're ready to move in I may bring NCIS on board, but not for the investigation. It's not a matter of trusting them," Fornell rushed to assure him. "It's the very real possibility of a leak somewhere in our communications system. Everything is going to be face to face this time and away from the office, both offices."

Fornell was glad to see that McGee gave some serious thought to the restrictions he would be working under before finally nodding. "I won't outright lie to Gibbs, but since I won't be doing anything where he would know about it, there shouldn't be a problem."

"Good enough." Tobias knew the kid couldn't directly lie to his boss if his life depended on it. He just hoped that Gibbs wouldn't push to a point where it would. "What about your dad?"

"If it comes up, I'll tell him the truth. Dad was sick and in a nursing home before he died." McGee checked his watch. "I've got to get back to the office soon. Where do you want me to start?"

"Have any plans for tonight?"

McGee shook his head. "Not really. I've got to pick up Jethro from the kennel and if we don't get caught up in a case, I'll probably give him a good run in the park before it gets too dark."

As humorous as Fornell found it that the kid had a dog named for Gibbs, this wasn't the time to joke about it. "Which park?" He recognized the park McGee named as one with not only a fenced in area for dogs, but also had one of Emily's favorite play structures. "Call when you're on your way there, and I'll meet you."

---NCIS---

"You're cheating on me." McGee felt like he was barely in the building before Abby cornered him in the elevator, throwing the emergency stop button.

Still reeling from what Fornell had told him, McGee wasn't too interested in her rant. "What are you
talking about Abby?"

"You sent a sample to another lab. What, I'm no longer good enough for you?"

"What? How did you… when did you start checking up on me?" The last thing Tim wanted was for her to somehow attract attention to the questions raised about his father's death before they even got started on the case. "That was a private matter, and is going to stay private." He moved her to the side and turned the elevator back on. "Stay out of my personal business, Abby. It had nothing to do with the agency or any of our cases."

"But…"

"No, Abby." Part of him winced at hurting her, but sometimes she refused to comprehend. "This time it's about me and what I need for once. Please try to understand it." Instead of answering, she stormed out the moment the doors opened.

---NCIS---

The last thing Tobias Fornell wanted to do after lunch was to go jogging, but this was the best way to speak to Director Haas directly and off the record. He paced himself carefully and managed to pull up along side the other man on their third trip around the indoor track at the FBI training facility. They were well into their fourth lap before either man spoke.

"Don't see you on the track very often, Tobias. Must be something pretty big to get you out here in the middle of the week."

"Edmund Moore." Fornell's words almost caused the director to stumble. When he saw how seriously Hass was listening to him, he continued. "I may have been handed a way to take him down."

Hass slowed down even as he tried to appear nonchalant. "Handed? By someone you trust?"

"Oh, yeah I trust him." Fornell looked around carefully. No one else was paying attention to them. "Moore's gotten away from us too many times, sir. I want to run this investigation totally off the grid until I'm sure what we've got."

Haas knew it was probably the only way to take down the man, but he had to be sure Fornell knew the risks. "You realize that if something goes wrong, you may not have help in time?"

"I know. I also know that if it goes right, we may have a shot at taking out his entire base of operations and uncover his plans." Fornell believed the director would recognize this was too big to pass up.

"Tell me what you need, Tobias."
"Abby, do you have the lab work on the Kale case ready to go to the DA?" Gibbs walked into the lab and set a Caf-Pow on the workbench.

"I think this time it was unforgivable." She reached out and took the drink, slurping it noisily. Gibbs tried to be understanding.

"It was a rough case, Abs."

She turned and stared at him. "Not the case Gibbs, McGee. He went to another lab behind my back. How can I ever trust him again after that?" When his only response was a raised eyebrow, she elaborated. "My friend Marcy at the lab in Rhode Island saw his name on some blood that was being tested."

"Tested for what?" Gibbs moved closer and lowered his voice. "When was this?"

Abby just shrugged, not picking up on his growing concern. "When everybody had those two days off. Why does that matter, he cheated on me with another lab tech. How could he do that to me?"

Gibbs was becoming annoyed with her attitude, which was a rare occurrence. "Have you tried to talk to him about it?"

"He said it was private, that it was about him and not me. Gibbs, how could he talk to me like that?" Abby pouted, expecting Gibbs to agree with her.

The older man just shook his head. He loved her like a daughter, but sometimes he wanted to shake some sense into her. Right now she was not interested in listening to reason. "Find out what you can about what kind of tests he had done." He didn't wait for a response as he took the stairs two at a time down to autopsy.

Ducky looked up as the doors banged open and Gibbs stormed in, ordering Palmer to inventory the van. Palmer looked puzzled, but after seeing the expression on the agent's face he scrambled out the door to comply.

'Well Jethro, is there a reason for this visit or are you running out of people to terrorize upstairs?"

"Has McGee talked to you?"

"Timothy? No, we haven't chatted since before your team caught that nasty case. Is there a problem?" Ducky thought back and realized that this was the longest he'd gone without a visit from the young man. "Jethro, what has happened?"

"I don't know, Duck." Gibbs sat on one of the unoccupied tables. "Whatever it was he won't talk to anyone about it, but he had blood tests done at a lab besides ours."

Ducky leaned against the next table over. "Blood tests? Timothy is ill? He hasn't said a word to me about it." The elderly man thought over the options. "If you can come up with a reason to send him down to me, I can look him over, but anything medical he tells me would be confidential, remember."

Gibbs was beginning to think he should have pushed McGee harder, but for now he would take what he could get. "At least I'll know someone I trust is helping him." He looked like he was going
to say something else, then shook his head and left.

---NCIS---

"Do you want me to shoot it and put it out of its misery?" Ziva watched as McGee picked at the sandwich he had brought back from his lunch with Fornell. It was rather early in the relationship for a lovers spat, but McGee seemed even more withdrawn than he had been that morning. McGee looked up at her, uncomprehending, until she pointed at it.

"Sorry, I guess I'm just not hungry." Truth was, he was feeling achy and tired and his throat was raw. Stress and lack of sleep were playing havoc on his resistance and he could tell he was fighting a losing battle with the virus of the week. He wrapped the sandwich back up and started to toss it in the trash bin, but DiNozzo intercepted it.

"If you don't want it, Probie, I'll take it." He snagged the food and returned to his desk while Ziva continued to watch McGee, waiting for him to look up. He still hadn't looked up by the time Gibbs walked back into the squad room. Without a word, Gibbs sat at his own desk and began to covertly watch McGee while he pretended to review the files on his desk. His two watchers jumped when McGee unexpectedly sneezed and DiNozzo immediately dropped the sandwich he had purloined.

"Geeze, you didn't tell me you were sick."

"I'm not sick; I sneezed, Tony." The wince from his sore throat probably didn't help his argument. He was a little surprised to see two worried faces looking at him while DiNozzo continued to stare at the food on his desk.

Gibbs wasn't going to look a gift horse in the mouth. "Go down and see Ducky, McGee."

"Boss, it was just a sneeze." Tim didn't have a clue why Gibbs and Ziva were hovering.

"Ducky, now." It was the 'don't argue with me' tone that had McGee on his feet and headed for the elevator purely on instinct. Once the elevator doors closed behind McGee, Gibbs leaned back in his chair, rubbing his face. Hopefully the medical examiner could coax the truth out of his agent.

---NCIS---

Dr. Mallard had just returned to the skeleton he was examining when McGee walked into autopsy. "Timothy, what a surprise, I haven't seen you in several days. How are you?"

"I'm fine, Ducky; Gibbs is just overreacting."

"Mmm, overreacting to what?" He looked McGee over with an appraising eye. Compared to when he'd last seen Tim, the young man looked wretched; no wonder Gibbs was worried. "I must admit, you've looked better, are you ill?"

"It's nothing; I'm just coming down with a cold. I sneezed once, and Gibbs sent me down here." Autopsy had never been McGee's favorite place for a doctor's visit, but today, especially, Ducky was staring at him like he was a prized gift for the table.
Ducky had to struggle to keep from grinning. Gibbs had certainly been grasping at straws if he sent McGee to him on the pretense of a sneeze. "Well, since you are here, I might as well take a look at you. Hop on up here like a good lad, would you?" He patted the table where Gibbs had been sitting, worrying, less than an hour earlier.
Chapter 6

Fornell looked over the apartment he'd spent the last several hours setting up. A secure building that had never been used by the FBI or any other agency was the safest option for this operation; a fact quickly agreed upon by the director. A few discreet inquires had put together a plan for a computer system that could handle anything needed to crack the previously impenetrable wall surrounding Moore's group. The actual parts had been gathered from so many different sources no one outside his own team would be able to trace them all.

McGee's first order of business would be assembling the parts into the working network of computers he should need. Fornell had no doubt that the other man's knowledge would show some gaps in what they had gathered for him, but at least it was a start. He'd already planned on Sacks working along side McGee at this stage of the operation and recognized that Sacks knew their agency well enough to track down any missing components needed without raising any red flags. Sacks was currently overseeing the installation of a T1 line into the apartment, a feat managed without the notice of either the CIA or NCIS. Tonight he planned on giving a key and the security code to McGee. By the time McGee had the computers up and running, Fornell believed he would have copies of every file in existence on Moore and the Dawn of Tomorrow ready for him.

While he waited for Sacks and the installers to finish, Fornell moved into the bedroom of the apartment. Usually he would not have bothered to furnish the site of a temporary operation like this, but he was worried about the scope and risk of what they would be facing. If any of this leaked and was traced back to the death of Tim McGee's father, then the young man would become an instant target for some of the most ruthless people Tobias had ever chased. He'd feel better if he could talk McGee into moving into here while this was going on.

---NCIS---

After the most thorough exam McGee had ever suffered through he was ready to put his foot down with the good doctor who was currently tapping at his knee with a reflex hammer. "Ducky, I guarantee you that one sneeze did not damage my reflexes."

"What? Of course not." The older man seemed guilty about something as he flustered about in his explanation. "It's been a while since your last check up and I just wanted to make sure you are all right. With the dangers you agents face out in the field, a cold is nothing to sneeze at if you pardon the pun." Ducky finally put down the instrument and studied his patient.

"You look tired and run down, Timothy. Is there anything else, any other symptoms, you'd like to tell me about?"

"Ducky…"

"There is something wrong, isn't there, lad?" He reached out and squeezed McGee's upper arm. "Keeping something like this bottled up isn't good for you, you know."

"Sometimes talking about something doesn't help either." Assuming the exam was done. McGee climbed down off the table and pulled on his shirt. Ducky waited until he was halfway to the door before speaking.
"Timothy, if you are ill, your team leader has a right to know how it will affect your work. The safety of your team has to be taken into account."

McGee stopped in the doorway, frowning as he tried to interpret Ducky's strange comment. "I promise you that nothing is wrong that will affect the rest of the team in any way." Still not sure what was being implied, he returned to the bullpen.

---NCIS---

After a painfully slow day, Gibbs sent the team home right on time. He listened as they made plans, none of which seemed out of the ordinary until McGee turned down a dinner invitation, claiming he had to pick Jethro up at the kennel.

"You were out of town?"

McGee picked up his backpack as his computer was shutting down. "For a few days. We weren't on call and I had my phone with me." He knew he sounded defensive, but the questions had seemed nonstop today.

Gibbs noticed a shift in his tone but didn't mention it. "I was just surprised that you didn't pick him up yesterday."

"I didn't make it there before they closed. See you tomorrow, Boss." McGee didn't wait to see Gibbs' reaction. Gibbs waited until the elevator closed behind McGee to call Ducky. The medical examiner was also concerned about their young friend, but had uncovered nothing useful, nor had McGee confided in him at all.

"Thanks, Ducky." Once he hung up the phone, Gibbs sat in the darkening squad room, staring at McGee's desk until well after the arrival of the second shift.

---NCIS---

It wasn't a surprise to Fornell when his little girl abandoned the play structure to romp with the large German Shepard. She had been hinting about wanting a dog for over a year now. So far he had resisted her pleas, but allowing her time with McGee's dog seemed like a good compromise.

Fornell handed McGee the list of specs for the computer components waiting for him at the apartment they had set up for the operation. While the younger man studied the list and wrote a few of his own suggestions in the margin, Fornell scrutinized him closely.

"You weren't sick at lunch."

"I'm fine." His rough voice seemed to argue the fact, so he explained further. "It's just the beginnings of a cold, no big deal." Tim rolled his eyes as Fornell's parenting instincts took over and he checked for a fever.

"What you need is a hot meal and a good night's sleep." Fornell was a little surprised to find the back
of his fingers on McGee's forehead, but he had been feeling a bit paternal toward the young man ever since tucking him in the night before. "Have dinner with us tonight."

Before McGee could say anything, Emily ran up to them, Jethro at her heels. "Please, oh please can you come and bring Jethro?" He found himself agreeing, unable to resist her happy smile.

---NCIS---

Unwilling to sit and be waited on, Tim found himself in Fornell's kitchen, making garlic bread and a salad while the other man added the final seasonings to his spaghetti sauce and drained the noodles. Emily helped him by tearing the lettuce while he chopped the tomatoes. Jethro watched the three of them, the tips of his paws just outside the kitchen.

Once they moved to the table, conversation was limited to topics safe for little ears. Emily told all about her day at school, while Tim regaled her with stories from his own childhood, telling about the weekend camping trips every summer with his father to look at the stars. Eventually the topics shifted again.

"Daddy, Bobby Martin's Mom is getting an artist to help him with his volcano. He's telling everyone that his is going to be better than anyone else's."

Tobias groaned. The Martins and their one-upmanship had put a drain on the rest of the families in the third grade class. "Do you want to do a different project for the science fair? He wracked his brain for another idea. The volcano had been simple science and easy assembly. As a father whose last science class had been sophomore year of high school, he'd been grateful when Emily had picked it.

Emily nodded enthusiastically. "I can't have the same project as him, Daddy."

McGee laughed quietly, recognizing the same parental dismay that he had seen on his own father's face when he was Emily's age and instantly took pity on the older man. "What requirements did your teacher give you?"

Quick as a flash she was in her room and back, carrying the packet from her teacher. She bypassed her father and handed it straight to McGee. He skimmed the papers quickly before returning them to her. "How about square bubbles?"

"There's no such thing." She looked at Tim before turning to her father. "Is there?"

Her father pointed at McGee. "He's the scientist, not me, Sweetheart."

Her attention immediately returned to McGee. "You can make square bubbles for me?"

"Nope." McGee winked at Fornell before he continued. "But I can teach you how to make them and help you learn all about the science involved. That way you will have a great presentation next Monday. How's that sound?"

Over the next two hours Tobias Fornell learned more about physics, surface tension and volume than he had ever learned in school, and McGee became Uncle Tim. Bedtime rolled around and after kisses for her favorite uncle, Emily happily let her dad tuck her in.
Tim couldn't hide the wistful smile as he listened to the story being read in the small bedroom. He and his father had read about Toad's adventures so many times during his childhood, he had memorized the book. He recited along as he loaded the dishwasher.

Tobias quietly closed the door before leaning on it, listening as the story continued in the kitchen. He snuck up on the other man, smiling as he jumped and blushed. "You've obviously heard the story a few times before."

"Yeah." The smile was sad as McGee explained. "Wind in the Willows was something that Dad and I read together every time he came home from a deployment. Even after I was too old really to be getting a bedtime story, we'd sit on the back porch at night and read a few pages before we'd start talking about everything that happened that day."

"Sounds like he was a good man, Tim."

"The best." He took a shaky breath, forcibly calming himself before continuing. "When will we be ready to get started on Moore?"

Tobias could feel the weight of the key in his pocket. The majority of the equipment needed was sitting in the empty apartment waiting for McGee to work his magic and assemble it all into a high tech assault on one of the most devious criminals Fornell had ever gone up against. Prior to yesterday he would have handed it to the young agent without hesitation. Now he saw not an agent standing in front of him, but a son; a lost, hurting boy, exhausted and sick. He answered as a father, not a senior agent with a task force.

"Tomorrow, we'll have everything set up by the time you finish at NCIS. For tonight, I want you to get some rest. Do you want to stay here again?"

It was tempting, but the siren call of his own bed was even more tempting. "Thanks, but I need to go home tonight."

"Call me when you get home."

For a split second it sounded like his father, asking for a call to make sure Tim got back to the dorm all right after a late night visit. "What?"

"You're practically out on your feet, you're sicker than you're willing to admit, and another storm is coming in. If you're not going to stay here, then I want to make sure you get home okay." He walked McGee and Jethro to the door. "If I don't hear from you, I'm sending Sacks out to check up on you."

"Okay, okay, I'll call." Even if asked, Tim could not have expressed how that small act of worry offset the loneliness he had been feeling.

---NCIS---

Down the street, parked in the shadows, Gibbs watched McGee pull away from Fornell's house. "Whatever is wrong, Tim, why couldn't you come to be about it? Why Fornell?"
Knowing the travel time between two points has always been a requirement in Fornell's book. It came in handy as an agent and it had always annoyed Diane. Tonight he knew how long it would take McGee to reach Silver Spring and adding in a few minutes for the dog to water a bush or two, he was ready for when the phone rang. Caller ID confirmed it.

"You home and all tucked in?"

McGee went to sleep that night thinking about Supervisory Agents and how they always knew everything.

---NCIS---

The first meeting of the DOT task force was short one member; Sacks noted instantly when he walked into the new safehouse. "Where's McGee?"

Fornell turned from where he was tacking financial records up on the wall. "I'm not bringing him in until tonight." At the table behind him, Jason Myers and Hank Thompson were looking through the stacks of files leftover from the last attempts to take down the Dawn of Tomorrow. Myers frowned as he looked up.

"Is there a security issue with him being on the task force?"

"There wouldn't be a task force if it weren't for McGee." Fornell pinned up the last paper and moved to sit with the rest of his agents before bringing the two newcomers up to speed about his late night visit from McGee and the connection between Moore and the nursing home chain. Fornell leaned back and took a sip of his now cold coffee. "The kid is like a bulldog when he's on a case, but right now he's exhausted and sick. With any luck he's getting some rest while we bring the two of you up to speed. We'll want him at his peak when he starts breaking into Moore's encrypted network."

Thompson was a father to three and soon to be a grandfather to one and recognized Tobias in paternal mode. "Well, if we want him in top form, then he's going to need some of Mama Sacks' secret formula." The rest of the group laughed in agreement. Violet Sacks may have worked two jobs to make sure her son had the finest uptown education possible after her husband walked out, but deep down she was still a country woman with a homemade remedy for every ailment known to mankind.

Her son just gave a throaty laugh. Ron was used to the teasing from the group. Nonetheless, they were always the first to ask for some of his mom's secret formula if they were feeling under the weather. "Already on top of it." He pointed out the paper bags on the countertop next to his coat. Fornell's late night phone call had his mother up early and in the kitchen, eagerly accepting one more 'boy' into her brood. The senior agent gave a knowing smile to Sacks.

"We'll deliver his care package to him at NCIS and that'll guarantee that Gibbs will make him ride a desk for the next few days."

Myers and Thompson were amused, but didn't comment. There was a reason the agents on Fornell's team called him the Sly Fox. With such a simple and casual move, Fornell had guaranteed that
McGee would be able to focus most of his energy on their case for at least the rest of the week.

As the meeting broke up, Fornell's cell phone rang. He listened for a few seconds before asking the caller to hold on and covering the mouthpiece with his hand. "Go ahead and make the delivery to McGee before Gibbs puts him out on the field. I'll catch up with you later." He was walking away deep in a conversation before Sacks could ask if there was a problem.

---NCIS---

Rushing because he was later than normal, Tony DiNozzo almost missed the familiar agent waiting for the elevator. Sacks was chatting up one of the young women from the research department and hadn't noticed him before he ducked behind one of the support columns. Curious and in the mood to cause mischief, DiNozzo eased back to take the stairs with the FBI agent apparently none the wiser.

The shiny stainless steel doors of the elevator acted like a mirror and Ron Sacks watched in amusement as DiNozzo tried to avoid his notice. Of all the things that annoyed Sacks about the other man, the one that was moving to the top of his list was the way he treated McGee. Grinning to himself as the doors closed behind him and DiNozzo made a dash for the stairs, Sacks decided to have a little fun showing DiNozzo how partners should take care of each other.

Sacks took a few moments to straighten his tie after he exited the elevator, giving DiNozzo time to catch up. Satisfied that he had an audience, he casually strolled to McGee's desk and propped his hip up on the edge. The kid didn't look too sick to work, but he certainly looked miserable. With DiNozzo, Gibbs and David all trying to covertly watch, he started pulling bottles and tubs out of the bags he carried. "Tobias sent you this. It's the official FBI sick agent care package."

As expected, it brought a wan smile to McGee's face. "Official care package?"

"Yep." Sacks pointed out the various items. "Zinc lozenges, vitamin C tablets, Echinacea and this is my mother's secret formula for the cold and flu." When McGee opened the bottle and took a sniff, Sacks grinned even wider. "Yes, I know what it smells like, but believe me, it works if you take it soon enough." He turned serious as he continued. "If you start feeling any worse, give Tobias a call and one of us will come get you. The last thing you need is for this to turn into bronchitis right now." He glared at DiNozzo before leaving.

The elevator doors had barely closed before Gibbs was on his feet and had the hand labeled bottle in his hand. One whiff and he handed it to DiNozzo. "Take that to Abby."

"Boss!"

The Gibbs glare sat McGee right back down. "I don't care who gave it to you. You are not taking anything we can't identify. After Abby and Ducky check it out, you can have it back. Until then, I don't want you to touch it."

McGee was determined not to whine; at least until he opened his mouth. "Can I at least have the vitamin C tablets?"

Instead of answering McGee, he started barking orders at Ziva. "Go downstairs and get him a bottle of orange juice. That's better than some manufactured vitamin. While you're at it, get him some chicken noodle soup."
Ziva glanced down at her watch as she stood. "Gibbs, it's not even 0900." One look at his expression and she decided McGee could have soup for breakfast.

---NCIS---

Fornell stood in the parking lot cursing as he closed his phone. It was too damn early in the case to have to worry about leaks. Parked next to him, Myers and Thompson were still there and Myers rolled down the window. "Trouble?"

"Looks that way." He was already scrolling through the numbers in his phone. "We're going to have to bring in the Marshal's office for a protection detail."
One look from Gibbs and Palmer was back outside rechecking the oil levels in the coroner's van while Ducky smirked. "Really, Jethro, you're going to wear the poor boy out. What is it this time?"

"McGee's still sick."

For a fleeting moment Ducky wondered if he could go help Palmer. "Of course he's still sick. He had the beginnings of a cold yesterday. I would imagine he feels even worse today. Good heavens, it's not the first time you've had a team member with the sniffles."

Gibbs was not in the mood to be placated. "If it was just the sniffles, why did Fornell send a bag of medicine over here for him?"

"Well, if you could tell me the names of the drugs he was given…"

"It was stuff like vitamin C and Zinc something." Gibbs was pacing between two of the autopsy tables. "The point is that Fornell knows more about one of my people than I do. He sent some sort of homemade tonic, for God's sake."

"Jethro, listen to yourself; you sound like a child who doesn't want to share his toys. Is Timothy not allowed to have friends outside of NCIS?"

"It's Fornell! He went to Fornell about something and now the man is all over him."

Ducky was trying desperately to keep up. "Are you worried because he's sick or are you worried because he's confided in someone else?" He replayed the last few minutes of conversation in his head. "What tonic?"

Gibbs waved his hand in the air as he dismissed it as unimportant. "Some concoction made by Agent Sacks' mother. The point is that we don't know what's in it."

"Unless you are accusing the FBI of trying to poison one of your agents, I believe that the point is that one of your children needed something and he didn't come to you." Ducky watched as his old friend refused to acknowledge what was in front of him.

"I'm not his father, he has a father. I'm his boss, and he didn't go through the proper chain of command." Suddenly spent, Gibbs leaned against one of the tables. "He didn't come to me, Ducky. Something is wrong and he didn't come to me. How can I fix it if I don't know what it is?"

Knowing how hard what he was about to say would be for Gibbs to accept, Ducky moved closer and leaned back against the table next to him. "Perhaps, this time the problem is something you can't fix. Would you begrudge Timothy the chance to go to someone who could help him?" When he didn't seem convinced, Ducky tried again. "I did some checking, and Agent McGee had his last official physical approximately seven months ago. There were no problems noted in the records. I could determine nothing when I examined him yesterday except the beginnings of a rather nasty upper respiratory infection. Until he comes to me with other symptoms or something noticeable happens to him out in the field, my hands are tied, Jethro, as are yours. The best we can do is wait for him to come to one of us."

"I hate waiting."

"I noticed." It was a struggle, but Ducky kept a straight face. Shaking his head, he turned serious.
"Just don't push him about this. You may end up pushing him away from all of us."

---NCIS---

Just a few miles down the road from the park where he would meet with Gibbs was the park where Tobias would meet with his contact in the Federal Marshals Service. Walt Harrison had taken a wide-eyed rookie FBI agent and turned him into the man Fornell was today. Just like that first case together, Walt was sitting on the bench, a package of cookies opened next to him. Handing his mentor one of the cups he carried, Fornell sat down and helped himself to the cookies.

"We're going to need some protection details, but we need to keep it under wraps for the time being."

Harrison studied him for a moment while he sipped his coffee. "Is there a reason why you aren't using your own people?"

"We've got a lead on Moore." Fornell waited to see the reaction.

"Moore? Edmund Moore? Are you serious?" If it wasn't so serious, the hissed reaction might have been funny.

"Yeah, I'm serious. Thing is, our investigation is only a few days old and it may have been compromised already. I need a couple of teams in place to protect my man's family. They need to stay in the background enough that they don't tip Moore off, but be ready to rescue and relocate his family in a moment's notice." Fornell resumed the wait while Harrison considered the options.

"Are you telling me that you've got a mole inside his organization?"

"Better," Tobias allowed himself a small grin. "I've got an agent that found a way to take him down."

"Tell me what you need." Harrison took out a pad and started taking notes.

---NCIS---

It had been raining almost an hour by the time the call came in. Gibbs slammed his phone shut as he grabbed his coat. "DiNozzo, gas the truck. Pipe bomb just went off at a recruiter's office." When the rest of the team stood, Gibbs snapped his fingers and pointed at McGee. "Stay here, McGee. The three of us can pick up shrapnel pieces as well as four can. You can start tracking manufactures as soon as we have the pieces." When McGee looked like he was going to argue, Gibbs let a little bit of his worry show through. "Sacks was right about one thing, you don't need bronchitis."

Only slightly annoyed, McGee watched the rest of his team leave before he called his father's doctor. Fornell's lab had left him a message that he needed to take care of right away. After twenty minutes of listening to music that nearly lulled him to sleep, the receptionist came back on the line.

"I'm sorry to make you wait, but Dr. Charbonneau is running a little late. We were so sorry to hear about your dad, how's your mom doing?"
"She's doing all right under the circumstances. Actually, you can probably help me; I know the doc's pretty busy." He looked around to make sure no one was close enough to hear him.

"All right, what can I do for you?"

It was a little lie, but under the circumstances, he didn't want to arouse suspicion at the research hospital that had treated his father until the last few years. "My doctor here would like to see copies of Dad's records so he had a better idea of what's coming down the road."

Even over the phone he could hear the concern in the older woman's voice. "You're not showing symptoms yet are you?"

"No, no I'm fine. They just want to know a little more about it, since there are not too many cases in the world."

"All right, give me the address and we'll get it sent out this afternoon." He could hear her writing down the address. "Remember that we're here if you need us."

"I know, Marcie, thanks." Once he hung up the phone, McGee started setting up the search parameters he would need when Gibbs called in.
Chapter 9

The attack on the recruiter's office was beginning to look like a lover's spat gone wrong, much to Gibbs' disgust. "DiNozzo!" The agent came running, his collar up to keep the water from running down his neck.

"Yeah Boss?"

"Ride back with the tow truck to maintain the chain of evidence." The once beautiful sports car was now a smoldering wreck thanks to the pipe bomb that had been underneath it. Gibbs was curious how a Staff Sergeant could afford a Lexus convertible, but that would be part of the investigation, too.

---NCIS---

Tim had to shout to be heard over the music when he walked into the lab. "Abby?"

She looked up from loading the Mass Spec and he could tell she was still upset with him. "What do you want, McGee?" He pointed to the bottle DiNozzo had brought down earlier.

"Have you finished testing that? I need it back."

"My lab wasn't good enough and now you want me to drop everything for you? I don't think so, mister." Dismissing him, Abby turned back to her tests. "Go away, McGee."

His hurt was quickly replaced with anger. "I'm not the one asking for the tests; that would be Gibbs. I'd suggest you remember that little fact before he gets back." Instead of answering, she just turned the music up even louder.

---NCIS---

A quick phone call told Fornell what he needed to know. The Major Crime Response Team, minus McGee was still at the location of a bombing. In the meantime he needed to talk to McGee. The man in question was sitting at his desk, nose buried in a computer program.

"McGee?" It wasn't his voice, but the sharp rap on the desk that got his attention. He looked around quickly before acknowledging the other man.

"Fornell, what are you doing here?"

"There're still at the scene, I checked. Come on, let's take a walk." He didn't wait to see if he was being followed. McGee quickly set up his desk phone to forward to his cell and rushed to catch up.

They stopped in the covered area right outside the evidence garage. No one was close and the technicians working in the garage were wearing ear protection and couldn't possibly hear them. "We may have a problem."
"What's happened?"

Tobias quickly looked over the younger man. He knew this was going to be hard to hear. "The exhumation of your father may have attracted some attention."

"What? It was supposed to be done in secret. What in the hell happened?"

'We're not quite sure.' He winced at the glare, but knew that McGee had the right to be angry. "One of the groundskeepers showed up when he wasn't scheduled. It may be nothing, but we have to be careful."

McGee started pacing. "My mother lives near there. If Moore suspects anything, she could be a target."

"I know, kid." Fornell rushed to reassure him. "We've got a team of Marshals in place to keep an eye out for her. The first suggestion of a problem, they'll have her in the witness protection program before you can even blink. There's another team watching your sister and they'll follow her back when she returns to college."

"You trust these teams?"

"I trust the man running that part of the task force." He snagged a sleeve as it went by. "Tim, I know you're worried, but we're going to take care of them. I give you my word."

McGee searched his face for a long time before he answered. "They're all I've got left."

"I know." Fornell repeated his words while he tried to give a reassuring smile. "Now we've got to talk about your protection."

"No." McGee shook his head as he put his foot down. "I'm not going into hiding and walk away from this. Besides, if they're only suspicious, it would be worse if I vanish."

Sacks had warned him, almost word for word, what McGee would say. As much as it had annoyed him, at least he'd been able to think though a counter proposal. "If you don't go into hiding, then I'm setting some ground rules." In response he got the raised eyebrow he knew the kid had learned from Gibbs. Knowing it was all he was going to get, he continued. "First, I want you to move into the safe house. It's in an upscale complex, so if someone is trying to track you, it will just look like you got a new apartment. Second, you will be followed to and from the yard by one of the members of the task force every day. Third, I'm going to get you one of the new vests we're testing. It's thinner and less noticeable under clothing. You will wear it everyday, no arguments."

McGee looked at him a long time before finally giving a short nod in agreement. Relieved, Fornell continued to hold his hand out. "Give me the key to your place and I'll pack you some clothes and take Jethro back to my place. He can go to the safe house after he's met the rest of the task force. I don't want him to eat one of them before you get there."

Once McGee took the papers and keys Fornell continued to hold his hand out. "Give me the key to your place and I'll pack you some clothes and take Jethro back to my place. He can go to the safe house after he's met the rest of the task force. I don't want him to eat one of them before you get there."

McGee couldn't help but laugh at that as he took his key off the ring. "He was a drug dog, not a guard dog, but yeah, he should meet everyone before they start walking in and out. You sure you don't mind having him at your place?"
"Are you kidding, Emily will be thrilled." Once he had the key in his pocket, Tobias stepped closer and grasped Tim's arms. "It's going to be okay, kid. We're going to take care of your family; I'm not going to let you lose anyone else to these monsters." He could see the momentary fear in those expressive green eyes before McGee forced it back down.

---NCIS---

DiNozzo hated to ride in a tow truck, but he hated crawling through wet, dirty alleys even more. What he hated worst of all was the fact that McGee was warm and dry, sitting at his desk. He flashed his ID at the gate and directed the driver to the entrance of the evidence garage.

Standing under the awning, much to his surprise was the object of his thoughts. McGee and Fornell were deep in a conversation and didn't notice the approaching truck. He watched, openmouthed, as the two men exchanged keys before Fornell walked away. McGee still didn't pay attention to the truck as he watched Fornell move down the sidewalk. Once Fornell was out of sight, McGee's shoulders slumped and he walked back inside.

Tony could barely conceal his impatience as the remains of the car was unloaded. Once the truck pulled away, he was texting Ziva.

~Probie n G-man xchng keys~

He settled in to wait for her response.
Chapter 10

Fornell was careful to call out to the dog as he unlocked the apartment door. Jethro stood growling at him until he was apparently satisfied and then bounded over to sit on Tobias' foot. He winced at the weight before shaking his head and laughing. "Come on, mutt; let's get your dad packed up. Clothes and toiletries were packed into the suitcase he found on the closet floor while a box sufficed for the many doggie items in the apartment. When he informed the large dog that he was spoiled, all he got in response was a doggie grin.

His last stop was the mailbox for the apartment. Using the small key attached to the ring Tim had given him he pulled out a large stack of envelopes, catalogs and magazines. Tobias couldn't help but notice one of the envelopes had the return address of a lawyer in Tim's hometown. Making a mental note to give it to McGee in private, he wedged the entire stack in the box and headed out to the car.

---NCIS---

The rain had stopped by the time Gibbs and Ziva were ready to return to headquarters. He'd called McGee twice with details he wanted researched and Ziva had used the internet connection at the recruiter's office to email photos of the crime scene to him. Gibbs felt confident that the information would keep McGee deskbound for the rest of the week. Over the phone the young man had sounded tired and distracted, but had insisted he was fine. Frustrated, Gibbs decided to explore other avenues in getting McGee to open up.

"Has McGee confided in you?"

"What?" That was the last question Ziva was expecting while she read the text from DiNozzo.

Gibbs knew he wasn't good at the touchy feely stuff, and a trained Mossad officer probably wasn't much better, but he was running out of options. "I'm not asking you to break a confidence. I just want to know if he's letting anyone help him besides…"

"Besides Fornell?" Apparently his spy knew more than he was expecting.

"You know about Fornell?"

She wasn't quite sure how to say it. "They have become close of late. I do not know when it started, but McGee has been acting strangely since the Kale case. I believe…"

They were stopped at a red light, so Gibbs turned to give her his full attention. "You believe what?"

Ziva thought back to that night and the moment when McGee's mood suddenly changed. "I believe he tried to tell us what was wrong the night we broke the case, before the dinner break."

That matched up with what his gut had been telling him for the last two days. "He hasn't given you any indication of what the problem is?"

"No, he has barely spoken at all to myself or to Tony. Perhaps Abby?"

Gibbs winced at the thought as Ziva continued. "Could there be a problem with Sarah?
"Sarah's fine." When she gave him a questioning look he clarified his statement. "I asked, and he said she was fine. McGee won't lie to me, Ziva."

That was one thing she knew for sure about McGee too. "You just need to be able to ask him the right question."

Once they were parked at NCIS, Gibbs sent Ziva upstairs to start working on the case while he took the box of evidence to Abby.

"What have you got for me, Gibbs?" She bounced over and tried to take the box, but Gibbs hung onto it.

"First off, what do you have for me, Abby?" When she stared at him, blankly, he reminded her. "You were supposed to call and find out about that blood test McGee had done, and have you finished analyzing that substance Sacks brought for him?"

She looked embarrassed to be caught, but had an excuse at the ready. "I've been busy, Gibbs. Both Balboa's team and Jacob's had a lot of evidence come in this week."

"If you were that backlogged, you should have asked for help." He gave her a hard look. "Or was it just McGee you couldn't get to? He's always been a friend to you, I thought you were a friend to him." The gentle rebuke hung in the air as Gibbs set the box on the table and left the lab.

---NCIS---

Fornell met up with the FBI's members of the task force after dropping Jethro off at his house. Hank Thompson smirked while Sacks and Myers openly laughed at the dog hair on his black wool overcoat and the suitcases in his arms.

"Apparently you talked him into moving in here." Sacks was still grinning as he took the luggage from his boss and tossed it into the bedroom. Behind him Thompson held out his hand while Myers dug for his wallet. "Where is the dog?"

"My place, he knows me but I wasn't sure how he'd react to you bozos without McGee around." Quickly he caught the rest of them up on the possible threat to McGee and his family and how it was being handled. "I'm not losing another agent to Moore and his army of lunatics, especially not this kid. Now, what have you three found?"

Jason Myers and Hank Thompson were the first to give their report. It had been slow and tedious, but Myers had linked the shell company Moore used to an additional five nursing home chains. So far he'd been able to track the spread over fourteen states. Thompson took over the report to show the time frame of Moore's acquisition of the homes. It showed an aggressive move that started picking up speed about a year earlier. Fornell interrupted him with a question.

"Have we looked at the death rates of these homes since Moore bought them out, compared them to before?"

"We were only able to get the data from the ones he's had controlling interest in for over a year." Sacks started to explain why his results were so limited. "Anything more recent than that isn't in the system yet."
Fornell made a mental note to get McGee on that. "From the data you were able to get, what did you find?"

"The death rates have doubled." When he saw the shocked expression, he rushed to give the rest of his discoveries. "They've also shifted their primary focus to more severely ill patients, more welfare cases and more patients with no family to speak of."

"In other words, more patients whose deaths wouldn't attract suspicions."

Jason nodded at Fornell's statement. "It looks like your kid is really onto something here."

---NCIS---

McGee was buried in his computer when Gibbs entered the squad room, while Tony and Ziva hovered nearby. "What have you got for me so far, McGee?"

"I'm trying to match up some of the bomb components you photographed, but nothing yet." His voice was rougher than it was before the rest of the team left and the congestion seemed worse.

"Keep at it, McGee." Gibbs glared at the two bookends at each end of McGee's desk. "What are you two doing?"

It was almost comical how they scurried back to their desks, but neither Gibbs nor McGee were in a mood for humor. Ziva reached her desk first as she announced that she would be going over witness statements while DiNozzo stated his intentions to review surveillance videos from nearby stores. Gibbs gave them one more glare for good measure before turning his attention to the history of that particular recruiter's office.

Less than an hour later Gibbs looked up to find McGee standing in front of his desk. "Boss, I need to use one of the terminals down in cybercrimes to run the financials on Sergeant O'Dell."

"Is there a problem with your computer?" He remembered a few times McGee had needed the larger capacity computers in MTAC, but never the ones down in cybercrimes.

McGee shook his head as he tried to explain in non-geek terms to his boss. "I've got seven search patterns running on my computer right now, tracing the bomb parts. It doesn't have the capacity for another search, and none of the other computers up here have the program I need."

Gibbs' expression changed from curious to questioning. "What program?"

"It's one I wrote to more efficiently look for anomalies in a person's financials. They started to beta test it a few months ago for me. Since the sergeant was driving a car that costs more than his annual salary…"

"Follow the money. Good thinking, McGee." He waited until Tim was walking away before continuing. "After we finish the case, show me this program of yours and what it can do, all right?" McGee almost stumbled in shock and Gibbs realized how seldom he acknowledged the young man's contributions to the team.

"Umm, sure Boss, I'm supposed to give a demonstration to the Director pretty soon. Would you like to sit in on that?" When Gibbs gave a nod, he continued to the elevator. "Somebody will need to
prompt my computer once in a while when it asks if you want the next search to start. Just click on the yes when it chimes."

"I think even I can handle that, McGee." Gibbs was glad to see a glimmer of a smile cross his agent's face as he walked away.

When McGee's computer chirped at him less than ten minutes later he wasn't so sure, but eventually he figured out which mouse went to which monitor. Before he could return to his own desk, McGee's phone rang and Gibbs answered it automatically.

"McGee's desk."

~Is Tim McGee available?~

"He's away from his desk, can I give him a message?" Gibbs refused to think about why he was playing secretary to one of his agents or why he wasn't just transferring the call downstairs.

~Tell him this is Marcie from Dr. Charbonneau's office and the file he requested has been sent, but Dr. Charbonneau still expects to see him at our office. He has the number if he has any other questions.~

McGee may or may not have any questions, but Gibbs certainly did. However, he knew he wasn't going to get them from Marcie. He checked the caller ID for the number and wrote it down for himself before leaving a note for McGee.

Marcie called,

said you had the number.

Once that was done, he headed down to autopsy, determined to know what was going on.
Chapter 11

Tony waited for the elevator to close behind Gibbs before he turned his attention to Ziva. "So, when do you think Probie's torrid little affair started oh observant one?"

She shook her head as she moved closer. "I do not believe they are…"

"Oh come on, Ziva, what else could it be?" Tony leaned back and put his feet up on his desk. "Although I would have thought he'd go for some geek like himself, and not such a big fish like Fornell..."

"Tony…"

"…Then again, maybe I should be calling him the Prober rather than the Probie. What do you think, Ziva?"

"I think you are not listening to me. McGee is in trouble."

"Well, yeah, Gibbs is going to kill him when he finds out he's dating an FBI agent."

Ziva slammed her hands down on DiNozzo's desk. "That is not what I meant. He has gotten himself into some kind of trouble and we need figure out what it is. Are you going to help me or not?"

---NCIS---

This time when Gibbs stormed into autopsy, Palmer didn't wait to be dismissed. He stood and started out the door before Gibbs had a chance to say a word. When Gibbs did yell at him, he almost misunderstood, stopping finally just outside the doors.

"Stay here Palmer, I need you to track down a doctor for me."

"Umm… okay… Agent Gibbs… what do you… I mean…"

Frustrated, Gibbs shoved the paper at Palmer. "Here. Last name of Charbonneau at this phone number."

"Victor Charbonneau?"

Ducky's question almost threw Gibbs. "You know him?"

"Well, I know a Dr. Charbonneau; I can't imagine there are too many doctors with that last name."

"It is him." By now Palmer had run a reverse phone directory search. "The medical offices attached to that phone number belong to Dr. Victor Charbonneau. He's a neurologist."

Before Gibbs could ask anything else, Ducky turned to his assistant. "Thank you Mr. Palmer, you may go check out the van now." Recognizing the dismissal, Jimmy scrambled to comply.

"A neurologist, Ducky, he's seeing an out of state neurologist. What do you know about this doctor?"
Ducky came over and leaned against the table next to Gibbs, not liking what he was about to say. "I saw him lecture a few years ago, he's quite brilliant. There's no easy way to say this Jethro, but he specializes in rare neurological disorders." An uncomfortable silence hung between the two men.

"There's more, isn't there?" Gibbs waited for the answer.

"I'm afraid so." Ducky looked uncomfortable as he glanced around to see if they were still alone. "After our last conversation, I decided to access Timothy's detailed medical records. Part of his records were sealed by Director Shepard a few weeks before she died."

"Sealed? Why?"

"I don't know."

---NCIS---

The argument between Ziva and Tony came to a sudden halt when McGee returned from cybercrimes. He snagged the note before dropping his stack of papers on his desk. As he stuffed the handwritten note in his pocket, Tony bounced over and perched on the corner of his desk. "So, you having dinner with Toby tonight?"

"I didn't know I had to clear my social calendar with you, DiNozzo."

Gibbs arrived just in time to hear the last of their exchange. His glare quickly shut up DiNozzo as the younger man scurried back to his own desk. "Is anyone actually working?"

"Boss, I have something." McGee stood back up and approached Gibbs' desk with the printouts he had brought up from cybercrimes. He handed over the papers as he brought up the same information on the plasma. Gibbs looked through the papers as he repeatedly glanced up at the screen on the wall.

"You put all this together in this amount of time? With the new program you developed? This would have taken days before."

McGee blushed under the rare praise from his boss. "Thanks, Boss."

DiNozzo came up to stand behind him "I have to admit, it's pretty impressive Probie. When'd you come up with this?"

He just shrugged. "When I was stuck in cybercrimes, I never got used to the idea of working nine to five, had to do something to keep busy. Anyway, I traced his increase in funds to a woman, Yasmeen Haddad. I'm running a background search on her and her known associates. Her father is a diplomat here in this country, so it's going to take a little bit longer."

"How long?"

"I should have everything for you by midnight at the latest."

It didn't take Gibbs long to decide. "Let your search run, we'll pick it up again in the morning."

"Boss?"
"Go home people."

"Wow, is the Boss going to make this a habit?" Feeling brave, Tony grinned at Ziva as he picked up his backpack before Gibbs could move towards him. Ziva didn't pay any attention to him as she was watching McGee send a text message. She tried to see the screen on his phone, but he turned away from her with a frown. Gibbs gave her a hard look and jerked his head towards the door. Understanding, Ziva snagged Tony's sleeve and towed him out behind her.

Finally alone in their section of the squad room, Gibbs crossed to stand between McGee and the elevator. "Are you feeling any better, McGee? Honest answer."

Tim wasn't quite sure how to handle this version of Gibbs. "It's just a cold, Boss, really. It would have been nice to try Mrs. Sacks' secret formula, but I'm sure the orange juice and soup were just as effective." He smiled as he finished altering his searches to continue running overnight.

"That was my fault, Abby shouldn't have taken so long with it." He moved back to his desk to shut down his computer while McGee shouldered his backpack and started for the elevator.

"I'm not Abby's favorite person right now; don't worry about it Boss. See you in the morning."

Gibbs waited a few minutes to allow McGee the privacy of riding alone in the elevator before he, also, left for the night.

Once he passed through the gate, McGee spotted the black sedan parked along the curb, engine running. He nodded to Sacks through the open window as he passed, slowing slightly to allow the other man time to pull out and escort him to the safe house.

Several cars back, Gibbs watched McGee leave the Yard and noticed a strange car pull in back of him. Although there were few other cars on the road, the sedan carefully matched McGee's speed and direction. Worried, he pulled out his cell and hit the speed dial for McGee. The other man sounded tired and distracted when he answered.

~What's up, Boss?~

"McGee, you've picked up a tail. I want you to stay on this road until I can get more back-up out here to help intercept it." McGee almost seemed alarmed by Gibbs' concern.

~No, Boss. It's a friend, we're going to dinner. I'm fine.~

When McGee and the other car turned down the next street, Gibbs let them go.

Once at the apartment, a quick round of introductions were made. While Myers and Thompson were getting to know the new member of the task force Sacks pulled Fornell off to the side to tell him about the temporary third car in their convoy. "We may have to bring NCIS in so they don't accidentally get the kid killed."

"Do you really want DiNozzo underfoot?"

Sacks shuddered at the thought. "Well, no."

Fornell had to grin at his expression before looking over at McGee. The kid had his sleeves rolled up and was already hard at work, with the two other agents roped in as assistants. He figured it would keep them busy for at least a few hours. "We'll wait as long as we can. Right now, I'm going to pick up dinner and get the dog."
Having witnessed Myers tackle food, Fornell called ahead and ordered the family dinner for eight and added extra egg rolls, potstickers and soup. The hostess packed the entire feast in a large box that barely fit through the restaurant door. He started to load it in the back seat before realizing his problem. He'd learned quickly that Jethro was a well behaved dog, but there were limits to even the best trained mutt. Instead, he opened the trunk and wedged the box between the spare tire and his emergency kit. It took some sweet talking of his little girl to convince her Jethro should go back to Uncle Tim, but he used the hostage negotiations techniques he'd learned when at Quantico. Eventually Emily was distracted enough and back hard at work practicing her science presentation with her grandmother.

Well trained or not, Jethro spent the trip with his nose buried between the seat cushion and the backrest of the back seat. Fornell decided not to think about all the dog snot being left behind.

By the time Fornell walked back through the door to the apartment, McGee not only had the computers up and running, he was busy programming them. It was a bark from Jethro that got the young man's attention.

"Hey, boy." Tim hit one last keystroke before standing up. Each member of the taskforce was introduced and received a canine handshake. Sacks laughed as he watched Jethro sit patiently waiting for something to fall off the table. "He's got better manners than DiNozzo."

By the time the work session broke up the first computer search had yielded results and they had a list of potential victims to start exhumations for testing. Many of the bodies had been cremated as there was no family to claim them, but even the ones McGee had located would be helpful in determining a pattern.

After the other three left, Fornell closed and locked the door before retrieving what he had gathered from McGee's mailbox. He set it all on the table except for the one from the lawyer. That he held in his hand as he sat next to McGee. "I assume this is something about your father's estate?"

Tim slowly took the offered envelope as he shook his head. "When Dad… after his diagnosis, and he knew what was in store for him… he wrote a series of letters for us. One for each milestone in our lives, and one for… one for when he died."

Fornell rested his hand on Tim's arm after giving him the envelope. "I'll give you some privacy." He moved over to the computers and watched the numbers and symbols flash across the screens. Unable to resist, he kept glancing over his shoulder as McGee's hands started to tremble and his breath hitched. Fingers pressed against the young man's lips before moving up to pinch the bridge of his nose. As the head bowed, Fornell could no longer resist and sat next to him. He rested his hand on the back of Tim's head for a moment, before sliding it down to wrap his arm around the shaking shoulders, pulling him close. "Let it out, kid."

Once the storm had passed, Tobias steered Tim into the bedroom, wincing slightly as Jethro joined his owner on the bed. Wanting to stay close, Fornell stretched out on the couch and hoped the hum of the computers would lull him to sleep.
The sound of the shower woke Fornell. As he rolled off the sofa with a groan he realized that it was still dark outside. After fumbling around for his reading glasses he saw that it was only 0530. Rubbing his face and muttering about Marines and how they train their agents, he found his keys and made a run out to his car. He was back with the new bulletproof vest just as the shower was turned off.

Both men left the apartment at the same time, but in separate cars as Fornell kept a close watch on the other man. They were only a few blocks from the main gate of the Navy Yard when his phone rang. He fumbled to answer it while keeping up with McGee’s Porsche. The big agency sedan would be no match for the sports car if they hadn't been on the same side of the law. Sacks was on the line and not happy, judging by his tone.

~I'm sitting at the Metro station across from the main gate and David is watching the gate from the other side.~

"Damn, has she made you?"

~No, I was in position before she arrived. I assume you don't want her to see you following McGee.~

Fornell pulled off to the side of the road and waved McGee on. "No, I don't want her to see me. That means yours are our only set of eyes on McGee right now."

~I've got a visual on him... turning... and he is through the gate with David following him now.~

"All right, he should be at the Yard for the rest of the day. Let's get started on the list of names he gave us last night." Fornell made a U-turn and headed to the Hoover Building for his morning 'jog' with the Director.

---NCIS---

Ambassador Haddad had, of course, left very little of his family's affairs open to investigation, but McGee's overnight searches had uncovered enough to keep the agents busy for several days. By the time the rest of the team arrived, he had everything sorted out and the important finds printed for each of them. He kept sipping on the extra hot coffee, hoping his voice would hold out.

Gibbs arrived, a little surprised to find McGee already at his desk, hard at work. McGee looked up briefly before returning his attention to the files he was assembling. The Senior Agent decided to try a little levity to get him to open up. "McGee, when I let you go an hour early yesterday, that doesn't mean you have to come in an hour early today." He got a smile in return and started to relax until McGee answered him in a raspy voice.

"Hey, Boss, I've found some links between the Staff Sergeant's girlfriend and a suspected terrorist. It looks like she was dating them both at the same time."

"You sound like hell, McGee," Gibbs studied the younger man. He didn't look feverish, but there were dark circles under his eyes and he was pale, "and you don't look much better. You're taking a
sick day today."

"I'm not that sick. There's still lots that needs to be gone through."

Gibbs thumped the stack of files McGee had assembled for the team. "It'll take DiNozzo and David at least a day to go through the info you've already put together. I'd rather you take one day now than spend two weeks out with pneumonia because that's what you're starting to sound like."

Behind Gibbs, Ducky had walked into the squad room with a stack of interoffice mail that was delivered to him by mistake. He'd been listening and instantly backed up Gibbs' concern.

"Yes, indeed, it's not very often I hear someone sounding quite so rough. You need to take better care of yourself, Timothy. Follow orders like a good lad and get some rest."

Gibbs made some quick calculations in his head. "Today's Friday, I don't want to see you back in the squad room until Monday. We'll just have to muddle through on our own. It might be good for Tony to see just how much you do around here."

Recognizing both a losing battle and an opportunity to continue with his other case, McGee agreed and handed over the rest of his search results. He passed DiNozzo on his way out of the squad room.

Frustrated, Gibbs rubbed at the sides of his face as he turned to Ducky. "The more we try to get him to rest, the worse he looks, what is going on?" Behind him, DiNozzo walked in and tossed his backpack under his desk.

"Well if he spent his time actually resting instead of with his new boyfriend… "

*Whack*

"Boss, I just call 'em as I see 'em." DiNozzo rubbed at the back of his head, surprised at the anger in Gibbs' tone.

"You don't have a damn clue, DiNozzo. He's got it hard enough right now without you causing him anymore problems with baseless accusations. You hear me?"

"Yeah, sure boss." Gibbs was already on his way out, so Tony wasn't sure if he heard him or not. He looked at Ducky, hoping for an explanation. Unfortunately, there was very little the Medical Examiner could tell him.

"He's worried about him, Tony."

DiNozzo shook his head. "No, no, Boss doesn't do worried. There's nothing wrong with McGee. He just has a cold."
Chapter 13

One look at his expression and Abby scrambled to turn down the music the minute Gibbs stormed into her lab. "Hey, Gibbs."

"Well?"

It was obvious he was not happy with her. Rather than waste time with an apology he didn't want, she handed him the readout from the mass spectrometer. "Here's the results from that tonic you asked me to test. It's mostly comprised of various herbs. Everything in is used in folk medicine for colds and flu, nothing that is toxic or dangerous." Abby handed the bottle back to Gibbs. "I only used a little bit to run the tests."

Gibbs took the offered bottle. "This would be most effective at the start of a cold?" She wouldn't look him in the eye.

"Umm, yeah. But Timmy gets colds all the time, it's never been a big deal."

The unspoken 'this time it was' circled around the room. Instead of a kiss to her cheek, she felt a wave of disappointment. "What about the blood tests he had done?" This time she did apologize.

"I'm sorry, Gibbs. By the time I called her, someone had purged the data from the system. She tried, but she couldn't get it back."

Gibbs closed his eyes as another avenue was lost. "Why would they do that?"

"I don't know." She moved closer, hoping for her hug, but he just started moving towards the door. "What's going on Gibbs? Did I mess up?"

"Yeah, you did, you really did, Abs." Gibbs walked out without telling her anything else.

---NCIS---

After sending Sacks to follow McGee back to the apartment Fornell walked into the secure lab at Quantico, twenty minutes early for his meeting with Mildred Novak, the director of laboratory services. Despite that, she was ready and waiting for him. This may be the most secure lab in the country, but he was expecting her to step it up another notch for this case. Mildred may have smiled at first, but she took his concerns very seriously and he was impressed with the changes in protocol she had made for this case. Once the tour was finished, they retreated to her office for coffee.

"How soon will we start getting samples, Tobias? If I need to tell my people to cancel their weekend plans, I'd better do it first thing this morning." She stood up to refill their coffee mugs. "How many samples will be coming in?"

"Honestly, I have no idea. The more we look into this, the bigger it gets. Plan on a worse case scenario. Nobody get time off until this case is put to bed."

Mildred had reached retirement age years ago and briefly wondered why she had never taken it. Retirement sounded better every day. "I'll break the news to them, but you'd better warn Director
Haas that we will be discussing our overtime budget again. By the way, thank your Agent McGee for me please. The doctor's office sent his father's file overnight mail. That is going to help sort out those test results. Poor kid.

Her last comment caught Fornell by surprise. "Why poor kid?"

"His father was already terminal before they killed him." She pulled a file out of a locked desk drawer and opened it.

Fornell wasn't sure where she was headed. "Yes, I know. Your point?"

"It's genetic." The file was turned so he could read it. Fornell groaned at her statement. He started to skim the document, but after a moment he dug out a pad to write down some notes, including the long name at the top of the chart.

---NCIS---

Director Vance arrived late at NCIS after a breakfast meeting with the SecNav. He rolled his eyes but turned with a smile as Gibbs followed him into his office. "What can I do for you this morning, Agent Gibbs?"

Gibbs didn't beat around the bush. "I want you to break the seal on McGee's medical history. Jenny Shepard sealed them and I want you to open them back up."

Leaning back in his chair, Vance clasped his hands together and rested his chin on them, studying the other man. "No. I am not overriding a previous director's orders just to satisfy your curiosity."

"Damn it, he's sick, Leon."

"I thought he had a cold."

Gibbs was rapidly losing his patience. "Besides that."

Vance hadn't even noticed the sealed packet in McGee's personnel records, but he'd never had a reason to dig that deeply in the young agent's file. "What symptoms has he shown?"

"None that I can tell."

"Then our hands are tied, Gibbs. You know that."

"How can I help him if I don't know what's wrong?" Knowing he would get no help on this front, Gibbs stormed out without waiting for a dismissal. Vance stared at the slammed door for a long time before getting up to lock it. After a quick call to his assistant to make sure he wasn't disturbed, he pulled out the file in question. Across the back where it was taped close was the flowing signature of his predecessor. For a moment it felt like he was walking across her grave, but he shook off the feeling and cut through the seal.

An hour later he was still staring at the papers spread across his desk, stunned.

---NCIS---
Ron Sacks parked next to the silver Porsche he had followed back from the Navy Yard and after a quick glance around the underground parking lot he followed McGee to the elevator. During the trip up to the ninth floor of the high-rise he took a good look at the other man. "You look like crap. Didn't Mama's formula help at all?"

The question made McGee feel even worse. "I never got to try it. I'm sorry, but the boss is pretty fussy about any of us taking something unknown. He sent it down to the lab to be tested."

Instead of being angry, Sacks started to laugh. "Fornell did the same thing the first time I brought some in. Say, can you get me the lab results from your people?"

"I thought you said that Fornell…"

"Yeah, but he never let me see the results; said that the only thing in there I needed to know about was my mama's love." Before McGee could come up with a response, they were at their floor and Sacks was tugging him down the hallway and into the apartment. Myers and Thompson were sorting through files at the table when they arrived. By their lack of surprise at McGee's early return, it was apparent Fornell had given them a heads up on the subject.

Thompson looked up and studied the sick man. "Go to bed, kid, we'll keep it quiet out here."

McGee shook his head. "I'm not sleepy. I might as well be miserable out here working as miserable lying down." He tossed his coat on the back of a chair and headed for the computer, but Myers intercepted him.

"Fornell's going to skin us alive if he thinks we made you work after getting sent home by Gibbs. At least go change your clothes so it looks like you were sleeping."

Ditching the suit and tie sounded pretty good, not to mention the bulletproof vest, so McGee didn't complain much before he detoured to the bedroom and changed into a warm pair of sweatpants and one of his favorite MIT t-shirts. The warm fuzzy socks his mother had knitted for him last Christmas completed the ensemble and he returned to the computer station set up in the living room of the luxury apartment. Within the hour he was engrossed in his work, not noticing the amazed observers he had behind him.

---NCIS---

Fornell entered his office and ignored the stack of messages on his desk for the time being. Instead, he pulled out the notebook and started running a search on the terms he had written down from the file Novak had shown him. Several links came up and he clicked on the one that sounded the most user friendly. He read the information on the screen three times before closing it out. Fornell rubbed his mouth as he stared, unseeing, at the screensaver. "Oh, God, kid, tell me you didn't inherit this."
Chapter 14

Fornell managed to leave his office at a reasonable time and headed straight for the apartment where the task force was working. As expected, McGee was at the computers running programs Tobias knew he would never understand. Jason was stealthily replacing the almost empty cup at his elbow with a full one, while Hank was sorting the piles of printouts into different stacks. He exchanged grins with Hank before turning his attention to the scene at the computer. "You're going to make somebody a fine mother some day, Myers." Jason gave a cocky grin to his supervisor before making a big show of checking McGee's forehead for a fever. Chuckling, Tim swatted his hand away before taking a drink from his cup.

"This isn't coffee." McGee stared at his cup as Myers and Thompson howled with laughter.

"It's herbal tea for your cold and you've been drinking it for the last three hours." Thompson ruffled Tim's hair. "Man, you really get in the zone when you're programming, kid." McGee shrugged and downed the rest of the tea before returning his focus to the screens in front of him.

Fornell smiled at the playful banter. Over the years the four of them had worked and played together, their individual families slowly combining to become one large extended family. Hank's teenage daughter babysat Emily on a regular basis and the entire team spoiled his step-grandchildren when they came to visit. Myers and Sacks, the Mutt and Jeff of his group even double dated on a regular basis and Ron had taken over teaching Jason's little brother to drive when Jason had broken his leg last year. They had taken in the young NCIS agent as their new baby brother just as Fornell had hoped. Now it was time to distract them and rescue the kid.

"Where's Sacks?"

Thompson looked up. "He's on the dinner run."

"Really?" When Sacks made the meal run, that often meant they were about to be treated with a homemade spread from Mama Sacks. Violet never missed a chance to fuss over one of her "boys" if they weren't feeling well. Thompson's raised eyebrow told him that was exactly the plan as he carefully moved the sorted papers to a nearby side table.

Thompson had just picked up the last stack when the door opened. Sacks came through, carrying a large stockpot and with a paper bag wedged under his arm. Behind him, Violet had a box balanced carefully. One sniff and Fornell knew exactly what was in the box. He bypassed Sacks and took the box.

"Why, thank you Tobias."

"Yeah, thanks." Ron struggled to maintain his grip on the hot and heavy pot with the bulky mitts preventing him from wrapping his fingers around the handles better. When he shifted, the bag slipped several inches before he could lock his arm better against it. Myers took pity on him and stepped out of the way to give him a clear path to the kitchen. "Really, thanks guys."

McGee stood up and took the bag, allowing Sacks to concentrate on getting the pot to the stove without spilling it. He followed Sacks into the kitchen and handed him back the bag as soon as he pulled off the mitts. Violet was right behind them and witnessed the entire exchange. She immediately cornered McGee to take a good look at the ill agent.

No rescue came as he was poked and prodded. She examined his throat, checked the glands in his
neck, looked in his ears, felt his forehead and laid her ear against his chest to listen to his breathing. Exam completed, she shook her finger at McGee. "That is settling in your lungs, young man. I am putting you to bed and after you eat, you are getting a mustard plaster."

"Umm…" McGee unconsciously leaned back from the pointed finger only inches from his nose. Ron's mother may only come up to his shoulder, but she was obviously a force to be reckoned with. Ignoring his non-reply, she turned to Fornell.

"You have a bed tray here, right?"

"Uhh, no…" Fornell winced as he explained his negative answer. "He wasn't sick when we set the place up."

"Tobias Fornell, what kind of an excuse is that?" McGee relaxed slightly as her attention was diverted. "Are you telling me the FBI can't add something to this place?"

Hank tried to appease her. "I'll run down to the mall and pick one up right now."

"And make this poor boy wait for his dinner?" She took Tim's arm and led him to the table as she issued orders to the rest of the men. "Ronny, you start dishing up the soup; Hank start slicing the bread." She pointed to the bag Tim had rescued earlier and Thompson pulled out a large loaf of homemade bread. It was still warm in his hands.

Violet glared at the cup sitting where McGee had been working. "That had better not have been coffee." Jason happily picked it up, taking the opportunity to be the golden boy.

"Of course not. I remembered and got him herbal tea."

As soon as she had McGee pushed into a chair she crossed her arms and glared at Myers. "Well, an empty cup is going to do him a lot of good." When Jason dashed into the kitchen to make another cup she checked on the progress in there. "Thicker slices, Hank, don't be so stingy." Fornell was hovering over the box as he waited for more bowls of the beef barley soup to carry to the table.

"Tobias, get your nose out of that berry cobbler."

The simple but hearty meal reminded Tim of the monthly dinners at his grandmother's home when he was a child, right down to the cobbler for dessert. Everyone laughed when Violet slapped Jason's hand as he tried to sneak a third helping.

"How do you expect to catch yourself a woman with that expanding waistline of yours?" Myers made a big show of catching her hand and kissing it before putting on a heavy Southern accent.

"Why, Miss Violet, I've already found myself the perfect woman, but Ronny here says he doesn't want me as a stepfather." Ron showed his opinion by pelting the other man with a balled up napkin while the rest of the group laughed and whistled.

After dinner, Jason took the dog out for a walk while Tobias and Hank took care of the leftovers and the dishes. Tim was chased off to bed while Ron helped his mother prepare the mustard plaster, unobtrusively turning on the fan over the stove and opening a window. The other two men made quick work of their share of the kitchen before retreating to the far end of the apartment.

Jason and Jethro returned as Violet was applying the plaster to Tim's chest. Once unhooked from his leash, Jethro made a dash for the bedroom, but came to a sudden halt at the doorway. Blinking and sneezing, the dog backed up, much to the amusement of the humans there. Tobias followed the dog, using the opportunity to wipe at his own eyes.
Back in the bedroom, Violet tugged Tim's t-shirt back in place over the warm, treated flannel. "There you go. Now that is going to help break up that chest congestion you've got going."

McGee was careful not to move more than necessary as moving seemed to stir up the vapors of the mustard. "Feels like it's clearing up my sinuses too."

"Absolutely." She patted his leg before standing up. "Now, who is staying here with him tonight?"

Before Tim could remind the group that he was actually quite capable of sleeping without supervision, Jason Myers spoke up.

"It's my night, tonight."

She gave him a careful look before issuing instructions. "I made that plaster extra strong to knock out that congestion. You need to check it every few hours to make sure it doesn't burn his skin, you hear me?" He gave her a sketchy salute in response.

Ron left the apartment with his mother soon after they had McGee settled for the night and Hank followed them a few minutes later. Tobias locked the door behind them and started reviewing what McGee had found. He looked up over his glasses as Jason plopped down on the chair across from him.

"I don't think I've ever seen anyone work a computer like that before. Certainly no one in our office can do it. I don't think any of the geeks in our cybercrime unit can do what that kid can do. Why are they risking him out in the field?"

Tobias thought about it as he lay the papers back down in their piles. He thought he was getting a handle on what made Gibbs' young agent tick. "It's what he wants. As good as the kid is at the computer stuff, I think he'd go crazy stuck at a desk all day." A quick look at his watch and Fornell was on his feet. "Call if you have any problems, otherwise I'll see you in the morning after I take Emily to her play date." He looked over at Jethro, still rubbing his nose on the carpet. "Come on, boy, you can come home with me tonight." Jethro was pawing at the door before Tobias had his coat on.

-NCIS-

Ziva David pulled into the parking lot and shut off the engine, staring up at the dark apartment. McGee's car was not in its assigned spot, but she wanted to make sure. With her lockpicks, it was an easy job to get inside McGee's apartment. She checked the bedroom first, but it was empty. The small bathroom contained few personal items and nothing that would be used on a daily basis. She checked the closet next, only slightly surprised to find most of his suits gone. Before she could check the dresser, a sound at the outer door caught her attention. It was a set of lockpicks and not a key that was working the lock and she drew her gun to greet the new arrival.

Gibbs regretted not bringing his glasses with him to better see what he was doing, but picking a lock was more feel than see once he got the picks through the keyhole. The door opened and he was looking down the barrel of a federally issued SIG Sauer.

"We should have carpooled, Ziva."

"Gibbs" She tucked her weapon back into its holster. Neither one of them felt guilty about breaking into McGee's home.

"Well?"

Her report was clear and succinct. "He is not currently staying here, his personal items have been
removed from the bathroom and most of his clothing is no longer here."

He made his own assessment as she spoke, looking around the living room and the kitchen. "Jethro's stuff is gone." Ziva nodded once before pulling out her phone. McGee sounded sleepy when he answered.

~Yeah, McGee.~

"McGee, it is Ziva. I thought I would drop off some food for you." She tilted the phone so Gibbs could hear both sides of the conversation.

~Ziva, thanks, but it's really late and I'm already in bed. Maybe tomorrow?~

"It's no trouble, and I am downstairs. Where is your car?" They both held their breath waiting for the answer.

~I'm at a friend's place for the night. I appreciate the thought, Ziva, but I'll see you on Monday, okay?~

They heard the dial tone and she closed the phone. Gibbs was the first to speak. "I wonder if that was the friend that was following him."

"We could trace his phone. I believe he will leave it turned on tonight."

As tempting as it was, Gibbs shook his head no. "Even if he's not willing to share with us, he needs to feel like he can trust us."

-NCIS-

Tobias crawled into bed just in time to hear Emily's door open. He waited and the door closed again just as quietly. Curious, he climbed back out of bed and crept down the hall to ease her door back open. Two pairs of eyes looked back at him before closing again. Laughing to himself, he closed the door on his little girl and her new seventy pound furry bedmate.

-NCIS-

Every few hours Tim was vaguely aware of Jason coming in to check on him and adjust the smelly pack on his chest. It was nice to be fussed over for a change, but he couldn't shake the notion that it would have been even nicer to hear some sarcastic jokes and movie references at the same time.
Tobias Fornell glared at the dog currently sprawled across his backseat. "It's your fault I'm late, you know that." Jethro gave a soft whuff and rolled onto his back, hoping for one more belly rub. Fornell just shook his head as he closed the door. It really wasn't the dog's fault that dropping Emily off at a friend's house got so complicated. He was an FBI agent, he should have known that combining a big, friendly dog with six little girls would be a time consuming experience. Nope, he decided, it was McGee fault for not warning him about Jethro's love of peanut butter and how many tricks he could do to earn some.

It was mid-morning by the time Fornell made it to the apartment to join Myers and Sacks. After a late night phone conference between them, Myers had quietly turned off the alarm in the apartment bedroom and muted McGee's phone. With any luck, the NCIS agent in their care would sleep late into the morning. Once he entered the apartment, he knew instantly the plan had failed. McGee was already at the computer and 'in the zone' as the team called it. Myers was apologetic while he taped papers up on the walls as fast as Sacks was pulling them off the printer. "Sorry, he was up at the crack of dawn this morning."

"Bulldog, remember?" Fornell moved closer to look at the papers Myers was putting up. Each grouping was for a different chain of nursing and care homes that was now under the control of Edmund Moore through one of his many shell companies. Under the chain information were pages of names with personal information. Tobias felt sick as he realized what he was looking at. "How many potential victims have you identified?"

For the first time, McGee looked up at him. His expression was haunted even as he petted his dog. "We're looking at thousands." He sounded better, Tobias noted, as he took another deep breath before telling the rest. "They started more than ten years ago."

"Ten years?" Tobias looked at the other members of the team hard at work. "That's before they were ever on our radar." He turned back to the sea of names slowly taking over the apartment walls. "What the hell are they up to?"

-Toby- 

Tony DiNozzo looked around as he climbed out of his car, balancing a bag of breakfast burritos and a stack of DVD's. There was no Porsche in the lot, but DiNozzo wasn't ready to give up. He took the stairs two at a time and started banging on the door as soon as he arrived at McGee's apartment. After getting no response, he moved onto plan B and pulled out his lockpicks. Once inside the empty rooms, the happy-go-lucky mask slipped as he leaned against the computer desk. "Damn it Tim, Gibbs is convinced you're in trouble. For once, prove the man wrong, Probie, prove him wrong."

-Toby- 

Julia cleaned up the table after a rare leisurely Saturday morning breakfast with her husband, Hank, and all of their children and new step-grandchildren. The only person missing was their oldest daughter's husband who was serving overseas. Behind her, Hank came into the dining room, pulling on his coat. "Are you sure you have to go into work today?"

"I'm sure, sweetheart." He gave her a peck on the cheek as he snagged an apple from the crystal bowl in the center of the table. "This morning was probably my last break until we finish this case. Take lots of pictures of the kids at the zoo for me."
After twenty three years of marriage, she recognized the look on his face. "This case, it's a bad one, isn't it?"

"Probably one of the worst." The second kiss he gave her was a lingering one and she knew he was committing that moment to memory.

Julia reached up and touched the faint scar on his temple, a reminder of the last case that had consumed him. "Stay safe. You hear me, Henry James Thompson, you stay safe."

Hank gave her a nod before he left for the lab at Quantico. Science had never been his strong suit, and Mildred gave him only a brief run down on the first batch of tests before she took pity on him and sent him on his way with a thick stack of results for McGee. Feeling like he was spending most of his day driving, he left Quantico to meet up with the rest of the task force at the apartment.

-NCIS-

"Shit." Fornell took one look at the caller ID on his cell phone and ducked into the bathroom to take the call. "Walt, what's going on?" Harrison didn't mince words.

~We've had an incident. Nancy and Sarah McGee are all right, but I think it's time to move them.~

"What happened?" Fornell let his head drop and started rubbing his forehead, a nervous habit he'd never quite overcome.

~A guy claiming to be from the cable company tried to get in. He told Sarah that he was there to upgrade their outlets or some such thing. Nancy threw him out and told him to make an appointment next time. I didn't think he was going to back down, but some of the neighbors showed up and he took off.~

"Is there any chance that he really was from the cable company?"

~I checked. No worker was scheduled for their street today and the entire block was upgraded to fiber optics four months ago. I know this family's been through a lot, but they're sitting targets here, Tobias.~

"Okay, okay, you're right. Go ahead and set it up. Let me bring McGee up to speed on what's happened and I'll call you back in a few minutes. Oh, and Walt?"

~Yeah?~

"I promised the kid we'd keep his family safe." Fornell closed his phone and squared his shoulders before walking back out to where McGee was waiting for him.

One look and Fornell knew that McGee knew; probably knew the moment he ducked into the bathroom to take the call. "My family?"

"Still safe, but it's time for the Marshals to take them. I'm sorry, kid." Tobias proudly noted the hands on McGee's shoulders in silent support as he brought him up to speed on what had happened.

Tim had been an agent long enough to know what those words meant. From the time the Marshals walked into his family's home to the time they left would only be a few minutes and Tim's family would, for all intents and purposes, cease to exist. His mother and baby sister would be whisked away to a strange city with new names and new histories. He would not see them or speak to them again until Edmund Moore and his followers were safely and completely locked away.
"Is there time for me to say goodbye to them?"

The father in him again ached for the young man. "Yeah, there's time. Besides, they need to know why this is necessary and it would probably be better coming partially from you."

Phone in hand, Tim scrolled past the names of his team members to reach his mother's cell number. He punched send and listened while it rang, knowing that at the other end it was playing the theme from the Untouchables. None of his friends knew Sarah had inherited her quirky humor from their mother. She didn't waste time when she answered.

~Timmy, something strange just happened.~

"The guy claiming to be from the cable company?"

~How did you know?~

"There's Federal Marshals outside, Mom. They wouldn't have let him hurt you, but now it's too big of a risk for you and Sarah to stay there any longer." He paused and swallowed hard before he continued. "They'll explain everything to you, but you have to go with them."

~How much time do we have? We have to pack and I haven't finished the dishes and...~

Despite the heartache, Tim had to chuckle. Of everything that had happened and was going to happen, the one thing that his mother would never forgive was being forced to walk away from her former life with dirty dishes left in the sink. He looked up at Fornell, who was back on his phone with Walt Harrison, and nodded. "No, Mom. You're not going to pack and you're not going to worry about the dishes. You and Sarah are going to pick up your coats and your purses and walk out the door like you're on your way to the store. Wave at the neighbors like nothing is wrong and get in the car that is going to pull into the driveway."

Next to him, Fornell stayed on the phone with Harrison until the women were safely in his car and away from the house. Walt was using the speaker phone while he drove and Tobias could when Sarah took the cell phone from her mom.

~Tim, I don't understand. What is going on?~

"Dad was murdered, Sarah. We're going to get the people who did it, but I need you and Mom to be safe while we do it."

~What do you mean, murdered? Why? Who would want to kill him?~

"Sarah, there's no time. Just know that I love you both and that eventually it will be all right. Do what the Marshals tell you to do, no matter what, promise me that, okay?"

~Am I ever going to see you again?~

She was starting to cry, he could hear it in her voice, and it broke his heart. "I swear to you, we're going to get through this."

~Promise?~

"Have I ever lied to you? And telling you that worms taste like chocolate doesn't count." That made her laugh, despite the tears and he silently disconnected the call.

Fornell stayed on his phone with Walt until the other man had met up with the rest of his team.
Giving a final thanks to his old friend he closed the last link between Tim McGee and his family. 

Without a word, McGee returned to the computer and immersed himself in the hunt. He was still there when Thompson arrived from the lab. Hank noticed the somber mood immediately. Tobias took the files from him and handed them to Myers before tugging Thompson into the kitchen.

"What's happened, is the kid alright?"

Alright was a subjective term as they all knew and that fact was brought home as Fornell explained the mood. "It looks like Moore's people are getting suspicious. They made a run at McGee's family and we've had to move them into the witness protection program."

"Damn, how's the kid holding up?" Both men turned and watched McGee as Myers handed over the lab results. He immediately started laying out the pages, starting on the table but quickly moving to spread the sheets out on the floor. Intrigued, they came out to see what he was doing.

Myers was watching, but just shrugged his shoulders as the two older agents came into the room. "Haven't a clue, and he's just muttering names of chemical compounds."

"Where's Sacks?" At first Fornell assumed he was walking the dog, but Jethro was asleep under the table.

"McGee sent him out for highlighters. Don't know what for." Myers gave another shrug as he turned back to watch. Fornell exchanged a look with Thompson before dropping down to one knee next to Tim.

"What have you got?" He could see the complicated answer in McGee's eyes and interrupted before he could say a word. "Pretend you're talking to Gibbs, no geek-speak, no five dollar words, just the basic facts."

It was the right thing to say as a slight smile crossed McGee's face. "The lab results are coming in from the first round of bodies you exhumed. We need to see if there is any pattern to what drugs were used on them in comparison to where they were and when they died. Next, we need to match the drugs up to whatever legal testing was done and by what company. After that, we need to figure out some of these other compounds and what they could be used for and then start tracking the financial end of each transaction and..."

"Okay, I get the point. Just let me know when you find something." Once Sacks returned with the largest set of different highlighters Fornell had ever seen, McGee set up a color code and they all got to work marking the names of the victims with the information from the lab.

McGee was focused on his work and didn't notice the quiet conversations behind him. Fornell quietly slipped out as the others continued to work. Even when they had gone through all the results available to them, McGee continued to stare at the pages on the wall. "There's a pattern here, I know there is. We just don't have enough results to show it yet."

Sacks checked his watch before stepping up to McGee and taking the marker from his hand. "We're not going to get any more results until tomorrow; it's time to take a break. We're going to go get some food."

"You guys go ahead." McGee turned back to his contemplation of the wall as Sacks picked up both of their coats.

"Not open to discussion." He steered McGee to the door. "How can you ever get a fresh perspective on something if you never take a break from it. Hank and Jason will be here if any new information
They drove for a good twenty minutes before stopping in front of a small bungalow with an immaculate garden and white picket fence. Another car pulled up behind them and Emily jumped out of it and rushed to them.

"Uncle Tim, Uncle Tim!" She bounced impatiently as he got out of the car, not waiting until he was fully upright before launching herself at him. "I'm so glad you're here. Daddy says I can practice my science fair presentation for you and Mama Sacks tonight after dinner. It has to be perfect before I slaughter Bobby Martin and his stupid volcano that he didn't even make."

Tim couldn't help but laugh as he gave her a hug before setting her back on the ground. Holding onto his hand, she happily skipped into the house. Behind them the two other men plastered on smiles before walking through the door. Their hostess sent Emily in to set the table while she checked McGee. After this round of poking and prodding, she pronounced him vastly improved, much to Tim's relief. As much good as her mustard plaster had done for him, he was glad not to relive the experience.

Of all the feasts she put on for her son's co-workers, Violet's chicken and dumplings was the most anticipated. As much for Tim's sake as Emily's the two FBI agents kept the conversation light as they each shared stories about their funniest arrest and Violet regaled them with tales from Ron's childhood. Taking pity on the embarrassed man, Tim countered with a recounting of his first science experiment and the hole it left in the kitchen floor.

Emily was enthralled by the story and Tobias began reviewing his homeowners insurance in his head. Smirking, Violet distracted the young girl with a request to see her presentation. McGee helped her fine tune the science while her honorary grandmother helped with the theatrics. By the third attempt, it was declared perfect by her audience and they all celebrated with chocolate cake.

The evening was a good diversion and it was close to midnight before Sacks and McGee returned to the safe house apartment. "Thanks, Ron. You were right, I needed the break. Your mom is quite a lady." An odd look passed across his face and Sacks reached out and touched his arm.

"You okay?"

"They've probably got them clear across the country by now." Tim turned to face out the passenger side window. "It sounds stupid, but for the first time in my life, I don't know where my mom is."
Chapter 16

Footsteps woke Ron Sacks as he dozed on the sofa. He shifted ever so slightly to rest his hand on his weapon as he listened. The sounds were coming from the hallway, moving closer to him, so he relaxed and opened his eyes. McGee settled in front of the computer without turning on any lights and started working. Numbers streamed across the various screens and McGee shifted his chair to concentrate on one particular search. Sacks shifted further down on the couch and let the clatter of the keyboard lull him back to sleep.

Daylight was streaming in the window when a softly chanted "yes, yes, yes" woke Sacks again. This time he rolled off the sofa to see what McGee had found.

"We haven't gotten any more lab results, what are you working on?"

"I'm in."

"In what?" Sacks rubbed his face to finish waking up as he came over to peer at the screen that had McGee's full attention. He could see Tim's reflection in the glass and he looked pleased with himself.

"I broke through Moore's firewall."

"You're in?"

"I'm in." McGee cheerfully repeated himself as Sacks stared in amazement. "I've been tracking how his system transfers data between operation sites and I was able to tag along for the ride."

Sacks was watching the information flash by on the screen as he fumbled for the phone in his coat pocket. "How long can you stay in before you run the risk of being detected?" On the bottom of the screen he watched a count down edge closer to zero. "What is that?"

"Hang on." McGee tuned him out again as he started working the keyboard. Sacks made a quick call to Fornell before tossing the phone onto the couch. The count down hit zero and a file transfer complete window popped up. McGee paid no attention to it as he continued to work. Eventually, the normal desktop appeared and McGee leaned back with a smile.

"How long until Fornell gets here?"

"About ten minutes, he and the guys are at the donut shop down the street picking up an order. Come on man, what did you find?" Sacks narrowed an eye as he studied the other man. "You're going to make me wait, aren't you?"

"Hey, it's only ten minutes." McGee turned back to the bank of computers he was working. "Besides, if Fornell is bringing donuts, won't he be expecting the coffee to be done?"

Sacks looked up at the coffee maker he had forgotten to program the night before. "Crap." As McGee chuckled behind him, he scurried in to get it started.

Fornell entered the apartment at almost a dead run, dumping the box of donuts on the table. Myers and Thompson were only a few steps behind him. "Is it true? You got through his firewall? Did they detect you in the system?"

"Yes, yes, no." After receiving a glare almost worthy of Gibbs, McGee gave a more detailed explanation. "Once a week every branch of his operation sends an updated file packet to the
computer system at his headquarters. I was able to use that window of time to get into his system undetected. As long as I get back out before the transfer is complete, they'll never notice the breach."

Myers grinned and pumped his fist in the air. "Yes." Fornell still had more questions.

"You're saying you can get in, undetected, every time he gets an update from one of his operations?"

"Yes. As soon as we've been monitoring long enough to know the schedule and how long each transfer takes…"

"You'll know when you can get in and how much time you have to work." Fornell finished with a grin.

Sacks had seen how quickly McGee had to work to get in and out. "It was pretty quick, how much can you do when you're in?"

"That I'm not sure of yet, but…" he grinned up at Fornell and Thompson who were standing over him. "I was able to make a copy of every file that was sent. They're encrypted, but we have them." Any further explanation was halted as something on the screens caught McGee's attention and he was back on the keyboard.

It looked vaguely familiar to Sacks. "Another update being sent?" Focused, McGee barely nodded as he worked. As the other three FBI agents watched what McGee was doing, Fornell slipped back into the bathroom to take another call. When he came out, he silently snagged Thompson and the two of them left without a word.

Thompson stayed quiet until they were in the car. "What have we got?" Whatever it was, Fornell did not look happy.

"I had someone do a check on McGee's place; looks like there might have been a break in."

"Moore's people?"

"Timing's right." Fornell cut down an alleyway to make better time. "Since the last time they checked the place, the doormat's been kicked to the side and it looks like somebody's picked the lock. We're meeting a forensic team there."

"You didn't tell the kid." Thompson's tone was sharp.

Fornell shook his head. "Not until we know for sure. He's had enough to deal with the last few days." The FBI Forensics Team was already unloading their gear when Fornell pulled into the parking lot.

The two agents followed the forensic techs up the stairs. One of them immediately rolled up the doormat and slid it into a large paper bag and left with it while the other began examining the lock with a fiber optics camera.

"It's been picked for sure." The tech backed slowly away from the door. "Either by someone not very experienced with picking a lock or it's been picked more than once in the last few days. Lots of marks on the tumblers and they're all fresh." A voice over his earpiece distracted him for just a second before he grabbed Fornell and Thompson and dragged them back down the stairs with him.

They were down on the ground level before he stopped long enough to say anything. "The mat tested positive for bomb making materials."
The tech handling the mat poked her head out of the van. "Bomb Disposal Team is on the way." Fornell was already on the phone, calling in reinforcements, while Thompson called Sacks.

Ever since Fornell and Thompson rushed out, Sacks and Myers had become increasingly more watchful, patrolling through the rooms, closing the heavy drapes, and making sure one of them was always between McGee and the door. When Sacks' phone vibrated against his hip, he moved closer to the door while Myers stood over McGee.

"What the hell is going on, Hank?" His hissed words were not loud enough to disturb McGee who was again following an incoming file deep into Moore's network.

~There may be a bomb at McGee's place. Tobias is bringing in extra agents and putting the Special Response Team on stand-by.~

"Shit, how close is our back up?" This time McGee heard him and started to get up. Sacks and Myers exchanged looks and Myers pushed McGee back down in his chair.

"Keep working for now, but when we say go, you go." McGee nodded at Myers and typed faster.

Sacks stayed on the phone with Thompson as he pulled rifles out of the coat closet and tossed one to Myers. Neither of the FBI agents started to relax until the extra agents arrived at the apartment.

It was almost midnight before Fornell stormed back into the apartment, with a smirking Hank Thompson right on his heels. Fornell looked at the leader of the back up team and jerked his thumb at the door. Sensing the other man's mood, the second team wasted no time leaving the apartment before the door was slammed behind them.

"There was no bomb." While Fornell paced in the living room, Thompson leaned against the entry to the kitchen as the other man continued to rant. "You want to know who broke into your apartment, McGee. I'll give you a hint; there were three of them."

Tim couldn't help it, he started to laugh. Fornell was not amused. "Damn it, they broke into your apartment, doesn't that bother you?"

"They do it all the time."

Sacks stared at the chuckling man. "Doesn't that bug you?"

"They're my team, they know something is wrong. Did you honestly think they were going to just walk away? Come on, Fornell, you know Gibbs."

Fornell did know Gibbs. "I can't bring them in yet, kid. You need to get them to back off, we don't need the distractions."

That was a conversation McGee was not looking forward to. "I'll take care of it."
Still nervous about the events of the weekend, Fornell drove McGee to NCIS rather than follow him in a separate car. "You can't tell Gibbs about the case; how are you going to get him to back off?"

"I'll ask him." McGee climbed out of the car and slammed the door behind him, leaving a stunned FBI agent in his wake. Fornell watched until he was safely inside the building before pulling away. From the upstairs, Gibbs watched the car leave before moving to greet the elevator.

McGee didn't even have to step forward to find himself toe to toe with Gibbs. The other occupants scattered before the doors were completely open. "Good morning, Boss." McGee stepped back to give the other man room.

Gibbs barely let the elevator start moving before he threw the emergency switch. "You sound better." He studied his young agent carefully, there was an air of exhaustion that surrounded him and made the senior agent ache. "I was hoping you'd get some rest over the weekend. You've still got plenty of sick leave; why don't you take a few days and go visit your family?"

For a second Tim couldn't take a breath and Gibbs grabbed his arm. "I'm okay." He straightened up and looked the other man in the eye. "Honest, I'm okay."

Gibbs didn't let go. "McGee, whatever Fornell has gotten you into, I can get you out of it. You just have to say the word." He shifted so both his hands were resting on McGee's shoulders. "Just tell me."

"Boss," McGee shook his head. "No, Fornell didn't get me into this, I got him into it and now… now I need you to back off." He took advantage of the stunned silence to press on, remembering what was in the file he read in Fornell's car. "You and Ziva broke into my place, you were there at the same time because your fingerprints were mixed together. Tony broke in later. One of you tracked in residue from the bombing at the recruiter's office."

In spite of the stress he was under, McGee couldn't help but smile a little bit as Gibbs looked guilty. "They evacuated my building and brought in the bomb squad, Boss. Fornell was so worried about my identity being discovered that he had a sniper up on the roof of the building I was in. You can't imagine the man hours that were wasted protecting me from a nonexistent threat." Tim knew he had to make his mentor understand how serious the FBI was taking the situation. "I can't afford them to be sidetracked by you guys, so I am asking you to back off." Gibbs hands were still on his shoulders so he reached up to grasp Gibbs' arms. "Please, Boss, I need you to trust me on this one."

Gibbs briefly wondered what happened to the baby faced kid who wouldn't even have a cup of coffee without permission. "You, I trust. That's not the problem, Tim." He released his hold on McGee, ruffling his hair once before turning the elevator back on. "Go down and have Ducky clear you for duty while I talk to Ziva and Tony."

McGee waited until Gibbs was stepping off the elevator. "If there is even a second that I think they don't have my back…" Gibbs turned to listen as he continued. "$The$ first number on speed dial is yours, Boss, not Fornell's. Always."
"Hey, Ducky."

"Timothy, what a pleasant surprise. How are you feeling, my boy?" Ducky pulled off his gloves and met McGee as he walked through the doors to autopsy. A quick glance sent Palmer heading out of the room.

"I'm much better, thanks, but Gibbs wants a check before he lets me back on duty." Knowing that Gibbs needed time to pass the message along to the rest of the team, he endured the assessment from the Medical Examiner.

Eventually Ducky was satisfied. "You're certainly turned the corner on that nasty virus you've been fighting, but you still look rather run down. Are you eating regularly? Getting enough sleep?

McGee thought about the food Ron's mother had sent, brought and had delivered over the last few days and had to laugh. "Ducky, if I ate any more, you'd have to roll me to my desk." Ducky picked up on what he didn't say.

"You're not sleeping well, are you?"

Tim shrugged. How could he sleep when there was so much to be done. Even Fornell's threat to handcuff him to the bed couldn't shut down his brain. His thoughts were interrupted as Ducky began to speak again.

"You do know that as your doctor, I am bound by an oath to keep anything you tell me in the strictest of confidences." Tim seemed to waver and Ducky pressed on. "I am concerned because part of your medical records have been sealed without my input. How can I gauge your fitness for duty if I don't have the entire picture?"

"Ducky, no, the sealed records have nothing to do with what is going on. You're just going to have to take my word on it." McGee didn't say anything else as he turned and left the room. Ducky sighed and leaned against one of the tables.

"Well, that could have gone better, old chap."

---NCIS---

By the time most government agencies start their day, NCIS had already put in several hours on the bombing at the recruiter's office. Tony leaned back and looked over at Ziva. "You're a woman, how much do you spend on clothes in a month's time?"

"I only buy clothes that I need when I need them, Tony. Why are you asking?"
He gathered some printouts, stood up and walked over to where Ziva and McGee were putting together a time table of the activities of both Staff Sergeant O'Dell and his girlfriend, Yasmeen Haddad. "She's spending exactly two thousand a month, every month." Tony handed the papers to McGee. "This is part of what your search came up with."

McGee studied the pages. "Same four stores, same credit card, always on the first four days of the month, five hundred at each of the stores." He looked up at Tony and Gibbs who had joined the group. "She's not buying clothes, she's using the stores to get cash without her family knowing about it. Sarah… Sarah tried it once."

The rest of the team noticed Tim's verbal stumble when he mentioned his sister, but Gibbs had made them swear not to push. Instead, Tony tried a lighter approach. "Just once? What happened?"

"We had a… discussion on the subject." Most people would have pegged McGee as a pushover when it came to his baby sister, but his team knew how seriously it took being her older brother. He smiled, lost in thought for a moment, before turning to Gibbs. "I wonder if her father knows about her extra money."

Gibbs knew exactly where McGee was going. Ambassador Haddad, most likely, had his daughter on a strict allowance. The information that she had devised a way to sneak that amount of money past her father every month just might be the foot in the door they needed for their investigation. "Let's go see the Ambassador."

As the team gathered their gear Gibbs cornered McGee behind his desk. "Is it safe for you to leave the Yard?"

The fact that McGee did not immediately object to the question drove home how serious the situation was. "It would be more suspicious if I wasn't with the team. I probably shouldn't be out doing interviews alone, but other than that it should be fine."

When Ambassador Haddad was informed that the agents at the gate wished to speak to him about his daughter's shopping habits he was sufficiently curious to allow them into the embassy. Once introductions had been made and the group seated across from the ambassador's desk, Gibbs turned the discussion over to McGee who stood up to lay out the last six months of statements for Yasmeen's father to see. The transactions in question were highlighted and the older man immediately yelled for his daughter.

Yasmeen entered the room with another man holding her close. Using her as a shield, he opened fire, getting off three rounds before Ziva was able to get a clear shot at him. Gibbs and two of the guards rushed to check on Ambassador Haddad who was struggling to get off the floor, clutching a bloody shoulder. Yasmeen started screaming as she stared at the figure crumpled figure at her feet. Ziva sidestepped her to check on the shooter and secure the weapon.

Once the guards took over with the ambassador, Gibbs turned to check on his own people as McGee dropped to his knees. Tony lunged for him, but McGee fell to the floor before he could reach him. The room filled with more guards and staff, but the team was focused on their fallen member.

"Where's he hit?" Tony eased him onto his back and moaned when he saw the two holes in Tim's jacket. Gibbs didn't say anything, just started ripping Tim's shirt open to better assess the wounds. Once the shirt was open, he froze, gasping. Tony wasn't sure what he was seeing and turned to Gibbs. "Boss?"
"A vest, he's wearing a vest." Gibbs let out a breath as he sagged in relief. On the floor, McGee started coughing weakly as he tried to sit up. As DiNozzo kept him still, Gibbs pulled the vest off McGee. Two bullets were impacted into the material, one almost dead center on the chest, and the other only four inches away.

Ziva dropped to her knees beside the three men. "Did we know he was wearing a vest?"

"No, we didn't." Gibbs tried to be angry at Fornell for putting his man in a position where he needed to wear a bulletproof vest on a daily basis but at the moment all he felt was grateful. Instead, he concentrated on the case. "Status on the shooter?"

"Dead." Ziva tore her eyes away from the bullet marked vest to complete her report. "Apparently he was Yasmeen's secret boyfriend and the recipient of the money she has been sneaking from her father."

Gibbs nodded as he listened, but his attention was on McGee. He had stopped struggling to sit up and was now laying still, obviously trying to keep his breathing shallow and slow. Haddad moved closer, much to the displeasure of the guard keeping pressure on his wound.

"He saved my life." Anything else he wanted to tell them was lost in the chaos as the ambulance and paramedics arrived, followed by several men in FBI jackets who rushed straight for McGee.

DiNozzo refused to move back to give room to at his partner's side for Ron Sacks. Sacks also refused to move back and they made a strange sight as the walked shoulder to shoulder behind the stretcher as McGee argued that he did not need to go to the hospital. The only agreement between DiNozzo and Sacks was that McGee was going to the hospital no matter what.
Chapter 18

Another FBI sedan arrived as McGee's stretcher was being wheeled out. Tobias Fornell was out of the car and running towards them before the driver had the car completely stopped. "Tim, my God, is he all right?" He reached the stretcher and saw the dark purple welts McGee's open shirt exposed. Immediately, he turned to Sacks. "Report!" When he realized Sacks didn't know, he repeated his order to DiNozzo in a snarl that had the NCIS agent stepping back.

McGee reached out and touched his arm. "Nobody's fault, just doing my job. I'm okay."

"We're going to have to discuss your definition of okay, young man." Tobias brushed Tim's hair back as he studied him. "How am I going to explain to Emily that Uncle Tim got hurt on the day of her science fair?"

"It's not until this afternoon, I'll be fine by then. It's just a couple of bruises."

"And some possible cracked ribs." Ron beat Tony to the announcement as they glared at each other.

Behind them, Gibbs looked at the older agent that drove Fornell to the scene. "Uncle Tim?" Thompson introduced himself before he explained.

"Tim's been helping Emily with her project for the annual school science fair." Thompson moved away to speak with Fornell before Fornell climbed in the ambulance with McGee. The other three FBI agents returned to their vehicles and followed as they left the embassy compound.

Stuck at the embassy, Gibbs watched the ambulance pull out of the driveway carrying his man, but accompanied by FBI agents. DiNozzo moved to stand next to him.

"There's just something wrong about that, Boss."

*Whack*

"Then let's solve this damn case and get him back."

---NCIS---

"What have we got so far?" Gibbs was short with Ziva as he stormed back inside. She blinked, but immediately started her report.

"Ducky is on his way, the scene is secure, the deceased is Maroof Antar. He was a groundskeeper here until about three months ago when he was fired because of his infatuation with Ambassador Haddad's daughter. The Ambassador is upstairs with his private physician and Yasmeen is with him." Once the official report was done, she showed more concern. "Is McGee all right? He should have someone at the hospital with him."

When Gibbs grunted and passed her as he went back into the study she turned to DiNozzo. "Tony,
what has happened?"

"He's with his FBI buddies. Fornell went in the ambulance with him." Tony turned and looked out
the window and down the street the ambulance had taken. She could see the muscle in his clenched
jaw twitch. "You were right, he's in trouble, Ziva. Serious enough that they have him wearing some
high-tech vest under his clothes."

Tony made a fist and she thought he was going to punch the wall. Instead, he stared at his hand
while he slowly and deliberately opened it and flexed his fingers. "I really wish he was having a wild
affair with Fornell instead."

Ziva reached out and interwove her fingers with his. "Me too."

---NCIS---

Gibbs took the stairs two at a time, ignoring the Secret Service agents, the private security, and the
foreign soldiers milling around and headed straight for Ambassador Haddad. The Ambassador didn't
seem surprised and waved away his bodyguard. "Agent Gibbs?" When Gibbs nodded, he continued,
"how is your man, will he be all right?"

The honest concern he saw blunted some of Gibbs' anger. "He should be, he's being taken to the
hospital as a precaution. We'd like to sort all this out so we can join him. Are you and your daughter
up to answering a few questions?"

Haddad waved his daughter over to join them. He looked her straight in the eye as he answered
Gibbs. "Of course, Agent Gibbs, explain your concerns about Yasmeen's clothing purchases.
Unfortunately I did not see the amount in question before the shooting started." Gibbs handed him
the papers he had retrieved from the study downstairs.

"Your closets are not that large Yasmeen, where are the clothes you have bought every month?" As
Gibbs waited for her to answer her father's question, DiNozzo and David came into the room. Ziva
stood behind the young woman and gave her a verbal nudge to get her started.

"There were no clothes, were there?"

She looked up at Ziva, then over at her father before shaking her head. "No, my friends work at the
stores. They charged my credit card and gave me the cash"

"Why? Don't I give you enough? What do you need all that extra money for, child?"

Gibbs almost felt sorry for the clueless father. "It gets expensive supporting two boyfriends, doesn't
it?" She nodded and started crying again, but he pressed her for more. "Did they know about each
other?"

"Maroof found out."

"About Staff Sergeant O'Dell?" She nodded again as her father swore under his breath. Gibbs gave
him a glance before resuming the questions. "Was he angry about your involvement with Staff Sergeant O'Dell?"

"Yes."

"Did he plant the bomb that exploded at the recruiter's office?"

She leaned her forehead against her father's uninjured side. "I'm sorry, Papa, I didn't mean for anyone to get hurt."

---NCIS---

Fornell decided he needed to work more on his glare, because McGee was sitting up on the small bed in the emergency room. "Damn it, kid would you stay still. The doctor isn't done with you yet."

"He went to get the paperwork for my release. Sacks can drop me off at headquarters after I change my shirt. You need to get going for the science fair."

"Whoa, whoa, whoa, you are not going back to NCIS today." Sacks jumped in the middle of the discussion before Fornell could even take a breath. "The only place I am dropping you is the bed at the safe house."

McGee turned to Fornell. "Are you ready to give Gibbs the location of the safe house?"

Tobias hung his head. The friend in him wanted to be able to show Gibbs that his boy was fine, was safe, was being taken care of. The agent in him knew the more people that knew about the safe house, the less safe it became. "You know we can't do that, Tim."

"Then I need to go back, at least for a few hours." McGee was trying not to move more than he had to. "Listen, convincing the Boss that I'm all right was hard enough when I was standing in front of him. He and Tony watched me get carted off in an ambulance, do you really think they're going to ignore that?"

After one more failed attempt at the glare, Tobias threw his hands up in the air. "Fine, Ron will drive you there and stay with you until Gibbs gets back. I'll be there to pick you up after Emily is finished and then you're going back to the safe house and you're going to stay there. Is that understood?"

"Until Thursday."

Fornell knew he was going to regret asking. "Why Thursday?"

"I have a presentation for Director Vance."

"Kid…"

"No." McGee stood, swaying for a moment before he straightened. "Those bastards have taken everything from me. We all agreed that I needed to maintain an illusion of normalcy so we didn't tip
our hand. My meeting with Vance is scheduled for Thursday afternoon, end of discussion." He
pulled on his shirt, not bothering with the one remaining button and pointedly not looking at the two
blackened holes.

"You're starting to sound like Gibbs, you know that?"

McGee grinned at Fornell. "Thanks. I think that's the nicest thing you've ever said to me." Behind
them Sacks covered his laugh with a strangled cough. Fornell found his glare was much more
successful on his own agent.

"It wasn't meant to be nice." He waited as the doctor came in and gave his last minute instructions.
Once the door closed on the retreating physician, he shook his head. "What the hell, let's get out of
here."

---NCIS---

Palmer followed the sedan into the Navy Yard, turning at the last moment to pull into the loading
zone assigned to the coroner's van while Gibbs parked on the other side of the building. Gibbs
intended to break the news to Abby and drop off the evidence from the embassy shooting before
heading for the hospital. Tony and Ziva carried in the boxes while he prepared to tell Abby what had
happened. He took her hand and led her to a chair.

"What's going on, Gibbs, what's all this?" She looked over the evidence and back at Gibbs. He kept
his voice low and soothing, knowing how she would react.

"Abby, I need to talk to you about Tim."

"He's upstairs, what about him? I tried to give him a hug to tell him that I forgive him for cheating on
me and those FBI guys he's been hanging out with wouldn't let me touch him.

"Upstairs? Now?" Gibbs and Tony exchanged a look while Ziva called up to McGee's desk. When
Abby tried to get up, Gibbs didn't let go of her. "Abby, he was shot a few hours ago. He was
wearing a vest, but he took two slugs to the chest."

While Gibbs tried to explain the situation to Abby, Tony took the more direct approach and opened
the bag containing Tim's NCIS jacket. One bullet hole was apparent on the jacket, but Abby's trained
eye spotted the damage to the zipper from the other shot. "These would have been fatal, Gibbs."

"I know, Abs. Now, do you want to come upstairs with us and try it again? He's probably hurting
too bad for a big hug, but I'm sure he'd like a little one."

"Why was he wearing a vest?" She was staring at the jacket, running her fingers over the damage.
"Were you all wearing vests?"

Tony took back the coat and laid it on the table. "Those FBI guys upstairs put him in the vest. He's
tied up with some case of theirs."
Abby never said she wanted to go upstairs, but she didn't object when Gibbs lifted her up and took her with him.

Despite Abby's report that McGee was upstairs and Ziva's confirming phone call that he was at his desk working, Gibbs didn't relax until he walked into the bullpen and saw him hard at work on the computer. He didn't stop until he was able to lean against the side of the desk and take a good look at his agent. "You okay?"

"Yeah, I'm fine as long as I don't try to move or take a deep breath." He tried to balance the worrisome words with a smile, but Gibbs wasn't distracted.

"Why are you here, then? You should be resting someplace or still at the hospital."

"I'm gonna be off the grid for a few days while my ribs heal. I wanted you to know that I was all right and safe. Wasn't sure if a phone call would cut it."

One thing Gibbs knew was that McGee was right. A phone call would not have cut it. "Will you be safe? When can you tell me what's going on, Tim?"

"I would tell you if I could, boss. There is one thing I can promise you, though."

"What's that, McGee?"

"You'll be read in before it goes down. I told Fornell today that I wouldn't do it otherwise."

Relieved by that simple statement, Gibbs leaned forward and rested his hand on McGee's shoulder. "I'm glad to hear that."

"Uncle Tim, Uncle Tim!" Both Gibbs and McGee looked up as Emily Fornell came running up to McGee's desk. Gibbs caught her as she came around the desk.

"Easy there, kiddo. Uncle Tim doesn't need to be jumped on right now."

"I know, Daddy told me he got hurt." She slipped past Gibbs and wrapped her arms around Tim's neck. "We're going to take good care of you till you're all better."

"Thank you, sweetie. You're the best nurse I could ever have." Tim gingerly returned the hug before leaning back in his chair. "Now tell me about the science fair." Emily smiled and pulled a blue ribbon out of her backpack.

"I won, Uncle Tim. I did it just like we practiced, and I won first place." While Tim and the rest of the team fusssed over Emily as she told about her presentation, Gibbs slipped away to corner Fornell.

Fornell didn't have to guess what Gibbs wanted. "Jethro, I give you my word, I'll take care of him like he was my own."
Chapter 19

McGee winced as he rolled over and reached for his watch. He rubbed his eyes as the numbers came into focus. As he stared at the time and date shown on the watch face, Sacks came in with pills and a glass of water. "Wednesday? You let me sleep an entire day?" He forced himself to sit up as he glared at the white tablets in Ron's hand. "What the hell is in those pills?"

"Muscle relaxants and pain killers, if they put you to sleep that hard, you probably needed it." Sacks continued to hold out his hand, waiting for McGee to take the pills. "Come on, man, you need them."

"No, I need is to get to work. We've lost an entire day." McGee swung his legs over the edge of the bed as he struggled to stand up. Sacks dropped the pills on the nightstand and pushed him back down.

"No, we haven't. Just because you're the one with the computer brains, doesn't mean you're the only one working on this. The lab is knee deep in samples and we're still charting the results like you started. This isn't the kind of case that gets solved in a few days or by one person. That's why we work in teams." When McGee stopped trying to stand up and just sat on the edge of the bed, Sacks slumped down beside him. "I know we're not your team, but…"

"But you guys have had my back ever since this has started. I appreciate it, I really do, but I want my life back and that's not going to happen until Edmund Moore and his group of crackpots are put away. My sister turns twenty-one next week. She's in a strange town, somewhere, and I'm not there to make sure she doesn't do something stupid. I'm not there, do you have any idea what that's like?"

Ron didn't answer right away. Being an only child made some things harder to understand, but then he thought about earlier in the week and realized he understood, if just a little bit. "It would be like sitting a couple of blocks away when a junior agent goes in for a simple interview and shots are fired. You don't know if the kid you're worried about is dead or alive. At least Gibbs and DiNozzo were with you and knew the vest stopped the bullets."

"I'm sorry, man." As close as he had worked with Fornell's team over the last week, he never considered that they would care about him. "I guess that would have been rough, but I'm okay now and it's time to get back to work."

Sacks sighed as he shook his head. "What do you need?"

McGee carefully straightened and felt the twinges across his chest. "How about some aspirin, some coffee and some help getting upright?"

---NCIS---

Fornell arrived after briefing the director to find McGee engrossed in the code scrolling across two computer screens and blocks of color on two more. Myers and Thompson walked through the door right behind him. Sacks nodded at them as he handed McGee several aspirins and some water. The
interruption didn't even cause him to break stride as he worked the keyboard while Fornell observed.
"What's he doing?"

"Haven't a clue." As Sacks watched, the colored blocks dissolved into text on first one screen and then the other. McGee gave a sub-vocal cheer and kept working. "Whatever it is, he's successful at it." After a few more keystrokes he gave a louder cheer and turned around.

"Ron, can you call and have… oh, Fornell, you're here already." The four FBI agents snickered at his surprise before they got serious again. Tobias moved closer to see what was on the screen and realized he left his glasses in the car.

"What have you got, kid?"

McGee winced slightly as he moved, but he leaned back with his fingers interlaced behind his head and a satisfied smirk on his face. "What do you think would happen if one of Moore's lieutenants were more scared of him than of us?"

Fornell narrowed his eyes as he thought about the question. "What did you find?"

"Raymond Lacy, name ring a bell?" McGee waited for recognition; it didn't take long.

"He's one of Moore's right hand men. What about him?" Fornell accepted a coffee mug from Thompson while he listened.

"Raymond's been a naughty boy; I can prove he's been embezzling money from Moore. I don't think Moore's going to like that very much, what do you think?"

"Embezzling, are you sure?" Fornell shouldn't have been surprised, but he was. Myers was just humored.

"That's rich; the accountant is stealing from the terrorist. Welcome to the modern world. How much money are we talking about?"

"Half a million and some change, and it gets better." McGee's calm announcement had Fornell spraying coffee across the kitchen.

While Fornell coughed and Thompson mopped up coffee, Sacks asked the obvious question. "How does it get better than that?"

"Instead of taking the money out of Moore's personal funds or one of the shell companies we're tracking, he stole it from one of the charities he bankrolls. We can go after Lacy and never touch anything regarding our real investigation." McGee waited while the rest of the group processed what he said.

"You mean…"

McGee nodded, pretty sure where Fornell was headed. "The discovery can be made during a pretty routine check of their non-profit status by the IRS, and they in turn…"

"Would hand the investigation over to the FBI. It's brilliant." Fornell already had his phone out. "Time to call my buddy in their enforcement division, we can have Lacy in custody this afternoon."
"Hey, it's pretty quiet in here." Tony set the Caf-Pow on the bench next to Abby's elbow. "Where's the music?" He pretended not to notice as she wiped her face before taking the drink.

"Didn't feel like it." She took a small sip and set the cup aside. Tony knew that it wouldn't take long; the one thing Abby could not do was keep quiet when something was upsetting her. "Why didn't he trust us, Tony? Why didn't he trust Gibbs? I mean Gibbs is Gibbs, you know, and not trusting Gibbs is like not trusting that the sun will come up tomorrow because it has to come up, because it's the sun. If he can't trust us anymore, then how can we trust him and if we can't trust each other then there can't be a team and then what's going to happen if we're not a team anymore?" Sniffing, she leaned her head against DiNozzo's shoulder.

"Abby, when you found out about my undercover assignment with Jeanne, did you stop trusting me?"

"What? No, of course not." She straightened up and punched him in the arm. "How could you even ask me something like that?"

He continued, hoping she would see the similarity. "But I lied to you and I kept things from you."

"You were undercover, you didn't have a choice."

"Are you sure McGee has a choice?" When his question silenced the Goth, he pressed his point home. "Whatever he's caught up in, I think he's in trouble and he's scared, even if he won't admit it. Trust isn't about telling us what's going on, it's about knowing the people you depend on are going to have your back when things go bad. I don't know what's going on, but I still trust McGee and I hope he trusts me." Tony rapped his knuckles on the table twice before walking out of the lab. He wasn't sure he'd gotten through to her, but he hoped she had something to think about now.

---NCIS---

A warrant for the arrest of Raymond Lacy was issued quickly and quietly by a federal judge and handed over to Thompson and Sacks who took great pleasure in arresting Lacy at his office in front of dozens of employees. They expected the murmurs of questions and protests. They expected Moore to be furious at being robbed by someone he trusted. They expected Moore to turn his back on the man who had served by his side for over twenty years. What they did not expect was the sniper shot that sent their car careening down the steep embankment to land upside down in the river.
Chapter 20

Fornell tossed the file down onto the table and rubbed at his eyes. Pages and pages of possible victims and tox screens were making him cross-eyed. Myers dropped into the chair next to him with a fresh stack off the printer. "If nothing else, I think we can nail Moore for the destruction of a national forest. We're going to need more paper." Fornell laughed at his comments, but his focus was on McGee as the younger man suddenly straightened up and started typing furiously.

"You find something else, McGee?"

"One of Moore's charities is a homeless shelter in New York."

"Soooo?"

"NYPD has put together a task force of their own, investigating the increase of murdered and missing homeless." McGee shook his head as he studied the NYPD file he had hacked into. "They're not really taking it seriously, but it's an election year so they can't ignore it completely."

Fornell came over and read over McGee's shoulder. "What makes you think there's a connection?"

"I don't think Moore does anything without a reason. Look at the list of charities he supports, almost all of them are medical, religious or tied in somehow with people that fall through the cracks of society. Then there's the other businesses he's bought into. Why would he need a fleet of bulldozers?"

"Bulldozers? You're right, that is weird." Myers came over to join them at the computers as McGee continued to explain what was bothering him about some of his latest finds.

"Have you really listened to all of Moore's speeches? The man rambled more than any politician I've ever heard, but there's one catchphrase that keeps showing up. He typed a command into the computer he was using and an audio file loaded and started playing. Fornell recognized Moore's nasally voice and concentrated on the words.

~God is not pleased with what we have allowed to happen to his country. Soon he will sweep his hand across this great land and scorch the world of all the non-believers. We will rise above the flames and rebuild this great country with his chosen ones. Mark my words, our day is coming.~

"Okay, yeah, the guy is seriously creepy, but what's your point?" Myers kept glancing between his boss and the young man who was already blaming himself.

"The bodies of the homeless that's turned up in New York were all burned."

Before Fornell could come up with an explanation, he phone rang. McGee and Myers watched as he paled and closed his eyes. Eventually, he spoke. "I've had a National Guard helicopter monitoring the pick up of Lacy."

"What went wrong?" Myers kept glancing between his boss and the young man who was already blaming himself.
Fornell was moving towards the door. "Sniper, they think. The car went into the river." He pinned McGee with a look. "Jason and I are the only ones left with the code to get in here. Anybody else shows up, shoot first ask questions later and keep working. Find out how Moore made us." Before McGee could answer, Fornell and Myers were out the door.

---NCIS---

"Hank!" Sacks was yelling for his partner as soon as he broke through the surface of the water. When the gray haired man did not surface, Ron took a deep breath and dove back down. The return trip seemed to take much longer and his lungs were burning before he reached the car. Inside, Hank was conscious, but his coordination was failing as he desperately sawed at his seat belt with his small pocket knife. The car had come to rest on the door that Sacks had been ejected through as the car rolled into the water, so he started pulling and prying at the driver's side door. It yielded only seconds after the belt came free and with a last burst of energy, Ron pulled him free of the wreckage.

Once they reached the surface, Sacks let them drift in the current until they reached some low hanging branches that protected them from view. He forced Hank's hands around the lowest branch. "Hank, come on buddy, stay with me. I need you to hang on so I can get Lacy."

"It's, it's too late." Thompson was coughing and shivering as he tried to get Sacks to listen to reason. "He's not worth killing yourself over." Sacks didn't answer as he started swimming back upstream.

---NCIS---

Tim rubbed at his chest as the screen filled with the information he was looking for. A phone call was made to one of Moore's shell companies less than ten minutes after the agents had left with a signed warrant. The call originated in the clerk's office, the only other person who would have known about the impending arrest. Acting purely on instinct, he picked up his cell phone and hit the first number in his speed dial.

---NCIS---

Gibbs sat at his desk, reading over the reports from the bombing at the recruiter's office and subsequent shootout at the embassy. No matter how many times he read the cold hard facts, it still pained him to review it. Lost in thought, he didn't bother to look at the caller ID when his phone rang. "Yeah, Gibbs."

~Boss, it's McGee. I need help.~
"What's happened?" Gibbs was instantly upright and snapping his fingers at DiNozzo. Tony and Ziva immediately scrambled to their feet and grabbed their gear.

~The guy we're after just took out half the task force. There's a mole in Judge Andrews staff and …~

Gibbs didn't bother waiting for the elevator, just headed straight for the stairs. "Tell me what happened, McGee." Behind him, DiNozzo and David exchanged worried glances as they ran to keep up. Gibbs didn't say anything to them until they were in the sedan as he raced through the streets.

"Boss?"

"They got their first arrest warrant today for one of the smaller players. Their big fish got a call from the Judge's clerk right after they left chambers." He swallowed and licked his lips, a nervous tell Tony had never seen from his boss. "It looks like a sniper took out half the task force."

"What about McGee?"

Gibbs spared Tony a sideways glance as he cut through traffic. "Safe for the moment."

Ziva recognized their destination. "Safe as long as we get to the mole before McGee's location can be traced." Nothing more was said as training took over. Vests on, Gibbs flashed his badge and they were able to bypass the metal detectors and the usual questions. The elevator was bypassed as they again used the stairs, as much for stealth as it was for speed. They entered the fifth floor corridor as a young woman stepped out of the target office. She saw them and ran back inside, locking the door.

Tony prepared to go high and Ziva was ready to go low as Gibbs kicked the door in. The woman was straddling the window and with a calm smile on her face she looked at Gibbs. "We will scorch the world of all the non-believers. You can't stop us." Still smiling, she pushed herself backwards out of the window.

"The hell we can't." Tony dove as she fell, managing to grab her hand as the momentum dragged him forward. Ziva and Gibbs lunged for his legs and started dragging them both back in through the window. The unknown woman was not willing to be rescued and clawed at DiNozzo's wrist, raking down his arm with her nails. Sweat and blood slicked his hand and before Gibbs could lean forward enough to snatch her, she was able to pull free of Tony's grip. The three agents watched as she fell to the concrete, the smile never leaving her face.
Tobias Fornell parked in front of the small, well-maintained home and leaned against the steering wheel. It seemed like a lifetime ago the last time he was here. The door opened and Violet Sacks came out onto the porch, watching him. He groaned, hating this part of the job most of all, and climbed out of the car.

She didn't move until he was up on the porch with her and by then he could see the fine tremors she was trying to hide. "Tell me he's alive, Tobias, just tell me he's alive."

"It's all right; he's alive." He opened his arms and wrapped them around her as she sobbed her relief into his shoulder. "He's got a slight concussion and they're treating him for exposure, but he's going to be fine." Tobias heard the softly whispered prayer of thanks and waited until she finished and pulled away from him. Are you ready to go see your boy?"

Violet nodded as she wiped at her face. "I'm ready." Tobias locked the house before wrapping his arm around her and walking Violet to the car.

"All right, sweetheart, we're going to pick up Julia and then I'll take you both to the hospital." He felt her almost stumble and pulled her tighter to his side. "Hank's alive, they're both alive."

Once the second stop was made, Tobias rushed to the hospital with the two worried women holding hands in the back seat.

---NCIS---

After six hours non-stop at the computer, Tim finally had to stop and work the kinks out of his fingers. Three more layers of encryption to go before he was inside the files Moore and his Dawn of Tomorrow group tried so hard to protect. Some of the apparently less important files only had two layers of encryption instead of five and he settled down to read those, trying hard not to think about the missing task force members or of his own team he'd sent out to capture Moore's informant.

---NCIS---

DiNozzo sat impatiently as Ziva cleaned the gouges on his arm. "Can you believe that woman? God, the look on her face, like killing herself was the greatest moment of her life. I've never seen anything like it."

"I have." Ziva dabbed at his wrist with an antiseptic wipe as she looked back over to the body. Gibbs was standing next to it, a troubled look on his face. Turning back to Tony, she explained. "Zealots believe so much in their ideology that it is their greatest reward to die for their beliefs."
"You're talking about suicide bombers in the Middle East, not law clerks here in America, Ziva." As Tony protested, the coroner's van arrived. Ziva waited until Gibbs finished speaking to Ducky and joined them before answering. "It would appear that McGee and Fornell are chasing a group of extremists"

"Really? And what was your first clue, Officer David, was it the sniper that went after his task force or her happily bouncing out of a fifth floor window." He thrust a finger in the general direction of the body Ducky and Palmer were processing. Gibbs pulled out his phone, still shaking his head as he dialed the lab.

~Hey, Gibbs, what's up?~

"Abby, I want you to start checking hospitals, find if any surviving FBI agents were brought in."

~What do you mean, surviving? What's going on?~

"McGee's FBI group was attacked…"

~What? No, not McGee… he can't… Gibbs, you… what…~

"Abby!" He used the bark that always stopped her rants. That accomplished, he reassured her. "He's all right and we're going to make sure he stays that way. Now, find me that hospital so we can meet up with the survivors." As soon as he disconnected the call, he shoved the phone in his pocket.

Ducky came up to the group, a concerned look on his face. "Our Jane Doe has a great deal of skin under her fingernails, did one of you…" DiNozzo held up his bloodied arm in response. "Oh Tony, I'll get my bag and we'll have you fixed up in no time."

"No."

"Jethro, really." Ducky was surprised at the force behind Gibbs' rejection. "I agree, it is only a superficial wound, but it still needs to be cleaned up and…"

"No, I'm taking him to the hospital." Gibbs looked over at the two agents with him and smiled. Both of them knew instantly what he was up to. His phone rang and he quickly answered it. "Gibbs."

~Two FBI agents are at GW. Where's McGee, Gibbs?~

"He's safe, and as long as we're careful, he's going to stay that way, so don't try to trace him, Abby."

~But Gibbs…~

"No, and that's an order, Abby." Ending the call, he turned to the remains of the team. "Ziva, finish processing upstairs and then ride back with Ducky. DiNozzo and I are on our way to George Washington Hospital. We'll all meet back at the office."

---NCIS---
By now, McGee was pacing through the apartment. The files he had read and the latest round of lab results were bad enough, but he hadn't heard from anyone in hours. The GPS chip from his phone was now stashed in his pocket, but it was a moot point as the battery was now dead, the charger locked in his car with the car keys safely in Fornell's pocket. Rubbing at the ache in his chest that the aspirin was no longer helping, he returned to the computers, determined to discover exactly what Moore and his people were up to.

---NCIS---

"Tobias, what a surprise. Fancy meeting you here." Gibbs put on his best 'play nice' smile he had as he joined the other man in the emergency waiting room. Fornell wasn't buying it.

"What a coincidence, Jethro." His tone made it apparent what he thought of the coincidence as the other man moved to sit next to him. Not wanting to discuss anything about the situation in front of the two women with him, Fornell stood and jerked his head towards the stairway entrance. Once the heavy door closed and they were beyond earshot of those in the waiting room, he rounded on Gibbs.

"What the hell are you doing here?"

"McGee called me. He found the leak and sent us to fix it." Gibbs watched to see Fornell's reaction as he continued. "Who else was he suppose to call, or would you have wanted to lose the informant?"

Fornell leaned against the wall. "No, he did the right thing. How'd he find the leak so quick?"

"How does he do anything he does with a computer?"

"Good point." Even under the circumstances, Fornell had to laugh at the two of them trying to understand how the geek worked his magic. "So, did you get the leak? I need to know exactly what information got passed along."

Gibbs knew the news wasn't good. "It was the clerk in the Judge's office. She smiled at us and stepped out of her fifth floor window."

"Shit." Fornell ran his hands through his hair in frustration. "The body with Ducky?"

"Yep." Gibbs crossed his arms over his chest and leaned one shoulder against the wall next to Fornell. "I want to know what's going on, Tobias. It's time."

Fornell knew he was right. They were down two agents for now and the case was spiraling larger than they had ever dreamed it could be. He still hadn't confirmed or ruled out a leak within the Bureau and he trusted Gibbs. More importantly, McGee trusted Gibbs and the rest of the team. "Yeah, it's time. McGee's presentation to Vance is scheduled for tomorrow. We'll use that as cover. Now, I've got to check on my men."
Gibbs followed him out. "How bad was it?"

"Sacks has a concussion, he'll be released in the morning. Thompson's got a busted leg. They're putting pins in it right now, so he's going to be out for a while." Fornell shook his head. "They're lucky; it looks like the guy they picked up is brain dead."

---NCIS---

Just as McGee was seriously contemplating how pissed Fornell would be if he left the safety of the apartment, Myers unlocked the door. "Jason, what's happening, how bad was it?"

"Sorry, kid, sorry. Didn't mean to leave you hanging so long. They're going to be all right." He reached out and grabbed McGee when the younger man swayed in relief.

"I'm fine." Tim tried to shake off the supporting hand, but Myers wouldn't let go until he was sitting down.

"Let me guess, all you've had today are pain killers and coffee." The reddening of the ears gave Jason his answer. "Time to eat and get some rest. Fornell called me, your team is getting a full debrief in the morning, so be ready to answer a lot of questions" He could see the weight lifting off McGee shoulders.

Tim knew what his reaction had been. "I'm sorry. You guys have been great, amazing really, but…"

"But we're still not your team. No sweat, man, I'd feel the same way if I were in your shoes. Now, did you find anything that can't wait until morning?"

McGee glanced over at the searches currently running. "I found a lot, but I need answers from the new search pattern to know if I'm right about it. I think I'd rather wait and brief everyone tomorrow. If I'm right, it's even worse than we thought."

"Crap, I didn't think it could get worse."

"Neither did I."
Chapter 22

It was after midnight before Abby returned to her lab. She had grabbed a quick bite of food and driven around for hours, going to every place McGee had ever taken her or mentioned to her, and nowhere had she seen his car. He was not answering his phone and she had left over a dozen voice mails, none of which had been returned. Frustrated, she wandered around the lab, hoping for an inspiration. In all the years she had known him, McGee had never acted this way before. Acting more on instinct than thought, she turned to her computer.

Upstairs, Ziva finished with her last contact. Every person she knew from DC to Panama to Moscow, all the way to Seoul, Korea and not one of them could tell her anything concrete. Only a vague sense of uneasiness, not even a solid rumor was threading through the network of contacts she had developed since her first days of training with the Mossad. Discouraged, she shut down her computer and prepared to leave. In the nearly empty parking lot she spotted Abby's car and became suspicious. This late at night, the elevator bell was loud and jarring, so Ziva ignored the luxury and slipped down the back stairs.

"Don't." A hissed voice and a hand grabbing her wrist almost sent Abby to her knees. Before she could yell or defend herself, Abby was pulled away from the computer and the search canceled. Her wrist still gripped tightly, she was frog marched into her office and shoved into the chair with enough force to force it back against the desk.

"Are you crazy or are you really trying to kill McGee?" Ziva pulled out her weapon and slammed it onto the desk. "If you're so determined to kill him, at least do it quickly and with some mercy."

Abby blinked at the venom in Ziva's tone. "That's a terrible thing to say to me, Ziva. Everyone keeps telling me that McGee's in trouble and I just want to find out what's wrong. Why is that a bad thing?"

Ziva retrieved her gun and started pacing in the small room. "Because you are meddling in things you do not understand. Because you are not a field agent and you do not know what has happened." She stopped suddenly and clutched the armrests of the chair, leaning into Abby's face. Because you were told specifically not to do it."

"So you know what is going on." Even Abby didn't know why she couldn't let go.

"What I know is that McGee is working on something that has brought him to the attention of some very dangerous people. People who have a way to find out details about the investigation. Think about it Abby. Those FBI agents hadn't even left the courthouse before their case was compromised. If they wanted to find McGee, they didn't have to search for him, all they had to do was follow your computer trail." When Abby's face started to crumple into tears, Ziva backed off and sat on the edge of the desk.

"Why didn't he go to Gibbs? When we're in trouble, we're supposed to go to Gibbs." Spent, Abby sagged back in her chair. "We're supposed to go to Gibbs."

That question had haunted Ziva since the first moment she realized McGee was in trouble. "I think… I think something happened to McGee when we were after Kale. The rest of us were too focused on hunting Kale to see what was it was. One thing I learned in Mossad," Ziva waited until Abby was looking at her. "Often you only have a moment to make a decision and once it is made, you have to keep going with it. When McGee can tell us, he will. Until then, we must have faith."
"Tony said we just have to trust McGee."

"Tony is only half right. It is more important that we do not do anything that would threaten his trust in us." When the Goth didn't have anything else to say, Ziva held out her hand. "Come, Abby, I will walk you out to your car."

---NCIS---

Fornell arrived back at the apartment to find Jason slumped on the sofa, snoring as Tim sat in the dark at the computer. "When I talked to Myers, he said you were sleeping."

"Tried." McGee shrugged as he rubbed his chest. "Figured I might as well work as stare at the ceiling." To prove his point, he leaned forward and hit a few keys on the keyboard, starting another search. Fornell leaned over his shoulder to see what he was doing, and Tim took pity on him and explained the new searches. "I'm running financials on Lacy and on Moore's other lieutenants on this computer."

"And on that one?"

McGee rubbed at his chest again. "I've been reviewing Moore's speeches, looking for more incidents where he uses specific phrases repeatedly, and…"

"And what, kid?" Tobias could see the tension in the younger man's posture

"I thought if I could get a better understanding of the way he thinks, maybe all these files and findings would start to make better sense. Maybe I could figure out what he's going to try to do; maybe stop somebody else from getting hurt." Now, Tobias realized, they were getting to the heart of the matter.

He pulled another chair up and sat next to McGee. "It wasn't your fault. We all agreed that arresting Lacy was worth the risk. He had to know something we could use."

"For all the good it did. Now two good men are in the hospital and Lacy is brain dead. Have you heard, when are they removing him from life support?" The reflected light from the monitor made Tim's skin an unhealthy color.

Fornell sighed. "They're not, his family refused to allow it."

"That's not right."

Another sigh. "It's their choice, Tim. We may not agree with it, but his family has the right to…"

"No, that's not what I meant." McGee sat up straight, quickly scrolling back through what he had been reading. Finding it, he pointed it out to Fornell as he explained. "Moore's group is very anti-modern medicine. He and Lacy both have even lectured about the evils of life support. Listen to this from a speech he gave two months ago. 'No doctor has the right to hold on to a soul that has been
called home by God.' Why would they change their minds like that?"

Fornell wasn't comfortable with the subject under the best of circumstances. "Theory is one thing, kid, but when it's the reality of your own family…"

"No. Moore doesn't do anything without a reason… so, what was his reason?" McGee sounded so sure of himself at first. It took a few seconds for Fornell to realize that it wasn't doubt, but deep thought that caused McGee's words to fade off.

"Kid, tell me what you're thinking."

Distracted, McGee repeated himself. "Moore doesn't do anything without a reason."

"Yeah…" Tobias knew McGee was headed somewhere with this, but he was too tired to see where yet.

"Once Lacy is declared dead, the family loses control of the body, right? He was murdered while in custody, so there has to be an investigation, an autopsy. The family can't stop it from happening except by not turning off the machines."

Fornell hated the reminder that someone had died in his team's custody; or at least would die as soon as the machines were shut off. "Yeah…"

"Why doesn't he want us to examine the body?"

"Crap." Fornell shook his head. He really was tired if McGee had to spoon feed him facts for him to see them. McGee wasn't finished either.

"Lacy had grown children, right?" As he asked, McGee scooted over to another computer and started another search. "Didn't I see somewhere that they work in the organization?"

Fornell had been after this group for most of his career, he'd seen those two boys grow up. "One of them is Moore's driver, but I don't know about the other one."

By now, McGee had found him in the files. "Other one is Kevin. Moore put him through college for a degree in…" He quickly scrolled through the data, "oh, God."

"What?"

"Kevin Lacy has his doctorate in Biological Sciences, specializing in infectious diseases. Now he works for a small research firm owned by one of Moore's shell companies. They send weekly updates to Moore with heavier encryption than any of the other files he receives."

That was troublesome on many levels, but Fornell filed it away for later. "Until we have access to the body, there's not much we can do. I can ask the doctors to take some blood samples for our lab, but even that might be tricky."

"The body…" McGee stood up, a look of horror on his face. "The body, that's not the only body. Phone, I need your phone." Fornell had barely pulled it out of his pocket before McGee took it from him and started dialing.

~Gibbs.~
"Boss, it's me. I need you to listen very carefully. We need guards on the body from today."

~Guards? I guarantee you she's dead, McGee.~

"I know, Gibbs, but they want her back." In the background McGee could hear the squeal of tires as Gibbs pulled a tight u-turn and he knew his boss wasn't wasting time as he asked questions.

~Why?~

"When we know the answer to that, we'll know the answer to a lot of our questions." He heard Gibbs disconnect and nodded to Fornell, relieved but still worried that they weren't in time.

---NCIS---

Gibbs didn't toss the phone on the seat as he was known to do; instead he immediately started dialing and barking orders the second the phone was picked up, not waiting for a hello.

"DiNozzo, where are you?"

~Home, Boss, what's up?~

"Get back to the Yard now. I'll meet you there." He disconnected and went straight to the next number.

"David, where are you?"

~Just leaving the Yard, Gibbs.~

"Turn around. They're going to make a run at the body from today. Notify security to shut down the building. I'm fifteen minutes out."
Tobias squinted at his phone as he checked the caller ID. He was beginning to think going without
sleep was a requirement to work with NCIS. Trying to not sound sleepy, he flipped it open.
"Fornell."

~What in the hell are you doing to my agency, Fornell? You've got one hour to get in here with
McGee.~

"Director Vance? Sir, we're already scheduled to meet in your office later today."

~I'm not waiting that long to find out why someone tried to blow up our autopsy room tonight. Get
McGee and get in here.~

"We're on our way, sir. You do understand that Agent McGee is still recovering from his injuries?"

~Unless he is currently leaking blood, I expect you both in my office in one hour.~

He was expecting the slamming of the phone, but he still jumped, much to Myers' amusement. Jason
rolled off the sofa and stretched, popping his back in a way that made Fornell jealous. Fornell just
rolled his eyes as he walked towards the bedroom. "I'll wake the kid, you start the coffee; and make
it strong; I think we're going to need it. Tobias stopped as the both heard the shower kick on.
"Guess he heard the phone call."

Jason fumbled with the filters one handed as he reached for the coffee grinds. "The way Vance was
yelling, I think most of the building heard that phone call."

In the shower, McGee turned the water as hot as he could stand it, hoping to fill the small room with
steam. He soaped quickly and rinsed before shutting the water off. With luck there would be enough
hot water for the others, but he needed the steam this morning. Cautiously he took another shallow
breath, then another a little deeper. The ache in his chest was sharper this morning and he had
developed a slight cough. He hadn't been able to take a deep breath since the shooting, but today was
definitely worse. As he dried off he hoped to have a few minutes to see Ducky while they were at
NCIS, but from their track record so far, he wasn't counting on it.

With just enough time to get to the Navy Yard without raising Vance's ire even more, the three men
left the apartment safe house. Fornell was a little surprised McGee had turned down the coffee, but
looking at the young man surrounded with stacks of printouts and a pocket full of flash drives, he
decided McGee was probably jittery enough without the extra caffeine.

---NCIS---

"Man, they've really ramped up the security since the last time I was here." Myers looked up in the
rearview mirror to see Fornell glaring back at him. Realizing that his boss was hoping that McGee
was too distracted to notice, he tried to backpedal. "Guess it's the monthly drill we're all supposed to
do."

McGee had been too well trained by Gibbs to not notice. "This is no drill." He looked over at Fornell
who was studying him closely. "I was right, they made a run at the body?" When Fornell just
nodded, Tim asked the one question he was dreading. "Was anyone hurt?"

Fornell knew his answer wasn't going to be believed. "I don't know, kid. Honestly, I don't know. Vance wasn't big on details."

Once their car, their bags, their badges and their signatures were carefully scrutinized, McGee was allowed into his own agency with the two FBI agents one step behind him. Leon Vance was waiting just inside the doors, two agents on protection detail flanking him and two armed soldiers to his side. Vance rarely looked happy, but Tim had never seen the man look this angry.

"So nice of you to leave us a present, Agent McGee. Tell me, how long was there between the time you knew the danger you put this agency in and when you finally got around to letting us in on the little secret?"

The reassuring hand on his shoulder fanned his bravery. "Four or five seconds, Sir. We had no proof or evidence, but I informed Agent Gibbs as soon as I had a suspicion there might be trouble. What exactly did happen last night?"

Vance pointed to the elevator. "Let's talk downstairs." The group moved to the elevator, but Fornell stopped Tim just outside it.

"You've got four people with you that haven't been vetted by the task force. Either they stay up here or we do."

"What are you suggesting?" Vance stared at Fornell with an incredulous expression. "Are you suggesting my agency has a turncoat?"

Fornell was just tired enough to not care about insulting the brass. "Well, Director Vance, I'd hate to think you're the only agency in the entire government to not have that pleasure right now."

For the first time since they arrived, Vance took a good look at the three men. They looked frayed and worn. His wife would have a fit if she'd seen how they had been greeted. Giving in, he dismissed the protection detail and waited for the three to join him in the elevator. No one spoke during the trip down, both Vance and Fornell noticed McGee rubbing his chest and shoulder when he thought no one was looking.

The elevator stopped at the sub-basement rather than the basement, much to McGee's surprise as Vance explained tersely. "Autopsy is sealed, we'll talk in here." He lead them into the lab where the rest of Tim's NCIS team were waiting along with Ducky, Palmer and Abby. The Goth seemed unsure of herself and was watching McGee closely.

Ducky was bandaging Ziva's arm when they arrived, several butterfly bandages closed a gash along Gibbs' hairline, indicating he'd already been treated. As McGee asked what had happened, Jason moved up behind him in a show of support. Gibbs turned to Ziva as he started the explanation, as much for McGee's benefit as for Vance's.

"I was almost home when you called about a possible attempt on the body. I called DiNozzo and David and ordered them to return here immediately. Ziva was the first to arrive." He nodded at her and she took over the retelling of the events.

"I was going through the main gate when Gibbs called me, so I had the guard at the gate radio for assistance and I immediately returned. I came through the garage entrance and…"

~flashback~
Ziva didn't even bother to throw the car out of gear as she came to a stop next to the coroner's van. She slammed against the door, cursing the time it took for the eye scan to recognize her and allow her into the building. Weapon already in hand, she crept down the stairs to the lowest level. She could hear sounds coming from behind the steel doors. Ducking down to not be seen through the glass, she made it past the doors to press against the wall and see inside. A masked figure, all in black was inside the room, pulling the drawers open in an apparent attempt to locate the body.

Behind her, a sound caught her attention and she turned to face a second intruder. He dropped a large glass jar of liquid, allowing it to shatter on impact. She recognized the smell of rocket fuel instantly. Ziva drew down on him as he laughed, flicking a lighter in his other hand. She fired, not at him, but at the lighter in his hand. The bullet tore through his fingers and sent the lighter flying to land away from the spilled fuel. She fired again, but he managed to get a round off at the same time, grazing her upper arm before hitting the glass window in the door. The attacker fell, unmoving, as the door to autopsy burst open, hitting Ziva's wounded arm and knocking her gun out of her hand.

For a split second Ziva stared at the ice cold blue eyes visible through the mask before they both dove for the gun. His first blow was to her injured arm, a move designed to cause pain, to incapacitate. For many, it would have succeeded, but not against a Mossad operative fighting for her life. The few seconds it did gain him cost her dearly as the fight dragged on.

When the sound of gunfire echoed through the stairwell, Gibbs abandoned all pretense of stealth and tore down the remaining stairs, sparing only a quick glance through the small window in the door before bursting through.

In the dim light he could see Ziva on the floor struggling with someone. They were too tangled together for Gibbs to take a shot, so he holstered his weapon and entered the fray as the masked man lunged back into autopsy, dragging Ziva with him. The door swung back, hitting Gibbs in the face as he slipped on the fuel slicked floor. The blow didn't slow him down much as he was quickly back onto his feet. The assailant struggled to get across the room, ignoring the two agents trying to control him. In a move that almost felt anticlimactic, his threw a sharp jab to the man's face, knocking him unconscious. Gibbs pulled his weapon back out and cautiously cleared the room while Ziva handcuffed him. Footsteps in the hall caught her attention and she eased into position next to the door. Through the cracked glass she could see that the new arrival was not masked.

~end flashback~

DiNozzo picked up the tale. "After Ziva decided not to kill me, we cleared the rest of the basement and secured the explosives."

"Explosives?" To answer McGee, DiNozzo pulled up a picture on one of the monitors of a large stack of C-4 blocks partially wired to a detonator.

"Between the C-4 and the rocket fuel, it would have destroyed both the basement and the sub-basement and cremated everything biological. Those are some freaky scary people you've gotten yourself tangled up with, Probie."

Fornell was more interested in suspects than blame. "You captured one of them alive?"

"Oh, that's the best part." DiNozzo gave a wry grin as he continued. "Bubba was sitting there grinning like a loon, kinda like the nutty clerk was before she went sidewalk diving, and then he announced that he had missed his time for the antidote and dropped over dead. So now Ducky has all three bodies sealed up and we get to figure out what to do with them after they finish getting all the explosives and rocket fuel cleaned up."
DiNozzo glanced at McGee. Tim had been quietly coughing off and on ever since he had arrived and Abby was plying him with a Caf-Pow. Every time he set it down, she would hand it back to him. She seemed more settled now that she was fussing over him, but he looked haunted as he listened to what had happened. Concerned, he pressed on in hopes of reassuring his partner. "Whatever is going on, apparently you've done a good job at it cause they're playing hardball and now it's time to let us play too."

Gibbs, too, had waited long enough. "Are you ready to tell us what is going on?"

McGee and Fornell exchanged a look before Fornell answered for him. "Let's take this up to MTAC, we'll need the security."

---NCIS---

If the technicians were surprised to be told to leave MTAC, they didn't show it as they filed out and Gibbs closed the door behind them. At first Fornell objected to the supporting members of the team being part of the discussion, but McGee quickly informed him that he trusted them and they needed to understand the significance of the tests Abby would be running when autopsy was opened back up. A strange look passed across Abby's face as McGee talked about trust, and DiNozzo and David watched her closely. Behind McGee, Myers watched all three of them.

Vance still seemed annoyed, but Fornell was beginning to think it was a perpetual state for the man. "All right, McGee, why don't you start by telling us who you're after and what's going on. Just start at the beginning."

McGee rubbed at his chest as he looked at Director Vance, using the formality of a report to keep his emotions in check. "Several weeks ago we discovered unusual deaths occurring at some nursing homes, starting in Iowa. Upon investigating, it was discovered that Edmund Moore had taken over a controlling interest in those chains of homes."

It was apparent that all the agents and operatives in the room recognized the name, but Palmer and Abby did not, so Fornell broke in to bring them up to speed. "Moore has been on our radar as a homegrown terrorist for years now, but we've never been able to pin anything on him. Every investigation up until now has ended with the deaths of one or more of the agents involved and always in a way that we couldn't connect to Moore. Everything from car accidents to allergic reactions. The man's like Teflon; nothing sticks to him."

Ducky looked at McGee in alarm at the mention of allergies, as Palmer asked a question of his own. "What exactly has Moore done that can be tied to him?"

Fornell was pacing as he rubbed the back of his head. "That's what made it so hard to nail him. We can't directly link him to anything, but he's always been in the background whenever there's been a major incident that we can't prove was an accident, like the mine collapse a few months ago. Moore was recruiting in the area literally days earlier."

"They operate in the guise of a church, call themselves the Dawn of Tomorrow." McGee picked up where he'd left off. "Some of their rhetoric is really scary. For the last few years it's all been about wiping away all the non-believers from the country and repopulating it with his own kind."

Even Gibbs paled at the implications. "So the nursing homes…"
Feeling the pressure of not knowing what Moore's group was planning to do with the money and the knowledge they were gathering, McGee cut straight to the chase. "They're the first layer of whatever he has planned. They're running illegal drug testing on some of the patients; probably to raise the necessary funds for whatever he's planning to do."

"How many," Vance looked over at Gibbs before clearing his throat and trying again. "How many victims are we talking about so far?" Before he answered, Tim pulled a stack of papers out of his backpack and handed it to Vance. The black clip at the top was barely holding the pages as the Director glanced through them. "So far we've identified more victims of his fundraising than have died from every terrorist attack on this country combined."

If felt like the air had been sucked out of the room as the members of NCIS stared at McGee and at each other, trying to absorb the sheer numbers of deaths McGee was claiming to have happened. DiNozzo was the first to react.

"That's not possible, somebody would have noticed. Why wasn't it noticed?"

McGee was hunched over slightly, holding his left arm tightly against his body. "Tony, he controls hundreds of nursing homes and rehab centers in forty two states. He uses the patients that are unable to communicate or have no family, and it's been going on for more than ten years."

"You said that Fornell didn't drag you into this; that you went to him." Gibbs words were gentle, something rarely heard by his team, as if the discussion would somehow fracture the young team mate who had carried this investigation on without them. "How did you discover what was happening?"

Tim was even paler now and dots of sweat on his forehead caught the dim lights in MTAC as he sat down for the first time since they had arrived. "The first identified victim was Mitchell McGee… my father."

Everyone else in the room ceased to exist as Gibbs squatted down in front of McGee. "When?" Even as he asked, barely breathing the word, he knew. He knew when he'd seen that broken, haunted expression even if he didn't recognize it at the time. "Kale, it happened when we were tracking Kale, didn't it?"

The one thing Tim never wanted to see was the guilt in his mentor's eyes as he tried to answer, but the pain and the pressure were becoming too much to bear. He tried to curl his body more, to relieve it somehow, but he sensed he was running out of time, out of strength, out of air as he fell forward.

Time stretched and warped as Gibbs asked his question. He saw the sadness cross Tim's face, the confusion, the pain, and finally the resignation as his body went slack. As time snapped back into normal he lunged forward, his knees hitting the hard floor as McGee's limp form tumbled into his arms.
"Ducky… Ducky!" Before Gibbs could take a deep breath to yell a third time, he and McGee were surrounded. Familiar hands helped him ease the semi-conscious man to the floor. Most of them moved back to give Ducky and Palmer room to work, but Gibbs refused to budge. Palmer was at Tim's head, checking his pulse.

"It's fast, doctor, really fast." Gibbs watched as the assistant counted and calculated in his head. Over one hundred, close to one twenty." Palmer looked at Ducky, alarmed. "His neck veins are distended."

Ducky nodded, ripping McGee's shirt open and tugging at the new bulletproof vest underneath. "My medical bag is still in the lab." DiNozzo scrambled to his feet and ran for the door as Ducky tried to get Tim to respond. "Tim, Timothy, can you hear me?"

Behind them, Fornell's pacing increased as he considered the possibilities Moore had somehow found the young man. Myers was obviously thinking the same way. "We were so careful, how did Moore get to him? He didn't even eat anything that we weren't…” He spun and looked at Abby who was wringing her hands, watching them work on McGee. "You! What did you give him? You kept pushing that drink on him. God, how could I have been so stupid to let it happen. I let my guard down here because Tim was so sure he was safe here."

"It was just a Caf-Pow, honest." Abby looked first to Director Vance and then to Ziva, who had a strange look on her face as she stared back at Abby. Vance noticed Ziva's discomfort with the other women.

"Officer David, if you know of something, this is too important to hide any suspicions you may have."

Ziva shook her head regretfully as she stared at Abby. "I do not want to believe Abby is capable of hurting McGee, but very late last night I found her in the lab trying to track his cell phone location after Gibbs very specifically ordered her not to."

That was enough for Vance and he went to the door to call for a security detail. Security arrived followed by DiNozzo with Ducky's bag. Abby stood her ground as she pleaded with Vance. "Director Vance, you can't honestly think I'd hurt McGee. That… that would be like kicking a puppy and you know I'd never hurt a puppy and…"

"Miss Sciuto, did you or did you not attempt to track Agent McGee's cell signal last night?" She wouldn't look him in the eye and he'd had enough. "At the very least, you've undermined the security of a highly dangerous operation and threatened the life of the agent involved, and at the worst," he gave her a hard look, "you may be charged as an accessory to whatever terrorist acts Moore commits. Security will hold you in an interrogation room until I decide what to do with you." Abby looked to Gibbs for help but his focus was on McGee.

Gibbs rolled up his jacket and slid it under McGee's head as he silently watched Ducky examine him. Ducky lightly slapped Tim's face. "Timothy, I need you to stay awake for me. Are you having chest pains?" A weak nod was given as Tim's eyes fluttered open for a minute. Palmer leaned over to speak to Ducky, keeping his voice low, but Gibbs was able to hear him.
"His blood pressure's so low I can't get an accurate reading, and with the distended jugular veins, it
could be a beck triad….

"There's definite arrhythmia and muffled heart sounds. Good call, Mr. Palmer, let's get him up and
see what effect that has on his blood pressure." Ducky looked up at Gibbs. "We need him upright
and leaning forward, Jethro." Gibbs shifted position to support Tim in this new position. Fornell
dropped to his knees behind him as he started to grill Ducky.

"Dr. Mallard, I need to know if McGee's been poisoned before we can call an ambulance."

"Fornell, he needs help now." For a moment, Ziva thought DiNozzo was going to charge at the FBI
agent, but Vance stepped in.

"Explain yourself, Fornell."

Fornell intently watched McGee as he did just that. "The last time we thought we had a handle on
nailing Moore, one of my guys collapsed during a lunch meeting. Something he had eaten sent him
into full anaphylactic shock. His epi-pen malfunctioned."

Palmer shook his head. "Those things don't malfunction."

"Yeah, I know, but his did." Anyone looking at Fornell knew exactly what he suspected happened
to that particular lifesaving device. "The ambulance got there really quick, and we were only minutes
from the hospital. He should have been fine. He was DOA at the hospital and no one recognized the
ambulance attendants and nobody's seen them since." Fornell stood and went toe-to-toe with Vance.
"They got to Robbie in my office, Leon, in my office. If they've somehow managed to poison
Tim…"

"Damn it." Today was a lousy day to quit chewing on toothpicks, Vance decided as he turned his
attention to Ducky. "Do you know what's wrong with him yet, Dr. Mallard?"

Ducky was listening to Palmer as he rechecked McGee's blood pressure. "His pressure's back up
some. It's still not great, but at least I can get an accurate reading." As soon as Palmer gave his report,
Ducky's attention was on the muffled heartbeat he could hear through the stethoscope.

After leaning so far forward, McGee seemed more aware of his surroundings and was able to answer
some questions from Ducky. The doctor didn't seem surprised that the chest pain was decreasing in
the awkward position. After exchanging a few muttered words, Ducky stood up and Palmer
exchanged positions with Gibbs. Ducky gathered them out of earshot of the ailing man.

"Well, Doctor?"

Ducky glanced at Vance before focusing on Gibbs and Fornell while the rest of them listened. "I'm
afraid that Timothy is showing all the signs of cardiac tamponade. I suspect he started developing
pericarditis over the last several days since the shooting and he's been pushing himself too hard."

"What exactly does that mean, Duck?" Gibbs kept glancing back at McGee. "How serious is it?"

"Very serious, I'm afraid. It appears that fluid or blood has been seeping into the sack that contains
his heart. The build up is enough that his heart is literally being crushed by the increased pressure. If
his heart functions are limited long enough, it could become life threatening. Agent Fornell, what
kind of pain medication has he been on?"
Fornell quickly thought back. "Vicodin and some sort of muscle relaxant, but they really knocked him out and after the first day he would only take over the counter pain pills."

"All we had at the safe house was aspirin." Myers interrupted, guilt evident on his face. "He's been downing aspirin constantly and that's a blood thinner, isn't it?"

"Between the chest trauma from being shot and the lingering viral infection, he was a prime candidate for this sort of complication. The aspirin and that caffeine jolt from Abby's drink didn't help, but I'm afraid this was almost inevitable given the circumstances. Now we must find a way to get him safely to the hospital."

"We drive him ourselves." DiNozzo spoke like it was the most obvious solution, which Gibbs realized, it was.

"We'll use the coroner's van. I'll drive; Ducky and Palmer will be in the back with McGee. Everyone else in sedans, heavily armed. We take him to Bethesda." Once they had a plan it went quickly, even if McGee was uncomfortable being transported on one of the gurneys from autopsy he was too ill to complain.

The medical staff at Bethesda was used to handling VIP's and weren't fazed by the guards that accompanied this patient, but they did not allow any of them into the emergency room except Ducky and Palmer. Just to be safe, Gibbs slipped Ducky his back-up Beretta.

Frustrated, the group congregated in an out of the way corner where they could still see the doors to the exam room where McGee was being treated. DiNozzo immediately turned on Fornell. "This can't be right, McGee's dad couldn't have been one of the patients. He talks to his dad every week."

"I know."

"Well, if you know, then you'd know that his dad couldn't have been one of those abandoned patients in some nursing home someplace."

Fornell hoped Tim would forgive him for telling such details, learned during one of the long nights at the safe house, but his friends needed to understand what he'd been through. "He called his dad every Sunday night, right?"

DiNozzo nodded, alarmed by the fact that Fornell knew this and maybe what he was saying was true.

"When he was a kid, Sunday afternoons were for the guys. If his father wasn't deployed, they'd leave Mom and baby sister home and have some sort of an adventure, just the two of them. After Tim left home, it became a weekly phone call between them." Fornell had to stop and clear his throat before he could tell the rest. "His dad had been ill, slowly slipping into a vegetative state for some time. But every week, Tim would still call, and someone would hold the phone to his ear, in the hope that maybe his dad could still understand what he told him."

"He never said a word to any of us about his dad being sick." Tony's eyes were suspiciously bright as he stared at the ceiling. "God, I used to tease him about calling home so often."

"His father died the same night we were…"
"Hunting the child rapist." Fornell finished Ziva's sentence as she glanced at him before turning to Gibbs.

"Why did McGee not tell us, Gibbs? Why did he feel he had to go through it alone?"

"Because it was a case involving children and I was being an ass. I reamed him for being six minutes late. Six damn minutes late, in front of the entire bullpen and half a dozen Metro cops. The kid's too damn polite to shove my face in it."

The self-loathing he heard in his old friend's voice reminded Fornell why Tim had been so adamant about not telling his boss. "It wasn't about being polite…"

"Then what was it about, Tobias? You seem to know all about it, why wouldn't he get in my face and tell me what an ass I'd been? Why?"

Myers spoke up for the first time. "God, you really don't get it do you?"

"No, I don't, so why doesn't somebody just tell me?" By now, Gibbs was yelling. "All this time, why did he feel like he had to suffer in silence?"

Fornell shook his head, sadly. "He'd already lost one father, Jethro, he couldn't bear to hurt another."

His pacing suddenly stalled, Gibbs collapsed into the nearest chair while the rest of the group started arguing about how or when they should have known.

"That night, he got real stressed all of a sudden." DiNozzo rubbed hard at his face. "I started teasing him about it, like an idiot." Ziva was staring off into space next to him.

"I am no better, I was right there and did not see he was hurting. That makes me just as much of an idiot, does it not?"

Up until now, Vance had been silent, observing the interactions of the team he respected, but still didn't quite understand. "So, why cover for you? Why not just come to my office and ask for emergency leave?"

"You'd have wanted to know why he went to you before Gibbs, why his team didn't know about his dad. Probie wouldn't have done that, he'd have suffered in silence rather than hurt any of the team. We'd have had it coming, but he wouldn't have done it."

Gibbs wasn't really registering the conversations behind him as he turned back to Fornell. "You were able to help him, right? I'm not talking about the case, but the rest."

Fornell sat next to him and thumped his knee with a fist. "We may have been the kid's second string, but yeah, I took care of him like he was my own, Jethro. We all did."
Chapter 25

It was almost three hours after their arrival before word came, in the form of Palmer's appearance in the waiting area. He seemed a little overwhelmed with the swarm of people that surrounded him. By unspoken design, they all deferred to Gibbs, including Vance.

"How is he, Palmer? Was Ducky's diagnosis right?"

Palmer tried to look reassuring, a feat in itself considering how intimidated he was by both Gibbs and Director Vance. "All the tests confirmed it; cardiac tamponade brought on by untreated pericarditis. He's on oxygen and they've got him on a medicated drip to bring his blood pressure back up to a safe level. They'll perform a pericardiocentesis as soon as he's stable enough."

Gibbs had no idea what that meant. "Is that dangerous?"

"It has some… risks." Palmer swallowed hard as Gibbs moved closer, Fornell right behind him. Feeling cornered, he rushed to detail the procedure and the risks, holding his left hand up in a fist with his other hand hovering over it. "Okay, his heart," Jimmy wiggled his left hand briefly, "is surrounded by the pericardium and there's usually a small amount of fluid in there, but in McGee's case, there's too much fluid and they have to drain the extra before the pressure does too much damage."

So far, the explanation was understandable. "This pericardio-something is to drain the fluid?"

"Pericardiocentesis. Yes, sir. They use a needle to go through his chest wall and puncture into the pericardial sack to place a catheter. Then they drain the excess fluid until his heart starts beating normally again."

"It sounds simple enough." DiNozzo's words didn't match the look on his face, while Ziva tried to be practical.

"What are the risks you mentioned?"

"They could go too far with the needle or the catheter and puncture the heart or one of his arteries, or if it goes in wrong, it could puncture his lung or his liver or even his stomach." Palmer started to panic at the expression on Gibbs' face and clarified. "They'll use an echocardiograph to watch the movement of the needle, so it's a really small risk, Agent Gibbs."

"What else?"

Palmer always wondered how someone could talk with their jaw clenched so tightly, but decided this wasn't the time to ask. "He could develop an infection or he could have a heart attack during the procedure." Gibbs stared at him and nervously he added a few more. "If they remove too much fluid, it can cause other problems. Other than that, the biggest danger is if air gets in the pericardial sack which can cause another episode of tamponade and then we're back where we started."

Vance decided to step in before Ducky would need a new assistant. "Thank you, Mr. Palmer, I'm sure that's more than enough information for now." However, Palmer was too nervous to stop talking.
"I'm sure he's going to be fine, Agent Gibbs. Dr. Mallard is still in there with him and he'll make sure they're careful and keep McGee calm when they work on him."

"Calm?" Myers shoved his way to the front of the group, much to DiNozzo's displeasure. "You mean they're going to keep him awake when they do this?"

"Umm, yes?" It was a barely audible squeaked answer as Palmer found himself surrounded by stressed agents. Ziva tried to change the focus.

"Shouldn't we call his family? His sister, at least, should be here for him."

Fornell and Myers both looked uncomfortable, but Fornell was the team leader. "We can't."

"Of course we can. That has nothing to do with the case. McGee and his sister are very close and I am sure she would want to be here for him. Especially if they have just lost their father."

"No, Officer David." Fornell looked up at the ceiling as he told in a low voice, "they're gone."

"What do you mean, gone?" Gibbs was in Fornell's face before anyone realized he'd moved. "What in the hell did you do?"

Fornell knew this had been coming and stayed calm, even as Myers moved close to defend him. "Moore's people tried to make a move on the family, and we retrieved them the second they were in danger. The Marshals have them in the deepest layer of witness protection right now."

Gibbs let go of Fornell's jacket and walked over to look out the window. "That must have just about killed Tim to send them away."

"Yeah, it did." Fornell stood in back of Gibbs, both staring at the window, both actually watching the reflection of the doors behind them, both waiting for Ducky to come through those doors.

---NCIS---

"Mom, I'm fine, stop fussing." Ron Sacks smiled in amusement at his mother as she insisted on tying his shoes. He had his release papers in hand, all that was left was the ride home. A subtle glance at his watch showed that Myers was almost thirty minutes late. In the next bed, Hank watched in boredom.

"At least you get to go home. I'm stuck here for another week." They both looked up as the door opened, but it was Julia back with a milkshake for Hank. The older man grinned as he took his treat. "If I'd known Jason was going to be this late, I'd have asked Julia to get you one too."

"Actually, Jason called me a bit ago. I'm your ride home." Violet picked up on the stress in her voice and closed the door the rest of the way. As soon as the door was closed, Hank leaned forward in his bed.

"What's going on, baby?"
Julia played with the strap of her purse. She hadn't met McGee yet, but she knew her husband was fond of him already. "That agent from the other agency you're been working with," she paused, knowing she had to be vague since they were not in a secure building. "He's been rushed to the hospital."

"What's wrong?"

"What happened?"

"Something to do with…" She quieted, tapping at the center of her chest when a nurse walked in the room. Once the nurse was done and the door closed behind her, she continued. "It's bad, Hank, Jason said it's really bad."

"Then that's where we're going." Sacks sat in the wheelchair the nurse had left. "Julia, can you drop Mom off at home on our way to Bethesda?

---NCIS---

When the doors finally opened, everyone was back on their feet before the bed was rolled out the door. The staff moved back to give them a moment, as Ducky broke the news. "He handled the procedure well, Jethro. Now he just needs some rest and time to recover."

"No time, we're running out of time." Tim was arguing even before his eyes were open, searching desperately through nonexistent pockets, as he tried to get up. Gibbs was right there, pressing his shoulders back down onto the pillow.

"Tim, you rest while Fornell brings us up to speed, all right?" He reached up and brushed the hair back from McGee's face. "We're not going to walk away from this. We're here, Tim, we're here."

"Flash drives?"

"I've got them, kid." Fornell caught one of the restless hands and pressed it down onto the bed. "Everything is safe and accounted for, I promise."

"Keep pushing New York for the autopsy results. Those are the key, those and the bodies we have. Somehow, that's the key."

"We'll take care of it. You just worry about getting better, all Right?" Fornell leaned over and waited until he got a nod.

Finally the exhaustion and the drugs pulled him under. Gibbs kept his voice low as to not wake him. "What happens now?"

Ducky smiled, but didn't comment on the two men unconsciously smoothing the blankets and tucking them in. "He'll be moved up to the Cardiac Intensive Care Unit to be monitored. Once we're sure there is no additional bleeding or fluids building up again, then he can be moved to a regular
room." At a nod from Dr. Mallard, the staff moved back in and began moving the portable bed towards the elevator. After a slight debate among the many volunteers, DiNozzo and Myers drew the first shift of guard duty outside of CICU while the rest returned to NCIS, allowing Fornell to start explaining the details of the case.
Chapter 26

It was a somber group that left Bethesda and returned to the Navy Yard. Once they were in Vance's office, he started barking out orders. "Dr. Mallard, Mr. Palmer, McGee's three bodies downstairs are your top priority. Every other case needs to be either put on hold or transferred."

"Director, may I suggest issuing a Zulu five."

The FBI agents, Ziva and Palmer looked at each other blankly. For Palmer's sake, Ducky explained his suggestion. "It's a security protocol that was established after our first run in with Ari. Once we have autopsy locked down, only the Director or Agent Gibbs will be able to over-ride the system and gain access to us."

Instead of responding to the request, Vance next turned to Gibbs. "We still have to make a decision about Miss Sciuto, but in the meantime, I do not want her to handle the lab work for this case. Do you have anyone in mind that you trust?"

"May I make a suggestion?" Fornell moved closer as he spoke. When Vance nodded, he continued. "Mildred Novak runs the secure lab at Quantico and has been in charge of all our lab work until now. She's qualified, already been vetted, and is up to speed on the case."

"Get her here now." Vance opened the wall safe and removed a lockbox. Inside the box was an elevator key. Gibbs raised an eyebrow but didn't say anything as they all filed out of the office and into the back elevator. Vance used the key instead of the down button and turned to face the back wall of the elevator. Gibbs shrugged at the rest of the group and faced the same direction with the rest of them following suit. They stopped and the back opened up to a dimly lit corridor.

"This part of NCIS was built during the cold war and redesigned after 9-11. Other than emergency drills, it's never been used… until now. Dr. Mallard, I am afraid we are well beyond a Zulu five." At the end of the corridor Vance stopped for both an eye and hand scan. Once those both responded with a green light, the voice activated panel lit up, waiting for him.

Entry gained, Vance led the group on a near silent tour of the hidden wing of their building. North of the elevator, a second autopsy room was next to a medical unit and across from a well equipped lab. Austere, but adequate sleeping quarters and a small kitchen rounded out that side of the facility. The south side consisted of several small conference rooms and a much larger version of MTAC, with double the number of computer stations covering the back wall. The explanation, when it came, was simple. "This was designed for a worst case scenario of possible chemical, nuclear, or biological attack."

Fornell's answer was just as simple. "I'm afraid we may be at that point, sir."

It took almost two more hours before all the members of the group present were fully authorized to access the system, including Mildred Novak who arrived just as Vance and Gibbs were headed upstairs. Ducky and Palmer began conducting autopsies on the three bodies while Fornell and David started to sort out the data brought from the safe house that morning.
"How is he?" Ron Sacks entered the CICU at almost a run, much to the displeasure of the nurses on duty. Myers pushed away from the wall to greet him, while DiNozzo didn't look away from the window into McGee's room.

"He's going to be okay." Myers and Sacks moved further away from the window while Jason brought his partner up to speed on the events of the day. Tony kept glancing at his watch and stepped through the door the second his ten minute visit could start.

Tony smiled at the nurse checking McGee's EKG. It looked reasonably normal to him and she seemed pleased, so he stepped closer to the bed without stopping to question her. "Hey, Tim," he leaned over and spoke quietly in the resting man's ear. "I'm so sorry you had to go through this alone, buddy, but no more. We're going to be with you every step of the way from now on, you have my word."

"He wasn't alone." Sacks' voice behind him made DiNozzo stiffen up. "The guys and I made sure he wasn't ever alone." Even though it should have, somehow that did not make Tony feel any better.

---NCIS---

"What do you want done with her?" Vance and Gibbs stood in the observation room, watching Abby sleeping on the other side of the mirror. Gibbs was a little surprised at the question.

"I have a say in this?"

Vance had found his hidden stash of toothpicks, much to his relief as he chewed on one. "She's attached more to your team than any other team here. You're the one that will have to deal with the results on a daily basis, so yes, you get a say in this."

Mentally reviewing the last few weeks, Gibbs knew he had to find some middle ground for everybody's sake. "McGee's been though enough and lost enough people since all this started. As angry as I am at her behavior, I don't want him to take on any misplaced guilt about Abby. Let me talk to her first." Vance watched as he walked out the door and then into the interrogation room.

Gibbs looked up at the mirror once before sitting at the table. Instead of yelling and slamming something on the table, he just whispered her name.

"Abby?" It was enough as she slowly raised her head, blinking at him as she wiped her face.

"Is McGee all right?" For once, her first thoughts were about him and not her. Something inside Gibbs relaxed just a bit at that.

"He's stable and in the cardiac intensive care surrounded by guards to keep him safe." He waited to see how she would react.
"Is it our guys or the FBI protecting him? Are we going to lose him to the FBI, Gibbs?"

"I don't know yet, Abby. Right now we have to focus on the case, on his case. We owe that to him." Gibbs stared at her until she started squirming in her chair.

"I really screwed up this time didn't I? How do I fix it, Gibbs? How do I make it right with McGee?"

Instead of answering, he turned back to the mirror and nodded. After a moment, the door opened and Vance stepped through, carrying a thick file from Fornell. He sat down next to Gibbs as the other man finally answered her.

Gibbs leaned back in his chair to watch her reaction as he spoke. "I'm not sure you can fix it Abby, at least not until you understand why you did it." Instead of saying anything, she just shrugged her shoulders without looking him in the eye. Vance stepped in to start asking the hard questions.

"Why were you so mad at him when you found out he used another lab, or were you angry with him before that?"

She didn't answer the Director either, so Gibbs also pushed her. "What was it Abs? What did he do to piss you off during the Kale case?" He could see the answer simmering right below the surface, so he slammed his hands down on the table and yelled at her. "What was it, Abby? What got you so riled up at him?"

"He didn't come see me. Everyone went on a dinner break and he didn't come get me." Even Abby was surprised at her yelled response and threw her hands over her mouth. Vance didn't give Gibbs a chance to respond.

"Let me get this straight; McGee found out his father had just died and you're angry that he went to break the news to his sister instead of taking you out to dinner?"

"I didn't know about his dad, I just knew…"

"Knew what, Miss Sciuto? That you weren't the center of his universe at that moment?"

"Timmy always comes to me when a case is bad and he didn't come to me and that means that it was so bad that he couldn't or he was hurt and didn't want me to worry because he never wants me to worry, but I worry more if I don't know that I'm not supposed to worry. And then he took blood to somebody else's lab and I didn't know why and I was still worried and I was scared and I do stupid stuff when I'm scared. Okay?" Her volume continued to rise as she babbled, until at the end she was crying and screaming as she repeated herself. "I do stupid stuff when I'm scared."

Part of Gibbs wanted to hug her and tell her it would be all right, but the case was too big and the potential for devastation too great to let go of the risk she had been willing to ignore. Risks to McGee would have been bad enough, but after being briefed by Fornell about what McGee and the task force had discovered, he understood how far-reaching the risks had become. "It was beyond stupid, Abs. Vance was right, it may have become criminal."

She was still sniffling and wiping her nose with the back of her hand as she moaned. "No…” Vance interrupted her, slamming his fist on the file.
"Our field agents depend on our lab, Miss Sciuto; you are their very lifeline in a case. They need to know we have their backs at all times, even when it's bad, especially when it's bad. They need you to be calm and rational with your concerns." Vance leaned back and took a deep breath, willing himself to calm down. "I've read through what happened, and I think, under the same circumstances, I would have had to make the same decisions McGee made. He was in an unconceivable position, and it took a great deal of strength to do what he did."

He finally had her attention and she nodded slowly, as realization started to creep across her face. "He might have confided in me as a friend if I hadn't treated him so mean."

"At least knowing the option was there would have made his burden easier to endure." His point finally through, Vance outlined what the young woman would have to do to return to the lab and the team she deeply loved.

---NCIS---

Ducky and Palmer stood in the airlock as they removed their hazmat suits before moving on to the next stage of decontamination. Palmer seemed shocked at the level of procedures they used, as it was much more involved than when the plague filled envelope was opened in the squad room. Ducky was taking no chances with whatever was hidden in these bodies. Once the samples were safely delivered to Mildred in the lab, he found Fornell and then went off to find Gibbs.

Luckily the events of the day had not affected Gibbs' innate ability to know when he was needed, and was just stepping off the elevator with Vance when Ducky came out of the lab. "Gentlemen?" With a tilt of his head, he had the three following him into the unused medical unit in the secret wing of NCIS.

For someone who loved rambling stories, Ducky could be straight to the point when it was necessary. "Agent Fornell, can the case continue without Agent McGee?"

"Honestly, I'm not sure." Tobias thought about what they had so far, and the holes left to fill. "With McGee, we have the computer knowledge combined with the instincts of a well trained field agent. He's gotten further in just a few days than any of our cybercrime guys got in years. We know a lot, and have a lot still to work with, but we don't know what Moore is planning. Instead of chasing him, we need to be able to anticipate what his big plan is, and for that we need McGee."

Gibbs was having none if it. "No, no, no, he's in intensive care, remember? He's been through enough; it's time the rest of us took up the slack. He needs to recover." The glare Fornell received showed that his time as Tim's surrogate father had ended and he was now considered a threat to the young man. The FBI agent refused to think about how much that hurt as he argued.

"Do you really think he's just going to walk away from the case after all its put him through?"

Ducky broke in before it could get ugly. "I fear Agent Fornell may be right, and we're going to be forced to find some middle ground."
Middle ground had been hard enough to reach upstairs, Gibbs wasn’t ready to start again, but Ducky would not be persuaded.

"His helpless father was murdered by these animals and now he has lost his mother and his sister to their threats. Whatever Moore and his people are planning, after ten years and thousands of murders, it is obviously something devastating. Timothy is too good of a son, too good of an agent to simply say his shift is over and then walk away."

"What are you suggesting, doctor?" Vance knew McGee's input would probably be necessary, but it would do no good if the man keeled over again.

"If he suffers no further fluid build up over the next forty-eight hours, his recovery will be simply that, recovery. This medical facility," Ducky paused and waved his arms around, "is more than adequate for his needs, and Mr. Palmer and I can certainly watch over him. There is some additional medical equipment we will need, but Bethesda can provide what we need."

In the end, it was an easy decision for the Director, even if Gibbs was worried that McGee would push himself too hard, too soon, despite Ducky's assurances that he could monitor McGee closely enough.
Chapter 27

It took more effort than it should have for DiNozzo to turn and look at Sacks. "Shouldn't you be in the hospital?" Ron made a big show of looking around the small room packed with medical equipment and McGee's bed.

"Gee, I could have sworn this was a hospital."

Tony couldn't stop the smile that was creeping across his face. "You know what I mean." He watched as Sacks moved carefully across the room and turned serious. "Are you all right?"

"Yeah, I'm fine, got a hard head." He reached the foot of the bed and watched the sleeping man.

"Almost as hard as yours, DiNozzo."

"Probie, you're awake." Tony and Ron both leaned closer as Tim's eyes slowly opened.

The voice was soft, but steady. "See, Ron, told you he's a pretty good investigator."

Even from the doorway, Myers had to smile, but the two FBI agents let DiNozzo be the one to carry on a conversation with the youngest agent. "How are you feeling? Are you hurting anywhere?" A nurse moved closer to hear, but didn't interrupt.

"I'm okay, kinda fuzzy." McGee tried to reach up to rub at his face, but Tony caught his hand and held it down to the mattress.

"You've got stuff attached to both arms right now, so let's not do that." That got Tim's attention and he opened his eyes more to notice the blood oxygen meter attached to the hand he had tried to lift. Two IV's ran into his other arm.

"What have they got me on?" Tim stared at the bags hanging over him, trying to focus on the labels. "Can't lie here, I've got to get back to work on the encryption."

"Oh, no, you are going to stay right here until the doctors say otherwise, McGee. In case it's escaped your attention, you're in intensive care. To be more specific, the cardiac intensive care. This case of yours is a heartbreaker, literally."

"What?" Tim instinctively reached for his chest and Tony grabbed his hand.

"There's still a catheter in your chest, Tim. I don't think you want to be messing with that."

A group of doctors and nurses moved down the hallway towards McGee's room and were intercepted by Myers who cleared them against the list of background checks they had run on the personnel. Once they had passed inspection, Tony and Ron had to leave to allow them to examine Tim in private.

Fornell, Gibbs, Ducky and Palmer all arrived at the cardiac wing just as the two agents left McGee's room.

"Hey, Boss."
"DiNozzo, what's happening?"

Tony grinned at his boss and the rest of the new arrivals. "He's awake and they're checking him over right now." That was Ducky's cue and he and Palmer made their way into the room. The remaining men moved to an empty waiting room as Fornell looked carefully at Sacks.

"Shouldn't you be home resting?"

"I needed to see for myself that the kid was going to be all right."

Fornell understood the sentiment. "Now that you've seen him, I want you to go home and get some rest. We're back at it again tomorrow, so if you're up to it, we could use you with us. The operation is being moved to the Yard for better security." DiNozzo looked pleased at that.

Myers frowned at the implication. "Is NCIS taking over the case? This is too big for…"

"No," Fornell interrupted before Myers could get into a pissing match with DiNozzo. "It's a joint operation, like it's always been. You'll see when we get there why the move was necessary. For now, Mallard and Palmer are the next shift here, so you guys are going back to the yard while Gibbs and I take care of other things."

"Call Vance as soon as you get to the Yard, he'll have to authorize your new security level." DiNozzo stared at Gibbs, not sure what was going on.

"Boss?"

While Gibbs and DiNozzo were talking, Fornell mentally counted how many computer towers and extra hard drives had to be removed from the apartment they had used as both a base of operations and a safe house. Suddenly the extra manpower was more important that he slight head start sending them to the Yard would accomplish. "Change of plans, everyone is going to the apartment, then we go to the Yard." Gibbs stared at Fornell, surprised at the change of plans, while Myers started laughing.

"We're been reduced to grunt labor, DiNozzo."

Gibbs had a slight smile at that before he added his own stipulation. "After we see McGee." Several doctors were leaving McGee's room, including Ducky, and Gibbs headed towards him.

Ducky greeted Gibbs with a smile, which he extended to the agents that joined them seconds later. "Timothy is doing remarkably well under the circumstances. If nothing unforeseen happens, he should be ready to be moved right on schedule." Only he and the two team leaders knew that Ducky meant moving him to NCIS, but that was a conversation for a more secure location than this busy hallway.

Both Gibbs and Fornell headed for the door into McGee's room and the others anticipated a problem as the two men were shoulder to shoulder. As they reached the doorway, Fornell fell back slightly, allowing Gibbs to be the first to enter.

Tim heard footsteps and struggled to open his eyes. "B'zz, zzat you? Don't… know whaz they… giv'n me, can't stay… w'ke."
"Then sleep, kiddo." Gibbs rested his hand on Tim's head, stroking his thumb across the pale forehead. "They're giving you those drugs for a reason." It had been many years, but the rhythmic thumb was as successful now as it had been all those years ago when Kelly fought sleep, and within moments, Tim was sound asleep. On the other side of the bed, Tobias watched in amusement. The 'daddy thumb of sleep' was something that had put Emily to sleep many times when she was younger. Finally convinced the young man was down for the count, the two agents were ready to get back to work.

---NCIS---

"How's it going?" Ziva looked up briefly at Vance's question, and then returned to her study of the readouts, worried that she would lose her place in the list of numbers and scientific names. He continued into the room and sat at the table with a cup of coffee.

"Slow," she finished with the row she was working on and now felt comfortable stopping. "I do not understand the science behind all of this, but I am marking it as Fornell showed us. I will be glad when McGee is well enough to return to make heads or feet of it all."

"Tails, Officer David, it's heads or tails." Vance knew better than to smile at the Israeli woman's mistake, but he secretly enjoyed her mixed up idioms as much as her team did. "I think we'll all be glad when McGee is back here. The more I read Fornell's report on what they've uncovered, the less I like having McGee in that hospital."

Ziva set the papers down and moved over to sit across from Vance. "Has there been a breech in the security?"

"Not yet there hasn't." Vance leaned back slightly in the chair and looked at the lists of victims now pinned up on the walls and waved his hands at the pages. "It's not hard to imagine how far they would go to stop us. Until we get McGee back here, we can't fully lock this place down."

---NCIS---

DiNozzo whistled as he took a look at the network of computers McGee had set up at the safe house. "Man, McGeek must have been in heaven here. Do any of these monitors get ESPN?"

*Whack.*

"Thanks, Boss."

Fornell smirked at the exchange. DiNozzo-smacking was his favorite spectator sport, but duty called. "Jason, start breaking things down, and keep track of what went where. I'm sure McGee had a certain order to it." DiNozzo found a roll of masking tape and started labeling the equipment as Myers unplugged it. After watching to see if they had it under control, Fornell moved into the
bedroom and Gibbs followed.

Gibbs opened the closet and started pulling out clothes. "Why did you move him in here?"

"Officially, it was because we were afraid Moore had discovered we'd exhumed his father's body." Fornell had the suitcases opened on the bed and was emptying the dresser drawers.

"And unofficially?"

Tobias found the letter Tim's father had written and sunk down on the bed, holding it. "I was worried about him, Jethro. He was trying so hard to be strong for everyone, pushing so hard to find out why they killed his dad, holding it all in. My team's been together a long time and they're a close bunch. I knew they'd take him in under their wings. Between all of us, he hasn't had to face any of this alone. When this came," he waved the letter towards Gibbs, "I knew I was right."

"What is it?" Gibbs held out his hand and Fornell handed him the envelope.

"It's a letter his dad wrote to him when he first got sick. Apparently, he wrote a whole stack of them, one for each milestone of Tim's life over the years." Fornell shook his head slightly and looked up at Gibbs. "This one was for when his dad died."

Gibbs didn't say a word as he read the letter and then handed it back. Rubbing his eyes, he returned to the task of packing McGee's personal effects. It wasn't until they were finished that he asked the question he'd been haunted by for weeks.

"What was wrong with his father?"

"Jethro…" In all honesty, McGee didn't know that Fornell knew; that he'd seen the copy of his father's medical charts sent to Mildred at the lab. Gibbs misunderstood his hesitation and he let him.

"I don't want you to break a confidence, just tell me – was it neurological?"

"Yes."

Gibbs remembered what the woman on the phone had said. "Is it hereditary?"

"Yes."

"Does he… does Tim…"

"I don't know."
"Good morning, McGee. How are you feeling?" Ziva leaned close as Tim started to wake. "Ducky said you had an uneventful night."

Tim looked around as he shifted slightly on the bed. There was a little less equipment surrounding his bed which was probably a positive sign, but he was still in the intensive care room. "Yeah, I feel better, I think. You've got babysitting duties today?"

"I am your guard this morning. I would not consider it babysitting, as the danger is real." She patted his arm before she straightened the blanket. "We have several MP's in the hallway, but I will be in here with you. You will be safe, I give you my word."

He couldn't help but smile a little as he relaxed. As much as the guys on the task force had worked to make sure he was protected, there was something about having his own team with him that gave him a sense of security. He saw the lumps under the sleeves of her sweater and knew they were her throwing knives, strapped to her forearms, knew she was wearing the clothing she wore when she carried the most concealed weapons. Knowing all this he dozed easily until raised voices disturbed him.

"If the doctor has not been here to see McGee, how did he order the change in his medicine?" The familiar voice was raised and sharp. The answering voice he did not recognize.

"I'm sure the doctor has been in, you probably just missed him. The new orders were left in his charts." When McGee opened his eyes, he vaguely recognized the nurse standing there with a new IV bag in her hand.

"Ziva, what's going on?"

"Quiet, McGee, I will handle this." Ziva stood, hand on the grip of her Sig, and stared down the nurse. "Did you recognize the doctor's handwriting? I wish to see the chart for myself."

Karen Sawyer had been a Navy nurse for almost five years, but she had never seen a war zone and had never dealt with any serious threats. Whoever this VIP was, his security frightened her, but she held her ground as she explained hospital protocol to the armed bodyguard. "All of our charts are computerized. The doctor doesn't have to be onsite to log in and order a change for a patient."

"Then how do you know he was the one that made the change?"

"Who else would it be?" She stared at Ziva, uncomprehending. "Are you suggesting someone broke into the hospital computer network?"

"Call the doctor and verify the change." When it looked like Sawyer was going to protest, Ziva held her ground. "You are not touching him until the change has been verified."

Ziva watched as the young woman returned to the nurse's station and made a phone call. At first she looked annoyed, then confused, and finally horrified as she listened to the phone and stared at the IV bag still in her hand. Eventually, she looked up at Ziva and shook her head. Ziva was already on her own cell phone, hospital regulations be damned.
"Gibbs, we need to move McGee now, there's been a breach at the hospital. No, he is unharmed, but someone has hacked into the computer and changed his ordered medication."

---NCIS---

Ducky and Fornell were working with Mildred Novak, trying to make sense of the unidentified substances she had found in some of the patients when Gibbs burst through the door. "Ducky, we need to get McGee now."

Whatever argument he may have had against moving the recovering man so soon died the moment he saw the look on Gibbs' face, but Fornell beat him to the question. "What happened?"

"Somebody got into Bethesda's computer system and changed the orders for McGee's medications. They caught it before he was given anything, but…"

"They know he's there." Fornell finished for him.

Ducky was horrified. "Good Lord, I'll wake Mr. Palmer at once."

Gibbs shook his head. Palmer had pulled a double guarding McGee overnight and he needed someone alert and fresh. "I'll drive the van. DiNozzo can ride shotgun." He didn't wait, knowing that Ducky would catch up with him.

The next stop was the secondary MTAC, dubbed by DiNozzo as the War Room. Leon Vance was in there, along with DiNozzo and the two FBI agents. All four of them looked up as Gibbs stormed in, Ducky and Fornell a few yards behind him. "DiNozzo, you're with me. They've made a run at McGee."

"What?" Multiple voices echoed in the room. The agents from the FBI were angry, while the NCIS agents saw their last hopes that everyone was overreacting fade away.

Gibbs couldn't afford for any of them to be distracted, so he was willing to take the time to explain, albeit briefly. "They tried to mess with his medication orders, but it was discovered and he's fine. Let's just keep him that way." Fornell broke in with another concern.

"Hank Thompson is still at George Washington Hospital. We need to move him too. I am not losing another agent to these people." Vance didn't even attempt to argue, which told Fornell that his concerns were being taken very seriously.

"Gibbs, you and Dr. Mallard pick him up on your way back from Bethesda. What about your families, are they safe enough?"

Fornell gave it some thought. "They know to be careful, but I'd like the option to bring them in if things get riskier."

"Agreed. Tell them to come straight here if anything out of the ordinary happens," Gibbs interrupted the Director with a concern of his own.
"Where's Emily?"

"She and Jethro are with her grandmother." Despite the seriousness of the situation, Tobias had to laugh. "I may never be forgiven for the dog hair, but they're safe. A retired agent is watching out for them." He started dialing his phone as he explained.

Gibbs bit back a laugh of his own as he headed for the garage with Ducky and Tony. He'd met Fornell's mother once, when Emily had been threatened. Her tiny house filled with china and figurines was not designed for a seventy pound dog.

---NCIS---

The panicked phone call from the nurse in CICU brought Dr. Hamilton rushing back to Bethesda. He arrived to find his patient being guarded by an overprotective Mossad operative who refused to listen to reason. "Listen, Miss…"

"David, Officer David. The security here is no longer adequate and we will be moving Agent McGee to a more secure location." Ziva was becoming impatient with the doctor. He may be an excellent heart specialist, but he did not understand security issues.

"We're a military hospital, how could you suggest that your agent's safety is in question? I'm sure when we look into it, we'll find a simple explanation for the mix-up." Hamilton crossed his arms and tried to look intimidating. Only Gibbs managed to intimidate Ziva, this short, skinny man with the receding hairline and thick glasses didn't even come close.

Ziva didn't bother to answer him, so he pressed on. "I assure you, your man is quite safe here and doesn't need the stress from your paranoia."

"It's not paranoia if they really are out to get you." Both Ziva and Hamilton turned at Gibbs' words. Only a step behind Gibbs was Ducky, who immediately began assessing McGee's condition. DiNozzo was still out in the hallway with the gurney from the van, grilling the MP's over anything they might have seen the night before.

When Ducky was satisfied, he started removing the various sensors that was monitoring McGee's condition. Dr. Hamilton stormed into the room. "This patient is in no condition to leave yet. Whatever danger you think he's in is can't be as bad as the risk you are putting him in by moving him."

Gibbs was right behind Hamilton and yanked him back by his arm to prevent him from reaching Ducky and McGee. "This patient," he hissed in the doctor's ear, "this agent, is closing in on a mass murderer. A killer that has murdered the last five agents that tried to capture him. I guarantee you that his next attempt to kill McGee won't be as subtle as changing his medication."

Hamilton still didn't approve, but he didn't object as McGee was transferred to the gurney and wheeled out of the room. No one relaxed until both McGee and Thompson were safely settled in the medical unit hidden away in the lower basement of NCIS.
Vance stood with Gibbs and Fornell, waiting for Ducky to finish checking over his two living patients. Once Ducky was done, the four men moved out to the corridor. "How much time do we need to give McGee to recover?"

Ducky responded to Vance with a question of his own. "How much time can he be given before the case is in jeopardy?" As much as he hated it, Fornell had an exact answer.

"The only real window of opportunity for McGee to get into Moore's network undetected is on Sundays. That's when all his subordinates send in their weekly reports and he's found a way to hide in the data stream."

"Well, Dr. Mallard, there's your answer. Do what you can."
The sounds in the hallway were muffled, but Gibbs was instantly alert and rolled out of bed, slapping DiNozzo's leg in the top bunk as he stood. Tony woke almost as quickly as Gibbs and hurriedly swung down onto the floor. They eased the door open to see McGee arguing with Ducky.

Ducky crossed his arms over his chest and stared down at the young man in the wheelchair. "I thought we'd agreed I would examine you before you returned to work."

"Actually, I believe the agreement was that I would resume working on Sunday and you would monitor my condition. It is now Sunday, so…" McGee trailed off with a slight grin as he turned the wheelchair.

Tony looked down at his watch. "It's Sunday by, like, three hours. Aren't you starting kind of early, McGee?"

On the other side, several more doors opened and the FBI half of the task force stumbled out. Myers glared at McGee, but there was no anger behind it as he spoke. "Don't you NCIS people ever sleep?" McGee's response was just as cheeky as he rolled down the corridor.

"How do you think we always get the jump on the FBI?" The rest of the group had to double time it to catch up with McGee as he waited for them at the door into the War Room. DiNozzo looked around as they hurried.

"Where is Ziva? Don't tell me she gets to sleep in." He thought about banging on the door to her room, but when they entered the War Room, Ziva was leaning over the table, laying out files. She nodded at Gibbs before turning her attention to Tim.

"You look much better today, McGee. It will be good to see you at the computer once again."

"Thanks, Ziva." McGee stood up, much to the displeasure of Ducky.

"Timothy…"

McGee just smiled at him and moved two steps before sitting in the wheeled computer chair that was next to him. Still smiling, he rolled back and forth in front of the bank of computers as he adjusted and fine-tuned his network. There was a reason McGee started so early, as he'd just finished his preparations when the first data stream came through.

In the week since his last run at Moore's system, McGee had devised a plan to maximize the short windows of time he had available and it took all the computers from the safe house, plus the large computer capacity in the War Room to pull it off. Other than an occasional barked request to change out a portable hard drive, he didn't say a word for over two hours.

Eventually, his hands stilled and he leaned back, exhausted. "We've got about an hour before the Midwest feed comes in." Ducky started checking him over.

"You need to rest in the meantime. How are you feeling? Are you having any chest pains, Timothy?" Although his pulse was only slightly raised and his heart beat steady, Ducky was not totally convinced the young man was all right.
"What was the deal with all the external drives?" Ron Sacks had sat through McGee's work the previous Sunday and was aware of the difference between the two events. "You didn't do all that last week."

McGee accepted the glass of juice Ducky handed him as he explained. "Last week, I was just copying the files that were being sent to his headquarters and studying the pattern of the transmissions."

Vance quietly made his appearance and sat next to Gibbs. "And this week?"

"This week," Tim handed the empty glass back to Ducky with a smile. "I knew approximately how long each transfer was going to take, so I was able to do a little snooping in their mainframe with one set of computers while the others copied the transmissions."

The technology of cybercrimes intrigued Vance and he tried to keep up with it much more than any of his predecessors had done. "You used the portable drives…?"

"To copy as much as I could, yes Sir." Knowing that Gibbs and Fornell weren't following, he explained in more detail. "It's like taking snapshots of the files in the hard drive of their main computer. If I'm able to do enough, we can piece it together." McGee entered several commands into the computer to his far left, watching the screen for several seconds before he was fully satisfied.

"Like a jigsaw puzzle?"

"Exactly, Boss." He turned his chair to better see the rest of the group. "Of course, it's a jigsaw puzzle with five layers of encryption, but it's something to work on."

"So what are you doing now?" Fornell stepped closer to watch the lines of code that were streaming across the monitor.

"This computer is set up to break through their first two levels of encryption. It can run while we work on the rest of the transfers." McGee rolled back to his primary computer and prepared for the second wave of data being sent to Moore. The group fell into a steady rhythm as they continued to sort through the information they had gathered and the less sensitive files from Moore's associates were decrypted.

By the time McGee had copied the last data packet from the west coast, it was midday and Fornell called for a working lunch to sort out what information everyone had found. Everyone joined in; even Hank was wheeled in, his leg still heavily bandaged.

"So, Boss, what kind of food have we got for lunch?"

Gibbs didn't have to answer DiNozzo because Ziva walked in with a case of military MRE's and dropped it on the table. "Lunch is served."

The former Gunny Sergeant grinned at them and dug through the options. "They make a great chicken tetrazzini."

Despite the grumblings they all grabbed a pack and tore into it, watching how Gibbs set up the heating unit that came in the packages. Sacks stared unhappily at the beef stew that looked nothing like what his mother would make.
DiNozzo was the only one brave enough to ask what they were all thinking. "We got real food yesterday, why not today?"

"You guys have already wiped out the supplies that were here and bringing in that much food every day will attract attention, especially on a Sunday." Vance watched as they all picked at their meals, except for Gibbs and Ziva who were well experienced with field rations. "Don't worry, there will be enough activity in the Yard on Monday for us to sneak in a food truck and tonight I'll get us all Chinese. You'll just have to make due until then."

When Palmer and Novak came in from the lab, Fornell gave up trying to squeeze peanut butter out of the little package that came with his meal. Instead, he pulled a white board over in front of the group. "All right, what do we have so far? Mildred, you start. What did you find in the samples from the bodies Ducky autopsied?"

Mildred ignored the pasta dish in her pack and went straight for the package of chocolate. Licking the last of the candy from her fingertips, she shook her head. "None of the tests showed anything unusual in the woman's system."

Nothing, are you sure?"

"I'm sorry, Agent McGee, but every test we could think of have came back negative. She hadn't been exposed to anything that any of the other victims were exposed to. I can keep running tests, but until I have a direction to look, I'm just shooting in the dark." She turned back to Fornell to continue her report.

"The other two had a synthetic poison in their bodies. I've seen it before, but not for the last twenty years. It was developed by the KGB to make sure none of their spies would defect or talk if they were captured. Someone with enough knowledge and the right lab could duplicate it easily enough." Frustrated at coming up blank, she handed over the latest results from the tests still being run at Quantico. "The last group of bodies tested showed the same as the rest, the drug testing and the unknown substances in a small number of the bodies."

Fornell glanced over at McGee who nodded in return. They had spoken in great detail about the direction of the case. "Tell your people at Quantico to concentrate on the unknown compound found in the victims. We don't have the time to spend on what Moore's group has done; we need to figure out what they are going to do next. Ron, do we have results from the burned bodies in New York?"

"Both the NYPD crime lab and our lab in New York are running tests, but we don't have results yet." Sacks tossed the plastic spoon from his stew onto the table. "Do we want to have the remains flown down here for Dr. Mallard to examine?"

Ducky thought about it, while the senior agents waited. "Sid is doing the autopsies personally. He's going to send me his findings later this afternoon. Let me review those before I make a final decision. We only have so much room for bodies here and I don't want any of them moved up to our normal facility until we know what is going on."

Vance started to walk around the table. "What are they up to? Do we have any idea?"

"Let's go over what we do know." Fornell wrote across the top of the board 'drug testing' and followed it with a large dollar sign. "We know that he's doing this to finance his plans."

Ron leaned forward, his recent call to New York still fresh in his mind. "The bodies in New York might be part of his testing program."

"But why go to all the extra work?" DiNozzo's eyes narrowed as he thought out loud. "The homeless victims disappeared first, which means they were held someplace, and why bother burning the bodies? Are we sure they're connected?"

"If they're not, it's a heck of a coincidence." Fornell turned to McGee. "Kid, tell us what you've got on their case so far."

It took just a few seconds for McGee to flip through and find his notes on the subject. "A city like New York has a pretty constant level of homeless that go missing every month, but eighteen months ago, the numbers started creeping up. That was the same time Moore's charity division opened a shelter there. Of the confirmed dead and missing, they've been able to link almost seventy five percent of them to Moore's shelter. They received services there within two weeks of when they went missing."

"That's a hell of a big coincidence."

"And we know what you think about coincidences, Boss." McGee flashed a brief smile at Gibbs before he continued. "NYPD has put somebody undercover in there a few times, but they haven't found anything."

Ziva was sitting across from McGee and was reading his notes upside down. "Why are his different charities only in large cities and in very rural areas and nothing in between?" Tim had noticed it, but he wanted a fresh perspective and just motioned for her to continue. "In the very large cities like New York and Los Angeles his groups are focused on the homeless and the addicted, but only offering them shelter and food. Do not most church run shelters at least offer their religion?"

Myers gave a laugh. "Guess they can't be bothered to save the souls when they just want the bodies for experiments."

"So, what are they doing in the rural areas?" Gibbs' question brought them back on track and McGee pulled up the print out he needed.

"Flu shots."

"Flu shots?" Fornell reached out and McGee handed him the paper. "Why in the heck would he be running a door to door flu shot campaign in the Midwest?"

"How do we know those people are actually getting a flu shot?" DiNozzo's question caught everyone off guard.

Ducky leaned over Gibbs' shoulder and read the findings he'd been given. "Rural farm communities seem to be his target group for these shots. Why would he want to harm the groups that so closely fit his ideals?"

Ziva straightened up and stared at Fornell. "Not harm…"

"What?" Fornell was getting there, but Gibbs was faster.

"Protect, but what is he protecting them from?"
"He's protecting them from whatever he plans on doing to the rest of us." Vance looked over at the computers McGee was using to break through the encryption. "We need to know exactly what he injected those people with instead of the vaccines they thought they were getting."

"Could they be giving people the antidote to the poison? The one the KGB developed?" Tony's question caused everyone to turn to Mildred. She flipped back through her notes from the tests she had run.

"The time frame is wrong. The antidote only lasts in the body for a few days before it breaks down. If they spent a week inoculating just one town, it would have worn off the majority of the people before they were finished. The fake vaccine has to be something that lasts longer than just a few days."

"Oh, my God." The whispered words were spoken with such intensity that the rest of the group stilled. McGee repeated himself once before looking first at Fornell, then at Gibbs as he explained.

"Raymond Lacy's son was put through school by Edmund Moore. Kevin Lacy did his doctoral studies on infectious diseases. Maybe it was a real vaccine, but just not for the flu."
Chapter 30

By Wednesday evening, time had lost all real meaning. The lights were never dimmed, you worked until you could no longer read the pages in front of you, you ate when the growling of your stomach annoyed the person next to you. Ducky was threatening to start coffee IV’s and Gibbs was wondering why he waited so long.

Other than McGee, whose suitcases had arrived from the safe house, and Gibbs who never looked rumpled, no matter what, it was a shaggy group that gathered for their twice daily round table.

"Okay people, what do we have?" Fornell's question lacked the spark from earlier in the week, but the agents, both FBI and NCIS, responded. Tony started out this briefing.

"He bought a zoo in Wyoming four months ago."

"A zoo?" Fornell stopped writing on the white board and turned to look at DiNozzo and then Gibbs, with incredulous look on his face. "What in the hell does he want with a zoo?"

Gibbs just shrugged; he and Fornell had been taking turns running these twice daily sessions and he was just tired and punchy enough to be glad this tidbit came on Fornell's rotation and not his.

DiNozzo was also glad he was not trying to explain this one to his boss. "Don't have a clue what the reason was, they closed it to the public two months ago, claiming to be upgrading the facilities, but I grabbed the most recent satellite photo and the place is empty. There's no sign of any of the animals and no sign of any construction."

Hank remembered sending his own family off to a day at the zoo another lifetime ago. "Please don't tell me that he's started testing his crap on animals."

"He could get dozens of dogs and cats from the pound, why would he bother spending the money on a zoo?" Fornell couldn't see any reasoning behind this move of Moore's group and was wishing it had been discovered when Gibbs was leading the team.

McGee was frantically flipping through the papers in front of him. "Nothing else indicates that he's moved onto animals, but one of his new business acquisitions is an organic seed company and he immediately closed it."

"So what, he's stockpiling animals and seeds? Is he building an ark someplace?" Sacks was trying to stay civil, but it was getting harder as the days went on.

Ziva and Jason had been tracking all of Moore's real estate holding, a complicated task considering how many shell companies he used for the purchases. They immediately started looking through their own pile of records. Jason found what they were looking for first, and Ziva read it off to the group. "They purchased a decommissioned missile silo in Colorado three years ago." She looked around the room. "Why would the government sell a missile silo?"

"If it's been decommissioned, what use would the government have for it anymore?" Fornell continued to think about it. "Nothing of military value would have been left in it, right? I mean, he didn't get some crony in the Army to leave some toys behind, right?"
McGee had already moved to the computer. "What kind of silo and when was it decommissioned?"

The rest of them were quickly going through the records they had on the purchase. Jason looked up at him. "Nothing, all I have is the name of the closest town and the deed number.

It was enough. Jason read off the little information he had and McGee was into the county records and from there, located what he needed. "It's a Titan One site." He reported back to Gibbs with a concerned frown on his face. "It gives them over forty-five thousand square feet of secure underground space and with the proper rebuilding, they could probably double it. Not only that, they've got over two hundred acres of land to work with there."

"DiNozzo, get us current satellite imagery of that silo."

"On it, Boss."

Once Gibbs and DiNozzo had that taken care of, Fornell focused again on McGee. "How are you doing on the encryptions?"

"I'm down to the last level."

Fornell couldn't help but perk up at the announcement. "So you'll have it soon?"

"Level four was more hardcore than what the Pentagon uses; I doubt level five is going to be any easier." He looked around at the concerned faces. "I'll keep working on it."

They were concerned about more than the encryption, and Tim knew it. "Vance is going to help me load the next set of parameters into the computers when he gets back from meeting with the SecNav. I'll get some rest while that's running."

"How many computers are you using on this?" Fornell really didn't understand the process, but he figured it was like manual paperwork, the more bodies working on it the better.

"I've got nine going right now, but I think Vance is raiding cybercrimes again." Everyone started laughing; it had become a standing joke about how many times Director Vance had 'dropped in' at cybercrimes and acquired the technology they needed. Before the hysterical laughter could gain momentum, Mildred burst through the door, running for the first time since Tobias had met her as a rookie.

"We've got a problem."

Tony couldn't help it. "You've just now noticed this?" Any other day, Sacks would have had a snappy comeback of his own, and the two men would have been at war. Today the two just leaned against each other and tried to muffle their giggles. Tobias nodded his approval and Gibbs stepped behind them and headslapped them both.

Gibbs' actions might have stopped those two in their tracks, but the rest of them started laughing at their matching expressions.

Smothering his own laughter, Fornell turned to the confused woman. "I'm sorry, Mildred, it's been a long couple of days. What new problem do we have now?"

"Dr Mallard, Mr. Palmer and I have spent the last two days working with the other labs, trying to
Two short sentences and the group was deadly serious again. Mildred glanced over at the agent she had worked with for so many years before she continued. "There were four separate body dumps, each several months apart. Some of the bodies were too badly burned to test for anything, but we were able to piece together enough information from each grouping to tell that each group died of a different cause." She started pacing, not a good sign to those who knew Mildred. "Group one died of Ebola, group two of Anthrax." She waited as several of the task force muttered curses.

Tobias could hardly ask the question. "The other groups?"

"Hemorrhagic Fever and," she looked over at DiNozzo with compassion, "the Plague."

"Shit!" Tony was on his feet before he even was aware of moving. "What, one deadly disease wasn't enough for them? What the hell are they going to do for an encore? Maybe we should start checking to see if any nuclear warheads are missing."

"DiNozzo, DiNozzo!" It was the second time Gibbs said his name that caught Tony's attention and he dropped back into his chair, rubbing at his cheeks.

"Sorry, I'm sorry, Boss. It's just that once was enough, ya' know?" He leaned back in the chair and stared at the ceiling while he composed himself. "So, were they disease shopping, or are they going to hit us with the whole enchilada?"

"Let's hope they were shopping." Fornell felt every bit of his age while Jason tried to grasp the full impact of what they were facing.

"How are they going to do this? Are they going to cram all their people in the silo and just wipe out the rest of the country? They can't be serious; they can't have enough followers to repopulate the country like he preaches about. Besides, when they come out of hiding, won't they be exposed to the disease anyways?"

DiNozzo remembered his own experience. "If they build a suicide gene into the disease, they can outlast it."

Both Gibbs and Fornell silently turned to the one team member who knew the most about how Edmund Moore thought and operated. McGee nodded in answer of the silent question and moved to stand in front of the bank of computer monitors. Everyone waited, now used to the sight of McGee gathering his thoughts. Eventually, he turned to face them with an even more troubled look on his face.

"What if he's not just protecting his own followers?" Tim's emphasis on the word 'protecting' made Gibbs sit up straight, remembering a previous conversation.

"My God, the vaccines."

"Exactly." McGee started picking up speed, both in his pacing and in his speech. "His people were going around door to door, right? So, they spend a few minutes chatting about the weather, politics, whatever. Farmer John's answers fit what Moore wants, and he gets the inoculation against whatever they're planning to do. Farmer Joe doesn't fit their version of utopia and so he gets a needle full of water and nobody knows the difference."
It was beginning to make sense in a horrible way. Ziva realized the next step. "Moore disperses whatever he plans on using to wipe out most of the population. The majority of the survivors are the ones that think the same way he does, proving that he was right and becomes their leader."

"More than that," Sacks thought about some of the wild revival meetings he'd seen as a child visiting his relatives in the southern states, "He's the one with the supplies to rebuild, proving that he is God's chosen one. He's even got seeds stashed away to raise food for the next year. They'll have no choice but to go to him."

Gibbs looked at it from a military perspective. "If he's got a few well placed followers in the Armed Forces, he'd have control over whatever military was left overseas. That would decrease the chances of foreign invaders."

Mildred looked at it from a scientific standpoint. "If we had a way to determine which biological weapon he planned on using, we might find a way to slow him down."

"It's the one he's vaccinating people against."

She stared at DiNozzo. "How do you propose we determine that without Moore finding out or triggering a panic?"

McGee started grinning at his partner. "Tony is right, and he started with his own people." Still grinning, he looked at Mildred. "You tested the bodies in autopsy for any disease they might have had, right?" He could tell she hadn't made the connection yet. "How about diseases they couldn't get?"

"Because they'd been vaccinated against it. Of course." She didn't wait for orders, just rushed back to the lab.

During the discussion Vance had arrived and was quietly listening. Finally he broke in. "If you're right then we need to know their exact plans and we need to know now." Beside him was a handcart with the extra computers he had taken from cybercrimes. "What else do you need, McGee, to get the encryptions broken by morning?" McGee looked over what Vance had brought him and started writing a list. He handed it over to Vance as he explained.

"I'll need this and full, uninterrupted access to the primary MTAC."

Vance studied the list and then looked around at the task force. "The only way to do it is to evacuate and lock down the building. You'll hear the alarms, but stay put until I get back. In the meantime, everyone back to what you are working on."
No matter how much they expected it, sitting still when the evacuation alarm sounded was harder than it looked. Both Fornell and Myers jumped when the ventilation system shut down and even Gibbs kept track of where the emergency door release was when the lights went out, to be replaced with the red lights run by the backup generators. Only the computers in the War Room still had normal power, but the odd, flickering light from the screens as the decryption programs ran did nothing to relieve the tension.

Twenty minutes without a fresh source of air really wasn't enough to deplete the oxygen levels in the hidden underground wing, but it was enough to raise both the temperature and the tempers.

"What in the hell is going on, DiNozzo? Is your Director trying to pull something?" Ron Sacks tugged at his shirt as he marched back and forth in front of the vault like door.

DiNozzo just shrugged as he stripped down to his t-shirt. "Don't ask me. I'm not his favorite person, never have been."

"If he's sitting up in his air conditioned office having a good laugh with Moore…"

"He's not." Tim was a miserable as the rest of them, but they hadn't had time to look at the big picture in regards to Moore. In unison the two men turned on him, but he held his ground. "Doesn't matter how important Vance is, he doesn't fit Moore's vision of his perfect world and neither do you, Ron. Moore wants people that think like him and look like him, haven't you noticed?" He waved his hand at the pictures tacked on the wall. Of the twenty different people they'd tied to Moore, all were of European decent, in addition to having his strict, twisted beliefs.

Myers brought over the rapidly cooling pot of coffee and divided it between the cups on the table as he gave his own interpretation of the man they were after. "Moore's one sick puppy. He's got his own warped views and he's deranged enough to kill off everyone who doesn't agree with him."

The mention of Vance had caught Gibbs' attention, but it was the lure of the remaining coffee that pulled him in. DiNozzo looked to him for reassurance.

"There's a reason this is taking so long, right Boss?"

"DiNozzo, it's only been twenty minutes. Twenty minutes to issue the alarm, evacuate the entire building, lock down every section and every outside door, wait for the crowds to disperse so they don't see what's going on, do whatever is needed to get the emergency responders to leave, and reactivate the systems in secure lock-down mode."

Tony cringed when he thought about what was involved. "I guess we should give the man some time."

"Ya' think?"

Before Tony could think of a snappy come back, the power and ventilation systems came back on. Almost immediately Ziva walked in with a steaming cup of coffee. When she saw them staring, she smiled. "Mildred made a pot on a Bunsen burner."
Despite the whining, or perhaps because of it, the building was secure and theirs alone within an hour. The only lighting available in the main building was still the emergency lights and what fading daylight came through the skylights, but it was enough to get them safely from their downstairs haven up to the primary MTAC. DiNozzo and Myers were once again grunt labor as the two networks were linked together. They returned downstairs to continue with their own research while McGee chose to monitor his work on the encryption from upstairs, enjoying the momentary peace.

After four hours of no McGee, Gibbs went to find him, Ducky in tow. As expected, the young man was slumped in a chair, studying the screens, his head resting on his fist. Gibbs motioned for Ducky to stay back while he quietly sat next to McGee and waited. As he expected, it took a few seconds for McGee to notice Gibbs and Ducky, who stood behind him.

"Hey, Boss."

"Hey, McGee." He waited and watched while the younger man continued to work the computers. "Do you have better access to the information you need up here?" He waved his hands at the bank of monitors.

McGee had to smile at the question. "Nah, I've got it set up so I can work at either one, it's just a little quieter up here." As soon as he said it, Tim was worried about how Gibbs would interpret it, so he quickly clarified his comment. "Who would have guessed Sacks and DiNozzo would bond over sports trivia?"

Privately, Gibbs thought it was their mutual concern for a tired and bruised geek that had brought the two polar opposites together, but for now he agreed with him. "That one surprised Fornell too." He waited, sensing McGee was working up to ask him something.

"Boss, umm, I asked Tony and Ziva both, but they wouldn't tell me anything. What's going on with Abby? Is she in trouble because of me?"

The last thing Gibbs wanted was for Tim to blame himself for her situation. "No, McGee, she's in trouble because she lost sight of what it is to be a team player. She let her personal feeling override her responsibilities. It's not the first time it's happened, you know that." He waited until he received a nod of understanding before continuing. "I've let it slide before, but this time her behavior and refusal to follow orders put people in danger."

"So, what happens now?" Other than the one nod, McGee had not looked up at Gibbs since the conversation started.

Gibbs rested his hand on Tim's shoulder as he explained. "She's on a two week suspension for now. I can't tell you the details of what she has to do, but Vance laid out a course of expectations and goals she has to meet before she can return to work. I know she realizes now what damage she could have done and she working very hard to accomplish what she needs to do to come back to work."

McGee nodded again and entered another set of commands into the network while Gibbs watched.
him, debating.

"Tim?"

McGee turned at the tone of voice he'd never heard from the older man.

"When Marcie called to say that she had sent the records…"

"My dad's medical records." McGee hoped his clarification would ease the other man's mind, but he saw no relief on the face so carefully watching him.

Gibbs continued on. "She said that they still expect to see you in their office. What, exactly, does that mean?"

Tim slumped down as he realized that he could no longer avoid this conversation. "My dad's condition was genetic."

"And fatal?"

"Yeah." Tim could see the question on Ducky's face as clearly as if it were one of Abby's tattoos. "My dad had GSS; a lot of the men in our family eventually die of it."

Ducky closed his eyes for a moment. "Oh, Timothy."

Gibbs looked over his shoulder at Ducky, seeing his pain for the young man, and then looked back at McGee, waiting for him to continue. Knowing his boss wouldn't want it sugar-coated, he was very blunt.

"GSS is short for Gerstmann-Straussler-Scheinker disease. The body develops rogue proteins that attack the brain and nervous system. There's no real treatment and there's no cure.

"How long before…" Gibbs couldn't even ask the question, but McGee understood it anyways.

"My dad was in his mid forties when he started showing symptoms. If I develop GSS, it will show up at a younger age than it did for my dad."

"If? So it's not a certainty that you will get this?" He leaned forward, searching the young man's face for answers.

"Not a certainty, no, but my grandfather and great-grandfather also died of GSS. Of course, that far back they didn't have a name for it."

Ducky broke in before the silence could become too uncomfortable. "Timothy, refresh my memory please. What are the earliest symptoms?" McGee didn't look away from the screen as he typed.

"The earliest symptom is usually clumsiness." This time he looked at his companions with a quick grin before turning serious again. "Yeah, I know. Maybe you better use the later symptoms as a better gauge, so that would be slurred speech and then muscle spasms, maybe blindness."

"You seem very calm about such a death sentence."

"It's not like I don't know what's coming." Suddenly, he straightened up and stared at the screen as it
began to change and cascading letters and numbers seemed to fall into place. "And now I know what Moore is up to. Call the team and Vance; I've broken through the last layer of encryption."
Chapter 32

It was just daybreak when Vance returned with Director Haas of the FBI. Using Vance's override code they got inside the evidence garage to park unseen. Vance was proud of both his people and the team McGee had brought in from the FBI and it was time to show Haas what the joint operation had accomplished.

No too many things would have gotten Michael Hass out of bed in the middle of the night, but the update from Vance had been worth it. Getting to see this rumored secret wing of the NCIS building was just icing on the cake. He was a little surprised when Vance opened the trunk of his car and started handing him bags from a local grocery chain.

"The next joint op we have, Michael, you get to feed the task force. Keeping Myers fed is killing our budget."

Haas had to laugh as he juggled the two bags and a gallon of juice. "You should have brought in Ron Sacks' mother to cook for the group. That's what we do."

"Now he tells me." Vance ignored the continued laughter as he led Haas to the elevator. Once they were downstairs, Haas wouldn't be laughing any more. As suspected, Hass stopped laughing when he saw the hidden complex under the main building, at least until DiNozzo walked past in his boxers, a towel slung over his shoulder, brushing his teeth.

With a foamy and muffled "Morning, Directors" DiNozzo banged on the shower room door. "Time's up, Ziva. Get your butt out of there." Before either of the arriving men could say anything, Sacks came out of another door, also dressed in boxers, and DiNozzo handed him the tube of toothpaste as he passed. While this exchange was going on, Ziva exited the small bathroom and Mildred slipped past the Directors and DiNozzo and into the bathroom, closing the door behind her. "Damn it, Mildred."

Smirking, both men continued on, as Leon led them to the kitchenette, passing Jimmy Palmer with a tray of coffee, heading to the War Room. Vance hooked the bag of donuts on one of his fingers to take with him. Inside the kitchenette was packed as Fornell manned the stove, leaning over Gibbs who was checking on the bacon. At the small table, Hank was cutting up fruit, his broken leg tucked safely under the table.

"Director, Director", Fornell greeted them both and pointed at a tray. Haas held the tray as Fornell filled it with scrambled eggs, stubbornly refusing to think about the origins of the deep stainless steel that looked suspiciously like an organ tray from autopsy.

Gibbs added the bacon to the tray as he explained the plans. "Twice a day we all meet to compare notes and plan strategy. Since McGee broke through the last layer of encryption, we've got a lot of ground to cover. Fornell took the bowl of mixed fruit while Gibbs handed Thompson his crutches. The five men left for the War Room and were joined by Ducky who came out of the lab with a large pot of oatmeal.

Haas looked down into the pot. "Please tell me those are raisins."

"Ziva raided the vending machines last night." Vance winced at Ducky's comment, knowing that the raid probably included a liberal use of lockpicks and very little loose change.
After a yell from Gibbs that reminded everyone of his background as a Marine, the stragglers arrived in the War Room. DiNozzo was the last one in the door, his hair still wet and wearing a set of scrubs. Plates loaded, the morning briefing started, Mildred Novak was the first to stand.

"We've confirmed that the three bodies in our possession have all been vaccinated recently against Y. Pestis. Knowing that, we've been concentrating our work on the bodies from New York that died of the plague, and now know that they had specifically suffered from Pneumonic Plague that's been genetically modified to not respond to antibiotics." She gave an apologetic look to DiNozzo before continuing. "We have no way of knowing if they've added a suicide gene into the mutation they've developed or not, but we can expect more than ninety percent of the exposed population to die within the first five days."

The silence that followed her announcement was broken by a whisper from Ziva. "The bulldozers."

"Yeah." McGee rubbed his forehead as he answered her. When the rest of them stared blankly at him, he explained. "When that many people start dying, it will be total anarchy, so they won't want to risk their people getting shot stealing bulldozers so they already have them stashed where they need them."

"But why do they need them?" Jimmy wasn't making the connection, so Ducky softly explained it to him.

"They'll need to bury the bodies quickly before, well, before it gets bad."

McGee quietly confirmed it. "Mass graves for the non-believers."

A soft ding from the elevator had all the agents reaching for their weapons, but Vance waved them back as the SecNav entered the War Room. "This had better be good, Leon, I'm going to be late for my tee time." Instead of trying to justify his call, Vance handed him a one page brief on what they uncovered to that point. Davenport skimmed it quickly and sat down, stunned. "How much time do we have?"

"McGee broke through the last layer of their encryption last night." Vance turned to face McGee, obviously turning the floor over to him. Tim carefully stood and moved closer to the largest plasma in the room, determined to not show any weakness before he dropped his bombshell. "Sometime today the biotoxin will arrive at their main compound in Virginia. Their plan is to send it out to their other sites sometime on Saturday. They have a countdown," Tim brought up the visual on the plasma, "that suggests they plan on commencing with their attack on Monday at approximately noon our time."

The rest of the group was silent as Secretary Davenport got up and stood next to McGee and watched the screen as he fired off his questions.

"How does he plan to spread it? What kind of exposure are we looking at?"

Ziva pulled out the file and handed it to Jason. He turned it over to Vance as he told what was in it. "Through his shell companies, he's amassed a large number of small aircraft, the kind used for crop-dusting."

While Myers talked, Fornell rifled through his own stack of papers. "They've been keeping close tabs on the upper air flows for early next week."
"Dispersal patterns."

"I'm afraid you're right, my dear." Ducky gave a sad smile to Mildred. He knew the answer, but wanted to see the visual. "Timothy, can you bring up a map of the United States up on the computer?" McGee quickly sat at the console and had it up on the main screen, anticipating Ducky's next request.

"Now, let's show all the known locations for his group." A few keystrokes and several dozen black circles showed up, scattered throughout the country and McGee took over the narration.

"Overlaying the air flow charts for the dates indicated will show us how far they expect to spread the plague for the first twenty-four hours." A red pattern showed up on the screen, enlarging every time he clicked the mouse.

Click. "Forty-eight hours."

Click. "Seventy-two hours."

Click. "Ninety-six hours."

Click. "One hundred and twenty hours."

By this point, the red markings had swirled and covered much of the map beyond the borders and were well across most of North America. Without saying anything else, Tim decreased the magnification to show the beginnings of the plague touching distant continents.

The SecNav almost wished he hadn't asked, but forced himself to continue. "Do we know how they're transporting it to their other sites or the route they're using?"

"No sir. Apparently that information was passed along before we started tracking their transmissions." He took a deep breath and summed up what they knew so far. "We have one shot at stopping them before they disperse a biological weapon that will kill almost everyone that is exposed, and we have less than twenty-four hours to plan out just how to do it."

"Gee, is that all we need to do?" Sacks' question may have been sarcastic, but McGee's answer was not.

"Actually, no. I need to physically access their mainframe computer from inside."

"Are you nuts?" DiNozzo stumbled to his feet. "Technically, you're not even supposed to be out of the hospital and you want to be part of the team that goes after them?"

McGee held his ground. "We need the information on that computer; we need to know how far his control went. Do any of you know how to bypass his security and firewalls to transmit the data back here?"

Phillip Davenport studied the young man in front of him before turning to look at Vance, and then the rest of the team sitting behind him. The entire group shared the same expression of quiet acceptance. "I will have to ask the President to authorize the use of military force on American land and bring in the Joint Chiefs."
"No, Sir." McGee handed him a printout before he enlightened the group. "I was able to copy a few files from Moore's mainframe. That is a partial listing of his followers in the government and in the military." He didn't have to explain further, most of the names on the list Davenport recognized. They truly were on their own.

---NCIS---

It had been many years since Davenport had been involved in the planning of an assault, but some things you never forgot. One of those things was how many people it took to pull it off. "We need more bodies to even have a chance at this."

Vance leaned back and rubbed at his eyes. "What we need is a squad of Marines that we can pull in without anyone else noticing."

"Captain Arvidas and his squad." Ducky leaned on the doorframe and waited for the response. Gibbs knew exactly who he meant.

"Aren't they deployed?"

Ducky continued into the room and sat between Gibbs and Haas. "I checked. They're scheduled to leave next Wednesday. A group of Marines, the weekend before they leave for six months in Iraq. Nobody's going to notice if they fall off the radar."

Gibbs was nodding in agreement as he turned to Vance. "Their First Sergeant was killed stateside by an El Salvadorian street gang a few years ago. We handled the case."

"You trust them?"

Gibbs gave Haas a hard look. "Yes Sir, I do."

"Let's bring them in." Davenport needed Gibbs to know the stipulations that would be attached to the mission. "Officially, this can't exist until after it's over. Make sure they know they'll be operating without written orders."
Chapter 33

"DiNozzo." As the group scattered to collect the last minute data needed to pull off the mission, Gibbs tugged his senior agent off to the side. "I'm putting you in MTAC for this operation." He waited for the explosion.

"What? Why? Come on, Boss, you need all hands on deck for this." Determined not to be left behind, DiNozzo refused to back down. "Give me one good reason why I shouldn't be out there."

"You've already had one run in with Y. Pestis, you don't need another."

The two men stared at each other; DiNozzo broke first. "No, I don't need another go-round with it, but if this mission fails, do you really think sitting in MTAC is going to protect me? Everybody's going to be dead if we fail, Boss. I gotta be there to help make sure we don't fail."

"You're sure?"

"I'm sure, Boss."

---NCIS---

"Kid, are you sure about this? You could be in MTAC and talk us through it." Fornell still wasn't convinced that McGee was up to the assault on Moore's compound.

McGee appreciated the concern, but he was finding it distracting. "I can handle this. There are too many variables to not do this myself." When the other man seemed to be winding up for another attempt to convince him to stay put, Tim put his foot down. "I understand that people are worried about me, I really do, but this is too important. The information on the computers is the only thing to prove exactly what he was planning and who else was involved. If we stop them tomorrow but don't take out their entire organization, then it's just a matter of time before one of his followers takes up the cause."

"I hate to say it, but he's right." Both men turned to face Gibbs as he came through the door.

"Damn it, Jethro, you were supposed to be backing me up on this."

Gibbs shrugged as he hitched his hip on the edge of the table and poked the papers McGee had been working on. "Let's face it, Tobias; none of us have a clue what all of this means. He's the one that's found a way to get us the data and we don't have time for him to teach any of us what to do."

Having lost his second argument of the day, Gibbs turned to leave, but turned back to tap McGee on the back of the head. "Just remember, you're no good to any of us if you get yourself killed before you hack his computer. Now go see Ducky. He wants to check you over before we leave."

He waited as the younger man left before turning once again to Fornell. "I'm counting on you to keep him safe, Tobias."
In the years he'd served as a Marine, Captain Arvidas had never stepped foot in NCIS. Having he and his men snuck in through a heavily fortified side door heightened the strangeness of the experience. He and his team were led down several levels below ground to come face to face with two suits and the Secretary of the Navy. All eight Marines snapped to attention. Davenport returned the salute and started out the briefing. Within an hour, the men were caught up and staring at him in shock.

The men all looked at each other before Arvidas asked for confirmation. "This is for real, Sir? It's not some sort of drill?"

"It's for real, Captain." It wasn't the SecNav that answered and the men looked up to see Gibbs walk in with Fornell.

"Agent Gibbs, sir." Arvidas stood and shook hands with both agents and introductions were made. As the men all returned to their seats, Davenport resumed speaking.

"Now do you boys understand the how necessary the secrecy of this mission is? I won't order you to do this, but I will ask."

Arvidas looked at each of his men carefully before accepting positions as temporary agents. Fornell rolled out the maps and diagrams of the compound and planning began.

It was just before midnight when Vance put on the headset. "Is everyone in position? Team One?"

"Team One is in position." Arvidas' voice came over the speakers clearly as he and three of his men crouched down just outside the fence that surrounded the Virginia Center for the Dawn of Tomorrow.

"Affirmative, Team One, stand by. Team Two and Team Three?" The two old friends waiting near the power transformer exchanged one last look before they each responded.

Gibbs was first. "Team Two is in position."

"Team Three is in position." Tobias Fornell never thought he would be in this situation, wearing fatigues and with a rifle slung over his shoulder, two Marines at his side.

Back in MTAC, Vance looked back at Davenport and received a confirming nod. Facing the main screen, he squared his shoulders and gave the order. "You have a go, people."
Gibbs tapped Ziva on the back of the head. "David, Lewis, you're up." While the rest of them waited, Ziva and Corporal Lopez crept down the ravine and placed a small explosive on the power junction that fed the compound. Once the timer was set, they scrambled back up to the rest of the group. The explosion would be large enough to instantly kill the power, but as designed, it was small enough that the sound did not travel. As they waited for David and Lopez to return, DiNozzo and McGee set up the first of three jammers that would block cell service in the compound.

Gibbs tilted his head, allowing him to speak softly into the microphone in the collar of his flak jacket. "Explosives are set and ready, lullaby one is in place."

"Affirmative."

On the other side of the compound Rodriguez and Silva set the second jammer under Arvidas' watchful eye. "Lullaby two is in place." Once that was set, Team One scaled the fence and started moving across to the rough terrine to the first outbuilding, located in the southwest corner.

Team Two and Team Three were still together as they followed the fence at the north end to place the third jammer, completing the triad that would silence the calls. Gibbs reported in again, alerting the command team at NCIS that the first stage of the operation was complete. "Lullaby three is in place. Teams Two and Three are entering the compound."

"Affirmative."

"Team One is in position." When Fornell heard the call, he checked his watch. So far, they were right on schedule. Their two teams quickly made it over the fence before separating. Team Three stayed close to the main house, while Team Two moved to the reinforced building on the eastern edge of the compound.

"Team Three in position."

Team Two moved quietly towards the building they believed held the biotoxin. It was heavily fortified and the few windows were replaced with industrial air filtration units. Gibbs watched the assault team as they settled in to wait. It was strange to have Sacks with them rather than McGee, but Gibbs was glad the young man was with Fornell. Tim had suffered enough and did not need to face what was awaiting them here. Gibbs made eye contact with his three agents, then Sacks, before acknowledging the two Marines with them.

"Team Two in position."

"Affirmative."

It seemed amazing; they had fifteen agents and soldiers in position inside. Davenport and Haas both moved to a different monitor as they activated their headsets. Once the mission started, each team would have their own link to MTAC. Haas touched the side of his headset.

"Command Three to Team Three, commence with lullaby."

"Team Three, copy." Fornell pointed at Myers and Private Evans. They stealthily crawled along the back wall of the large house until they reached the bundle of phone wires. Myers turned and gave Fornell the thumbs up. Next to Fornell, McGee had the controls for the three jammers. Fornell jerked his hand downward and McGee activated the jammers as Evans cut the wires.
"Team Three to Command Three, lullaby complete."

"Copy that, Team Three."

---NCIS---

Gibbs removed the rifle from his back and knelt down in position as Corporal Martinez did the same. This was not a war zone, combatants could not be gunned down without warning, and so these rifles fired darts. Martinez had his man in his sights and nodded to Gibbs. Gibbs called it in for authorization. "Team Two has targets acquired."

Miles away, up in MTAC, Vance smiled. Who knew having a former Marine sniper as an agent would come in so handy. "Command Two to Team Two, you have a go." Two silent shots and two sentries hit the ground. Sacks and DiNozzo scurried out and pulled them under some bushes out of view. Gibbs checked his watch; still on time. "Team Two to Command, targets nullified."

"Copy that Team Two."

---NCIS---

While the other two teams quietly eliminated the means to raise an alarm, the third team had a different goal. In the furthest barn filled with trucks and tractors, Team One prepared a diversion. Arvidas and Lewis cut fuel lines, spilling gasoline and diesel, while Silva and Rodriguez pulled down bales of hay from the loft and broke them apart. Once they were ready, Arvidas called it in to Davenport.

"Team One set and in position."

"Affirmative, Team One. Stand by."

The three team commanders looked at one other. Ducky was convinced that Moore and his closest lieutenants were too egotistical to believe they could be threatened so close to their moment of triumph. They were about to find out. Davenport activated his headset.

"Team One, you have a go. Light up the sky."

All of Team One, except Silva were back against the fence, waiting. Silva tossed a burning rag through the window and ran. It took only forty five seconds for the glow of the flames to be visible from the main house and less than a minute more for the first truck to explode. Looping around, Team one met up with Team Two outside the target zone while Moore's followers rushed to confront the fire.
Team Three was at the back of the house listening and watching as the occupants rushed out the front. Silent, but right on cue, the explosive pack took out the power junction, plunging the area into darkness. Under the cover of the darkness and the chaos, Team Three was able to slip inside and quickly descend into the basement where the mainframe was believed to be hidden. McGee pulled out his gear and started working. Fornell and Myers stood guard over him while the two Marines set up a perimeter.

When the power junction blew, the individual video links in the teams' flak jackets went live, feeding images into MTAC and allowing the three team commanders to see what was happening. The night cameras were grainy and gave everything a green glow, but they were adequate. For those not used to the rapidly moving images as the agents and soldiers ran, it could be an unsettling experience and Haas found himself grateful that his team was relatively stationary in the basement.

Scattered throughout the various buildings, several generators kicked on, restoring power to vital functions, but still leaving most of the camp in the dark. Arvidas and his team stationed themselves near the front of the secure building, between the building and the barn currently on fire. When the shooting started, they would be the shield between Team Two and those who would abandon the fire to join in the firefight.

"Team One in position."

"Affirmative, Team One."

"Team Two, you have a go."

When Gibbs heard Vance give the go, he and his team were immediately on the move. Ziva blew the back door and the two Marines with them were the first to go through, followed by the rest of the team. They had the element of surprise on their side in the almost soundproof building, but not manpower. The guards opened fire with fully automatic weapons, killing Martinez within seconds and injuring both Lopez and Sacks.

Lopez went down hard as the bullet ripped through his leg, but rolled with the force of it and ended
up on his stomach, rifle at the ready, instantly taking out two men. The impact of the grazing shot staggered Sacks, but DiNozzo grabbed him and dragged him behind some equipment. Gibbs and Ziva found shelter behind more equipment. Lopez was protected by the body of his fallen teammate, the five of them taking turns firing at the equally protected terrorists.

"Guys, guys?" DiNozzo's voice could be heard both in the room and over the radios. "Let's not shoot any holes in the big vat of plague that they're hiding behind, okay?"

Back in MTAC, Vance snorted at DiNozzo's comment as he prayed whatever was holding the biotoxin was bulletproof.

Gibbs' radio cracked as Arvidas' voice came over it. "Team Two, what's your status?"

"One dead, two injured, we're pinned down, but so are the terrorists." Behind him, Ziva was tossing a field dressing to DiNozzo before crawling over to Lopez with the first aid kit. Gibbs gave her cover fire as she crossed the open area.

Outside, Arvidas gave the orders. "Silva, you and Lewis move in. Rodriguez and I will hold them here."

Silva could hear yells as some of Moore's followers abandoned the fully engulfed barn. "You sure Cap'n?"

"Protecting the biotoxin is top priority. Just," he flashed his men a grin, "don't take all day."

Lewis slammed a small plastic explosive against the door lock and shoved a wire in it. Everyone moved to the side as much as possible before he detonated the charge. The two men were through the door before the debris hit the ground.

---NCIS---

"Damn it, this isn't it." McGee skimmed through the data on the screen in front of him.

Myers looked horrified. "What do you mean that not it? That's got to be it." He watched as McGee crawled under the desk and popped back out a few seconds later.

McGee started walking the north perimeter of the basement, the furthest side from the stairs. Myers and Fornell shrugged at each other while Myers tried again. "What's going on, kid?"

"That's not the computer I've been hacking. It's not even a gateway."

"Gateway? Hell of a time to get snobby about brands."

Near the stairs, one of the Marines hissed over his shoulder. "Let's get moving. I've got a really bad feeling about this."

Acknowledging him with a nod, McGee continued to look as he explained. "That is just a regular
computer. No way could it handle the data and encryption I've been looking at. The files haven't even been going through it to another computer. There's a totally separate system here, somewhere."

"Crap."

Fornell took a more practical approach. "How do we find it? What are we looking for?"

"It's going to be big and need power and cooling. I'm sure they've got a generator dedicated to it."

That made sense. "Trace the power, find the computer."

McGee answered Fornell as he worked his way down the wall. "Pretty much, I hear something behind here." The two agents joined him, Myers looking around and up at the ceiling.

"The footprint of the basement doesn't match the house. Cool, I always wanted to find a hidden room." They traced where the electronic hum was the loudest and from there found the entry. The false shelves swung out to reveal tower upon tower, all lit up with a soft glow. McGee turned so that his camera could fully catch the image before he touched his throat. "Director Haas, Vance, are you guys getting this?"

Vance told him what he already knew. "We don't have enough hard drive space for that level of transfer." Next to him, Haas and Davenport were momentarily distracted by what was on Vance's screen. All three men listened as McGee explained how he was going to attempt to transfer that amount of data. The two directors changed teams as McGee needed someone familiar with both computers and the capacities of MTAC to help him.

"Vance, I need you to set up a relay, using the computers in MTAC as the gateway. Set it up between the computers downstairs, the mainframe at the FBI and the one at the Pentagon."

Davenport frowned at the suggestion. "That means Moore's people will discover what's going on."

The visual from McGee's video feed went dark as he hit the floor. Over his radio, they could hear automatic gunfire.

"I think they know we're here."

Listening with one ear to the gun battles throughout the Tomorrow Camp, Haas and Davenport called their most trusted assistants and authorized NCIS to have total access to their computer systems.

---NCIS---

Two more terrorists fell as Gibbs' team kept up the pressure. The half healed graze on Ziva's arm was oozing blood again and DiNozzo was scrambling for another clip for his rifle when they heard the blast coming from the front entrance. Silva came in high while Lewis came in low, guns blazing. Three of Moore's men fell to the new arrivals, caught unaware, while four more were taken out in the pattern of crossfire laid down by the two teams. Silva fell backwards, clutching his throat. The blood sprayed between his fingers, then slowed as his eyes closed.
Secrecy had given away to speed as MTAC buzzed with activity. The last resort scenario McGee had brought him the night before was being implemented as Vance coordinated between every agency with the computer capacity to be useful. Haas called in the special response team he had on standby in DC. They were almost fifteen minutes out from the scene, but that was as close as he'd felt he could risk. Now to let them know help was on the way.

"Command to Team Two. Status report."

McGee worked feverishly as he bypassed level after level of security. Fornell and Myers stood over him, rifles at their shoulders, waiting for the next wave of attack to begin. Private Morris was leaning up against a tipped over desk, as Evans tried to stop his bleeding. The bullet had gone through the side of the flak jacket, the weak section below the arm taking another victim. Once he had Morris stabilized as best he could, Evans resumed sentry duty.

"Are you in?"

McGee didn't look up as he answered Fornell.

"I'm in. Transfer underway."

"How long?"

"Too long."

"Keep working; no matter what happens, just keep at it."

McGee worked at compressing the data stream to speed up the process as another group of terrorists came down the stairs. Evans opened fire, as did the two FBI agents. It was quick, but not quick enough as one of them managed to throw a grenade at the doorway before he went down.

The voice was shrill in his ear, as Gibbs moved carefully through the building, watching for any
stragglers left alive.

"Command to Team Two. Status report."

Alarm bells were ringing in his head. "Hass, where's Vance?"

"Team Three is in trouble, I say again, Status report."

"Biotoxin is secure for the moment. Team Two has two injured and one dead. Team One has one confirmed dead. What is the status of Team Three?"

"We've lost contact. SRT is approaching to your location. Choppers from the east, fifteen minutes out. Can you keep the toxin secure until they arrive?"

Gibbs ducked at a bullet hit the wall above him. DiNozzo returned fire, killing their latest attacker. "We'll hold them off as long as we can, Sir."

---NCIS---

"Team One, report." Davenport waited, and then repeated himself. "Team One, status report." Two of the individual video feeds were no longer moving, and one was inside, trying to work towards Team Two. The last feed showed some movement, but it also showed a number of unfriendlylies moving closer.

"Team One, we're holding them off the best we can."

"Understood, Team One. Reinforcements are airborne, ten minutes out. Just hold on, son."

---NCIS---

In the corner of MTAC, a fourth member monitored the raid on a missile silo in Colorado. The team of NCIS agents from Los Angeles was grateful that this one was peaceful, except for the crying of frightened children and one rampaging elephant. Ducky smiled and informed them it could have been worse; it could have been a tiger.

---NCIS---

Out of the corner of his eye, Myers saw the object being thrown. He had never served in the military,
but he'd had enough anti-terrorist training to recognize a hand grenade. Fornell saw it too and dove for cover. McGee looked up at the yell, but surrounded by tall towers he had no place to go. Jason made his decision and charged the young agent in his care.

---NCIS---

Vance froze as the video feeds from Team Three blinked out one by one just before the data transfer was lost. He grabbed the keyboard and started working, but could not reestablish the link to either the computer or the men. One of the videos came back on, flickering and fading in and out. The lens was apparently cracked because it was like looking through a prism. Unable to make out any detail, he concentrated on regaining the audio link.

---NCIS---

Gibbs pointed at the back door. "Ziva, you and Lopez cover that door. I'm going to help Arvidas hold them off at the front."

"Boss?"

"Tony, you and Sacks head for the main house. They've lost contact with Team Three."

---NCIS---

The smell of sulfur burned his eyes and throat as Tim became aware of his surroundings. Coughing, he tried to raise up, but there was a pressure on his back, making it difficult. His back was wet and when he shifted for the second time, the weight moved and he was able to see the slack face of Jason Myers. A part of his mind recognized the futility, but he checked for a pulse anyway before closing those once bright blue eyes.

He staggered to his feet, trying to find the rest of the team. The two Marines were beyond help; he didn't have to move closer to tell that, so he turned his attention to the remaining member of his team. A groan led him to Fornell, pinned under one of the tall towers.

"Fornell? Tobias, can you hear me?" He slapped the other man's face to get him to focus.

Fornell quickly realized he couldn't move. "Where are the others?"

"Dead. Come on, I'm going to get you out of here." Tim tossed aside the smaller debris to make
room to work. Fornell shook his head as he tried to grab the younger agent's arm.

"It's no use, kid. You'll never be able to lift it. Finish the transfer and get the hell out of here."

"No." McGee moved to the side with the most space to work. "The blast took out the generator, the computer's dead."

Fornell managed to grasp Tim's arm this time. "Get out of here, McGee, this place is going to come down any minute."

"Emily is not going to grow up without a father, now get ready." Tim braced himself and shoved, lifting the heavy tower a few inches. He yelled as he shoved again and it rolled to the side, freeing the pinned man.

Overhead they could hear the incoming helicopters along with the groans of the weakening beams. "Go on kid, get out of here. They'll find me."

Grumbling about stubborn FBI agents, McGee dragged Fornell away from the debris and prepared to lift him onto his shoulder. "You're forgetting one thing, Fornell."

"What's that?"

"My boss is a Marine and we don't leave our people behind."

McGee tugged hard and got his shoulder under Fornell's stomach as he stood. Fornell screamed once as his broken leg was jarred, and then promptly passed out as McGee struggled up the stairs. At the top of the landing someone grabbed him. He twisted and leaned back; going for his last weapon, the small automatic against the small of his back.

"Whoa, McGee, it's us."

Tony and Ron were there, bracing him as his knees started to buckle. Ron looked over his shoulder, back down the stairs. "Where's Jason?"

"He's... the grenade... he saved me."

Sacks gave a jerky nod in understanding as he helped support McGee and Fornell. Tony led the way as they left the failing structure. The SRT team passed them, but made no effort to stop them as they rejoined the rest of the survivors and waited for Medevac to arrive.
It was fitting that it rained the morning of Jason Myers' funeral. Even the expansive awnings designed to cover the mourners could not keep back the dampness that chilled their souls. This was a funeral unlike any seen by most of the FBI agents there. It was a sign of respect for other agencies to send a few representatives when someone fell in the line of duty, but this time the agents from NCIS were sitting with the family and teammates of the fallen agent. Even the Director of NCIS was sitting next to Director Haas.

Emily transferred easily from her father's lap to her Uncle Tim's and curled up in his arms. He kissed the top of her head and gently rocked with her as the preacher told of sacrifice and eternal life. After the final goodbyes were said, Gibbs pulled back with Ziva and Tony to allow Tim a few minutes with the men who had been at his side throughout this nightmare.

It was a battered group that sat together quietly as the mourners quietly slipped away; Tobias and Hank with matching crutches and Ron's arm still in a sling. The few visible bruises and scrapes would suggest that the fourth man had gotten off easy, but they knew differently as bullet wounds and broken bones would heal in time.

"You sure you won't reconsider?"

"I'm sure, but thank you, Tobias. Your offer meant a lot."

"You going to be all right?"

Tim didn't answer right away, which was enough of an answer for Fornell. When the helicopters arrived at the raid, the most fervent believers had run into the burning barn rather than be captured. Two dozen bodies burned beyond recognition and no way to identify most of them. No dental records, no DNA samples, no living relatives of Edmund Moore could be found to prove or disprove if he was even in the camp that night.

Tim and his family were in a state of limbo as it wasn't possible to determine if the threat was gone or just carefully hidden. After several difficult and painful discussions with both Fornell and Gibbs, it had been decided to keep his family in the witness protection program.

Changing the subject, Tobias asked an easier question as he looked over at his daughter who was sitting on Violet's lap. "Emily's going to be at the next level of the science competition next week. Are you going to be able to make it?"

Unable to stay away from his hurting man any longer, Gibbs had finally sent his other agents on their way and quietly come up behind them. "He'll be there, Tobias. I'll make sure of it personally."

"Good, and would you make sure he gets some sleep between now and then?"

Gibbs gave a short huff at that; he'd heard about the threats to handcuff McGee down to force him to rest during the worst of the case. "I'll do my best. Are you guys going to be all right getting home?"

Ron pointed with the thumb on his uninjured side. "Julia has her minivan, we'll be fine." He stood and helped the other two pull themselves upright. "We'll see you later, McGee."
By an unspoken arrangement, McGee had been staying at Gibbs since the night of the raid. Once home, Gibbs changed out of his suit and snagged two beers before heading down to his basement, knowing that McGee would be joining him soon. They had both downed half of their beers before Gibbs broke the silence.

"You didn't take Fornell up on his job offer."

Tim chuckled as he picked at the label. Nothing got past Gibbs – eventually. "It was a great offer, and they're a great team, but they're not my team." He didn't have to look up to see the smile on his boss's face. "Besides, no matter how much I would work at it, that desk would always be Jason's, you know? I mean, sure Kate's desk is now Ziva's and that doesn't bother me, but Jason died for me. He saw that grenade and he chose to save me instead of himself. That's a hard thing to live with, especially if…"

"If you might be dying anyways?" For the last four days Gibbs had tried to find a way to carefully bring this up. Trust McGee to drop it in his lap all wrapped up and tied in a bow. "How long have you known?"

Tim never looked up as he told of his first exposure to the disease that decimated his family. "When I was ten, we visited my grandfather. His muscle spasms were so bad that when I tried to hug him, he accidently hit me and knocked me down. After we got home that night, Dad explained what was wrong with Grandpa and how it was probably going to happen to him someday too."

"God, Tim…"

McGee just shrugged and kept going. "Dad wasn't planning on living with it. I heard him and Mom talking about it one night. When he was still in the Navy, he requested the option of a one-way mission, so that his death would have some meaning, but he kept putting it off. He said he had to go to Sarah's dance recital, and then I kept winning science fairs and he always, always went. Then one day he was too sick. It sounds ironic, doesn't it? He was too sick to die, so he had to suffer for years."

Sitting on the floor of Gibbs' basement, leaning back against the wall, Tim looked impossibly young. He didn't look up when Gibbs knelt down in front of him, so Gibbs spoke to the top of his head. "I can't imagine what you're feeling but I can tell you one thing. No matter how bad it got, no matter how much he may have suffered, he never regretted one day he got to spend being your dad." Gibbs pulled Tim closer, letting his cheek rest on the top of Tim's head. "I can tell you something else. What you faced, what you accomplished, you made sure that your dad's death did have meaning and he'd be so damned proud of you."

They were so raw, so laid open, that Gibbs could no more stop asking than he could stop breathing. "The sealed file in your records, you've made the same request haven't you?" The silent nod he received almost broke his heart. "Promise…" Gibbs cleared his throat and tried again. "Promise me one thing." After a moment there was another nod. "Promise me you won't just disappear, promise
me that you'll give us a chance to say goodbye."

"I… I promise."

---NCIS---

It wasn't officially a funeral the second time Mitchell McGee was laid to rest, but a somber group of mourners were present. Grateful to the son who had saved countless lives, the SecNav provided a private jet.

Once the interment was finished, Tim stood over his father's grave and said his last goodbyes. While his father's body had been tucked away in the FBI lab, the headstone had arrived and been placed over his then empty grave. Tim ran his fingertips across the words 'beloved father' just once before turning away. Tony was right beside him and wrapped his arm around his partner as they walked away. Ziva joined them a few steps later and the two of them guided him to Gibbs. Surrounded and protected, he was finally able to grieve for all that he had lost.

Gibbs pulled back and nodded to Tony, allowing he and Ziva to walk Tim back to the car. Once they were out of sight, he returned to the grave to say his own goodbyes.

"You raised a fine man, Mitchell. Wherever you are, I know you're proud of him. I am too."

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